

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php



Reformation
& REVIVAL
JOURNAL

A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 14 · NUMBER 4 · 2005

FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

In each issue of this quarterly journal we have, at least more recently, sought to engage an important movement, issue, or book. In this issue, the subject was Dr. D. A. Carson's book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*. Our four reviewers represent four different contexts. The first reviewer is David Dunbar. David is a seminary president in an unusual context. He has led Biblical Theological Seminary, both the board and faculty, to pursue a mission statement that reads as follows:

To prepare missional leaders who incarnate the story of Jesus with humility and authenticity and who communicate the story with fidelity to Scripture, appreciation of the Christian tradition, and sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of postmodern culture.

Happily, I am a part of this process, serving as both a board member and adjunct faculty member at Biblical. Dr. Carson has been a welcome guest on our campus on numerous occasions. We respect his scholarship and written work. Since Dr. Dunbar not only knows and respects Dr. Carson, but also knows the emergent movement and leaders within it, I felt he was a great choice to engage this controversial new book.

The second reviewer is Dr. David M. Mills, a philosopher and a leader in an emergent congregation. He first heard Dr. Carson give his material at Cedarville University and began a critique then that continues now in his excellent work.

The third reviewer is Phil Sinitieri. Phil is a PhD student at the University of Houston (Texas). He has previously contributed to this journal and is a bright young man that I

believe will make a significant wider contribution to the church at-large.

The fourth reviewer, Anthony Smith, is a man who has engaged the emergent movement very directly. His study includes actual participation in what could be called an emergent church. His most unusual e-mail address tells the reader that he is a "postmodern negro." Anthony has keen insight and writes from firsthand experience. He is definitely not an armchair quarterback.

I have also read Dr. Carson's book. I found myself agreeing with a great deal of what he says in a number of important places. My problem, however, finally came to one question: "If you wanted to help emergent church leadership hear your concerns, what approach would you take?" Again and again I had to say to myself that my approach would differ from Dr. Carson's considerably. I, too, have concerns about some things in the emergent church. I think the difference might come down to this—I see God wonderfully at work in this movement. I also see some huge blind spots and mistakes in the developments of this new phenomenon. I find many of the leaders that Dr. Carson critiques are more than willing to personally engage the conversation and listen. I am not ready to write off evangelicals who genuinely want to see the church renewed by the mercies of God.

In reading this growing corpus of popular literature, I find some of it inane, some downright ridiculous, and some perhaps dangerous. I also find most of it to be fresh, stimulating, convicting, and very missional. Perhaps I am seeing this differently than Dr. Carson precisely because I am learning to find friendship with some of the people in the movement. This conclusion, if you read the literature at all, is precisely what the emergent leaders believe makes a huge difference in how we ought to do theology.



C. S. Lewis is in the news these days with the appearance in December of the Disney film version of *The Lion, the Witch and*

the Wardrobe. My first introduction to C. S. Lewis came through his famous fictional work, *The Screwtape Letters*. Screwtape is a senior demon who writes letters to a junior associate on how to disrupt and discredit the Christian faith day-by-day. One entry came to my mind this week as I reflected upon the blessings and dangers of new movements in the church and the Christian life. In one excellent letter, Screwtape writes about how humans dread "the horror of the same old thing." Screwtape says:

What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call "Christianity And." You know—Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian coloring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing.

The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship.

Christianity and _____ is still a technique used religiously by the Evil One to disrupt the church and the Christian believer. Something new comes along and the pattern emerges again, all the time appearing as if it really was some new thing. The wise are to be encouraged to see this for what it is and to help others get beyond it.



Dallas Willard has written that the history of soul care and spiritual formation in the church can be understood in this way:

Spiritual direction was understood by Jesus, taught by Paul, obeyed by the early church, followed with excesses in the medieval church, narrowed by the Reformers, recaptured by the Puritans and virtually lost in the modern church. (Cited by Bruce Demarest in *Soulguide*, 49)

Eugene Peterson has gone so far as to argue that "for most of the history of the Christian faith it was expected that a person would have a spiritual director."

