

EMERGING DIFFICULTIES

A look at how the Bible today is being watered down in an Emerging Church context; comparing the neo-liberalism of Karl Barth with an Emerging Church Bibliology.



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Foundational Problems of a Biblical Nature

In the Emerging Church

DEFINITIONS

Perspicuity – The idea that scripture interprets scripture and that when the plain sense makes common sense seek no other sense for interpretation.

Canon – The development of the particular and collective books of the Bible in what we have today as a complete text of revelation from God.

Wittgenstein – From Ludwig Wittgenstein who developed the philosophical idea that words in a text do not mean what the user or author intended them to mean; they have no inherent meaning and mean only what the reader imposes upon those words.

Solipsism - a theory holding that the self can know nothing but its own modifications.

Dialectics – A “Yes” and “No” answer in seeking truth where a middle ground may not be discovered.

Tertium Quid – Literally a third option in a yes and no dialogue where something cannot be classified in either of two groups.

INTRODUCTION

Anytime there is a new movement in the church we can find something to learn from that movement if we look for it. The liberal movement of the early 20th century, for example, was a step in the direction of a more active Christianity in the community where the church had relinquished its role in a return to the fundamentals of the faith. The Charismatic movement of the later 20th century was a movement towards a more personal encounter with God where intimacy with Him in many churches had become cerebral and distant.

There is often a God-element and just as likely a man-element in all new movements. Such is the case with a current movement known as the Emerging Church. On the plus side is a call back to active, service-oriented and dialogue-based ministry to and interaction with the world around us. The Emerging Church is right on mark with this call to reaching out in practical ways to reflect God's love to the world around us and also in opening up dialogue with unbelievers. On the other hand are attending issues that are

not so commendable with the Emerging Church. One such issue is how the Emerging Church treats the Word of God. Since the way we approach God's Word is so pivotal to our developing belief-system and worldview then this merits close attention. This paper addresses a treatment of the Word of God in the context of what looks very much like a resurgent Barthian approach to the Bible. For those who may not be familiar with the theology of Karl Barth, this biblical approach is not a good thing. Barth was a prolific theologian who had some good things to say but his Bibliology was very much off course with clear biblical guidelines.

Karl Barth has been called the most prolific theologian since Thomas Aquinas. His Christo-centrism and community oriented ecclesiology are two of his valued contributions to the church in the 20th century. Unfortunately his various liberal leanings are enjoying a renewal among an Emerging Church with an inclination to set aside orthodoxy and embrace what is referred to as a new way of looking at Scripture and the church. This paper will explore ways in which this contemporary Emerging Church movement is spearheading a rediscovery of liberal leanings in the form of a Barthian Bibliology.

BIBLICAL DATA ON BIBLIOLOGY

Historically there have been three basic theories regarding biblical inspiration. **Orthodoxy**, the traditional belief of the church from very early on, states that the Bible *is* the Word of God. Just how it may be the Word of God involves nuances regarding either a dictation method or the idea of conceptual inspiration.¹ Either way, according to orthodoxy God used human authors to convey His express meaning in words. The Bible

¹ Norman L Geisler and William E. Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), p 18.

we have today is comprised of that conveyance according to orthodoxy. By contrast to this historic view, **Modernism** states that the Bible merely *contains* the Word of God and **Neo-orthodoxy** states that the Bible only *becomes* the Word of God in certain instances.² It may be shown that the orthodox view comes from of the Scriptures themselves.

Second Timothy 3:16 states that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God....” The word for inspiration in this text is “theopneustos.” Theo-pneustos literally translated means “God-breathed.” This presents a parallel. Since it takes breathe to give speech this is what occurred divinely as God spoke His Word to, through, and for man. It was God’s breathe that was the originating source of the Word of God, the words in the Bible.

