

A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF THE EMERGING CHURCH

Matthew Williams

The emerging church. It has a cool, “with-it”, contemporary ring to it. It sounds progressive, thoughtful, sensitive. The term has been tossed around in a variety of American, evangelical circles during the last decade, referring not to a specific church, denomination or movement, but to a loose collection of churches broadly defined as “missional communities arising from within postmodern culture and consisting of followers of Jesus who are seeking to be faithful in their place and time.”¹ Emerging churches believe our culture has fundamentally changed from a modern age to a postmodern age and unless the church changes accordingly, our current understanding and articulation of the gospel will soon be irrelevant. Our culture is emerging and the church needs to emerge with it.

At first glance, the definition above seems entirely biblical. Of course scripture commands us to live as a community of believers, focus on our mission, follow Christ’s example, and obey God in a variety of cultural settings. And in fact, emerging church leaders do a number of things quite well. They recognize and clearly articulate the cultural change in epistemology, or how we know things, from modernism to post-modernism. According to Dr. Al Mohler of Southern Theological Seminary, modernism “pursues truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism and certainty often producing arrogance, inflexibility and the right to control.” Postmodernism “recognizes that much of what we “know” is shaped by the culture we live in, controlled by our emotions, and is only intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right.”²

Two philosophical subtypes exist under the broader category of “postmodernism”: “hard” and “soft”. Hard postmodernism is closely associated with relativism and believes there is no absolute truth. One view of God is just as true as another view of God. Soft postmodernism acknowledges absolute truth exist, avoiding the self-refuting trap of relativism, but given our finite nature, concludes man is incapable of acquiring an understanding of absolute truth. As will be demonstrated shortly, however, neither hard nor soft postmodernism upholds the authority of scripture. By embracing the latter, emerging church leaders fail to respond biblically to a correctly perceived cultural shift.

In response to the all too prevalent seeker-friendly, give a little, do a little, get a free ticket to heaven American church model, emerging church leaders do well to stress the importance of adopting a missional ecclesiology.³ “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” (James 2:17, ESV) The church must indeed be outward focused, seeking to faithfully spread the gospel, pursue social justice, care for the poor and orphaned, and welcome nonbelievers. Scripture makes clear that unless believing right things is accompanied by doing

¹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 28.

² Al Mohler, Crosswalk Commentary: *What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part One*, (June 29, 2005).

³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, “Many emerging church folks are reacting against a gospel of personal fulfillment and megachurch identification.” (21) “Emerging church leaders are reacting against an understanding of the gospel that consists of giving a little, doing a little, paying membership dues and getting a “going to heaven” ticket through accepting the gospel.” (55) Al Mohler, Crosswalk Commentary: *What Should We Think of the Emerging Church? Part One*, (June 29, 2005), “Emerging church leaders want to recover a sense of community deeply engaged with culture, but avoiding the dangers of consumerism and superficiality of mainstream churches.”

right things, our belief is false. A church is an affront to the glory of God if it has the most accurate theology in the world, but fails to live a life informed by their theology.

We also need to cultivate a loving community of Christians united by the gospel of Jesus Christ in a society dominated by individualism. Here again, emerging church leaders start with a biblical value. The church is the “body of Christ” and believers are called to build one another up in the faith. Corporate meetings alone do not create community. Sharing words of encouragement throughout the week, being open and humble about our current experience of God, and serving one another with joy are genuine marks of New Testament church life. Unbelievers need to be warmly welcomed, listened to, and gently cared for. The world should not feel like it must be perfect, listen to a certain kind of music, home-school their children, avoid R-rated movies, have well-behaved children or dress a certain way before being overwhelmed by practical demonstrations of the love of Christ. Emerging churches often highlight the importance of community and sharing the love of Christ with non-Christians.

Cultural attentiveness, missional ecclesiology, community focus, and outward orientation are all biblical values. And the emerging church does well to highlight their importance. However, in the process of applying these values, the emerging church has challenged the authority of scripture, minimized the depravity of man, ignored the centrality of the cross, and established a dangerously false dichotomy between church doctrine and practice. These four dangers are considered in sequence below, with a special focus on their appeal to young people in American evangelicalism.

