

The Theory of Relativity
Understanding the Influence of Post-Modern Thought on the Church Today
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I'm going to start by answering two simple questions that were asked of me just last week. A person I know has some friends who are involved in the Emerging Church movement. And my friend, who was trying to sort out what to think of it, asked me two questions and challenged me to give brief, one-sentence answers. Here are the two questions: (1) If you had to boil postmodernism down into one significant idea, stated as simply as possible, what would it be? And (2) If you could summarize your criticism of the Emerging Church movement with just one major complaint, what would *that* be?

Those are good questions, huh? Obviously, the person who asked me those questions was trying to see the big picture, and that's always a good idea with complex issues. So I'm going to try to answer those questions, as requested, with one-sentence answers.

But before I do, let me make a short disclaimer. The problem with one-sentence summaries and big-picture definitions is that they can't really be completely satisfying answers. One-sentence answers to complex questions like those are *always* incomplete. There are always exceptions to the rule. The ideas themselves are too big to do justice to in a single sentence.

But the *real* problem for me here is that postmodernists and most of the apologists for the Emerging Church movement don't like definitions in the first place—and they especially hate *concise* definitions. Try to describe what they stand for in a pithy way, and they will inevitably accuse you of trying to broad-brush something that needs to be carefully nuanced, and if you are critical of their position, they will dismiss everything you say by claiming you are only dealing with a caricature anyway.

So: just so were clear here, I *realize* these are complex and difficult subjects, and I can't possibly do full justice to them with a single-sentence answer. Also, I'm *not* trying to oversimplify in order to make someone an easier target; my only goal here is to give people who have a hard time with these issues a good starting point for a clearer understanding.

The fact is, if you really want to understand something complex, there *is* great value in summarizing and simplifying and singling out central themes and big ideas. For most people a simple, concise, thumbnail definition of a complex idea is actually a very helpful starting point. We just need to be careful to remember that it is a starting point only, not an exhaustive definition.

With that in mind, I'm going to take a stab at answering these two questions:

Question 1: If you had to boil postmodernism down into one significant idea, stated as simply as possible, what would it be? I would say the central idea that drives postmodernism is *a nagging suspicion that at the end of the day, no one can really know with absolute certainty what is true and what is not*. That's what I would say is the distilled essence of the postmodern idea.

Of course, postmodernism is really *much* more complex than that. It involves theories about how language works, and how ideas are constructed, and how texts should be interpreted. For example, postmodernists tend to think that reality itself is a socially constructed concept—something inherently subjective and ever-changing and always different depending on your perspective when you see it—which is why they tend to deny that truth itself is objectively fixed and knowable. It's a large and very difficult idea.

But I do think if you understand that postmodernism always runs in a straight line back to the notion that no one can really be certain what is true, you have got the gist of what is most distinctive about the era in which we are currently living.

A typical person steeped in postmodernist ideology might refer to it as “epistemological humility.” That's how they see it: *humility* is what keeps them from knowing and declaring that anything is true. Furthermore, as far as postmodernists are concerned, that sort of humility is the one supreme and cardinal virtue. That's why, according to any postmodern way of thinking, dogmatism is inherently arrogant, diversity is the highest of virtues, and propositional truth-claims don't ultimately matter much.

Evangelical Christianity is rooted, of course, in the conviction that God has *revealed* truth that He wants us to know and affirm. Our certainty about the truth of Scripture is derived from the fact that this is God-breathed truth. Some things He has made clearer than others, some things are indeed hard to understand, and Christians have their own intramural squabbles and academic discussions about epistemology: *How do we arrive at an understanding of the truth? By what means do we acquire knowledge in the first place?*—and whatnot. But at the end of the day, this is one of the fundamental tenets of true, biblical Christianity: We believe God has revealed vital truth, and because God says it, we can have implicit faith that it is absolutely and necessarily true—because God cannot lie. God Himself holds us responsible for believing what He has revealed. It is our *duty* to receive it as fully reliable, objectively true, factually accurate, historically trustworthy, inerrant, unchanging, eternal, and divinely revealed truth. So Scripture is the touchstone of all truth by which every other truth-claim must be tested.

That has always been the Christian perspective, clearly stated over and over in the New Testament. It was perhaps assumed more than it was articulated during some eras of the church's history, and it became terribly muddled and obscured in medieval times by a church that kept the Word of God out of lay-people's hands and taught them instead that the church's own authority was the source of truth. The Dark Ages were the inevitable result of that.

But the authority of Scripture was unleashed again during the Protestant Reformation in the principle of *sola Scriptura*. In fact, one of the greatest contributions of the Reformation was the way it cleared away the cobwebs of medieval confusion about what is true and who gets to say what is true—and it pointed instead to an objective repository of sound and reliable truth: Scripture. The Word of God—not church tradition or papal bulls or the opinions of some earthly magisterium—but *Scripture alone* is the objective repository of sound, reliable, inerrant, infallible, completely trustworthy truth—revealed by God.

Study church history and you will see that the health and growth of the church rises and falls in direct proportion to the general level of confidence in Scripture.

