

A Book Review of *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*

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Introduction

Based on the 2004 Staley Lectures at Cedarville University (Carson loc. 50)¹, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* is an attempt at an introduction and critique of the Emergent Church. The book provides a solid and scholarly introduction to the Emergent Church and the issues that are shaping the movement.

Organization of the Book

Carson's book exhibits good general organization and functional characteristics that aid reader comprehension. First, Carson is very logical and methodological in his discussion of the Emergent Church. His presentation starts with a high level overview (Chapter 1). Then, he moves methodologically through the positives of the movement (Chapter 2), his critique (Chapters 3-6), and Biblical support and exegesis for the crucial areas in which he critiques the emergent church (Chapters 7-8). In this aspect, he particularly exhibited care in his critique as he kept separate the emergent church's evaluations of culture and the emergent church's solutions to these evaluations. He also presented a critique of postmodernism itself. Second, Dr. Carson over and over demonstrated excellent argumentation and logical method as he made his points. One of the best examples of this kind of logical argument was his treatment of the "manipulative antithesis" sometimes advocated by postmodernists (first mentioned in loc. 1849). Thirdly, the book is also well documented in regard to his sources, and this is evident both in the summary chapters of the book, as well as the section (Chapter 6) in which he focuses on two specific books of the Emergent Church movement. Finally, the ultimate conclusion of the book on the Biblical foundation for his presentation of the crucial areas of truth and experience was especially effective in concluding the general argument of the work. In conclusion, the book is an excellent piece of scholarly literature in its organization and functional features.

The Critique of the Emergent Church

There is little question that Carson is critical of the emergent church movement. Yet, throughout his work, in typical Carson fashion the book demonstrates a balanced approach that was not overly critical, but firm when warranted and needful. This type of balance is needed for preachers and teachers, because they discredit ourselves when they resort to "buzz word" preaching (c.f. with his critique of the emergent church in loc. 1313ff) and controversies that simply put do not edify (c.f. 1 Tim. 1:4). There are two specific areas in which he critiques the movement.

The Movement as a Whole

On the whole, Dr. Carson has two primary issues with the emergent church, as I have already mentioned. In both cases, the root of his critique is the issue of epistemology. First, he does not agree

¹ All citations from the book are from D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle Edition.

with its assessment of modernity. He very astutely points out that as a protesting movement (Carson, loc. 117ff) one must evaluate the protestor's reasons for their protest. In this regard, he argued that the emergent church is far too imbalanced in its treatment of modernity. The theme is that the emergent church over generalizes modernism as excessively absolutist and too confident in man's ability to find the truth through the methods of modernity. I agree with him on this topic. Second, he does not agree with the emergent church's solutions to the problems of both postmodernity and modernity. Early on, I think Carson was right on in discussing the differences between the Reformation and the emergent church, as to what the primary problem was that the movements respond to. The Reformation was concerned with Biblical fidelity in a way the emergent church is not. Later on, however, Carson focuses on the emergent church's failure to adequately respond to postmodernity, which is the focus of chapter 5. He ably demonstrated how they have failed to deal with the truth claims of historic Christianity in the context of postmodernity's aversion to these types of truth claims, explaining 3 aspects of this failure. Carson was right to focus on the epistemological issue with the emergent church's approach.

The Critique of Specific Individuals

In regard to his discussions of specific individuals, I am confident that Dr. Carson ably critiqued some of the most notable figures. First, in chapter 1, his use of one of the books of "stories" of emergent is effective. In fact, he rightly connects the emergent church's pendulum swings with a reactions on the part of its members to certain types of fundamentalism and conservative evangelicalism. Second, his evaluation of McLaren in particular was fair, not excessively critical, but rightly interacted with his writings. His selection of the workshop regarding pluralism (Carson, loc. 371ff), and one of McLaren's more popular writings in *Generous Orthodoxy* was also good. However, the focus on McLaren may have led to leaving out some notable names missing from the discussion, and I am not certain how much the book's age has to do with this, having been originally published in 2005. Some examples of such missing individuals might include Scot McKnight, Doug Pagitt, and others². Notwithstanding, the book demonstrated a good treatment and critique of specific individuals in the emergent church movement, even if some notable individuals are absent from the critique.

