

*A Review of Mark Driscoll: Commendations and Cautions*  
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The “Emerging Church Movement” is, by postmodern definition, a difficult movement to define. In more recent days it appears that the Emerging Church movement is dividing along the lines of a left wing (embracing doctrinal liberalism) and a right wing (embracing doctrinal orthodoxy). An example of Emerging Church on the left would be Brian McLaren. On the right would be Mark Driscoll.

This lecture will offer a review and some reflections on the ministry of Mark Driscoll as expressed in two of his recent books, *The Radical Reformation* (Zondervan, 2004) and *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.* (Zondervan, 2006). It also draws on a feature article on Driscoll in the September 2007 issue of *Christianity Today* under the title of “Pastor Provocateur.”

Driscoll’s ministry has been increasingly embraced and promoted by mainstream, new evangelicals, including some Southern Baptists. He has spoken at John Piper’s Pastors’ Conference. Piper has also preached in Driscoll’s church. Driscoll is a council member of D. A. Carson and Tim Keller’s “Gospel Coalition.” Driscoll was a featured speaker at a 2007 conference on the emerging church movement (The “Convergent Conference”) held at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and is slated to speak at the 2009 Student Conference at Southeastern. At the recent “Building Bridges” Conference on reformed theology in SBC life, Southeastern President Danny Aiken noted that while he was unwilling to work with those on the left end of the emerging movement spectrum (like Brian McLaren, Tony Evans, and Doug Pagitt), he was more than willing to work with men like Driscoll. Ed Stetzer of the North American Mission Board and Lifeway is on the board of directors of Driscoll’s Acts 29 Church Planting Network. Driscoll also has several books that will soon be released by Crossway, a respected publisher of neo-evangelical books. Of course, not all evangelicals have embraced Driscoll and his message. John MacArthur, for example, issued a harsh critique of Driscoll in a December 2006 article on the *Pulpit Magazine* blog. There is no doubt that Driscoll has already had a large impact on many younger pastors and church planters

and he is poised to have an even greater impact on evangelicalism. How should we evaluate his ministry?

### **Biography**

We begin by attempting to understand the man and his story. Who is Mark Driscoll? He is the founding Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington. This is an alternative church in an alternative town. Driscoll founded the church in 1996 when he was in his mid-20s. He proudly notes that he planted the church having never attended seminary or Bible college and having never been a member of any church.

Driscoll, born in North Dakota in 1970, grew up in a hardscrabble neighborhood in Seattle as a nominal Catholic. He was president of his class in high school, played baseball, and edited his school paper. He went to college at Washington State, where he was converted after reading an NIV Bible a high school friend gave him when he was seventeen. The friend, a pastor's daughter, later became his wife.

Mars Hill has grown from humble beginnings to have attendance over 4,000, and Driscoll has expressed hopes that it would eventually grow to over 20,000 in attendance. He started out trying to plant a "Gen X" Church, but later jettisoned the whole notion of generational targeting. His church later became identified with the Emerging Church Movement. The story of his planting of Mars Hill, with all its ups and downs, is told in the book *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.*

Driscoll sees himself more as a cross-cultural missionary rather than merely as a Pastor. As early as 1995 he started traveling and speaking with Leadership Network, out of which has come the so-called "emerging church movement." Around 2001 that group became *Terra Nova* and then *Emergent Village*. At this time Driscoll broke with other emerging church leaders over doctrine. Driscoll also started the Acts 29 Network, a church-planting ministry network, seeking to start like-minded "missional" churches.

### **Driscoll's Views on Ecclesiology**

Driscoll sees four different churches models, relating to three key areas: Church; Culture; and Gospel.<sup>1</sup> There are three typical models:

1. Gospel plus Culture minus Church = Parachurch;
2. Church plus Culture minus Gospel = Liberalism;
3. Church plus Gospel minus Culture = Fundamentalism.

Finally, there is a fourth option which Driscoll advocates:

4. Gospel plus Culture plus Church = Reformission.

Driscoll wants to combine a clear gospel message from a defined church that is relevant to contemporary culture. He wants to be “culturally liberal yet theologically conservative.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Commendations**

Our critique of Driscoll begins with six areas in which his ministry is to be commended:

#### **1. Driscoll claims to be reformed in theology.**

Driscoll identifies his theology as reformed, and he stresses the sovereignty of God in salvation. He notes he came to these convictions after preaching through Romans at Mars Hill. He commends reading and embracing the doctrines of men like the Puritans, John Piper, and J. I. Packer.