All the serious post-Reformation threats to evangelical Christianity have attacked the reliability or the perspicuity of Scripture: Socinianism, Deism, universalism, Unitarianism, modernism—*whatever*. As far as their attitude toward the Scriptures is concerned, these have all been basically the same error recycled for each new generation. You could add theological liberalism, and now the left wing of the Emerging Church movement to that list. All of them have used essentially the same arguments, and they have attacked evangelical doctrine at precisely the same points.

Now, if you had grandparents or great-grandparents—or even great-great-grandparents—who were evangelical at any time from, say, 1860 through 1960, *modernism* was something they were greatly aware of and resistant to. Modernism. If you want to boil it down to the same kind of one-sentence description, *modernism* is the notion that the only sure and reliable test of truth is science—or perhaps more broadly, human reason.

So whereas biblical Christianity had always said, “Truth is revealed by God,” modernism said, “Truth is learned through science.” And the conflict between those two ways of looking at truth was profound and fundamental.

There existed people in the church—lots of them—starting around the mid-part of the 19th century, who were saying, “Look: the world is becoming modern, and the church had better modernize, too.” Most evangelicals in that era were caught completely off-guard by the paradigm shift and frankly did not know what to think of it. Did the church need to adapt its interpretation of Scripture to the latest scientific theories—Darwinism, rationalism, and philosophical materialism? Suddenly you had scholarly commentaries questioning the historicity of Jonah and the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the account of creation, and all the miraculous elements of Scripture. All of that reflected the influence of modernism.

And most of the evangelical lay-people in that generation—not to mention a large number of ministers—were totally at a loss how to respond. For a while, it seemed as if modernism was prepared to overwhelm the church and utterly change the face and the character of Christianity.

If you want a kind of front-row seat to observe the debate that ensued when modernism assaulted the church, read the collection of documents I have at my website dealing with *Charles Spurgeon and the Down Grade Controversy*. (Spurgeon.org is the address, and when you click past the intro page, look for the link to the Down Grade documents.) There you can read how the controversy over modernism led to Spurgeon's censure by the Baptist Union—and it ultimately (I believe) hastened his death. It's a great window through which you can see how modernism launched a very subtle attack on the church.

Read those documents, and you will discover that almost everything Spurgeon had to say in that controversy is immediately applicable to the church of today. He was denounced as too shrill and too negative, and he was run out of the Baptist Union. But history has completely vindicated Spurgeon. He was absolutely right to oppose the influence of modernism in the church. Churches that embraced modernism went completely off the rails; they declined in their influence; and they lost their spiritual health completely. Most of them shriveled and died.

While modernism was killing off the mainline denominations, through the first three quarters of the twentieth century, evangelical churches were growing and thriving and multiplying—and gaining new influence.

(Frankly, the evangelical movement of the past 30 years has utterly mishandled and squandered its influence, and many evangelical churches quietly stopped teaching the very same doctrines they had fought to defend from the modernists—and that is the main reason postmodernism is now a threat to the church. Many evangelicals also quietly adopted the methodology of the modernists. In the long term, many of them abandoned their own distinctives and forfeited the spiritual influence they had because they were hungry for political influence. But that's all another story.)

The clear reason evangelicals grew in the first place is that in the beginning they were proclaiming a clear and definite message with confidence and conviction—*against* the popular modern idea that nothing is sure except science. They refused to accommodate their message to the modernist point of view, and they prospered *because* they stood against the dominant trends of that generation's intellectual culture.

Now I hope you are following along. These are absolutely vital issues, because they go to the heart of the question of how we determine what is true. You have on the one hand the historic Christian perspective, that truth is revealed by God and set forth for us in Scripture.

And against that, you have the *modern* perspective, which said that science is the only real certainty; men are only animals who evolved from lower creatures; and everything hinges on the survival of the fittest. The result was communism, Marxism, and fascism. Modernism spawned two world wars and a long cold war—until finally communism collapsed under its own weight, and modernism died with it. By the 1980s, the absolute certainty science and human reason had once promised had clearly proved to be an

illusion. Modernism was utterly discredited and suddenly it was regarded as outmoded. Almost before anyone knew it, the world had entered the postmodern era.

I think we can understand why the adjective *postmodern* would sound appealing to evangelicals. I remember the first time I heard the word, I thought it had a pleasing and promising ring to it. Because I had always thought of modernism as something inherently hostile to Christianity, so *post*-modernism sounded like it *had* to be a good thing. Modernist thinking was now discredited. That must be good, right? Anything that takes the place of modernist unbelief must be a superior way of thinking, no?

Not necessarily. Remember, biblical Christianity says we know truth with certainty because God has revealed the truth to us through His Word. Modernism claimed instead that the only way to be certain about truth is *through the scientific method*. Modernism was wrong, but at least modernists still acknowledged the possibility and the desirability of knowing truth with some degree of certainty. Modernists clearly understood that *something* in the universe must be objectively true.

