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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

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*D. A. Carson on the Emergent Church:  
A Younger Evangelical Critique*



*Phillip Luke Sinitiere*

*I*t is not customary to start a book review with a disclaimer, but because my thoughts are part of a forum, it seems reasonable to offer some autobiography in order to better understand the angles from which I read *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. First, I am what Robert Webber calls a “younger evangelical.”<sup>1</sup> Second, I am by training a historian, though my interests, writing, research, and teaching straddle disciplinary boundaries. Third, I am not “officially” part of an emergent community, though I am an interested observer and occasional participant in emergent activities.<sup>2</sup>

D. A. Carson, an established presence among evangelicals and familiar to readers of *Reformation & Revival Journal*, is but one of many voices in recent months to offer commentary on the emergent/emerging church.<sup>3</sup> As such, his reflections in *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding the Movement and Its Implications* (2005), to date one of the few book-length studies of the movement, demand thoughtful summary, careful analysis, and critical reflection. In what follows, I will summarize the contents of this important book and assess Carson’s contribution to a broader understanding of the emerging church.

First delivered as the Staley Lectures at Cedarville University in February 2004, Carson’s analysis of the emerging

church profiles the movement, notes its ability to read contemporary culture, and situates it in relation to postmodernism. Carson also summarizes the emerging church's critique of postmodernism, documents its weaknesses, reflects on biblical passages relevant to the emerging church's weaknesses, and concludes with thoughts on issues of biblical truth and religious experience.

In the opening chapter, Carson profiles the movement and notes the decidedly protest(ant) nature of the emerging church, specifically its critique of fundamentalist strains of evangelicalism, its animus against modernism, and its discontent with seeker models of ecclesiology. Carson constructs a profile using the voices and observations of emerging church leaders like Brian McLaren, Spencer Burke, Chris Seay, and Todd Hunter.

"The emerging church movement," writes Carson, "honestly tries to read the culture in which we find ourselves and to think through the implications of such a reading for our witness, our grasp of theology, our churchmanship, even our self-understanding" (45). Carson goes on to note that the emerging movement rightly demands spiritual authenticity; and that it correctly understands the cultural particularity and social context of Christian expression; the necessity of thoughtful, dialogical evangelism; and the utility of engaging Christian tradition.

In a chapter critical of the emerging church, Carson indicts the movement with a "reductionistic and wooden" (59) understanding of modernism that essentializes the modernist moment in history. Such a posture, in Carson's estimation, leads to a virtual dismissal of any and all of the positive contributions to Christian history delivered by confessional traditions. Furthermore, Carson suggests, such a reading of modernism is doctrinally irresponsible and intellectually unkempt. Logically, then, contends Carson, this leads to an emerging church with a woefully inadequate and painfully misguided understanding of postmodernism. In turn, this suggests that the emerging movement embraces postmodern perspectives because it is fashionable to do so; misunderstands social

movements in history by blanketing them with totalizing concepts; employs terms (such as postmodernism) that are "passé" (81) in academia; and assumes postmodern perspectives issue forth a kind of ontological authenticity.

To situate his comments on the emerging church's use of postmodern thought, Carson offers his own perspectives on postmodernism first outlined in *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (1996). In this chapter, Carson situates pre-Enlightenment epistemology, summarizes modern epistemology, demonstrates how postmodern epistemology differs from modern approaches, and outlines what he calls "correlatives" and "entailments" (98), what Carson sees as the logical deductions *and* liabilities of postmodern epistemology.

