

Emerging Church Movement

Read this first

The emerging church movement is controversial and CARM does not approve or disapprove of it as a whole. There is so much diversity within it that it cannot be labeled as all good or all bad.

There is no official, single doctrinal statement from "The Emerging Church" nor is there a single official leader. There are prominent figures who are pushed to the forefront as representatives of the movement by some critics and some adherents (Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, etc.), but they don't represent the whole. So, it is difficult to summarize the entire movement into a few sentences and give it a thumbs up or down. Therefore, I ask you to be patient with me as this section continues to grow and be updated. There are more articles to come.

Undoubtedly, people who read the pages in this section will have opinions that range from very supportive to very negative. As this happens and I am sent various citations about who said what, I'm sure I will want to modify some of the articles and write new ones.

Of all the topics I've researched for CARM, none of them has taken as long as this section. Primarily I've been sidetracked with a lot of CARM related issues that have made it difficult to focus. My traveling has increased and the necessities of running this ministry are becoming more complex. On one hand it's been frustrating, but on the other hand, I'm glad because it has given me more time to peruse the topic, think about what I've written, and polish some ideas. After all, this is a controversial movement in the church and publishing articles about it means that they will be scrutinized. Of course, this is good but it can also be rather demanding to respond to everything that people say.

Nevertheless, I decided to release the section before I took a week long trip even though there is more I wanted to write about. Heck, the emerging church is changing and growing and there is no way I can keep up with its claims, errors, strengths, quotes, etc. Still, I kept getting side-tracked and I finally just decided to get out there. But remember, there is more to do so expect updates periodically.

Have a comment or complaint?

So, If you have a comment I would like to hear it. If you e-mail me with a complaint or question about the emerging church that I know I've addressed in the articles, I'll simply delete your email. Use the search engine before you ask a question. I don't plan to rewrite in emails what I've already answered here. I've done a lot of research on the movement. I've interviewed several emerging pastors and read thousands of emerging church pages both pro and con, so the least you can do is read what I have written before you contact me -- with a complaint, that is. If you want to say, "Well done", that's fine. But, if you want me to change something, make your case well. Provide documentation and please be patient.

Thanks

[Matt Slick](#)

About the emerging church and this section

There is good and bad in the emerging church movement. Not all emerging church pastors are the same. In fact, some of them contradict each other on a variety of issues. You might have one emerging church pastor say you don't need to believe in the resurrection

of Jesus and another would say it's an essential. You might find one saying something as unbiblical as, "I don't think we've got the gospel right yet...None of us has arrived at orthodoxy," ([Brian McLaren](#)¹). Then, another appropriately says, "Jesus died in the place of sinners, sometimes called penal substitution. Though Jesus was sinless, he died for our sins, and death is the penalty for sin," ([Mark Driscoll](#)²).

It is isn't appropriate to lump the whole emerging church into one huge mound and condemn or approve of the whole.

If you thought of emerging churches on a scale from good to bad, you'd have churches filling in the whole thing. Some are so liberal they might not be Christian while others are extremely orthodox doctrinally. The movement has a wide variety of pastors, church styles, theological positions, and methods for reaching the lost. So, it is isn't appropriate to lump the whole emerging church into one huge mound and condemn or approve of the whole. Therefore, we need to look at individuals and churches and not judge the whole by the words of a few. I agree with D. A. Carson who said,

"because the emerging church movement is remarkably diverse, penetrating criticisms that apply to one part of it are sometimes inappropriate to other parts... the things I find encouraging and hopeful in the movement are not found everywhere in the movement."

Off with their heads!

It didn't take very long after I announced that I would be researching the emerging church for e-mails to come in telling me how it needed to be done. There were suggestions of all sorts, mostly very negative ("Condemn it all"; "Of course, you're going to expose it as satanic, right Matt?"). The emails that were most troubling were those that automatically and openly condemned everything in the emerging church movement. As with any topic I study, I like to get as much information as possible before making decisions.

