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THE EMERGING CHURCH



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Contact Us

9Marks

525 A Street NE

Washington, DC 20002

Toll Free: (888) 543-1030

Email: info@9marks.org

9marks.org



An Emerging Church Primer

By Justin Taylor

I Am Not an Expert

Some of you may be called to be experts on the emerging church. We need experts. But I'm not that expert. And perhaps it's good for you that I'm not. In conservative evangelical circles, we can be tempted to listen to experts so that we can hear the person's conclusions: "Just tell me what to think—don't bother me with how you got there." We want the Cliff Notes on the emerging church. We want to read the cast of characters—"this guy's a wolf, that guy's a sheep," and so on.

I'm not going to do that. One of my goals is to help you understand the "emerging church." But my deeper goal would be for us to become the sort of people who know how to think about things like the emerging church. After all, the "emerging church" is not here to stay. It's a movement, and this is its season. It might be replaced in a year or so; it might stretch out for decades. Yet one thing's for sure: Emerging Church Version 2006 is going to look different next year. And the next.

As Christians, we want to train ourselves to have the mind of Christ, so that we can respond like well-trained tennis players to whatever ball flies in our direction—no matter the angle, the spin, or the speed.

DEFINING THE EMERGING CHURCH

What Is the Emerging Church?

What exactly is the "emerging church"? Here is one common way that many people think about the movement:

Popularly, the term "Emerging Church" has been applied to high-profile, youth-oriented congregations that have gained attention on account of their rapid numerical growth, their ability to attract (or retain) the twenty-somethings, and their contemporary worship that draws upon popular music styles with the accompanying pyrotechnics, and that promotes itself to the Christian sub-culture through its web-sites and by word of mouth.¹

The emphasis here falls entirely on matters of style and demographics.

My wife recently told someone that I would be giving a talk on the emerging church. The person responded, "Is that where they light candles, sit on couches, and try to do church?" If you are a critic of the emerging church, you will probably think this definition is accurate. If you are a cheerleader, you will undoubtedly think it's unfair.

How do we find an answer? I suggest that we listen not only to the critics of the emergents, but to the emergents themselves. If possible, we should also listen to (ostensibly) disinterested third-party observers who offer a sociological perspective. In what follows, I hope to draw from all three.

Distinction Between "Emergent" and "Emerging"

First, we should distinguish between "Emergent" and "Emerging." Emergent is an organization (emergentvillage.us) or an official network of likeminded leaders and churches involved in one particular stream of the emerging "conversation." Tony Jones now serves as the first national coordinator in the United States. Emerging, on the other hand, is the term most often used to describe the much broader movement (or "conversation") of those seeking to incarnate and contextualize the gospel for postmoderns.

¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005). Gibbs and Bolger go on to explain why this definition is inaccurate.

All that is emergent is emerging, but not all that is emerging is necessarily emergent. In other words, some pastors, churches, and writers want to retain the emerging label—or who bear emerging characteristics—without identifying themselves with or even supporting the Emergent organization.

The emerging church movement is larger than North America. There are thousands of emerging Christians in Western Europe and the South Pacific and, to a lesser extent, in Asia, Africa, and South America. My remarks pertain mainly to the American version. But keep in mind that this is part of a larger worldwide conversation with its own dynamic and nuances.

The Wikipedia Definition

Wikipedia—the free, online, open-source encyclopedia—is a helpful place to begin for defining the emerging movement as a whole:

The emerging church or emergent church is a diverse movement within Christianity that arose in the late 20th century as a reaction to the influence of modernism in Western Christianity. The movement is usually called a "conversation" by its proponents to emphasize its diffuse nature with contributions from many people and no explicitly defined leadership or direction. The emerging church seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct Christianity as its mainly Western members live in a postmodern culture. While practices and even core doctrine vary, most emergents can be recognized by the following values:

Authenticity

People in the postmodern culture seek real and authentic experiences in preference over scripted or superficial experiences. Emerging churches strive to be relevant to today's culture and daily life, whether it be through worship or service opportunities. The core Christian message is unchanged but emerging churches attempt, as the church has throughout the centuries, to find ways to reach God's people where they are to hear God's message of unconditional love.

Missional living

Christians go out into the world to serve God rather than isolate themselves within communities of like-minded individuals.

Narrative theology

Teaching focuses on narrative presentations of faith and the Bible rather than systematic theology or biblical reductionism.

Christ-likeness

Emerging, not Emergent, Thank you

"I was part of what is now known as the Emerging Church Movement in its early days.... I had to distance myself, however, from one of many streams in the merging church because of theological differences. Since the late 1990s, this stream has become known as Emergent. The emergent church is part of the Emerging Church Movement but does not embrace the dominant ideology of the movement. Rather, the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity" (p. 21).

Excerpt from Mark Driscoll's Confessions of a Reformation Rev. (Zondervan, 2006)

The Leaders of Emergent

The following seven leaders of the Emergent network are represented in the document "Response to Recent Criticism" (2005).

- *Tony Jones*, national coordinator of Emergent in the US; Ph.D. candidate at Princeton
- *Doug Pagitt*, pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis
- *Spencer Burke*, founder of THEOOZE.com
- *Brian McLaren*, founding pastor and minister-at large of Cedar Ridge Community Church outside Baltimore
- *Dan Kimball*, pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz
- *Andrew Jones*, founder of TallSkinnyKiwi.com
- *Chris Seay*, pastor of Ecclesia of Houston

While not neglecting the study of Scripture or the love of the church, Christians focus their lives on the worship and emulation of the person of Jesus Christ.²

Note that a definition like this contains an element of protest. There is a flip-side to all of these attributes. If the emergent movement values these four attributes, it's because they regard the traditional church as

- full of fakery, not authenticity;
- individualistic and isolated, not missional;
- fixated on abstract doctrine, not narrative theology;
- obsessed with the church, the Bible, or tradition, not Christocentric living.

The "Order and Rule" of the Emergent Village

The Emergent Village website is another source that sets forth the self-understanding of the movement. The four following values and practices are listed as their "order and rule":

1. "Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus," which means
 - seeking to "live by the Great Commandment: loving God and loving our neighbors"
 - understanding "the gospel to be centered in Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God, a message of reconciliation with God and among humanity"
 - and committing to "a 'generous orthodoxy' in faith and practice – affirming the historic Christian faith and the Biblical injunction to love one another even when we disagree."
2. "Commitment to the Church in all its Forms," which means
 - affirming "the church in all its forms – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal."
 - seeking "to be irenic and inclusive of all our Christian sisters and brothers, rather than elitist and critical, seeing 'us' we were used to see 'us versus them.'"
 - and being "actively and positively involved in a local congregation."
3. "Commitment to God's World," which means
 - practicing "faith missionally, that is, we do not isolate ourselves from this world, but rather, we follow Christ into the world."
 - seeing "the earth and all it contains as God's beloved creation, and so we join God in seeking its good, its healing, and its blessing."
4. "Commitment to One Another," which means
 - "valuing time and interaction with other friends who share this rule and its practices."
 - identifying "ourselves as members of this growing, global, generative, and non-exclusive friendship."
 - making "an annual pilgrimage to an emergent gathering."
 - representing emergent well whenever we can; to exemplify the best of what emergent strives to be and do.
 - staying "reconciled to one another."

Again, notice the implicit protest in each of these values. If the emergents are committed to the way of Jesus, the church in all its forms, the world, and one another, it's because traditional Christians are committed to

- other things besides the way of Jesus.
- a narrow segment of the church, not all the church
- their evangelical ghettos, not the real world.
- their narrow slice of the church, not other Christians.

The Gibbs-Bolger Definition

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger of Fuller Seminary, after spending five years interviewing participants in the "emergent conversation," wrote the book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Baker). Though the book is not a defense of the movement but aims to present an objective analysis, it has been well received and commended by prominent members of the emergent community. Gibbs and Bolger begin with the premise that emerging churches are those faith

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emerging_Church

communities “engaged in particular processes.” These faith communities “take culture, specifically postmodern culture, very seriously,” and they tend to share up to nine common practices—three core practices and six derivative practices. At the core, emerging churches are those (1) who take the life of Jesus as a model way to live (2) and who transform the secular realm (3) as they live highly communal lives. Derivatively, emerging churches (4) welcome those who are outside, (5) share generously, (6) participate, (7) create, (8) lead without control, (9) and function together in spiritual activities.

All this can be boiled down to one sentence: “Emerging Churches are communities who practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.” Or, to say the same thing another way, “Emerging Churches are missional communities arising from within postmodern culture, consisting of followers of Jesus seeking to be faithful in their place and time.”³

Three Kinds of Emerging Folks

By now it should also be evident that all emerging church folks are not the same. Ed Stetzer, a missiologist with the Southern Baptist Convention’s North American Mission Board, divides them into three categories: (1) the relevants, (2) the reconstructionists, and (3) the revisionists.⁴ My purpose in citing his taxonomy is not to suggest that these are the best terms or that this is exhaustive, but rather to illustrate that the “conversation” and “movement” are by no means monolithic.

The relevants, say Stetzer, take “the same Gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture.” They seek to retain “the old, old story,” but they might retell it in new language and with a different approach to worship, preaching, or church structure. In other words, this group wants to distinguish between what’s essential to the Christian faith and what’s not.

The reconstructionists take “the same Gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church.” For example, they promote house churches.

The revisionists question and revise not just the church, but what most evangelicals would understand the Gospel to mean. Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and Tony Jones would fall into this last category.

As we turn to evaluating the emerging church movement, it is important to remember the diversity within this movement. There is clearly a difference between what the “relevants” are doing and what the “revisionists” are doing. Speaking in generalities without acknowledging some of these nuances and distinctions will paint an inaccurate picture and will hamper our ability to speak clearly and convincingly on these issues.

EVALUATING THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

Like I mentioned earlier, when most people think of the emerging church, they think of couches, candles, clothing, and music. These things grab our attention. But the Bible does not have a lot to say about drums versus organs, slacks versus jeans, or candles versus chandeliers. Yet the Bible does have a lot to say about our heart and our doctrine. So that’s what we should consider.

Four Areas of Concern

My major concerns about what I see in Emergent⁵ can be boiled down to four issues: (1) the authority of God’s Word; (2) the cross of Christ, (3) the concepts of truth and knowledge, and (4) sexual ethics. In what follows I am only able to scratch the surface and to provide a brief sketch of these issues.

1. The Bible

One of the things I appreciate about the Emerging Church Movement generally is that they stress the narrative aspects of Scripture. As they rightly insist, Scripture is not just a big fact-book. It’s not just a series of propositions and commandments. It’s not even a systematic theology textbook. Scripture is a story of God’s plan to save us. Postmoderns are much more attracted to instruction driven by storytelling than the traditional “three points and a poem.”

³ Bolger and Gibbs, *Emerging Churches*, 28.

⁴ Ed Stetzer, “Understanding the Emerging Church” (<http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>).

⁵ Hereafter I’ll just abbreviate it for convenience as EM (emerging movement). Unless otherwise noted, I’m referring to the more liberal wing of the conversation.

But as you have probably heard said, “a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.”⁶ While Scripture is more than a set of propositions, it is not less. It’s both/and, not either/or.

Also, we must ask questions about the way some within the EM view the authority and inerrancy of Scripture. By focusing on the narrative aspects of Scripture, they are able to discuss “the big picture”—broad trajectories, themes, and metaphors—without digging into the details. But God has given us the details of Scripture for a reason. Not a word is wasted our Bibles. As Francis Schaeffer once said, “God has spoken, and he is not silent.”

Remember how the serpent led Eve into disobedience: “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). Satan does not begin by lying, *per se*, but with a question. He plants a seed of doubt: “Hey, I’m just asking questions. Raising the issues. Exploring the terrain. I’m not saying God didn’t say this. I’m just wondering if we all really understood what he said.”

We do not need a generous orthodoxy, as some have claimed. (As Al Mohler has perceptively observed, “generous orthodoxy” is neither generous nor orthodox!⁷) We want a humble orthodoxy. And undermining the authority of God’s Word—which I think you will observe in my next three areas of concern—is not the way of humble orthodoxy. It is neither humble nor orthodox to undermine the inerrant, authoritative Word of God. There is nothing hip or cool or relevant about asking a new generation, “Did God actually say...?” The doctrine of God’s authoritative Word should be absolutely humbling. We are weak. We are biased. We are sinful. We idolize ourselves. And God has a powerful Word that stands over and above us. We must submit. Mark Dever has said it well:

What we need is humble theology—theology which submits itself to the truth of God’s Word. ‘Liberal’ theology—theology which does not view Scripture as finally trustworthy and authoritative—is not humble before the Word. Churches which are tentative and decry dogmatism may sound humble, but it is not truly humble to do anything other than to submit to God’s Word.

Christian humility is to simply accept whatever God has revealed in His Word. Humility is following God’s Word wherever it goes, as far as it goes, neither going beyond it nor stopping short of it. The humility we want in our churches is to read the Bible and believe it—everything God has said, dogmatically, and humbly! It is not humble to be hesitant where God has been clear and plain.⁸

2. The Cross

If you read the EM writers, you will often hear them contend that the atonement is bigger than substitutionary atonement—the biblical idea that Christ acted as our substitute and graciously absorbed the wrath of God that we deserved.

And the EM folks are right; there is more to the atonement than substitution. The Bible also refers to the cross in terms of his example for us (e.g. 1 Peter 2:21ff), or in terms of his defeat of his enemies (e.g. Col. 2:13-15). Yes, more happened on the cross than Christ bearing our sins and the wrath of his Father.

But less was not happening either! Once again, “a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth.” It is a half-truth to say that “many aspects of the atonement need to be taken into account.” It is the whole truth to say that many aspects need to be taken in to account, and substitutionary atonement is at the heart of Christ’s work and the gospel itself.

Tom Schreiner, in a recent address “Penal Substitution as the Heart of the Gospel,” expresses the biblical view on this:

The theory of penal substitution is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of the atonement. I am not claiming that it is the only truth about the atonement taught in the scriptures. Nor am I claiming that penal substitution is emphasized in every piece of literature, or that every

⁶ J. I. Packer, [Introduction to Owen’s Death of Death](#)

⁷ R. Albert Mohler, Jr. [“A Generous Orthodoxy—Is It Orthodox?”](#)

⁸ Mark Dever, “Three Marks of a Faithful Pastor,” delivered at Together for the Gospel, Louisville, KY (April 26, 2006).

author articulates clearly penal substitution. I am claiming that penal substitution functions as the anchor and foundation for all other dimensions of the atonement when the scriptures are considered as a canonical whole. I define penal substitution as follows: The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy his justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God's holiness and love are manifested.

The riches of what God has accomplished in Christ for his people are not exhausted by penal substitution. The multifaceted character of the atonement must be recognized to do justice the canonical witness. God's people are impoverished if Christ's triumph over evil powers at the cross is slighted, or Christ's exemplary love is shoved to the side, or the healing bestowed on believers by Christ's cross and resurrection is downplayed. While not denying the wide-ranging character of Christ's atonement, I am arguing that penal substitution is foundational and the heart of the atonement.

If we lose Christ's work of substitution and propitiation, we lose the gospel and are left with a theory of the atonement that is a complete untruth.

In the United States, the EM is often associated with the name Brian McLaren. In the United Kingdom, Steve Chalke (pronounced "chalk") is an increasingly popular figure. A few years ago Chalke said the following about substitutionary atonement in his popular book *The Lost Message of Jesus*:

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed [as the doctrine of penal substitution makes it out to be]. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love". If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.⁹

Notice what Chalke is saying: The doctrine of propitiation—that Christ removed the wrath of God by absorbing it himself—is labeled "child abuse." Not only does Chalke think that propitiation is untrue, he thinks it is immoral and reprehensible.

Brian McLaren suggests that Chalke's book "could help save Jesus from Christianity," which is not surprising since McLaren places the "cosmic child abuse" argument on the lips of one of his characters in one of his books.¹⁰ And never does McLaren refute this idea. It seems as if this is McLaren's passive way of saying something without saying something.

Chalke and McLaren's approach to the atonement has led Don Carson to write the following sobering words:

I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel. Perhaps their rhetoric and enthusiasm have led them astray and they will prove willing to reconsider their published judgments on these matters and embrace biblical truth more holistically than they have been doing in their most recent works. But if not, I cannot see how their own words constitute anything less than a drift toward abandoning the gospel itself. . . .