Constructively, Carson notes the positive things a postmodern outlook brings: a critique of the positivist dreams of modernism, attention to metaphor (and human experience) as an explanatory tool, contextuality of cultures, and the situatedness of epistemology. Lamentable strains of postmodern epistemology include its "manipulative antithesis" (104), the conviction that humans can know things *either* completely *or* in fractured glimpses. Carson finds this problematic, because it squelches an honest search for "truth," insofar as humans can discover it, and champions finitude in deceptively dishonest ways. This leads to the criticism that the postmodern perspective only highlights the ways in which individuals construct meaning, and thus questions about morality—absent probing analysis—become highly problematic. Finally, Carson intones, not only is the embrace of a full-orbed postmodernism intellectually inconsistent, it demonstrates "absurdism" (114) and outright arrogance. Couched in the observation that human beings *cannot* know things fully and completely, but through repetition and thoughtful familiarity can come fairly close and thus know some things "truly" (116), Carson's "measured response[s]" (115) to the postmodern outlook include a "fusion of horizons" approach, riding the "hermeneutical spiral," and imagining an "asymptotic" way to understand reality. Collectively, Carson's prescriptives to remedy postmodernism suggest that despite the

liabilities of human finitude, humans can nevertheless know some things “truly,” if not exhaustively.

Chapter five chronicles the failures, in Carson’s opinion, of the emerging church. He notes that the emerging church (1) fails to provide an adequately and philosophically complex response to postmodern extremes; (2) issues an accommodationist posture toward world religions (to use but one example) that uncovers an unwillingness to interrogate serious matters relating to “truth”; (3) neglects the principle of *sola Scriptura* in favor of an eclectic appropriation of Christian traditions; (4) enervates the question of “becoming” the body of Christ while “belonging” to the world; and (5) fails to use and apply biblical and historical facts in doctrinally responsible ways.

In a similarly critical vein, Carson offers a chapter that documents the theological “weakness” of Brian McLaren and British emerging writers Steve Chalke and Alan Mann. Limitations of space require that I address only Carson’s comments about McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* (2004). Carson takes McLaren to task for offering a simplistic reading of the story of feeding the five thousand and for misnaming the Jesuses McLaren describes in a chapter on Christian understandings of Jesus. Carson expresses extreme discomfort with the ways McLaren distances himself from conservative evangelicalism and the way McLaren in general omits evaluative statements about the plurality of faith experiences he examines, whether those experiences have to do with fidelity to the Bible, hell, Christ’s atonement, or Christian ethics. In sum, Carson indicts *A Generous Orthodoxy* with “elementary analysis” (180) and argues that McLaren has “largely abandoned the gospel” (186) and, in turn, the quest for “truth” itself. Carson suggests that McLaren’s feeble thinking, together with his selective use of evidence to uphold positions and pass judgments, results in overstatement and distortion. Worst of all, writes Carson, McLaren rarely references the Scriptures at all, while musing on a vast array of topics.

*Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* closes with a chapter on Scripture passages meant to reroute and correct

deficient thinking within the emerging church and another brief chapter on “truth and experience” (218), an exposition of 2 Peter 1, followed by a few closing remarks.

In what ways then does Carson’s book contribute to a better understanding of the emerging church, and what is the overall significance of Carson’s labors?

One must applaud Carson for tackling one of the most important strains of the evangelical world. As many of the recent articles, essays, and blog posts indicate, the emerging church is a complex movement about which it is hard to generalize. Furthermore, though very critical of it, Carson ably defines and discusses postmodernism and follows closely the contours and implications of this branch of contemporary thought. In addition, Carson’s citation of biblical references is expansive, and his scriptural analysis is cogent, thoughtful, clear, and customarily thorough. Finally, and importantly, though Carson voices serious concern, he does praise the emerging church for its willingness to engage today’s culture and registers appreciation for the movement’s focus on contextuality, its dialogical approach, and its desire for transparency. In the end, however, Carson displays clear reservations about the movement and even questions the emerging church’s orthodoxy at several points. While the foregoing comments show that Carson’s book merits some praise, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* also leaves much to be desired.

