

**The Emergent Church – Another Perspective**  
**A Critical Response to D. A. Carson’s Staley Lectures**

David M. Mills, Ph.D.

As I begin this essay, I want to make clear my reasons for writing. I am not articulating this response because I believe that the Emergent Church Movement (hereafter, ECM) or Brian McLaren has everything right. In fact, I find myself concerned about certain aspects of the ECM and find myself in substantial agreement with Carson regarding the potential dangers inherent in what the ECM is trying to do. However, I seem to find myself frequently in the position of defending McLaren’s writings or those of the ECM in general. This is not because I agree with everything in them, but because I find them to be very helpful dialogue partners as I and others reflect on our faith in the year 2004, and most importantly because I consider it an issue of Christian justice and charity to represent as accurately as possible any view that I critique. In my recent interactions with my colleagues regarding Brian McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* and in D. A. Carson’s recent Staley Lectures on the ECM, I have encountered what I consider to be a substantial misrepresentation of many of the key aspects of McLaren’s work specifically and the ECM more generally. I am making no judgments here about why or how these ideas have come to be so misrepresented, but I find such misrepresentations to be counterproductive to genuine, informed dialogue about what it means to be the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is in an effort to correct those misrepresentations for the sake of constructive conversation on this important issue that I offer this response to Dr. Carson’s lecture series.

In short, my concern is that while Carson himself noted the complexity and diversity of the ECM, he failed to keep these factors in view as he critiqued the movement. He objected at

one point to the best of other religions being compared to the worst of Christianity, but seems in his own critique to use of the worst of the ECM in contrast to the best of more mainstream evangelicalism. I am sure that there are extremists in the ECM, but their extremes should not be used to dismiss the entire movement any more than the excesses of a Jerry Falwell or a Jimmy Swaggart should be used to dismiss all of American evangelicalism. To illustrate Carson's misrepresentation of the ECM in terms of its extremes, and to provide a more balanced view of the movement, I believe it will be best to adhere to Carson's own 3-day outline, identifying his main claims about the ECM<sup>1</sup> and responding to them. I should also make one other thing clear before proceeding. In criticizing Dr. Carson's handling of this topic, I am in no way trying to diminish his stature as one of our foremost New Testament scholars. I respect his work in that area immensely, and I have learned a great deal from it. I praise God for the ways in which D. A. Carson has been used by God for His work.

### **Day 1 – “Will the Real Emerging Church Please Stand Up?”**

Carson began his lectures by defining the ECM as a protest against traditional (Modernist) churches and pragmatic megachurches.<sup>2</sup> He pointed out that the ECM's plea for

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<sup>1</sup>I will do my best to reproduce accurately the claims Carson made. Since I will be working from my written notes, taken as he spoke, I will undoubtedly provide more close paraphrases than word-for-word quotations, but I believe that I will capture fairly the essence of what Carson intended to communicate.

<sup>2</sup>Although he did not identify his source here, Carson is apparently working with Robert Webber's (*The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002.) tri-fold distinction between Traditional Evangelicals (roughly 1950 - 1975), Pragmatic Evangelicals (roughly 1975 - 2000) and Younger Evangelicals (roughly 2000 - present).

According to Webber, traditional evangelicals are defined as those who think of Christianity primarily as a rational worldview and thus appeal to evidential, foundationalist apologetics. Traditional evangelicals tend to link patriotism and Christianity. These churches

reform in the church is based on perceived changes in the culture. Their concern, he says, is not that the church has drifted from the centrality of the gospel, but rather that the culture has changed and that the church must now change in order to adapt to its culture. He fleshed out this point in contrast to the Protestant Reformation, which for Carson was a plea for reform within the church without consideration for cultural factors.

This is a substantial oversimplification of both the Protestant Reformation and the ECM.

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tend to be rural or neighborhood churches and are pastor-centered; most programs (such as for the youth) are church-centered. Sunday school is primarily information-centered, and the worship style is traditional and restrained. Evangelism is typically in mass form (e.g., crusades), and social action is focused on political issues such as abortion and homosexuality.

Pragmatic evangelicals tend to think of Christianity as answers to life's needs and thus their apologetics tend to emphasize experiential, personal faith as giving meaning to life. They strive for culturally-sensitive, market-driven approaches to church growth, tending toward the suburban megachurch model. Leadership tends to be developed on a managerial (CEO) model, and programs (such as for the youth) tend to be outreach focused events. Sunday school tends to target generational groups and needs, and the worship style is contemporary. Evangelism focuses on bringing people into seeker-sensitive services in the church. Social action is focused on need-driven support groups (divorce, drug rehab, etc.) in addition to larger political issues.

Lastly, younger evangelicals tend to think of Christianity as participation in a community of faith called out by God. Their apologetics, therefore, tend to emphasize community, with a focus on an embodied apologetic and a lived metanarrative. Rather than combining Christianity and American patriotism or striving to be seeker-sensitive, younger evangelicals tend to emphasize the missional nature of the church, striving to be a counter-cultural community within the world. They tend to start up small churches, often in urban contexts. Their leadership approach is often team-oriented, and their programs (such as for the youth) emphasize small group Bible studies, social action, and interpersonal involvement in existing community organizations and relationships. Their approach to education is to seek out intergenerational formation in community and their worship style is often ancient/future – an attempt to integrate word and flesh, past and present, reason and senses in the life of the community. Evangelism and social action are also community-focused, working through the redemption/restoration of individuals, families, neighborhoods, and cities.

While distinctions such as these always are more easily handled on paper than in reality, these distinctions nonetheless serve as a decent starting point for making sense of certain shifts in evangelicalism over the last 50 years. For the remainder of this essay, I will make use of Webber's triadic distinction between traditional, pragmatic, and younger evangelicals as a convenient nomenclature to distinguish the ECM from other elements of American evangelicalism.