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

⁹ Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.

¹⁰ Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 102. As Carson points out, "the objections are never answered and are elsewhere voiced by McLaren himself, who makes no attempt to show how those who support substitutionary atonement would answer such objections or to examine the extent to which substitutionary atonement is taught in Scripture."

would rise up and call McLaren and Chalke to account where they have clearly abandoned what the Bible actually says.¹¹

Carson's concern, if accurate, takes us way beyond any debates we might have over music, candles, communal living, and culture. Such matters cut to the very heart of our faith. Is the wrath of God real? Does sinful humanity deserve God's just condemnation? Did Christ go to the cross to absorb and remove the wrath of the Father? Was he our substitute—our sacrificial lamb?

Nothing should be more central to our lives than the gospel.

3. Truth and Knowledge

Sometimes the EM is charged with not believing in "absolute truth." I'm not sure that's a fair charge. Many within emerging churches say that they believe truth exists, and that it is absolute.

But many of them also say that such truth belongs to God, not us. While truth itself might be unchanging, our knowledge of the truth can never be certain. We may have confidence that something is true, but we can never have certainty. So the question of truth is really a question about our knowledge of truth, our knowledge of right and wrong, and so forth.

I do appreciate the fact that emerging writers stress human fallenness on this particular point. During the Enlightenment, many people believed the process of obtaining knowledge was fairly mechanical process, as if humans were computers. Plug in the correct information, and the correct analysis will pop out. EM advocates rightly point out that the process of gaining knowledge is much more complex, and that sinful human biases and perspectives color how we view the world.

But remember: "a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth." Here, exhaustive knowledge is being confused with certain knowledge. I can have the latter without having the former. For example, I can know with certainty that God exists, and yet not have exhaustive knowledge about him. This distinction can be made in most areas of our lives, whether we are talking about my knowledge of my spouse, a country to which I have never traveled, football, or even my own personality. We can have confidence in our knowledge about something even if we don't know everything there is to know about that thing. But the EM perspective, like the worldview of postmodernism generally, uses the lack of comprehensive knowledge to undermine the ability to have confidence or certainty.

Scripture clearly teaches that humans are fallible, mixed in their motives, and partial in their knowledge. At the same time, Scripture unashamedly describes humans as capable of knowing the truth. It even portrays doubt as a negative characteristic at times.¹² Humility is a virtue, but doubt is not.

4. Sexual Ethics

I wonder if you have noticed this pattern: in the places where Western culture is critical of traditional evangelical Christianity, so—often—are the emergents.

Take, for example, the issue of homosexuality. Here's what Brian McLaren recently said on this topic:

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say 'it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.' That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives whom seem to know exactly what we should think.

Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection.¹³

¹¹ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with Emerging Churches*, 186-187.

¹² Cf. John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, a book very influential in my own thinking about biblical epistemology. On the biblical case for "Knowing Some Truths, Even with 'Certainty'" see a sampling of the Scriptural witness pulled together by Carson: *Becoming Conversant with Emerging Churches*, 193-99.

¹³ Brian McLaren, "Leader's Insight: No Cowardly Flip-Flop", <http://www.christianitytoday.com/leaders/newsletter/2006/cln60123.html>.

There is a time for charity and a time for deference. But there is also a time for straight-speak. What McLaren says here is foolish. I am not simply calling him names. I am drawing on the language of folly in Proverbs and elsewhere to offer you my measured biblical assessment. The Bible says many things, and some topics are clearer than other topics. Its teaching on homosexuality, however, is clear. It may not be popular, but it is not ambiguous.

The Bible also commends the idea of seeking truth and understanding (e.g. Prov. 2:1-6). But I believe that the emerging church often makes seeking an end in itself, and Scripture condemns that line of thinking. So Paul condemns those who are “always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim. 3:7).

G.K. Chesterton offers us a biblical alternative to McLaren’s methodology: “The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth, is to shut it again on something solid.”¹⁴

Other Concerns

I have touched on just four issues: the authority of God’s Word, the cross of Christ, the truth and knowledge, and sexual ethics. But sadly, we could go right on down the line and talk about other issues like whether women be elders/pastors, whether sinners must believe in Jesus to be saved, or whether eternal torment awaits those who do not know God in Christ. In fact, I cannot think of a single major doctrine that is not be “reinvisioned” or “reimagined” for today. Even someone like Professor Scot McKnight, who has been tireless in his efforts to explain and encourage the EM, recently had to conclude his review of a book by Spencer Burke (of the Emergent The Ooze website) by sadly concluding that he is heretic, a universalist, a panentheist, denies the Trinity, and gives no evidence in his recent book of believing in the gospel as the New Testament defines “gospel.”¹⁵

Do these concerns apply to every church that is considered an emerging church? Absolutely not. But they do apply to a number of the most prominent leaders and popular churches. I believe that much of the criticism against emerging churches would be quelled if those from within the movement arose and spoke clearly about these crucial issues, and criticized the abandoning of such central Scriptural matters.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES?

A Call for Humble Orthodoxy

Humility has to do with rightly viewing the greatness of God such that you see yourself in the proper light.

In other words, humility does not mean hating yourself and believing that everything you do is wrong. And it doesn’t mean remaining continually uncertain. Rather, humility means being confident in—and looking to—God and his grandeur and greatness. It means submitting yourself to his word and his ways.

Orthodoxy refers to having right beliefs, which involves affirming the historic truths of the Christian faith—believing what the church has always believed and confessed. It’s not about trying to come up with a new kind of Christianity for your present community. It’s about standing in the historic stream with the communion of saints and confessing what the church has always confessed.

As indicated earlier in this article, we must commit to a stance of humble orthodoxy, understanding that true humility should lead us deeper into orthodoxy, that orthodoxy should have a humbling effect on our souls, and that we must speak the truth (orthodoxy) in love (humbly).

A Call for Contextualized Confessionalism

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography*, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 212.

¹⁵ Scot McKnight, *Heretic’s Guide to Eternity*, 4.

Appropriate contextualization means “adapting my communication of the gospel without changing its essential character.”¹⁶ In short, we must retain the essentials and adapt the non-essentials. In the New Testament, it is a non-negotiable that Christians love one another and express their affection. One way that it commands this is for Christians to greet each other with a holy kiss (Rom. 16:16). Now when most guys in the United States get together, there may be handshakes or hugs or high-fives—but no smooches. Are they disobeying Scripture? I don’t think so, because they are obeying the core of the command but changing its cultural expression.

Let me give some other examples. Let’s imagine that you go over to a pastor’s house for lunch after church. The lunch is ready, and everyone pulls up their chair to the table. Everyone grows quiet and you look over to the pastor to ask the Lord’s blessing on the meal. But Pastor Joe (we’ll call him) looks at you and everyone else and just says, “Well—what are you all waiting for? Let’s dig in.” No prayer.

What would you think? You might wonder if your pastor is doing okay spiritually? You might wonder why he was so dishonoring to God.

Now I think praying before meals is a great idea. It’s something I always try to do (I’m not on a crusade to change the practice!). But we should recognize that the Bible does not command us to pray before each meal. We’re commanded to thank God for providing us our daily bread. We’re commanded to pray at all times, giving thanks. But we’re never told, “Pray before breakfast, pray before lunch, and prayer before dinner.” Yet we Christians tend to confuse our practices within Christian sub-culture as commands from our Creator.

There are lots of things like this: praying with your eyes closed, having a quiet time first thing in the morning, singing only hymns, having pews in your church, a pastor wearing a coat and tie, and so on.

Paul discussed the relationship between unchanging truth and changing culture in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. Now this I do for the gospel’s sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Tom Ascol recently offered a good summary of Paul’s intentions here: “I would make a sharp distinction between compromising what God has revealed in His Word and accommodating others where we can for the sake of gaining a hearing for the Gospel.”

We must never compromise—but we must accommodate. What are those things in our lives, in our ministries, in our churches that have more to do with cultural Christianity than they do with eternal, unchanging truth? Our great danger in the Western church comes when we refuse to accommodate the non-essentials in the name of not compromising.

Contextualization has become a buzz word. The flip side of the coin is that we must not only be contextual, but also confessional. By confessional I mean that we should affirm and confess the historic teachings recovered during the Reformation.

Walter Henegar recently wrote: “Emergent writers may correctly diagnose postmodern sensibilities, but their prescriptions tend to conform rather than transform.” For transforming prescriptions, we often have to turn outside of our own narrow window of time. Part of being a confessional Christian is reading church history—and reading writers from church history. We all know the statement: “those who are ignorant of history are doomed to repeat it.” We would be naïve to think that all of the issues being raised are “new” and that variants on them have not been dealt with in the past.

One of the things I appreciate about Tim Keller’s approach to these issues is his insistence that Reformational Christianity already has within it the resources needed to minister to post-everythings.¹⁷

¹⁶ Keller, *Advancing the Gospel into the 21st Century*, Part 3. His thoughts here on contextualization are well worth reading and heeding.

- Post-everything folks love narrative and story—and Christ-centered biblical theologians like Geerhardus Vos can teach us how to avoid moralisms and to show that every story points to Christ.
- Post-everythings are experientially oriented—and Jonathan Edwards’ affectional theology can serve as our guide.
- Post-everythings rebel against moralisms and self-righteousness—and who better than Martin Luther to teach us about the meaning of true freedom found in Christ alone?
- Post-everythings are concerned about social justice—something powerfully addressed by Herman Ridderbos’ exposition of the coming and presence of the Kingdom of God.
- Post-everythings love art because they love the material world—a perspective shared by Abraham Kuyper, who declared: “there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, ‘Mine!’”¹⁸
- Post-everythings tend not to be moved by evidences and proofs—and this is where Cornelius Van Til and company may offer help in explaining the issues of faith, authority, and uninterpreted facts.

A Call to Speak the Truth in Love

We need to remember that we are bound by the Word of God to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Some of us are so wired to “speak the truth” that we fail to do it in love. (And of course, the converse is true as well. There are those who are so concerned about speaking in love that they never get around to speaking truth.) I know that, for myself, I am often far too impressed with my own cleverness and far too desirous of “scoring points.” Yet the biblical imperatives call us to a higher ground: truth and love. It’s not an either/or, but a both/and.

Perhaps the most helpful phrase is one coined by John Piper: “brokenhearted boldness.” We must seek to soak our critiques with meekness and humility.

Listen to the wise counsel of John Newton—the vile slave trader turned redeemed author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”:

As to your opponent, I wish, that, before you set pen to paper against him, and during the whole time you are preparing your answer, you may commend him by earnest prayer to the Lord’s teaching and blessing. This practice will have a direct tendency to conciliate your heart to love and pity him; and such a disposition will have a good influence upon every page you write. . . . [If he is a believer,] in a little while you will meet in heaven; he will then be dearer to you than the nearest friend you have upon earth is to you now. Anticipate that period in your thoughts. . . . [If he is an unconverted person,] he is a more proper object of your compassion than your anger. Alas! ‘He knows not what he does.’ But you know who has made you to differ [1 Cor. 4:7].”¹⁹

CONCLUSION

I want to close with a couple of quotes from pastors wiser than myself. First, Walter Henegar says,

There’s an old story attributed to Dwight L. Moody, who was once criticized for his methods of evangelism. He responded, ‘I like my way of doing it better than your way of not doing it.’ Reformed Christians may be right about how to reach new generations, but are we doing it?

¹⁷ Tim Keller, [Post-Everything](#)s.

¹⁸ Abraham Kuyper, *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

¹⁹ John Newton, “On Controversy” [Letter XIX], vol. 1 of *The Works of the Rev. John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 269.

Are we seeking to rescue other professing Christians from the jaws of error? Are we willing to submit our own thinking to the scrutiny, correction, and ridicule that inevitably come from publicly joining the conversation?

Most important, are we building friendships with postmodern non-Christians, the type who bristle at the sight of steeple and pew? Do we even know such people? Are we bringing the gospel to them in dialogue, listening for their responses so we at least know they understand? And if they place their faith in Christ, are our churches prepared to embrace them without requiring a second conversion into a church culture that may have less to do with the gospel than we're willing to admit?

I close with another quote from Tim Keller, who calls both the emerging church and the evangelical church to a better way:

I see people who are desperately trying to reach the post-everythings who in their desperation are trying to throw out essential elements such as the substitutionary atonement, forensic justification, imputed righteousness, the Sovereignty of God, or the inerrancy of Scripture. Many of them are probably over-adapting to the post-everything situation. But while they do not have our theological resources, often we do not have their level of engagement with the people of the emerging society. To correct this, let us confess that we really have failure across all our parties to reach the coming society, and let us resolve to use the premier resources of Reformed theology. If we can make these changes, then we may really start to see renewal and outreach, and we might actually be a resource for the broader body of Christ in this culture.²⁰

Justin Taylor is the managing editor of Crossway's forthcoming ESV Study Bible. He is also the editor of *Overcoming Sin and Temptation*, an unabridged but more accessible version of John Owen's classics on sin and temptation, due out this October from Crossway.

September 2006
Justin Taylor
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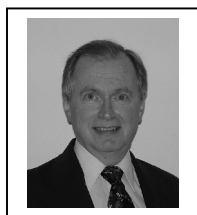
²⁰ Tim Keller, [Post-Everything](#).

A 9News Pastors' and Theologians' Forum

"What do you hope will ultimately emerge from the emerging church conversation for evangelicals?"

Answers from

- D. A. Carson
- Mark Driscoll
- Michael Horton
- Mike McKinley
- Daniel Montgomery
- Brent Thomas
- Carl Trueman
- Jonathan Leeman



D. A. Carson

(1) I hope that the movement or conversation in its present form will increasingly divide between those who deeply and intelligently desire to be faithful to Scripture while learning to communicate the gospel to a younger generation, and those who, whether mischievously or ignorantly, happily domesticate and distort the Scripture because of their analysis of contemporary culture—and that the former will become among the sharpest critics of the latter.

(2) I hope that Christians both within and outside the movement will become more discerning. The Bible says that certain offenses must take place to demonstrate who is approved by God. In this fallen and broken world, God uses irresponsible ideas about Scripture to enable Christians to formulate a robust doctrine of Scripture; he uses convoluted and exegetically unwarranted approaches to justification to help Christian thinks through what Scripture says about justification more carefully; he uses sloppy analysis of culture to guide Christians into thinking about the complex ways in which the gospel is proclaimed within any culture, and is called upon to transform that culture.

(3) I hope that increasing numbers of Christians will come to embrace the joint responsibility of cherishing all that is good in tradition so that we learn to see ourselves in continuity with the people of God across the ages, while simultaneously probing and understanding today's world so that, even while remaining anchored in the past and above all in Scripture, we clearly love the men and women of our own generation, and passionately desire to serve as faithful witnesses here, facing the challenges and opportunities of our own time.

(4) My most forlorn hope is that as this fad—for that is what it is—burns itself out, rising numbers of Christians will learn a great lesson, and resolve afresh to be passionate about Christ, about Christ crucified, about the gospel holistically considered, and not about fads. As a result, when new fads come along, we will learn from them what we should, while maintaining our allegiance to and excitement in the old rugged cross and him who hung upon it, was buried, and rose again for our justification, so that our reading and praying priorities, the kinds of conferences we attend and the colleagues we cherish and admire, the language we use and the heritage we seek to pass on to a new generation, are all shaped by eternal realities, and not by fads. *Soli Deo gloria!*

D. A. Carson is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL, and is the author of numerous books, including *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*.



Mark Driscoll

A good friend of mine and noted missiologist named Dr. Ed Stetzer has rightly said that the gospel of Jesus Christ must be both contended for (Jude 3) and contextualized (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Relatedly, the hottest theologies today are reformed and emerging. Reformed folks have a legacy of being great defenders of biblical truth, while also being less skilled at contextualizing the gospel for various cultural groups in America. The result is sometimes an irrelevant orthodoxy. Emerging folks are skilled at contextualizing the gospel but often woefully weak at contending for the timeless truths of sound doctrine. The result is sometimes a relevant heterodoxy.