Postmodernism, however, represents the abandonment of knowing truth with any degree of certainty. It is not an improvement on modernism; it's a major step further in the wrong direction. Instead of a quest for truth, the postmodernist thinks in terms of a huge campfire or a round-table discussion around which we all have a great conversation and take turns telling stories. Everyone has a *different* story, and that's good. You have yours; I have mine, and we can have a ripping good conversation about our diverse stories and our contradictory perspectives. But if you want to join the conversation, you have got to remember that it's impolite and unacceptable to claim my story is true and someone else's is false. It really doesn't matter what's right and what's wrong. All that matters is that we share our stories and celebrate the diversity of our perspectives.

That is how postmodern discourse is supposed to work. Of course, preaching with conviction is right out. *Too dogmatic*. Certainty is not conducive to the conversation. We just want to share our stories with one another. *Narrative* theology, not propositional truth. That is what "works" in a postmodern culture.

If you have read any of the literature of the emerging church lately, you no doubt will recognize in that little shorthand description of postmodernism some of the familiar jargon that goes hand in hand with emerging trends in the church. *Stories* and *conversations* and *narrative theology* are deemed good; propositions and truth-claims and doctrine are usually seen as impolite and uncharitable—lacking in the epistemological humility that has become the trademark of postmodern discourse.

Keep in mind what Brian McLaren says about this. (He is, of course, one of the founders of "Emergent," a group that leans decidedly toward the left end of the Emerging spectrum.) He said he doesn't even like the expression "Emerging Church." That sounds too structured for his tastes. He prefers to think of it as the "Emerging *Conversation*."

For convenience's sake, I'm going to speak of the Emerging Church movement, but bear in mind that what we are talking about when we mention "the emerging church" is not an organization at all; it's not even really a coherent *movement*. But it's is a diverse conglomeration of many different streams—all aiming at keeping the church in step with the postmodern paradigm shift.

That brings us to the second of those two questions I promised brief answers to:

Question 2: If you could boil your criticism of the Emerging Church movement down to one major complaint, what would that be? Short answer: Virtually every distinctive strategy I have seen advocated by people who identify themselves as Emerging so far strikes me as utterly wrong-headed; rooted in a lack of confidence in the power and authority of Scripture; borrowed from the modernist playbook; already discredited by experience; and contrary to what Scripture teaches.

I realize that sounds too negative, so let me put it another way: I think the Emerging movement has shown an uncanny knack for *adapting to and embracing* the very aspects of postmodern culture that most need to be *confronted* with the truth of the gospel.

On the positive side, let me say that I *appreciate* the fact that many Christians these days are grappling with the question of how the church should respond to postmodernism. I do think that's a serious and vitally important question that we all need to face. It's a question many old-style evangelicals are completely unprepared to answer but every person I have ever met who is involved in the Emerging Church movement is eager and ready to discuss. At the end of the day, that *is* the key distinctive of the emerging church: it is fundamentally a self-conscious attempt to adapt the church and frame the gospel message in a way that meets the unique challenges postmodernism presents.

Understand: I'm not suggesting that is an unworthy goal. I have *many* criticisms of the Emerging Church movement, but the fact that they want to reach postmodern people for Christ is *not* one of my criticisms. It's vital that the church should wake up and understand how our world is changing, and at the very least, the Emerging Church movement is sounding a wake-up call.

Furthermore, I think if you listen to the Emerging Church Movement's critique of mainstream evangelicalism, you'll find that they are right on target in many ways. I agree wholeheartedly with much of what the literature of the Emerging Church movement says about the failure of mainstream evangelicalism. Many who are joining the Emerging movement have bailed out of the evangelical movement because they are rightly fed up with American-style late-20th-century evangelicalism.

(I'm talking here especially about the so-called "neo-evangelicalism" that rode the wave of Billy Graham's popularity and reached its peak in a handful of massive, worldly megachurches where serious teaching was deliberately ousted and replaced by entertainment.) That kind of "evangelicalism" has utterly failed as a movement and will probably die out completely in a generation or so if serious and significant changes are

not made. And, the Emerging people will tell you, that movement needs to die. Good riddance to it.

The thing is, I absolutely agree with that assessment.

But I could hardly disagree more strongly with *the kind of remedies* that have been proposed by the chief engineers of the Emerging Church movement. In fact, I think the big-picture strategy they have adopted actually works *against* the idea of reaching postmodern people for Christ.

Okay. That's all essentially introduction. Considering the fact that I wanted to begin by giving one-sentence answers to two short questions, that took a lot longer than I planned. But let's review. Question 1: What's the central idea that gives postmodernism its flavor? My answer: *It's that nagging suspicion that at the end of the day, no one can really know with absolute certainty what is true and what is not.* Question 2: What's your major complaint with the Emerging Church movement? My answer: *I think their strategy is seriously flawed—even counterproductive.*

So now you know where I am coming from, and I hope you understand what I mean when I speak of postmodernism and the Emerging Church movement. I want to spend just a little bit of time looking at the multifarious streams of the Emerging Church movement. What, exactly, are the strategies they are using to reach postmodern people, and what is it that binds such a diverse movement together?