I assumed that some of the people making these strong condemning judgments had likewise studied. But after some dialogues with some of them, I discovered that wasn't the case. Well, if they weren't going to do the heavy lifting of studying actual emerging church writings, it didn't mean I didn't have to either. So, I purchased a [number of books](#) authored by emerging church pastors and non-emerging church pastors. I wanted to get a good balance.

It is one thing to sit in a chair in front of a computer, read some books, and write articles about individuals and their churches without having interacted with them. It is another to actually go to the churches and talk to the pastors. So, that is exactly what I did. As of June 30, 2007, I've attended three self-professed emerging churches and spoken face-to-face with two of the pastors: [Dan Kimball](#) and [Karen Ward](#). Since that date, I've had [Doug Pagitt](#) and [Mark Driscoll](#) on my radio show. So, you could say I'm going straight to the horses' mouths.

As you read the articles in this section please understand that I'm trying to be fair, accurate, and true to biblical revelation as well as attempting to properly represent individuals with whom I have spoken and/or read their material. Undoubtedly I will displease some with my opinions because I don't automatically condemn the entire movement and everyone in it. Then again, I will please others for being, hopefully, fair in my analysis.

Does CARM approve or disapprove of the Emerging Church Movement?

CARM does not approve or disapprove of the emerging church movement as a whole because there is no single, official representative of the emerging church nor is there a single, official doctrinal statement from "the Emerging Church". Quite the contrary. There is a wide variety of emerging church pastors and writings -- and they don't all agree with each other. Nevertheless, CARM approves of certain proponents within the movement (i.e. those who hold to doctrinal fidelity, desire to reach the lost, etc.) and disapproves of others (i.e., those who hold to doctrinal infidelity, political correctness, etc.). As you know, there is good and bad in most every theological movement.

Below I've offered a small grid of good and bad within the movement. But please understand that not every emerging church participates in every aspect of the following grid.

GOOD within the movement

Contextualize the Gospel
Speak the cultural language
Different media of expression and focus
Provides absolutes in a non absolute world
Focused attempt to reach the lost

BAD within the movement

Watering down the Gospel
Use culture to dominate the message
Media used in unbiblical ways
Absolutes of doctrine are optional
Reaching the lost trumps truth statements

So, as I attempt to analyze the movement, its pastors, its goals, and its language, I hope that you will be informed and edified in the process.

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1. http://culture-makers.com/articles/the_emergent_mystique
 2. Webber, Robert. ed., *Listening to the beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five perspectives*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2007, p. 30
 3. Carson, D. A., *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2005, p. 45.

Musings about the emerging church

Unfortunately my journey through research and writing about the emerging church has taken a long time, perhaps, longer than any project I've undertaken with CARM. But, these delays have been mostly due to traveling, a little burnout, and CARM maintenance -- not to mention those unexpected events in life that derail plans. Sometimes I got so busy that I had to focus my attention elsewhere for a month or two. However, I have had a lot of time to think about what I've discovered in the Emerging Church. I now believe I understand it and its really quite simple. The emerging church is a conglomeration of different churches and pastors, who have a wide variety of theological positions and methods for reaching the lost.

Writing about the emerging church is like trying to write about the shape of waves in the ocean. There are a lot of them, they are changing, and they are not all the same. Therefore, how do I write and analyze a large movement with so many variations within it and do it to the satisfaction of all? I can't. So, I'm not going to try. But, that doesn't mean I won't be accurate and fair to the subject matter -- well, at least to the best of my ability. And, I have to confess, I am also trying to avoid countless future e-mails (from all sides of the issue) telling me how I need to alter the website once I have released these articles. Well, read the articles first.

Some emerging church pastors seem to be more concerned with being nice and touching people's hearts, than with the actual truth of the Gospel that our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life to establish.

