

EMERGENT POSTMODERNS:

WHO ARE THEY AND WHAT IS THEIR BIBLICAL HERMENEUTIC?

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CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS
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I. INTRODUCTION

A camp director who I once worked for always referred to new movements as “new waves of the Spirit.” There are many who would say there is a new wave of the Spirit in the Church today and many are calling that the *emerging church*. The emerging church has only recently become a term that more and more are becoming familiar with.¹ Through the writing of the emerging church’s most prolific author, Brian McLaren,² the terms *Emergent* and *emerging church* have become fairly mainstream in both evangelical and mainline Christianity. Because of the recent popularity of some of these books, as well as the hundreds and thousands who have attended the past three Emergent Conventions, many are now beginning to write books *against* this movement, most notable is evangelical scholar D.A. Carson’s forthcoming book, “Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications.”³ This movement is one which I believe has the potential to do some very progressive things for people’s understanding of Christianity; I chose to research this cultural group because I thought it would be intriguing to see how the cultural variables from this postmodern crowd was directly affecting the way they read and interpreted Scripture.

Before proceeding in this paper, it will be important to define terms that I will be working with throughout this paper. The term “Emergent” is used specifically for the organization of people who are behind the “emerging church.” Initially formed as Terra Nova, this group consisted of several friends who were pastors in fairly large conservative evangelical churches who had reached a point in their ministry where they knew they could not go on doing what they

¹ When I visited Princeton last fall, I mentioned the term to a few people, and received only blank stares back. This year, for better or worse, more and more people know what the emerging church movement is about (or rather, *think* they know what it is about).

² McLaren has written over 10 books. His *A New Kind of Christian* series and the recent *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished Christian* have been his most well-known books.

³ Forthcoming: D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

were doing, believing and teaching that ‘type’ of Christianity and doing that kind of church. They needed to know there was something else out there, some new form of Christianity, or else they were not going to survive. Emergent is a group of people who are open to rethinking everything from theology to worship styles to ecclesiology to leadership structures to methodology; all of this rethinking is done with the acknowledgment that we are living and thinking in a post-colonial, post-modern society.

The “emerging church” is a term used to describe a group of pastors, churches (many from within Emergent) and other groups who are engaging with these ideas, engaging with theology and trying to do church in a new way. As opposed to those who are involved with Emergent who have moved beyond their conservative evangelical roots, there are still some churches who want to be called “emerging churches” but who are still steeped in a very conservative evangelical culture.

Many who identify themselves with the emergent “conversation”⁴ would also refer to themselves as postmodern (see below for a variety of textures of postmodernism)⁵. For the remainder of the paper, these are the people within Emergent and the emerging church conversation I will be referring to. Other literature I use may refer to this group as Generation X or younger evangelicals, but I will use the term “postmodern.” I use this term to describe those within Emergent and the emerging church movement who are moving away from their conservative evangelical roots and looking for a more progressive faith, as opposed to those in the emerging church conversation who still desire to remain faithful to their conservative backgrounds.

⁴ There are some who want to say that the emerging church is not a movement, but rather, a “conversation.”

⁵ I first saw this phrase “textures of postmodernism” in a book by A.K.M. Adam and want to use that term for this paper. A.K.M. Adam, What is Postmodern Biblical Criticism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 1.

II. TEXTURES OF THE POSTMODERN⁶ CULTURE

Before I get into the four textures of postmoderns and their culture that I see (post-institutional, post-rationalistic, post-individualistic and post-Holocaust/post-9/11), let me share a quote from A.K.M. Adam, who is drawing off the work of Cornel West:

“Postmodernism is antifoundational in that it resolutely refuses to posit any one premise as *the* privileged and unassailable starting point for establishing claims to truth. It is antitotalizing because postmodern discourse suspects that any theory that claims to account for everything is suppressing counterexamples, or is applying warped criteria so that it can include recalcitrant cases. Postmodernism is also demystifying: it attends to claims that certain assumptions are ‘natural’ and tries to show that these are in fact ideological projections.”⁷

Through the following four textures of postmodern culture that are shared, as well as how that impacts their hermeneutic, the reader will find many similarities between the above quote and the way in which those items get worked out in hermeneutics.