And then I want to spend the remainder of our time—as much time as I can possibly carve out—answering a third question. I know I can't answer that question in a single sentence, so I'm not really even going to try. But this is the question I think the pastoral staff had most in mind when they assigned me this seminar: *What should the church do in order to reach people in a postmodern culture?*

First, let's talk about the various ways people in the Emerging Church movement are already trying to reach people for Christ out of a postmodern culture. I've said I think their strategies are seriously muddle-headed and unbiblical, but I want to give you a few specifics and explain why I think the whole approach is so seriously flawed.

Last month's *Christianity Today* had a major article by Scot McKnight in which he outlined what's happening in the Emerging Church movement. The article's title is "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," subtitled "Key Elements of the most controversial and misunderstood movement in the church today." The article is adapted from a lecture McKnight gave last October at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

McKnight is professor of religious studies at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago. He's overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Emerging Church movement, and he says at the beginning of his article that he himself is an emerging Christian. *"I happily consider myself part of this movement or 'conversation.' As an evangelical,"* he says,

“I’ve had my concerns, but overall I think what emerging Christians bring to the table is vital for the overall health of the church.”

It’s true that Scot McKnight *has* on occasion expressed some concerns about things in the Emerging Church movement—most famously just last August when he took issue with Spencer Burke. Burke is a leading figure in the online community of emerging church-people. Spencer Burke created a website called TheOoze.com, which is one of the original and most heavily trafficked Emergent websites. So Burke has had significant influence in the larger movement. He is widely regarded as a leading voice in the “conversation.”

Last year he wrote a book titled *A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity*. That’s frankly a fitting title. The book is a manifesto for a quasi-universalist reinvention of the doctrines of salvation and the afterlife, and it’s a denial of practically everything Jesus ever said about hell and judgment—replete with a foreword by Brian McLaren. Scot McKnight is by his own admission more evangelical than some of his emerging friends, so naturally, he wasn’t completely pleased with Spencer Burke’s book. He posted a review on his weblog in which he highlighted some concerns about Burke’s book.

Now I should say that Scot McKnight strikes me as an overly hesitant critic. He actually wrote a four-part review of that book, and in the first installment, he suggested that it was a mistake for Burke to call himself a heretic. *That’s not really a helpful category*, he said. But by the time he got to the fourth entry, he had to grapple with the fact that Burke is basically a universalist who denies the personality of God. (Here are Burke’s exact words from page 195 of the book: “I’m not sure I believe in God exclusively as a person anymore either. The truth is that seeing God as spirit more than person doesn’t destroy my faith.”) McKnight acknowledged those deficiencies in Spencer Burke’s belief system. He also pointed out that the gospel is completely missing from Burke’s theology. And then he ended the review with a direct plea to Burke in which he said, “Spencer, you’re a good guy. But I have to say this to you: Go back to church.”

I bring that whole episode up because I think it’s important to understand first of all how large and dangerous the fringe of the broad Emerging Church movement is. In his review of Burke, McKnight wrote,

The emerging movement is proud of creating a safe environment for people to think and to express their doubts. Partly because of what I do for a living (teach[ing] college students), I am sympathetic to the need for such safe environments. But, having said that, the emerging movement has also been criticized over and over for not having any boundaries. Frankly, some of the criticism is justified. I want to express my dismay today over what I think is crossing the boundaries.

I’m glad Scot McKnight recognizes those problems, but frankly, I think that’s a pretty weak response to a book that flatly denies practically everything that’s distinctive to the Christian faith, beginning with the personality of God.

But it does give us a context for Scot McKnight's evaluation of the Emerging Church movement, especially when McKnight starts his article in *Christianity Today* by complaining that critics of the movement are usually too severe. And (by the way) here's my challenge to Scot McKnight and others who call themselves evangelicals but who have taken the role of apologists for the Emerging Church movement: *With errors of this magnitude flourishing in and around your movement, it would be helpful if you expended more energy dealing with truly serious errors like this in your midst than you spend nitpicking and deconstructing the words of the movement's critics.*

Nevertheless, I think the article by McKnight in last month's *Christianity Today* is a pretty fair look at the Emerging Church movement from someone who regards himself as an insider. McKnight gives some helpful insight into what the various strains of the emerging subculture have in common, and how they see things differently. Just remember as you read that article, that when it comes to being a critic of the dangers of the movement, McKnight has a track record of minimizing the problems and grossly exaggerating the strengths of the movement. So take the whole article with a salt pill.

Here's my quick summary of it:

As his title suggests, Scot McKnight outlines five tributaries that feed into the larger movement. In his words, these are "streams flowing into the emerging lake." That's fitting imagery. As I said in my seminar last year, the Driscoll stream isn't anything like the McLaren stream, and you can also be "emerging" without being *Emergent*. The words have different nuances of meaning. But all the various streams—some of them choked with huge doses of theological sewage—flow into the same pond, and it frankly makes a pretty muddy mess.

Look at some of the most prominent leaders in the movement and you get an idea of how broadly diverse it really is. Mark Driscoll is no doubt the most doctrinally conservative national figure in the mix. He has defended the atonement and the authority of Scripture against attacks from other quarters within the movement. His willingness to argue about doctrine makes him stand out from the rest of the group. And lately he has been the target of criticism from lots of other Emerging leaders because they complain that he is just way too combative.