Discussions of Key Topics along the Way

The one thing I was struck by in the book was how good Carson's treatments were of a few key topics along the way, and sometimes these were presented in an effective self-contained fashion. The self-contained sections will be useful for pastors, teachers, and other church leaders as an introduction to the topics for themselves, as well as for use in teaching others. Three topics stood out in particular.

The Discussion of Postmodernity

As already mentioned, at the heart of the critique of the emergent church is Carson's views of epistemology, and chapter 4 is Carson's discussion of his views of postmodernity. The chapter is perhaps one of the best short summaries on postmodernity I have read. Carson describes the premodern, modern, and postmodern approaches to epistemology. Then, outlines correlatives and entailments of postmodernity, which are the kind of things people are talking about, but in reality aren't the foundation of postmodernity. Finally, the chapter concludes with effective explanation of strengths and weaknesses of postmodern epistemology. This chapter is highly recommended as an introduction to postmodernity and Biblical epistemology.

² Michael D. Stallard, "An Expose of the Emerging Church, Part II: Concerns of the Emerging Church" (lecture, Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA, January 9 and 10, 2014).

The Becoming and Belonging Tension

In Carson's chapter in which he criticizes the emergent church's solutions to the problems of modernity and postmodernity, he criticized them for failing to properly handle the becoming and belonging tension in regard to the way seekers and unbelievers interact with the visible, local church. After his critique, Carson outlined three specific issues that must guard us from going into the ditch in regard to this matter. In the context of seeking to reach the lost, which goal is at the heart of both emergent and evangelicals alike, this caution is desperately needed. The section is an effective discussion of the topic that is worth going over with church members and ministers alike.

The Church's Mission in the World Today

Without a doubt, one of the more spiritually enriching parts of the book is the portions in which Carson speaks for the desperate need for confessional evangelicals to be faithful to their mission to reach the very groups the emergent church wants to reach. This is not found just in a specific chapter of the book, but there are two concentrations of it. The first section is in his discussion of the emergent church's strength in evangelizing outsiders (Carson loc. 890-928), in which Carson effectively draws parallels with the Jesus Movement and of the 60s and how we can compare that period with what is going on with the emergent church today. The second concentrated section on this theme is in his discussion of the church's responsibility to interact with the lost in the context of the becoming/belonging tension (Carson, loc. 2669-2716). At the end of the book, this theme comes out in his concluding appeal to emergents to be both evangelistically faithful and Biblically faithful. Carson has got it right in regard to balancing faithful ministry to the lost amidst his defense of historic Christianity in the face of postmodernity.

Issues with the Book

It is hard for me to point out any issues with Carson's book, nevertheless I will mention three things that I noticed. First, I do wish the book interacted with some other notable names in the emergent church movement, and perhaps a future revision of it may provide that. Second, in his brief discussion of the nature of the creeds in the context of the becoming/belonging tension, I thought he may have overstated his case in saying that "without exception" the creeds were formed in the midst of controversy. (Carson, loc. 2649). Finally, in Carson's discussion in the final chapter of 2 Peter 1, I find myself questioning whether the role of election and call is as central to the passage as he made it out to be. These latter two concerns are only a cautious comment, and further exegetical work may be needed on my part. On the whole, however, it was hard to identify areas of disagreement in Carson's book.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Carson's work *Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church* is a magnificent treatise of the emergent church, but is replete with excellent Biblical content that is enriching for the reading and useful outside of the context of the debates concerning the emergent church. Carson demonstrates his balance and scholarly research in this excellent introduction to and critique of the emergent church from the perspective of Biblical Christianity.

Bibliography

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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