

# A Book Review of *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*

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## Introduction

*An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*<sup>1</sup>, written by Ray S. Anderson, former professor at Fuller Seminary, is an attempt to write out a theological foundation for the emerging church. The work actually stands as a summary of the author's personal theology near the end of his life, as he passed on three years after it was written.<sup>2</sup> The work stands as one of the most scholarly works about emergent theology, but its form of emergent theology represents a serious deviation from biblical truth.

## Organization and Style of the Book

Right from the beginning, one is struck very quickly by the manner in which Dr. Anderson speaks and explains his subject. The book exhibits good organization and scholarly discussion, but at the same time is very difficult to understand and follow because of the means and categories in which the author's thought takes shape. The book shows good organization, organized in ten chapters in a format of "Practice this, not just that." The way Anderson works through these dichotomies is appropriate, as he starts right off with the foundational discussion of Antioch and Jerusalem. Additionally, the first six chapters also appear to stand as somewhat more foundational and important to the last four. Within each chapter, the author also does use headings and attempts to exhibit some kind of organization, and often times his transition to the next major section in a chapter is evident by the last paragraph before the header. This was a useful organization. Each chapter also concludes with some kind of personal anecdote or non-systematic musing he calls a "Concluding Nontheological Postscript." This being said, however, the book was extremely difficult to follow. Part of the reason is that the author claims the he does not think in terms of clear analytical categories. (Anderson, loc. 70-71) The work may make much more sense to emergent church people, but it was extremely difficult for this reviewer to follow. Nevertheless, for what the work is, it definitely lives up to what it claims to be, "an emergent theology for emerging churches." This being said, however, it is clear there are some major issues in the work and the author's thought.

## Primary Issues

There is little question that Dr. Anderson's system exhibits some painful problems that must be addressed. His work must be understood that his book is really a book on Pauline Theology, and an unfaithful view of Pauline Theology at that. His distinct views of Pauline Theology are undergirded by two noteworthy perspectives about history and theological method. It is to these two areas I will now turn, before summarizing his Pauline (emergent) Theology.

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from the book are from Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> Christian D. Kettler, "Ray S. Anderson (1925-2009)," *Faith and Theology*, June 23, 2009, accessed January 17, 2014, <http://www.faith-theology.com/2009/06/ray-s-anderson-1925-2009.html>.

## *The Antioch-Jerusalem Relationship*

As already outlined, right from the beginning Dr. Anderson in the preface and chapter 1 discusses a distinctive view of the relationship between Jerusalem and Antioch. It is also important in Anderson's thought to understand the continuity, yet discontinuity he sees between Jerusalem and the life of Jesus. In his view, over and over again, he portrays the Jerusalem church as opposed to Paul and the work out of Antioch. It is troubling the times in which he mishandles Scripture accounts of Acts and Galatians in particular to prove his case. In reading the work, the thing that Anderson appears to have missed is that not everyone that was opposing Paul was officially sanctioned by the Jerusalem church. Additionally, his treatment of the Acts 15 conference is much more negative on Jerusalem than the text really allows. On this point, Anderson assumes a late date for Galatians and a rejection of the South Galatia theory in support of the idea that the incident with Peter and Barnabas at Antioch was post-Acts 15 (Anderson, loc. 2661). Unfortunately, Anderson does seem to exhibit the kind of irresponsibility that Carson mentions in his critique of the emergent church<sup>3</sup>, and this is just one such area. Now, to be sure, the Jerusalem church does not seem as zealous originally to go to all the world with the gospel. But, it's hard to take Anderson positively in this considering the gross misrepresentation he has given in this work of Jerusalem and its relationship to Paul.

## *Theological Method*

In chapter 6, Anderson discusses that it's about "the work of God, not just the Word of God." As this chapter unfolds, the reader finds perhaps the most explicit explanations of Anderson's theological method. One wonders if this chapter should've been earlier in the book. Yet, it does form the last of the "primary matters" that are discussed as a whole. His method rejects Scripture as the norming norm<sup>4</sup>, and instead places the work of God in the present as the filter through which we interpret Scripture (e.g. Anderson, loc. 1386-1388). In this chapter, he remarkably explains how Jesus and Paul both were simply proponents of this type of thinking, and suggests that Scripture itself requires this type of approach, as he claims to have demonstrated in the first 5 chapters of the book (Anderson, loc. 1356). This is also coupled in the discussion with an emphasis on how the Jerusalem church mistakenly set up a Word of God centric theology rooted in the historical Christ event. While claiming to reject full acceptance of postmodernism, it is hard to not see in Anderson's thought a hermeneutical method that removes the locus of meaning from the text itself. This cannot be accepted by faithful Christians.

