

The Postmodern Church

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2012

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University

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## Abstract

Within the past twenty years, the Church (especially in America) has experienced dwindling membership and attendance, along with a host of other problems. Many of these problems are symptomatic of a massive cultural shift toward postmodernism, leading to discontentment with the Church. In attempting to respond to these challenges, the emergent Church has arisen as a major element of American religious culture. Their methodology and doctrine is heavily influenced by postmodernism, which presents a further challenge for Christian leaders and ministers. This paper will survey the challenges facing the Church, will describe the emergent Church's origin and response to these challenges, and will suggest a Church ministry paradigm that answers the challenges of postmodernism while preserving the integrity of the Gospel message.

### Introduction

The Church, as established in the New Testament, has endured thousands of years of upheaval and controversy. From its beginnings, when believers were charged with atheism, savagery, and even cannibalism, to modern accusations of being unintelligent, hostile to change, and superstitious, the Church has been no stranger to controversy. One needs only to look at the Holy Roman Empire, the Crusades, the Protestant reformation, and various “Great Awakenings” to see that centuries of conflict have brought the Church to its current position in the world. As an institution, the Church has always held a prominent position in the world and the affairs of men. Even in the Church’s infancy, the Roman world recognized that it had “turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Those words, penned early in the first century, have described the Church’s actions for the better part of two thousand years. For better or for worse, the Church has turned the world upside down.

As the Church moves into its third millennium, one must understand the scale and the length of the Church’s existence; it has outlasted governments, nations, even entire empires. It has seen the rise and fall of tyrants and kings, and has even participated in many of those very events. At its best, the Church has been a force for good in the world, exercising a profound moral influence over human society. At its worst, the Church has participated in bloodbaths, perpetrated by fallen men who believed they were acting on the words of Christ. Throughout history, the Church has been described in many ways, by many people. However, of all the words, both positive and negative, that could be used to describe the Church, one would be hard pressed to acceptably use the term *irrelevant*. Regardless of one’s opinion of the Church’s actions throughout history, one must

concede that Christ's Church has indeed "turned the world upside down", as quoted in Acts 17:6 (NASB).

However, as the Church, and the world as a whole, moves into a new era of existence, Christianity seems to have become irrelevant to many. In the western world, the Church is experiencing a decline; few would care to debate this proposition, because the dwindling numbers of so many Churches provide irrevocable evidence that people are just not staying in Church. The decline has been felt most in Western, and specifically American churches.<sup>1</sup> While researchers often differ on the exact numbers, it has been suggested that up to ninety-four percent of Churchgoing high school students will leave the Church after high school.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, additional research from the Barna Group indicates that many of those outside the Christian faith have neutral or negative opinion of Christianity and the Church.<sup>3</sup> In addition to a mass exodus from the Church and increasingly negative opinions of outsiders, further research, also performed by Barna, indicates that even those who claim a relationship with Christ do not demonstrate the fruit of that relationship in their lives.<sup>4</sup> Writers such as McDowell present a dire picture of the Church's future in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the title of McDowell's book, *The Last Christian Generation*. While some would doubtless call him an alarmist, the research of the Barna group supports his alarming predictions. Denominational

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1. The focus throughout this work will be on the Western church, and specifically the American church. The research provided only focuses on a Western context, as non-Western segments of Christianity have not necessarily experienced the same decline.

2. Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, Florida: GreenKey Books, 2006), 13

3. Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007), 25

4. George Barna, *Think Like Jesus* (Minneapolis: Baker Books, 2003), 26, quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation* (Holiday, Florida: GreenKey Books, 2006), 18

organizations such as the Southern Baptist Convention corroborate this information for their own denominations, citing a drop in baptisms and a drop in membership.<sup>5</sup> If the research of Barna and McDowell is to be trusted, the Southern Baptist Convention is not the only denomination faced with a drop in membership.

Furthermore, within the Church, many have expressed discontentment and disillusionment with the traditional, evangelical Church paradigm. Countless books contain testimonies about believers, including pastors and Church leaders, growing tired of the Church and leaving the Church as an organization, if not leaving the body of Christ itself.<sup>6</sup> In the twenty first century, the Church seems to be destined for obscurity and irrelevance. A rapid decline in membership and attendance, as well as the exodus of so many young adults would seem to indicate that the Church has lost its cultural influence. Whereas once the Church was positioned to change the world with the gospel, the Church now seems to occupy the position of a dying social institution. If the Church is dying, one must seek a cause of death. One must seek a reason as to why the Church is hemorrhaging members, leaders, and cultural influence. A number of problems face the modern, western Church, including loss of faith in the Church as an institution, the growing influence of liberal theology and mainline denominations, the cultural shift to postmodern philosophical and religious views, and the rejection of absolute propositional truth. In response to these problems, many scholars, authors, and Church leaders have

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5. Allen, Bob, 2011, "SBC notes a drop in baptisms, attendance." *Christian Century* 128, no. 14: 16-22. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 10, 2012).

