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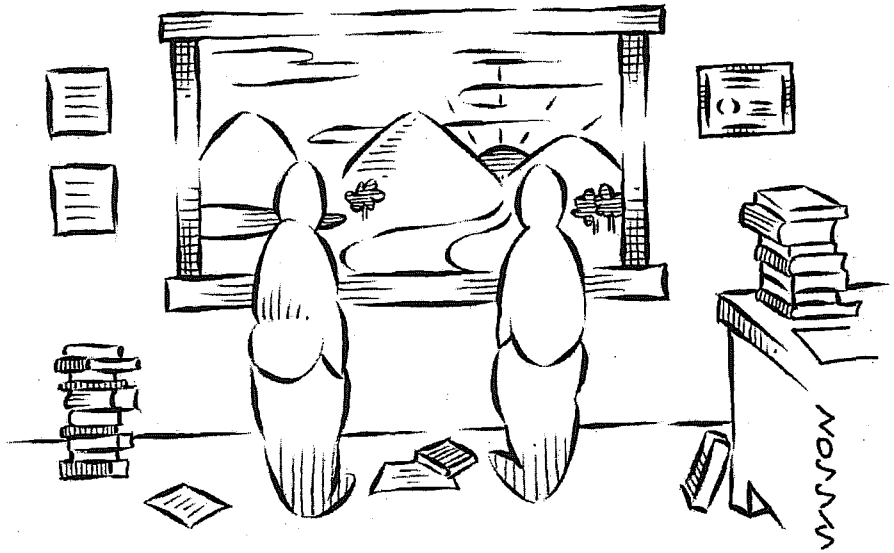

Becoming Conversant with D. A. Carson's Christendom

Anthony Smith

In *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, D. A. Carson, promises to aid us in becoming conversant with the emerging church movement. Why so? What is so important about the emerging church movement (henceforth, ECM) that a major Christian scholar would be so compelled to write a book that promises to help people become conversant with it? Like a tour guide in a foreign land showing us the sights and sounds, Dr. Carson sets out to help us understand a movement and its implications for Christians in our North American context.

> Whenever a Christian movement comes along that presents itself as reformist, it should not be summarily dismissed. Even if one ultimately decides that the movement embraces a number of worrying weaknesses, it may also have some important things to say that the rest of the Christian world needs to hear. So I have tried to listen respectfully and carefully; I hope and pray that the leaders of this "movement" will likewise listen to what I have to say.[1]

I have read many of the reviews put forth about this book: some have praised Carson's work and others have pointed out

its many weaknesses. Many of the reviews have centered on the debate as regards the topic of epistemology. While I think this kind of conversation needs to take place, I feel compelled to delve more deeply into the epistemology issue. For I think there is more at stake here than simply getting our theory right. What are at stake are the social and political formations we presuppose as Christians that give credence to our particular epistemological stances. I will be addressing epistemology in a deeper way as it relates to the particular socio-political formation I believe is presupposed in Carson's appraisal of the emerging church.

I believe that one's epistemic norms presuppose a particular social and political formation. Epistemologies arise out of particular historical contexts and often take shape as they both subtly and overtly provide legitimation of particular social and political formations. What Carson's project appears to be is an attempt to tame the ECM's willingness to do church and theology on the boundaries of the accepted norms of conservative evangelicalism (or what Dr. Carson calls biblical Christianity). Dr. Carson's ambivalence is really about the ECM digging deep in the church's self-understanding of how Christianity, in our North American context, is wedded to our society in ways that are a direct affront both socially and politically to the gospel of the kingdom of God. Carson wants to tame this tendency in the emerging church.

I am fairly certain Dr. Carson will not see it this way. For him the issue is a matter of a "proper epistemology." He sees in the emerging church, primarily in the writings of pastor Brian McLaren, acquiescence to postmodernity that he believes is dangerous to the enterprise of Christianity, as he understands it. I believe he is concerned that the ECM will be a Christianity that will be unable to legitimate itself in the face of secularism and non-Christian religions. What is at stake for Dr. Carson is the very basis for truth and our ability to know it.

I can appreciate this cautionary note put forth by Carson, but I think he fails to appreciate that the ECM is, in some quarters, attempting to move away from ecclesial self-understandings and theological praxis that are too cozy *locus imperii* (on the scene of empire). Drawing from the works of postmodern philosophers and particular Christian theologians gives a critical edge for those Christians who see the many ways in which our theology and praxis is wedded to the American liberal democratic empire. Indeed, many of the postmodern philosophers in the twentieth century sound more like the prophets in the Hebrew scriptures with their critique of power and its relationship to conceptions of knowledge and truth that go unnoticed by Christians who hold to particular epistemologies. This all for good reasons, I believe.