My hope is that what emerges is a blessing of both teams, so that contenders for the gospel become better at evangelism, and contextualizers of the gospel walk away from some of the heretical doctrines (e.g. denial of the inerrancy of Scripture, penal substitutionary atonement, hell, and male pastors) they are considering by returning to Scripture and the legacy of faithful teachers who have guided the church in previous generations. In short, I hope for an uprising of cool Calvinists who can preach the Bible, teach the truth, fight the heretics, plant churches, evangelize the lost, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, and compel men to be manly.

Mark Driscoll is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Church and the also the author of *The Radical Reformation* and *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*



Michael Horton

Many of the concerns raised by emergent folks have helped the wider church to think through its preoccupation with "Boomer" values. At the same time, I hope that the criticism the movement has received will be taken to heart. The church is not a niche market or a demographic. To paraphrase the Apostle Paul, in Christ there is no Boomer or Buster, Gen Xer or Millennial. When will we get off of the movement roller coaster and patiently endure the community that Christ has established for the fellowship and growth of the saints as well as their mission to the world? Hopefully,

all of us will take the church more seriously and find ways of integrating rather than segmenting the generations.

Michael Horton is the J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics at Westminster Seminary California in Escondido, CA, and is the author of numerous books including, most recently, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology*.



Mike McKinley

The emerging church conversation will be profitable for evangelicals if it results in a clarification of the gospel and a better understanding of how the church should proclaim the gospel to the unbelieving world.

Evangelicals need to clarify what elements of the church's life and proclamation cannot be altered or adjusted no matter where the culture drifts. They also need to identify which aspects of the church's life are adaptable and should be tailored to the environment in which the church is functioning. Failure to keep to the unchanging truths of the gospel has made the church impotent, a gun with no bullets. Failure to adapt the merely cultural forms of church life has made the church irrelevant, a tree falling in the forest with no one to hear it.

At its best, the emerging church represents a valid criticism of the cold, dead, legalism that has killed so many churches. At its worst, it represents an extreme accommodation to the culture that leaves the church looking so much like the world that it no longer has a gospel to proclaim or a platform from which to do it. If evangelicals can sort out the essential, unchanging aspects of the faith from the cultural forms, then we will be better prepared for the next cultural shift that comes our way.

Mike McKinley is the pastor of Guilford Baptist Church in Sterling, VA and the 9Marks lead writer on the topic of church membership.



Daniel Montgomery

There have been many attempts in recent years to have a “dialogue” with the emerging church. In reality, the so-called emerging church is so diverse that I’m often left wondering with whom this dialogue is supposed to be taking place. Is it the freewheeling neo-universalist emerging church, or is it the theologically orthodox church plants in black t-shirts? Nonetheless, if one backs up far enough on the emerging canvas, one can see some recurring themes—most born from reaction against their church predecessors. Instead of focusing on criticism, I want to echo a legitimate concern that emergent church leaders have voiced: a reductionistic understanding of Christianity.

First, many believers have adopted a reductionistic understanding of the church, believing that the church is a building, a political affiliation, or a name on a membership role. This understanding produces religious consumers, whose commitment waxes and wanes whenever the next building is built, when the politics cool, or when the next big thing happens down the block.

Second, many Christians have reduced the scriptures to a set of moralist rules or a self-help guidebook. Emergent leaders loudly remind us that the scriptures are an organic whole, the beautiful story of creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. Tired of Dr. Phil-inspired sermons, many emergent leaders invite us back into the life-changing story of scripture, the story of what God has done throughout history to reconcile all things to himself.

Finally, and most tragically, many Christians have come to believe a reductionistic gospel. One only needs to say a prayer and walk an aisle to be “saved.” The emergents are right in reminding us that a confession of faith is not the whole story. Salvation is an event, but it’s also a process (Phil 2:12-13). The gospel is the means and the motivation for every aspect of the Christian life - not just conversion. Instead of seeing the gospel as solely about justification, they remind us that it’s also about sanctification—the transformation of our minds and hearts into what he wants and intends for them to be. Our conversion is (as one emerging leader notes) the starting line of a life-long, life-giving journey.

Unfortunately, in the emerging church, these prophetic reactions sometimes swing the pendulum too far. Sanctification overshadows justification, and the glory of the cross isn’t acknowledged. The story of the scriptures overshadows the fact of the scriptures, and inerrancy and authority are lost. The joys of community overshadow the needs for polity, discipline, and worship, and the purity of the church isn’t guarded.

For this reason, I hope that evangelicals and emergents can hear one another. I hope that we can embrace the church in its rich biblical and historical heritage. I hope we can walk back into the strange world of the Bible, amazed as much by its God-breathed authority as we are by its life-giving power and presence. Most of all, I hope that all of us—emergents, evangelicals, and Christians of all stripes—can stand amazed once again at the blazing glory of Christ in his life, death and resurrection.

Daniel Montgomery is the pastor of Sojourn Community, a church he planted in Louisville, KY in 1999.



Brent Thomas

The emerging conversation has drawn attention to the need for both humility and orthodoxy. Humility is an identifier of Christianity, as many have been saying. Yet humility does not mean refusing to say something is wrong.

Unfortunately, humility has become equated with uncertainty, and it has been labeled prideful to ever draw lines or arrive at sure answers.

It’s true that doctrine is sometimes promoted in pride. It’s true that doctrine has often been fed to the head and not the heart. It’s true that doctrine has been treated as a mere intellectual pursuit. As we continue to take doctrine seriously, therefore, we must do so in humility, always considering others as more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3-4) and learning to “speak the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). We should also repent where we have used doctrine as a hammer and for elevating intellectual pursuits, because “knowledge puffs up”(1 Cor. 8:1); and “a proud heart” is sin (Prov. 21:4).

At the same time, all the so-called humility in the world apart from truth is nothing more than a worthless rag. Only the truth will set us free, and this requires knowing truth from falsehood, and labeling error as such. As we see orthodoxy being stretched, we are reminded of its necessity. Scripture admonishes us to take doctrine seriously (Eph. 4:11-15), because some will (intentionally or not) bring false doctrine with them.

The emerging conversation has been a helpful starting point for many of these considerations, and I pray that the church at-large will grow in both humility and fidelity to the truth through this conversation, so that it may fulfill its role as the “body of Christ” and the “pillar and buttress of truth.”

Brent Thomas is the teaching pastor at Grace Community Church in Glen Rose, TX.



Carl Trueman

There are a number of things which we evangelicals as a movement have, on the whole, done rather badly. One of them is history, and a cursory glance at the key texts and figures in the emergent movement would indicate that it is no exception to this rule. So, to put it in a somewhat facetious way, I hope that evangelicals will see the poor historical analysis offered by various emergent leaders and be provoked in reaction to think in more depth about history, how our past is to be understood, how it can help to inform the present, and how it allows us to develop a critical perspective on the world in which we live.

Further, we evangelicals have not really spent enough time thinking about the church—what she is, what she should look like, and how she connects to individuals. The emergents offer, as far as I can see, some valid, if scarcely original, criticisms of evangelicalism in this area. If this causes us to think carefully about how evangelicalism (as an essentially transdenominational movement) needs to think in more ecclesiastical terms, then the EC will have done us a great service.

Carl Trueman is the professor of historical theology and church history at Westminster Theological Seminary, and the author of *The Wages of Spin*, *Luther's Legacy*, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen's Trinitarian Theology*, and other titles.



Jonathan Leeman

As Carson suggests in his second point above, most challenges to orthodoxy throughout the church's history have enabled the church to better define what it believes about God and his relationship with humankind. Arias gave Christ's church the opportunity to consider more carefully what Scripture says about the Trinity. The German Enlightenment prompted the church to develop a more robust account of revelation and inspiration.

Okay, what about the Emergents? Where is orthodoxy challenged, or at least “discussed”? Let me comment on two areas. On the one hand, the discussion they bring to the table simply represents the most recent stages of the revelation/inspiration controversies of modernity. The purveyors of a generous orthodoxy who claim to move beyond conservatism and liberalism say so because that's what their theological daddies—the “post-liberals”—say (see “Emerging Consequences”). This is not the place for an explanation, but post-liberalism isn't post anything. (Same Cartesian starting point. Same post-Kantian result.)

On the other hand, the generously orthodox aren't so much interested in talking about revelation or inspiration. If you force them to, they'll often—like their post-liberal fathers—wave the conversation away with something that sounds vaguely Barthian about God speaking, and the words of Scripture witnessing to what he has said. Really, they would rather spend their energy talking about how fallen, finite, and embedded human beings are. They have a very strong sense of the fact that humans belong to particular times and places and families and ways of speaking. Ergo, even if God does speak through Scripture, we have no way of agreeing or being certain of what his words mean. To the contrary, our embeddedness or situation-ed-ness will determine how we interpret Scripture.

If the first challenge to orthodoxy remains in the broad areas of revelation and inspiration, as it has been for some time, the second challenge moves us more narrowly into the area of Scripture's clarity, or what theologians sometimes call its perspicuity. Is Scripture sufficiently clear for us admittedly fallen, finite, and embedded humans to understand what it means. The doctrine of the clarity of

Scripture, which has been explicitly affirmed at least since Martin Luther, says that Scripture is sufficiently clear for instruction in the way of salvation and a life that is pleasing to God (2 Tim. 3:16), and that presumes the church in different times and places will agree on what the way of salvation is and what the life pleasing to God is.

It's interesting to consider how many theologically conservative writers say that the emerging conversation is about relevance. Relevance is to the Emergent's situational determinism what Dr. Jekyll is to Mr. Hyde, the sedate and urbane version of what can transform into a dangerous ogre. After all, both versions instruct the church to exercise greater awareness of time and place in how it uses language and metaphor.

The goal for evangelicals, therefore, isn't to get rid of Dr. Jekyll. He's a nice guy and an above-average scientist. The goal is to prevent him from drinking the nasty serum of postmodern epistemology that turns him into his less savory counterpart. One way of doing that may be to include a stronger doctrine of the clarity of Scripture in his diet. Mark Thompson's brand new *A Clear and Present Word: The Clarity of Scripture*, which 9News hopes to review sometime this fall, puts a healthy portion of clarity on the menu. Hopefully others will follow suit.

And pastors, explicitly teach your churches about the clarity of Scripture! Model it in your preaching as well.

Jonathan Leeman is the 9News editor.

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The Emerging Consequence of Whose Ideas?

With contributions below from Gregg Allison, Micah Carter, J. Ligon Duncan, Keith Goad, Jim Hamilton, Jonathan Leeman, and Stephen Wellum

Maybe you have heard plenty about the popularizers. After all, their shows are selling out. Their books are conquering the best-seller lists. And every weblog, magazine, and e- newsletter in the biz is talking about them. But where are these Emergent guys getting this stuff? Where do their ideas come from?

It's worth peeking into the Emergent classrooms to find out. A number of these popular level writers claim to eschew "doctrine." But you cannot not have doctrine. The eschewal of doctrine is a doctrine, and it rests on certain presuppositions. Whose? What professors are teaching their classes? What books are they dutifully reading?

Until recently, emergentvillage.com, one of the primary Emergent websites for networking and discussion, offered the following list of recommended "theology" books and authors (listed here in its entirety). Scroll down further, and you will find a brief summary on each author. The jargon might get a little technical. But if ideas have consequences, it's good to know what ideas are driving such a popular movement in our churches today.

Recommend reading "On Theology" at emergentvillage.com:²¹

Walter Brueggemann

- Ichabod Toward Home: The Journey of Gods Glory
- Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination
- Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles

Hans Georg Gadamer

- Truth and Method

Stanley J. Grenz, John R. Franke

- Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context

Stanley Hauerwas

- Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony

George A. Lindbeck

- The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age

Jürgen Moltmann

- The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God
- Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology

Nancey Murphy

- Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism

Miroslav Volf

- After Our Likeness: The Church As the Image of the Trinity
- Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation

N.T. Wright

- The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is

Walter Bruggemann (1933 –)

Author of some 58 books and professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia (PCUSA), Walter Brueggemann is characterized by some as a "post-modern"

²¹ This list was posted through early July 2006, but was taken down in late July or early August. However, David Donaldson cites this entire list in his article "Constructing a Postmodern Church with Ancient Building Blocks," in McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry 6 (2003-2006), 166, which can be found [here](#) (PDF).

scholar. Brueggemann himself distinguishes between three perspectives of biblical scholarship and likes to say that all three schools can learn from one another: the modernists, who see no unifying theme in Scripture but believe that every dominant interpretative tradition is a form of social control; the pre-modernists, who affirm a canonical reading of Scripture in light of the church's traditions (though here he is actually referring to post-liberals like Brevard Childs or George Lindbeck [see Lindbeck below]); and the post-modernists, who do not want to privilege any one reading of Scripture but argue that specific texts yield dynamic new meanings when read in new and evolving contexts. Brueggemann's own approach to biblical theology, a dialectical approach that seeks to be sensitive both to the historical forces that shaped the text ("in the fray") as well as to theological meaning of the final canonical form ("above the fray"), reflects aspects of all three perspectives.

This dialectic is worked out through "imaginative remembering." The Old Testament does not give us actual history or "reportage" of history, but a "sustained memory that has been filtered through many generations of the interpretive process, with many interpreters imposing certain theological intentionalities on the memory that continues to be reformulated." Memory is critical because Israel has transmitted its faith to us through story. "Story is not interested in 'deep structures,' in 'abiding truths,' nor in 'exact proofs.' It does not trade in 'eternal realities,'" he writes in the introduction to his Genesis commentary. "Story offers nothing that is absolutely certain, either by historical certification or by universal affirmation. It lives, rather, by the scandal of concreteness, by the freedom of imagination, and by the passion of hearing" (all ital orig.).

Biblical interpreters must therefore not be overly reliant on historical, rational, and dogmatic questions, but should instead yield to the "surprise raids" and "surprise assaults on imagination" of the biblical texts. That said, preaching becomes a dangerous business: "Preaching is a peculiar, freighted, risky act each time we do it: entrusted with an irascible, elusive, polyvalent Subject and flying low under the dominant version with a subversive offer of another version to be embraced by subversives"!

When asked in an interview if Scripture was his authority, Brueggemann replied, "it's the chief authority to me as long as one can qualify that to say that it is the chief authority when imaginatively construed in a certain interpretive trajectory."

—By Jonathan Leeman, Director of Communications, 9Marks.

Stanley Grenz (1950-2005) and John Franke (1951 –)

Without doubt, until his untimely death in 2005, Stanley Grenz (1950-2005) was one of postconservatism's most prolific and important theologians. For more than a decade, he was at the forefront of challenging evangelicals to rethink their understanding of the nature of theology, especially in light of the postmodern critique of what is now dubbed "modernism." Grenz, who served for many years as professor of theology and ethics at Carey/Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, co-authored *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* with John Franke, who presently serves as professor of historical and systematic theology at Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania.

As the title of the book suggests, Grenz and Franke are convinced that evangelicals need an alternative way of viewing the nature of theology in light of postmodernism's rejection of epistemological "foundationalism" for a more "chastened rationality." For them, this entails that theology must employ a nonfoundationalist epistemology which adopts a combination of coherentism, pragmatism, and the later-Wittgenstein's notion of language-games. In addition, Grenz and Franke develop the insights of Wolfhart Pannenberg (i.e. truth as historical and eschatological) and George Lindbeck (i.e. theological statements are not "true" in the sense that they say anything about a reality external to language, rather they are rules of grammar establishing the grammar of Christian thinking, speaking, and living). Thus, theological statements are not making "first-order" truth claims (i.e. asserting something about objective reality); instead they are "second-order" assertions (i.e. rules for speech about God). Within this understanding of the nature of theology, Grenz and Franke assert that what is "basic" for theology is not sola Scriptura, but what they label "the Christian-experience-facilitating interpretative framework" which consists of three sources—Scripture, tradition, and culture—and ultimately the Spirit who speaks through these three sources to the church today.

In their proposal for understanding the nature of theology, Grenz and Franke are clearly distinguishing themselves from historic evangelical theology and especially what has been meant by sola Scriptura,

namely, that Scripture is first-order language and thus the final, sufficient authority for all Christian faith and praxis. For them, Scripture is authoritative because it is the vehicle through which the Spirit speaks, yet in the Spirit's appropriation of Scripture, the Spirit's intention is not simply and totally tied to the author's intention in the text. Hence, reminiscent of Karl Barth, they are reluctant to posit a one-to-one correspondence between the Word of God and the words of scripture.

