“For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption.” (Act 13:36) **A New Dark Age?**

Christianity, in all of its experiential beauty, is first and foremost a cognitive religion. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones insists that vital religion first impacts the mind, which effects the will, which moves the emotions. Whenever we short-circuit this process, we invariably find ourselves on the edge of losing our moorings, and slipping into ignorance and superstition.

The Dark Ages (The period encompassing 476 AD to 1000 AD.) were called such, not because there was no electricity, but because society had slipped into an intellectual and spiritual stopper. Superstition ruled both Church and State, the rich as well as the poor. The primacy of preaching was slowly replaced by the abominable Mass, stained glass windows, and icons. Symbols of religion and man-made ritual filled every chapel, church, and cathedral as the image-based culture slowly overtook a word-based culture. This cultural shift was not done as a wholesale change, but rather by increments, slowly, over several generations. Where once the Word of God was central to the life of the Church now bowing, ornate art, rootless mysticism, and syncretistic superstition entered the Church. And the candle of true Christianity flickered in the wind of spiritual darkness.

I submit to you, dear reader, that the Church is once again, at the edge of another dark age. And the desired foot soldiers are not the clergy (per say), but more importantly, our own youth. When the Reformation threw off the image-based superstitions of the Roman system, and rediscovered the invigorating light of Sola Scriptura (Scripture Alone), fresh life was breathed into the Western Church. A new grasp of old ideas, invigorated by the Holy Ghost was carried by the zeal of a young and ignited generation. As place was given to reading, preaching, and cognitive thought, vital godliness and practical piety swept through Europe and North America in reformation and revival. This was largely lead by a generation of the young.

However, since the ending of the Second World War, we in the West (much like the early Church and the Nicaean and anti-Nicene eras), have slowly become flooded with images once again: this time on our iPod's, TV screens, the theater, and the Internet.

It is said, that because of the image-based mediums of our pop culture, the average attention span of the North American youth is 23 seconds! And in 23 seconds, images flash
before their eyes that convey

*exactly*

what the producers wish for them to see. Our youth are being told, like the people of the Dark Ages, what to think, what to feel, and what to believe. One needs to ask the question at this point if the medium is not also the message?

### Postmodernism

What is Postmodernism? And why is it important to discuss in a setting such as this? To understand this movement, we need to know some of the underlying philosophical ideas that brought about its birth. Postmodernism is associated with one or more of the following:

1. **Relativist Pluralism**

   That is to say, there is no absolute truth. All truth is only truth as it relates to the ever changing landscape of modern society and ethics. At the same time, all kinds of truth, be they secular or religious, are *equally true*. That is to say, “What you believe is true for you, what I believe is true for me. All truth is relative. Your beliefs and my beliefs are equal since there are multiple descriptions of reality. No one view can be true in an ultimate sense”. We can see this everywhere we go in today’s culture, can’t we?

2. **Consumerism**

   Consumerism is the “ism” that teaches that the individual will be gratified by consuming. It is a modern form of hedonism that believes that satisfaction can be attained by having and consuming what we want upon our lusts. It packages happiness in bubble wrap, glossy advertisements, and “pleasure-now-pay-later” ideas. Consumerism affects every strata of social structure in the West, insisting that to buy and spend will bring happiness.

3. **Political Correctness**

   Political correctness is the belief that great care must be taken not to use *
   discriminatory language*
   in any way that would isolate any given social or ethical group. Its main theory is based on *
   relativistic pluralism*
   (see above) that believes that every ideology is correct, and no belief system or moral proclivity should be challenged. One wonders where this places the Word of God in society, which constantly distinguishes between the holy and the unholy, saved and lost, redeemed and reprobate?
To sum up then, postmodernism is the societal embrace of relativistic pluralism, consumerism, and political correctness. This is the world in which we live, and the properly identified harvest field of the Church, be we Reformed or other.

**Enter, the Emergent Church**

The Emergent Church is a new movement in North America that has correctly identified the paradigm shift from a Christian culture, to a modern culture, to a postmodern culture. The Emergent Church did not create postmodernism, but attempts to make Christianity relevant the postmodern mind. In other words, “If you can't beat them, join them” is very much the prevailing attitude. Now, the Emergent Movement would not admit that they are a movement at all, but rather a “conversation”. It is not easily identified by well-structured borders. However, it still has a central belief structure, dogmas and ideologies which lend to its identification as a movement. In form (although they would hate this comparison), it could be compared to the Seeker Sensitive movement of the late 1980's and the 1990's. The Seeker movement sought to minister to the Baby Boomers, while the Emergent Church seeks to reach their children (the 30-something crowd). By using broad strokes, the Emergent Church seeks to minister to the postmodern mind, by assimilating the culture of the day with the teachings of all spectra of Christianity. A Theological “wax nose” if you will, that bends to prevailing culture or church. Remember, there is no one way, but all ways are equally true or untrue depending on how you define them. This is why Brian McLaren, one of the leading spokesmen on the Emergent Church subtitled his book, “A Generous Orthodoxy”, “Why I am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN.”

The result of this thinking is a montage or collage approach to church, and a theology that collapses a myriad of kinds of Christianity into one loose superstructure. Thus, the Emergent Church teaches that everything and nothing are all true and false at the same time. It's Barthianism come home to roost to the children of the hippie era. While lauding the past creeds and confessions for instance, in the same breath they call them too narrow by having, “final orthodoxy nailed down, freeze dried, and shrink-wrapped forever” (McLaren, GO, 285). Now I have come across this in my own Church, and perhaps some of the young people reading might echo these sentiments: “We need to get with the times, and come up to speed. There is not necessarily one truth but many true-ish (if I can use that term) systems of thought and belief within the walls of Christendom”. Sound familiar?

Also, within this system a great deal of emphasis is placed on emotion and feelings. Experience, if you will, (of the ungrounded kind) that emphasizes feelings over rationality. Why? Because feelings as well as rationality are both true, or false, as per relativism. Objectivity and
subjectivity are rolled into one categorical equal. Also, a desire for community and cohabitation is paramount over any truth claims, which is contrary in the linear thinking of traditional creedal Christianity. Also, in line with a sensualistic age, aesthetics are used to invoke feelings and to move all kinds of people into one centralized communal experience. This is why there is less said, and more felt or experienced in a typical emergent service. In front of the people will be perhaps a huge plasma screen depicting a photograph of a mother holding a baby, or a sun rise, or a rose with dew on it, something that appeals to the sense perception, which invokes a strong feeling of peace and communal harmony. Lateral thinking and cognitive thought are also replaced with anecdotal experientialism where love and toleration trump truth claims of all kinds. In our day, this ideal is appealing, because in a very real way the great relativistic pulpits of TV and Movies are preaching this same message. And believe me when I say, that the North American culture is not getting tired of this philosophy. And the Church, as she lets down her guard to postmodern influences, is becoming anesthetized to its ideas and even incorporating them.

In brief, this is the identification of the Emergent Church. Its chief goal is to take what is helpful in every denomination and tradition and use it in a modern context while discarding that which is useless. So Pentecostalism, Presbyterianism, Baptist, and Roman Catholic are all looked at as possible harvest fields of ideas, assimilating what is good in their movements and discarding what is bad. Remember, that to the Emergent way of thinking, there is no one way to truth, but all ways are equally true (or untrue) depending on how you define them. The comparison is made in one Emergent book to that rings of a tree. Each ring represents a generation which builds upon the good things of previous generation making up a single stronger tree.

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