6. See Dwight J. Friesen's *Thy Kingdom Connected*. Friesen describes, early in the book, the case of two Church ministers, husband and wife, who grow discouraged by the Church and subsequently leave the ministry. Additionally, Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*, as well as *A New Kind of Christianity* contains many such tales about Christian ministers who have left the traditional Church in favor of less traditional contexts

proposed and sought to enact strategies that demonstrate that the Church is relevant and that its message is true.

Based on the belief that culture has entered a postmodern era, many Churches and religious movements have sought to “postmodernize” the Church.<sup>7</sup> One need look no further than the movement known as the emergent Church to see an example of the Church seeking to actively engage culture in the wake of a cultural shift toward postmodernism. This “emergent” movement has much to offer the Church as a whole, including an attempt at revitalizing the Church through various means. However, as the Church seeks to engage a postmodern world, it must exercise care to preserve the truth of the Gospel while altering methods of ministry, evangelism, and community.

### **Current Problems in Church Ministry**

While a massive decline in Church attendance and membership appears to be the Church’s main problem, in reality a decline in numbers is simply a symptom of a problem with the Church itself as an organization. While the Church may not necessarily be actively doing something wrong, the loss of membership and interest indicates a failure to adequately engage the culture with the gospel. A failure to engage the culture with the gospel may not come from a lack of effort on the part of the Church. Many individual Churches have not failed to preach the gospel, and yet they seem to be failing in bringing new converts into the kingdom of God.<sup>8</sup> Beneath the symptom of lost membership and declining attendance lie the diseases that plague Christ’s Church: a failure to engage culture resulting in a loss of faith in institutional Christianity, the

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7. The term *postmodern* will be discussed in greater detail later.

8. Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2009), 21

growing influence of mainline and liberal theology, and the effects of a massive cultural shift from modernism to postmodernism.

### **Loss of Faith in the Church as an Institution**

While many organized churches and denominations are faced with declines in membership, baptism, and attendance in worship services, other polls and surveys indicate that individual “religious participation” (i.e., attendance at weekly services and participation in occasional events) is actually increasing, though churchgoers participate in a different way, preferring not to fully identify themselves as members of a particular denomination or church.<sup>9</sup> An increase in individual religious participation combined with a decline in Church attendance and membership demonstrates that an interest in religion still exists, but that seekers and believers alike have reservations about the organized Church. Reasons for dissatisfaction have been voiced by many in the Christian community, from all different denominational viewpoints. Many emerging Church figures have led this charge and many of their stories include a decision to leave the traditional Church organization, often due to unanswered doubts or a perceived lack of authenticity in the Church.<sup>10</sup> Authors such as Brian McLaren and Donald Miller give voice to the discontentment and disillusionment felt by many Christians. Miller, in *Blue Like Jazz*, a favorite book among college students and other young adults, presents a number of reasons for his dislike of Church. Miller states that he “felt like people were trying to sell [him] Jesus..” Brian McLaren echoes a similar disillusionment, voicing

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9. Frykholm, Amy Johnson, 2011, "Loose connections: what's happening to Church membership?." *Christian Century* 128, no. 11: 20-23. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed January 10, 2012).

10. D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 19

agreement with many others, saying “something isn’t working in the way we’re doing Christianity anymore.”<sup>11</sup> McLaren, while he may be a more liberal emergent thinker, has aptly identified the problem: the numerical decline is due to a deepening dissatisfaction with institutional Christianity. McLaren points out that this growing disillusionment reaches not only into Protestant circles, but is felt by Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believers.<sup>12</sup>

Further research indicates a growing dissatisfaction with nearly every facet of American Christianity, as young believers reject the religious culture of their parents. They are dissatisfied with “megaChurches, altar calls, and door to door evangelism.”<sup>13</sup> Christians have grown weary of moralistic Christianity and have begun to experiment with behaviors once considered taboo for Christians along with seeking religious experience outside of traditional churches<sup>14</sup>.

Other, more conservative scholars have noted similar issues with the Church. Long before McLaren expressed his concerns about the Church and growing dissatisfaction within it, others had been suggesting that for too long, the Church has been concerned with attempting to morally improve society.<sup>15</sup> The decline of institutional Christianity can be seen as a reaction to thousands of years of Christianity’s occupying a relatively prominent position in Western society. Authors and scholars such as McLaren,

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11. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity*. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 9

12. *Ibid.*, 11

13. Brett McCracken, *Hipster Christianity: What Happens When Church and Cool Collide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010), 97

14. *Ibid.*, 98

15. John MacArthur. *Nothing But the Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1999), 10

MacArthur, Miller, and others have noted that centuries of social prominence have effectively transformed the Christian faith into something different, in many ways, from what Christ taught. Whereas the early Church (during and shortly after the time of Christ) was the victim of persecution at the hands of empires, Constantine's acts essentially enabled the Church to become the agent of that same persecution.