First, we will consider the issue of epistemology. Though there is a good deal of variety within the emerging church on the proper interpretation and application of postmodernism, the “soft” version is widespread in popularity.⁴ The emerging church is correct in recognizing the fundamental finiteness or limited knowledge of man, especially when it comes to understanding the nature of God. (Romans 11:33-34) We will never be able to exhaustively know anything about God’s character or ways. Yet they err in concluding we will never know if our current understanding of God’s character and ways is true or right. We might not be able to *exhaustively* know anything about God’s nature, but that does not mean we are unable to know anything *truly* or *accurately*.⁵ The glory of Holy Scripture is that God has spoken and revealed Himself to man in words we can understand, words conveying truth about God. (Ps. 16:11, Rom. 16:25-26) Scripture is replete with references to us knowing true things about God. (John 8:45-46, 1 Tim. 2:3-4, 1 Cor. 13:9, 1 Jn. 2:3)

⁴ For example, in the section on “Moving from Perceived Arrogance to Transparent Humility” Gibbs and Bolger (*Emerging Churches*) quote Debbie Blue of House of Mercy (St. Paul), “We are comfortable with having a lot of unanswered questions. We think maybe that’s what it’s like being in relationship with a living Being. We think it’s more honest than providing a lot of answers, abstract notions of truth.” (124) Donald Miller shares a similar view in *Blue Like Jazz* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003) writing, “I told the radio show host that I would rather talk about Jesus and how I came to believe that Jesus exists and that he likes me...For me, the beginnings of sharing my faith with people began by throwing out Christianity and embracing Christian spirituality, a nonpolitical mysterious system that can be experienced but not explained.” (115) The gospel is not a mystery, it is revealed in scripture and can be explained, not exhaustively, but truthfully. (1 Cor. 2:10)

⁵ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), explains why knowing God’s nature truly or accurately is an essential foundation for faith. “Faith is never validated in the New Testament when its object is not true. Indeed, New Testament faith is strengthened when its object is validated, supported by witness, shown to be revealed by God, impregnably real, true. Such an understanding of ‘faith’ is utterly at odds with the use of ‘faith’ in most Western culture.” (152)

The fact that God has primarily revealed Himself in the present day and age through His written word stands in stark opposition to the common practice of mysticism within the emerging church.⁶ It is well and good to paint pictures, sculpt statues, write music, and share personal testimonies or “stories” for the glory of God. But a true and objective understanding of God will never come through emotional experiences and rituals. Only the divinely inspired, inerrant words of Holy Scripture can be completely trusted as a source for plumbing the “depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.” (Rom. 11:33, Ps. 19:7-11, 2 Peter 1:16-21) In the words of D.A. Carson, “Christians participate in the divine nature not through mystical experiences, but rather gospel promises (2 Pet. 1:3-4).”⁷

Young people are likely to be drawn to the emerging church understanding of epistemology during their years of higher education. Widespread acceptance of “soft” postmodernism in American academia all too often honors the “they both have a point” conclusion as the most thoughtful, nuanced, sensitive, mature and humble response.⁸ Particularly in controversial issues of morality, the “best” students can always “see” both sides of an argument and locate their personal opinion somewhere in the comfortably gray middle ground between the two. Emerging churches applying this kind of logic to doctrinal or moral disagreements within American evangelicalism have essentially hijacked humility.⁹ In scripture, humility is never equated with uncertainty. If the Bible is very clear on a doctrinal or moral issue, we are called as Christians to be equally clear. Pride is manifested both in making absolute assertions beyond the scope of biblical clarity and willfully remaining uncertain or vague on issues within the scope of biblical clarity. True humility, for young and old alike, is thinking and living in submission to scripture.

One truth scripture is very clear on is the depravity of man. Sadly, emerging church leaders and writers often present the gospel as God’s plan to redeem humanity from a life of selfishness, a pattern of unloving and unjust acts toward your neighbor.¹⁰ They perceive a world

⁶ Shane Rosenthal, “Faith A La Carte? The Emerging Church: Experiencing Emergent” (*Modern Reformation*, July/August 2005), “The next morning I walked past the Emergent yoga class to check out the labyrinth where visitors, guided along a mazelike path, listen to soft, comforting music, while pondering encouraging words and suggestions for prayer.” (29)

Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, “Andy Thorton shares similar convictions, combining the mystical with a regard for the whole person: body, mind, and spirit. ‘Late Late Service attempted to create a broad, cultural, and social approach to faith early on. We sought to create an emotional, intellectual, and mystical spirituality. We sought to awaken our mystical side, to be body oriented. Meditations helped us with this.’” Spencer Burke of the Ooze (Newport Beach, CA) agrees. ‘A move away from intellectual Christianity is essential. We must move to the mystical.’” (230) Mysticism is not the God of scripture. He is a revealing God who makes Himself known through words. Our spiritual feelings will only be “real” to the extent they are grounded in truth about God as revealed by God. We’re not looking to be a spiritual community, we’re looking to help people see their need for a Savior and respond to His gracious invitation.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 225-226.

