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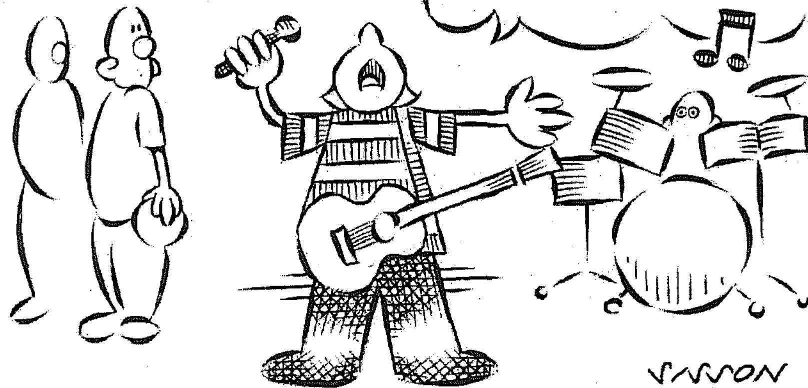
worship leader loses perspective amid flurry of personal pronoun laden choruses...



D. A. Carson's Protest Considered

David G. Dunbar

BECOMING CONVERSANT WITH THE EMERGING CHURCH
D. A. Carson
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234 pages, paper, $14.99

In recent years we have seen numerous books explaining and advocating a new style of church, largely within the evangelical tradition, known as the emerging church, or simply "Emergent." As the visibility of this group has increased, so have the criticisms. This book, by one of evangelicalism's best-known scholars, is the first extended critique of the movement. It develops and expands material presented in three Staley Lectures at Cedarville University in 2004.

The emerging church is a loose-knit group of thinkers and practitioners who actually prefer to describe themselves as a "conversation" or a "friendship" rather than a movement. The theme that Carson finds running through the emergent conversation is that of protest. Many of the leaders trace their roots to traditionally conservative evangelical, or even fundamentalist, churches and now find themselves uncomfortable with various aspects of that heritage. A particular concern in their protest is the degree to which the Western church has accommodated itself to the worst elements of modernity:

rationalism, foundationalism, absolutism, and a host of related evils.

For emergent leaders there is widespread consensus that the world is undergoing a massive cultural shift from modern to postmodern. This shift is not so much to be critiqued—Carson points out that there is little or no criticism of postmodernity among the emergent leaders—as it is to be understood, accepted, and even welcomed as a fresh opportunity for the gospel. This cultural analysis is close to the heart of the emergent movement. Carson commends them for trying to read the times, acknowledging that Christians have often failed to understand how social location and cultural embeddedness shape our interpretation of the gospel.

While the desire to understand and address the new culture is commendable, Carson worries that emerging leaders may not be up to the challenge: "Is there at least some danger that what is being advocated is not so much a new kind of Christian in a new emerging church, but a church that is so submerging itself in the culture that it risks hopeless compromise?" (44). At the end of the day, his answer seems to be, yes.

The problem, according to Carson, is that emergent leaders do not work with a very good understanding of modernity or postmodernity. Their representation of modernism ". . . seems too reductionistic and wooden" (59), and results in stereotypical criticisms of the modern church, which, though containing a measure of truth, are often "theologically shallow and intellectually incoherent" (68). Nor is postmodernism handled much better by emergent writers who are, suggests Carson, too uncritical of its potential dangers, particularly in the area of epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge).

Here we arrive at the heart of Carson's critique: the shift from modern to postmodern is fundamentally a shift in the way we think about truth. Modern thinkers, under the influence of Descartes, looked for a firm foundation on which to build systems of objective (a-historical) truth. In the modern outlook, certainty of knowledge was both desirable and possible if one followed appropriate methods (particularly scientific

methods). But in postmodern philosophy, all bets are off. Knowledge is now understood as strongly perspectival and subjective. Truth is seen as much harder to come by, and claims to know the truth are often rejected as arrogant and potentially dangerous.

