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Missing the Real Conversation with the Emergent Church

David M. Mills

In January 2004, at Cedarville University, D. A. Carson delivered a lecture series on the "Emerging Church Movement." Since I teach at Cedarville, I attended those lectures and afterwards wrote a response to them.[1] Since that time, Carson developed those lectures into a book, and in this essay, I will update my response to the lectures into a review of the book. In some ways, the book is a definite improvement over the lectures. This is to be expected, since the constraints governing a 234-page book are far less restrictive than those governing 135 minutes of lecture time. The book is more thoroughly researched than the lectures, is more detailed in its treatment of some issues, and was crafted with some awareness of the initial critiques of the lectures from writers such as myself. However, in spite of these areas of improvement, the problems that plagued the lecture series also plague the book. As best I can tell, it is little more than a longer, more detailed, more footnoted version of the lecture series' oversimplifications and misrepresentations of emergent church writers.

In light of this fact, I will not repeat here the same criticisms developed in my initial response to Carson's lectures, although I think they still apply. Instead, I would like to focus on a more general problem that may explain why Carson

persistently misunderstands emergent writers. Specifically, my philosophical concern is that Carson seems to have a predilection toward abstract, decontextualized theories to the exclusion of embodied, contextualized practices. I will not here critique this disposition in and of itself, although I do have grave misgivings about it. Rather, my concern is to demonstrate that Carson's theoretical bent sets him up for significant misunderstandings of postmodern theorists in general and emergent writers in particular, because both groups deal with the postmodern turn[2] in terms that go well beyond Carson's narrowly epistemological construal of the turn.

Carson explicitly rejects social history, describing it as essentially an indirect way of doing epistemology.[3] He contends that epistemology is primary in Western history (30), and that other elements of culture are best understood as "correlatives" of the epistemological issues (79, 98–101).[4] To establish this, he sets up a false antithesis between, on the one hand, a precise description of postmodernism as exclusively or principally an issue of epistemology and, on the other hand, a hopelessly vague account of postmodernism as "nothing at all except change or speed of change."[5] Clearly, if these are our only two choices, a precise account is more helpful than a hopelessly vague one. But Carson nowhere offers reasons why we should think that the only way to achieve precision in our understanding of the postmodern turn is to couch it exclusively in epistemological terms. Nor does he engage the arguments of those who see the epistemological aspects of the postmodern turn as themselves the products of other, more basic, forces.

Were he to do so, Carson would be in a better position to treat the theorists of the postmodern turn as something more than self-contradictory "tolerant" relativists.[6] As it stands, though, the postmodern theorists against which Carson asserts his position are more likely to be made of straw, not flesh and blood. Over and over again, Carson describes the positions of "radical postmoderns," but never provides specific names, quotes, or other documentation. So, for instance, Carson's postmoderns believe that each reading of a text is as

valid as every other reading (52), that Aztec child sacrifice rituals cannot be morally criticized (70), that all texts are essentially totalizing (79), that religious claims are authoritative only for those already within specific religious traditions (79), that all disparate voices are true in a nonexclusive sense (97), that pantheistic Eastern religions are better than Western religions (98), that we have no way to talk about what is objectively true or real (104), that we have no means of grasping the importance of any knowledge claim (105), that there are no absolute distinctions between right and wrong (112), that the Holocaust can only be thought of as evil from certain perspectives (112), that the pursuit of immediate pleasure is the highest good (113), that morality is insignificant in comparison to a good theory (114), and that Native American religion is something to be usurped by postmodern theory (137). None of these claims is documented, and each of them is false when applied as a broad-brush generalization to "postmoderns," and the vast majority of them are false even when applied individually to specific "postmodern poster-boys" such as Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, or Lyotard, all of whom get brief mention in Carson's text.

Those whom Carson tars with this broad-brush have, without exception, developed their theories in response to specific real-world factors—some theoretical, others practical, most predominantly ethical. Wars, riots, persecutions, technologies, economic arrangements, legal practices, and art world developments all have played a role in influencing postmodern theories. But Carson ignores these kinds of non-theoretical factors, never actively exploring any non-theoretical causes of epistemological change. On the one occasion when Carson does note the "long roots in history" of the postmodern understanding of the "finite 'I'" (96, footnote 7), he cites exclusively theoretical influences such as hermeneutics and literary theory. But without some interaction with the world beyond theory, he cannot hope to understand those who are attempting to theorize the postmodern turn, because they theorize in dialogue with political, technological, artistic, interpersonal, and other non-theoretical factors.

