

## TRUTH & THE EMERGENT CHURCH

INTRO: I am in a subject that is far too big for me. I listened to Ravi Zacharias and pretty well drowned in the words he was using on this subject. This subject involves things like epistemology and pre modernism, modernism and post modernism. When I went to Bible school a certain teacher who had become enamored with present trends of higher education in Bible schools gave us an assignment on epistemology. I had never even heard of the word before that I could remember. When I was done, I felt I knew little more than when I started.

Basically, epistemology has to do with the question: How do we know things. That sounds like a typical university type question. Recently I read an article in Chuck Missler's, Koinonia House magazine. It was entitled, "Understanding the Emergent Church". It caught my attention. And in the first brief paragraph he says that to understand the Emergent Church one must understand the cultural trend in epistemology. Then he explains what epistemology is. He says, "Epistemology is a fifty cent word meaning 'the study of truth or how we learn truth.'" The article said that to understand the emergent church, one has to understand how our new generation understands truth, and there we have a very critical subject as far as the Bible is concerned.

Well, trying to understand the emergent church and what it is like trying to understand post modernism. Both are relatively new concepts. In an internet article by Matt Slick, from the *Christian Apology and Research Ministry* comes this definition of the Emerging Church, "The Emerging Church is a movement that claims to be Christian. The term 'Emerging Church' is used to describe a broad, controversial movement that seeks to use culturally sensitive approaches to reach the postmodern, un-churched population with the Christian message. Some Emerging Churches might use props such as candles, statues, and incense along with poems, open mics, and videos, etc. EC services are sometimes extremely informal, while others are more formal."

So, I want to look briefly this morning at the latest development in the church called the 'emergent' church. And what we want to see is how this is related to truth.

## I. DEFINITION OF TRUTH

One of, if not the central matter important to understand in order to grasp what the emerging church is all about is an understanding of its relationship to truth. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." One of the major philosophical questions that has plagued mankind is the question Pilate asked of Jesus, "What is truth?"

So we must begin with a definition of truth. The most basic definition of truth is this: *truth is that which corresponds to reality*. To grasp that, let me give you an example I have given you before. If I write down the number 1, that is not a truth. If I make a statement about the number 1, and say, "That is the number one", that statement corresponds to the number and therefore the statement is true. So, if I would write down,  $1+1$ , that is not a truth. There is nothing to correspond to  $1+1$ . But if I would write down  $1+1=2$ , that is a truth. The 2 corresponds to the  $1+1$ , and therefore it is true. If I would write down  $1+1=3$ , the three does not correspond to the  $1+1$ , therefore it is not the truth. But to understand such equations you have to first understand certain mathematical laws. It is the law of addition. There are other mathematical laws such as the law of subtraction or multiplication etc... These mathematical laws help you to arrive at the truth or to determine answers given to a mathematical problem are true.

Truth is of utmost importance in Scripture. Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." The truth is incredible! When we are able to face truth and do it in our own lives, it is incredibly freeing. But, we love darkness rather than light. Look with me at John 3 (read 16-21).

Truth has been and will continue to be one of the central issues for the Church. It has been in the past, is so in the present, and will continue to be so in the future. A.W. Tozer said many years ago, "There is a great decision that every denomination has to make sometime in the development of its history. Every church also has to make

it either at its beginning or a little later -- usually a little later. Eventually every board is faced with the decision and has to keep making it, not by one great decision made once for all, but by a series of little decisions adding up to one great big one. Every pastor has to face it and keep renewing his decision on his knees before God. Finally, every church member, every evangelist, every Christian has to make this decision. It is a matter of judgment upon that denomination, that church, that board, that pastor, that leader and upon their descendants and spiritual children. The question is this: Shall we modify the truth in doctrine or practice to gain more adherents? Or shall we preserve the truth in doctrine and practice and take the consequences?" So, the Church and truth is the matter before us this morning.

With that, let me introduce to you now the historical views of truth that we will be looking at shortly. We will have to get a little grasp of words like, modernism, pre modernism and post modernism. When we use words like modernism, pre modernism and post modernism we are talking about views held by people we call civilized. Civilized people recognize certain basic human rights etc...

Now one of the elements crucial in understanding pre modernism, modernism and post modernism is to understand how truth is viewed in these ages. With regard to truth, in my rather small understanding of this whole thing, there are two ways in which we can know truth. The first is through reasoning. This is the empirical method of coming to truth. In this method you get to know truth through experience. It is what we call the scientific method. We learn truth through the senses. We might also refer to this as that which we learn through general revelation. Psalm 19:1-6 speaks of this. As I see it, the importance of general revelation, which we learn to understand through reason and the senses, is that it teaches us how to live right with regard to our physical well-being.

The second method of coming to know truth is through divine revelation. Psalm 19:7-14 speaks of this. For us,

the Bible is our divine revelation. In the things of this world, we learn truth through the five senses and observation. But we cannot learn about our spiritual nature and our spiritual needs through this kind of investigation, therefore we need divine revelation. To understand our tendency to sin, the fact that we are sinners, and how to be saved from sin cannot be learned through general revelation, therefore God has given to us divine revelation. The importance of general revelation was to teach us how to live right with regard to our physical well being, but the importance of divine revelation is that it teaches us how to live right with regard to our spiritual well being.