## *Pauline Theology as a Whole*

These two foundational matters lead to his perspective of Pauline theology. All throughout the work, he argues that is the theologian of the emerging church out of Antioch, who has had an experience of Christ that is independent of the apostolic tradition, and in fact is from the future Christ, rather than the past Christ of history. His Pauline Theology has some significant correlation with the type of thinking of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century heretic Marcion, in that Paul is placed against the Old Testament and even Jesus himself. The return to a type of Marcionism is a serious deviation from Biblical truth, and those emergent whom he is representing should not be considered as friends of the gospel.

## **Individual Problem Areas and Faulty Explanations**

After the preceding section, it is not surprising to find individual areas of concern. In some cases, it is hard to respect the misinterpretations, which I will briefly note as I point out three notable trouble

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<sup>3</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), loc. 2732-2743, Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, loc. 2478.

areas I observed. First, he clearly espouses egalitarian views of men and women, seem most clearly in his explanation of what happened at Fuller Seminary in this issue in chapter 6. Most troubling was his equation suggestion that Phoebe (Rom. 16:1-2) had to be a deacon, not a deaconess, because of the gender of the Greek noun (loc. 1416, 2701). The gender of a Greek word is not the same as the sex of the person it is referring to<sup>5</sup>, and so this statement in the footnote is seriously faulty.<sup>6</sup> In another place, he revealed sympathies with liberation theology in the context of political/racial liberation, feminism, and social gospel (Anderson, loc. 1910-1913). Secondly, as an example of misrepresentation of Biblical facts, Anderson says that “Great Commission, which was given by Jesus prior to his crucifixion and resurrection...” (loc. 2071). It is hard to view this as an unintended error in light of the rest of the book, as it does seem likely to be kind of statement Anderson would make. Finally, his views of human ethics (see Chapter 7) are woefully man-centered. This is also connected with the way he paints the human condition in non-sin terminology (loc. 2105), and perhaps this is why, as noted by Dr. Mike Stallard,<sup>7</sup> he is so fuzzy on the gospel’s definition and how it is appropriated. The purpose of this section is to highlight the trickle-down effect that is seen in Anderson’s theology and to point out a couple examples of errors he exhibits in making his argumentation, even as he attempts to do it in a scholarly fashion.

### **Positives in Anderson’s Thought**

In spite of the issues, Anderson does demonstrate some good insights on occasion in the book. For example, in the book he demonstrated in both chapter 3 and chapter 8a a balanced perspective on the need for the Spirit to be present not just in us as individuals, but in our churches as well (e.g. Anderson, loc. 983), even though his overall system surely colored his presentation at times. Also, while critiquing those who “Love the sin and hate the sinner,” (Anderson, loc. 1710-1713) his observations are right on that such people misunderstand the connection between our actions and who they are, even though he misses the significant fact that God is personally angry with us as people because of the sins we commit. There are more nuggets of truth in the book, but they are not particularly unique and they cannot take away from the improper picture Anderson has painted.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Dr. Ray Anderson has been successful in his goal. He has outlined an emergent theology that will provide the basis for the practice of emerging churches. However, the system is fatally flawed and along the way Anderson makes significant errors in his dealing with Scripture. As such, we would do well to ensure that we are keeping Scripture, interpreted in a grammatical-historical fashion, as the “norming norm”<sup>8</sup> to our theology.

### **Bibliography**

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Carson, D. A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. Kindle Edition.

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<sup>5</sup> Rodney J. Decker, *Reading Koine Greek: An Introduction and Integrated Workbook* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 53-54, PDF file.

<sup>6</sup> I do not intend to take a position on the translation of the word “deacon” in this passage, but am merely highlighting his faulty argumentation in support for the idea that Phoebe was a deacon in the fullest sense.

<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Stallard, “An Expose of the Emerging Church, Part II: Concerns of the Emerging Church” (lecture, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, January 10, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Carson, loc. 2478.

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