While our histories of the Reformation tend to focus on Luther's reading of Romans 1:17 and his call for the church to change, such a reading ignores the multiple cultural factors at work in this shift and the many other pleas for ecclesial reform which were heard even before Luther's time. Changes in philosophy, science, politics, technology, art, education, and historiography were beginning to change the way that people thought about their religion, and Luther himself is an illustration of that shift. While this point can be overstated, there is a real sense in which Martin Luther's "discovery" of justification by grace through faith would not have been possible in the same way at a different time in history. His plea for reform is itself enmeshed in a specific time and place within Western culture, and the changes he calls for are bound up with other changes taking place at the time. To ignore those factors is to misrepresent the nature of the Protestant Reformation.

Likewise, to portray the ECM as solely an attempt to adapt to culture is to ignore the genuine doctrinal issues bound up with its call for reform. While it is not a perfect parallel to the Protestant Reformation, it is not a polar opposite either, as Carson's comments would lead us to believe. Could it be the case that the evangelical church in America today has consciously or unconsciously acquiesced to certain aspects of Modern Western culture, to the detriment of the gospel? If this has happened, wouldn't it be likely that we would be largely blind to such acquiescences as long as those Modern cultural conditions went unchallenged or unchanged? Could it not also be that larger cultural shifts that lead to broad questioning of Modern assumptions could allow the church to investigate itself as well? Would not this be a potentially helpful thing for the church to do? This, I believe, is exactly what the ECM is trying to do, and in this respect, their position is quite similar to that of Protestant reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In

both cases, thinkers are taking advantage of key transitions in culture that reveal blind spots and weaknesses within the church. In both cases doctrinal expression and doctrinal change cannot be divorced from cultural context. What is crucially important in both cases is a faithful presentation, articulation, and living out of the gospel and all of its entailments within a specific cultural context. To imply that the ECM cares less about doctrinal purity than it does about cultural relevance is unfairly polarizing.

Just what are the cultural transitions that we are experiencing, which the ECM is attempting to map and seize as an occasion to reflect critically on Christian practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These changes go collectively under the heading of “postmodernism.” In his lectures, Carson noted that this term is notoriously hard to pin down, but then immediately simplified the term for us. He claimed that postmodernism is essentially a shift in epistemology, according to which we learn less by rationality and conclusive proofs and more by emotion, experience, probability, etc. This is perhaps the grossest of Carson’s oversimplifications, and it undergirds his other misrepresentations of the ECM. I cannot here fully engage with all of the misunderstandings represented by this description of postmodernism, but let me make a few quick remarks that could point us in a helpful direction for thinking about postmodernism.

The most obvious point to make in response to Carson is to point out that postmodernism is *not* essentially a shift in epistemology. Whatever epistemological shifts we have experienced within the last 40 years, they have been as much symptoms as they have been causes of broader cultural changes. Carson’s description of postmodernism ignores developments within globalized Capitalist economics and its Marxist and Marxian critiques, global politics, the arts, architecture, literature, population growth and urbanization, image reproduction and

proliferation, anthropology, science and the philosophy of science, information technology and biotechnology, religion, and theory of all types within the last century. To appreciate fully the nature and significance of recent epistemological shifts, one must view them within this broader context. I don't claim to have a full understanding of all of these transitions, but I am convinced that as one moves toward such an understanding, one begins to see that postmodernism is not merely an epistemological shift from objectivity to subjectivity, from reason to emotion, from certainty to probability. Much more is involved, more than I can relate here.<sup>3</sup> But what I must note here is the fact that insofar as postmodernism is more than a shift in epistemology, it is not exactly a set of ideas that one can choose for or against. The issue before us is not whether or not we *agree with* postmodernism. That is like asking whether or not we agree with the year 2004. The question before us is the same question that faces Christians in every age: how should we then live? Given the *fact* of the postmodern cultural transitions of the last half-century, how should we live out our Christian faith? Answering this question will of course involve critically agreeing or disagreeing with the responses to our cultural context put forward by others, but it will also require serious self-criticism and a willingness to think creatively in directions not explored by Christians in previous eras. Doubtless, this is a task fraught with difficulty and danger, but I take it to be central to a life of faith that is lived out in truth and love in its actual context. This task is far more complicated than Carson leads us to believe, and I believe that his failure to address the complexities of the postmodern situation leads him to misjudge and

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<sup>3</sup>For a bit more on this, read Brian McLaren's "The Three Postmodernisms: A Short Explanation," found on his website at [www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000071.html](http://www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000071.html). This will provide a slightly more expanded look at postmodern thinking. It still falls short of a precise philosophical treatise, but it helpfully points out, in accessible terms, some of the transitions involved in postmodernism.

oversimplify the nature of the ECM.

Based on his understanding of the nature of postmodernism, Carson constructed the following list of ECM emphases:

- feelings and affections *over against* rational thought
- experience *over against* hard-edged rational truth
- the contemporary definition of tolerance
- inclusion vs. exclusion
- a refusal to tell others they're wrong, in favor of an effort to win by example, care love (he put this in terms of inviting folks into a community and hoping they'll convert by osmosis)
- participation
- narrative *over against* propositional truth
- anti-individualistic
- anti-consumerist
- witness/evangelism bound up with life, not just words
- peer-discussion; suspicious of all hierarchy

This list definitely hits on many of the emphases one will find within the ECM, but the list itself is constructed as a critique, not the objective description it claims to be. Carson's own words at the end of his final day in chapel serve as a deserved judgment for many aspects of his own construction of this list: "Damn all false antitheses to Hell!" In presenting these emphases in an "*over against*" arrangement, he is constructing antitheses where the more thoughtful members of the ECM do not, and he is foisting those antitheses onto the movement as a prelude to judging it deficient on those very grounds. This is uncharitable, unjust scholarship.

