book reviews

Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church. Understanding a Movement and Its Implications.

To a large extent, the challenge to the church addressed in this volume (postmodern thinking) is not generational: it is de facto cross-generational since the postmodern worldview and way of thinking saturates Western culture and exerts a large influence on the members of all current generations (as well as all other social stratifications) whether the various generations would identify themselves as postmodern or not. Consequently, serious communicators of any sort, above all, those who wish to share the message of the Christian Gospel in the 21st century, cannot avoid this challenge. Carson has served the church well by clearly identifying and defining the challenge that postmodern formulation of the Christian faith poses, as well as providing a thorough and challenging critique.

The issue is demonstrated and made concrete by giving a sampling of the thinking of leaders of the “emerging church.” While recognizing that the movement is remarkably diverse and amorphous at this point, nonetheless, Carson contends that “for almost everyone within this movement, it works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion; on participation over against individualism and the heroic loner” (p. 29).

Carson is not without appreciation for the leaders of the emerging church. On the plus side he commends them for: 1) honestly trying “to read the culture in which we find ourselves and to think through the implications of such a reading for our witness, our grasp of theology, our churchmanship, even our self-understanding” (p. 45); 2) “the emphasis on authenticity—authentic Christian faith, authentic spirituality, authentic Christian obedience” (p. 49); 3) highlighting “that all of us inevitably interpret things out of a particular framework” (p. 52); 4) “the interest in evangelizing people who are often overlooked by the church” (p. 52); and 5) “wanting to be linked to historic Christianity and not merely the latest twenty years of Christianity” (p. 55).

The above accents are commendable. The issue is how shall they best be achieved and can churches of the modern era (churches of traditional denominations and confessions) achieve them? Those in the emerging church believe that the current culture has changed so radically that churches of the modern era cannot effectively do mission and ministry to postmoderns. What is called for is the reworking of the church so that it can effectively operate in contemporary (postmodern) culture. Carson contends that for emerging church leaders this means applying the tenets of postmodern epistemology to the formulation of the Christian faith and the church’s practice of it.

This leads the author to give a succinct comparison of the main characteristics of the epistemologies of the premodern, modern and postmodern eras. Carson insightfully identifies the primary difference in epistemology between premodern and modern/postmodern epistemology (the latter two being alike in this) as the premodern orientation of beginning with God and the modern/postmodern orientation of beginning with the human self. Beginning with God gives the knower a solid and humble foundation for the task of learning, while beginning with the self leads the knower to an arrogant over-confidence (modernism) or arrogant pessimism (postmodernism). Postmodern epistemology differs from its parent in: 1) rejecting universal foundations (self-evident axioms such as Descartes “I think, therefore, I am”); 2) relativizing all methods of knowing (intuition is as valid as empirical observation or logic); 3) rejecting objective knowledge as both unattainable and undesirable (especially since it frequently leads to absolutism and intolerance); 4) rejecting “ahistorical universality” of truth (identifying all truth claims as social contrivances); and 5) rejecting philosophical materialism (thus, being open to mysticism, spirituality and superstition as legitimate means of knowing).

Carson even-handedly and fairly demonstrates how leaders of the “emerging church” (for example, American Brian D. McLaren and British Steve Chalke) more or less adopt the tenets of postmodern epistemology as they formulate the Christian faith for the contemporary world, especially for reaching non-Christians. While Carson sympathizes with their goal and passion, he rejects their methodology and much of its results as unbiblical, sometimes intellectually dishonest or incompetent, absurd (particularly with respect to moral issues) and ultimately (if consistently applied) self-condemning.

After a thorough critique of emerging leaders’ formulations of the faith, the author provides extensive lists of biblical references on the topics of truth and idolatry as well as a number of more in-depth exegetical studies of pertinent texts in support of the premodern/biblical epistemology.

Carson reaches the conclusion that the legitimate concerns of the emerging church can be met (and only met) while maintaining biblical epistemology. The author’s presentation is penetrating, well-argued, even-handed and direct while being respectful of the concerns and goals of the emerging church. While Lutherans would emphasize that saving faith in Christ precedes and is the foundation for a commitment to biblical epistemology, they will heartily agree that such an epistemology is both necessary and highly profitable for attaining certain knowledge. Confessional churches will find Carson’s evaluation affirming and encouraging. It is worth the read and serious discussion by all generations in the church today as they seek to bring the Gospel to their neighbors of the 21st century.

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Can a worshipping community be all things to all people? McIntosh deliberately tackles this question and methodically arrives at several solutions in *One Church* by defining the general characteristics of each of four generations and giving practical ideas for each. He defines a generation as having a common place in time, boundaries and characteristics. Readers who have been students of generational histories will find a general overview as well as practical ideas on how the church can be attractive to each of the generations.

McIntosh desires to help churches be purposefully and skillfully involved in mission with people of all generations who are not followers of Jesus Christ. He writes about each generation in three ways. First, he generalizes the characteristics of the generation based on common histories. Second, he discusses what these characteristics mean to the church (or to church leadership). Finally, based on their characteristics, he specifically identifies practical ideas for being missionally effective with each generation.

Generational category and subcategory information included in *One Church* are:

**BUILDERS**
- G. I. Generation 1925
- Silent Generation 1926-1939
- War Babies 1940-1945

**BOOMERS**
- Leading Edge 1946-1954
- Trailing Edge 1955-1964

**BUSTERS**
- Bust 1965-1976
- Boomlet 1977-1983

**BRIDGERS**
- Generation Y 1984-1993
- Millennials 1994-2002

The final chapters attempt to give practical information on ministering intergenerationally. McIntosh chooses to write primarily about worship settings and solves the problem by using blended worship techniques that satisfy the likes of each generation. This reader believes he loses his focus on a mission of making disciples of all nations for the sake of attracting numbers.

For leaders trying to get a grip on how to come to an understanding of generations and the technologies that have influenced those generations, an excellent companion book to *One Church* is *The Millennial Matrix* by M. Rex Miller.

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