With Constantine's rise to power and his establishment of Christianity as the official religious system, Christianity became the established belief system in the West, and has remained that way for almost two millennia. The Edict of Milan and Constantine's actions to legitimize Christianity as an official state religion changed the course of Church history.<sup>16</sup> Those born in a postmodern era have little interest in religious expression that they see as an extension of worldly government. Church historians have suggested that the whole of Church history since Constantine's actions has been "a series of reactions and adjustments in response to those policies."<sup>17</sup> Now that a current of postmodernism has overtaken the Church, Christianity as a tool of the empire and the religion of the establishment has begun to appear too political, too agenda-driven, and, for lack of a better word, too *bourgeoisie* to be accepted by thoroughly postmodern individuals. The objections given by contemporary Christian authors and "emergent" thinkers echo the objections raised by many others. If Christianity is the religion of the nation, the government, or the Republican (or Democratic) party, they want no part of it. Such a religion offers no room for questions or disagreements. Postmodern religious

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16. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 106

17. *Ibid.*, 113

seekers want more than moralistic, politically motivated faith, and they have lost faith in the ability of the Church to provide them with what they seek. They have rejected a Church which has, over the centuries, participated in “holy” wars, crusades, prohibition, and attempting to legislate morality, not necessarily because they disagree with all of its actions, but because they want more. While wise Christians may note that popular perceptions of the Church greatly exaggerate certain aspects of its history (i.e., the previously mentioned crusades and “holy” wars), the Church is faced with a largely negative perception by a large segment of culture.<sup>18</sup> The church, unfortunately, must deal with these perceptions, inaccurate though they may be.

### **Theological and Doctrinal Challenges**

The Church is faced with a number of theological and doctrinal issues that challenge the mission of the Church. These issues come from both within and without the Church, challenging the Church by drawing members away, or by inundating congregations with beliefs and doctrines that have no actual basis in Biblical exegesis. Within the Church, many have become comfortable with a moralistic, legalistic conception of Christianity. Outside of the Church, liberal and emergent movements have brought into question many doctrines that were once considered essentials of the faith.

Postmodern religious seekers, most often young people between eighteen and thirty (as evidenced by the large numbers of people who indicate a desire for religious experience, but do not attend church) have found themselves adrift in a search for satisfying religious experience. Having rejected, in most cases, traditional, evangelical

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18. Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. *Unchristian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2007),

Christianity, many have been drawn to forms of Christianity that seek to emulate more closely the conditions of the Church in the first century A.D, such as small meetings in homes, and a focus on worship and fellowship or community. Still others have been drawn to forms of Christianity which reject certain ideas that Christianity has espoused for centuries. The rise of the “emergent” Church, while advocating an understanding of scripture that considers the context in which the text was written, has often included a rejection of doctrines that have long been considered essentials of the faith. Much controversy already exists surrounding rather unorthodox statements given by popular Christian authors such as Rob Bell and the previously mentioned Brian McLaren. Bell caused controversy in evangelical circles by suggesting, in *Velvet Elvis* (2005), that perhaps certain doctrines (such as the virgin birth) were not necessary to the faith and could be rejected if necessary.<sup>19</sup> Bell caused further uproar with his book *Love Wins* (2011), by vaguely suggesting (without giving a definitive answer as to his own opinion) that hell might not be a real place, but rather some sort of metaphor<sup>20</sup>.

Liberal, more socially oriented iterations of the Gospel have also taken hold with postmodern religious seekers. Often associated with the emergent Church, the social gospel seeks to rectify economic and cultural injustices through the action of Christ’s followers. The movement, catalyzed by Walter Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, seeks to take Christ’s words seriously and lends itself to helping the poor and reforming government policies that undermine or injure less fortunate people

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19. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 26.

20. Rob Bell, *Love Wins* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 2.

groups<sup>21</sup> In many ways, growing social concerns regarding injustice and poverty have given seekers and Christians opportunities to emulate the work of Christ; however, if the movement is not tempered with the eternal significance of the gospel, the social gospel risks no longer being about the true Gospel. Social action by Christians is consistent with following Christ, and often presents opportunities to share the gospel; however, an inordinate focus on the social aspects of the gospel serves as a challenge to the church whose mission is not simply to feed the poor, but is also to present the Gospel which leads to eternal life. Conservative Christians and churches would do well to remember that the gospel does indeed have social aspects, and they cannot be ignored, because Christ did not ignore them. Christ fed the hungry and healed the sick; he sought to minister to those who had been overlooked by the culture. However, Christ did not simply heal the physical sickness or satisfy a physical hunger; He came to heal a spiritual sickness and to finally satisfy a spiritual hunger in those who heard his message. An inordinate focus on the social aspects of the gospel serves as a challenge to the Church whose mission is not simply to feed the poor, but is also to present the Gospel which leads to eternal life. However, Christians must also take great care to remember that they must not focus on the social aspects of the gospel to the exclusion of its eternal significance.