#### **2. He rejects postmodernism.**

In *Radical Reformission*, Driscoll describes the rush of young pastors to jump on “the present-day postmodern bandwagon.”<sup>3</sup> He denounces

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<sup>1</sup> Driscoll claims to borrow his views on the merging of Church, Culture, and Gospel from Lesslie Newbigin. See *Radical Reformission*, pp. 11-23 and *Confessions*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Confessions*, p. 16.

postmodernism as “basically a philosophical junk drawer in which people toss anything and everything they cannot make sense of. If you ask four philosophers what postmodernity is, you will get five answers.”<sup>4</sup> As a philosophy major in college who made a name for himself discussing “postmodernism” on the Leadership Network circuit, Driscoll has more than a passing acquaintance with postmodern theology, but he rejects any uncritical embrace of these perspectives as dangerous for orthodox theology.

### **3. He is openly critical of emerging church liberalism.**

In *Confessions of a Reformissionary Rev.*, Driscoll distinguishes between “*emergent* liberal churches” and his own “*emerging* evangelical churches.”<sup>5</sup> He describes the “emergent church” as “the latest version of liberalism.”<sup>6</sup> He notes in particular the following ways in which the *emergent* church has drifted from the gospel:

- a. In its rejection of the penal, substitutionary view of atonement;
- b. In its resistance clearly to denounce homosexual acts as sinful. Driscoll references here Brian McLaren’s infamous quote in the February 7, 2005 *Time Magazine* cover article on “The 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America.” When asked about his views on gay marriage, McLaren replied, “You know what, the thing that breaks my heart is that there’s no way I can answer it without hurting someone on either side.” Driscoll rightly notes, “Sadly, by failing to answer, McLaren was unwilling to say what the Bible says.”<sup>7</sup>
- c. In its rejection of the concept of a literal, eternal torment in hell for the wicked.
- d. In its embracing of open theism.
- e. In its rejection of Biblically defined gender roles.

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<sup>3</sup> *Radical Reformission*, p. 161.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Confessions*, pp. 21-23. Emphasis added.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199, n. 7.

Here is one typical jab he takes at the left wing of the emerging church in *Radical Reformation*, in discussing his church's efforts to reach young men in Seattle with the gospel:

In Seattle young men are, generally, pathetic. They are unlikely to go to church, get married, have children or do much of anything else that smacks of being responsible. But they are known to be highly skilled at smoking pot, masturbating, playing video games, playing air guitar, free-loading, and having sex with their significant others. However, the emerging-church massage parlor tactics of labyrinth-walking by candlelight will do little more than increase the pool of extra's for television's *Will and Grace*.<sup>8</sup>

**4. He rejects homosexuality and fornication.**

**5. He rejects egalitarian notions of church leadership.**

As an example, he chides those emergent churches that have jettisoned preaching in the name of egalitarianism among believers:

Some churches have gone so far as to replace a preaching monologue from a recognized leader to a spiritual dialogue among a group of peers who refuse to acknowledge any leader in authority over them. This makes about as much sense as shooting your doctor and gathering with the other patients in the lobby to speculate about what is wrong with one another and randomly write out prescriptions for one another in the name of equality.<sup>9</sup>

Driscoll stresses the need for strong, purposeful pastoral leadership.

**6. He affirms expositional and doctrinal preaching and teaching.**

Driscoll's preaching method is verse by verse Biblical exposition. He preaches long sermons that directly address doctrine.

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<sup>8</sup> *Radical Reformation*, p. 184.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 173.

## Concerns

Alongside these affirmations, however, we must also offer the following six cautions:

### 1. Personal conduct and language.

This is likely the most controversial area with Driscoll. This critique first came to light when Don Miller in *Blue Like Jazz* (a cult classic among emerging church types) referred to Driscoll as “Mark the cussing preacher.” Driscoll’s language is often coarse and irreverent.

*Christianity Today* quotes a *Seattle-Times* article that noted Driscoll often “comes off as a smart-aleck former frat boy.” It proceeds to say that Driscoll’s “sharp tongue” is “his greatest strength and his glaring weakness.” Of course, Driscoll justifies his language as an attempt to avoid sanctified preacher talk and to speak in a manner that unchurched people can understand.

Driscoll also is particularly notorious for his frank discussion of sexual topics. One of his first breakthrough message series that drew large crowds was one on the Song of Songs.

In *Radical Reformation* he caused waves by advocating the consumption of alcohol (without drunkenness) including the brewing of beer. He notes three views on alcohol: (1) *prohibitionist* who think that “alcohol itself is evil”; (2) *abstentionists* who think Christians should avoid alcohol so as “not to cause anyone to stumble”; and (3) *moderationists* who say “drinking is not a sin and that each person must let the Christian conscience guide them without judging others.”<sup>10</sup>

In this area, in particular, Driscoll parodies those who object to alcohol consumption as unbiblical, frivolous, and narrow-minded. He does not address serious and conscientious objections to alcohol use by believers not merely based on simplistic or naïve exegesis or prudishness but in light of the great harm that has been done to individuals and society through alcohol abuse. Any pastor knows the damage done by alcohol in the lives of people.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149-50.