—By Stephen J. Wellum, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY

Stanley Hauerwas (1940 –)

Stanley Hauerwas is the professor of theological ethics at Duke Divinity School. His own graduate studies occurred at Yale. He was later influenced by the Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder and the Catholic theologian Alasdair McIntyre. In 2001 he was named "America's Best Theologian" by Time magazine, and was a guest on the Oprah Show. His major works include *The Peaceable Kingdom*, *The Grain of the Universe* (Gifford Lectures), and *Resident Aliens*.

In his theology, Hauerwas attempts to reframe the discussion away from what he perceives as the false modernist dichotomy following Kant between a liberal turn to the subject and one's experience of God, and the conservative insistence on a universally relevant, special revelation from God.

Hence, Hauerwas denies that Scripture has the inherent property of "divine authority" for what the church should believe or do. Instead, Scripture is the narrative of the Christian community that is taught by generation to generation, and is used, tested, and developed by people seeking to live out the narrative. Since the Scriptures belong to the Christian community and not some other community, it's the church that provides the proper interpretation of the Scriptures and confers authority to it. In that sense, Scripture takes a secondary role to the church.

By the same token, Hauerwas criticizes modernist thinkers (liberals and conservatives) for separating ethics from theology, community, and history. Instead he proposes a virtue ethic where a tradition or a narrative-community teaches people the will of God. A person does not act upon rules; rules are secondary to virtue. Rather, a person acts upon the convictions and virtues that have been instilled by a particular community. Hauerwas says that the Christian life as a journey instead of a dialogue, since the dialogue metaphor only allows the believer to go back-and-forth between the law and the gospel. The journey proposes that the Christian develops in character by committing himself to the story of Jesus Christ—the man of peace. (Hauerwas also declares that being a Christian necessarily means being a pacifist.)

Hauerwas is less concerned with who Christ was and more on how he is an example to a community. He believes theology has no "essence," but is merely an outline to help illuminate the story of a community. Therefore, he redefines the classic doctrines of justification and sanctification out of their historical interpretation. Justification is following in the path of God by Christ's example. Sanctification is a reminder of what kind of path Christians are on.

—By Keith Goad, Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Hans Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

Hans Georg Gadamer is best known for his contribution to hermeneutics. His most influential work and magnum opus is *Truth and Method*, which is of particular interest for emergent thinkers. His position in hermeneutics stands in contrast to the traditional and popular position of E. D. Hirsch, Jr. and Emilio Betti. Unlike Hirsch and Betti, Gadamer clearly rejects the notion of authorial intent as the supreme criterion of textual meaning.

Gadamer's goal in hermeneutics is not prescriptive like Hirsch (i.e., putting forward "rules" for correct interpretation), but rather descriptive in the phenomenological sense (i.e., what happens in the process of our seeking understanding). Gadamer applies the philosophy of Husserl (phenomenology) and the existentialism of Heidegger to hermeneutics to produce what is appropriately labeled "phenomenological hermeneutics."

Gadamer's influence on the emergent movement is perhaps most clear in his understanding of "truth." For Gadamer, truth is not a static concept, but a dynamic one; it is existential, not epistemological. Truth arises in the context of language, which must be properly interpreted according to the community or tradition from where the language originates (notice the similarity with Wittgenstein here). The tradition, not the author, is the ultimate locus of authority in interpretation. Further, there are no objective "answers" but only questions, and these questions are present from within the tradition.

Finally, Gadamer produces a concept related to truth and understanding endearing to emergent culture: conversation. Conversation, or dialogue, is more than just the intersection of two monologues, but rather the search for commonality and mutuality. With this concept, truth is what the conversants agree it to be as a result of dialogue. Thus, meaning, truth, and understanding stem from conversation. Here is Gadamer's dichotomy between truth and method, where praxis is more highly valued than is objective truth.

—By Micah Carter, Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

George Lindbeck (1923 –)

George Lindbeck is a theologian of the "New Yale School." His interests and writings have been ecumenical and seek to reconcile Protestants and Roman Catholics (he was invited to observe the Second Vatican Council). His major works include *The Future of Roman Catholic Theology, Infallibility,* and *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.* The latter is his greatest contribution to postliberal theology, where he proposes a theory of doctrine that attempts to reconcile all Christian traditions "without capitulation."

Lindbeck does not believe the church can go back to a "pre-critical" theory of doctrine. And he reacts against both conservative and liberal "post-critical" theories, whether the "cognitive-propositional" theory of Carl F. H. Henry, which asserts that doctrines proclaim objective realities; or the "experience-expressive" theory of writers like Friedrich Schleiermacher, which finds universality in all religions according to similarities in feelings and attitudes.

Lindbeck proposes an alternative theory by comparing religion to culture—the cultural-linguistic model. Religion provides a set of skills, a grammar, a vocabulary, and a logic that give shape to a believer's life and thought. Doctrine is therefore defined as "communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action." It functions like grammar does with language, giving structure to how we think and what we say. Yet that's all it does. It does not make objective truth-claims that can be used to assess the "grammar" of other religions, just like one would not use an English grammar to assess the Chinese language.

To make this argument, Lindbeck distinguishes between three ways of talking about truth (ontological, categorical, and intrasystemic). He essentially says that a statement is "true" (ontologically) if it achieves or performs the intended outcome within the community of believers (categorical) and in a fashion that's coherent within the entire system (intrasystemic). Again, the "truth" cannot refer to any "extra-linguistic or extra-human reality" (something outside the system). For instance, the church community's statement "Christ is Lord" is true not because it can be certain that he really is Lord, but because the community really lives as if Christ is Lord. In short, no proposition can achieve the status of universal objectivity; a proposition can only be true in "determined settings." The proposition "Christ is Lord" is only true within the Church. In all this, Lindbeck wants it to be known that he is not proposing a "creedless Christianity," but he does say that creeds are culturally, linguistically, and historically limited.

A further example should help. Lindbeck confesses there is no salvation outside of the church. But he also says there is no condemnation outside of the church. In order for an individual to be condemned, one must learn the unique language and logic of the Christian message by being a part of the church, and then reject it. The goal of proclaiming the story of Jesus is to provide doctrines that are guidelines for how to believe and live, rather than affirmations of objectively true content.

—By Keith Goad, Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Jürgen Moltmann (1926 –)

Professor of systematic theology at Tübingen, Jürgen Moltmann (1926-) is perhaps one of the most influential theologians of the post-WWII period, particularly among liberation theologians. He is best known for his early work, *Theology of Hope*, which reflects a dialectic between cross and resurrection as the foundation for both a present and a future hope of the transformation of the whole of reality. Moltmann's thesis borrows heavily from Hegel, adding bits and pieces of the Christian truth claim to Hegel's scheme of "dialectic" (note also the affinity for the Marxist philosophy of Ernst Bloch here).

Moltmann touches on resurrection again in his later work, *The Coming of God*, where he argues that God is a future reality drawing everything into himself. In a real sense, for Moltmann, God does not exist in the present, since he is in the future (reflecting an overemphasis on divine transcendence, probably showing his interpretation of Barth). Moltmann does not really believe that there will be, historically, a resurrection from the dead, however. Rather, it is the hope of the resurrection that is what matters most.

The Trinity and the Kingdom of God, of particular importance to emergent thinkers, submits a strong proposal for the social Trinity combined with aspects of process theism, arguing that God is deeply influenced by the world. Moltmann is not a process theist, but his understanding of God's involvement with the world (and vice versa) is strongly panentheistic. Moltmann's panentheism leads him to defend a strong ecological concern as well.

—By Micah Carter, Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Nancey Murphy (1941 –)

Nancey Murphy is a professor of Christian philosophy at Fuller Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren. She has written a number of books including *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, *Theology in the Age of Scientific Reason*, *Reconciling Theology and Science*, *Religion and Science*, and *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*. Much of her work explores the intersection of faith and science.

With the development of neuroscience, MRIs, and PET scans, an ever-growing body of evidence suggests that that much of what used to be considered the realm of the soul—including consciousness, self-awareness, personality, moral sensitivity, cognitive reasoning, memory, volition, even religious aptitude—is intimately tied to neurological processes operating in the brain and central nervous system. This has led to a serious questioning by some evangelicals of the traditional doctrine of humanity, especially as to the reality and nature of the soul and its relationship with the body. Murphy has become known for her perspective on this debate.

She is a proponent of a theory called nonreductive physicalism. She notes what her view denies: "First, physicalism is a denial of dualism. Second, the nonreductive part is the denial of the supposition that physicalism also entails the absence of human meaning, responsibility and freedom." Then she explains her theory:

What do nonreductive physicalists believe about human nature? For starters, let me put it this way: For dualists, the concept of the soul serves the purpose of explaining what we might call humans' higher capacities. These include a kind of rationality that goes beyond that of animals, as well as morality and a relationship with God. A reductive view would say that, if there is no soul, then people must not be truly rational, moral or religious; that is, what was taken in the past to be rationality, morality and spirituality is really nothing but brain processes. The nonreductive physicalist says instead that if there is no soul, then these higher capacities must be explained in a different manner. In part they are explainable as brain functions, but their full explanation requires attention to human social relations, to cultural factors and, most importantly, to God's action in our lives ("Nonreductive Physicalism," in Joel B. Green and Stuart L. Palmer, eds., *In Search of the Soul: Four Views of the Mind-Body Problem*, 115-16)

In other words, the "whole person" cannot be identified, as was done previously, with a "soul" (thus, the physicalism of Murphy's proposal), but neither can it be fully analyzed and explained with recourse to neurophysical processes (thus, the nonreductive aspect of her proposal). The whole person—

existing in and with social relations, cultural realities, and divine activity—contributes top-down or downward causal effects, resulting in human meaning, responsibility and freedom. She admits, “Downward causation is a controversial idea.” Yet, “The sense in which I intend it here is parallel to the claim that there are emergent properties...with new causal powers. This is not to say that there are new causal forces, but rather that there are new complex entities with the ability to use lower-level causal forces...in new ways to do new things....This does not involve overriding lower-level laws, but rather selection among lower-level causal processes” (ibid, 136).

In her book *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism*, Murphy argues that the intractable Liberal-Conservative divide is due to “foundationalist” methods. With the demise of foundationalism, a postfoundationalist approach like George Lindbeck’s points to a way forward.

—By Gregg Allison, Associate Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Miroslav Volf (1956 –)

After completing his Dr. Theol. under Jürgen Moltmann at Tübingen, Croatian born Miroslav Volf went on faculty at Fuller Theological Seminary. He is now a professor of systematic theology at Yale Divinity School. He is most known for his books *Work in the Spirit*, *Exclusion and Embrace*, *After Our Image*, and, most recently, *Free of Charge*. In February 2006, Volf hosted a conference at Yale Divinity School called “Emergent Theological Conversation” together with Christian Scharen, Tony Jones, and Brian McLaren.

The atrocities committed between Serbs and Croats in the early 1990s drive much of Volf’s work. The themes of reconciliation, forgiveness, and God as supreme giver figure prominently in his writings and projects. These themes arise in his earlier book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, where Christians are called to avoid rigid boundaries which exclude others, and to have porous boundaries that both recognize dependence on others for identity (a Serb is made a Serb, in part, by virtue of the fact that he’s not a Croat) and leave space open for reconciliation with the other, even if the other is one’s enemy. In *Free of Charge*, Volf again offers an account of the radically giving and forgiving Christian life, a life patterned after the forgiveness given to all humanity through the work of God in Christ.

Like Scot McKnight (in *Jesus and His Death*), Volf affirms what he describes as an “inclusive” view of substitutionary atonement, as opposed to an “exclusive” view. The exclusive view characterizes Christ as a “third-party” who dies “in our place” or “instead of us.” This fails to recognize that guilt is not transferable, Volf says, even if Christ absorbs the penalty. An inclusive view therefore emphasizes the fact that it was God himself, not some third party, who bore the penalty for sin. Also, atonement occurs through a sinner’s identification with Christ in his death and resurrection. Christ “bore our sin,” and the “divine Judge was judged in our place.” Yet sinners share that condemnation with Christ. Christ “died for all, and therefore all died” (2 Cor. 5:14). So “Christ’s death doesn’t replace our death. It enacts it.” And “What happened to him happened to us. When he was condemned, we were condemned. When he died, we died.” Since the sinner then participates in Christ’s death, “Death then separates the doer from the [guilt of his] deed” (see *Free of Charge*, chs. 4-6; esp. 147, 164).

The implications of Christ’s death for “all” are “immense.” “All means all without exception.” So God doesn’t wait for confession to forgive; “God forgives before we confess.” Does that mean God unjustly overlooks unconfessed sin? No, he still condemns sin, and he does so by forgiving it. To forgive someone is to implicitly acknowledge the fact that they have sinned; that implicit acknowledgment, then, is a form of condemnation, i.e. justice. Volf therefore wrote an open letter to Timothy McVeigh in *Christian Century* on May 9, 2001, one week before McVeigh’s execution, and told him about the amazing forgiveness of God in Christ to the thief on the cross. He then closed the letter, “Timothy, we have never met, and we are not likely to meet in this life. But I will look for you in paradise.”

—By Jonathan Leeman, Director of Communications, 9Marks.

N. T. Wright (1948 –)

Tom Wright is the Bishop of Durham (Church of England). Wright has made significant contributions to the study of Paul and Jesus, being a major figure associated with the “New Perspective on Paul” and

having given the “Third Quest for the Historical Jesus” its name. He is engaged in a massive, multi-volume project, “Christian Origins and the Question of God,” which may prove to be as influential as Bultmann’s Theology of the New Testament.

The first volume deals with hermeneutical starting points and the history of the second temple period. The second volume presents Jesus from the Synoptic Gospels. The third volume argues for the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The next volume on Paul is eagerly awaited, because Wright accepts the conclusions of E. P. Sanders regarding second-temple Judaism. Sanders holds that the Jews with whom Paul was in dialogue were not legalists. If the Jews did not understand themselves to be working for their salvation, then the church needs a radical redefinition of the traditional understanding of justification.

Central to all of Wright’s work is a focus on the grand sweep of the whole narrative of the Bible. He focuses on Jesus and Paul both in their own historical contexts and in salvation historical perspective, asking questions such as, what is wrong with the world? What is God doing to remedy it? Where are we in the story? A major emphasis in Wright’s telling of the Bible’s story is that Jesus came proclaiming the end of the exile and Yahweh’s return to Zion. He holds that the exile reached its climax at the cross, and that membership in the covenant community is the key issue for the people of God.

Wright has had a wide influence in evangelical circles, where he is appreciated for, among other things, his evident intellect and learning, his considerable abilities as a popularizer, his high view of the historicity of the Gospel records, his supernaturalism, and his willingness to engage in the defense of cardinal Christian doctrines (like the resurrection of Christ) even in the context of the liberal academic guild.

However, Wright has also prompted concern amongst evangelicals because of his rejection/criticism of the historic Reformational understanding of key doctrines like justification, the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, as well as his outspoken defense of women’s ordination and egalitarianism. More basically, Wright attempts to chart a middle way between what he considers to be equally errant fundamentalist and liberal views of Scripture and revelation (both of which he views as products of modernity that need to be transcended), and consequently his view of Scripture is different from the Calvin-Westminster-Warfield-Chicago Statement inerrancy position.

Those in sympathy with the project of recasting Christian theology in light of our “postmodern” context are often attracted to Wright’s views of eschatology and ethics, with his focus on the “now,” rather than the “not yet” and on the social and structural entailments of the kingdom of God for Christians who want to live out the Lordship of Christ as intended by Jesus and Paul (as Wright sees it).

Of Wright’s view of justification, Bryan Chapell has astutely observed, “Wright’s argument that justification is not so much about how someone is personally saved, but rather who should be recognized as a member of the covenant community can move the focus of our theology from properly emphasizing the personal faith and repentance from which all true Christian assurance and faithfulness flows. Of course, we must grant that there is every necessity of recognizing Christ as Lord, and living out the imperatives of our faith commitments in order to have the assurance of our salvation and express love for our Savior. Still, this necessity is an insufficient reason to question the historic understanding of justification.”