One of the first textures of postmoderns today is their insistence on being **post-institutional**. Many do not feel comfortable belonging to any “group:” there seems to be a general distrust for institutional structures or affiliations with groups. For example, a postmodern Christian will be much more likely to identify her/himself as a Christian before they would claim to be a Presbyterian or United Methodist;⁸ “Their failure to commit to traditional religious and denominational structures does not signal their lack of interest in questions of meaning and values. Instead, it signals that new institutions are being birthed, and that current ones must be reinvented if they are to survive within this environment.”⁹ Many postmoderns would place themselves *in-between* Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives or even between

⁶ Again, when I refer to “postmodern” in this paper, I am not necessarily referring to the philosophical postmodern tradition of Derrida, Lyotard and others, although some of the emerging church/postmodern crowd may be familiar and influenced by such philosophy. Rather, I am referring to the group of people involved in with Emergent and/or the emerging church movement who would call *themselves* “postmodern.”

⁷ Adam, 5.

⁸ Many see this as proof that the postmodernism could be linked to a growing post-denominationalism.

⁹ Donald E. Miller and Arpi Misha Miller, “Introduction: Understanding Generation X,” in Gen X Religion, eds. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

liberal and post-liberals. There is a growing sense that this in-betweenness is a result of the strong dualistic nature that pervades much of our society. This dualism is present in many structures in society, and impresses upon this generation the need to “choose sides” and claim which group they are going to link up with. This attempt to force them into a box is very dissatisfying for the postmodern crowd. In novelist Walker Percy’s book, *The Second Coming*, the main character is struggling with his eventual early retirement and life in the deep “Christian” south, and says the following: “The rest of my life, which will be short, shall be devoted to a search for the third alternative, a tertium quid – if there is one.”¹⁰ Postmoderns don’t want to choose sides – they are looking for the tertium quid.

In their desire to live into their postmodernness, this group of people recognize that they live in a world that is becoming more and more **post-rationalistic**. As soon as one begins speaking of post-rationalism, many people get immediately skeptical and ask, “So, you want to live in an irrational world?” This is not the issue at stake: “In the twenty-first-century world, the attitude toward the use of reason has shifted rather significantly. The new attitude, born out of cultural shifts, is that the use of reason and science to prove or disprove a fact is questionable. This conclusion is no argument

Characteristics of the Younger Evangelicals*

1. Grew up in a postmodern world.
2. Marked by a post-9/11 era.
3. Have recovered the biblical understanding of human nature.
4. Are aware of a new context of ministry.
5. Differ with the pragmatist approach to ministry.
6. Minister in a new paradigm of thought.
7. Stand for the absolutes of the Christian faith in a new way.
8. Recognize the road to the future runs through the past.
9. Committed to the plight of the poor, especially in urban centers.
10. Willing to live by the rules.
11. Facility with technology
12. Highly visual
13. Communicate through stories.
14. Grasp the power of the imagination.
15. Advocate the resurgence of the arts.
16. Appreciate the power of performative symbol.
17. Long for community.
18. Committed to multicultural communities of faith.
19. Committed to intergenerational ministry
20. Attracted to absolutes.
21. Ready to commit.
22. Search for shared wisdom.
23. Demand authenticity.
24. Realize the unity between thought and action.

Chart taken from Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 54.

*Webber uses the term “younger evangelical” which is similar to “emergent” or “postmodern” – but I do not think all these characteristics would be applicable to the group I am referring to.

¹⁰ Walker Percy, *The Second Coming: A Novel*, (New York, NY: Picador, 1999), 190.

for irrationalism.”¹¹ The rationality and desire for ultimate certainty that came with the Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment projects has helped to contribute, as well, to the dualities present in the world, creating the false-assumption that this world consists of black or white answers. Postmoderns respond with a resounding “No” to that assumption, claiming that they live in a both/and world, as opposed to an either/or world. Living in a post-rationalistic world also causes postmoderns to be much more comfortable with mystery than those in past generations. Rationalism called for clear answers to questions about the world and God. Post-rationalists do not deny that humanity’s rationality can be used for determining some things in this world, but are content to live with mystery and paradox. Much of God’s Story is mystery and paradox, which is one reason why postmoderns are skeptical and unimpressed by modern attempts to pull clean-cut propositional truths out of Scripture. Postmoderns are persuaded by *stories* and so place a greater emphasis on storied truth as opposed to the *cold, hard facts*.