Second Peter 1:21 refers to the writers of Scripture as “borne along” by the Holy Spirit in their writing. Men spoke and yet the impulse and direction were from God, originating with Him.³ Since God in these two passages is clearly declared to be the source of Scripture then the Scriptures are said to be inerrant and infallible. They are infallible in that they possess “an indefectible authority.”⁴ They can never fail in their judgments and statements. They are inerrant in that they possess the quality of freedom from error. They are in perfect accord with the truth.⁵ This is basic biblical orthodoxy adhered to by the majority of the church for many generations. A basic premise in this view is that if the Bible cannot be trusted regarding what it says about itself then for what may it be trusted?

The views of Karl Barth on Scripture have rightly been labeled Neo-Orthodox. Barth believed there to exist a vast unapproachable chasm between God and man. His view of God was ultra-transcendent. That transcendent emphasis ultimately led to his

² Geisler, p 19.

³ Thomas Paul Simmons, *A Systematic Study of Bible Doctrine*, (Clarksville, TN: Bible Baptist Books, 1979), p 39.

⁴ Edward J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Erdmans, 1981), p 113.

⁵ Young, *Thy Word is Truth*, p 113.

treatment of God's Word as uncertain in historicity and vaguely applied in his belief of the Word only *becoming* the Word for the individual. His belief that Scripture contained merely a record of divine truth and not actually the revelation of God led him to reject the orthodox inerrant view of Scripture. Although Scripture may from time to time for Barth *become* the Word of God for the individual, and although Scripture must have a close affinity with God who gave it, Barth would never present a positive description of a relationship between God and Scripture outside of his denial of inerrancy. With regard to Second Timothy 3:16 Barth would say, "all that we have to say can consist only in an underlining and delimiting of the inaccessible mystery of the free grace in which the Spirit of God is present and active...."⁶ Yeah, right. Barth's emphasis on the incapacity of human language to describe God combined with his insistence on the fallibility of Scripture as a human document has caused some to label his viewpoint biblical docetism. Truth therefore may not be known. Scriptures are removed from the possibility of intellectual inspection because the events of the Bible exist not in actual history but in the realm of a supra-history for Barth. According to him, orthodoxy had allowed the human aspect of the Bible to be overshadowed by the divine aspect of the Bible because in orthodoxy there is no room left for error on the part of man (something Barth highlighted).⁷ Language for Barth cannot accurately tell us about God even in the Bible because it proceeds through flawed human instruments and the Bible is no more than a collection of language orchestrated by man. Man in all his limitations cannot reach near to God for Barth and therefore man can never really know God's truth. True to his leanings, Barth expounded the Gospels in a way that treated them like a loosely

⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word*, (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 1974), p 195.

⁷ Montgomery, *God's Inerrant Word*, p 237.

organized nonfictional novel.⁸ He would speak of miraculous stories in Scripture as little more than mere alarms for humanity.⁹ He would lay claim that his views were in line with the view of Scripture itself, with the teaching of some of the early Church Fathers, and with the position of the Reformers. An examination of his written and spoken view reflects that this is not exactly the case. Thus his views were labeled neo-orthodox.

In an astonishing turn of events for contemporary biblical scholasticism, there is a movement afoot in the ranks of evangelical believers reverting back toward the unfounded biblical positions of Karl Barth. Terms like Emerging Church and Open Source Theology are found in connection with what appears to be more and more like a neo-Barthian movement among anti-orthodox theologians and pastors. Brian McLaren, Andrew Perriman and Rob Bell are among the names that head the list in this development. Their cavalier approach to and use of Scripture is strikingly similar to that of Karl Barth. As Barth proclaimed theology without basing that theology on a dependable supporting text, so goes the emerging church in an embrace of mysticism and experience over the plain text of Scripture. This is clearly a problem.

One example of this watered down Bibliology is found the work of Rob Bell in his book *Velvet Elvis*. In this book, the importance of the Bible is declared to be little more than a book that inspires something beautiful. He refers to the Bible as amazing, deep, and engaging as a collection of writings but the words infallible, inerrant or sufficient are noticeably missing.¹⁰ Bell even goes so far as to question whether or not the

⁸ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p 90.

