

A Review of
Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church
By D. A. Carson

It is so difficult to write a short summary of what's going on in the Emerging Church "conversation." I have read some of the literature being produced by EC advocates and have visited one of their main websites on several occasions to see what they're all about (www.emergentvillage.us). I also read D. A. Carson's book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, and have found that book to be both fair and accurate in its critique of the EC conversation. In fact, I really don't have much to add to what Carson's book says about the EC. As a result, I thought it might be helpful to walk you through the contents of Carson's book and interact with what he says. Hopefully, this will be broad enough to give you an overall picture of the EC movement while still able to discuss some of their distinctive doctrines.

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the topic of what exactly is the Emerging Church. Carson points out that what lies at the heart of the movement (or conversation as they like to call it) is the conviction that changes in the culture has led to the emergence of a new church. In response to this emergence, Christian leaders must now be ready to adapt because if they don't they will no longer be able to communicate the gospel to this new emerging generation (p. 12). Carson also points out that the movement is amorphous and therefore cannot be easily defined (p. 12). In fact, there are many churches that share many of the emergent churches' core values and yet don't identify themselves as emerging churches (p. 13).

Many of the adherents of these emerging churches come from conservative evangelical or fundamentalist churches. Much of the literature presents a protest against these traditional expressions of Christianity. The idea is that they started in one place and emerged into another (p. 14). Carson then details some of the earmarks of the emerging churches' protests: (1) protest against spiritual McCarthyism, or the type of pastoral leadership wherein the pastor is the CEO and exist in an "linear, analytical world." Since the Church has been wrong about a plethora of issues in the past we should be less than certain about our opinions in the present (i.e. homosexuality) (p. 16). Since Jesus challenged the establishment of His day, we should be willing to do the same thing in our own day (p. 17); (2) spiritual isolationism, churches moving from the city to the suburbs. The implication is that believers are cloistering themselves away from the rest of the world and therefore unable to communicate or fit in with others (pp. 17-18); (3) Protest against seeker sensitive churches. Another earmark of EC is their postmodern approach to community. It is soft on absolutes and more tolerant of differences of beliefs and other viewpoints ("oozy") (p. 19). Pastors are not seen as expositors of propositional truth but storytellers (p. 23).¹ The EC reformation is built around mission and relationship rather than thoughts, systems and ideals. Carson describes one of the EC that meets in a lounge bar in South London called Holy Joe's. "The atmosphere is relaxed: people can drink or smoke, participate as much or

¹ Doug Pagitt, the pastor of Solomon's Porch in Minnesota, is an advocate of "progressional dialogue" over expository preaching. He disdains "speaking" because it invests too much power in the preacher when instead there should be more power in the community. This thinking leads to more of an open dialogue amongst church members as opposed to one-way "speaking." His book "Preaching Re-Imagined" sets forth his case.

as little as they like in the worship evenings – which place a high value on contemplation, candle, symbols, ambient music – and if they don't like it, they can move off to the main bar" (p. 25).

Since EC are postmodern in their thinking they are also a protest against Modernism (see my discussion of chapter 4, for the differences between pre-modern, modern and post-modern epistemology). Modernism is characterized by absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, and the cerebral, which in turn breeds arrogance and the lust to control and be right. Postmodernism instead recognizes how much of what we know is shaped by the culture in which we live and controlled by our emotions, aesthetics and heritage and so we hold what we believe as part of our tradition but without the exclusive claim to being true or right (p. 27). Feelings, experience, affections and individualism take center stage in EC over against linear thinking, rationality, participation and inclusion. EC attitude incorporates the contemporary attitude of tolerance and therefore we should not tell others that they are wrong (a move from the absolute to the authentic) (p. 29). Practically applied in their context, they would say that they know of no other way of salvation than faith in Jesus Christ but they would also be careful to say that God automatically sends to hell all others. They don't know for sure and so they live with that tension (p. 34). Furthermore, it causes them to be uncertain as to moral issues such as homosexuality. How can we be sure that the Bible is speaking to the same thing as we see today in contemporary homosexuality? (p. 35).