⁸ Mark Dever, *A Review of Brian McClaren’s A New Kind of Christian*, (<http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598026|CIID1946990,00.html>), “To suggest that liberalism and conservatism are really two parts of a whole, would dismiss all the proponents on either side of the issue in dispute. The ‘they both have a point’ conclusion is, at best, misleading, at worst, can condescending and dangerously naïve. In this, he seems to appear charitable, even while unintentionally abandoning crucial points. Such apparent even-handedness...serves too often to de-emphasize the question, or even de-legitimize the whole discussion. It can too easily encourage doctrinal apathy in a church already theologically anemic.”

⁹ Justin Taylor, in a message given at the New Attitude ’06 Conference, *A New Kind of Christianity: A Look at the Emerging Church*.

¹⁰ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, “If you haven’t done it in a while, pray and talk to Jesus. Ask Him to become real to you. Ask Him to forgive you of self-addiction, ask Him to put a song in your heart. I can’t think of anything better that could happen to you than this.” (240) We don’t primarily need forgiveness from self-addiction so we can love others; we need forgiveness for rebelling against the sovereign Lord of the universe.

filled with brokenness and believe Jesus came to rescue us from this condition.¹¹ Their perspective is not surprising given many emerging church thinkers are reacting against a “faith without works” model of church where reconciliation with and love for God never translates into reconciliation with and love for the world. But the problem with mankind is not primarily lack of love toward neighbor; that is secondary to the problem of how to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength when we are dead in trespasses and sins.¹² (Eph. 2:1-3) The gospel is first and foremost about God redeeming us from alienation from Himself, restoring our vertical relationship with Him.¹³ Apart from the gospel, we are, as emerging church thinkers correctly point out, incapable of being ambassadors of God’s love to the world. They fail to recognize, however, that true reconciliation with our neighbor is only enabled by first being reconciled to God! (2 Cor. 5:14-21)

A gospel message addressed to a “broken” people is deliciously attractive to Christian young people who have grown up in the church and are tempted to proudly and self-righteously believe they are saved not by grace, but by good works. Saying Christ is my inspiration for a life of good deeds is a lot less humbling than saying Christ is my sin-bearer.¹⁴ Most emerging church thinkers agree sin is the problem. But they speak of humanity as “broken” or “needing rescue” rather than thoroughly depraved and hating God.¹⁵ The difference is not just a matter of semantics. The very glory of God in election and effectual calling is at stake.

A third error flows from the second. Emerging church leaders exchange the peripheral for the central by emphasizing Christ as moral example over Christ as substitutionary sacrifice for the atonement of sin.¹⁶ If mankind’s greatest dilemma is a life of selfishness toward other

¹¹ Ibid., “‘Actually,’ I told him reluctantly, ‘I have always agreed with the idea that we have a sin nature. I don’t think it looks exactly like the fundamentalists say it does, ‘cause I know so many people who do great things, but I do buy the idea that we are flawed, that there is something in us that is broken. I think it is easier to do bad things than good things.’” (17) “I know now, from experience, that the path to joy winds through this dark valley. I think every well-adjusted human being has dealt squarely with his or her own depravity. I realize this sounds very Christian, very fundamentalist and browbeating, but I want to tell you this part of what the Christians are saying is true. I think Jesus feels strongly about communicating the idea of our brokenness, and I think it is worth reflection. Nothing is going to change in the Congo until you and I figure out what is wrong with the person in the mirror.” (23) Jesus didn’t come to rescue me from a life of brokenness, but from an eternity of deserved judgment without God. Stan Friedman, *Covenant News* at www.covchurch.org, “McClaren: ‘Finding the Right Words is Difficult’” (The Evangelical Covenant Church, 2005), “For McClaren, the primary concern of the kingdom’s community is to bring wholeness to a broken world rather than provide a way out of hell.”