Unfortunately, this misreading of postmodern theories becomes the lens through which Carson interprets emergent writers, and thus he pervasively misreads them as well. Because most of these writers are pastors, not academics, they are, first and foremost, responding to the trends and shifts that they encounter in the culture at large. Some of these trends and shifts are epistemological, but many more are artistic, technological, economic, political, educational, and relational. Thus they find it necessary to invoke wide-ranging accounts of the postmodern turn, trafficking in issues that Carson would consider "correlates." In this respect, their writings resemble those of postmodern theorists who engage issues beyond the domain of analytic epistemology. And, as with those theorists, Carson seems unable or unwilling to enter the conversation on the terms already established within it. His reading of McLaren illustrates this. Carson knows that McLaren approaches the postmodern turn through social history more than intellectual history (30), yet he insists that the emerging church's focus is, by and large, "on perceived shifts in epistemology, including the many implications of these shifts in social dynamics" (58). He offers no real arguments for his decision to read emergent writers in this way, nor does he engage McLaren's reasons for preferring social over intellectual history. Instead, he sets up his preferred epistemological approach to the issues and begins talking past McLaren, misreading him and his fellow conversationalists at nearly every turn.

There are many examples of this in Carson's text. For instance, his reduction of world religions to nothing more than belief systems that are idolatrously false where they contradict Christianity (132–38) leads him to misunderstand McLaren's efforts to treat world religions as cultural/social practices in need of redemption.[7] In the same way, Carson's abstract theoretical focus leads him to misread emergent ministers on the "belonging/becoming" distinction (146–55). He appears to equate preaching with intellectual argument,[8] and "belonging" with a specific theory of church membership.[9] Thus, he talks past those in emergent churches for whom the

life of the Christian community has evangelistic force, functioning as an Abrahamic conduit of blessing through which unbelievers can encounter the blessings of life with God as a lived context for proclamation.[10]

But the most flagrant of Carson's misreadings is his continual portrayal of emergent writers as *tolerant*, in his negative sense of the term. Over and over, Carson attacks McLaren and others for supposedly refusing to deal in truth-claims.[11] These attacks get uglier as the book progresses, culminating in the final chapter with the claim that there is a huge gap between the position of "emerging church leaders" and the position of Jesus, because these leaders "warn *against* using truth categories" (213). These are serious claims and should be extensively documented. But, unfortunately, they are not. More often than not, when making these kinds of accusations, Carson either misreads a passage from an author like McLaren, trying to force that author's cultural critique into an abstract conceptual framework, or he just appeals to the same kind of undocumented, unspecified straw men such as we encounter in his account of postmodern theorists in general. In the quote just referenced, Carson refers to anonymous emergent leaders who warn against using truth categories, and elsewhere he refers to an anonymous emergent teacher who keeps "telling us that we can't know, making students uncomfortable with what Scripture actually says . . ." (200). Later, he claims that the emergent "pendulum swing now makes it almost impossible to pronounce condemnation on any position or stance or habit of life" (210). None of these serious allegations are documented with specific names, quotations, or other evidence.[12]

Toward the end of his book, Carson asks an excellent question: "how many emerging leaders want us to stop talking about the truth?" (214). Carson, of course, intends this question rhetorically, with an implied answer like "too many!" But as a genuine question, guiding genuine inquiry, it is helpful. And its answer, as best I can tell, based on such inquiry, is "none!" [13] Why would they write works full of propositional truth-claims about the nature of the church and

our cultural milieu if they think that we should stop talking about the truth? Their books are full of propositional truth-claims. Indeed, it is against some of those very truth-claims that Carson is reacting! We cannot take the easy way out of this dilemma by accusing them of being self-contradictory, postmodern relativists. McLaren, for instance, makes direct, propositional claims about the wrongness of relativism.[14] Unless we are so deeply cynical and suspicious in our hermeneutics that we will read such statements as calculated political machinations or mindless self-contradictions, we had better be willing to recognize that truth *is* a central and significant matter for those who participate in emergent conversations. They want to establish the *truth* about what it means to follow Christ in the midst of the postmodern turn. They may be employing metaphors and vocabulary in their conversation that are unfamiliar to Carson, but it is his responsibility to listen carefully, to learn the form of their conversation, and only afterwards to enter it so as to correct it if necessary.

But rather than humbly entering their dialogue, Carson has dismissed them as self-contradictory and absurd (114). Because he views the postmodern turn as principally a turn from objective to subjective epistemology, he is willing to dismiss an entire half-century (or more) of thinkers as self-contradictory and absurd rather than entertain the possibility that he has misunderstood them. This, it seems, flows from a hermeneutic of suspicion that is incompatible with Christian scholarship. As a follower of Christ who is convinced that it is only by his grace that one has all that is sufficient for life and godliness, one's initial stance in all matters of interpretation must be a hermeneutic of suspicion first and foremost toward *oneself*, and a hermeneutic of charity toward others. One should charitably hope for the best and look for God's truth in any text, and one should initially assume that apparent contradictions or other problems are the result of one's own misunderstanding. This attitude should be maintained until the text itself shows itself unworthy of such respect. Especially if one adopts an interpretive stance (in Carson's case, that epistemology is primary to the postmodern turn) that leads