Driscoll's in-your-face advocacy of alcohol use does not fairly address this issue. The chapters of *Radical Reformation* feature profiles of Mars Hill members, including a man who is founder and president of a brewery who even advocates drinking by pregnant women, stating, "With regard to the fetus, my mother drank during her pregnancy, as did most mothers in that era, without undue harm. I don't believe that moderate drinking is any threat to the unborn."<sup>11</sup> Other members profiled, by the way, include a tattoo artist and a rock-n-roll band manager.

Phil Johnson in an October 25, 2006 article on his *Pyromaniacs* blog made the following trenchant observation on Driscoll:

But I don't think his perpetually coarse language in the pulpit and his apparent preoccupation with off-color terms and ribald subject matter are merely minor flaws in an otherwise healthy ministry. It is a *serious* shortcoming.

No, it's actually worse than that, because it blatantly violates the clear principle of Ephesians 5:3-4 ("3 But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; 4 neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks."). It is shameful (v. 12) and therefore a reproach. It's characteristic of the old man and one of the fleshly behaviors we are expressly commanded to put aside (Colossians 3:8: "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth."). Scripture even seems to indicate that unwholesome language signals an impure mind (Matthew 12:34: "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."). And yet this seems to be a deliberate, calculated, and persistent practice of Driscoll's. It is practically the chief trademark of his style.

Many evangelicals are more than a little bothered by Driscoll's irreverent speaking and writing style. Equally disturbing is his advocacy of questionable practices and the dangers this poses for the preservation of holiness and separateness in the Christian life.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 156.

## 2. Advocacy of cultural engagement.

Driscoll urges Christians in general and pastors in particular to be fully engaged with contemporary culture. He notes they should do this not merely in the name of “entertainment” but in the name of “education.”<sup>12</sup> He says, “As a missionary you will need to watch television shows and movies, listen to music, read books, peruse magazines, attend events, join organizations, surf websites, and befriend people that you might not like to better understand people that Jesus loves.”<sup>13</sup>

He does note the dangers of getting this close to worldliness:

All this is to day that worldliness is a sin, and before we naively seek to be relevant to a dying world, we must realize the dangers before us and proceed with our eyes wide open and our hands ready for spiritual war.<sup>14</sup>

He frequently chides young pastors, particularly in the emerging church, who have fallen into moral error.

Driscoll is more critical, however, of what he calls “fundamental sectarianism” which he denounces as being at least as harmful as “liberal syncretism.” Driscoll argues:

To let go of culture is fundamentalist sectarianism. Sectarianism is huddling up God’s people to enjoy each other and Jesus without carrying about anyone who is lost and dying outside of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

He concludes, “Eventually, sectarians become so dated and removed from people in the world that their churches are little more than museums

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<sup>12</sup> *Radical Reformation*, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.



dedicated to the past, with dumb reader boards outside that sound like silly telegraphs from an alien planet.”<sup>16</sup>

In evaluating Driscoll’s method, however, the question remains: Is such cultural engagement really required for effective Biblical ministry? Is this really what Paul was advocating in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23? What of his call in 2 Corinthians 6:17 to “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. And do not touch what is unclean and I will receive you”?

Though complimentary of Driscoll’s soteriology, John MacArthur notes that this does not make up for his “infatuation with the vulgar aspects of contemporary society.” He adds, “The lifestyle he models—especially with his easy going familiarity with all this world’s filthy fads—practically guarantees that [his disciples] will make little progress toward authentic sanctification.”<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Doctrinal drift in spiritual experience.**

Driscoll is a non-cessationist. This is very strikingly presented in *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.* Driscoll describes confrontations with the demon possessed, miraculous dreams and visions, words of knowledge, and even a dream that came to him from Satan. Such outspoken advocacy for extra-Biblical spiritual experiences raise serious questions about Driscoll’s understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture.

### **4. Doctrinal drift in Ecclesiology.**

Driscoll speaks of people become part of the church before they become Christians. He also speaks of non-Christians “discipling” Christians in the ways of the world. This lack of clarity on the boundaries of the church is confusing.

### **5. Doctrinal drift in Manhood and Womanhood.**

Driscoll affirms what he calls a “moderate” complementarian view of gender roles in the church. This means that he rejects women pastors and elders and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> As quoted in *Christianity Today*, September 2007.

affirms male leadership in the marriage relationship. Driscoll advocates male spiritual leadership in the home, and he even endorses and encourages those in his church to be fruitful and multiply. One might even say that Driscoll puts forward a view of Christian manhood on steroids. He writes of carrying a hand-gun, watching “Ultimate Fighting,” brewing his own beer, and of his disdain for limp-wristed wimps.