Although much of the literature protests against seeker sensitivity, there is a point of contact as well. Rick Warren has had some positive remarks about Dan Kimball's book because he feels the EC are using the same approach that he himself used. In other words, they are seeking to reach people who are not attracted to the church by traditional approaches (p. 36). In fact, they are going after the Post-seeker-sensitive generation. Kimball's profile of the postmodern – "accepts pluralism, embraces the experiential, delights in the mystical, and is comfortable with narrative, with what is fluid, global, communal/tribal" (p. 37). People who attend EC are those who want relationships, community and equipping along with a place to serve in worship in smaller settings than the mega church (pp. 39-40).

Chapter 3 begins Carson's evaluation on the EC's analysis of contemporary culture. The EC's approach to evangelism is less on the content of the message as opposed to the action itself. In other words, evangelism is connecting with others in "conversation, friendship, influence, invitation, companionship, challenge, opportunity, dance, something you get to do" (p. 58). Carson points out that the EC is quite critical of modernism to a fault. Its analysis of modernism is somewhat reductionistic and simplistic to say the least. Modernism is seen as one cohesive whole, devoted singularly to the rational, cerebral, linear and absolute, which in turn has led to arrogance whereas in truth there were already pockets of postmodern thinking in this period. Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche were both highly influential in this regard (p. 59). Therefore the EC doesn't even realize that their movement is but one strand of modernism that reacted against its own time (p. 60). Furthermore, the strong contrast between the cerebral of modernism and the experiential/relational emphasis in postmodernism cannot be borne out by the facts [in relation to Christianity]. Carson points to the prayers of Spurgeon (pp. 61-62) and to the devotional flavor of the period from some of its great scholars such as Warfield, Westcott and Machen (p. 63). They certainly stressed the importance of truth but didn't neglect the practical as a result.

Carson also points out the one-sided nature of their critique of Christianity during the modernist period. It seems as if they dismiss the whole of Christianity during this time

(p. 64). Truth and propositions are downplayed quite a bit. Their emphasis on the incarnate word of God is there but not the written word (p. 65). Carson points out the foolishness of buying into one epistemological worldview as infallible considering our fallen nature (p. 68), seen in their almost universal acceptance of postmodernism and almost equally as universal condemnation of modernism (p. 69). Carson makes a significant point in showing that the EC pushes tolerance and is tolerant about every other “ism” except modernism, which is a self-contradictory position. He points out that in order to be tolerant, one must first disagree about something. Yet, EC advocates tend to be tolerant with those they agree with and intolerant with those they don’t (pp. 69-70).

Brian McLaren² believes that all the major ills of the past 3 centuries (Nazism, communism, slavery, slaughter of the Aztecs, colonialism, imperialism) can be attributed to absolutism. Absolutism is the fruit of the Enlightenment and the endless quest for certainty [of which there is none]. The antidote is postmodernism (p. 71). Its one thing to understand Postmodernism and where people are coming from when you minister to them but it’s quite another when you yourself immerse yourself into their ocean of uncertainty (p. 78). What I find rather contradictory is their claim of authentic Christianity as opposed to what came before under modernism (p. 82). That seems to me to evidence the same kind of arrogance that they accuse the modernists of.

Chapter 4 begins with Carson’s survey of epistemology. He begins with *premodern* epistemology, which is basically the presupposition of God’s existence and His knowledge of everything. In other words, God and His knowledge is the starting point rather than self. Those who were of this mindset did not conceive of knowing anything that God didn’t know of first (p. 88). Carson goes on to list the six elements of *modern* epistemology. Descartes (1596-1650) was a committed Roman Catholic who had a desire to convince his unbelieving friends about the truth of Roman Catholicism. He observed that many of his friends no longer held to a pre-modern epistemology. In order to reach out to those who had a different starting point than himself caused him to come up with his famous catchphrase, “I think, therefore I am” (p. 92). This was a definite shift in epistemology because the starting point was now the finite “I” as opposed to the infinite God of modern epistemology. There was no longer a dependence upon God for all of knowledge. Secondly, modern epistemology was foundationalist. In other words, looking for a starting point from which both sides could agree upon and go from there (p. 93). Third, modern epistemology was constrained by rigorous method. That is, you start with the right foundation, add carefully controlled methods, and then you let it run its course in order to get the truth (p. 94). Fourth, modern epistemology rarely doubted that it was possible to attain epistemological certainty and that such certainty was desirable. Fifth, modern epistemology embraced a principle known as, “ahistorical universality.” This is the idea that what is true is universally true. In other words, the truth would not be jeopardized by shifting contexts from one historical period to another, from one culture to another, or from one language to another because truth is universal (p. 94). Sixth, most of the early modernists were theists or at least deists, but after the passing of many centuries, more and more modernists became philosophical naturalists – the idea that matter, energy, time and space are all that is. Probably the acceptance of Darwin’s evolutionary theory was responsible for much of the shift (p. 95).