Further problems exist, within the Church walls, which are directly connected to Christianity's long legacy of prominence within society and government: namely, many

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21. Nelson, Janet R., "Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel: a Hopeful Theology for the Twenty-first Century Economy." *Cross Currents* 59, no. 4 (December 1, 2009): 442-456. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 11, 2012).

of its adherents believe something that does not resemble the Gospel, but rather what MacArthur and others have called “easy believism.”<sup>22</sup> This system of religious belief requires little sacrifice, little true repentance, and little serious devotion from followers. Christianity has become too easy, and no longer demands that the believer “pick up his cross” and follow Christ (Luke 9:23). When Christianity became the religion of the empire under Constantine, believers no longer suffered persecution. Religious leadership became little more than a political office, and the lives of Christians became characterized by ease and convenience, a marked contrast with that of Christians in the early days of the Church.<sup>23</sup>

The most prominent challenges facing the Church today come from both inside and outside. On the inside, the American Church must contend with growing apathy as a result of hundreds of years of “easy” Christianity that often seems to require little actual commitment. On the outside, the Church faces dwindling attendance and membership numbers, an indication that people have lost faith in the traditional Church structures, belief systems, and communities. A number of popular authors have given voice to this discontentment, revealing that both believers and seekers desire an authentic religious experience, but have little faith that a traditional Church can bring them to that experience.

The challenges faced by Christianity in the twenty-first century are not simply isolated challenges; the challenge to attract and keep new members and instruct them in a faith that requires true commitment signifies a transition into a new way of doing and

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22. MacArthur, 16.

23. Gonzalez, 106.

thinking about ministry. Society has changed drastically in the past dozen years thanks to many different factors including the rise of social media, the increasing prevalence of the internet over other methods of communication, the 9/11 attacks, a faltering global economy, and a gradual, but massive shift into postmodern ways of thinking about and viewing the world.

### **Postmodernism and the Church**

The problems facing the Church can be easily attributed to a growing shift in the worldviews that define and shape culture. The term *postmodern* would describe this new paradigm well, but postmodernism consistently resists clear definition, and its specifics are the subject of debate by philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. Many have suggested that postmodernism has already died and that another term must be used.<sup>24</sup> In seeking a time of death for the movement, some have suggested that September 11, 2001 marked the end.<sup>25</sup> Many felt that such an inherently relativistic system that does not prescribe moral absolutes was incompatible with the horrors the world witnessed on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Given that postmodernism has proven so difficult to define, however, one cannot say with certainty exactly when the movement collapsed, or that it truly has.

Regarding a beginning date for the movement, one must contend with equally vague suggestions. As early as 1996, notable Christian academics had taken note of society's shift toward a postmodern paradigm. Stanley Grenz and others sought to educate ministers and Church leaders for the purpose of adequately engaging a

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24. Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press: 2009), xvi.

25. "Postmodernism after 9/11," *Wilson Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (September 2002): 99, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 5, 2012).

postmodern culture.<sup>26</sup> A specific date for the beginning of the movement is impossible to state; rather, the advent of postmodernism should be seen as a gradual, progressive rejection of modernism. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Nietzsche sought to undermine modernism, but postmodernism spent decades growing into an intellectual force which came to light in the 1970s.<sup>27</sup>

Postmodernism began, essentially, as a critique of modernist beliefs. Nietzsche attempted to refute modernism's "central values: the notion of the progress of reason in history, the ideals of dispassionate search for truth, the link between democracy and a better life for humanity."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Nietzsche's response to modernism included his critique of religious expression in the modern era. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, published in 1883, Nietzsche uttered what is perhaps his most famous contribution to philosophy and theology, the proclamation by which he is remembered, the claim which branded him subversive and heretical: the death of God.<sup>29</sup> These words, according to some, sounded the death knell of the modern era.

In reality, Nietzsche's rejection of modernism on religious and philosophical grounds began with his rejection of the previous centuries' most prominent philosophical and ideological movement: the Enlightenment.<sup>30</sup> While many contrasts abound between Enlightenment thinking and postmodern thinking, the differences between the two begin

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26. Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) 10.