Postmoderns across the board emphasize the role of community. This insistence on the role of community in spiritual formation is in direct opposition to the rampant individualism in American – allowing postmoderns to be more and more **post-individualistic**. “The younger evangelicals yearn to *belong to a community*. They do not embrace the individualism birthed out of the Enlightenment and dominant in the twentieth century, nor are they attracted to the me-ism of the eighties. They have rejected the culture of narcissism and seek community.”¹² The postmodern rightly looks out into the world and acknowledges that the individual no longer deserves the center of the stage,¹³ and looks to the community. Along with the emphasis on community is the role dialogue plays in the formation of truth for the postmodern. Dialogue and the dialectical process is important in that truth is arrived at through conversation, through a

¹¹ Webber, 84.

¹² Webber, 51.

¹³ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 168.

process and not necessarily in a clear, cut-and-dry approach. Postmoderns also identify authenticity as a trait that is especially important today.

Finally, postmoderns find themselves living during an interesting time in history: the **post-Holocaust/post-9/11** era. This has a dramatic impact in the way they view the world, truth and progress. Webber writes, “They know that the world will never be the same, that the ideals of prosperity and hope of a pre-September 11 world of peace will never happen.”¹⁴ Because of these two horrifically significant events in our recent history, one during the lives of the postmodern generation, the world will forever be viewed with great skepticism. The Holocaust, which brought about the death of millions in Europe, was perpetuated by a man who believed he held the one, absolute truth – that he held the one, absolute, correct viewpoint. This is enough to make anyone skeptical about absolute truth. Postmoderns’ views on absolute truth vary, but for this group, many still believe that some absolute truth exists, but just that they will never be able to know what it is. Because they don’t have the capacity to know the absolute truth, many postmoderns will be more comfortable with accepting the validity, and truth, that exists within a multiplicity of truth-claims.

III. AN EMERGING POSTMODERN HERMENEUTIC

A postmodern biblical hermeneutic is hard to define for this group of postmoderns, because they are still so spread out across the board on so many different issues. However, one could argue that for these postmoderns, their biblical hermeneutic will be post-institutional, post-rationalistic, post-individualistic and post-Holocaust/post-9/11. Let us examine how each of these postmodern characteristics affect and create an emergent postmodern biblical hermeneutic.

Postmoderns are post-institutional and therefore, their biblical hermeneutic will strive for ecumenism and multiple, alternative approaches; they will not simply follow the party-line of

¹⁴ Webber, 47.

their institution or denomination. Because postmoderns are not tied-down or held accountable¹⁵ to denominations, there is the freedom for more ecumenical interpretations. It also allows for more creativity in interpretive methods and interpretations. Also, because postmoderns may not desire to claim loyalty to any one denomination, any interpretation that they come up with will more than likely be much more ecumenical. This desire for ecumenism allows the conversation to take place across denominational walls and lines, across a wide-variety of faith traditions, and also makes room for the possibility for interfaith dialogue over biblical interpretation.

The post-rationalistic tendencies of postmoderns affect their interpretation of the Bible in a variety of ways; these interpretations will be both/and-construals, dynamic, and ones that leave room for the mystery and ultimate Story of God. The rationalistic inclination of many in the past desired to pull the “one right and true interpretation” out of the Scriptures is rejected by postmoderns; rather, postmoderns leave room and actually desire a multi-vocal interpretation. There is room at the table for a both/and-interpretation, as opposed to an either/or-interpretation; and not just both/and but all interpretations are valid and worthy of being heard. Blount argues this as well: “We therefore found that the full spectrum of the text’s meaning can only be appreciated if one’s analysis is not limited to an individual interpreter or a single group of interpreters. The complete ‘rainbow’ becomes visible only when each of the micro-interpersonally oriented investigations is considered.”¹⁶ Postmoderns also desire dynamic interpretations. Right doctrine and right belief has its place, but if it does not lead to action, it is simply not enough or desired by the postmodern. Postmoderns believe in the ability of humanity

¹⁵ Obviously, that can also be viewed as a negative result of not having to be held responsible by an institution. Postmoderns, if they remain post-institutional and post-denominational, will need to find their own way to create a system where the interpretations and theologies being formed are within at least some type of a Christian framework, though I am not sure who will be the one to decide what that *framework* looks like.