—By J. Ligon Duncan III, Ph.D., Adjunct Professor of Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, President, Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church (PCA), Jackson, Mississippi.

—Also, James M. Hamilton Jr., Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Biblical Studies, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Houston Park Place Campus.

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Book Reviews:

The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out Without Selling Out
(Zondervan, 2004, 204pp)

&

Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an
Emerging Missional Church
(Zondervan, 2006, 208pp)

By Mark Driscoll



Reviews by Mike McKinley

Much ink has been spilled lately describing, advocating, criticizing, and defending the emerging church movement. Rightly so. It is a challenge that evangelicals need to handle well if they want to move into the next era of church life in a healthy way.

Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and founder of the Acts 29 network, is a unique voice in the conversation. He was a part of the emerging movement at its beginning, and he now stands as one of its most visible figures and one of its most passionate critics.



In his first book, *The Radical Reformation*, Driscoll lays out his "contribution toward the furtherance of the emerging church in the emerging culture" (*Radical*, 2). The problem, as Driscoll sees it, is that most evangelical churches are either completely hostile to the unbelieving world in which they live, or so friendly with the surrounding culture that they have lost the unique claims of the gospel that alone have the power to change people. The former are the fundamentalists, the latter are the liberals.

Driscoll insists that a church that wants to effectively minister to the emerging culture must combine the best of both worlds: the conservative theology of the fundamentalist church with the deep cultural involvement of the liberal church. The result is a church "living in the tension of being Christians and churches who are culturally liberal and yet theologically conservative." As you might imagine, this kind of thinking generally succeeds in annoying parties on both sides of the issue. And Driscoll is not without his critics.

In his second book, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*, Driscoll provides a history of how Mars Hill Church began, while also throwing in a healthy dose of the lessons he has learned along the way. He describes in often gory detail how Mars Hill Church grew from less than forty-five people to over four thousand. Along the way he shares the terrible mistakes, the jaw-dropping successes, the blessings, the failures, and the costs that have come along with pastoring an emerging church.

Taken together, the two books constitute a clarion call to the evangelical church in America, as it adapts to its marginalized status in post-modern culture. In order to review these books most helpfully, I would like to point out a few of their most prominent strengths as well as suggest a few areas of concern.

STRENGTHS

1. A Distaste for Legalism

Driscoll rightly perceives that legalism threatens the church's ability to reach the lost. He describes legalism as one of the "well-worn and dangerous ruts that are seemingly impossible to avoid" (*Radical*, 139). Yet he argues the church must break out of these ruts if it wants to reach the lost in postmodern culture.

Too often, says Driscoll, the conservative church, in its effort to keep itself and its children away from the corrupting influence of sin, has simply removed itself from sinners. It has ostracized those who do not agree to abide by its extra-biblical rules, and it has used those rules as a litmus test for true faith. As a result, many churches have lost their opportunity to be a prophetic voice in the sinful world. They

rarely engage the culture, and when they do it's only to scream slogans at those with whom they disagree.

Driscoll serves the church by calling attention to the dangers of legalism. Legalism is nothing less than an attempt to "define holiness as we see it, rather than as God sees it" (Radical, 142). As a result, it's a threat to the gospel, and it destroys the church's ability to fulfill its God-given mission by hiding its light under a bushel. Instead, Driscoll urges legalistic churches to renew their faith so that the true gospel of Jesus Christ is given the opportunity to transform even the worst sinner, which means actively pursuing just those kinds of people.

Legalists aren't idiots, though. They are responding to a real problem, the corrupting influence of the world. So what should churches do?

Driscoll helpfully points to a better way forward. Rather than building walls around ourselves, we must stick close to Jesus, who was not corrupted by involvement with sinners. Legalism does not actually keep anyone from sin, he points out, but rather only serves to "rearrange the flesh and get people to stop drinking, smoking, and having sex, only to start being proud of their morality" (Radical, 40).

Rather, we must push forward faithfully into the world, confident that what will keep us from sin is not our own commitment to separation from sinners, but "Jesus' love for us and our love for him (which are) the only tethers that keep us from abusing our freedom" (Radical, 40).

2. A Love for the Lost

These books also reveal the heart of an evangelist. Driscoll shows a genuine passion and love for the lost that cannot fail to energize and challenge the reader. Jesus was a friend to prostitutes and tax collectors, and many of Driscoll's stories describe amazing conversions of the same kinds of notorious sinners. These books present a pastor and a church modeling a sincere love for the lost, all the while insisting that the church must not accommodate their sinfulness but call them to repentance.

This approach toward the lost means engaging sinners on their turf. And this, in turn, means the church will find itself in some unusual—but not inherently sinful—places. So Mars Hill Church has done a number of unusual things in order to reach sinners, including renovating and running a venue for punk rock shows in a neighborhood known for being a place where heroin addicts liked to shoot up, defecate, and, not infrequently, die.

Though this kind of engagement with the world might offend the sensibilities of some, Driscoll is right to argue that the church cannot afford to be squeamish about such matters. As the culture drifts farther and farther from any kind of identification with Christianity, the church will simply be unable to call decent people with Judeo-Christian morality to attend church more regularly. Instead, the vast majority of people in the surrounding culture (which is the church's mission field) will be completely unchurched and largely devoid of Christian ethics (Confessions, 16ff). Thus, the church will have to extend itself into some very dark places in order to shine its light there.

3. Respect for Scripture

Many who push the church to engage with the surrounding world emphasize exegeting the culture rather than the Bible. But Driscoll has kept the horse before the cart. He consistently affirms that the Scriptures must regulate our thinking and behavior. He writes that in the early days of his ministry,

The more I read my Bible, the more deeply the Holy Spirit convicted me that I had grievously erred by trying to figure out how to do church successfully by reading a lot of books, visiting a lot of churches, and copying whatever was working (Confessions, 44).

That conviction gave way to a new approach to the church:

As our mission began to develop, the New Testament teaching on church leadership and church discipline seemed increasingly wise and urgent.... people's eternal lives were at stake, and I would one day stand before Jesus to give an account for each person that he had entrusted to me to pastor,

leaving no room for ecclesiological experimentation or for vainly creating new definitions of church because I wanted to be cool (Heb 13:17). (Confessions, 47-48).

Most importantly, though, Driscoll has the gospel right. In reaching the culture, he does not advocate pandering to the lowest common denominator or simply meeting people's felt needs. Rather, he is crystal clear about the necessity of preaching the substitutionary death of Christ and the need for repentance and faith. He rightly sees that only the true gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to change lives and worlds.

4. Personal Transparency

In both of his two books, Driscoll is very honest about his personal failings, temptations, weaknesses, and sin. Some of the stories will make you laugh, some will make you cringe, others will make you rush to repent of your own sin and foolishness.

That he has such weaknesses does not make Driscoll unique, but his transparent willingness to share them does. Many leaders and authors seem bent on portraying themselves in the best light possible, thus discouraging "normal" pastors who are acutely aware of their weaknesses, and robbing Christ of the glory due to him for using such ordinary vessels to do great things. Driscoll's willingness to admit his weaknesses and failures is encouraging to those who would follow him, and it is glorifying to God.

CONCERNS

1. Emphasis on Church Size

The very structure of *Confessions* speaks to its emphasis on church size. The storyline follows the growth of the church, and each chapter is subtitled according to the church's size for that part of the story (e.g., "150-300" people). What's more, the size of the church is assumed to be a roughly accurate indicator of the church's health. Interestingly, Driscoll rightly assumes that some people will chafe at this kind of approach.

My concern is not so much that Driscoll has a large church, but rather that he seems to think that Scripture does not have anything to say about these kinds of matters. When it comes to church leadership and discipline, Driscoll goes to the Bible for guidance. But when it comes to matters of church size, he says that churches should "determine what size they would like to become" (*Confessions*, 28).

The same is true for worship style. Driscoll treats things like worship style as matters completely left to a church's tastes and preferences. Again, I'm not particularly concerned about the actual decisions he might have made on this question (though they may not be the same ones that I have drawn). Rather, I wish he would walk the reader through the process of evaluating these questions biblically, instead of quickly assuming that Scripture has nothing to say.

2. Strange Associations

Driscoll straddles two worlds: the theologically conservative universe of Reformed theology and the much more liberal world of the emergent church and its advocates. Thus, the friends he keeps probably annoy people on all sides of the issues. That being said, it is frustrating that Driscoll seems to admire and advocate the ministries of people who do not in any way hold to his core convictions about the gospel and the church. Am I just being a legalist? Well, I have to think there's a difference between spending time with and loving a person and advocating that person's ministry.

3. Style

Driscoll's is a larger than life personality. He is bold, brash, sarcastic, opinionated, and blunt. And he clearly revels in being thought of as such. In some ways, this style serves him well. He is able to say powerful and perceptive things in a way that makes their truth immediately obvious.

Yet I wonder if this style might work against his ultimate purpose. The tone is oftentimes intentionally irreverent and contrarian (e.g., he calls the Holy Spirit "the Ghost"; and he refers to Jesus coming back with a tattoo in Revelation 19:16). Driscoll tells stories and uses language that will offend those whose scruples are sensitive.

Now, Driscoll isn't stupid. In each of these cases he is trying to make a good point about the dangers of legalism. (Actually, I have no idea why he calls the Holy Spirit "the Ghost." That's just goofy). But I worry that a large part of his intended audience will never hear the message because of the style. Is it possible that Driscoll, ironically, has failed to tailor his message to the audience? My guess is that not many of Seattle's gutter punks are clamoring to pick up these books. I'd also guess that many evangelicals that read the books are already sympathetic to Driscoll's view of the church engaging with the world around it.

Where he really has an opportunity to change people's minds would be among the strongly conservative Christians—the legalist-leaning ones—who tend towards withdrawal as opposed to engagement.

Driscoll certainly has the credentials to gain a hearing with those kinds of people: his soteriology is Reformed. He has established a relationship with respected leaders like John Piper. He clearly affirms the inerrancy of Scripture and the importance of complementarianism. And he has something important to say about the church's need to be on mission with Jesus in a lost world. Yet my fear is that many people will not be able to get past some silly matters of tone and style in order to hear the message.

CONCLUSION

I encourage pastors and church leaders to read these two books and seriously weigh the ideas they contain. One cannot help but be sharpened and challenged by their call to missions in the world around us. These books have helped me to repent of ways in which I was failing to share Jesus' heart for the lost. They have sharpened my focus as a leader of the church. And they have refreshed my excitement for what can be done through the power of the gospel.

Mike McKinley is the pastor of Guilford Baptist Church in Sterling, VA and the 9Marks lead writer on the topic of church membership.

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Michael McKinley

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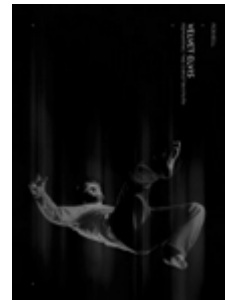
Book review:

Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith
(Zondervan, 2005, 208 pp.)

By Rob Bell

Reviewed by Greg Gilbert

Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, is in many ways taking the Christian world by storm. His "Everything is Spiritual" tour sold out 24 of 25 venues in 2006, and his series of short videos, called NOOMA, are selling thousands of copies each.



Apparently, Bell has a message that is resonating with vast numbers of people, and he's presenting that message in a way that's obviously connecting.

On its surface, Bell's first book, *Velvet Elvis*, might seem rather innocuous. His stated goal is to rethink the Christian faith in terms that will "strip it down to the bare bones" and get it back to "the most basic elements." For the most part, he pursues that goal in a style that is reasonable and to-the-point. He talks about humility, about asking questions, about wrestling with the biblical text—phrases that many evangelicals use daily.

But I am convinced that when Bell brings all these things together, the result is something far more revolutionary than what appears on the surface. In fact, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Bell actually ends up throwing the entire Christian gospel up for grabs. God is made so mysterious, doctrine is deemed so questionable, and biblical interpretations are so relativized that in the end, Bell leaves us wondering if anything can be known for sure, or if any understanding of the Christian faith and gospel is any better than any other.

For example, take Bell's reconception of the idea of doctrine. Bell argues that the doctrines of Christianity should be thought of as the "springs" that hold up the trampoline on which we jump and live in Christ. The springs are not the main point; they merely facilitate the greater goal of "us finding our lives in God" (25). Now that analogy has some truth to it. But it's also more dangerous than it might first appear. Conceiving of Christian doctrines as springs allows Bell to say that getting the doctrines right is not really that important. If you don't like one or two of the springs, you can just take them out of the trampoline and keep on jumping.

Here is Bell's take on the doctrine of the Trinity, for instance: "It is a spring, and people jumped for thousands of years without it. It was added later. We can take it out and examine it. Discuss it, probe it, question it. It flexes, and it stretches" (22). And what about Christ's birth to a virgin? Bell asks, "What if that spring was seriously questioned? Could a person keep jumping? Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian?" (26).

Bell affirms his belief in both the Trinity and the Virgin Birth, but he also says he wants to carve out some room to "question" those doctrines.

But what does he mean by that? Is he saying that one can study them, ask questions of them, learn from them? I wish he was. Yet why does Bell even pose the question? Why does he ask, "Could a person keep jumping?" and then not answer it? I can only conclude that Bell is saying that it wouldn't matter very much if someone stopped affirming them. "Yes, of course you can keep jumping, even if you stop believing in the Trinity or the Virgin Birth."

Bell's "questions" are not as innocuous as they first sound. They are the means by which he permits one to disconnect and throw away the springs one doesn't like.

The same relativizing tendency is present in Bell's handling of Scripture as well. Bell likes to say that the Bible has to be interpreted, a point with which very few people would disagree. But Bell's point is broader. He wants his readers to understand that they have as much right to interpret the Bible as anyone else (50). Even more, no one's interpretation is any better than any one else's.

When you hear people say they are just going to tell you what the Bible means, it is not true. They are telling you what they think it means. They are giving their opinions about the Bible" (54).

Everybody's interpretation is essentially his or her own opinion. Nobody is objective" (53).

In other words, some person or group of people simply made a decision that the text means this, not that. So the fact that we worship on Sunday, and not Saturday? "At one point in church history, a group of Christians decided that the Sabbath is not Saturday, but Sunday." (56) The fact that we do not sell all our possessions for the poor, or make women wear head coverings? Or even more to the point, the fact that we say a wife's role is to submit to her husband? "This is because someone somewhere made a decision about those texts . . . Somebody in your history decided certain Bible verses still apply and others don't" (55-56).

The effect of all this is to say that you can safely ignore just about any Christian doctrine or practice that doesn't sit well with you. That's the logical outcome of calling every interpretation a mere opinion.

Now of course there is some truth in Bell's statement that every Christian can interpret Scripture for himself or herself. That is what we mean by the "priesthood of all believers." But the point is to determine as accurately as possible what the author meant, and there are rules and systems and tools for determining that meaning. Bell is right to say that no one can come to the Bible entirely objectively. But even recognizing that, the fact remains that some interpretations are better than others. They make more sense of the words and the context. Bell seems to have no appreciation for that at all. By making all understandings of Scripture mere "opinions," and all traditions mere "decisions," he drives the priesthood of all believers to absurd, post-modern conclusions. The interpreter is now authoritative, not the text! Readers are invited to shape the Christian faith as they see fit.

There are other questions to be asked about this book as well. For instance, Bell's reinterpretation of hell—that it is full of forgiven people who simply have chosen to live in their own version of their story, rather than in God's version of it—is open to serious scrutiny (146). So is his assertion that Peter's problem was that he lost faith in himself, rather than in Christ (133). Neither of these ideas enjoys any support in Scripture. But as Bell understands Christianity, they have as much right to be believed as anyone else's "opinions."

That's what happens when one relativizes Christianity in this way. Bell can so unashamedly offer up such novel ideas because he is convinced that the traditional body of Christian doctrine and the traditional interpretations of Scripture are just opinions. Thus they can be dismissed without a second thought, and replaced with doctrines and interpretations more to his liking. At bottom, Bell seems to have no patience with a well-defined, systematic Christianity. On the contrary, he appears to be on a mission to shove away anything which threatens to give the gospel hard edges or clear boundaries.