Since a number of these "descriptions" comes up again as a point of critique on Day #2, I will not respond to all of them here. But I will address two as representative of Carson's overall treatment of the ECM. First, Carson portrays the ECM as constructing an either/or between

narrative and propositional truth. But, as McLaren notes on page 17 of *A New Kind of Christian*, the issue is not one of narrative *or* rational propositions, but an inclusive both/and. He wants “narrative, poetry, and the arts in general (which yield softer, more impressionistic returns than science, math, or engineering)” to be taken out of the “back seat” and be regarded as “serious ‘front-seat’ colleagues in the search for truth.” This balance is sought throughout the text, as is illustrated in his statement about theology on pages 159 and 163:

According to the Bible, humans shall not live by systems and abstractions and principles alone but also by stories and poetry and proverbs and mystery. (159, email from Neo to Casey, underlining mine)

That’s not to say that we don’t need theologians to work with words, but it is to say that believing as we do that the Word became flesh, the focus of our words should be the creation of communities that embody our good news... (163, email from Neo to Casey)

Anyone who studies literature will tell you that literary expression is not antithetical to propositional truth. Truth can be addressed by fiction, but not in the same way that it would be addressed by a conceptual essay in philosophy, theology, or science. One cannot reduce literature to nothing more than a set of propositions, but one cannot divorce literature from propositional content, either.<sup>4</sup>

The second of Carson’s false antitheses to note here is that between feelings, affections, and experience on the one hand and rational thought and truth on the other. Carson addresses this perceived antithesis more fully on Day #3, but for now, I should note that my own reading of and interaction with those in the ECM has convinced me that a good many of them are striving to live in recognition of John Stackhouse’s insight that

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<sup>4</sup>For more on this, read Peter Lamarque’s *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), especially chapter 6, “Truth and Art.”



...since the Christian message is fundamentally an invitation extended to human beings – not just human brains – to encounter the person of Jesus Christ rather than to adopt a doctrinal system or ideology, it is only obvious then that establishing the credibility and plausibility of that message will depend upon more than intellectual argument. It will depend instead upon the Holy Spirit of God shining out through all the lamps of good works we can raise to the glory of our Father in heaven.<sup>5</sup>

Stackhouse does not say that there is no need for intellectual argument or for doctrinal systems. Rather, he is trying to point out that these are not ends-in-themselves; they cannot be considered a full living out of Christian faith if they are divorced from action and loving community. He calls not for the overthrow of rational truth, but for the supplementing of that truth with a lived enactment of it. It is a call for the very thing that Paul commends the Corinthians for when he refers to them as a “letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (II Corinthians 3:3, NIV).

After providing his list of ECM emphases, Carson concluded Day #1 with an observation of the praiseworthy aspects of the ECM:

- The ECM is trying to read the times. Cultural differences are important.
- The ECM pushes the value of authenticity
- The ECM does recognize at least *some* of the cultural changes bound up with postmodernism, but they don't always have the appropriate responses to them.
- The ECM has a deep concern to reach the “way outs.” They have developed the ability to talk to anyone.
- The ECM is willing to question tradition.

This cursory and general list of positives, a list far less specific or heartfelt than the list of negatives to be provided on Day #2, was then followed by two cautionary points: First, we need

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<sup>5</sup>“From Architecture to Argument” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, edited by Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 55.

to be sure that this movement is seeking to be reformed by the Word of God, and is not merely being submerged into its culture. This is an excellent piece of advice, and one with which many thoughtful members of the ECM would agree. Second, Carson noted that all of these positives could be found within the traditional evangelical church, citing a Presbyterian church in Manhattan as an example. Here again, I believe that many within the ECM would affirm this point and rejoice in God's work in Manhattan. Many ECM folks talk in terms of "deep ecclesiology" (a play on the concept of "deep ecology"), by which they mean that we must not become "either/or" in our thinking about traditional or pragmatic evangelicals. Rather, we must affirm the work of God wherever it is truly being done, without judgments of form, tradition, etc. Unfortunately, Carson dismisses this attitude as relativistically *tolerant*, thereby painting the ECM into a corner. Either the ECM is "either/or" and fully rejects all previous forms of evangelicalism, in which case it can be judged as a reactionary swinging of the pendulum too far the other way, or the ECM affirms God's work within other forms of evangelicalism, in which case it can be judged to be relativistic, only one step away from including Catholics and Greek Orthodox in the family of God.<sup>6</sup> There is evidently no way out of Carson's assessment that the ECM is wrong.

But, I believe that Carson's brief description of postmodernism and his specific critiques developed on Day #2 indicate that he really does not understand the ECM. He admits that he has only been studying this movement for a short period of time and that he knows no one personally who is involved in the movement. I affirm his point about the need to be able to talk to anyone,

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<sup>6</sup>This concern is one that Carson brought up several times in discussion during the departmental dinner on Tuesday evening.

and I would offer an observation that before one can talk to another, one must be willing to listen honestly to that other, laying aside as fully as possible one's preconceptions and prejudices. It was not apparent to me from Carson's assessment of the ECM that he has reached the point of doing that yet. If not, then he is not truly talking *to* the ECM, but only *about* them, to others who already agree with him. This is not conducive to fruitful dialogue.