27. Grenz, 17.

28. McAfee, 2008, 602.

29. Grenz, 83.

30. *Ibid.*, 83.

with, and chiefly concern views of the self, or the individual.<sup>31</sup> With an elevated estimation of the potential of the individual, the Enlightenment spoke prophecies of progress and evolution.<sup>32</sup> Postmodernism rejects the overarching “narrative” of Enlightenment thought, beginning with a rejection of the Enlightenment understanding of the self. Beginning with the nonexistence of “the self” in the modernist sense, postmodernism rejects truths that transcend human society, or at least rejects the idea that humans can ever understand and know truth by means of rational thought and discovery.<sup>33</sup> Postmodernism rejects notions of progress in history (again rejecting the “narrative” of modernism) and does not see certain eras as qualitatively better than others.<sup>34</sup> In regard to morals, Nietzsche’s postmodernism, as well as that of those in the years to follow, rejects the idea that morals could be “rational, universal, and axiomatic.”<sup>35</sup>

In the years following Nietzsche, postmodernism grew to be an all-encompassing rejection of modern conceptions of reality itself; the nature of the self, of truth, and of transcendent morals have been called into question by postmodern thinkers. The movement is inherently anti-foundational in that it spurns any attempt to establish a firm

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31. Ibid., 87.

32. Woods, 20.

33. “Postmodernism” in *American Philosophy: An Encyclopedia*, ed. John Lachs and Robert Talisse, 603.

34. Ibid., 604.

35. Grenz, 9.

foundation for knowledge (such as Descartes' famous "I think, therefore I am.")<sup>36</sup>

Postmodernism does not, however, simply reject modernist foundations for knowledge; rather, it rejects any and all foundations, including scripture and human experience.<sup>37</sup>

Though Nietzsche is often associated with postmodernism, he concerned himself more with rejecting common modernist assumptions than with creating a new philosophical movement. His ideas were prototypical of postmodernism, though not necessarily completely postmodern. However, from Nietzsche onward, hundreds of voices over the course of more than a century have contributed their own understandings and opinions regarding the movement. For more than a century, postmodern thought has taken an increasingly tight hold on culture; whereas it once may have been relegated to the halls of academia, most, if not all, of Western culture has become thoroughly postmodern. Electronic social networks and the ease with which anyone may access information about and connect with other cultures have altered the conception of the self and of others. Notions of the inevitable progress of history now ring hollow in the face of worldwide conflicts and global economic struggles, and surveys of young people reveal that many live without notions of transcendent morality.<sup>38</sup> The dwindling attendance and membership numbers of many Churches reflect the postmodern rejection of Christianity, and even of God's existence.<sup>39</sup> The postmodernism begun by Nietzsche has saturated culture; even though postmodernism is dead in the estimation of some academics and

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36. Barbour, Travis I., and Nicholas E. Toews, 2010, "The emergent Church: a methodological critique." *Direction* 39, no. 1: 32-40. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed January 29, 2012).

37. *Ibid.*

38. McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation*, 51.

39. Frykholm, "Loose Connections".

scholars, the profound effects of postmodernism permeate culture and present the Church with a challenge that must be addressed. Postmodernism has brought about a fundamental change in culture; a fundamental change in culture necessitates fundamental changes in the way the Church engages culture. While postmodernism espouses many ideas that are directly contrary to Christianity, some of its ideas are more compatible with Christ's teachings than the teachings of modernism ever could have been. In engaging postmodernism, the Church must balance its duty to preserve the integrity of the gospel with its responsibility to reach the world with the gospel.

The Church has not been exempt from the gradual cultural shift to postmodernism. The Church has addressed these cultural changes in a number of ways, some of which have already been discussed. Doubtless, many believing Christians have chosen to reject all of postmodernism as a theological and philosophical aberration. They have rightly acknowledged that postmodernism's rejection of transcendent, absolute truth is incompatible with the teachings of Christianity. However, in obeying the Great Commission, the Church must prepare itself to minister in changing cultural contexts, including the context of postmodernism. To that end, some Church leaders, authors, and ministries have sought to "become all things to all people" (1 Corinthians 9:19, NIV) in order to effectively communicate the gospel to postmodern hearers.

### **The Emergent Church**

The movement of some Churches and groups of believers into a more postmodern methodology has been called, alternatively, either the *emerging Church*, or the *emergent Church*, depending on its specific cultural context. In America, this movement has most

often been called the *emergent Church*.<sup>40</sup> As a reactionary movement, the emergent Church seems to have begun with the protests of a number of Christians who were dissatisfied with a Church that seemed out of touch with culture and, at times, too worldly.<sup>41</sup> As the movement has aged, the emergent Church has become less a reactionary movement; due to its size, the emergent Church should be characterized as an independent religious movement in its own right.<sup>42</sup> Even though the movement at times resists clear definition, the movement is marked in all its iterations by a rejection of “modernist” views about the Church and ministry and an attempt to develop a Christian orthodoxy which fits into a postmodern context.