It is one thing to read about the emerging church, it is another to interview actual proponents. So, I decided to go straight to the horses mouth. I drove to Seattle, WA and attended Mars Hill church and later interviewed its pastor, [Mark Driscoll](#) on my radio show, *Faith and Reason*. I've also interviewed [Doug Pagitt](#) over the radio as well. I drove to Santa Cruz, CA and sat in [Dan Kimball's](#) office for an hour talking theology with him (where he graciously submitted to me quizzing him doctrinally) before I attended one of his services. And, I spent about 20 minutes talking with [Karen Ward](#) at her church in Seattle, WA, before attending a service there at her church. So, after having read thousands of pages of their writings and spoken at length to several of their proponents, I think I have gained a good understanding of what the emerging church is and isn't. But there's a problem.

I've read a lot of what critics have said about the emerging church. A lot of it I agree with and some of it I think is rather vitriolic and unfounded. Granted, there are certainly false teachers within the movement, but there are also some good teachers as well.

Unfortunately, the emerging church movement is known for its relativism and its unorthodox methods for reaching the lost (candles, couches, statues, sculptures, poems, open microphones, etc.). In some emerging writings there is an "updated gospel" that really isn't a gospel at all, but is instead a confusing deconstruction of storytelling and narrative. Some emerging church pastors seem to be more concerned with being nice and touching people's hearts, than with the actual truth of the Gospel that our Lord Jesus Christ gave his life to establish. But, that is not the case with all of them!

There is much wrong in the Emerging Church and there's much good in it, too. The good is that the proponents desire to reach the lost, that they want to use new methods, that they want to reevaluate how things have been done, and seek to adjust, to tweak, and modify the approach so that those in our [postmodern](#) culture can be won for Christ. On the other hand, the bad is that so much of what has been written by emerging church pastors is nothing more than flagrant heresy (see [A list of quotes to make you shiver](#)). There are those who deny hell, who deny the absolute necessity of faith in Jesus Christ, who deny that Jesus is the only way. I spoke with [Karen Ward](#) who told me to my face that it was okay if someone did not want to believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus! I was shocked at this severely anti-biblical teaching.

I know that there will be people who will not like what I've written here. I know that there will be those who have a grudge against anything and everything that appears emerging and will automatically dismiss it as an evil work from Satan as well as others who think it is all good. I cannot condemn the whole movement for the heresy of a few, or many as the case may be. Nor can I affirm that it is a good movement from God because a few of its teachers are Orthodox and uphold historic Christian theology (i.e., [Mark Driscoll](#), [Dan Kimball](#)). Each pastor/church in the emerging movement must be examined independently of the others.

The truth is that I cannot offer an overarching and absolute condemnation of the entire movement. There is good and there is bad, but there's definitely enough bad in it that we need to be very wary about what is said from many of its proponents.

As I said in [Read this first](#), before you write me, please read what I've written here in the section. If I have misunderstood something, please point it out. If I have missed a worthy quote, a heresy, or a positive that needs to be addressed, please document it and let me know. I'd appreciate it, but please don't email me to call me names and say I'm an ignorant Christian. I'll only hit the delete key.

Yes, there are essential Christian Doctrines

Some emergent pastors might think that the concept of invariable, essential Christian doctrines would be contrary to a proper and healthy "conversation" as they experience the "story of God" in their lives and the lives of others. After all, absolute truths necessarily mean there are absolute errors and far too many emerging pastors do not like the idea of alienating anyone else's "truth beliefs" lest they not develop a loving relationship with them and somehow offend them or not reach them. That is understandable, but truth must be coupled with love.

Whether or not any emerging pastor likes the concept of absolute truths as revealed in the Bible, is irrelevant. The fact remains: the Bible tells us there are essentials.¹

Now, before you listen, the reasons it is good to know essentials are multiple. When we have essential truths,

1. We can properly proclaim the truth of who God is.
2. We can properly proclaim what God requires for salvation.
3. We can recognize errors that that would jeopardize salvation.
4. We can allow for a diversity of worship practices as long as the essentials are not violated.