### **Day 2 – “Evaluating a Complex Movement”**

On the second day of lectures, Carson began his direct criticism of the ECM. He offered five specific critiques. Each of his five points is well-taken. They represent legitimate concerns and real dangers to be avoided by any Christian, within the ECM or not. But, my concern is that he unfairly misrepresents the ECM so as to make his critiques stick with force. Thus, without disagreeing with any of his concerns, I would like to respond to his implicit or explicit claims that these apply as condemnations of the ECM.

1. *The ECM does not understand postmodernism. They reduce it to oversimplified sloganeering, and they throw around semi-technical jargon which muddies the waters rather than clarifying issues.*

This is a genuine problem for some in the ECM. One can find a good deal of sloppy history and sloppy conceptual analysis in many ECM books, and especially on websites where there are no editorial controls. A good number of ECM writers do flirt with or give into the temptation to use “postmodern” as a synonym for “cool” and “modern” as a synonym for “stodgy.”

What surprises me, however, about Carson's treatment of this issue is his own apparent blindness to the degree to which this critique is true of the vast majority of *all* evangelical writing on the topic of postmodernism, *including his own!* There are very few books within the

Christian publishing world as a whole that correctly use the word “deconstruction.” This is not a problem unique to the ECM writers. And in fact, there are a few cases in which ECM authors have a better handle on the complexities of postmodernism than Carson himself. His own reduction of postmodernism to an issue of epistemology, and his own belligerent misreadings of McLaren and Webber illustrate this point.

As an example of what he takes to be an oversimplified view of postmodernism, Carson targeted a brief passage in McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian*. On page 19, McLaren’s character Neo states, “In the postmodern world, we become postconquest, postmechanistic, postanalytical, postsecular, postobjective, postcritical, postorganizational, postindividualistic, post-Protestant, and postconsumerist.” Now, none of these labels is intended as an either/or rejection of what has come before. Instead, McLaren is mapping gradual shifts in emphases within our culture, shifts that are continuous with what has come before. McLaren notes that being postmodern “doesn’t imply being antimodern or nonmodern, and it is certainly different from being premodern (though it is similar in some ways). To be postmodern means to have experienced the modern world and to have been changed by the experience – changed to such a degree that one is no longer modern” (*A New Kind of Christian* 15-16). While this explanation still lacks the kind of precision a philosopher or historian of ideas would expect, it is a more helpful starting point for a study of postmodernism than is Carson’s own reduction of postmodernism to an epistemological either/or.

In his lecture, Carson critiqued a number of these “posts” with a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* approach. He ridiculed several of them with rhetorical questions or brief observations of our current cultural state. In nearly every case, he showed his ignorance of McLaren’s points.

McLaren's character offers this list of "posts" at the end of almost 3 full pages of explanation of what those terms mean. Carson bypassed all of the detailed explanation and rhetorically attacked the terms themselves. For example, in response to "postmechanistic," Carson scoffed, "Postmechanistic? Postmechanistic? We make more robots today than we ever have!" and then he moved on to ridicule the next term. But this misses the point of "postmechanistic" entirely. If he had carefully read page 16 of McLaren's text, he would have understood that McLaren is not talking about how many machines we make or use. He is talking instead about the metaphors we use to explain ourselves and our context. Do we first and foremost appeal to machine-based metaphors to understand the human being, human organizations, society, or the cosmos? Undoubtedly many of us still do in some form or fashion, but a brief look at the development of such metaphors over the last century will reveal that increasingly, organic or natural metaphors have replaced mechanistic metaphors in describing humans, organizations, societies, and the cosmos. Carson's comments do not even demonstrate an awareness of this as the relevant issue. While I personally think that some of McLaren's "posts" do overstate the case or oversimplify the issues, Carson misses an opportunity to demonstrate this fairly. His responses to most of the other "posts" showed an equal amount of ignorance regarding the claims being made, demonstrating a willful imposition of an alternative meaning onto them. In doing so, he misses a chance for legitimate and constructive critical engagement, and instead opts to construct a series of straw men in place of McLaren's real points, demolishing the substantially weaker versions of McLaren's actual points, claiming intellectual and moral superiority.<sup>7</sup> Again, this is unjust,

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<sup>7</sup>Another illustration: Carson rattled off a list of chapter titles from Robert Webber's *Younger Evangelicals* without actually describing or engaging the content of those chapters. One should not judge a book by its chapter titles any more than one should judge it by its cover.

uncharitable scholarship, unbecoming for a Christian scholar, especially one invited to the university as an exemplification of the Christian mind and heart at work.

2. *The ECM doesn't assess Modernism very well.*

Here again, Carson raises a good point. ECM writers can sometimes be guilty of Modern-bashing, using the term as a synonym for all that is wrong with the church today. McLaren, for example, often finds the Modern bogeyman lurking behind problems that can easily be explained by appeal to good old-fashioned human depravity or stupidity!

However, as with his first point of critique, Carson overstates the case in a way that shows his own ignorance of the disciplines he is critiquing and once again demonstrates a blindness to the fact that his critique applies to himself every bit as much as it applies to the ECM. He noted that Modernism is far from monolithic, which is true, and noted that Modernism comfortably housed both Romanticism and Existentialism under its roof. Again, this is true. But

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Carson should know this. But instead of recognizing Webber's attempt to map gradual trends rather than to demarcate battle lines, Carson treated the chapter titles as definitive declarations, once again foisting false antitheses onto a writer who is not trying to construct any. One example of this is the chapter heading "History: from ahistorical to tradition." Carson responded to this heading by observing that many Christian universities today have strong history departments. Thus, he observed, we are anything but ahistorical. But, a quick observation even of Cedarville's curriculum will note that we almost never approach our *theology* historically. It is a gaping hole in our curriculum. And I believe that a Barna-style survey of the average evangelical church-goer in America would reveal an almost total ignorance of the historical development of our doctrine. Some in the ECM are trying to respond to this problem of treating our doctrine in an ahistorical way by investigating our history and traditions as Christians. Their hope is that we could learn something from such a study, something that we may have lost by virtue of our acclimatization to the Modern western world. Except perhaps in rare extreme cases, one will not find a mindless resurrection of tradition for its own sake, and Carson's request for New Testament support for ancient practices such as *Lectio Divina*, journaling, liturgy, etc. is a red herring, because we cannot find such New Testament support for a number of things done in traditional or pragmatic evangelical churches today (PowerPoint, praise choruses, choirs, pulpits, organs, youth groups, etc.). We do not have explicit New Testament support for all aspects of our Christian practice in the present or the past.