² McLaren is one of the main pastoral spokesmen of the Emerging Church Movement and has written a number of influential books, including “A Generous Orthodoxy.”

Carson next lists Postmodernism's epistemological challenges to modernism. He notes that there are certainly similarities between the two, including the same starting point ("I"). The difference however is that PM views every other "I" as different from every other "I" and thus the various perspectives (p. 95). But the fact that they both start at the same place demonstrates the relationship between the two and therefore we could say that PM is a stepchild or late form of Modernism (p. 96). Second, Carson points out that PM epistemology is quite suspicious of all foundationalism. In other words, because of the limitations of finite man, they don't believe the foundations itself can be very stable let alone anything built upon it (p. 97). Third, PM accepts there is a validity of many methods which may all produce different results and are all equally valid. All foundations are suspect to begin with and all methods are made by man anyways, so who can judge what is objective truth (p. 97)? Fourth, PM is adamant that objective truth is not only unattainable it is not desirable either. PM glories in diversity and therefore it sees absolutes as squelching creativity. All can claim to be true so long as none claims to be exclusively true (p. 97).

Carson then goes on to spell out the correlatives of PM – syncretism, secularization, biblical illiteracy,³ ill-defined spirituality and globalization (pp. 98-100). He also mentions five entailments (pp. 101-02). He makes the good point that PM has negatively affected evangelism. If Christianity is presented as the objective truth, then it necessarily implies that all else is inferior. Since PM is all about tolerance and acceptance, you can't really evangelize in such a direct way. The best alternative is to say nothing and simply demonstrate the Christian life in hope that someone will ask you about your faith. This is why personal "narrative" becomes so important, or the testimony. You can explain what happened to you and how it affects what you believe rather than "meta narrative," which seeks to interpret reality for everyone.

Carson does list what he believes to be the strengths of PM thought. He concedes that modernism did often possess unwarranted optimism which bred arrogance. Because the starting point ("I") is finite, any certainty in the results is much more difficult than many Enlightenment thinkers had considered. Carson also points out that PM has been more sensitive to the diversity of cultures and the acceptance of other cultures as opposed to the modernistic assumption that my culture is better than your culture (p. 103). Most of all, PM's greatest contribution is to point out the limitations on human knowledge (p. 104).

There are more weaknesses than strengths however, in PM thought. First, it makes an unnecessary antithesis in understanding knowledge. Just because we don't know something exhaustively, perfectly or omnisciently, is that to say that we cannot know something truly? Is the only alternative to omniscience, uncertainty? This kind of antithesis would necessitate that in order to have true, objective knowledge; we'd all have to be God Himself. Yet these PM argue that all distinctions between right and wrong are nothing more than social constructions since there are no absolutes (p. 112). Carson points out that there are two types of PM, strong and soft. The strong PM is like the one just described whereas the soft PM is one who professes that whereas all human knowledge is perspectival, human beings can know the truth about some things but not exhaustively (p. 106). An increasingly popular approach to science within PM is known as "constructionism." It's the idea that the conclusions of science are more the results of social forces rather than reasoning through evidence. Scientists often see things as they do due to paradigm shifts that cause them to see

³ Where PM flourishes, there will be less desire to read Scripture since its not really seen as the authoritative revelation of God Himself.