¹⁶ Brian Blount, Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 179.

to create with God, to be co-(re)creators¹⁷ with Christ, and so any good hermeneutic will lead one to co-(re)creativity, action and the determined seeking of bringing the Kingdom of God into our midst today.

The emphasis on acceptance of mystery also plays into the biblical hermeneutic, in that postmoderns are more comfortable than others with ambiguity, incoherence, paradoxical passages and the mysterious nature of God. Grenz, who is working within a framework that is more conservative, attempts to help conservatives realize that this does not mean postmoderns are anti-rational: “Rather, in understanding and articulating the Christian faith, we must make room for the concept of ‘mystery’ – not as an irrational complement to the rational but as a reminder that the fundamental reality of God transcends human rationality.”¹⁸ Acceptance of mystery within God’s story is preferred and emphasized in the postmodern worldview. In addition to mystery, they emphasize the acceptance of the Bible as God’s “Story,”¹⁹ as opposed to simply a storehouse of propositional truths just waiting to be found. This also plays into the desire to see interpretive work create dynamic results: “We do not understand or verify a story by standing outside it and seeking to analyze or defend it. Rather, we understand stories by becoming a part of them, experiencing them as participants.”²⁰

Being post-individualistic is one of the most important attributes to the postmodern crowd. A post-individualistic hermeneutic of the postmoderns will be communal, dialectic and authentic. “We come to scripture aware that we are participants in a concrete, visible fellowship of disciples in covenant with one another. In the end, our goal is to hear what the Spirit is saying

¹⁷ This term was coined by Doug Pagitt, who is on the US-Coordinating Team of Emergent. Pagitt pastors an emerging church in Minneapolis, MN called Solomon’s Porch (<http://www.solomonsporch.com>). Pagitt writes about humanity’s role in co-(re)creation in his book, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 133.

¹⁸ Grenz, 170.

¹⁹ Brian McLaren’s sequel to his *A New Kind of Christian* was entitled *The Story We Find Ourselves In* – suggesting the need to look at the biblical narrative as just that: a narrative, and not something that simply consists of hundreds of little propositional truths that are just waiting to be found, pulled out (of context) and claimed as “truth.”

²⁰ Webber, 90-1.

to this particular congregation and to these particular believers who share together the mandate of being a fellowship of believers in this specific setting.”²¹ Grenz writes: “Although the gospel comes to us personally, God’s purposes for creation find their fulfillment not in the formation of an aggregate of ‘saved’ individuals but in a community of reconciled people. Consequently, the Spirit’s task is to bring into being a new community...”²² While God is for the individual to some extent, God’s true desire is for community, and so postmoderns place their emphasis there as well. A biblical hermeneutic must come from *within* the community, impact the community and call the community to action.

The dialectical aspect of dialogue is also key, and connected to the communal aspect of an emergent postmodern biblical hermeneutic. In a church setting, the whole interpretation of a biblical text will no longer simply come from one person, generally the preaching pastor, but rather, the interpretation will arise from within the community, through the process of dialogue. Emergent pastor Doug Pagitt has implemented such a strategy for his church, Solomon’s Porch.²³ Pagitt invites everyone to a Tuesday night gathering to discuss that week’s biblical text. Pagitt explains his role in the process:

This process helps me see the passage as a living testament with much to say to us in the here and now. It allows me to go into Sunday knowing that I am not just a guy spewing out my “vast” knowledge of the Bible, but a member of a community who is being formed on the spot by the God-given insights of others – in short, a member of a dialogue.²⁴

²¹ Grenz, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 92.

²² Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 78-9.