So what happens to doctrine? It's demoted. Scripture? Relativized. Hell? Redefined. Faith? Redirected. And what Bell erects in the old gospel's place is a new gospel heavy on openness, mystery, questions and rawness, but inexcusably light on biblical Christianity.

Greg Gilbert is the 9Marks lead writer on the topic of the gospel. He is also the director of theological research for the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, KY.

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Greg Gilbert

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Give Me Doctrine or Give Me Death

By Greg Gilbert

In recent years, a number of books have been published that urge Christians to rethink a traditional understanding of “doctrine.” The discussions surrounding this question are many and varied, and they take place on every level of theological sophistication.

At the highest levels, the questions probe whether doctrine is even possible given postmodern ways of thinking: How capable are we of formulating any objective statements at all, given that we are all products of a culture? Is the idea of propositional truth even valid? Does the Bible contain doctrine as we have defined doctrine in the past?

These types of questions have begun to filter down into more popular works as well, so that they are becoming a part of the collective evangelical consciousness. At the more popular level, though, they are not articulated in terms of whether objective, propositional doctrines can exist in a postmodern world. They are stated like this: if I want a Christianity that is authentic, real, textured, and alive, can I possibly have that within the narrow constraints of a structured system of doctrine?

A growing number of books argue that the solution is to do away with the system altogether. Christians need to recognize, the argument goes, that the notion of a solid, objective doctrinal framework is a hold-over from the Middle Ages, or from the sixteenth century at best. There is no well-defined system of doctrine, and there doesn’t need to be. Christianity is more beautiful, more compelling, if we don’t try to clarify it and define it. To insist on this doctrine or that set of propositions is stultifying and restrictive. Better to leave the faith more mysterious, more open to interpretation, more free for people to arrive at their own understanding of the Christian faith.

One author to call for such rethinking is Rob Bell, who devotes a chapter of his book *Velvet Elvis* to the idea of doctrine. In the chapter he calls “Springs,” Bell paints a picture of a child jumping on a trampoline. He draws an elaborate—and initially compelling—analogy between that trampoline and the Christian faith. Doctrines, Bell says, are like the springs of the trampoline. They are necessary, but they are not the point. Far from it. No child who jumps on a trampoline thinks about the springs, and he certainly doesn’t call his friends to come and stare with him at the springs. No, he calls them to jump. He calls them to climb up on the canvass and leap and flip and fly . . . and live. No one argues about the springs of a trampoline. No one is excluded from jumping because they do not understand how the springs work. The point is the jumping, and the springs play only a secondary role in accomplishing that one main goal.

So it is, Bell argues, or at least so it ought to be, in the Christian life. Far too many Christians have placed far too much emphasis on the springs—on the doctrines. And in the process, they have made the gospel of Christ a cold, metallic, and logical thing, instead of the breathing, moving, adapting, living gospel that Christ taught and the apostles preached.

As I said, this vision of a living, jumping Christianity is compelling at first. In fact, we should not be too quick to dismiss what Bell is saying. So far as it goes, he’s right: The doctrines of Christianity are not the final and ultimate end. The doctrines point us to Christ. They help us to savor and love him more, and to understand better what God has accomplished in him. In this regard, Bell’s analogy is helpful.

But Bell actually pushes his playful analogy further. Consciously or not, he ultimately calls us to rethink the nature of doctrine more radically than is suggested by the affirmation that doctrines are not ends in themselves. As it turns out, the individual springs on Bell’s trampoline are expendable. You don’t like one spring or another? Alright, just disconnect it and keep jumping. It’s possible you’ll lose a little bounce, but on the whole, you ought to be fine. For example, people jumped for thousands of years, he says, without the “spring” of the Trinity. It was added to the trampoline later. And what about the Virgin Birth? What would happen if that spring were disconnected? Could you still jump? Bell implies that you probably could.

That kind of thinking throws the entire gospel up for grabs.

But is this really how we are to understand the role and place of doctrine? If so, the doctrines of the gospel have become something (or rather somethings) that can be tweaked and rearranged,

connected or detached, depending on one's own preferences and sensibilities. Bell's analogy was fun at first; but as he continues to press it, it becomes evident that saying that the doctrines of the gospel are just so many springs on a trampoline fails to observe how all those doctrines are inter-related with one another, how they all fit together, how they grow into and out of one another and form one integrated whole. It makes the doctrines of the gospel unrelated, unconnected, isolated, individual bits. It robs them of their organic beauty.

No analogy is perfect, but people used to talk about the "body" of Christian doctrine. It strikes me that the analogy of a "body" is much more than a trampoline. For one thing, a body can't be divided into pieces. It's not a collection of bits. Each part affects and is affected by all the others, and the result is an integrated and organic whole in which the many are and act as one. Moreover, no part of the body is expendable. You can't decide that you don't like this or that part and simply disconnect it.

Finally, a body is not designed simply to lie dead and immobile on the ground. It is meant for living—for allowing a person to walk and run, to touch and see and smell and taste and hear. In short, a body allows a person to engage with the world around him.

All of this is true of the doctrines of the gospel. Understood rightly and framed within the entire storyline of the Bible, the gospel is a perfect and beautiful whole. It is not merely a set of isolated statements; it is a story in which every part contributes to and is inseparable from the whole. Therefore, you can't simply remove one element of that story and expect it to stay the same. Above all, the gospel is not meant to lie dead, cold, and hard on a sheet of paper. It is meant for...living. The story of what God has done in Christ, the narrative of how he has redeemed and is redeeming the world, is meant to lead us to know him, to worship him, and to be reconciled both to him and to other people.

THE GOSPEL

God

The beginning of everything is God. Any complete understanding of the Christian gospel must begin with him and nothing else. "In the beginning," says Genesis 1:1, "God created." There is no more foundational truth than that, and the implications are staggering.

Especially so in our day. The idea that the world itself is not ultimate, but that it sprang from the mind, word, and hand of Someone Else is nothing short of revolutionary. It means that everything in the universe has a purpose, including us. Far from being the result of random chance, mutations, re-assortments, and genetic accidents, human beings are created. Every one of us is the result of an idea, a plan, and an execution—a fact which brings both meaning and responsibility to human life (Gen. 1:26-28).

One implication of this is that no one is autonomous. Despite all our talk about rights and liberties, we are not as free as we would like to think. We are created. We are made. And therefore we are owned. God makes claims on each one of us, one of which is the right to tell or command us how to live (Gen. 2:16).

Yet God's claim on our lives also includes the grand privilege of ruling over his creation under him, a kind of vice-regency over the entire world. "Fill the earth and subdue it," God told Adam. "Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Gen. 1:28). Had humans obeyed, the world would have been a paradise and we would all be princes—creation bringing forth its fruits, with Adam and Eve ruling over all of it, in perfect relationship with God, the world, and one another.

God's plan was "very good" (Gen. 1:31), so good that the stars sang together and the angels in heaven shouted for joy (Job 38:7). All creation looked at God's establishment of the world and its order, and they rejoiced. All of them, that is, except humans.

Man

It is often noted that Adam's sin—violating God's command by taking fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—sprang from pride. Adam wanted to be, and thought he could be, "like God." That's what the serpent promised Eve, and both Adam and Eve jumped at the chance to shed the vice-regency and take the crown itself. I'm sure their sin was rooted in pride, but surely there was more than pride at work in Adam's sin. There was discontent, too. Adam did not just look at God's

position on the throne and wish he could be there. He also looked at his own situation—his own exalted position over creation—and wished himself not there.

In all the universe, there was only one thing that God did not place under Adam's feet: God himself. Yet Adam decided that this arrangement was not good enough for him. So he rebelled.

The consequences were disastrous for Adam and Eve, their descendants, and the entire creation. Adam and Eve themselves were cast out of the idyllic garden of Eden. No longer would the earth willingly and joyfully present its fruits and treasures to them. They would have to work hard to get them. Even worse, God had promised them that death would follow disobedience (Gen. 2:17). They didn't physically die right away. Their bodies continued to live, lungs breathing, hearts beating, limbs moving. But their spiritual life—the one that matters most—ended immediately upon their removal from the garden. Their fellowship with God was severed. And thus their hearts shriveled, their minds filled with selfish thoughts, their eyes darkened to the beauty of God, and their souls became sere and arid, utterly void of that life God gave them in the beginning, when everything was good.

Still worse, this spiritual death did not stop with Adam and Eve. They passed it on to the rest of us. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Many died through one man's trespass." And again, "Because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man" (Rom. 5:15, 17).

This doctrine of original sin—that Adam's guilt was imputed to all humanity and his corruption passed from one generation to the next—is probably one that many people would rather disconnect from the trampoline. "What difference does it make?" they might ask. Yet it seems to me that if the author of a passage of Scripture—not to mention the Author—found those words worth including, there must be some reason for them. They must explain something, illumine some problem, or somehow enable worship.

So it is with the doctrine of original sin. This is not something that is dispensable to the gospel. In fact, to disconnect it or leave it out would create a gaping hole in the story. After all, the doctrine of original sin explains why one hundred percent of human beings are less than perfect. It illumines why we distrust biographies that say nothing negative about their subjects. If humans know anything beyond a shadow of doubt, it's that everyone, even our most exalted moral heroes, have flaws. Human beings are not basically good at all, and that is something we need to know in order to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. Until you have a sober understanding of the problem, you will not see the need for a solution.

If the story of history ended with a dismissal from Eden, the future would hold nothing but darkness and despair, pain and separation, hell and judgment. But the story doesn't end there. God acted.

In the darkest moment, even as he pronounced his curse against Adam and Eve, God let fall a word of hope. It wasn't much more than a word, either. It was just a hint, just a phrase tacked onto the end of God's sentence against the serpent. One misplaced sob, one distracted second, and Adam and Eve might have missed it. But it came—the tiniest flicker of light: "He shall bruise your head," God declared, "and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15).

The story was not over. Here was some gospel, some good news in the midst of the cataclysm.

The rest of the Bible tells the story of how the tiny seed of hope God planted on that day germinated, sprouted, and grew. For thousands of years, God prepared the world for his stunning coup de grace against the serpent. When it was all over, the sin Adam inflicted on his entire race would be defeated, the death God pronounced over his own creation would be dead, and hell would be brought to its knees. In essence, the Bible presents the story of God's counter-offensive against sin. It presents the grand narrative of how God made it right, how he is making it right, and how he will one day make it right finally and forever.

Christ

The coup de grace came ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ, who was fully God and fully man. He fulfilled that tiny flicker of hope God gave to Adam, and realized all that God promised to the chosen nation of Israel—the great prophet, the highest priest, the most exalted king.

He was the Savior, who brought life to that which was dead. And he did it by dying. Actually, he did it by living, then dying, then living again.

Here's how Jesus himself described his work:

"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (John 3:17).

But how? Paul says it like this:

"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14).

And again,

"God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In that one moment on the cross at Calvary, all the horrible weight of the sin of God's people was placed on Jesus' shoulders. And the curse that God pronounced in Eden and the curse of the law promised through Moses—the sentence of death—struck. Jesus cried out in agony as his Father turned his back and forsook him. And then he died.

Jesus did not suffer for his own sin; he didn't have any. He suffered for his people's sin. They should have died, not him. And yet he died for them, in their place. Just as Isaiah prophesied so many centuries before,

"Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:4-5).

My transgressions, his wounds.
 My iniquities, his chastisement.
 My sin, his sorrow.
 His punishment, my peace.
 His stripes, my healing.
 His grief, my joy.
 His death, my life.

If doctrines were springs, this one—the penal substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross—would be one of the most frequently stretched, twisted, and disconnected of them all. People are uncomfortable with the idea of Jesus being punished for someone else's sin. More than one author has called the idea "divine child abuse." And yet to toss this doctrine of substitution aside is to cut out the heart of the gospel. To be sure, there are other pictures in Scripture of what Christ accomplished with his death: ransom, example, reconciliation, and victory, to name a few. And yet the story of the Gospel demands this idea of substitution, too. You can't leave it out, or else you litter the landscape of Scripture with unanswered questions. Why the sacrifices? What did that shedding of blood accomplish? How can God have mercy on sinners without destroying justice? What can it mean that God forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, and yet by no means clears the guilty (Ex. 34:7)? How can a righteous and holy God justify the ungodly (Rom. 4:5)? He can because in Christ, mercy and justice were reconciled. The curse was executed, and we were freed.

And then Christ rose. If any doubt remained whether sin was defeated and death destroyed, that doubt was erased when the angel said to the women, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen!" (Luke 24:5-6).

If Christ had remained in the tomb, humanity would remain without hope. Death would have washed over him just like every other human. Every claim he made while living would have sunk into nothingness. But when breath entered his lungs again, when resurrection life electrified his glorified body, everything Jesus claimed was fully, finally, irrevocably, and unquestionably vindicated.

Once again, the whole of the Christian faith stands or falls on the doctrine of the resurrection. Disconnect this, re-imagine it to be anything less than the whole person of Jesus, body and all, rising

from the dead in resurrection life, and everything is lost. If the resurrection did not happen and Jesus' desiccated bones lie somewhere in a lost grave, then the entire Christian faith crashes to the ground. But if it did happen and he is alive, then the whole thing stands. And it stands unassailable. Indestructible. Unconquerable. Forever.

Response

All this of course requires a response from people. Jesus said it this way: "The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15)

Repent and believe. Turn away and trust. Renounce sin and rely on Christ.

Relying on Christ means embracing the fact that salvation has nothing to do with works performed or not performed, words said or not said. It means renouncing every other possibility for appealing to God's mercy. It means jumping empty-handed off a cliff and crying, "Jesus, if you don't save me, then I am lost," and then trusting by faith that he will save. Relying on Christ means putting away the instinct to stand before God and point to all your good words and works for why he should save you. When he asks why he should declare you righteous, you only point to Jesus and say, "God, justify me because of what he did on the cross. I have no other plea."

Renouncing sin—repentance—is not merely turning over a new leaf. It is not an über-New Year's resolution. It is a comprehensive, wholesale change in a person's life. And it is possible only by regeneration, the life-giving work of the Holy Spirit in a believer's life.

Repentance is a change of orientation: from death to life, from darkness to light. And it has repercussions in every area of a believer's life. It means, first of all, turning away from sin and toward God. Not that a believer will never stumble into sin again—at least not until heaven (1 John 1:8). But a believer will count himself dead to sin and alive to God. He will refuse sin the right to reign. He will not offer his body to sin, but to God as an instrument of righteousness (Rom. 6:11-13). He will orient himself to live in harmony with God's law.

Indeed, the repenting believer does even more. He determines to live in such a way that restores relationships, keeps peace, and gives people around him the sense and smell of Jesus Christ in his life. He determines to join God's work in redeeming the world, caring for the poor and oppressed, and rolling back the effects of the Fall. Repentance is both vertical and horizontal, God-ward and people-ward.

Again, both these directions—vertical and horizontal—are important, and to neglect either one of them leads to a distortion of the gospel. For example, the revivalism that characterizes large segments of evangelicalism tends to neglect the horizontal aspect of repentance, focusing almost solely on the believer's individual relationship with God. Far too often, revivalistic sermons call people to believe in Christ, repent of sin, and be baptized—but that's about it. And the result is that thousands of people are "won and baptized" in America's biggest churches every year, and then never seen again. There is no change of life, no union with Christ's church, no repentance toward other people, nothing at all of what the Bible describes as newness of life. They are won one minute, and lost the next.

On the other hand, there is also a danger of over-emphasizing the horizontal, of pressing Christians in the work of restoring earthly relationships so hard that the most important relationship of all is neglected. Many new books—perhaps especially Brian McLaren's—major on alleviating this world's oppression and overturning this world's injustices. They press believers, often compellingly, to join God's work in "redeeming" the world. But their gospel becomes so socially oriented, so focused on the present, that "redemption" comes to take on a different meaning entirely. The great biblical themes of salvation from sin and its consequences for God's people get lost. Yet those ideas lie at the very heart of the gospel's meaning. To be sure, the horizontal aspects of responding to the gospel are crucial. God will one day create a new heaven and a new earth, and God expects us to work, even here, even now, toward that goal. But that cannot be all. We cannot de-emphasize the doctrines of salvation and eternity, or pretend that they are somehow not important to the Christian life. For as Paul once wrote, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" (1 Cor. 15:19).