Carson's claims imply that Romanticism is somehow at odds with Modernism, and he explicitly claimed that Existentialism and Postmodernism are the same basic thing. Both of these claims are astoundingly misleading. One could perhaps make a case for certain aspects of Postmodernism as a sort of Neo-Romanticism, especially in the arts. But one could also make the case for a conceptual linkage between Modern Romanticism and Medieval Mysticism. Ideas tend to come back around in cultural cycles. But the crucial thing to note about such cycles is that the ideas are never the same when they come back. Modern Romanticism is *not the same as* Medieval Mysticism. Each bears the stamp of its own age. Likewise, there are crucial differences between Postmodern Neo-Romanticism and Modern Romanticism. The key point here is that Modern Romanticism is still very much at home within Modernism because it shares many of its essential assumptions. Romantics were extremely self-aware Moderns, but they were Moderns nonetheless. In much the same way, one can find precursors of 20<sup>th</sup> century Existentialism in Socrates, Augustine, Pascal, and Kierkegaard, to name but a few. But again, each of these will bear the mark of his own age, and cannot be equated with 20<sup>th</sup> century Existentialism. And neither can 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialism be equated with Postmodernism. At the metaphysical level, there are *vast* differences between these tendencies of thought. In light of these observations, I would suggest that Carson himself needs to study Modernism more thoroughly before accusing others of misunderstanding it.

Leaving aside these shortcomings in Carson's argument, I should note that he did make a good (and appropriately postmodern) observation that one's experience is going to affect one's assessment of problems and opportunities within a given set of ideas. He noted that the Reformed tradition, for example, really doesn't struggle with Open Theism, but is challenged by

the new view of Paul, a view which isn't really even on radar for Arminians. He claimed that the ECM folks all seem to come from very narrow, conservative, fundamentalist backgrounds, and thus they are inclined to swing the pendulum to an extreme that folks from a moderate, healthy evangelical background are not. This is a good observation, as far as it goes. What surprises and disturbs me about Carson's handling of this observation is the fact that he does not really ever seem to apply it to himself. Instead, he seems to treat his own context and experience as normative. Those who have a background like his, he seemed to say, will see that this ECM stuff is nonsense, it's immature.<sup>8</sup> Carson did not ever explore the degree to which his own context may incline him to judge the ECM unfairly, misunderstand it, swing the pendulum another direction, etc. Ironically, his implied contextless attitude, his implicit assumption that *his* context is the one from which the truth can be seen most clearly, is one of the very attitudes that characterizes Modernity and that should be seen as at odds with the Christian message.

While the role of context and experience in influencing our judgments can definitely be overstated, leaving us with no ability to grasp truth, a recognition of our context-bound situations and our need for God's grace in the knowing process should engender a humility within us that counteracts the Modern hubris. I will not judge Carson's own heart, because I do not really know him, and what little I do know of him would lead me to believe that he is an earnest godly man who has been used by God to do great things for the cause of Christ. Further, I was not present for the Q&A sessions, so perhaps the tone of his presentation was different there. What I will say, however, is that his 3 days of presentation did not evidence the kind of self-awareness that I

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<sup>8</sup>This is a claim he made during individual discussion at the Bible department dinner on Tuesday evening; the same attitude was strongly in evidence during his second chapel lecture.



would hope to see demonstrated by a Christian scholar. Again, I want to be clear that in calling for an awareness of our own shortcomings, I am not saying that we should never claim to know truth, or never be willing to call another viewpoint wrong (indeed I am doing those very things here!). What I am saying is that Carson's overall attitude, rhetorical style, and lack of engagement with most of the actual arguments and specifics of the ECM communicated an unwillingness to dialogue. I can only assume, based upon Carson's high reputation within evangelicalism, that this is not reflective of his heart, and is not something he would truly wish to communicate. In this case, I would exhort Dr. Carson to examine his methods of presentation with an eye to what they may communicate unintentionally to his listeners.

3. *The ECM needs to begin talking about where Postmodernism should be confronted, not catered to.*

Once again, Carson points out a real need – for all of us, not just those in the ECM. And perhaps traditionalists and pragmatists need to flip the suggestion and start talking about the good aspects of the postmodern cultural shift, not just its negatives. And while there are doubtless extremists who misuse the term “postmodern” or who uncritically accept certain cultural shifts as good, there are others who are trying (successfully or unsuccessfully) to keep Carson's very point in mind. Consider the following examples from Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*:

I have to keep reminding myself: it's not that modern is bad and postmodern is good. No doubt there are seeds of evil in postmodernity just as there are in modernity. I remember hearing a saying somewhere that he who marries the spirit of the age is sure to be a widow in the next. Give us a century or two of postmodernity and we'll see its fatal flaws as clearly as those of modernity are becoming to us now. (page 22, Pastor Dan's journal)

No model – no matter how resplendent with biblical quotations – can claim to be *the* ultimate Christian worldview, because every model is at the least limited by the limitations of the contemporary human mind, not to mention the ‘taste in universes’ of that particular age. (page 35-36, Neo's college-group lecture – this insight is applied to

modern *and* postmodern models)

Aren't you scared by this new kind of talk, Neo? I mean, it seems to me that you could be preparing us for a new, like, revival or something, or else you're sending us down the road to some sort of, like, major heresy....