¹² D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, “In a profound sense, therefore, the most severe ‘problem’ of fallen human beings is God himself, acting justly and entirely in line with his own character and glory as he confronts his rebel image-bearers.” (204)

¹³ Shane Walker, book review of *Blue Like Jazz* by Donald Miller, (<http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598026|CIID2157892,00.html>), “As an evangelistic tract *Blue Like Jazz* is too narrow. Jesus is presented as a nice fellow who meets one at the campfire and swaps stories. He’s a listener, a friend, accepting, warm, kind, and gentle. And Jesus is all these things. But the meta-narrative of the Bible also reminds us that Jesus is terrible. He is the judge, the king, the warrior, the avenger (Rev. 19:2). The good news is not merely that Jesus wants to listen to your story, but rather that he wants to save you from his just wrath.”

¹⁴ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, “I am human because God made me. I experience suffering and temptation because mankind chose to follow Satan. God is reaching out to me to rescue me. I am learning to trust Him, learning to live by His precepts that I might be preserved.” (101) I live by His precepts not to be saved, but in response to being declared righteous in Christ.

¹⁵ Ibid., “All great characters in stories are the ones who give their lives to something bigger than themselves. And in all of the stories I don’t find anyone more noble than Jesus. He gave His life for me, in obedience to His Father. I truly love Him for it. I think the difference in my life came when I realized, after reading those Gospels, that Jesus didn’t just love me out of principle; He didn’t just love me because it was the right thing to do. Rather, there was something inside me that caused Him to love me.” (238) God’s love for me is a gift of sheer grace, nothing more and nothing less.

¹⁶ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, “What do we mean by the ‘way of Jesus’? Simply, the life of Jesus and his engagement with his culture, as embodied in community and given verbal expression in the Sermon on the Mount, is prescriptive for Christians. Modern readings of Jesus are prone to dismiss his life and focus on his death and resurrection and are preoccupied with a believer’s

men, then Jesus could change us by simply being the ultimate role-model of love and compassion toward his neighbors.¹⁷ His death on the cross would then be nothing more than an exemplary demonstration of God's love for the world. Once again, emerging church thinkers start with a true statement, namely God wants us to follow Christ's example by participating in His redemptive activities throughout the world. But we can never follow His example without being first being redeemed from our slavery to sin.¹⁸ We can never move forward in our sanctification, or progressive growth in the image of Christ, without first being sure of our justification, or declaration of legal righteousness before God through our union with Christ. Thus one cannot respond to the gospel message by emulating the love of Jesus, but by admitting inherent sinfulness deserving the just wrath of God and believing by faith in Christ death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. The gospel message is unflattering, yet true.¹⁹ Christ must first be our crucified Messiah before he can be our moral role model.

Lastly, the emerging church reinforces a dangerously false dichotomy between doctrine and practice. They believe modern evangelicals are so focused on determining who's "right" and "wrong" in matters of theology and morality that they fail to respond to truth with action by incarnating the love of the kingdom of God throughout the earth, what they term a "missional" lifestyle. And their accusation is largely true. However, they go on to subtly suggest one is either arrogantly consumed with establishing absolutes and objective truth (i.e. modern) or humbly recognizes there are many ways to interpret the Bible and is focused on loving and accepting people (i.e. postmodern).²⁰ Some go so far as to assert the Jesus of the epistles, apparently devoted to the doctrine of sin and final judgment, must be replaced by the Jesus of the gospels, who seems to be more interested in serving and caring for people.²¹

interior experience of Christ. In contrast, Jesus welcomed the outcast, hosted the stranger, and challenged the political authorities by creating an alternative community. Jesus' entire life, including his words, established the way of Jesus, and it is this way that has greatly influenced emerging churches...Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures." (44) The central problem is that biblical fidelity warrants preaching the full gospel, not pitting one part against another. Both the sinless life and substitutionary death of Jesus are equally emphasized as critical for our justification and sanctification.

¹⁷ Ibid., "Evangelism is the invitation to the conversion process for someone. It is inviting someone to change their life.' Doug Pagitt (Solomon's Porch, Minneapolis) goes on to address two fundamental questions: What is the gospel? and How does one convert? Pagitt believes that the old view perpetuated the idea that changed ideas (conversion) leads to changed behavior. Pagitt believes, however, that a changed life (conversion) leads to changed beliefs. 'We are much more involved in inviting them to live differently than to believe differently.'" (129) In an effort to avoid faith without works, they have discarded the fundamental nature of the gospel. A true life change can only happen as a result of a genuine belief change.