Though he rejects outright egalitarian (liberal) views and embraces complementarian (moderate) views, he contrasts this with what he calls hierarchical (conservative) views. So, he notes that at Mars Hill, “All church ministries are open to qualified men and women, with the singular exception of elder-pastor, which is only opened to qualified men. Women can be deacons, teach, lead worship, serve communion, and be in full time paid ministry.”<sup>18</sup>

The danger here is with Driscoll’s definition of “complementarian” roles. One wonders if in future years Driscoll and his church will not move further in the egalitarian direction despite all the macho bravado. For warnings in this area, read Wayne Grudem’s *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism?* (Crossway, 2006). Driscoll has clearly rejected what he calls a “hierarchical” view on the roles of men and women but offers no Biblical justification for this move. The hierarchical view Driscoll rejects is, in fact, what many evangelicals merely refer to as the true complementarian position.

## **6. Myth of the moral neutrality of medium and means.**

This is perhaps the most important caution. Driscoll urges *a neutrality of means* view of ministry. That is, his view seems to be one of, “It doesn’t matter how you get them to come as long as they come,” or “you have to catch the fish before you can clean him.” He maintains that the gospel can be mediated through high, folk or pop culture. He notes, “While each of these cultural forms can mediate the gospel (arguably some more easily than others), this fact is often overlooked because people tend to attach a moral value to the cultural form they prefer.”<sup>19</sup> Driscoll, thus, sees little difference

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<sup>18</sup> *Confessions*, p. 111.

<sup>19</sup> *Radical Reformation*, p. 99.

in what his church is doing and what Bill Hybels is doing at Willow Creek. In his view they have the same goal (evangelism) but merely use different methods. Also, Willow Creek is “attractional” (focus on getting people in) while Mars Hill is more “missional” (focus on sending people out).

Driscoll notes that the growing criticism between these two camps (“attractional” or seeker sensitive and “missional” or emerging church) is unnecessary “because they are working for the same goal—the reaching of lost people for Jesus—but simply using different methods, methods that are complementary, not contradictory.”<sup>20</sup> He adds, “Jesus’ incarnation is in itself missional.”<sup>21</sup> This conviction leads Driscoll to offer praise of the Puritans alongside Billy Graham, Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, and John Piper. Many will find this more than mildly discordant. For Driscoll the end (“reaching people for Jesus”) justifies various means. What is lacking here, however, is a sound evaluation as to whether or not the means themselves are Biblically faithful.

This is perhaps most evident in the area of music. Driscoll is, of course, an advocate for rock music. Not just rock music, however, and certainly not watered-down contemporary Christian music, but hard, edgy, alternative rock music. His church even sponsors secular rock concerts at the church owned Paradox Theater. He is proud of the fact that his church’s worship bands are respected by the alternative music scene in Seattle and that one of his drummers is part of a popular Punk Rock band.

One might wish, however, that Driscoll would read Dan Lucarini’s book *Why I Left Contemporary Christian Music* in which the author notes that rock music “is clearly and unequivocally associated with immorality, especially promiscuous and adulterous sex, glorification of drugs, and rebellion against authority.”<sup>22</sup> Lucarini thereby raises the question: “With what moral dimension is my favourite music associated?”<sup>23</sup> Lucarini

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<sup>20</sup> *Confessions*, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Dan Lucarini, *Why I Left the Contemporary Christian Music Movement* (Evangelical Press, 2002): p. 91.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

concludes: “We should not accept just any worldly method to reach the lost. Instead we must discern carefully what methods are acceptable for use in the kingdom of God.”<sup>24</sup>

In reading Driscoll I could not help but think of Joel Beeke’s little booklet *A Loving Encouragement to Flee Worldliness* in which he writes to Christian parents that refusing to love the world “includes turning away from worldly music: hard rock, soft rock, Christian contemporary music, and many forms of today’s music which either in their lyrics or in their beat promote the lusts of the flesh. Of all the music that we and our children listen to, we must ask: Can I pray over this music? Does it glorify God or ignite fleshly lusts? Does it pass the test of Philippians 4:8, being ‘honest, pure, lovely, and of good report.’? If it encourages lust, rid yourself of it.”<sup>25</sup> Ministry means are not neutral. The very means we use in ministry communicate a spiritual message.

### **Conclusion**

Driscoll is a very gifted and able young man, but he holds ideas that are dangerous to the faith in the long term. He sees himself as a missionary to culture in contrast to fundamentalists who avoid culture. The problem is that Driscoll both overestimates his own ability to use culture as a gospel tool and underestimate the culture’s corrosive impact on those who immerse themselves in it. Many young Calvinistic Pastors are prone to jump on the “Reformation” bandwagon as the latest “next big thing.” We should, however, heed John’s warning: “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God” (1 John 4:1).

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> Joel R. Beeke, *A Loving Encouragement to Flee Worldliness* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2002): p. 4.