First, Carson’s profile of the emerging church, while expansive and somewhat thorough, is only textual. Carson draws from and makes reference to several collections of essays from emerging leaders, as well as the work of Dan Kimball, Leonard Sweet, and, of course, Brian McLaren.<sup>4</sup> In simple terms, Carson’s profile concludes correctly that the emerging church is a protest movement; as such, Carson contends, any evaluation of the movement must consider its engagement with contemporary culture and its use of Scripture and its “biblical fidelity” (44). These evaluative lenses are certainly important *and* shed significant light on the movement, but the sources from which Carson creates his profile—again,

only textual—is highly problematic for several reasons. A solely textual analysis ignores the *electronic* presence of the emerging church and the sustained discussion of and about the movement that takes place through websites and, most regularly, through weblogs.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, no personal engagement with the movement, whether by attendance at one of several annual emerging conventions or by participation in an emergent worship service, is part of Carson's analysis of the movement, though in a footnote he mentions having listened to a recording (on CD-ROM) of a convention. An apparent lack of broader engagement with the movement leads Carson to use generalist and undocumented statements like "most of the other leaders of the emerging church . . ." (29), "for almost everyone within the movement . . ." (29), and "most (though not all) emergent leaders . . ." (141). Carson's approach to creating a profile is not only methodologically slim, but it leaves the discussion solely in the realm of (theological and philosophical) ideas. While these facts do not render Carson's work unfruitful, it certainly leaves his profile shortsighted and baldly incomplete.

Second, and related to Carson's slim profile, is that Carson, the theologian and academician, stands in judgment over (mainly) McLaren, the pastor, the practitioner. This is an important point to make. The *ideas* about which McLaren writes, it seems, were forged in the furnaces of pastoral labor, where, like much of the literature and electronic discussion of and in the emerging movement, the conversations focus on *praxis* and *theology as lived faith*. This does not mean emerging people do not have the pedigree to engage in philosophical or theological discourse, nor does it mean that willingness to participate in such conversations is absent. As I understand it, in the emerging church a focus on praxis means that in one sense the movement's ideas *are* its practice and vice versa, and any study of the movement is incomplete without such an analysis. And it seems at best mildly insulting for Carson to thunder theological critiques at one (McLaren) who provides practical insight into biblical living, not to mention his dismissal of McLaren's creative, dialogical, and pastorally oriented trilogy

about a new kind of Christian. Certainly Carson's own pastoral labors have in some ways shaped and influenced his own theological reflections. A final matter: situating the discussion solely in the world of ideas also renders as problematic Carson's critique of the emerging church's understanding of postmodernism. Here again we find the professional theologian in the ring with pastoral practitioner(s), and Carson suggests that McLaren's application of postmodernism appears "manipulative" (175).

Third, and again related to Carson's slim profile, is the litany of "failures" he identifies. The emerging church fails, according to Carson, to adequately address "tough questions" (132) related to truth; to place scripture over its "eclectic appeal" (139) to church tradition; to adequately discriminate between being in the world but not of the world; and to exegete scripture properly. Again, a focus on "truth" as solely a philosophical proposition misses the gospel truths lived out by many in the emerging movement, such as taking care of the poor, widowed, orphaned, and marginalized, or addressing racism in starkly biblical ways.<sup>6</sup> In my estimation, such things fulfill Christ's command to give our attention to the marginalized, to meet James's admonition to care for the poor, and to biblically combat the powers and principalities that seek to thwart our attempts at faithful living.

Carson's observation that many in the emergent movement sometimes privilege tradition over scripture may be correct in selected cases (again, Carson documents none), and he *seems* to imply that this indicates a "low" view of Scripture. On this score, Carson does not address the possibility that a responsible and rigorous application of ancient Christian tradition is tenable, something about which evangelical theologians and historians write.<sup>7</sup> Further still, Carson correctly observes that some emerging churches wrench tradition from its historical context. These observations lead to Carson's claims that emerging pastors and leaders fail to "handle facts, both exegetical and historical, in a responsible way" (155). Regrettably, Carson's claim on this last point contains no concrete examples of what he argues, and astute readers might

therefore find this point both parading and fruitless.