CONCLUSION

Some people will argue that subjecting the doctrines of the gospel to interpretation, making them flexible and even expendable, would result in a freer, more open, more mysterious, and thus more

compelling Christianity. I just don't believe that is true. In fact, I believe it would result in a tragic distortion and even fatal falsehood in our understanding of both ourselves and God.

John Calvin once wrote that a person cannot truly know himself until he has come to a knowledge of God. And you see, people can only know God and themselves truly—who they apart from Christ, who they are in Christ, and who they are becoming through his work in their lives—through the doctrines of the gospel revealed in Scripture. The gospel is the divinely-revealed key to our own story, and therefore every part of it is crucial if we are to see ourselves or God clearly. Take out any part of it, subject any line of it to your own re-imagining, and you blur your own vision. That's not freedom. It's more bondage.

Real freedom is seeing clearly. It is knowing beyond doubt who you are and what God has done for you in Christ. It is being able to live your life with full assurance that God will do what he has promised and that one day you will see his face. That kind of freedom doesn't come from having the ability to remake the gospel in your own image. It comes simply from trusting what God says about you, about himself, and about his Son. In short, it comes from believing the gospel.

Greg Gilbert is the 9Marks lead writer on the topic of the gospel. He is also the director of theological research for the president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and an elder at Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, KY.

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Greg Gilbert
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What's Essential? Contextualizing the Gospel in an Egalitarian World

By Jonathan Leeman

Recently at lunch, a friend and I were discussing how to best proclaim the Christian message of the gospel among America's diverse sub-cultures and generational divides. (Sometimes I wonder if we're all beating questions of contextualization and relevance to death. But the rate of technological change and the ever-shrinking globe must mean they will continue to become more pertinent.)

FORGIVENESS, FULFILLMENT, OR FREEDOM?

I referred in our conversation to a distinction Seattle pastor Mark Driscoll makes in his book *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* between a gospel of forgiveness, a gospel of fulfillment, and a gospel of freedom. Traditional churches preach a gospel of forgiveness. Contemporary churches preach a gospel of fulfillment. And emerging churches preach a gospel of freedom, Driscoll says.

"According to the gospel of forgiveness," he writes, "we have sinned against God and are under his wrath until we ask for his forgiveness and live changed lives of repentance." Driscoll personally affirms these truths, but he worries that these days it "seems judgmental, mean-spirited, naive, and narrow-minded" to an ever-growing number of people.

The gospel of fulfillment comes under more direct attack: "The therapeutic gospel is a false gospel and an enemy of mission for many reasons," reasons you can read about in his book if you want.

The gospel of freedom begins with the observation that we were made to live in community with God and each other, but sin has wreaked havoc in all creation. "And though we are self-destructive," Driscoll writes, "God in his loving-kindness has chosen to save us from ourselves." What then did Jesus do to accomplish our salvation? "Our God, Jesus, came to live without sin as our example, die for our sin as a substitute, and rise from death as our Lord who liberates us from Satan, sin, and death."

In sum, "the gospel of freedom says that only through Jesus can we be brought back into friendship with God and with each other, because he takes away the sin that separates us."²²

So preach forgiveness, you'll get blank stares. Preach freedom, and you'll watch the eyes open.

Driscoll is not the only one to speak this way. New York City pastor Tim Keller says something similar in his much noted article, "Post-Everything's":

Traditional gospel presentations assume that the people want to be 'good.' But our kids' generation wants to be 'free.' Luther said, 'Look, you want to be free? Good. It's good to be free. But you're not. You are living for something and, whatever that something is, it enslaves you.' If a person lives for reputation, then he is a slave to what people think. If a person lives for achievement, then he will be a workaholic. As did Luther, we should tell such people, 'You want to be free? Fine. But you're not going to be free unless Jesus is your salvation.'²³

Sitting at lunch, my friend asked me whether I thought this was a right kind of contextualization. Should we preach a "gospel of freedom"?

HIERARCHY AND THE GOSPEL

I answered by saying that if I put a sociologist's hat on, I can sympathize with these authors. Think about it. What Driscoll calls the gospel of forgiveness—sinners asking for forgiveness from a wrathful God—depends on a hierarchical formulation of the biblical evidence. It depends on a strong conception of hierarchy between man and God. It also depends, in light of Christ's work of propitiation, on a very strong notion of functional hierarchy (not ontological or moral) between the Son and the Father.

²² Mark Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* (Zondervan, 2006), 23-25.

²³ Tim Keller, [Post-Everything's](#).

If Driscoll is tracing the gospel of forgiveness back to the traditional churches that led the way fifty years ago, it seems worth observing that the average citizen fifty years ago generally conceived of his (or her!) life within the framework of the hierarchies he (or she!) occupied, at least more so than the average person does today. Students more quickly obeyed their teachers in the classroom. Wives more quickly deferred to their husbands in the home. And minorities resigned themselves to the back of the bus.

Many hierarchies were unjust, and much authority was abused. Yet just or unjust, the average person would have more immediately grasped, I should think, what it meant to transgress the will of someone over you, thereby drawing the authority's condemnation, even if that was only a ruler slap to the knuckles for blowing spit wads in arithmetic class.

For a non-Christian, a gospel of forgiveness may have been considered foolish for many other reasons, but a near inability to think in terms of authority and hierarchy was less likely to be one of those reasons. People expected authority to be exercised over them, and they perceived this state of affairs as somewhat normal.

Less so today. Beginning in the sixties, the very ideas of hierarchy and authority have been burned to the ground and stomped on (for which we can be deeply thankful on topics like race relations; perhaps less thankful for topics like behavior in the classroom.) In their place, the ideas of entitlement, autonomy, and self-creation have blossomed. Surely these latter ideals have defined America from the beginning, but I don't think I'm forging into new territory by suggesting that they have recently taken hold in our consciences with a blinding vigor. A ruler slap to the knuckles today will land you with a lawsuit.

So approach the average Boomer or Gen X-er and tell them about the "debt" they "owe" to the "Lord" God for which they must be "forgiven," and the circuitry of their brains—hardwired to entitlement and autonomy by an entertainment-driven, instant-credit, politically correct culture—cannot process the data. It sounds naïve at best, judgmental at worst. Just like Driscoll said.

The struggles of daily living send the average person today in search of good news somewhere, no less than his counterpart fifty years ago. But can we say that more of today's struggles occur internally to the individual? Is that not a reasonable assumption to make, if we also assume along with the Bellahs, Lasches, and Putnams that society has become more atomistic? So we struggle with the angst of self-creation (tattoos anyone?), the structure-less-ness and direction-less-ness of radical autonomy (e.g. prolonged adolescence, high divorce rates), and the worldview ambiguity of many clashing perspectives (e.g. globalization, historical revisionism, etc.). Less is our battle with "the man." More is our battle with listlessness, a sense of meaninglessness, shallow relationships, insatiable appetites, and, the worst enemy of all, addiction. At least this is the level at which we consciously experience the battle—a.k.a. "existential angst" or "felt needs."

How should we then respond?

Some say we need a gospel of purpose. Driscoll and Keller say we need a gospel of freedom. The gospel of freedom requires little to no hierarchy in its expression. In one sense, it's the explosion of hierarchy. Yes, God is God and we are not, but the emphasis has moved and away from the above/below strata of propitiation to the side-by-side reconciliation of estranged relationships and broken community.

So—I said to my friend at lunch—I'm sympathetic with their analysis when I'm wearing my sociologist's hat. But to understand what's going on here, we need to push a little further.

A VARIETY OF METAPHORS AND IMAGES

It would be easy to respond to all sociologically-driven thinking with the clichéd "Hey, the church must aim at real needs, not felt needs."

Yet Scripture gives us a variety of metaphors for explaining what Christ's atoning work accomplished: propitiation, justification, reconciliation, redemption, freedom, adoption, conquest, and so forth. Moreover, it's commonly pointed out that each one of these metaphors or family of metaphors carries with it a host of associations. Justification resounds of the law court. Redemption takes us to the marketplace. Reconciliation the family. And so on.

Not only that, when we add the array of emotionally resonant images from the vast tracts of Old Testament and Gospel narrative—"I brought you out of Egypt"; "You have played the whore with many lovers"; "my compassion grows warm and tender"; "Lord, I want to see!"; "The kingdom of heaven is like..."—we find ourselves with an embarrassment of riches for explaining the good news of what God has accomplished in our salvation.

Presumably, God has blessed us with a wealth of biblical images for what his Son did in accomplishing our salvation, both so that we might praise him for the multi-splendored nature of his work, but also so that we might recognize the gospel's relevance in and through the many dimensions of our daily lives. All these metaphors and images and their diverse associations point to, I believe, an aspect of subjectivity in the communicating and the comprehending of the gospel message. In other words, real needs can sometimes be deciphered through felt needs.

A pastor-friend recently told me about an impromptu evangelistic sermon he gave in Brazil to a group of artists that had descended from Brazilian slaves, and who were now rumored to suffer from demon possession. So he preached the gospel in the language of Romans 7 and freedom. That makes sense.

I remember sharing the gospel with a college student in a semi-closed Muslim nation a couple of years ago. It emerged in the conversation that he had an acute sense of Allah's justice, so it was easy for me to explain the gospel emphasizing the doctrine of justification.

When preaching through books of the Bible, a rightly interpreted and contextualized text should be what pushes a preacher toward one family of metaphors or another. Mark 10:45—I don't need to tell you—is about ransom or redemption. Second Corinthians 5—another softball—is about reconciliation. What about the exodus? Redemption, perhaps. The Passover story then points us to sacrifice and expiation. Move into the offerings of Leviticus and the aroma that is pleasing to the Lord, and it's hard to avoid talk of propitiation. I'm brushing in broad strokes, and whether you agree with my assessment of any of these books, hopefully you get the point. Different passages will emphasize different aspects of our salvation and how we can understand it.

At the same time, a pastor should know his congregation, and a Christian should know his non-Christian friend, so that a pastor and a Christian both can exercise wisdom and sensitivity in communicating the gospel.

THE FOUNDATIONAL METAPHOR

But it is this very wealth of biblical metaphors for our salvation and the gospel, as well as the element of subjectivity these permit, which present so much difficulty. Is there a primary metaphor? Should one metaphor or image assert hermeneutical "control" over the others? What are the essential components of "the gospel"?

After all, one metaphor pushed to the exclusion of the others produces a different theory of atonement and a different gospel. We know from 1 Peter 2:21, for instance, that Christ's work on the cross serves as a moral example for us. But give moral influence an undue emphasis, and you get Abelardianism, or Enlightenment German liberalism, or whatever. I don't need to tell you that heresy often results from an individual or a group picking their favorite set of metaphors or texts. What makes a false teacher false? Often it's just reductionism.

I won't take the time to make the argument here, but I believe that the covenantal structures of redemption history as a whole point to penal substitution as the basic or primary metaphor that a systematic understanding of Scripture yields (so the New Covenant fulfills *lex talionis* or God's demand for justice as articulated in the Sinai Covenant; see the book of Hebrews!), an understanding then attested to by manifold individual texts in Old Testament and New. Penal substitution is the gospel.

So pick whatever text you want, respecting the canonical context in your exegesis requires you to understand that text within the framework of penal substitution. For instance, you are preaching through 1 Peter and you land on 2:21, which reads, "Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps." Respecting the textual horizon, you would rightly preach, "The humility Christ showed in suffering serves as an example for us as Christians." But respecting the canonical horizon and the nature of God's work in redemption history as a whole, you should also preach, "Not that we can emulate what Christ uniquely did in serving as our substitute. Indeed, it's

because we have been united to him through his sacrifice of atonement that we are called to follow his example.”

So we must do with texts that point to propitiation or reconciliation; forgiveness, fulfillment, or freedom. Penal substitution undergirds every other metaphor or image the Scriptures use to describe our salvation.

As such, whatever gospel language we employ to subjectively resonate with our listeners, we must always combine it with the basic elements of penal substitution: a holy and offended God, a guilty sinner, a loving and justice-accomplishing sacrifice of substitution by Christ, and the declaration “not-guilty” and “righteous” for all who repent and believe. Anything less is not the whole gospel and will, if used exclusively, win people to something less than the whole gospel.

This is where I am made slightly nervous by pitting a gospel of freedom against a gospel of forgiveness, because the latter sounds a lot like penal substitution. I know that Driscoll and Keller affirm penal substitution, and that this is borne out by their weekly preaching ministries (I believe Driscoll is even writing a book defending penal substitution!). I don’t mean to assess either by a few sound-bite statements, and I don’t assume either individual was trying to present us with an exhaustive systematic theology or a guide on how to preach. As with Jesus’ parables, I assume these two authors, gifted as they are with uniquely good cultural instincts, had one or two basic points they wanted to make with these types of statements.

Still, I would urge caution when making such rhetorical distinctions. The gospel includes a salvation from self and its appetites. Yet the gospel is a salvation from God and his wrath.

EGALITARIANISM AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION

There is one further point I think we need to draw out of all this. As I have contested, our culture bucks against structures of authority in a manner more pronounced today than fifty years ago, and this visceral reaction/conceptual incapacity (it’s both, I think) makes the gospel that much harder to communicate and comprehend. But let me be clear: it’s not just the so-called gospel of forgiveness that triggers these reactions; it’s penal substitution. Penal substitution radically depends on one kind of hierarchy between God and man, and another kind between Father and Son.²⁴

We don’t typically use the word “hierarchy” when speaking of penal substitution, but it’s there. And it clearly plays a larger role than it plays in other theories of atonement extant today. Consider *Christus Victor* (popular among Emergents and new perspective writers) or moral influence (always fashionable among liberals) or the all-empathetic “crucified God” (adopted by liberation theologians). With each of these, as well as with any other theory you might find scattered across church history (recapitulation, ransom, governmental, etc.), God is slightly smaller and man is slightly bigger.

Moreover, because these theories downplay or altogether jettison that astonishing moment in which Christ became, in Luther’s words, “the greatest sinner that ever was” who bore the Father’s wrath, I would also contend that each of them diminish the distinctiveness of the Father and the Son’s particular work in redemption, a distinctiveness which depends largely on a meaningful understanding of the words “Father” and “Son” from eternity past.

What occurs to me, by way of casual observation, is that so many of the same individuals who criticize penal substitution as presenting an overly wrathful Father and an overly pitiable Son are also egalitarians. It’s common to point to the connection between the egalitarian/complementarian debate, hermeneutics, and the doctrine of Scripture. It’s also common to connect this debate to how one formulates the doctrine of the Trinity. But we should also stop to observe what implications egalitarianism might have for one’s theory of the atonement. I do not believe there is a necessary connection here, just as I don’t believe there is a necessary connection between one’s position on

²⁴ Between man and God, the hierarchy is total: ontological, ethical, and functional. Between divine Father and divine Son, the hierarchy is neither ethical nor ontological; it is merely functional. That is, it concerns the roles they occupy in relation to one another in creation and redemption, as well as (I believe) in relation to one another in eternity past, i.e. the “Father” was always the “Father.” Egalitarians restrict the functional hierarchy subsisting between Father and Son to creation and redemption. Extending it to eternity past, they argue, makes the hierarchy ontological.

women in the church and how one formulates the doctrine of the Trinity. Still, as with this latter comparison, there's a likely connection to be made.

Correlation does not necessitate causation, and many egalitarians affirm penal substitution. Yet even for those who do, it's the tendencies of egalitarian thinking that worry me, and it's their theological children for whom I'm concerned. It's willful human beings that are doing the theologizing, not will-less robots. And if your theologizing is bent on silencing the slightest peep of hierarchy or authority in the church, in the home, and in the Godhead itself, then something about penal substitution is eventually going to get stuck in your craw.

The take-away lesson here: take note of this potential connection between our culture's aversion to hierarchy and the inarguably hierarchical aspects of penal substitution. It will help us to recognize one more way that pastors and Christians will be tempted to present a partial gospel. Also, expect to hear more and more gross caricatures of penal substitution from egalitarians.

Being relevant is good so far as it goes. But it may be that evangelism in the twenty-first century is just a lot harder than evangelism in the mid-twentieth century and before. This is not a Reformed resignation to divine sovereignty for the sake of justifying passivity in evangelism. It's just the opposite. It's a plea to use the right tool—the whole gospel of penal substitution—because the enemy's deceptions are subtler than ever.