Okay, that is simple enough. But, how do we determine what is and isn't essential? It is really quite simple. You read and believe what the Bible says--I'll show you below.

You'll see what I call primary essentials. These are doctrinal truths that the Scriptures declare to be essential. You will see secondary truths which the Bible doesn't say are essential, but are explicitly said to be true and include necessity with them. It is from these that we can then determine what is and is not good.

By way of example, the first statement among the primary essentials below is where Jesus makes a statement that contains a warning, a consequence declaring something essential. He says that unless you believe he is "I am" you will die in your sins. Jesus is stating that you must believe he is God in flesh (See [John 8:58](#) with [Exodus 3:14](#)). So, we can see that this is how Scripture declares essentials. Are there others? Yes.

Primary Essentials

1. The Deity of Christ
 - A. [John 8:24](#), *"I said, therefore, to you, that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins."*

- B. Jesus is God in flesh ([John 8:58](#) with [Exodus 3:14](#)). See also [John 1:1,14](#); [10:30-33](#); [20:28](#); [Col. 2:9](#); [Phil. 2:5-8](#); [Heb. 1:8](#)
2. **Salvation by Grace**
- A. *"You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" ([Gal. 5:4](#)).*
- B. *"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast," ([Eph. 2:8-9](#), NIV).*
3. **The Resurrection of Christ**
- A. *"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" ([1 Cor. 15:14](#)). "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" ([1 Cor. 15:17](#)).*
- B. These verses clearly state that if you say that Jesus did not rise from the dead in the same body He died in as he prophesied in [John 2:19-21](#), then your faith is useless.
4. **The Gospel**
- A. *"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!" ([Gal. 1:8-9](#), NIV).*
- B. [1 Cor. 15:1-4](#) defines what the gospel is: *"Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (NIV).*
5. **Monotheism**
1. There is only one God ([Exodus 20:3](#); [Isaiah 43:10](#); [44:6,8](#))
 2. "You shall have no other gods before Me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. ⁵ You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, ⁶ but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments," ([Exodus 20:3-6](#)).
1. We can see that God will visit iniquity on the descendents of those who do not follow the true and living God.

Secondary Essentials

Secondary essentials are likewise necessary truths, but there is no self-declared penalty for their denial -- yet they are still essential to the Christian faith. Again, by way of example, Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father but by him, ([John 14:6](#)). I call this a secondary essential because there's no penalty associated with its denial. Nevertheless, it is a statement of absolute truth and is an essential Christian teaching that cannot be denied.

1. Jesus is the only way to salvation
 1. "Jesus *said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me,'" ([John 14:6](#))
 1. Jesus declared that he was the only access to God the Father. To deny this is to deny what Jesus said.
2. Jesus' virgin birth

1. "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us,'" ([Matt. 1:23](#)).
 1. Without the virgin birth, we cannot substantiate the doctrine of the incarnation of Jesus being God in flesh. This would put at risk what Jesus said above in [John 8:24](#), where he said, "I said, therefore, to you, that you will die in your sins. For if you do not believe that I am, you will die in your sins."
3. Doctrine of the Trinity
 1. [Matt. 28:19](#), "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," (See also, [Matt. 3:16-17](#); [1 Cor. 12:4-6](#); [2 Cor. 13:14](#); [Eph. 4:4-6](#).)
 2. This doctrine is not represented by a single verse per se, though it is hinted at. The doctrine of the [Trinity](#) is arrived at systematically by looking at the totality of Scripture. It is, nevertheless, the proper representation of scriptural revelation concerning the nature of God.

Our faith is only as good as who we put it in. There are false teachers who redefine God, redefine Christ, and redefine the gospel to their own destruction. Jesus warned us about false Christs and false teachers in Matt. 24:24. Paul clearly said in Galatians 1:8 that anyone who preaches a false gospel is to be cursed. Therefore, we can see from Scripture that there are doctrinal/propositional truths we cannot avoid and that these truths cannot be governed by experience and/or the ambivalence of emerging "conversation". If that were the case, we would not need the propositional truths given to us by God in the Bible.