things according to their new model. Science is often nothing more than the belief system of that particular group of scientists at that particular point in history (p. 107). There is certainly some truth in what they are pointing out here as can be seen in the case of Darwinian evolution. The problem however with the PM who holds strongly to constructionism is that whereas they strongly profess that all scientific knowledge [and all knowledge] is the product of social constructionism, they conveniently exclude themselves from the same charge (p. 109). Carson points out that there is such a thing as a critical realist, one who holds that meaning can be adequately determined but not exhaustively (p. 110). Carson also points out that strong PM can never really live consistently with their belief system (p. 113). He also points out its absurdity – PM has to be taken as objectively true in order to destroy any differences between right and wrong (p. 114). The most interesting criticism that Carson has of PM is its strange combination of absurdism and arrogance (pp. 114-15). This is seen in its strong criticism of modernism.

One of the principles that help us to realize that humans can know some things truly is the principle of distanciation. A person living today may not be able to know things exactly as the apostle Paul did but he can get closer and closer through repeated study in the original language, culture and theology of Paul's time (p. 117). Strong PM focus too much on the differences in order to drive us to the conclusion that we cannot find Paul's meaning only the one interpreting Paul's meaning. Soft PM is helpful in reminding us that there are limitations in our humanity while also pointing out the errors of modernism and yet leaving open a place for objective truth (pp. 121-22).

In chapter 5 Carson deals with the EC lack of critique against PM. It has much to say in terms of denouncing modernism but very little to say negatively about PM. Most of what is written is about how PM has caused such a paradigm shift in the way people think that the Church must either adapt to PM or be relegated to irrelevance (pp. 127-28). As Carson points out repeatedly throughout the book, PM has not wrestled sufficiently with the idea that you can know something truly without knowing it exhaustively. He focuses attention upon one of the leading EC leaders, Brian McLaren. He answers McLaren's analogy of "ants discussing elephants," with great clarity to show how imperfect his analogy is (p. 129). Carson continues to point out how EC writers are not able to handle Christianity's truth claims in a way that is biblically satisfying. McLaren for example will hold to Jesus as the only way of salvation that he can point to but at the same time not limiting salvation to only those. McLaren lives with this tension in his theology and it affects him by rarely if ever, evoking anathemas or damnation on anyone (p. 135). He also critiques McLaren's stance that since Christianity has committed its own share of evils throughout its history, how can it speak to the evils of other religions? Carson points out that McLaren has really missed the point on this one. The issue is not whether Christianity's adherents have always lived up to its own teachings, but whether its teachings are true (pp. 136-37). A Crusader may have uttered the confession "Jesus is Lord" as he is killing an infidel but that doesn't mean he's living out that confession (pp. 144-45). Christianity certainly has its cases of sinful or evil acts but that's been out of disobedience to the Word of God, and therefore does not have a bearing on its truthfulness. Carson's verdict of McLaren's writings? "I have not found him coherent and convincing, precisely because he will not deal with the claims of truth" (p. 138).

Carson also points out some of the ironic stances that many of these EC leaders take. For example, many of them appeal strongly to the importance of tradition and yet do not abide by any long standing tradition. They eclectically pick and choose from which tradition suits their fancy and as a result, it's a hodgepodge of their own PM tradition. He

also points out how many of the EC advocates are moving away from the content of Scripture as objective truth to Jesus as the personal truth of God (p. 149). They downplay teaching without realizing just how much of the New Testament emphasizes teaching or doctrine. Ironically, many of the EC leaders will affirm the truth of the Apostles and Nicene Creeds, without realizing that those creeds were born out of controversy. In other words, they were necessary in order to define what the Church believed and to condemn others who taught differently (p. 150). EC leaders have misunderstood what it means to live by faith alone, thinking that it means to live without certainty (p. 151). Scripture emphasizes the opposite, that faith's validity is tied to the truthfulness of its object (p. 152). Lastly, the EC leaders shun sectarianism, yet they are just that with their strong appeals to abandon modernism and to embrace their way of thinking (p. 155).