Incidentally, Driscoll stands out as an exception to the rule in several categories of characteristics that would be true of the rest of the emerging church. Some have argued that he doesn't really fit with the rest of the Emerging Church movement (doctrinally, he is more like a fundamentalist in their midst), and to a certain extent I agree with that. So please just bear in mind that some of my general criticisms of the Emerging Church movement don't necessarily apply in exhaustive detail to Driscoll, and if you can please just hold that thought in your head, I won't have to keep repeating the disclaimer.

Still, I'm including Driscoll in the broad Emerging Conversation because he includes himself, even though he wouldn't necessarily fit the overall pattern in every respect. Driscoll seems to relish his role as the Emerging movement's bad boy—the guy with a

trash-mouth and an attitude who breaks all the rules, including the rules of the movement itself.

Let me just say that I'm not exactly giddy with delight over Mark Driscoll's influence within the Emerging movement or his approach to ministry—even though I appreciate his defense of the atonement, and he certainly has a better grasp of doctrine than you will find in the rest of the Emerging Church movement. I still think Driscoll's strategy is seriously flawed. For one thing, I think his identification with the larger movement is a serious problem. He is a willing participant in the conversation. Whatever he may say with his mouth, he lends support and credibility to the dark side of the movement by that participation.

But that's really only a secondary complaint. What disturbs me most about Driscoll's approach to reaching a postmodern culture is this: The way he has chosen to contextualize Christianity for postmoderns is by wearing worldliness on his sleeve. He wants it known that he is familiar with, and quite comfortable to be a part of, the more squalid and disreputable aspects of postmodern culture—from ultimate fighting to trashy movies. He seems to enjoy parading his familiarity with the world's fashions. And as much as he might seem to disagree profoundly with the dark side of the Emerging Church movement, but he'll be happy to continue the conversation with them down at the pub over a pint.

Driscoll participated in a book-length symposium with other Emerging Church leaders titled *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, published just last month by Zondervan. (The whole book is an instructive read, if you really want to appreciate the vast breadth of heresies being floated in the Emerging Church movement, that would be a good book to read. Driscoll doesn't back down from challenging the heresies, but when you finish the book, you'll understand, I think, why it's a serious problem that he hasn't washed his hands of the movement entirely.) Anyway, one of the strangest chapters in the book is by Karen Ward, a thoroughgoing theological liberal who has founded her own church in Seattle, not that far from Driscoll. Of course, they disagree on practically every *theological* issue, but she ends her evaluation of Driscoll's chapter with this:

Who knows...maybe someday, the Spirit will arrange for me to run into Mark at the Jolly Rancher pub in Seattle and have a chat at this middle space between our worlds, because I have no doubt that Mark loves God in Christ as much as I do, and I have heard that like me, Mark enjoys a good beer.

My point here is not to make an argument for teetotalism, but to say that if that's the first thing a rank liberal in your own movement says about how you might start to settle your profound theological differences, you probably need to work on your image.

But Driscoll seems to work hard to cultivate the bad-boy image. One of the first issues that usually come up when Driscoll's name is mentioned is his use of profane language. In Donald Miller's book, *Blue Like Jazz*, he nicknames Driscoll "Mark, the cussing Pastor." Again, I'll just say that if that's your reputation, you have probably taken the

notion of cultural contextualization to a ridiculous and unbiblical extreme. And in Driscoll's case, this would be my main concern: That approach has affected the message he communicates. There is practically no emphasis on sanctification in his approach to the Christian walk. And to a certain extent it looks as if that omission is largely a studied, deliberate attempt (in my judgment, a totally *misguided* attempt) to contextualize Christianity to the Seattle grunge culture.

Enough about Driscoll. Again, he is an exception to many of the rules, but on the other hand, all my criticisms of Driscoll *would* apply generally to most of the Emerging Church movement. And I don't want to lose perspective on the big picture by focusing so much on Driscoll. So let's just say that in the big picture, Mark Driscoll is on the distant right end of the spectrum.

Brian McLaren, on the other hand, is at the opposite pole doctrinally from Driscoll. He is a flat-out liberal—in several senses of that word. I don't need to say a lot about McLaren, because I dealt with him in some detail two years ago in the first seminar I did on the subject of postmodernism.

Dan Kimball would fall somewhere between, but he is probably closer to the Driscoll side of the spectrum. Kimball *might* even try to argue that his doctrine is just as conservative as Driscoll's. He comes from an evangelical background. But it's frankly hard to tell how much he has retained of his core evangelical beliefs, because unlike Driscoll, Dan Kimball doesn't want to make doctrine much of an issue.

In that symposium book I mentioned, *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches*, Kimball says the only doctrines he is really sure about these days are the doctrines that were affirmed universally by the church up to and including the Nicene Creed. Listen to this quote from Kimball, and I think you'll hear a classic example of the kind of thinking I already suggested is the main idea in postmodern thought. Kimball writes (p. 92):

When we move beyond what the Nicene Creed discusses, I feel that it is not as easy to be saying so confidently that we have things all figured out. I wonder quite often if, beyond the Nicene Creed, we end up shaping some theology or even choosing what theology we believe because of personality and temperament.