Conclusion

Having clarified the essentials, we are better able to identify the benefits and dangers of emerging church teachings. As I've said before, there is good and bad within this movement. There are teachers who hold to the essentials, but but there are also emerging church teachers who not only deny them, but consider them to be somewhat irrelevant to their view of the "Christian conversation".

Let's "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints," ([Jude 3](#)).

1. I am aware of the huge undertaking of trying to define the essentials of faith. I do not offer this article as "the final authority" on what are essentials, but it is a short and biblically-based list that quickly enables us to judge between truth and error. For more information on this please see, [The Doctrine Grid](#).

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2. Gibbs, Eddie and Bolger, Ryan K. *Emerging Churches*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 2005.
3. Jones, Alan., *Reimagining Christianity*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons), 2005.
4. Kimball, Dan.,
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 2. *The Emerging Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2003.
5. McLaren, Brian.,

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Issues and Answers

What is the Emerging Church?

The emerging church is a movement among those who claim to be Christian. The term 'emerging church' is used to describe a broad, controversial movement that seeks to use culturally sensitive approaches to reach the [post modern](#), un-churched culture with the Christian message. Some emerging churches might use props such as candles, statues, and incense along with poems, open mics, and videos, etc., Some EC services are sometimes extremely informal, while others are more formal.

Emerging churches seek to reach the lost by focusing on relationships and developing a "story", a "journey of life" that is expressed through the "narrative" of learning. These words and others are often used by emerging teachers in describing their religious experience.

Emerging churches seek to reach the lost by focusing on relationships and developing a "story", a "journey of life" that is expressed through the "narrative" of learning.

Other [terms](#) sometimes used are "reimagine", "tribe", "story of Jesus", "deconstruction", etc. There is sometimes an ambiguous, feelings oriented desire to experience God and also share in the lives of people as they seek to find God in their way. Some emerging churches are inclusivistic (those outside of Christianity will be saved), while others are not. Some emerging churches are environmentally focused, while others concentrate on local issues. Some downplay doctrine, reinterpret creeds, and de-emphasize tradition, while others hold to them. Obviously, it is difficult to precisely define what is emerging.

Seeker sensitive churches are similar to emerging churches except that emerging churches are sometimes lax doctrinally, where seeker sensitive churches, which sometimes are lax in presenting the gospel hold, nonetheless, to orthodox theology. Seeker sensitive churches try and meet people's needs through programs, where emerging churches do this by investing time in people's lives. Seeker churches tend to focus on people in their thirties and up where emerging churches tend to reach people in their teens to thirties. But, some areas of the emerging church are so similar to seeker sensitive churches that it is hard to tell the difference. So how do you distinguish between the two? Generally, a pastor will proclaim themselves to be emerging or seeker sensitive in his approach.

Emerging Church Characteristics

Following are some of the common traits I have discovered by reading through emerging church material. But please understand that not all emerging pastors adhere to all the points listed.

1. An awareness of and attempt to reach those in the changing [postmodern](#) culture.
2. An attempt to use technology, i.e., video, slide shows, internet.
3. A broader approach to worship using candles, icons, images, sounds, smells, etc.
4. An inclusive approach to various, sometimes contradictory belief systems.⁵
5. An emphasis on experience and feelings over absolutes.
6. Concentration on relationship building over proclamation of the gospel.
7. Shunning stale traditionalism in worship, church seating, music, etc.
8. A de-emphasis on absolutes and doctrinal creeds
9. A re-evaluation of the place of the Christian church in society.
10. A re-examination of the Bible and its teachings.
11. A re-evaluation of traditionally held doctrines.
12. A re-evaluation of the place of Christianity in the world.