In chapter 6, Carson reviews two books by two of the leading EC writers. The first is *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian McLaren and the second is *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke, with the help of Alan Mann. Before Carson lays open the contents of each of these books, he makes it clear that they both share in common, "the distortion of facts, evidence, arguments, and Scripture that is prevalent in the writings of the leaders of the emerging movement" (p. 157). The first major complaint that Carson points out in reference to McLaren's book is the chapter on "The Seven Jesuses I have known." These include the conservative protestant Jesus, the Pentecostal/Charismatic Jesus, the Roman Catholic Jesus, the Eastern Orthodox Jesus, the liberal Protestant Jesus, the Anabaptist Jesus, and the Jesus of the oppressed (p. 159). Carson takes umbrage with McLaren's portrayals of the respected Jesuses however; as they do not truly deal with what is essential to each of the traditions. Carson specifically points to his misrepresentation of liberalism and Roman Catholicism (pp. 160-62).

McLaren is careful to describe himself as an evangelical with a little "e" as opposed to evangelical with a big "E." These latter evangelicals are the conservatives or those of the religious right (p. 162). For McLaren, an evangelical is not who believes in a doctrinal core or system of beliefs but instead is redefined as "an attitude toward God and our neighbor and our mission that is *passionate*" (pp. 162-63). An evangelical in this vein is defined by his passion rather than by his beliefs. What does McLaren mean when he describes himself as "biblical?" Once again, we see a redefinition of terms. A biblical Christian is one who does good deeds and has a transformed character regardless of what he believes. In other words, it's the good deeds that make them biblical (p. 163).

The most disturbing aspect of McLaren's book is his understanding of what the gospel really is. He rejects the concept of substitutionary atonement which is the heart of the gospel and opts for two theories, "powerful weakness" and his own private theory. The "powerful weakness" view is that by suffering on the cross, Jesus is showing God's loving heart which wants forgiveness and not revenge. It's about accepting suffering and violence and transforming it into reconciliation rather than avenging suffering through retaliation. It's basically nothing more than an example for mankind to follow (self-sacrifice and vulnerability), which is nothing more than age old liberalism dressed up in new garb (pp. 166-67). McLaren's private theory is that the cross is all about God's agony being made visible. All the pain that He feels from forgiving, but being betrayed, loving and forgiving when the object is least worthy of it. Therefore it must be embodied with nails and thorns, sweat, tears and blood in order to portray betrayal and forgiveness (p. 167). Hard to fathom how any of these theories have any ring of truth, biblically speaking. McLaren has thrown out the biblical doctrine of the atonement and yet calls himself "biblical."

Hell is a subject that McLaren wants nothing to do with as well as many other EC thinkers. McLaren doesn't like to address it and instead focuses on the importance of restoring one's relationship with God rather than salvation from God's judgment (p. 169). In one of McLaren's fictional character interactions, his character Neo will not answer Dan Poole's question about what happens to a person if he rejects the grace of God. In fact, he is rebuked for doing so repeatedly. Other moral subjects such as homosexuality are met with more agnosticism. McLaren states [along with other EC writers] that he wants to think through the homosexuality issue further since he's not convinced that what the Scripture condemns is the same thing that we see today. He feels a strong desire to treat homosexuals as people and goes so far as to credit liberalism with leading the way on many ethical issues (p. 170). He misleadingly states that liberals blaze a trail for the Conservatives to follow decades later. I don't know where he gets all that from but it's full of baloney. Also, he may praise the liberals for loving the homosexuals but is it truly loving not to confront people over their sin? Yes we should treat homosexuals as people but not to the exclusion of ignoring their sin. Carson points out how many homosexuals will call anyone homophobic who dares to say that homosexuality is wrong despite it being done with gentleness and compassion (p. 171).

McLaren also refers to himself as a post/Protestant. What is that? He doesn't want to refer to himself as a Protestant since Protestantism started out as a protest against the right things but soon degenerated into a protest against one another. McLaren says that Protestants have paid the most attention to the Bible but for the purpose of proving themselves right and others wrong (p. 173). His understanding of the Protestant Reformation leaves much to be desired. He views the reformation as nothing more than a debate about indulgences rather than what it really was, a debate over the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of justification. It was about truth, plain and simple. McLaren has sorely missed this point (p. 174).