All this for lunch and a ham sandwich. Thanks, Bruce.

Jonathan Leeman is the director of communications for 9Marks.

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The Devotional Life of the Professional Christian

An Occasional 9News Column

By Mike Gilbert-Smith

The Indispensability of Discipline in the Devotions of a Pastor

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes (Eph. 6:10-11).

In the first article on the "Devotional Life of the 'Professional Christian,'" we saw that pursuing Christ must be the central aim of our lives, and that our devotions should help center our lives upon that aim.

Yet merely affirming this fact doesn't automatically produce a rich devotional life. We need discipline: discipline for having devotions and discipline for using the time well.

In this article, we shall consider the need to set aside time. In the future articles, we will consider how to use that time well. Only through our (grace empowered) struggle can we overcome the pressures of our busy lives, as well as the opposition of the devil, the flesh, and a world in rebellion against Christ.

1. UNPLANNED DEVOTIONS ARE SQUEEZED OUT BY BUSYNESS

Often, we blame our schedules for our lack of devotions. And there is certainly some legitimacy to this charge. Life assigns us tasks that must be completed, and tasks that must be completed immediately. Few people finish everything on their daily list.

So unless we appreciate the importance and the urgency of prayer and meditation on God's word, we will leave it until tomorrow. When tomorrow comes we will leave it until the next day. Soon we find that days and weeks have passed without rich time in the word and prayer. As D. A. Carson writes,

We don't drift into spiritual life; we do not drift into disciplined prayer. We do not grow in prayer unless we plan to pray. That means we must set aside time to do nothing but pray. What we actually do reflects our highest priorities. That means that we can proclaim our commitment to prayer until the cows come home, but unless we actually pray, our actions disown our words.²⁵

For as much as we blame life's busyness, notice that it's not merely our short-term commitments that relegate our devotions; something more is happening. What?

2. DEVOTIONS ARE VITAL PREPARATION FOR SPIRITUAL BATTLE

To begin with, there are active spiritual forces opposing us.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 6:12).

We must not just fall back on the busyness excuse, but realize that we are under attack.

Strikingly, Paul in this passage does not tell us how to engage in spiritual warfare as much as how to prepare for spiritual warfare. He tells us to put on the full armor of God today so that when the battle is waged, we will be prepared.

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand (Eph. 6:13).

²⁵ Don Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, (Baker Books, 1992), 19.

Once the battle begins, it is too late to begin our preparations.

What foolishness for a soldier to be so confident in his years of military training that, on the day of battle itself, he enters the battle unarmed and wearing his pajamas! What foolishness for the pastor to be so confident in his Christian maturity that he enters the daily battles without the sword of the spirit or the shield of faith worked out in prayer!

The Christian life is a battle that should be fought not only reactively but also proactively. The battle will often be brought to us, but we must put on the armor of God through prayer and the study of his word before those times come. Otherwise, we are giving the devil a terrific advantage.

Satan knows what orders thou keepest in thy house and closet, and though he hath not a key to thy heart, yet he can stand in the next room to it, and lightly hear what is whispered there. He hunts the Christian by the scent of his own feet, and if once he doth but smell which way thy heart inclines, he knows how to take the hint; if but one door be unbolted, one work unmanned, one grace off its carriage, here is advantage enough.²⁶

Perhaps pastors, before they were pastors, thought that the discipline of prayer would come more easily once they were in full-time ministry. After all, few jobs list “prayer” as one of the two principle items on the job description (“We will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word”; Acts 6:4).

Yet not only is it difficult for pastors to be devoted to prayer; in many ways it is harder than ever. The devil recognizes the transforming power of the word of God, and seeks to snatch it from people’s hearts.²⁷ Will he not focus his attention on keeping those who feed others with the word from being fed by the word?

3. CONSISTENT DEVOTIONAL LIFE IS A STRUGGLE AGAINST THE FLESH

Not only do the devil and his forces oppose us, our flesh—what the NIV translates “sinful nature”—opposes us.

For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want (Gal. 5:17).

In order to mortify this flesh, this sinful nature, we must pursue knowledge of Christ through his word and through prayer. As one nineteenth-century Irish pastor wrote,

Knowing him, his grace, what he is to us, and what we are to him, what our life, our rank, our holiness, our inheritance, and our glory, all that as head he is to his members as revealed to us in the word, this is the power that enables us to mortify the deeds of the body, and makes us, with more and more emphasis, morally and practically what we are judicially – crucified, dead to the world, dead to sin.²⁸

But the flesh has no desire to be mortified. Like the calf that spies the butcher’s knife, it bolts at the thought of studying God’s word. What that means, ironically, is that the flesh may not revolt against our ministry to others to the same extent that it revolts against our own devotions. The flesh is content for us to busy ourselves aiding others in their mortification, so long as it remains intact itself. After all, the flesh is not like the devil. It is not fighting a broad war against the whole church.

Each morning, we who are in the pastoral ministry must recognize that our desire to pursue ministry before we have pursued Christ is a desire of the flesh, which resists its own mortification. Recognizing this, we will see that there is no substitute for the discipline of placing our devotional time on the calendar as the most urgent of our daily appointments.

4. FEAR OF MAN IS A POOR SUBSTITUTE FOR THE FEAR OF GOD

²⁶ William Gurnall, *The Christian in Complete Armour*, (Banner of Truth, 1964), 64f.

²⁷ Matthew 13:19.

²⁸ Joseph Denham Smith, *Life Truths* (Philadelphia: Rice & Hurst, [no date]), 15f.

In addition to the devil and the flesh, we must recognize the world's opposition to our devotional life. Not only should we expect non-Christians to perceive the pursuit of Christ as foolish, we should expect a residual worldliness within our own congregations. They will neglect the tasks that Christ has assigned to the whole congregation—such as visiting the sick or befriending the lonely—by expecting the pastor to carry the weight of those tasks alone.

I have never known a pastor to be fired for prayerlessness, even though I expect that many justly could have been (myself included). There are at least three reasons for this. First, congregations rarely hold a pastor accountable for his devotional life. Second, pastors themselves too infrequently seek such accountability. Third, pastors can conceal the neglect of private duties more easily than the neglect of public duties.

But what does such private neglect reveal? That a pastor fears man more than he fears God.

The solution is simple: pray and act. Pray for a humble, God-fearing heart. And then act accordingly. There is no substitute for self-control. Self-control that prioritizes the devotional life is the fruit the Spirit in one who fears God more than men. Such self-control recognizes that what others want us to do must be sacrificed sometimes out of love for the Lord.

Again, one might assume that of all people pastors will find it easier to resist the worldliness that kills the devotional life. But, once again, it is often harder. Many duty-neglecting demands from a congregation, like visiting the sick, still make for good, eternity-building opportunities. Yet a pastor must learn to refuse some of them lest he become a "professional Christian" with no vital walk with the Lord.

Notice the kingdom work that Jesus had to "neglect" in order to set aside time to pray:

Yet the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed (Luke 5: 15-16).

Notice also what the apostles had to delegate in order to pray:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word' (Acts 6: 1-4).

Jesus left himself open to the accusation of not preaching or healing those who had come specifically to find him. And the apostles faced major division among the only New Testament church in the world! Yet both Jesus and the apostles knew they had to pray. They loved their Lord more than they feared men, and this enabled them to love and serve men more than a worldly wisdom might have predicted.

CONCLUSION: THE JOYFUL GOAL OF DISCIPLINE

Amidst all this talk of discipline, it's worth remembering that we do not exercise self-control in order to harm ourselves. Rather, self-control provides an opportunity to enjoy the riches of God's grace—as we all know full well based on the times when we have obediently set aside sufficient time for devotions. The world, the flesh, and the devil oppose our devotional lives precisely because not one of them wants us to enjoy fellowship with Christ. Yet—praise God!—we can enjoy it, if only we will set aside the time.

Peter tells us that 'angels long to look into the things that God has revealed to us' (1 Peter 1:12). Isn't it tragic that where angels long to look we can't always be bothered to glance! Perhaps we have begun to take God's blessings for granted. If you come to your quiet times feeling weary and wanting to get them over as quickly as possible, stop and think about the privilege that you have been given! You are able to meet with your Creator, you are invited to encounter Almighty God, to hear from Him and worship Him. What better reason could there possibly be to set the necessary time aside?²⁹

²⁹ Simon Robinson, *Improving your quiet time* (Day One Publications, 1998), 24.

It is no hardship to meet with our Lord. We were saved for him. Will we not enjoy him each day?

Mike Gilbert-Smith is the senior pastoral assistant for college ministry and evangelism at Capitol Hill Baptist Church.

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Mike Gilbert-Smith
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Doing Seminary Well An Occasional 9News Column

By Owen Strachan

Have you heard the whispers of the past? I have.

Everything is normal. You're sitting in an easy chair, doing your church history reading for the third consecutive hour. Then, suddenly, your reading seizes you. For just a few moments, you are face-to-face with Luther before he enters the Diet of Worms and changes the world forever. He paralyzes you with his stare, and then he whispers, Be faithful.

Or perhaps you are studying Greek vocabulary. You're well past tired and losing the battle with concentration. Then—in a second—you are face to face with the Apostle Paul. He is writing Romans, weighing each word to communicate justification by faith so that the world will understand it. He looks up from his work, pierces you with a glance, and whispers, Be faithful.

The whispers of the past are awesome things indeed.

All Christians may hear them. But the seminarian, the one who is consecrated for the service of God's church, is called to listen extra hard. This privilege must be taken up with thankfulness and diligence. But how may one do this? Or, to put it another way, how do we listen well?

This first installment of the "Doing Seminary Well" column seeks to answer this very question. This column is written with the hope that current and future seminarians will approach the task of theological learning with a love for Christ, a humble heart, and an ear for the whispers of the past. We must be those who listen well, in order that we may be those who lead well.

In this particular article, I want to encourage seminarians to approach their work with reverence, receptivity, realism, and responsibility.

1. APPROACH SEMINARY WITH REVERENCE

The opportunity to study the word of God in an academic setting for several years is an incredible privilege. For the majority of students seeking the master of divinity degree, one of the longest master's degrees available, this undertaking will generally involve three to five years of class work. The amount of study can be daunting.

Not only that, it can obscure the special nature of theological study. We must therefore fight to remember that nothing is more powerful, more special, more helpful, more transformative, more enlightening than sustained study of the word of God and its doctrines. No other book engages our intellect and stirs our heart like the Bible. Men and women could study it all day every day their entire lives and utterly fail to exhaust its riches. Seminarians may not get a lifetime, but they do get a few years.

This is an incredible privilege, and a weighty one. The learning accumulated in this period comes like a theological blizzard. The original languages, the theology of the Bible, and the history of the church all engulf the student who tries diligently to absorb such matters.

How important, then, for students to approach seminary with reverence. Given how quickly our hearts become hard, it is very easy for the joy of Bible study to fade into a programmatic dutifulness devoid of passion. Those who enter seminary not just as a "graduate school," but as the place for preparing for the work of the ministry, will avoid many of the initial letdowns of the average seminarian.

Seminarians will need to fight to maintain a reverential outlook. This attitude will be continually revived and invigorated through a daily devotional walk, fellowship and service with one's church members, and the continual effort to apply one's studies devotionally. More than these important practical matters, though, is the need to keep the gospel ever in view. The gospel is everything. It is the reason we want to attend seminary, it is the means by which we complete seminary, and it is our motivation to leave seminary. We must remember this. We do not attend seminary to become

evangelical all-stars. We come to learn about the gospel and how to declare it. That thought alone should awaken daily reverence in our hearts.

2. APPROACH SEMINARY WITH RECEPTIVITY

Students should also approach their studies with a teachable spirit. The humble student will try to learn as much as possible from his professors, both inside the classroom and outside. He will, of course, hold fast to truths already learned. Yet he will also welcome opportunities to test ideas and debate positions.

Ironically, seminarians often fail to have teachable spirits. Yet they must remember that the individuals who teach at respected evangelical seminaries have spent years mastering their field, reading material, arguing with other scholars, publishing books and articles, and marinating in the material of their discipline. While students may have a different viewpoint than a particular professor, they may still learn much from that professor and better define their own beliefs. Students should not simply seek to rubber stamp their own opinions but should try to sharpen their understanding of God's word through theological engagement.

Seminarians also show teachability by seeking out friendships with professors in order to learn from their lives and doctrine. Do not pass up the chance to share a meal with them and learn how they integrate life and doctrine together.

At my seminary, for example, one well-respected professor holds a weekly lunch hour in the school dining center. All students have an open invitation to join him for discussion and conversation. This is merely one example of how a professor can pass on his wisdom and experience to future leaders of God's church. Students should not disdain such opportunities, but seek them wherever they may be found. We will only grow as we receive counsel, correction, and instruction with moldable spirits and teachable hearts.

3. APPROACH SEMINARY REALISTICALLY

It is a great privilege to attend seminary. One should avoid, though, unrealistic and inflated expectations of it. Seminary is not heaven. It is a training ground for the church. It is an artificial environment, in the sense that the makeup of the student body is not reflective of the church itself. Seminary is male-dominated, textbook-oriented, and often lonely.

A good number of people come to seminary expecting something different. They expect an academic utopia and are disappointed to find out that it is not. Classes are demanding, time is short, and interactions are often rushed. There are not enough hours in the day to do everything one might want to do. Lectures can be dry, classes disappointing, and life demanding. In this regard, seminary is like everything else of this earth—it's imperfect.

Prospective students who keep this truth in mind will experience less of the letdown early on in their seminary career or even beyond. In short, do not expect too much from seminary.

But how can students practically avoid the seminary letdown? Let me offer just one idea that is easy to apply: be involved in the local church. Be active and committed to it. Love it, and serve it well. The local church, not the seminary, is the nerve center of the Christian life.

Like all Christians, you need to hear about God every week. You need to hear the Bible's stories of faith, its imperatives to holy living, its sweet words for the weary soul. You also need fellowship with God's people that does not consist of grade comparisons and professor evaluations. You need to focus on evangelism, discipleship, and serving the body. The local church provides the arena for such nourishment.

Brothers and sisters, enjoy seminary. Prize it. But love the local church. You will be in seminary for a few years. In some capacity, you will serve in the local church for the rest of your life.

4. APPROACH SEMINARY RESPONSIBLY

It is important that students remember that seminary is fundamentally academic. It is not Sunday School. There are quizzes and tests and papers and research. Not everyone gets the grade they want.

The realistic seminarian comprehends this element of seminary and does not buck against it. Again, approach seminary responsibly.

I said above that seminary is not just another graduate school. That said, seminary is a graduate school. Students must remember this, and not pester professors for excessive information about the test, or grow angry for grades lower than expected, or casually submit late papers presuming on the professor's grace. Being a Christian does not mean being exempt from the rigors of academic life.

Students should thus come to seminary ready to work hard, to learn, to cope with the occasionally low grade, and to take seriously the opportunity to study. From experience in the academic environment will come a stronger work ethic and the ability to handle success and failure with grace.

Remember that seminary is fundamentally serious. People should not come to seminary because it is the best thing to do after graduating from the college fellowship group. Seminary is not a year-round Christian summer camp for adults with a few quizzes thrown in. It is not college extended. It is quite different. The years spent in seminary contribute to the foundation one lays for a lifetime of ministry.

Students should not treat seminary as they might treat college. They should go to their classes, read the materials assigned them, and study it for the purpose of learning. They should work diligently and not treat seminary lightly. We seminarians have one chance at seminary, which is one more chance than most godly people ever get. We must make the most of the time we have, for the glory of God and the betterment of the church.

We should thus take up our work with vested diligence and sober minds. Though the hours stretch on and the semesters go long, the student is not alone. For it is in the midst of study that the saints of the past approach our side and stand for a minute. There they lock eyes with us and with holy solemnity whisper to us, Be faithful. May we be those who make the most of the opportunity given us. May we listen well.

Owen Strachan is a master of divinity student at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He also works as an editorial assistant in the office of seminary president R. Albert Mohler. Hear more from Owen at consumedblog.blogspot.com.

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Owen Strachan
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