¹⁸ Ibid., "The gospel is that God wants you to help solve that problem, to participate with God through redeeming acts.' McClure reflects on his experience. 'The gospel is not that we agree with some abstract propositions in order to qualify to go to heaven when we die but an invitation to live in a new way of life...Non-Christians resonate with this participative gospel message.' When Zander shared the four spiritual laws with his neighbor, his neighbor replied that it indeed was news, but it was not good news. 'What difference does this make in my life?' his neighbor asked. When Zander shared with him that we are to participate in God's goodness, that message, for his neighbor, was good news. 'It had substance.' This gospel is for Christians and non-Christians alike, as it is an invitation to participate in God's redemptive activities." (56) Yes, but it flows from a decision to trust in Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. He's not just our leader/role model. The invitation to participate in redemptive activities is not central, it falls out of the gospel. We are not saved by joining in an imitate Jesus program of social justice. The gospel is essentially God drawing people into a relationship with Himself. Social justice is not primary. The emerging church risks making Jesus a divine mother Teresa instead of the Son of God who died to deliver us from our sins. God is first and foremost about redeeming us from alienation from Himself, not from selfishness.

¹⁹ In the section on "Moving from Changing Beliefs to Changing Lives" Gibbs and Bolger write, "Emerging churches focus on changed lives rather than changed beliefs. People do not want to be converted, but experiencing the life of the kingdom may be welcomed by many." (128-129)

²⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, "Adherents of postmodern religions (actually all religions that are not modern) tend to practice a holistic way of life." (218)

²¹ Ibid., "How did emerging churches come to emphasize the gospel of the kingdom? It began as a change of focus from the Epistles to the Gospels as a way to understand Jesus more profoundly. With a growing conviction that something was seriously wrong with the church, these emerging leaders felt they needed a fresh understanding of the gospel to proceed any further...In a

Here's the problem. The gospels and the epistles present a unified view of Jesus. Why set them against each other? Even if two sections of scripture highlight different aspects of the character of Christ, we need to emphasize both and recognize Jesus came to bring conviction *and* forgiveness of sin, to judge *and* to extend mercy. God incarnate did not have a multiple personality disorder. We must not respond to a partial understanding of the gospel by seizing upon the remaining part, but by preaching the whole! More broadly, the solution to pursuing biblically accurate doctrine to the neglect of biblical practice is not to simply focus on loving your neighbor. Rather we must pursue a biblical practice informed by accurate, biblical theology. There is no choice to be made between loving and serving people and warning them of the wrath to come. Rather we need to love and serve people with the hope of bringing them to saving knowledge of a God-man named Jesus who died on a cross for the forgiveness of sin so that they do not have to experience the wrath to come. Genuinely biblical doctrine is always evidenced by biblical practice. Establishing a false dichotomy between doctrine and practice renders the former unbiblical and the latter unloving.²² The one is the foundation for the other.²³

The impact of emerging church language suggesting a false dichotomy between pursuing Biblically sound doctrine and loving people is perhaps best seen in their posture toward other religions.²⁴ They believe modern evangelicals need to move away from defining themselves with a denominational label and embrace the faith traditions of other religions around the world.²⁵ We need to love other people and welcome diversity in Christian spirituality, instead of arrogantly asserting another person's belief or practice is unbiblical and false. We must reject the modern tradition of establishing moral absolutes, especially on controversial issues, and accept everyone as beloved children of God.

Once again, the emerging church begins with a biblical concept. The Lord calls us to incarnate the love of God on earth, which includes demonstrating Christ-like love toward Christians and non-Christians alike. Yet notice how quickly a false dichotomy is established.

times of immense cultural change and disconnect with the church, emerging churches retrieved the Jesus of the Gospels but not necessarily the Christ of history." (49)

Ibid., "In ancient Israel, the categories clean and unclean maintained identity and established boundaries, and contact with outcast, sinners, or lepers made one unclean. In conjunction with the holiness codes and food laws, the priest declared who was in and who was out. The sinners, the outcast, the oppressed, the poor, and the hungry were despised and were definitely out." (118) Not true. Notice the tinge of mocking in the argument. Jesus fulfilled the law. He didn't break it.

²² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, (quoting Mark Scandrette (ReIMAGINE!, San Francisco)), "We want to help people consider Jesus as an option through the beauty of how we live our lives. Living in the way of Jesus is not a belief system but a reality." (58) First encouraging a way of life tends to produce a salvation by works that is neither true life nor true salvation. Instead, we must encourage people to respond to God's gracious invitation of salvation that leads to a new way of life.

²³ For example, the emerging church often emphasizes the importance of the overall storyline of the Bible over the specific propositional truths contained therein. They find the big picture of "God loving people" more attractive than explicit moral guidelines. Justin Taylor addressed this issue in a break-out session at the New Attitude '06 Conference. "We won't want to pit the overarching picture/storyline/narrative of the Bible against the doctrinal details. One is a context for the other and keeping doctrine in context helps avoid arrogant forms of absolutism."

²⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, "Burke's community is prepared to learn from faith traditions outside the Christian fold. There is a Buddhist family in their church. As a community, the church visited a Buddhist temple. They participated in a guided meditation with this family. Burke celebrates the many ways God is revealed. He recognizes that the Spirit has been with these people all along. The community celebrates other traditions. They reach out to other traditions, and they see them as beloved children of God" (132)

²⁵ Ibid., "From a postmodern perspective, the ultimate question is, Why is it important to label oneself as evangelical? Aren't labels simply artificial divisions that make us feel safe or help us exert control? Why not mine the riches of many traditions / What is obvious is that the ecclesiastical or theological label one decides to wear is of far less concern to emerging churches than how one relates to the gospel and culture." (39)

Either you love and care for people like Christ, or you arrogantly reject them as unbiblical. Either you humbly seek to learn from people of all faiths, or you isolate yourself with a denominational label. Loving people like Christ doesn't mean we must accept their doctrinal positions as true.²⁶ It is possible, and often necessary, to extend love to someone and yet firmly and humbly explain why you believe their theology or morality is unbiblical (Acts 18:24-28, Eph. 4:15, John 4:1-42). Nor is recognizing every religion as containing elements of "truth" the only alternative to defining Christianity with exclusive, denominational labels. The distinguishing mark of genuine Christianity is biblical fidelity in belief and practice. In the process of emphasizing the importance of welcoming and perceiving elements of truth in all religious traditions, we lose sight of the fact that many "faith traditions" are rooted in unbiblical concepts of the nature of God and his will for mankind. Genuinely listening to and seeking to learn from, where scripture permits, other "faith traditions" is good. But we must not set up an artificial antithesis between believing they're wrong where scripture has made it clear and demonstrating the love of Christ to them in practical ways.²⁷ "We need to discern between the judgment that discerns and the judgment that condemns."²⁸

Three groups of Christian young people are particularly vulnerable to accepting a false dichotomy between loving people and loving sound doctrine: recent converts, "church kids", and those with a unique passion for social justice. Many young people are sadly resistant to Christianity due to the poor example of highly visible evangelical leaders who have either failed to live out biblical theology or are more known for the "judgment that condemns" than the "judgment that discerns". When these young people are brought to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ during their late teens or twenties, their understanding of the relationship between loving people and loving sound doctrine may be more shaped by a negative reaction against an unbiblical model than a positive understanding of the biblical connection. Thus they might avoid studying doctrine and learning what the Bible has to say about controversial moral issues for fear of becoming an arrogant, unloving Christian. They need the example of a mature Christian who pursues humble orthodoxy, whose passion for gospel-centered truth overflows in love for his neighbor.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., "Jonny Baker (Grace, London) expresses his desire for an inclusive faith. 'The danger with the church is that it all gets too tribal. I'm not interested in that. I want to be connected to Christ and the body of Christ, both through history (the communion of saints) and globally (the worldwide church), so it is enough for me to be Christian, a follower of Christ.' Simon Hall (Revive, Leeds, U.K.) also favors an inclusive approach. 'My main aim for the community is not to be 'post' anything but to be 'and' everything. We are evangelical and charismatic and liberal and orthodox and contemplative and into social justice and into alternative worship.'" (38-39)