McLaren has also redefined what it means to be a "Fundamentalist/Calvinist." His definition of a fundamentalist is one who loves God and his neighbors (p. 177). As far as being a Calvinist is concerned, he seeks to follow the Reformers' example in seeking to formulate the faith in postmodern times just as they did in their post-medieval times (p. 179). He has also come up with his own TULIP anagram: T=Triune love, U=Unselfish election, L=Limitless Reconciliation, I=Inspiring Grace, P=Passionate, Persistent States (p. 180). McLaren also denies the reality of Satan as a personal being, opting for a personification of evil (pp. 181-82). All this to say that there is very little that is evangelical about Brian McLaren.

The other book that Carson reviewed was *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke. He is an influential leader in Britain and is praised by Brian McLaren. The title of the book is meant to imply that others have got it wrong and now Chalke is going to set us all straight (p. 182). Chalke makes the common liberal mistake of defining God in terms of one controlling attribute – His love. He even makes the faulty claim that God is nowhere else referred to as anything but love (cf. I John 1:5, Is. 6) (p. 183). And just as others who emphasize God's love to the exclusion of His other attributes, a de-emphasis of sin is the inevitable result (p. 183). Chalke, much like McLaren, rejects the idea of substitutionary atonement as an idea that is offensive and contradictory to God's love. He refers to it as a form of "cosmic child abuse" (p. 185). Instead he opts for a version of the cross event as simply a "symbol of love." It is nothing more than a demonstration of how far God as Father and Jesus as Son are willing to go to prove their love. The cross becomes a statement of the powerlessness of love (p. 186). Other aspects of the gospel are denied as well,

including repentance. The biblical call to repentance is relegated to nothing more than a call to fulfill our natural potential, to improve ourselves by acting like God. This leads Carson as well as any other biblical minded Christian to conclude that both McLaren and Chalke have abandoned the gospel (p. 186).

In chapter 7, Carson points the reader to some helpful passages that deal with truth, knowledge, and pluralism (pp. 188-91, 193-99). The purpose of this is to stress how one must deny or contradict much of the Bible's emphasis on truth and knowledge in order to maintain a PM mindset. Carson says, "When the Scriptures encourage us to know so much – when they can even say that they are written in order that we *may* know (I John 5:13), indeed know the *certainty* of the gospel story (Luke 1:3-4) – only an oxymoronic humble arrogance (or is it arrogant humility?) could keep telling us that we can't know, making students uncomfortable with what Scripture actually says on these matters" (p. 200).

Carson also points out the Bible's condemnation of idolatry which is no small emphasis. Israel was never commended by God when they worshipped the false gods of their pagan neighbors, just the opposite (pp. 200-01). So how can EC leaders be so open to other religions and fail to recognize the worship of other gods as idolatry? The answer is obvious – the EC is tolerant of idolatry and is silent where the Bible is loudly clear. Carson then goes on in the rest of the chapter to take a closer look at ten relevant biblical texts that touch on the issues that are central to the EC (pp. 202-16). He concludes the chapter with a timely quote from G.K. Chesterton, my favorite part – "A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed" (p. 217).

The final chapter of the book features Carson's exposition on 2 Peter 1:1-21 (pp. 219-34). He does this because this passage features a blend of both truth and experience and how the apostle emphasizes both (p. 219). Carson disdains the EC's false antithesis between truth and experience and so on the final page of the book he angrily proclaims: "Experience or truth? The left wing of an airplane, or the right? Love or integrity? Study or service? Evangelism or discipleship? The front wheels of a car, or the rear? Subjective knowledge or objective knowledge? Faith or obedience? Damn all false antithesis to hell, for they generate false gods, they perpetuate idols, they twist and distort our souls, they launch the church into violent pendulum swings whose oscillations succeed only in dividing brothers and sisters in Christ" (p. 234).

The Emerging Church Movement is not really anything new – its old liberalism repackaged for a Post Modern generation.