The emergent Church seeks to address the aforementioned issues facing the modern Church by questioning many traditional (though not necessarily scriptural) practices. Emergent authors specifically address the problem of the Church’s supposed entanglement with empires and governments, such as attempts to “Christianize” society through legislation and establishment of Christianity as a state religion.<sup>43</sup> Emergent leaders see themselves as being on the frontlines of a new Reformation that questions the long-held assumptions and dogmas of the Church.<sup>44</sup> In seeking reform for many of the Church’s problems, emergent Christians have attempted to live out the faith within the context of postmodernism by tailoring their methods (and sometimes their message) to

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40. Ibid.

41. Mark Devine, “The Emerging Church: One Movement—Two Streams,” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 4-46.

42. Ibid., 6.

43. McLaren, 6.

44. Ibid., 16.

the postmodern cultural climate. The movement speaks to a discontent, disaffected demographic who have found the traditional Church unsatisfying or unaccepting and yet still desire to know and follow the teachings of Christ. The emergent movement sees the Church as being mired in secular modernism; if the Church does not change, it will “go down with the modernist ship.”<sup>45</sup>

In seeking to move past a religion that they believe has been beset by modernism, driven by political agendas, and hostile toward questions or challenges to accepted dogma, the emergent Church has grown as a postmodern movement, incorporating postmodern ways of thinking into their theology and methodology. Many have accepted the anti-foundationalism of postmodernism, and thus have sought to redefine the nature of the pursuit of knowledge about God.<sup>46</sup> While at one point, the emergent Church was projected to be a short lived trend among Church organizations and congregations, the emergent movement has firmly established itself, and the movement shows few signs of slowing down or disappearing.

While one might date the birth of the emergent Church according to the publication dates of its most famous works, the movement began with people, not books. The emergent Church began its emergence with the growing dissatisfaction of Church members and leaders. The aforementioned objections to a Church entangled with modernism have led to the birth of communities of believers committed to living out the Gospel in ways often far different, and often far more biblical, than their predecessors. Popular emergent communities include the Simple Way, established by *Irresistible*

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45. Barbour and Toews, 34.

46. Ibid., 35.

*Revolution* author Shane Claiborne, Mars Hill (a Church community in the Pacific Northwest pastored by Mark Driscoll), and yet another Church called Mars Hill, this one pastored by Rob Bell.<sup>47</sup>

As the movement has aged, a number of theological and methodological distinctions have emerged which definitively set the emergent Church apart from the mainstream of American Christianity. Some differences are radical differences in doctrine or theology (views of the inspiration of scripture, the virgin birth and deity of Christ, and views regarding hell, among others), while others are simply differences in emphasis or methods. Certain congregations have demonstrated a deep commitment to Calvinist views of justification (and Reformed Christianity in general).<sup>48</sup> In engaging the emergent Church an understanding of the wide spectrum of theological and practical differences must be undertaken. The movement has a great deal to offer to a Church that must make its way in a postmodern world, and not all emergent believers are heretics, or even unorthodox.<sup>49</sup>

A shared characteristic of many elements of the emergent Church is the understanding that a postmodern society is a pluralistic society. The narrative of Christianity is not the only participant in religious culture.<sup>50</sup> Emergent leaders hold to the epistemological belief that knowledge is often heavily shaped by culture, and that absolutism in the religious sphere fails for lack of a completely firm foundation. In

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47. McCracken, 105.

48. *Ibid.*, 104.

49. Bartlett, Rick. 2010, "Why I can't write an article on the emergent Church." *Direction* 39, no. 1: 97-105. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed January 31, 2012).

50. Carson, 31.

rejecting absolutism in the face of pluralism, emergent believers demonstrate the anti-foundational influence of postmodernism.<sup>51</sup> However, rather than simply turning to complete relativism, emergent leaders such as McLaren seek to communicate a confident faith, while still acknowledging culture's inherent pluralism and the influences of culture on religious belief. McLaren rejects outright the possibility of complete relativism, acknowledging that Christians must not "finally go down that avenue."<sup>52</sup>

Understanding that many emergent Church leaders reject total relativism helps to clarify what the movement is not, to a certain extent. However, an understanding of what the movement is may be more difficult to achieve, given major differences between groups of emergent believers. The most helpful method of analyzing the movement would be to analyze the works and teachings of its most prominent figures, such as the aforementioned Donald Miller and Brian McLaren. All have established themselves as seminal figures within the movement, and their works reveal the disparate, often conflicting strains of emergent theology and methodology.