Hopefully you can see some problems in the list. But, I have to say it again, not all emerging church adherents agree with all the points. Emerging church pastors [Mark Driscoll](#) and [Dan Kimball](#) both acknowledge the necessity of preaching doctrinal truths which properly define Christianity while others like [Brian McLaren](#) are extremely lax when it comes to proclaiming the true biblical faith, so much so that he's been called a false teacher.

No official emerging church or doctrine

There is no official single emerging church or emerging church doctrine so there is no unified structure to examine. But, there are a lot of emerging church writings. The more I read them, the more concerned I become. It is apparent that the movement as a whole, is off-center and is sacrificing time honored biblical truths for a let's-get-along kind of attitude. This makes sense since many of those in the emerging church are disillusioned with traditional evangelical institutions.

- "...the emerging church movement is characterized by a fair bit of protest against traditional evangelicalism and, more broadly, against all that it understands by modernism."¹
- "They [the emerging generations] are disillusioned with institutionalism and see the church itself as an obstacle to faith."²
- "the emerging church is a place where people have felt the freedom to explore questions and experiment with new forms of lifestyle and corporate practice."³

This rejection of traditionalism (regimented service, hymns, organs, a dress code, "we've always done it this way", etc.) has made it easier for those who don't like absolute truth statements, who reject exclusivism (that Jesus is the only way) are thus drawn to very casual settings where they can also more easily reject traditional doctrines such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and his physical resurrection.

"Sit down here next to me in this little restaurant and ask me if Christianity (my version of it, yours, the Pope's, whoever's) is *orthodox*, meaning *true*, and here's my honest answer: *a little, but not yet*. Assuming by *Christianity* you mean the Christian understanding of the world and God, Christian opinions on soul, text, and culture... I'd have to say that we probably have a couple of things right, but a lot of things wrong, and even more sprints before is unseen and unimagined." (italics in the original) McLaren, Brian, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2004, p. 296.

Remember, the emerging church is, in part, reacting against the modernistic, absolute structure of traditional churches that want people to convert to their style of worship and time-frozen culture. Instead, emerging church members believe it is necessary to establish relationships with people, going where they are, meeting them on their level, and then later presenting doctrinal truths after they have become part of their lives. I must admit, this is what Jesus did. He was involved with the lives of the disciples, interacted with them, grew very close to them and taught them by example, not just propositionally.

There are some churches that hold to orthodox Christian theology, but many do not. There are emerging churches that want to reinterpret the Trinity, and/or the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and/or the purpose of the Church in the world. And there are others that try to teach biblical orthodoxy in contemporary culture. It isn't a single, definable doctrinal set that we can examine. [Dan Kimball](#) an Emerging Church pastor of the Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz says, "instead of one emerging church model, there are hundreds and thousands of models of emerging churches."⁴ He's right.

Conclusion

Even though there are some pastors in the Emerging Church Movement that are true to scripture, the movement as a whole needs to stick to the [essentials of the Christian faith](#) otherwise in spite of its proclamation to renew Christianity afresh, it will become stale and heretical. No one, no movement of people should ever be so arrogant as to say that they can't fall into error -- even though they seek truth. As I've always said, if you want to mess something up, all you need is two things: people and time. The emerging church movement has much good in it, but it also has a good bit of bad already within its doors.

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5. Inclusivism is the error that people can be saved without specific knowledge of Jesus Christ and that their general faith in the concept of God and sincerity of heart is sufficient to warrant forgiveness.