There is some healthy corrective in the postmodern shift. What Carson calls "soft" postmodernism represents a chastened rationality that recognizes the limits of human knowing while at the same time believing that truth is accessible to us. He seems willing to include himself in this "soft" category (108). More dangerous is "hard" postmodernism, which gives up any notion of objective or absolute truth. Humans are hopelessly mired in their own perspectives and presuppositions. Truth can only be "truth for me," or for my group. This outlook spells disaster for the Christian faith, insofar as it subverts any notion of a divinely given and humanly accessible revelation.

Hard postmodernism builds its case on a false antithesis: either humans can know things absolutely and comprehensively or they cannot genuinely know in any real sense at all. Since few would argue that we enjoy the first kind of knowledge, the conclusion of hard postmodernists is that we have no access to the truth—every point of view is only a view from a point.

Of course, emergent writers do not advocate a hard postmodern epistemology. Carson acknowledges that Brian McLaren, probably the most prominent emergent leader, endorses neither the absolutism of modernism nor the relativism of the hard postmodernist, and we might expect Carson to explore some epistemological common ground with McLaren at this point. But, in fact, he is skeptical whether emergent leaders really mean what they say: "While formally repudiating the hard forms of postmodernism, when it comes to their actual arguments, they either cave in to these hard forms or, to say the least, never provide any hint of how Christians informed by postmodern insights can speak about truth in the ways that Scripture does . . ." (131–32).

Again, this is the core of Carson's critique: the emerging

church lacks a coherent epistemology and thus functionally succumbs to hard postmodernism. He explores various ways this impacts the emergent approach to biblical interpretation and authority, ecclesiastical tradition, evangelism, and the relationship of Christianity to other religions. In each of these areas he sees a reliance on the hard epistemological antithesis that makes leaders like McLaren ". . . remarkably averse to trading in the coinage of truth" (128). Given his analysis of the emerging church, it is not surprising that Carson finishes his book with a survey of biblical texts that relate to truth, knowledge, and pluralism, and a meditation on truth and experience from 2 Peter 1.

I have taken the liberty of an extended summary of Carson's book, because his is an influential voice in conservative circles, and his work is always worth reading. I agree with Carson that epistemology is important, particularly as it relates to our understanding of Scripture and its role in the theology and life of the church. I like many of the positive things that McLaren, for example, says about the Bible (e.g., the norming norm, a gift from God, inspired, and useful for good works), but I am also at a loss to know what a number of these descriptors mean when it comes to certain aspects of his theology. Carson focuses particular attention on the meaning of Jesus' death and the doctrine of hell. In regard to the former, McLaren is uncomfortable with the idea of penal substitutionary atonement, but there is little effort made to evaluate this or other "theories" of the atonement from the standpoint of how well each of them reflects biblical teaching about the nature of sacrifice, the prophetic anticipation of the work of the Messiah, and the apostolic witness to the meaning of Christ's death. Thus the sense in which the Bible functions as "norm" in the discussion is very vague.

With regard to the doctrine of hell, Carson criticizes McLaren for being unwilling to say as much as Jesus said. But in his most recent book (*The Last Word and the Word after That*, Jossey-Bass, 2005), McLaren actually has much to say about Jesus' statements regarding hell. He deconstructs those statements to argue that the primary concern of Jesus is to challenge

the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and warn them of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and Judaism as they knew it. The language of apocalyptic is interpreted in a "this worldly" rather than an "other worldly" sense. The plausibility of the argument seems, however, to depend on ignoring the witness of the epistles and the Apocalypse. Here I feel the force of Scot McKnight's observation that emergent is a Jesus-first movement that runs the danger of becoming a Jesus-only movement.