My own reading and teaching on this subject impresses upon me the simple fact that these two respected evangelical authors are quite right. Now what I worry about is that this interest will become a new fad.

The famous Anglican mystic, Evelyn Underhill, claimed that *every* Christian needed a competent co-listener, discerner, and resource person for the journey through life. I am also inclined to believe this as well. Whether this person who helps us is a friend, minister, teacher, or specially chosen director, we all clearly do best if we find someone who is not our judge but our companion, someone who sees the ills and trials we face and who can help us grow through them.



The earliest apologists in the Christian church were teachers and writers who lived during intense times of persecution. Because the early Christians refused to worship the ancient pagan deities of Rome, as well as the emperor, they were regularly made the scapegoats for assorted political and social issues. They were, oddly to us at least, even accused of atheism because they did not acknowledge the gods of the Romans. Because of this charge, it was assumed that the gods punished the Romans with plagues, famines, and floods due to the presence of Christians among them.

Because of these factors, the Christian religion was officially proclaimed to be *strana et illicita* ("strange and unlawful" according to the Senatorial decree of AD 35). Plinius said the Christian faith was *prava et immodica* ("wicked and

unbridled"), and Tacitus referred to it as *exitialis* ("deadly"). The famous Suetonius added that this faith was *nova et malefica* ("new and harmful").

What turned this around? Strictly speaking, it was the Edict of Milan in AD 313 which gave freedom to the church to prosper in public without official opposition. In the centuries before the Edict, formal apologies (defenses) were written by serious Christian writers that addressed the emperors and other official persecutors. What makes these apologies so powerful, at least to my mind, is not that they engaged in philosophical speculation about the faith, but rather they argued that the Christians were not a threat to the Empire precisely because their lives were honest and good. They were hard-working citizens who respected the laws and were loyal to the emperor.

One of the earliest defenses written was in what we now call *The Letter to Diognetus* (the author is a second-century Christian who is unknown to us). Here is part of the argument made:

Christians are not different because of their country or the language they speak or the way they dress. They do not isolate themselves in their cities nor use a private language; even the life they lead has nothing strange.

Their doctrine does not originate from the elaborate disquisitions of intellectuals, nor do they follow, as many do, philosophical systems which are the fruit of human thinking. They live in Greek or in barbarian (foreign) cities, as the case may be, and adapt themselves to local traditions in dress, food, and all usages. Yet they testify to a way which, in the opinion of the many, has something extraordinary about it.

They live in their own countries and are strangers. They loyally fulfill their duties as citizens, but are treated as foreigners. Every foreign land is for them a fatherland and every fatherland foreign.

They marry like everyone, they have children, but they do not abandon their new-born. They have the table in common, but not the bed. They are in the flesh, but do not live according to the flesh (2 Corinthians 10:3; Romans 8:12–15). They dwell on earth, but are citizens of heaven.

They obey the laws of the state, but in their lives they go beyond the law. They love everyone, yet are persecuted by everyone. No one really knows them, but all condemn them. They are killed, but go on living. They are poor, but enrich many (2 Corinthians 6:9–10). They have nothing, but abound in everything, but in that contempt they find glory before God. Their honor is insulted, while their justice is acknowledged.

When they are cursed, they bless. When they are insulted, they answer with kind words (1 Corinthians 4:12–13). They do good to others and are punished like evil-doers. When they are punished, they rejoice as if they were given life. The Jews make war against them as if they were a foreign race. The Greeks persecute them, but those who hate them cannot tell the reason for their hatred.

The letter concludes by saying that the Christians are “in the world” as “the soul is in the body.” By this, the writer argued that Christians live everywhere in the world but are not part of this world. Their living and acting can be seen by the world, but their worship is spiritual in nature, thus invisible to the world.

After teaching a formal apologetics class this past term, I was reminded of these kinds of arguments, or defenses, for the faith. I could not help but pray that God would refresh Christians and churches in our day so that we, too, might be prepared to be a living, and even dying, apologetic for the faith.