Particular epistemologies have indeed legitimated the violence of particular social and political formations in the West. McLaren points this out by emphasizing absolutism's legacy in Western history, but, unfortunately, Carson downplays this:

> My fourth criticism is a particularization of the first three—it is not directed to everyone in the emerging church movement, but only to a few who tend to be among the most capable. I mentioned that in his recent seminar, Brian McLaren, working through social history as he understands it, assigns the major blame for the litany of major evils during the past three centuries—Nazism, Communism, slavery, the slaughter of the Aztecs, colonialism, imperialism—to absolutism, and absolutism, he argues, is the fruit of the Enlightenment, the fruit of modernism's endless quest for certainty. . . . Thus modernism has been at least a major contributor to most of the world's mega-ills of the past three centuries, and the answer is postmodernism. Once again, we find broad-brush condemnation of modernism, and the solution is postmodernism. (71)

It seems Carson has actually made a broad-brush stroke at McLaren here. To my knowledge, nowhere in McLaren's work has he said, "The solution is postmodernism." What McLaren says about postmodernism is that there are aspects of it that equip us conceptually to see how Christians have been complicit with various forms of political and social power that have had negative consequences in the past and in our present.

In the opening pages of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren discusses the relationship of North American Christianity to both modernity and postmodernity:

> The maps of North American Christianity that not so long ago provided reliable orientation and guidance are being redrawn. Many of these developments can be traced to the failure of modernity's categories and paradigms to recognize the social and cultural diversity of the human experience. This failure has prompted the emergence of postmodern theory with its critique of certain, objective, universal knowledge and its quest to construct new forms of thought in the aftermath of modernity. These new forms of thought have significantly reshaped our common cultural and intellectual life in a variety of ways, including the standard assumptions that have guided Western culture and expressions of Christian faith since the Enlightenment. Of course, not everyone believes these developments are positive, and this has triggered considerable discussion and controversy in many ecclesiastical and theological circles. In the context of this debate, it is important to remember that postmodern theory does not support the rejection of rationality but rather supports rethinking rationality in the wake of modernity. This rethinking has resulted not in irrationality, as is often claimed by less-informed critics of postmodern thought, but rather in numerous redescriptions and proposals concerning the understanding of rationality and knowledge. These postmodern ideas produce a more inherently self-critical view of knowledge than modernity.[2]

McLaren does not see postmodernity as *the* solution, as Carson suggests. Rather, he sees postmodernity as a way to be more self-critical to forms of thought and being that we have inherited as Christians in the West, and which continue to deeply influence our theology and ecclesial practices.

I have to admit that it has been difficult to read this book for a number of reasons, the chief one being that this book, although purportedly directed towards the emerging church, is a book that fits nicely within the context of particular

strands of European-American Christianity. This is not to say that Christians of different ethnic backgrounds have no stake in this discussion. I am saying that Carson largely misses this aspect of the emerging church and its desire to become more of an ethnically diverse, ecumenical Christian movement. I feel left out of Carson's conversation. One wonders whom Carson wants to become conversant with on these matters. It is understandable given that most of the participants in the ECM in our *North American context* tend to be middle-class, white males, something which I do not believe is intentional.

From what I can gather from my conversations with leaders in this movement, there is a burden for greater ethnic and gender diversity. Carson does not speak to this issue as a weakness in the emerging church, which I find to be a glaring weakness in his review. This is, I believe, the most troublesome aspect of Carson's project. His failure to point out the lack of socio-economic diversity in the movement called the ECM simply reveals Carson's own social location as a European/American Christian scholar. Again, it is understandable why he would not point out this weakness in the ECM. He may or may not consider the lack of socio-ethnic diversity in the ECM a serious theological matter. That he may not see it as such is, I believe, due to Carson possibly being overdetermined by the bad habits of modernity.

This really goes to the heart of why I find Carson's review quite revealing of his social location as a theologian-scholar. It seems to be an attempt to critique a budding, global, ecumenical Christian movement through the lens of a particular form of Christianity that privileges Western forms of Christianity, which in turn presupposes a particular social and political formation that has a long history of being ethnically and culturally exclusivist (dare I say, absolutist) in a very unhealthy way. There are many instances throughout the book where Carson demonstrates this privileging and practices what I call "normative gaze." To bolster my argument I want to draw attention to a brief passage where Carson extols the virtue, and possible vice, of relying too heavily on narrative portions of scripture, but he also concedes how mod-

ernist explanations of scripture narrowly focus more on the didactic than on the narrative portions of scripture:

> Yet, to put things in perspective, I have heard a fair number of African preachers handle narrative texts very ably, but can think of only three or four African preachers who can expound Romans very well. The narrative culture of many Africans (though that is now changing somewhat) produced certain limitations; the heritage of Western epistemology and culture produced another set of limitations. (67)

I am not suggesting that Carson is a white supremacist. What I am suggesting is his failure to point out this aspect of the ECM lack of color is a major weakness in his appraisal. Carson does, however, reveal his own blindness to this very important issue. He speaks to the issue regarding the contextual nature of our knowledge:

> During the last two or three decades many people have written books and articles on the changing culture of America, and most of us are well aware of the rapid developments. But many of us somehow remain under the illusion that we Christians live outside these cultural changes. We therefore address the changes from a kind of independent bastion of impregnability. In other words, we observe the changes in the culture and strategize about how to respond faithfully to them, but these changes are all happening out there, in the culture—but not in us. In short, many Christians have yet to come to grips with the fact that we ourselves are part of this rapidly changing culture, and we cannot help but be influenced by it. (51)