²³ Pagitt is a contemporary example of such a phenomenon, but obviously not the right. In Rosemary Radford Ruether’s book, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983), she shares the story of a community Italian Benedictine abbot, Dom Giovanni Franzoni of the Italian Basic Christian Community of St. Paul’s Outside the Walls in Rome. Ruether writes: “In the early 1960s, during the Second Vatican Council, Franzoni began inviting the laity to reflect with him on the Scriptures every Saturday night. He then preached his Sunday homily from this shared reflection...A core community of several hundred people began to reshape the liturgy in a more participatory way and also to engage in direct political action on such issues as war and unemployment.” Pagitt is doing the same thing by incorporating the use of dialogue in his community’s interpretive methods.

²⁴ Pagitt, 89.

As the role of community becomes more and more important, so does the necessity for authenticity among postmoderns. “Younger evangelicals are tired of people wallowing around in the mud of their past or beating their breasts about all their successes. They just want people to be real.”²⁵ An authentic hermeneutic will be one that puts on nothing to attempt to impress anyone, but rather, it will be *real*. If a postmodern has a problem with a passage and doesn’t understand it, instead of trying to ignore those problems, they will *claim* them. A postmodern interpreter will not be afraid to ask questions, reveal doubts and even resist the biblical text if that is what they are honestly feeling.

Finally, a postmodern biblical hermeneutic will take into account the fact that we live in a post-Holocaust/post-9/11 period in history today. As mentioned above, this aspect leads postmoderns to be very skeptical about ultimate, absolute truth claims, especially when they relate to one’s interpretation. Because of this, postmoderns, again, are open to a variety of truth-perspectives and interpretations. “Readers can also ‘think the opposite’ by resisting biblical and interpretive tendencies to post mutually exclusive interpretive options. Much biblical rhetoric posts either/or alternatives; biblical scholars tend to address problems as though they already know the range of possible alternatives.”²⁶ Postmoderns, instead of latching onto one “true-for-all-time” interpretation, want to exhaust the range of possible alternative interpretations.

When one interpretation is finally determined to be a “good” interpretation, it is also held very loosely, knowing the transitory and temporal nature of all interpretive work. In a post-9/11 society, postmoderns have seen the lie of permanence, and they have come to be skeptical of the unchanging nature of things. People die, nations fall apart, dreams go unfulfilled. Postmodern interpretation, thus, becomes something organic: “...there can never be one final text

²⁵ Webber, 53.

²⁶ Adam, 75.

interpretation...Because we know that human circumstance is constantly changing, we can conclude that text interpretation will remain fluid.”²⁷ Postmodern interpretation remains in flux; it is not something fixated.

IV. CONCLUSION

It is difficult to paint the entire spectrum of a postmodern worldview and understanding of biblical hermeneutics. However, I think that an adequate summary of this cultural group of emergent postmoderns consists of a post-institutional, post-rationalistic, post-individualistic and post-Holocaust/post-9/11 worldview. Therefore an emergent postmodern biblical hermeneutic is ecumenical, dynamic, communal and organic. The hermeneutic is ecumenical in that it struggles to fight against institutions and desires to bring all into the conversation; it is dynamic because it reads the Bible through the lens of a Story and attempts to bring about life-action and response from the text; it is communal because it seeks first the community (over against the individual) and arrives at such an interpretation through authentic relationships of people in dialogue; and lastly, it is organic because it is fluid, ever-changing and has a good understanding of human limitations. An emergent postmodern biblical hermeneutic will not claim to be *the only and true* hermeneutic, but I believe this hermeneutic is one such way that disillusioned postmoderns find T(t)ruth,²⁸ meaning and hope in the Bible.

The rules for postmodern interpretations become manifest only after the fact; we will not know how to judge such interpretations until after we have wrought them. The thing to do is just to go ahead, to bricolate the –versions that seem right from the materials we find at hand and to present our interpretations to our audiences...Propound your own –versions of the age-old stories; spin unfamiliar text-iles from the familiar threads we have been given; steal away across the border to smuggle an unauthorized insight into a hermeneutical Babylon; “strike from silent lines a fire”, wri(gh)t the interpretations that modern biblical hermeneutics has forbidden.”²⁹

²⁷ Blount, 184.

²⁸ As postmoderns like to play with language and words, this is my term that encompasses both the Truth that is **only** found in Jesus and other truths that can be found in scripture, but are not limited to the Bible, nor are they limited to the Christian tradition.

²⁹ Adam, 77.

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