⁹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1963), p 67.

¹⁰ David A. DeWitt, *Velvet Elvis; Repainting the Christian Faith, A Review*, September 2005, Available online from: www.relationalconcepts.org/long%20topics/Velvet%20Elvis%20Review.pdf, [Accessed November 17, 2008], p 4.

Bible was “the best God could do.”¹¹ The worse thing about *Velvet Elvis* is the apparent disregard for what Scripture says that Scripture is.

Rob Bell seems sincerely inclined to help people who are immersed in a pluralistic postmodern culture wrestle with the big questions of life. In this opinion he is a sincere leader and some of the points he makes about the failures of the contemporary church are very true. To those things we should listen. Unfortunately he approaches his task unarmed, with a less than healthy view of the importance of Scripture. His position is neo-orthodox in nature. It doesn't really matter whether or not the biblical facts are factual or not for Bell. What one feels and what people glean together in community over dialogue about the Bible is what matters most. Individual experience is akin to Barth's individualization of the Bible *becoming* the Word of God for the individual. Once it becomes the Word of God then the individual would presumably live out that truth. This subjectivity is a clear Barthian approach to Scripture and a departure from orthodoxy that follows what the Bible says about what the Bible contains.

Bell appears to question the authority of Scripture at every turn. He downplays first century believers' understanding of the importance of the resurrection, Jesus as the Way, and holds a loose view of the process of canonization.¹² His less than biblical view of the Bible has him even questioning how to become a Christian stating, contrary to Scripture in John 1:12; 3:12-18; 5:24; 8:24; 14:6; Ro. 10:9-10; Titus 3:5; I Jn. 5:12, that becoming a Christian is not about receiving Christ and that forgiveness is true for everyone.¹³ These statements sound like universalism and more Barthian than Barth.

¹¹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p 44.

¹² Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, pp 164, 180, 185.

¹³ Ibid, pp 109, 146.

Francis Schaeffer was speaking prophetically when he stated that evangelicalism was straddling a watershed of critical importance with the issue of biblical authority.¹⁴ With the emerging church, biblical scholasticism has taken a nosedive away from biblical authority. An elementary issue is raised here once again. If we cannot depend on the Bible to inform us as to the kind of book it is then how can we depend on it for anything else?

CONTINUITY WITH HISTORIC TEACHING

Karl Barth's dialectic approach to Scripture with a version of truth that is both yes and no at the same time, leaving a *tertium quid* to be potentially discovered, is alive and well in the emerging church. In the open source theology of Andrew Perriman truth is also wide open to exploration, dialogue and reinterpretation.¹⁵ What is true and important with Scripture is determined by the community in dialogue. Truth is open-ended and incomplete, much like the alleged open Canon in the theology of Karl Barth who leaves space for God to speak beyond what is in His written Word.

Open Source Theology is a departure from the certainty of Scripture as a complete revelation of God's Will for man. Subjectivism and individual interpretation rules the world of Open Source Theology. This concept (open source theology) is taken from the principle of open source software where open source developers are presumably the good guys, making their software available to the masses for free use and personal manipulation. This is contrasted with the *bad guy* producers like Microsoft who develop, market, retail and copyright their software. Open Source theologians who develop a

¹⁴ Scott R. Burson and Jerry L. Walls, *C.S. Lewis & Francis Schaeffer; Lessons for a New Century from the Most Influential Apologists of Our Time*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), p113.

¹⁵ WordPress, August 29, 2006, *Open Source Theology*, Available online from:<http://carefultought.wordpress.com/2006/08/29/open-sourceany-source-theology/>, [Accessed 111708]

community theology through dialogue are touted as the good guys where studied orthodox theologians are characterized as closed to new ideas and overly protective of their theological turf.