Having summarized what I believe are the generally helpful aspects of this book, I should also register a few concerns. To begin with, the title of the book seems to promise more than it delivers. Readers unfamiliar with the emerging church conversation are likely to think that Carson has given them a reasonably comprehensive overview of the topic. Actually, what they will have received is (1) a detailed review of a narrow swath of material on the subject from (2) a less-than-sympathetic perspective.

A NARROW SWATH

As I noted above, Carson sets up his treatment of emergent by focusing on the element of protest as the unifying motif of the movement. This protest is directed to a large extent against the conservative wing of the evangelical/fundamentalist church, the same wing that will likely constitute the largest readership of this book. My fear is that by focusing on the element of protest, Carson's work will serve only to intensify the polarization on this subject.

But now suppose we were to adopt a different lens to look at emergent. The lens I propose is mission. I think the emergent conversation has been very helpful at this point, and mission brings us closer to the "heart of the matter." Consider the work of Brian McLaren, who serves as the primary foil for Carson's treatment of the movement. Yes, McLaren is hard on the evangelical wing of the church. Yes, he uses hyperbole, false antitheses, and straw man arguments that are alternately funny, thought provoking, and infuriating. But what drives McLaren—as anyone who has spent time with him knows—is

mission. He is passionate about seeing people trust in Jesus and become faithful disciples. His concern is that there is so much in the church that seems to get in the way of people coming to faith, particularly those who are now thoroughly rooted in postmodern culture. His protest is in service of mission. For this reason he is willing to re-think much of his theology, Christian experience, and reading of the Bible. And there are many in the emerging church who, to varying degrees, are willing to do the same.

This leads to the additional observation that emergent is a flat organization (or non-organization). No leader (or group of leaders) speaks for the movement. There is no formal confession or doctrinal statement. Much of the significant discussion takes place on Internet blogs and in other such informal venues. Carson is surely aware of these characteristics, but by focusing so much of his critique toward Brian McLaren's publications, his analysis is inevitably skewed.

A LESS-THAN-SYMPATHETIC PERSPECTIVE

One of the more helpful insights of the postmodern turn is its emphasis on the cultural embeddedness of all knowledge: much (all?) of what we *assume* we know is shaped by our social location. This is frequently hard for us to see—our ways of knowing seem self-evidently correct, at least until something or someone from a different culture challenges them.

I think that some of this is taking place in Carson's work. He and I represent a long-standing cultural tradition in higher education. It is to a large extent the theological scholarship of the Enlightenment—rational, precise, detailed, exacting, and confident of its results. And Carson has mastered it well.

But now some strangers have rolled into town, and they are playing by a different set of rules. They suspect that the historical- and scientific-research train doesn't get us as far down the tracks as we once thought it did. They think that a few good metaphors may do more to help our thinking than do many paragraphs of careful and precise prose. They think that well-framed questions are at least as important as finely elaborated answers. And they definitely enjoy a playful hyperbole over an understated footnote.

But it is not that they don't care about truth. McLaren thinks that he knows a lot of truth, and he wants the church to live by that truth in ways that it currently does not. I don't think Carson has been particularly fair on this score. McLaren says: "Our words [in the new world] will seek to be servants of mystery, not removers of it as they were in the old world. They will convey a message that is clear yet mysterious, simple yet mysterious, substantial yet mysterious" (*The Church on the Other Side*, 89). Carson comments, "Here it is again: the absolute antithesis. Either we can know God exhaustively, or we are restricted to the mysterious" (129). But surely McLaren is not arguing antithetically here. This is not *either/or* but *both/and*.

Perhaps I am naive on this score, but I would hope that a sympathetic listening to the concerns of the emerging church might result in a general strengthening of the body of Christ rather than increasing polarization. And perhaps if we all were to listen more carefully, McLaren would not feel the need to write (even in jest) that ". . . I keep elbowing my conservative brethren in the ribs in a most annoying—some would say *ungenerous*—way" (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 35). And then perhaps Carson would not feel the need to respond to such elbowing with, "Damn all false antitheses to hell . . ." (234).

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