

Book Review

Carson, D A (2005) *Becoming Conversant With the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. ISBN: 0310259479

- Amazon Reviews:
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0310259479/>
- Reviews by Albert Mohler:
http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-06-29
http://www.albertmohler.com/commentary_print.php?cdate=2005-06-30
- D. A. Carson (Ph.D., University of Cambridge) is research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. He is the author of over 45 books, including the Gold Medallion Award-winning book *The Gagging of God*, and is general editor of *Telling the Truth* and *Worship by the Book*. He has served as a pastor and is an active guest lecturer in church and academic settings around the world.

This book is an attempt to survey and critique a movement that has been developing for the last 10-15 years – mainly in the US & Britain, but also increasingly elsewhere. It is written at a scholarly level – but many of the issues addressed are important for churches today to consider as we seek to reach a new generation.

In many ways this is a continuation of his earlier work (*The Gagging of God* – 1996) which outlined a cultural shift to postmodernism and evangelical responses/failings.

The problem with critiquing new movements is that they often take time to cohere. Often the edges are blurred and different groups have different emphases. This puts those in a more seek to critique a new movement at a disadvantage as they can be accused of over generalising. Carson acknowledges this and seeks to avoid it by citing the recognised authors in the movement.

➤ **Key Emergent Authors:**

- Brian McLaren (US)
- Steve Chalke (UK)

➤ **Key Terms**

- Modernism
The dominant worldview of the 20th century. Argues that people can come to authoritative truth by reason alone
- Postmodernism (or ultramodernism)
Recognises that all human reasoning is conditioned by cultural and personal perspectives. Post-moderns are moderns who have lost faith in the ability of modernism to know the Truth. The best we can know is our interpretation of Truth – but we cannot know for certain whether one interpretation is better than another. It rejects absolute truth claims as arrogance and leading to a lust for power
- Emergent (or Missional) churches
Those who identify with the emergent movement's call for Christians to embrace an inclusive approach to the faith that acknowledges different perspectives in the hope of reaching a post-modern culture

➤ **Key features the movement (Chap 1)**

- Prefers to view itself as a 'conversation' rather than a 'movement'
- Many in the movement are from conservative Fundamental or Evangelical backgrounds reacting against the Evangelical compromises with modernism (in the form of separatism in the case of fundamentalism; consumer/market/vision/prosperity orientated seeker emphasis in the case of popular Evangelicalism)
- The sense of protest is strong that such 'Evangelicalism' needs to be rejected in favour of something more culturally engaged with the emerging post-modern

- **Key lessons we can learn from the movement (Chap 2)**
 - They are adept at reading the times and know that the presentation of the Gospel must change with the times
 - They value authenticity & sincerity
 - They recognize the social location of the church, and know that the church is within a cultural context and cannot be removed from it
 - They place high value on evangelism.
 - That they probe tradition and seek to build a faith that is rooted in the past while still being relevant to the present

- **Key criticisms of postmodernism and the emergent (Chaps 4-6)**
 - 'Hard' postmodernism is sceptical of all truth claims. This is self refuting as postmodernism is itself a truth claim – namely: the Truth that the Truth cannot be known
 - Emergent leaders tend to be overly critical of Modernism and Evangelicalism – but minimally so of Postmodernism and other 'Christian' traditions. 'Pick and choose' rather than testing them by the Word
 - False either/or antitheses are often used. Eg:
 - We must know everything certainly/ omnisciently, or we can't know more than our own interpretations. However – what about knowing 'adequately'? However - in real life we readily understand each other adequately (though never exhaustively).
 - Christ the Word ('dynamic') against the Word/Bible ('static'). But why can't it be both?
 - Implicit or explicit denials of key doctrines as 'interpretations' (eg: view of atonement [substitution = 'cosmic child abuse'], Scriptural inspiration, hell, personal devil, etc.) comes close to abandoning the Gospel. Emergent churches criticise those without for cultural failings while tolerating major doctrinal compromise within
 - Failure to articulate clear Biblical stances on issues of the day (Eg: homosexuality, Scriptural infallibility, etc.)

- **Key Biblical Critique (Chaps 7-8)**
 - Carson presents abundant Biblical evidence to show that the Bible does not share Emergent scepticism concerning Truth and knowledge
 - The key to escape the subjective trap of postmodernism is to start with God rather than Man. He knows Truth and His view is the objective one – which He has revealed adequately by His Word – which as author He interprets to us by His Spirit. But in this issue the emergent is too uncertain.

- **Key Lessons for Us**
 - The movement emerged largely in reaction to the failure and compromise of Evangelicals with the modernist world and the failure to practice a rich church life
 - We must hold to a strong Christ & Word centred approach. As the Reformers critiqued Medieval Catholicism in light of the Word – let us be willing to test Modernism, Postmodernism, the Emergent & ourselves by the same standard
 - We must seek to present this objective Truth humbly and consistently in ways that speak to our pluralistic world

Carson has done in his works on Postmodernism what Machen did in 1930's against Modernism in *Liberalism and Christianity* – exposed the idolatry and false nature of a worldview in rebellion against God – even where it dresses itself in a Christian guise. To this the church is now forewarned and forearmed. Let us pray that it may influence those in the movement back to a renewed confidence in the Word.