This appeal to the masses amounts to truth that is whatever you make it yourself. What is true for you is true and this is not to be hampered by the authoritarian dictates of Scripture. Such an open-ended use of the Bible is a byproduct of both Barthian and Emergent Bibliology. Barth's dialectic method in the context of community where truth is contingent on the individual's reception of that truth is a postmodern component of the emerging church. The experience of the individual appears to be more important than biblical facts. Personal experience defines truth. One striking example from Bell's book is his interaction with a couple who wanted to get married in the beauty of nature but they didn't want anything about God or Jesus to be mentioned in their ceremony. Bell performed just such a ceremony for them calling it "one of the most sacred things he was ever a part of" and stating further that his friends, "in the deepest sense resonated with Jesus" whether they acknowledged it or not.¹⁶ My response is, "What?!" Any resonation with Jesus was completely and decidedly missing. The experience was all that mattered to Bell, not that his friends rejected God's love for them and His plan for their lives through the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Barth's view of supra-history (*Geschichte*) is well known. He did not consider the text of Scripture to be historically verifiable and accurate. Historical events mentioned in the Bible were a part of something mysteriously and unreachably *above* history, not a part of history itself. The Emerging Church treats Scripture in the same vain. The Bible is viewed as a human product where an understanding of it has consequently become vague

¹⁶ Bell, pp 77, 92.

and unknown for the Bells. "I grew up thinking that we've figured out the Bible," Kristen Bell says, "that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means."¹⁷ This is a telling statement. Truth is vague and ultimately unreachable in this *new way* of looking at the Bible. This hardly seems an improvement over orthodoxy.

The Scriptures are viewed as more human than divine. Like Bell and others in the Emerging Church movement, Karl Barth did not give a list or even a sampling of errors or humanness in the text of Scripture and a joint lack of concern for this deficiency in dependability is equally shared among these two groups (neo-orthodoxy and emergents). Emerging Church leader Andrew Perriman also approaches the Bible as though it were a *profane text*. According to him, superimposing a meaning from above is to be avoided and a process of deconstruction for reconstruction afterward is an approach to Scripture for the emerging movement.¹⁸ Such deconstructionist thinking can also be found with Bell in his view of an "open-ended Bible."¹⁹ Wittgensteinian discussion of terminologies is set forth in a manner that rejects a perspicuous view of Scripture interpreting Scripture. All interpretive moorings are lost in such a context. Simple meanings of terms like *work*, *rest* and *holy* are posited as vast puzzles to Bell²⁰ who would only need to observe how God uses these terms in His Word to discover the definitions. Instead, his Barthian rejection of the literal nature of Scripture leads to open-ended questioning of every jot and tittle. These kinds of statements and questions with Bell and Perriman sound very familiar. They represent a renewal of the *tertium quid* consequences of Karl

¹⁷ Andy Crouch, Christianity Today Magazine Online, *The Emergent Mystique*, 11-01-04; Available Online From:<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=8>, [Accessed 111808].

¹⁸ Andrew Perriman, *10 Principles for reading the Bible in a Postmodern Context*, Otherways, In search of an emerging theology, Available Online from : <http://www.opensourcetheology.net/node/67>, [Accessed on 110308].

¹⁹ Bell, p 46.

²⁰ Ibid, p 46.

Barth theology whose “yes and no” dialectics were a key factor in a theology that never fully launched beyond the gravitational pull of liberalism from his younger days under Adolf von Harnack. The bottom line is this, for both Barth and Emergents, absolute truth is out of reach since their view of Scripture is equally watered down.