one to judge thinker after thinker as self-contradictory and absurd, one should carefully reconsider one's understanding and assessment of their ideas. Is it not more likely that one has misunderstood something important in postmodern theories (in this case, that they are dealing with more than just epistemology) than it is that dozens (or more) of postmodern theorists are willfully or ignorantly self-contradictory and absurd? Or is there a hidden Tertullianism at work here that seduces us into thinking that non-Christian theory is always ultimately absurd? As a corrective to that seduction, I think that Carson, and all of us, would do well to keep in mind Flannery O'Connor's reminder that "ignorance is excusable when it is borne like a cross, but when it is wielded like an ax, and with moral indignation, it becomes something else indeed."[15]

The issues raised in emergent conversations are important and must be taken seriously. But as we wrestle with these issues, we must not turn axes of ignorance on one another. We must be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry. Emergent churches cannot become sectarian, and, at the same time, established evangelical churches must provide space for genuine conversations about the real issues raised by these voices. If no space is provided, some will have no choice but to start their own conversation elsewhere, not out of sectarian impulses, but out of a genuine desire to find the truth. Such a division in the body would be incompatible with the unity that Christ prays for in John 17. We must do all that we can, including working beyond our preconceptions, to achieve the unity and love by which the world will know that we are his.

Author

Dr. David M. Mills is associate professor of philosophy, and honors program director, at Cedarville University, Cedarville, Ohio. He has a BA in mathematics from Cedarville University and a PhD in philosophy from Penn State University. His primary teaching and research interests are in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American and Continental

philosophy and the philosophy of art and literature. He is married to Rebecca, who is also a teacher, and is the father of two daughters, Taylor and Ellery. He notes that the family dog, Murphy, is also very much a part of the Mills family household. This is David's first contribution to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. For those interested in reading that review, it can be found at *people.cedarville.edu/employee/millsd/mills_staley_response.pdf*.
2. I use the term "postmodern turn" rather than "postmodernism" or "postmodernity" because the latter terms misleadingly suggest a level of theoretical coherence and consensus regarding the modern era and our own. I believe we are in a time of paradigm-crisis. Because of this, we see elements of the modern paradigm still firmly entrenched, and even strengthening, even as we see key elements of that paradigm being challenged, undermined, or otherwise seriously weakened. But it is not yet clear what exactly will replace the modern paradigm. I believe the term "postmodern turn" captures the dynamism and ambiguity of our present age more effectively than the other terms.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 30. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.
4. Carson presents this as "the majority view" (27), but doesn't specify what group this majority is a majority of. Theologians? Intellectual historians? Analytic philosophers? It is definitely not the majority opinion of social historians, sociologists, or critical theorists. And, importantly, emergent conversationalists have more kinship with the latter groups than the former.
5. On page 79, see also 30, 81, 98–101. Even in his characterization of this horn of the false dilemma, Carson fails to see the importance of cultural context. Perhaps postmodernism can be helpfully understood as the speed of change, but only insofar as our present rate of change is unique, unparalleled in human history, fueled in part by forces of globalizing capitalism and technologies of transportation and communication. Perhaps the present dizzying rate of technological, environmental, political, and economic change spawns further changes in how we think about truth, self, God, and other theoretical issues. Perhaps Paul Virilio is correct in identifying speed as the dominant trope of our age (see, e.g., *Speed and Politics*, 1986; *The Information Bomb*, 2000; and *Negative Horizon*, 2005). If we look at "change or speed of change" from the perspective of social history or cultural theory, perhaps we will see that it is not an altogether vacuous way of describing the postmodern turn. Perhaps it is a legitimate alternative to an exclusively epistemological account.

6. This characterization is pervasive in Carson's text. For representative samples, see 27, 70, 97, 104ff., 112ff., and 122.
7. See, for example, chapter 17, "Why I Am Incarnational," in *A Generous Orthodoxy*, and chapter 9, "Redeeming Our Culture over Dinner," in *A New Kind of Christian*.
8. See his response to John Stackhouse on 66–67.
9. This is especially visible in his treatment of church discipline on pages 147–48. See also 152–54.
10. See, for example, chapter 5, "Why I Am Missional," in *A Generous Orthodoxy*.
11. See, for example, 29–30, 128, 131, 137, 145, 155–56, 166, 187, 208, 210, 213, 214, and, of course, the extensive lists of proof-texts on truth and knowledge in chapter 7.
12. See also 125, 131, 142, 145, 156, 187, and 234 for other undocumented allegations about emergent truthlessness.
13. Several emergent writers have published a response to their critics in which they state this directly. It can be found at *www.anewkindofchristian.com/archives/000429.html*.
14. See, for example, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, pages 35, 38, 249, 285–87.
15. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997) 189–90.