The ECM is a subaltern movement that is growing on the edges of a burgeoning global Christian culture. It is a movement that is self-conscious in a way that is setting a new precedent in the questions and alternatives it has put forth compared to the standard fare of Christians attempting to be relevant to a younger generation. In a recent book by Robert Webber, he classifies these new kinds of Christians as part of

growing number of what he calls "younger evangelicals."[3] Brian McLaren, considered a leading voice among younger evangelicals, has written a number of books that are a part of this growing subaltern movement. The emerging church to this point is self-described as a conversation between friends attempting to create spaces for global ecclesial friendships, or what popular ECM leader and blogger Andrew Jones describes as "deep ecclesiology."[4]

What the emerging church has done is critically embrace the insights of postmodern philosophers and theologians that have questioned the foundations and presuppositions of a Christianity wholly wedded to what has been described as modernity. McLaren's project is to reimagine being church in a North American context. He is in dialogue with theologians and thinkers in the missional church movement, post-liberal/conservative, and, more importantly for the purposes of this brief review, post-colonial Christian theology and praxis.

Many in the emerging church, like McLaren, are trying to reimagine a practice of Christianity that is more self-conscious of its past and present complicity with Western-style imperialism in its many guises. I do not know if McLaren would interpret it this way, but I see in the ECM Christians who are growing in their uneasiness of being church in the heart of the mightiest empire known to humanity—namely, America. What others, along with McLaren, are recognizing is *how* we have believed and practiced the Christian faith in a way that has made it difficult to discern our complicity with forces that are opposed to the kingdom of God.

Many of the discussions in the ECM are abstract and deeply philosophical. This has been a stumbling block to some standing at the edges of this movement. As in the abstract, these discussions may appear that there is still something subversive in comparison to the standard accounts of Christianity *locus imperii*, as, for example, with the debate surrounding epistemology (the theory of knowledge). This is a subcategory of philosophy that seeks to answer the question as to the nature of our knowledge or knowing. In these kinds of discussions you will hear terms like foundationalism ver-

sus post-foundationalism (or anti- and non-foundationalist). What these discussions center on are attempts to re-present the gospel in a cultural milieu different from the one that gave context and coherence to previous generations of Christianity—what some are calling a modernist Christianity. There is a critical embracing of postmodernist culture and philosophy that has ruffled the feathers of more conservative Christian voices. As mentioned already, one of those critical, yet in some ways affirming, voices is respected New Testament scholar D. A. Carson. Carson is attempting to give corrective advice and make available to a particular Christian audience this growing subaltern movement of Christians.

There have been many online reviews of Carson's book providing some great insights, both in praising and in critiquing him. This review has sought to bring out into the open the clash between the socio-political formation presupposed in Carson's review and that presupposed by some in the ECM. Part of my interest in this is due in part to my proximity to theologies of resistance, protest, and liberation. I cannot help but see in Carson's appraisal of the ECM Western Christendom's straining to hold on to ownership of global Christianity. Carson's critique is quite uncomfortable with people like McLaren and others in the emerging church, because they are trying to reimagine and practice the Christian faith in a way that does not presume universal theological and ecclesial hegemony.

McLaren is attempting to do a post-colonial theology in our North American context. Carson's theological milieu assumes an epistemology that privileges the socio-political formation of colonialism and imperialism that may not be equipped to appreciate this kind of project. D. Stephen Long, in his book *The Goodness of God*, suggests to us that all moral claims and norms presuppose a particular social and political formation. Epistemic claims also presuppose a particular social and political formation. I would also add that Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* is not so much about how the emerging church squares up with the Bible—one can only imagine the incessant comparison charts created

by polemicists with the topic or group under suspicion arrayed on one side of the chart and bible verses on the other. Interestingly enough, Carson has just such a chart at the end of his book citing a number of verses that mention *knowing* and *truth*.

What *Becoming Conversant* is about is a form of Christianity that is quite comfortable with being situated *locus imperii* while at the same time being uncomfortable with a growing movement of Christians who are questioning the theological and epistemological assumptions that aid status-quo Christianity in being comfortable *locus imperii*. This is an outrageous claim to be sure, but when one becomes conversant with Carson and the theological voices that have helped shaped the theological contours of those in the emerging church, this thesis becomes crystal clear, I hope.

Author

Anthony Smith is a self-described "Emergent Negroblogian," an African-American Christian who seeks to dialogue (in part through his weblog, "Musings of an Emergent Postmodern Negro," *postmodernegro.blogspot.com*) with the emergent conversation and with prophetic black Christianity. He co-organizes (with Steve Knight of *www.knightopia.com*) an emergent cohort in Charlotte, North Carolina, where he resides with his wife, Yashica, and their four children.

Notes

1. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 10.
2. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 10.
3. Robert Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of a New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).
4. Deep ecclesiology is basically holding a profound appreciation for the various Christian traditions that have emerged in the past two thousand years. In my context, it is an understanding that Christianity did not begin or end in Europe.