Am I scared? Sometimes I'm terrified. ...you're right – the dangers of transition are real. But are the dangers of the status quo less real? People often call me a risk-taker, but really, I consider myself a risk avoider. To me, Stella, the risk of digging in our heels and resisting change is so high – I think it's the highest risk. The second-highest risk is to just let go and go with the flow, whatever happens. You know, this would mean reinterpreting the faith so it fits in with whatever 'taste in universes' the culture around us has. History tells me that that is a terrible risk too. The lowest available risk that I see is the risk of journeying in faith. You see, I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe Jesus meant it when he said that the Spirit of God would be with us, guiding us, to the very end. So I believe that he will guide us through these winds and currents of change, no matter what storms come. In fact, I believe that he is the wind in our sails, leading us into the change, because that's his way. He always moves ahead. He's not about taking us back into the past, some beautiful illusion of the good old days. He has a purpose he is working toward, and I want to keep up with him. I suppose that's my greatest fear, not that I'll go too fast or too far but that I'll lag behind" (41-42, Neo's college-group discussion).

As an illustration of his judgment that the ECM has uncritically catered to postmodernism, Carson talked about tolerance. According to his definitions, the contemporary understanding of tolerance is the view that "every position is morally equal." Carson condemned this viewpoint as "rabidly illogical, incoherent, and intolerant," especially toward those with alternative definitions of tolerance. I would agree with Carson that such a view of tolerance is illogical, incoherent, and intolerant. But, I would suggest that one will not find such a view within a good percentage of contemporary postmodern scholarship. Nor will one find it within a good percentage of those within the ECM. This account of tolerance is what one might encounter amongst college students or those who have a specific vested interest in avoiding a

specific moral responsibility.<sup>9</sup> One rarely finds a postmodern philosopher or theologian making the claim that all positions are morally equal. Instead, one finds philosophers and theologians questioning or attempting to change the terms by which we assign value to positions. Do we do so on the basis of a correspondence theory of truth? Do we do so pragmatically? Do we do so with an eye on piecemeal social engineering, or on Platonic absolutes? Now, certainly there are plenty of positions within these debates with which a thinking Christian would want to disagree, but Carson doesn't even engage the dialogue on the terms in which it is taking place. Instead, he dismisses the whole in terms of an unrepresentative part (a hasty generalization) by mapping onto all of postmodernism a narrow, ignorant, knee-jerk form of relativism that is rarely found amongst those who are seriously trying to answer important questions.

I would include a good number of those in the ECM within the group that Carson unfairly dismisses. I simply do not see support for Carson's contention that the ECM has absorbed a relativistic understanding of tolerance and thus will not confront anyone with sin, will not proclaim the gospel to the exclusion of false religions, treats all religions as morally equal, etc. I will address this more fully under point four.

4. *Postmoderns need to recapture the sweep of Biblical texts, without fudging.*

Here again we find a legitimate point, and where fudging occurs, it should be called out and corrected. One such fudging would be the case that Carson cites – that of rejecting all hierarchy in the name of an 'everybody's equal' attitude. If any ECM church is characterized by

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<sup>9</sup>And perhaps these are Carson's most frequent interlocutors. Perhaps he is guilty of the same crime he accuses McLaren and friends of committing, namely, mapping his narrow range of experience in the postmodern world onto the entirety of the postmodern world and dismissing the whole in terms of a narrow part.

such thinking, that would indeed be a problem and should be corrected. However, Carson is once again unfair to the movement as a whole, overlooking the diversity toward which he himself nodded in his opening remarks on Day #1. I have personally had contact with 8 different churches that could be called “emergent.” While this is an admittedly small sample, only one of those churches (a small, fledgling house church in Columbus, OH) is guilty of the charge that Carson levels here. Each of the others is structured according to the principles of elder-rule. Roles of accountability and leadership are clearly defined, maintained, and respected. These churches are hardly guilty of fudging on the Biblical texts regarding the local church. If further inductive research shows my sample to be unrepresentative, then Carson’s point stands. If not, we need to honor the differences and recognize the strengths of those younger evangelicals who do not fall prey to reactionary rejection of hierarchy.

As further evidence of “fudging the Biblical text,” Carson cited Brian McLaren’s attitude toward other religions in the “Yeah, But What About the Other Guys?” chapter of his *A New Kind of Christian*. In that chapter, McLaren’s character, Neo, makes some provocative claims about our attitudes toward other religions in the world. I don’t agree with everything McLaren’s characters say in this chapter, but I think one has to work pretty hard to turn McLaren into a relativistic tolerant acceptor of all religions as equal. Consider the following quotations from that chapter:

‘But don’t you want to critique other religions? I mean, there’s so much that’s false there. Are you saying that any dance will do? It doesn’t matter whether it’s the right dance?’ ... ‘Yes, Dan, I believe it must be God’s dance. And you’re right, there is so much that is false in other religions. But you know, there’s a lot that is false in here,’ he said, pointing to his head and then his heart. ‘and in here to. My knowledge of Buddhism is rudimentary, but I have to tell you that much of what I understand strikes me as wonderful and insightful, and the same can be said of the teachings of Muhammad, though of course I have my disagreements.’ (62, Neo to Dan, underlining mine)