That's a really odd and historically ignorant statement, because the Nicene Creed, in 325 A.D., actually marked the *start* of several volleys of controversy about the person of Christ—and it wasn't until the council of Chalcedon, 126 years later, that the doctrine of the hypostatic union was agreed upon and set down in a creedal statement, and that's what finally ended a more than 200-year-long parade of heresies about the person of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. It would be much easier to understand Kimball's position if he said he thought the Council of Chalcedon marked the final plank of vital orthodoxy. I would still disagree with him, but his position would make a lot more sense.

Anyway, the point Dan Kimball was making there is not just an obscure, offhanded remark that I am responding to. It's practically the main point of his chapter, and it's also

the one point he makes in rebuttal to Mark Driscoll's chapter: Kimball doesn't think any doctrine that wasn't settled by the first ecumenical council in 325 A.D. is worth fighting over.

Now, if that's really Dan Kimball's position, then he has in effect repudiated the Protestant Reformation, not to mention Augustine's refutation of Pelagius, which occurred a hundred years after the Nicene Council. I seriously doubt if you backed him into a corner whether that's really a position Dan Kimball would defend. It's a position that is certainly fraught with a number of serious problems. And if you read the book, you may get the impression, as I did, that not only has Kimball not really thought it through very carefully—but he probably wouldn't really care to give it much serious thought. Frankly, the message that comes across in what he has written is that he really doesn't want to be bothered with doctrine. Like a lot of postmodern church members, he doesn't seem to have the stomach for propositional theology. I have a hard time interpreting what he says in any other sense.

With the exception of Driscoll (and perhaps I would include Scot McKnight and one or two others), it seems to me that the whole Emerging Church movement is shot through with that very same kind of doctrinal apathy, and it is one of the main reasons I think the Emerging Movement's approach to reaching postmodern people could hardly be more seriously wrong.

Without a commitment to sound doctrine and a strong sense of what is truth and what is error, you simply have no way to fend off heresy. Unfortunately, once you decide *not* to take a firm stance against the most basic postmodern presuppositions about truth and assurance, you have already made any kind of vigorous, biblical defense of the faith impossible. Even the most conservative voices in the Emerging Church movement have this problem, because although they might not be self-consciously postmodern in their own thinking, they are too concerned with keeping the conversation going. And in order to do that, you are virtually required not to take a confrontational stance against postmodernism's view of truth and certainty. I think that's a serious mistake.

Perhaps that explains why a guy like Driscoll is willing to keep swimming in the Emerging cesspool along with other Emerging Church leaders who *do* embrace an essentially postmodern epistemology. Now I'm thinking now of people like Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, and Rob Bell—all of whom clearly would fall on the McLaren end of the spectrum—and all of whom, to some degree, embrace a postmodern perspective on truth.

Scot McKnight is correct; this is a big, cloudy pond with lots of different streams flowing into it. I imagine it would be hard to cite a doctrinal position on any of the major theological questions that has not been affirmed to some degree by someone in the Emerging Church movement. So this is a movement that is incredibly broad and diverse. Doctrinal homogeneity is by no means what binds the Emerging Church movement together.

Here, briefly, are the five streams McKnight sees flowing into the Emerging trough:

1. He says there are elements of the **prophetic**. He instantly modifies this with a parenthetical remark: *Well, at least they are Provocative, he says.* “The emerging movement is consciously and deliberately provocative,” he says. I agree, and I do think the word *provocative* is clearly the right one, rather than “prophetic.” Because the hallmark of the prophetic message is a firm “Thus saith the Lord,” and that’s a message the typical emerging Christian would never want to announce in plain and unvarnished language.

And I have to say, also, that the examples Scot McKnight cites under this point to show examples of “prophetic” rhetoric from the Emerging Church movement don’t strike me as prophetic at all. One is a quote from McLaren, who says, “I don’t think Jesus would be caught dead as a Christian, were he physically here today.... Generally, I don’t think Christians would like Jesus if he showed up today as he did 2,000 years ago. In fact, I think we’d call him a heretic and plot to kill him, too.” (If that’s *prophetic*, you can have it.) But I think I get the idea McKnight is trying to communicate: There’s a strong strain within the Emerging Church movement that loves ideas that are deliberately provocative.

2. There’s also, obviously, a very heavy dose of **postmodern** influence in the Emerging Church movement. McKnight explains what postmodernism is (in typically muddied postmodern terms), and then he points out that the attitude toward postmodernism within the Emerging Church movement is not uniform. He says there are some in the Emerging Church who want to “minister *to* postmoderns, others *with* postmoderns, and still others *as* postmoderns.”