²⁷ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz*, "The problem with Christian community was that we had ethics, we had rules and laws and principles to judge each other again. There was love in Christian community, but it was conditional love...I was tired of Christian leaders using biblical principles to protect their power, to draw a line in the sand separating the good army from the bad one. The truth is I had met the enemy in the woods and discovered they were not the enemy. I wondered whether any human being could be an enemy of God." (215-216) It is possible to say I believe I'm right and yet not be judgmental, but rather loving toward others. To his credit, Miller later poses the question, "How could I love my neighbor without endorsing what, I truly believed, was unhealthy spirituality?" But the answer is not biblical: "He was a great human being getting even better. I could feel God's love for him. I loved the fact that it wasn't my responsibility to change somebody, that is was God's, that my part was just to communicate love and approval." Yes, we are called to love people, but love is not always synonymous with approval. The Bible calls us to speak the truth in love, even when the truth is unpleasant or convicting. For the unbeliever, the truth is that God loves them, but apart from responding to His gracious invitation of salvation through the gospel, they have only His righteous wrath, not His approval, to anticipate. For the believer, the truth is that God loves them in Christ and has eternally approved Christ's sacrifice on the cross for the forgiveness of their sin, but He still brings discipline conform them into the perfect image of His Son.

²⁸ Paul Alexander, book review of *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* by D. A. Carson, (<http://www.9marks.org/CC/article/0,,PTID314526|CHID598026|CIID2082384,00.html>).

²⁹ Justin Taylor, in a message given at the New Attitude '06 Conference.

“Church kids” or those who have essentially grown up immersed in popular, evangelical, youth culture, are equally at risk. Too often the majority of the biblical teaching they hear is more concerned with doing right things (be a good student, respect your teachers and parents, serve your community, etc.) and avoiding bad things (don’t do drugs, don’t have sex before marriage, don’t use bad language, etc.), than learning to believe right things about God as revealed in scripture, the gospel of grace chief among them. As a result, “church kids” can easily adopt a works-orientated understanding of Christianity with little desire or interest in sound doctrine. For them, Christianity is only about loving people because that’s all they were ever told to do. They need the example of mature Christians, whose growing love for people is informed by a deepening knowledge of God’s truth, starting with the fact that they’re a sinner in need of a savior who, apart from a gospel of grace, cannot do good works (including loving people) for God’s glory.

The last group includes Christian young people who have a unique passion for social justice. Many western children move through the K-12 years with little understanding of the poverty, disease and famine plaguing the rest of the world. During their college years, their eyes are opened to a whole range of social justice issues. Professors, counselors and peers urge them to “make a difference” as ambassadors of Christ’s love by meeting the practical needs of oppressed populations. After all, didn’t Christ instruct His disciples to care for the poor? (Matt 25:31-46) And didn’t Christ spend much of his ministry healing the sick, restoring the outcast, and feeding the hungry as an example for us to follow? Yes, He did. But Jesus met all these temporal needs with an eternal cause in view. He healed the sick, restored the outcast, and fed the hungry for a greater purpose: the salvation of souls. (Luke 4:16-21, 43, John 9:35-41, 10:7-11) And he instructed his disciples to do the same! (Matt. 28:16-20) Providing for temporal needs creates an opportunity to join God’s work in meeting a far greater eternal need. The cause of social justice must serve the cause of spreading the gospel. Loving people and loving sound doctrine are biblically inseparable. Passion for the former apart from the latter renders the church more of a spiritualized, humanitarian companion than a bright beacon of “the glory of God in the face of Christ” in a dying world.³⁰ (2 Cor. 4:6)

The emerging church does well to emphasize the importance of cultural attentiveness, missional ecclesiology, community focus, and outward orientation in an American, evangelical culture plagued by epistemological arrogance and self-centered ecclesiology. Unfortunately, they overreact to the situation and in the process threaten the authority of scripture, minimize the depravity of man, downplay the centrality of the cross, and use language suggesting a dangerously false dichotomy between church doctrine and practice. Young people are unlikely to connect such theological errors to the emerging church movement specifically, but their cultural popularity makes them especially attractive to a younger generation increasingly pressured to surrender biblical values to the demands of secular society. As those called to pastor the next generation, we must, in response, be faithful to uphold the authority of scripture and model humble orthodoxy.

³⁰ Terry Heaton, “10 Questions for Brian McClaren” (<http://donatacom.com/papers/10Q7.htm>), quoting Brian McClaren, “We’re trying to have an eschatology that thrusts us into the world as agents of justice and peace and reconciliation and service, rather than one that makes us stand on the edge with condemnation and judgment.” Note how McClaren boldly suggests you can either stand for truth or love people. (A false dichotomy) We must remember that a social gospel does no good if hearts are not changed.