### **Donald Miller**

While Donald Miller has not become a multi-million-selling Christian author and has never pastored a large Church, his name has come to be one of the most recognized names in modern evangelical Christianity. Doubtless his most famous book, 2003's *Blue Like Jazz*, presented a challenge to years of evangelical tradition. The work marked a sort of transition in the Church; *Blue Like Jazz* is not a theology book, not a text of Biblical exposition and teaching. Rather, *Blue Like Jazz* tells Miller's story. Miller speaks of his

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51. Carson, 26.

52. Ibid., 36.

struggles to understand God in light of his relationship with his earthly father.<sup>53</sup> He expresses his frustration with Christianity that seems to be in the hands of the government, who “always uses God to manipulate the masses into following them.”<sup>54</sup> Miller’s story comes full circle in *Blue Like Jazz*; Miller does not summarily reject evangelicalism or even call for a reinterpretation of key doctrines.<sup>55</sup> Rather, Miller encourages Christians and non-Christians to separate evangelicalism from the “baggage” that it has accumulated in its relatively short life.<sup>56</sup> *Blue Like Jazz* introduces the ideas and the questions that have more recently become the recurring themes of the emergent Church. Miller’s writing indicates that he places a higher value on right actions than right beliefs.<sup>57</sup> A desire for orthopraxy in addition to orthodoxy has been the preoccupation of the Church in recent years; many Churches and ministries have come to the same realization as Miller (and perhaps because of him): the acceptance of propositional truth about God is meaningless unless Christians are willing to put the words of Christ into consistent practice.

### **Brian McLaren**

Representing a more controversial, progressive brand of emergent Christianity, Brian McLaren expresses a call to restore Christianity to the kingdom-oriented work and

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53. Miller, 4.

54. Ibid., 119.

55. Dodd, Patton, "A better storyteller: Donald Miller helps culturally conflicted evangelicals make sense with their faith." *Christianity Today* 51, no. 6 (June 1, 2007): 28-33, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2012).

56. Ibid.

57. Ed Stetzer, “The Emergent/Emergent Church: A Missiological Perspective” in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 47-90.

teachings of Christ.<sup>58</sup> McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus* suggests that Jesus's true message has been buried under centuries of religious dogma.<sup>59</sup> McLaren reflects prevailing postmodern thought when he cites a problem with religious "framing stories"—much like the postmodernist rejection of transcendent narratives.<sup>60</sup> McLaren sees a problem with the "framing story" that has guided much of Western Christianity because, in his mind, they have largely focused on the spiritual needs of the individual, rather than both the physical and spiritual needs of the larger community.<sup>61</sup> According to McLaren, such framing stories have left the Church inculcated with modernist ideas that conflict with the central message of Jesus. McLaren's beliefs strike at foundational beliefs of modernism, including pervasive individualism and notions of imperial conquest.<sup>62</sup> McLaren maintains that these modernist ideas have influenced the Church as a whole, and individual believers as well. A focus on the individual in the Church, according to McLaren, encourages isolation and keeps believers from living out their faith in community.<sup>63</sup>

*In A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith,*

Brian McLaren argues that the modernist influences upon Christianity can be traced all

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58. McKnight, Scot, "McLaren emerging: in his last two books, Brian McLaren presents more clearly than ever his vision of the gospel." *Christianity Today* 52, no. 9 (September 1, 2008): 58-63. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 2, 2012).

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid.

62. Smith, Scott R, "Some suggestions for Brian McLaren (and his critics)," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (March 1, 2006): 67-85. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed February 2, 2012).

63. Ibid.

the way back to Greco-Roman philosophy. He believes that the common understanding of the overarching narrative of the Bible is more influenced by Plato and Aristotle than it is by the Jewish writers of the Old Testament.<sup>64</sup> McLaren argues that a Platonic conception of the Biblical narrative precludes the possibility for views to develop or change; he holds this “change” on high as being highly important for the Christian faith, saying that Christianity must constantly be refined.<sup>65</sup>

With refinement or growth as his goal, McLaren proposes a different understanding of the Biblical narrative, one more influenced by the Old Testament than by Greek philosophy. McLaren sees the story of the Bible as being one of “creation, liberation, [and a] peace-making kingdom.”<sup>66</sup> McLaren suggests that an understanding of God must be based on an understanding of Christ, because Christ is the physical incarnation of God. To that end, McLaren warns Christians not to ignore Jesus's clear social agenda; Jesus did not simply come to offer a way to heaven. Rather, Jesus came to establish God's kingdom.<sup>67</sup> McLaren's holds a higher view of Christ than one might expect him to hold. He points directly at a problem with much “Christian” theology: many “Christians” are content with simply believing in God and that Jesus is the way to him, rather than believing that Jesus is truly “the image of the invisible God”, as he is

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64. McLaren, 37.