Fourth, and finally, I must note one thing about the readability of *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*: the consistent use of passive voice. Carson uses passive voice at least once in all but one chapter. Admittedly, given my training as a historian, this critique might simply be a disciplinary quibble. However, in my opinion, to both write and speak in active voice energizes one's written reflections and infuses one's speech with vigor.<sup>8</sup>

Given Carson's adherence to the highest standards of scholarly rigor (as demonstrated in his publishing record), one would think that in a book such as *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* his scholarship would be more thorough, his observation more pointed, and therefore his analysis more evenhanded. Unfortunately, Carson's book is skinny on scholarship relating to the emerging church, short on observation, and therefore analytically incomplete.<sup>9</sup> It is mostly partisan and biting in tone, and lacks adequate discrimination for a book that purports to hold significant promise. Despite my reservations about Carson's book, anyone interested in the emerging church should still give Carson's work adequate and honest—albeit cautious—attention; it is an important, if incomplete, part of the literature on the movement.

#### Author

Phillip Luke Sinitiere teaches history in the Upper School at Second Baptist School in Houston, Texas, and is a PhD student in history at the University of Houston. He is working on a dissertation that examines pastoral dismissal titled, "Expelling Jesus: Pastors and Popular Religion in Eighteenth-Century New England." Phillip lives in Houston with his wife, Jenni, and their two sons, Matthew and Alexander. This is his second contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. Phillip can be reached via email at: [psinitiere@sbseagles.org](mailto:psinitiere@sbseagles.org); he also has a Web page: [www.jard.org/philsinitiere](http://www.jard.org/philsinitiere).

#### Notes

1. Here I refer to Webber's, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). I am one who attempts to "deal thoughtfully with the shift from twentieth- to twenty-first-century culture," as Webber puts it, "[one who] is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelical witness in the twenty-first century" (16). More specifically, I would describe myself as a "catholic evangelical," one who hails from the evangelical strain of Christianity, and is somewhat ambivalent toward, yet hopeful for, the movement, and who attempts to dialogue historically, theologically, practically, and relationally with both Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.
2. Here I mean that I research the emerging/emergent movement by reading books, articles, and essays so defined, and by reading (and commenting on) weblogs (and web sites) of persons affiliated with the emerging/emergent church. I also write about the movement itself, with a conference paper at the recent Civitas Conference held at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in September 2005, and with a forthcoming article in *Reformation & Revival Journal*. In addition, on occasion I attend Ecclesia, one of two emergent communities in Houston, Texas.
3. Here I use "emerging/emergent" since both participants in and observers of the movement use both terms. Hereafter I will use "emerging" since Carson uses this term. It is helpful here to recall Scot McKnight's definitional clarity: many of those who are part of the "emerging" church live and work within the United States and have had some affiliation with evangelicalism. Centered in the United Kingdom and elsewhere is the "emerging" movement and is less defined by experience with North American versions of evangelicalism. See the July 19, 2005, post titled, "One thing (and there are more) I like about the Emerging Christians," on McKnight's blog, "Jesus Creed," at [www.jesuscreed.org](http://www.jesuscreed.org).
4. Carson creates a profile from books such as, Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Brian McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); and Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).
5. All of the major leaders of the movement, as well as many of the movement's practitioners, have web sites and regularly post on personal weblogs. See, for example, the blogs of Tony Jones ("Theoblogy," at [theoblogy.blogspot.com](http://theoblogy.blogspot.com)), Dan Kimball, ("Vintage Faith," at [www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith)), Holly Rankin Zaher ("happydaydeadfish," at [happydaydeadfish.blogspot.com](http://happydaydeadfish.blogspot.com)), Ryan Bolger ("The BolgBlog," at

[www.thebolgblog.typepad.com](http://www.thebolgblog.typepad.com)), and Karen Ward, ("Submerge," at [submerge.typepad.com](http://submerge.typepad.com)). Most of these blogs offer links to other emergent blogs, and thus there is a consistent and sustained electronic presence and conversation.