I am in no way saying that the Buddha, Muhammad, or anybody else is the way. I'm not saying they're alternatives to Jesus. I'm just saying that it's pathetic for some ignorant preacher to mock the Buddha and Muhammad – neither of whom he has every seriously studied, much less understood – as if he's smarter, wiser, and better just because he believes in Jesus. He might be blessed for believing in Jesus, but that doesn't make him smart. ...I think some Christians use Jesus as a shortcut to being right. In the process they bypass becoming humble or wise. (65, Neo to Dan, underlining mine)

I really believe that he [Jesus] is the truth. He is reality; he is authentic; he is genuine and real and not fake or false in any way. And I really believe that he is the life, that fullness of life is in him. And I really believe that not one person will be in real contact with God the Father apart from the work and wisdom and love of Jesus. If I didn't believe that, I don't think I could call myself a Christian. (65, Neo to Dan)

I believe that to be a just person means I should defend others when they're falsely accused. (66, Neo to Dan, speaking of his desire to defend other religions against misrepresentations by Christians)

Look, my understanding of the gospel tells me that religion is always a mixed bag, whether it's Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism. Some of it reflects people's sincere attempts to find the truth, and some of it represents people's attempts to evade the truth through hypocrisy. Some of it reflects glimpses of God that people get through nature, through experience, through the fingerprint of God in their own design and the design of the universe – like Paul talked about in Romans 1 or in Acts 19. And some of it represents our own ego, our own pride, as we try to suppress the truth and look holy while we do it. As you said, even Peter had to be told that he was a mouthpiece of Satan once! So I don't think Christianity has, on the whole, proved itself much better than Peter. But isn't that the point of the gospel – that we're all a mess, whatever our religion, in need of God's grace? (66, Neo to Dan)

While Carson provides a legitimate response to the concerns raised in the last quotation by pointing out the record of good in the world done by Christians, and the “guilt literature” in Christian culture because of Christian sin (in contrast to the absence of such literature in Islamic cultures), his overall reading of McLaren on this point overlooks completely what McLaren's character, Neo, calls “predicamentalism” (126). In chapter 14, McLaren encourages us to stop trying to prove conclusively who's in and who's out – who's going to hell and who's not. Rather, he says, focus on what you do know – the gospel. Act on that, live that out. Recognize

the predicament that you and all other humans are in, alienated from God by sin. And recognize Christ as the mediator and redeemer. If we sit back, and say “maybe God will save the Hindus without us proclaiming the gospel to them”, we are not acting responsibly on the basis of the truth that God has revealed to us. It is like the parable of the talents: the servant who is dealt with most harshly is the one who buries his talent, his knowledge of God. The others take the knowledge God has granted them and invest it by acting in the world on the basis of it. It is multiplied and God blesses it further. The one who buries the gospel is not acting in full recognition of the human predicament and is lacking faith in God’s revealed truth. But, in McLaren’s favor, to act on that truth and to invest one’s “talent” in the world, one does not need a specific theory of who’s in and who’s out. One needs the guidance of the Spirit, the Word of God, and a willingness to obey. That’s it. I have personally witnessed this many times in the eager lives of new Christians.

Perhaps I am reading McLaren too charitably here, projecting my own desires and hopes onto his text. If so, I’d rather be guilty of a hermeneutics of charity than a hermeneutics of suspicion which is incompatible with Christian behavior. But I don’t think I’m reading too much in here, because if we are to read McLaren (or Neo) as a tolerant relativist, we have to ignore one of Neo’s direct statements on this issue:

This approach [pluralism/relativism] at first glance feels very tolerant. But ultimately, it may be the least tolerant position of all, since behind the scenes it must admit that every other position’s claim to legitimacy is bogus. The only ones who really have it right are the pluralists/relativists – which is a kind of exclusivism all over again. To me, pluralism/relativism is more of a late-modern option – trying to hold itself aloof from personal commitment, trying to be absolutely objective, trying to avoid believing anything that can’t be rationally and ‘absolutely’ proved. It’s certainly very popular, although I consider it a seduction into apathy. (126, Neo’s email to Dan)

How much more direct a rejection of relativistic tolerance does Carson want McLaren to give?

In the final analysis, if one seriously follows Carson's line of critique against the ECM, and one believes that the ECM has denied the uniqueness of Christ, defined sin out of existence, and put the gospel on equal footing with other world religions, then one is lead to the judgment that those in the ECM are not really Christians at all! This is a *very* serious allegation, and one had better have significant evidence to support such a charge. But, it seems that it is this very evidence that is missing from Carson's case. Perhaps the straw man of the ECM that Carson has constructed is not a Christian straw man, but as with any straw man, it does not reflect the actual state of that which is purports to represent. I would submit that many, many writers and others in the ECM, at least the majority of those that I am familiar with, take the gospel seriously. Yes, they are passionate to change things, but they do so *because of* their passion for the gospel; they desire to see it lived out in relevant ways in their current context.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to Carson's claim that those in the ECM have no passion for the gospel,<sup>11</sup> those that I know in this movement are deeply passionate for the gospel. Some of them may express that passion in ways that are different than what we are used to, but as I said before, if we are willing to talk to anyone, we must be willing to listen to them first, in order to hear what they are really saying.

Carson concluded his treatment of point #4 with a brief epistemological outline, one with which I find myself in substantial agreement insofar as it rejects the Modern quest for omniscient

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<sup>10</sup>“The younger evangelical is anyone, older or younger, who deals thoughtfully with the shift from twentieth- to twenty-first century culture. He or she is committed to construct a biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware new evangelical witness in the twenty-first century” (Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* 16).