65. Ibid., 128.

66. Ibid., 129.

67. Ibid., 129.

portrayed in Colossians 1. McLaren sees in Jesus a retelling of the entire Old Testament, a new narrative of creation, liberation, and peace.<sup>68</sup>

McLaren's desire that Christians develop an accurate understanding of Jesus is admirable. The Christian's understanding of God should be influenced by Jesus and the writings of the Old Testament rather than by the writings of Greek and Roman philosophers. McLaren warns against the tendency of Christians to "remake Jesus" according to their own beliefs, rather than letting Jesus be the one who remakes their beliefs.<sup>69</sup> McLaren warns readers to avoid believing in and worshiping, among others, the "white supremacist Jesus, the Eurocentric Jesus, the Republican or Democrat Jesus...and so on."<sup>70</sup> Again, McLaren's desire for an accurate picture of Christ is admirable.

However, McLaren's vision of Jesus seems to be that of a social revolutionary or activist whose goal was to eliminate oppression and financial inequality. McLaren meets a need in the Christian community: He helps believers to paint an accurate picture of Jesus as a man who had a definite social agenda and came to establish a spiritual kingdom that would do nothing less than turn the world upside down. However, readers of McLaren must be careful that they do not create their own Jesus based solely on McLaren's teachings. Jesus was more than a social activist; his message carried both eternal and immediate significance. The best picture of Jesus available is one that looks through the lens of Biblical history and sees Jesus as the one who brought liberation from the spiritual oppression of sin, (through His death, burial, and resurrection) and will ultimately bring

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68. Ibid., 131.

69. Ibid., 121.

70. Ibid., 122.

freedom from sin's physical manifestations, including poverty, sickness, physical death, and oppression (through His return and the establishment of His kingdom.)

### **What the Church Can Learn from the Emergent Church**

The emergent Church has created a great deal of controversy in its relatively short existence. Its leaders have often called into question age-old practices of the Church, some of which are biblical and some of which are not. Many emergent authors and leaders have written books, asked questions, and started new conversations because they love Christ and the Church and they desire to reverse the Church's decline. They have sought to do so by encouraging Christians to abandon the non-scriptural cultural baggage that has accumulated simply by virtue of the Church being in the world. Countless reformers throughout history have engaged in the same task. Martin Luther desired to see the Church remove the baggage of works-based salvation; Jesus himself encouraged Jews to jettison their notions of superiority and desired for them to understand that God had sent a Messiah for the entire world. The Emergent Church and its leaders have the same goals in mind; they strongly desire for the Church to return to a true understanding of Christ and to reject modernist ideas that have crept into the Church slowly in recent centuries. Their intentions are noble, and often, their ideas are based on a solid Biblical foundation. However, in the same ways that modernism is often incompatible with Christianity, the postmodernism embraced by many Emergent believers is not completely compatible. Postmodernism totally rejects transcendent moral or spiritual truth; Christians, however, must acknowledge that they live their lives according to

transcendent moral and spiritual truth embodied in the person of Christ and the writings of Scripture. Rather than opposing any sort of foundational belief system, the Christian must have confidence in his convictions, while still acknowledging the inherent pluralism present in culture.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the Church should be unafraid to make truth claims, even when those claims may offend a pluralistic, relativistic culture. The Emergent Church, often, seems to equivocate on certain claims of Christianity when they come into conflict with prevailing worldviews. In so doing, they risk simply replacing modernist influences with postmodern sensibilities, rather than simply letting Christianity stand on its own as it did in the early days of the Church. An understanding of the Emergent Church should be tempered with the understanding that Emergent authors write from a postmodern perspective and may therefore often hold ideas which are more influenced by the postmodern culture around them than they are by the Bible. In evaluating the Emergent Church, Christians should exercise discernment in which ideas they accept and which they reject. If no discernment is practiced, the Church will not end up any better; rather it will simply trade one worldly influence for another.

The Church is faced with a serious challenge to its legitimacy as its numbers continue to decline and people venture outside its walls to seek religious experiences. Centuries of modernist influence have left the Church at times unable to speak to the postmodern religious seeker, or even to postmodern Christians. As culture has become thoroughly postmodern, many have begun to seek new paradigms for Church ministry. The Emergent Church has arisen from this challenge and has called into question many

viewpoints and beliefs of traditional Churches. The works of many Emergent authors encourage believers to develop a better understanding of Jesus that is grounded in Scripture rather than modernism or Greek philosophy. Many have wisely questioned the way Christians have often painted Jesus to resemble themselves. However, the Emergent movement has at times, unfortunately, also encouraged believers simply to replace modernist baggage with postmodernist baggage, rather than to reject cultural influence on their worldview. In developing new strategies for ministry and new paradigms for mission, the Church should align with the Emergent Church in acknowledging that society is pluralistic and that the Church must consider the possibility of corruptive modernist influences. However, the Church must also reject any postmodern attempt to alter the message and integrity of the Gospel.

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