Emerging Church Terminology

One of the problems with trying to understand some of the writers and teachers in the emerging church movement, is deciphering what they mean by various terms. They use phrases such as "

1. **Becoming** - the transformation from the modern to the post modern, emerging view of knowing truth.
2. **Christian conversation, the** - the Christian based series of stories, myths, experiences, etc. that are offered for acceptance or rejection.
3. **Conversation** - a flowing, non-precise communication made possible by linguistic commonalities. Give and take based on people's opinions, experiences, and feelings. It is an internalized, non-objective feeling that is often discussed or the focal point of meaning. A non-ending process.
4. **Coherantism** - belief system that adheres to itself, making sense of the whole when its many parts are interrelated.
5. **Contextual** - sensitive to the cultural and historical context
6. **Deconstruction** - removing the stale, modernistic, absolutism that has permeated interpretation of scripture, God, and truth
7. **Emergent Village** - an organization headed by Tony Jones, Ph.D.
8. **Emerging** - intellectual and/or spiritual movement away from traditionalist, rational, truths.
9. **Growing** - development of the individual in concert with God in the working of God's plans for the world.
10. **Missional** - making the emerging conversation part of the social culture as it relates to temporal needs: housing, clothing, environment, etc.
11. **Myth** - The stories believed by people that may or may not be factual.
12. **Narrative** - Non systematic, non linear approach to knowing, a rejection of the absolute codification of spiritual truths.
13. **Reimagine** - to reinterpret a long-standing truth.
14. **Story** - myth, procession of myths strung together by conversation. A lesson with a value statement. If one story doesn't work for you, try another. The Christian resurrection is a story.
15. **Story of God, the** - The procession of myths and narratives dealing with God as found in the Bible or other religious works.
16. **Story of Jesus, the** - The procession of myths and narratives dealing with Jesus as found in the Bible.
17. **Tribe** - a localized culture with inherent morals, myths, stories, and customs that differ from one another. Therefore, which tribe's position is true?

Emerging from what?

What is the Emergent Church emerging from? In short, it is emerging from the established, modernistic (rational), traditional church that appears to be stuck in bland traditionalism and is out of touch with the [postmodern](#) society. At least, that is what I gather from reading their material. When reading emerging authors you discover them talking about how a new church is emerging, one in which the old sterile approaches to religion are reassessed and new more adaptive, and relative approaches are utilized to meet the needs of the unchurched. This fits perfectly into contemporary culture where truth is relative and conveniences in life, home, and food are pervasive.

Drive up theology

"May I take your order?"

"Yes, I'd like a religious experience, please, with extra feelings, but no absolute doctrine."

"Alright. That'll be one emotional trip, stripped. Would you like anything else with that?"

"Uh, well, yes, can I have a side of candles, non judgmentalism, and some theological deconstruction?"

"Alright, so you want a light, free, decon. Is that all?"

"Yeah."

"Very good, that'll cost you biblical truth and eternal life at the window."

"Okay, thanks."

The above dialog is meant to be humorous, but there is truth in it. At the drive-up theology window, those who are raised in a society that has largely rejected absolutes, feel at home with the convenience of a "have it your way" belief system. They have "emerged" from stringent absolutes and prefer relativity in both truth and morals. This relativism is only a pendulum swing away from the recently historical modernism with its scientific mindset that has permeated so much of society and from which so many of the youth are now emerging in intellectual and spiritual rebellion.

What is postmodernism?

Postmodernism is not all that simple to define because it is a word used in different areas of study: art, film, architecture, literature, religion, truth, etc. The term "postmodernism" can best be understood by relating it to modernism. Modernism came out of the 1800's of Western Europe with the manifestation of mechanism, industrialism, progress, literature, art, and the ideas that sought to capitalize on what promoted a progressive and prosperous society. It elevated human reason, human progress, and human authority.

Postmodernism, then, is not necessarily a rebellion against modernism (though some postmodernists see it that way), but a movement "after" it, a movement that builds upon it but, more or less, rejects modernism's strict rationalism. In contrast to this, postmodernism upholds a subjectivity regarding morality, social constructions, political movements, art, religion, and truth statements. In other words, to perhaps oversimplify what postmodernism is, it is relativism, the belief that truth is relative, that objective truth may not be knowable.

"Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the effective -- which in turn breeds arrogance, and inflexibility, the lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we 'know' is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to be true or right."¹

Postmodernism denies the ability to know things for sure. It even undermines the construction of language by stating that words can be interpreted differently, that language is fluid, and that the Bible, written in ancient languages, is open to various interpretations of equal validity. Given this underlying idea that nothing is truly knowable (a self contradictory statement that is no problem for postmoderns), the very foundations of truth both moral and spiritual are suspect and open to re-evaluation -- along with the Bible.

- "Spencer Burke of the Ooze (Newport Beach, CA) agrees. 'A move away from intellectual Christianity is essential. We must move to the mystical.'"²
- "This mystical/poetic approach takes special pains to remember that the Bible itself contains precious little expository prose."³

The postmodern mind

The majority of unbelievers today do not have even a basic understanding of biblical principles. Their worldview is often naturalistic; that is, they perceive and interpret the world in light of natural principles (often evolutionary) combined with relativism in the areas of morals and truth. The postmodern person says that truth is understood in the context of one's culture and personal experience and these observations in turn dominate how the world is to be interpreted. Instead of an objective absolute truth, i.e., God's revelation, the individual observes and accepts what he considers to be true and false based upon his experiences. This means that different cultures and different individuals will interpret reality differently. In other words, what is true for one person may not be true for another.

"Concluding from an earlier Barna study in May, David Kinnaman, president of The Barna Group, had noted that most Americans do not have strong and clear beliefs largely because they do not possess a coherent biblical worldview. The study found that fewer Americans were embracing a traditional view of God and the Bible."⁴

The postmodern person rejects the biblical absolutes that there is an immutable God, that God is sovereign, and that the only way to salvation is through the blood sacrifice of Jesus. Therefore, the Christian and the postmodern person often do not have sufficient common ground to allow proper dialogue on spiritual matters.

The postmodern person might ask if there is any such thing as truth and whether or not truth can be known either experientially or rationally. The modernist would say, "Of course there is! Asking if truth can be known is an absolute question!"

Postmodernism and the Emergent Church

Generally speaking, those in the emergent church movement are aware of the postmodern mindset and admirably seek to adapt evangelistic efforts to accommodate postmodern thinking. This sometimes means that some emerging churches will feature church services and emphasize relationship, community, common traditional values, while using visual methods, storytelling, and more expressive worship instead of absolute truth constructions derived from Scripture as delivered during preaching and teaching.

"emerging churches use paintings, slides, drawings, and candles as visual expressions. In addition, they might show videos or television clips. On occasion an art installation or exhibit functions as the entire 'service.'"⁵

We agree that we must reach the culture in a relevant way, a way they are familiar with, but we must also make sure that we do not compromise the revealed word of God and we must not let the revealed truth of God's Word be subjugated to cultural pressures.

Conclusion

To oversimplify, postmodernism is relativism. Postmodernism is a reaction against the logical truth structures of modern thought that gave us absolute propositions about nature, time, space, mathematics, knowability, repeatability of experimentation, predictability, etc. As modernism developed the sciences, technology, and medicine, it's helped to produce a comfortable and predictable society -- wherein people tend to become complacent, comfortable, and predictable. But there are always people who ask questions rather than blindly follow the status quo. They look for different ways of expression, different interpretations of truth, teach the idea that truth is not necessarily absolute, and that reality can be reinterpreted. It is within the postmodern context that the emerging churches are seeking to work. It is a difficult venture to try and reach the hearts and minds of those who are less open to absolutes than previous generations. So, instead of absolute truth propositions, emerging churches tend to focus on relationships, expressiveness, and new ways of trying to reach God. Is it good? Yes and no. It is good only so far as it is consistent with Scripture. It is bad whenever it deviates from it.

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1. Carson, D. A., *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2005, p. 27.
 2. Gibbs, Eddie and Bolger, Ryan K. *Emerging Churches*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 2005, page 230.
 3. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2004, page 155
 4. http://www.christianpost.com/article/20071204/30332_2007_Trends_Analysis:_Americans_Reformulating_Christianity.htm
 5. Gibbs, Eddie and Bolger, Ryan K., pp 73-74.