The perception of Scripture in the contemporary emerging church is based largely on a vague and debatable metaphorical view of the text. This metaphorical loose interpretation of Scripture as a product of man, with the added emphasis of theology by dialogue in community consensus, all fits neatly under what Kevin Vanhoozer has called *biblical body piercing*.²¹ Kevin’s “body piercing” is an apt metaphor for how the text is treated in a postmodern world with the lack of a concern for the natural sense of Scripture. In a postmodern view where everyone may have their own truth, the only truth is an individual or subjective truth by social consensus. Scripture does not hold its own literal sense according to these notions. The sense of Scripture is not determined by what it says of itself, or anything else, but is determined by those who read it. This is Barthian-like in his Word *becoming* approach to Scripture and this is emerging theology in their Neo-Barthian watered down view of experience over Scripture.

THE IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY CHURCH MINISTRY

An approach to Scripture that questions historical facts (Barth) or begins with a profane text (Perriman) and then prioritizes a metaphorical view of Scripture (Bell) does great damage to exegesis and hermeneutics (study of the meaning of the text and how to apply it). Just as Karl Barth believed that the Canon of Scripture was not closed (strictly

²¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002), p 281.

speaking) since God is always free to do what he pleases,²² so too does the emerging church qualify Scripture as less than complete since truth goes on and on leading to more and more truth ad infinitum where “the bottom is always out of reach.”²³

One example of the kind of poor exegesis and worse hermeneutics this generates is found in Rob Bell’s book *Velvet Elvis*. A principle gleaned for believers is that *God has faith in you, in your inherent abilities*. Here is an upside down reinterpretation of the relationship between God and man that merits concerned attention. Bell’s foundation for such a statement comes from his extrapolation of Peter walking on the water and then beginning to sink after looking more to the waves than to the Master. The erroneous conclusion of Bell is that Jesus rebuked Peter for not believing in himself; Peter simply did not realize his own potential.²⁴ My response to this interpretation is, “Are you kidding me?” These are the kinds of disconnected results to be expected when the actuality of the biblical text is called into question. When the Bible is seen as merely a human product and merely the expression of the spiritual experience of God’s people (i.e. record rather than revelation a la Barth) then all metaphorical options are up for grabs. The text can say anything to anyone. It appears that both Barth and Emerging leaders simply ignore a basic rule of exegesis and hermeneutics: *a text cannot mean what it never could have meant to its author or his readers*.²⁵ All guidelines and all sense of Scripture interpreting Scripture is set aside in such a climate. This foundation for living biblically has as much dependability as no foundation at all.

²² Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce Demarest Editors, *Challenges to Inerrancy; A Theological Response*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), p 125.

²³ Bell, p 33.

²⁴ Bell, p 133,134.

²⁵ Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p 74.

Apologist and Biblical scholar John Warwick Montgomery has rightly said that in a generation known as postmodern where a plurality of worldviews are colliding, “an appeal to common facts is the only preservative against philosophical solipsism and religious anarchy.”²⁶ The factual approach by the Lord Jesus Christ with Scripture should suffice for our generation also. His appeal to the historicity of Scripture is fundamentally more dependable than both Barthian dialectic and emerging metaphorical evasion of historicity. Jesus often pointed to the Scriptures with the simple phrase, “it is written,” attesting to the plain revelatory nature of the written Word of God. It seems amazing and is certainly alarming that the Emerging Church is missing this fundamental approach.

Karl Barth was antipathetic to apologetics, and the emerging church having no foundation upon which to raise apologetic issues with the world also avoids it putting in its place mere equal-footing *dialogue*. In this emphasis on mere dialogue believers have nothing but equal footing opinions to suggest to unbelievers of other religions. This is a position contrary to Biblical reality.

Barth looked for the text to impress itself on his listeners so that they would have their own experience of what could become God’s Word to them. Emerging leaders also emphasize experience over a dependable foundation of Scripture. Both Barth and Emergents seem to have forgotten that when we argue the truth of Scripture based on facts or feelings outside of Scripture, we are elevating those facts, feelings and experiences to a position of greater authority than Scripture itself.²⁷ No clear exegesis or hermeneutics can come of such a position. No dependable interpretation is possible with such a view. Truth is clearly out of reach in both scenarios.

²⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, *Faith Founded on Fact: Essays in Evidential Apologetics*, (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 1978), p 119.

²⁷ John Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, (New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1994), p 19.

CONCLUSION

As many have pointed out, the inspiration of Scripture is a primary issue even though the precise nature of that inspiration may be secondary. However, when a belief in inspiration is qualified with metaphor, supra-history, and rejecting perspicuity, the reality and applicability of inspiration is quickly watered down. Both Karl Barth and Emerging Church leaders view Scripture not as something historically verifiable or historically important but as something that may merely *become* the Word of God for the individual. This Neo-orthodox view heavily waters down what the Bible means and is not at all a new way of looking at the Bible. It is in fact an old and liberal way of looking at the Bible with very poor and questionable results.

Cornelius Van Til would often remind his students that there are no brute facts. Reality does not exist as uninterpreted fact but exists created by a God who desires that “we think His thoughts after Him.”²⁸ Barth missed this when he became lost in God’s transcendence over immanence. The emerging church is missing it in an overactive leaning on God’s immanence in relationship over His authoritative transcendence. This overactive sense of God’s immanence is seen in Bell’s (and others’) view that God has an incredibly high view of man. He is so close and doting that man can do anything in this love context. Man is therefore quite capable of reinventing Scripture and interpreting it in any new ways he chooses.

In Barth’s lopsided sense of God’s transcendence man loses his grasp on Biblical truth because language is insufficient and God is too elevated to grasp. Both Barth and the emerging church seem to be making the same error yet from different imbalances. Luther referred to this error as man being *incurvatus in se*, curved upon himself. Man

²⁸ Vanhoozer, p 322.

tends to think of his own views, perspective and interests as more important than anyone else's.²⁹ Both Barth and Emergent leaders seem curved in upon themselves in their lopsided viewpoints, one weighted toward transcendence and the other weighted toward immanence. Either imbalance leads to a skewed view of Scripture as the inerrant and infallible Word of God. Both paths lead man in the way of his own choosing over God's choosing.

I am all for looking at the Word of God with fresh eyes and hearts. I am convinced that one of the worse things we can do with Scripture is hold onto our preconceptions about the things of which the Bible speaks. There is always more to learn. But the simple and foundational principles laid out in what the Bible says about the Bible, if tossed aside, open up all imaginations and metaphorical interpretations where nothing means anything any longer. That is clearly a less than solid foundation and believers should be aware that authors that promote such things should be taken with a huge grain of salt. This issue is a clear and present emerging problem in the church. Readers of these authors should be careful to sift through what is biblical and what is a Barthian rehash of liberal leanings. Yes we should listen to their outcry that Christianity has fallen short of a vibrant and biblical faith but to follow their lead into the direction of what will work instead of what has God said can only end in a dead end. The liberal movement that started a hundred years ago reflects this clearly and the emerging movement is following in their steps with God's Word. McLaren's book *A Generous Orthodoxy* is a prime example. There is meat to be gleaned there but much sand to sift through first. His stated intentional lack of clarity in order to be provocative and his belief that clarity is overrated

²⁹ John Warwick Montgomery, *Where is History Going?*, (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 2001), p 32.

is not a position of “God hath said” but sounds more like “Hath God said?”³⁰ A more clear path to making truth alive and vital would be to follow the biblical model of making truth as clear as possible like both Paul and Luke sought to accomplish (I Cor. 15:3; Lk. 1:1-4).

What is stated as a new way of looking at the Bible for the Emerging Church is actually an old way of neo-orthodoxy at least and liberalism at worst. This is not helpful in biblical study but leaves the reader and interpreter helpless in the discovery of truth. Such an approach lacks clarity, jettisons apologetics, and dismantles exegesis and hermeneutics. Let the reader beware. If we do not get our view of the Bible correct then we can get little right after that. Let’s take the good offered by the emerging church but leave their approach to scripture far behind us.

³⁰ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), p 158.

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