Furthermore, several bloggers have hosted online discussions with emerging leaders, and it is common for many in the movement to participate in online forums. For example, in May 2005, emerging leader, speaker, and blogger Andrew Jones hosted an online discussion with what he creatively called, "Going to Hell with Brian McLaren," a forum in which McLaren responded to comments on his *The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005). See the blog post for May 8, 2005, at Jones's blog, "TallSkinnyKiwi," [tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi). In July 2005, emerging pastor Aaron Flores hosted an online forum called, "Go to Hell with TheVoiz," to discuss conceptions of hell more generally, but also to comment on McLaren's *The Last Word*. Visit the archives for July 2005 at Flores's blog, "TheVoiz," [thevoiz.typepad.com/weblog](http://thevoiz.typepad.com/weblog).

Finally, from September–October 2005, Brian McLaren, Bruce Ellison Benson, Ellen Haroutunian, Mabiala Kenzo, and Myron Bradley Penner contributed to a "blog-book" discussion called, "A New Kind of Conversation: Blogging Toward a Postmodern Faith." Each participant posted on a topic related to the Christian faith and postmodernism, online visitors then responded to their comments. While some of the contributor's posts generated less than twenty responses, others resulted in over forty. This indicates the level of engagement in the emerging church's electronic conversations. Visit "A New Kind of Conversation" at [www.anewkindofconversation.com](http://www.anewkindofconversation.com).

For those inclined to dismiss "e-conversations," I should note that many of these emerging church bloggers value personal interaction and face-to-face contact. For example, prior to some of the national emergent conventions, one finds posts advertising blogger "meet-ups." In other words, "e-fellowship" among emerging bloggers materializes (and continues) at national meetings. This electronic engagement is also the subject of academic scholarship about the emerging church. Bryan Murley, a doctoral student in communications at the University of South Carolina, presented "The Mediahood of All Receivers: New Media, New 'Church,' and New Challenges" in September 2005 at the Civitas Conference at Cornerstone University in Grand Rapids, Michigan. A copy of Murley's paper is available in the September archives at his blog, "Emerging Church Research," at [emergingchurch.bryanmurley.com](http://emergingchurch.bryanmurley.com).

6. Here I have in mind "Worship in the Spirit of Justice" and a series of blog posts by Anthony Smith titled, "Postmodern Black Church (or a church where a Negro can feel at home)." "Worship in the Spirit of Justice" was a series of worship services held June–July 2005 and organized by Brian McLaren and others. The aim of these services was to pray, sing, preach, and raise humanitarian funds in order to bring attention to the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. For more about "Worship in the Spirit of Justice," visit [www.worship4justice.org/index.html](http://www.worship4justice.org/index.html). Smith's posts commented and

critiqued conceptions of "whiteness" in the church in historical and theological perspective, and offered a (emerging) multi-ethnic and sacramental prescription with what he calls "Practicing Pentecost." For more about a "Postmodern Black Church," visit the August and September archives at "Musings of a Postmodern Negro," [postmodernegro.blogspot.com](http://postmodernegro.blogspot.com).

Granted, "Worship in the Spirit of Justice" and "Postmodern Black Church" appeared after the publication of Carson's book, so my critique here may be slightly unfair; however, my previous comments demonstrate that Carson fails to acknowledge the "practical" importance of the emerging movement.

7. See, for example, Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); and D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influence of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).
8. See, for example, pages 43, 55, 68, 91, 161–62, 172, 188, 216, and 230.
9. For enlightening commentary on the future of evangelical scholarship, readers may wish to consult Millard J. Erickson, "Evangelical Theological Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46/1 (March 2003): 5–27. Erickson suggests, among other things, that humility, "auto referentiality" (15), "ironic irenicism" (16), a more thoroughgoing historiography, a keener (scholarly) precision "in terms of understanding and expression" (12), and adoption of interdisciplinary perspectives define the future of evangelical theology.