McKnight then makes this claim: “The third kind of emerging postmodernity attracts all the attention.” I want to pause here to say that I think McKnight has misunderstood the critics’ concern. My complaint with the Emerging movement *as a whole* is that they are far too accommodating when they meet postmodernism face to face. Rather than answering postmodern skepticism and refuting it with biblical truth, they typically try to tiptoe around the sensitivities of the postmodern unbeliever. But it is nevertheless quite true that this third group is by far the most problematic. In McKnight’s words, “[They] have chosen to minister *as* postmoderns. That is, they embrace the idea that we cannot know absolute truth, or, at least, that we cannot know truth absolutely.” I think that is a far more popular perspective among the rank and file in the Emerging Church movement than McKnight cares to admit, but we have to keep moving here.

3. He says emerging Christians tend to be **praxis-oriented**. In other words, they would place more value on right behavior than on right doctrine. He writes, “Here is an emerging, provocative way of saying it: ‘By their fruits [not their theology] you will know them.’” My response would be that their theology *is* an important aspect of their fruit.

I would argue that this notion that what people do is ultimately more important than what they believe flies in the face of all the very same proof-texts that are used to support it.

McKnight quotes James 2:20: “Faith without works is dead.” That doesn’t suggest that what we do is more important than what we believe; the whole point is that the two things, seen properly, are perfectly symbiotic. One is just as important as the other. And if one must have the priority over the other, faith would necessarily take first place over works, because any truly *good* works we do are the fruit of our faith.

But the picture McKnight himself paints seems to come dangerously close to making our works the ground of our justification. It’s an absolute lie—a damnable lie, and the lie that undergirds practically every kind of false religion—to suggest in any way that what you believe doesn’t ultimately matter very much as long as you are good enough.

4. McKnight’s fourth stream of influence he labels **post-evangelical**. He sees the whole movement as a backlash against evangelicalism. He writes, “The emerging movement is a protest against much of evangelicalism as currently practiced. It is post-evangelical in the way that neo-evangelicalism (in the 1950s) was post-fundamentalist.”

This is, I think, the most intriguing and yet maddening section of McKnight’s article. As I said, I would wholeheartedly agree with many of the Emerging Church movement’s typical criticisms of evangelical culture: the evangelical movement in general has become materialistic, self-centered, worldly, shallow, smug, and hypocritical. I happen to think all those criticisms are absolutely fair and right on target.

But that’s not an argument for abandoning the core of historic evangelical belief. In fact, I would argue (and I *did* make this point in one of my seminars last year) that evangelicalism’s failure stems from her abandonment of historic evangelical *principles*.

Incidentally, I defined evangelicalism pretty thoroughly in that seminar last year. Without covering all that ground again, what I said was that the historic theological distinctives of evangelicalism can be boiled down to two principles that anchor everything else: *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*—the formal and material principles of the Reformation. The point I made is that the monstrosity we usually refer to as the evangelical movement in America has functionally abandoned both principles, and that is the reason evangelicalism as a movement has lost its way. (Incidentally, I’m not excluding fundamentalists from that definition. In historical terms, if you are a fundamentalist you are an evangelical, too, and the fundamentalist movement is in the same kind of disarray as the evangelical movement, for similar reasons.)

The right response to the current theological crisis would be a return to the historic *theological* principles of authentic evangelicalism and a complete abandonment of the shallow, worldly, self-centered substitute theology that has increasingly dominated evangelical pulpits over the past century or more.

My complaint with the Emerging Church movement is that in their haste to turn away from the culture of the 20th-century evangelical movement, they are also turning away from the doctrine of historic evangelical Christianity, and that is a serious, catastrophic mistake.

My assessment would be that Scot McKnight either doesn't really appreciate or perhaps isn't being totally candid about the degree to which people in the Emerging Church movement are abandoning and have already abandoned vital evangelical doctrine. He claims that "the vast majority of emerging Christians are evangelical theologically." It might be true to state that the majority of Emerging Christians are refugees from the *culture* of American evangelicalism and that is their cultural and doctrinal heritage, but I have read more than enough of their books and their blogs to know that the vestiges of authentic evangelicalism in the Emerging Church are a comparatively small factor in the overall direction of the wider movement.

I can't help thinking that McKnight himself knows this, and he has redefined what it means to be evangelical in order to make the movement he has embraced seem as benign as possible to evangelicals who think there is some safety in that term—and yet many of them haven't noticed that even their own movement has become a monstrosity that really isn't *theologically* evangelical anymore, even though it has retained the name. But I have to move on:

5. McKnight's final stream of influence in the Emerging Church movement is **political**. He acknowledges that the political drift of the movement is toward the left. They are fed up with the evangelical movement's 35-year dalliance with the Republican Party—but they don't want the church to get out of politics; they want the pendulum to swing back to the left.

Again, there are exceptions to this rule also, even though Scot McKnight doesn't mention them. He admits that his own political leanings are leftward, and he also acknowledges that he is somewhat concerned that the emerging church might repeat the error of the modernist churches who embraced the social gospel and abandoned the *biblical* gospel in the process.