<sup>11</sup>He made this claim directly during his address to the Bible department faculty and spouses at the dinner on Tuesday evening, and he strongly implied it during his subsequent chapel messages as well.

certainty and upholds our dependent status as knowers. Carson has long talked in terms of being able to know truly without knowing exhaustively, and this is exactly the third way that needs to be offered between godlike Modern certainty on the one hand and relativism/skepticism on the other. I applaud his efforts to articulate a middle way between these extremes. He has said quite eloquently much of what I have been trying to articulate to my colleagues for some time now. I only wish he would not continue to call such knowledge certainty. It should be called knowledge, and it should be called true. The truth that we know can be called objective, absolute, universal, as long as we recognize that those adjectives describe the truth itself, and not our knowledge of it. We know fallibly and finitely, but we know nonetheless, and what we know we can know truly. But I would recommend the word *confidence* to describe this situation insofar as that word implies trust, dependence, humility, and boldness wrapped up together in an attitude of obedience toward the object of one's trust. For Carson to call this attitude "certainty" is like trying to go back to using the word "gay" to mean "happy." As much as we might not like what has happened to the usage of that word, it has happened, and we must adjust our vocabularies accordingly in order to be understood. We must, I believe, be willing to do this with the word "certainty" also. Like it or not, our Modern heritage has linked that word with omniscient, exhaustive, infallible knowledge. We cannot just go back to any prior range of meaning for this term without being misunderstood. In order to be heard to say what we've been trying to say all along, we must learn to speak a slightly new language. In this way, we can love those who speak or think differently than we do.

5. *The ECM needs to be more careful to avoid sectarianism.*

Carson's point here is well-taken; those in the ECM cannot be driven entirely by negative



reaction against perceived problems within traditional or pragmatic evangelicalism. There are definitely groups within the ECM who unfairly reject all aspects of traditional or pragmatic evangelicalism, and who have not yet begun to think positively about what they are doing, focusing almost exclusively on that to which they are opposed. This is never a healthy basis on which to build a sense of Christian identity.

But here again, Carson's brief admonition rejects the option of developing complex and nuanced response to the diversity of the ECM in favor of painting a picture of a homogeneous problem. He downplays the fact that, again, careful thinkers within the ECM are aware of the dangers of sectarianism and want to avoid it. Consider again an example from McLaren's *A New*

*Kind of Christian*:

I don't want to divide 'New Christians' from 'Traditional Christians,' or 'Postmodern Christians' from 'Modern Christians.' I don't have time for that kind of foolishness, so I think we need to be very careful about the language we use. Please help me try to avoid any 'us-and-them' kind of thinking, and if you see me going in that direction, by all means tell me, OK? We're talking about *a* new kind of Christian, not *the* new kind or a *better* kind or *the* superior kind, just a new kind. Right? (46-47, Neo to Dan)<sup>12</sup>

If there are sectarian tendencies within the ECM, not only should those within the ECM consider ways to avoid those tendencies, but also, we should consider what those *outside* of the ECM can do to prevent such tendencies. If those within traditional or pragmatic churches cannot find a place for younger evangelicals, then of course they must find others to talk to, outside the context of mainline evangelical churches. The reaction of many to Brian McLaren's recent visit to Dallas Theological Seminary illustrates this point. If the voices of those who claimed that

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<sup>12</sup>See also Webber's introduction to *The Younger Evangelicals*, in which he repeatedly emphasizes the continuities between "older" and "younger" evangelicals even as he explains what he takes to be their differences.

nothing good or productive could come of a dialogue with McLaren at DTS are representative of contemporary evangelicalism as a whole, then the blame for sectarianism lies not only at the feet of the ECM but also at the feet of those who shove these earnest Christians out to the margins of the church.

### **Day 3 – “A Biblical Meditation on Experience and Truth”**

On this day, Carson presented a wonderful exposition of II Peter 1:3-21, emphasizing the intertwined importance of truth and experience in our lives of Christian faith. Specifically, I appreciate Carson’s emphasis on the validity of faith being grounded in the reliability of its object, not in the intensity with which it is held. I also appreciate his emphasis on the historicity of Christian faith – its connectedness to objective claims about history, claims which can’t be known with Modernist certainty, but which can be known humanly through trust in the reliability of the witnesses who relate those events to us in the Biblical text.

My only concern with Day #3 was its context in relation to the first two days. The implied application of Carson’s exposition of II Peter 1 was a condemnation of the ECM. This was captured clearly in his climactic “Damn all false antitheses to Hell!” at the end of the message. In making that exclamation, he clearly had in view the false antithesis he believes the ECM to construct between truth and experience. I hope that my brief remarks in this response have indicated that this is a misrepresentation of much of what goes on within the ECM. As I said earlier, I believe that much of Carson’s condemnation of the ECM is rooted in his own false antitheses which he unfairly maps onto the movement. Such antitheses do indeed generate false religions, idolatry, and divisions within the church. I only wish that a thinker as experienced and as responsible as Dr. Carson would have worked harder to avoid generating such divisions

himself.

### **Conclusion – Where Do We Go From Here?**

Am I glad that Dr. Carson came to Cedarville and addressed this topic? I won't lie; I'm quite disappointed with how it went. That much should be obvious from my remarks above. I had really hoped for a more fair, balanced, and carefully researched presentation than we received. However, Dr. Carson's visit here with us will have been beneficial if it serves as a starting point for honest and open dialogue about the future of the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If we fully reject all that he had to say because we disagree with it, or if we uncritically accept all that he had to say because it vindicates our preconceived opposition to the ECM, then we do him, the ECM, and ourselves a great disservice. Many important issues have been surfaced by his time here, not least of which is our need to do more careful, responsible research into postmodernism and ecclesiology. He has left us with many pieces of good advice and has made us aware of many potential dangers that we must carefully address in the days ahead. I am thankful that he shared with us his views on this topic, and I look forward to the *emergence* (sorry, I couldn't resist) of a fruitful dialogue on these issues on our campus in the days to come.