McKnight clearly sees that danger and seems to sense that the movement is barreling that direction, by tying its future to the democratic agenda the way evangelicals bought into Republican Party pragmatism. He writes, "I don't think the Democratic Party is worth a hoot, but its historic commitment to the poor and to centralizing government for social justice is what I think government should do." He's not completely comfortable with the leftist agenda, because he doesn't support abortion or homosexuality. But it hasn't kept McKnight from voting democrat, and he really doesn't seem to offer any strategy for making sure the Emerging Church movement doesn't fall into the same devastating error that destroyed the mainstream denominations.

That point, in microcosm, illustrates the main reason for my deep concern about the Emerging Church movement. There are countless parallels between the Emerging Church movement and early modernism. Both movements are responding to massive paradigm shifts in the wider culture. Both grow out of a conviction that the church *must* change in a fundamental way or be rendered irrelevant: she must adapt her perspective of truth and certainty to fit better with the way the world has changed.

Exactly like early modernism, the Emerging Church movement is being defended most vigorously by a group of mostly-sincere people who really do envision themselves as completely evangelical and who insist that they have no agenda to do away with any essential doctrine.

But meanwhile, people here and there throughout the movement they are defending are attacking some of the most essential of all evangelical truths, starting with a handful of truths that are especially hard to receive: They want to reimagine the atonement to do away with the penal aspect, because they think it makes God look harsh. They question the doctrine of eternal punishment. They despise the doctrine of original sin. They diminish the importance of sound doctrine completely, and blithely pretend that their critics' only possible motive is an utter lack of charity toward them. Their favorite, and practically their only, defense is the claim that they have been misunderstood and misrepresented.

We are seeing history repeat itself.

Now before I run *completely* out of time, I need to answer that third question I promised I would get to: What *should* the church do in order to reach people in a postmodern culture?

Let's start by acknowledging the scope of the problem. We are in ministry today at the end of a hundred-year-long era that saw evangelicalism grow increasingly shallow and worldly. Although the evangelical movement came into the 20th century with a roar, fighting to defend its core beliefs against modernism and liberal theology, by the end of the 20th century, the movement was dominated by people who never mentioned those core doctrines, certainly did not want to fight about them, and were enthralled with entertainment and public relations and almost completely hostile to biblical preaching and doctrinally-oriented teaching.

In other words, although evangelicalism won every war against modernism on the battlefields where we engaged the enemy, our movement capitulated to modernist ideology and practice out of sheer apathy.

Meanwhile, we grew comfortable in a culture that was becoming more secular and more ungodly at an incredibly rapid rate.

What we have now is a serious, two-pronged problem: an untaught church and an increasingly hostile world.

There's no easy way out of the mess. My strategy would have five points. Unfortunately, I barely have time to list them for you, but if I ever have an opportunity to do a follow-up to this seminar, we'll put some meat on this skeleton. Here are my five points: We need to—

1. Remember *why* we're not modernists. The church needs to see the postmodern shift in light of our own recent history, and take some lessons from our experience with modernism about the best way to respond to postmodernism. As I said last year, when you really analyze postmodernism, it's not really antithetical to modernism at all. It's really just modernism 2.0.

Point 2: We also need to—

2. Recover the role of *teaching* in the church. This is my 25th year of Shepherds' Conferences, and I can tell you, this part of my strategy is nothing new. This has been the central message of every Shepherds' Conference I have ever attended or spoken at: the church needs to get back to the Word of God.

Point 3: We need to

3. Reemphasize the *certainty* of revealed truth. The apostle Paul wrote, "If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?" (1 Cor. 14:8). The postmodern preference for ambiguity and uncertainty is seriously at odds with Scripture. It also runs contrary to every lesson church history teaches.

Study any era of revival or the style of any great preacher, and you will discover that boldness and clarity were their hallmarks—never qualities like vagueness, ambivalence, hesitation, wavering, apprehension, a cloudy message, fickle opinions, obsessive self-criticism, or any of the other qualities postmodernism falsely equates with "humility."

It's one thing to understand postmodern sensitivities; it's something completely different to sympathize with postmodernism. I am convinced that the Emerging Church movement has shown entirely too much sympathy with postmodern skepticism. Here's my challenge to Mark Driscoll and his Acts 29 network: You guys need to disassociate from the Emerging mess, clean up your act on the issue of personal sanctification, and employ your gifts in a sustained polemic against the cancer of postmodern qualms about the certainty of truth. If you really want to be prophetic, that's the way to do it.

Prong number 4 in my strategy: We need to

4. Reinstate holiness on our list of priorities.

And finally, we *have* to—

5. Regain our *true* missionary emphasis. I had wanted to talk about what it means to be missional, but I realized that should probably be a stand-alone seminar someday. Here's a preview: Our focus in evangelicalism ought to be the gospel, not merely a methodology. You don't win people to Christ by osmosis, and you certainly don't win them to Christ merely by trying your best to fit into their culture. I'm starting to hate the word *missional*. Apart from the fact that it's useless jargon, it is often used to describe a strategy that is

frankly anti-evangelistic, where the gospel never even enters the picture. If we're really going to be concerned about reaching postmoderns, we need to remember that our one legitimate message—the only story we are commissioned by Christ to take to every tribe and every culture—is the gospel. And that's not a message about how cool the church is.