So, before we go to the historical views of truth, let me briefly give you the important areas and briefly share how they view truth. To understand this we need to understand pre modernism, modernism and post modernism and how these sections of time viewed truth. Now let us say that the pre modern time ran up until about the 1600's. Some might say it was a little later. During this time, so called believers accepted both divine revelation and reason as ways of learning truth. Then came an era we know as modernism, and in this time man began to exalt reason above revelation. The scientific method began to rule and divine revelation began to be minimized. In the time of modernism, man left divine revelation and put all his marbles in the bag of science. And when reason was exalted too highly, and divine revelation was downplayed, it gave way to post modernism and an entirely new era was born. The post modernist became disillusioned with science, realizing there is more to life than scientific truth. And this new view said, "You cannot learn truth through reason or divine revelation." And that is where we are today in the secular world and in many, many churches.

So here is how it went: To pre modernism, to learn all the truth man needs to know, God has given us reason and revelation, or general revelation and special revelation. Then came modernism and reason was exalted above revelation. Revelation was minimized until it was eclipsed. Now you cannot know any spiritual truth for

certain, only scientific truth is certain. That then led to post modernism, the time into which we are now rapidly slipping. Post modernism says you actually can't know any truth at all.

So, we want to look at these separately as we look at the historical views of truth.

## II. VIEWS OF TRUTH

### A. Pre Modernism and Truth

Pre modernism would be from creation until about the 1600's. It would be hard to say when we became mostly modern. But it began to seep in, probably as early as around the 1600's. With regard to general revelation and truth, progress was slow in learning a lot of new, what we would call scientific discoveries. For hundreds of years modes of travel and methods of getting things done more efficiently grew ever so slowly.

However, with regard to special revelation, it was mostly held by the civilized world that the Bible was the truth needed in the spiritual realm. The article in Missler's magazine says, "A pre modern epistemology assumes that God exists and knows everything. Our knowledge and ability to learn truth depends on divine revelation from God Himself." He says that pre modernism was the first known epistemology.

### B. Modernism and Truth

When we come to the time we now known as modernism, say from the 1600 - 1750's we entered a time when the senses were elevated in learning and knowing truth. We entered the age of science. The word *science* basically means knowledge. Studies in health and medicine and other modern inventions such as motors and cars etc... sky rocketed. Go back 200 years to the time of Florence Nightingale and consider nursing and medical practices until today. The discoveries in medicine alone are staggering. Consider the industrial realm. Consider the first car made by Karl Benz in 1886, and then consider cars today. Consider the Wright

brothers and their first airplane flight, on December 17, 1903, and in less than 100 years, man flew to the moon!

And when knowledge had increased exponentially, something happened to man. Man began to exalt scientific methods of learning truth to such an extent, that he left divine revelation. Man left God. We thought that such things as believing in God were old fashioned and out of date. The way it seems to me is that learning and knowing truth through the senses was now exalted to such a measure that in the higher learning centers we began to reject spiritual truth. We had learned so much of what we call scientific data, that we dropped out on spiritual data.

What happened in this day of scientific discovery? We began to explain away God and evolution was born. It was born through so called science. The word 'science' occurs twice in the KJV, once in Daniel 1:4 and in 1 Timothy 6:20. In both those texts it basically means *knowledge*. Our word 'science' comes from a Latin word, *scientia*, which comes from the root *scio*, meaning *to know*. But turn to 1 Timothy 6:20 (read). The KJV speaks of *science falsely so called*. The NKJV says it is *false knowledge*. Now if there ever was a science or knowledge falsely so called, it is the teaching of evolution! It is neither scientific nor knowledge, for knowledge cannot be false.

And, what happened to the Church in the age of modernism? Well, the Church became so enamored with modernism and science, that when science, that is supposed science, discovered that everything had evolved rather than that it had been created, the Church sought to make room for evolution in the Bible. The Church became worldly in almost every way as well. We had entered an age we speak of as modernism.

### C. Post Modernism and Truth

That brings us to our present day and the view that is now sweeping through our schools, higher institutes of learning and even the Church. Pre modernism said both general and special revelation were important for man's well being. Truth must be gleaned from both realms. Reason

had its place, and so did revelation. Then came modernism and they said, reason rules, and divine revelation is obsolete. Man can discover all the truth he needs through empiricism and man can control his own destiny. He does not need God. This conclusion has led millions to a Christless eternity, including many men like Charles Darwin and their followers.

But the worst was yet to come. When man had deserted that incredible source of truth available through special revelation, or the Word of God, he began to reject truth altogether, and post modernism was born. One article I read said, "Postmodernism (is) the contemporary philosophical perspective that rejects revelation and reason - takes this process to an extreme conclusion by denying the validity of all comprehensive truth systems, or what it calls metanarratives."

Wikipedia says of post modernism that it is, and I quote, "A general and wide-ranging term which is applied to literature, art, philosophy, architecture, fiction, and cultural and literary criticism, among others. Postmodernism is largely a reaction to the assumed certainty of scientific, or objective, efforts to explain reality. In essence, it stems from a recognition that reality is not simply mirrored in human understanding of it, but rather, is constructed as the mind tries to understand its own particular and personal reality. For this reason, postmodernism is highly skeptical of explanations which claim to be valid for all groups, cultures, traditions, or races, and instead focuses on the relative truths of each person. In the postmodern understanding, interpretation is everything; reality only comes into being through our interpretations of what the world means to us individually. Postmodernism relies on concrete experience over abstract principles, knowing always that the outcome of one's own experience will necessarily be fallible and relative, rather than certain and universal.

"Postmodernism is 'post' because it denies the existence of any ultimate principles, and it lacks the optimism of there being a scientific, philosophical, or religious truth which will explain everything for everybody - a characteristic of the so-called 'modern'

mind. The paradox of the postmodern position is that, in placing all principles under the scrutiny of its skepticism, it must realize that even its own principles are not beyond questioning. As the philosopher Richard Tarnas states, postmodernism "cannot on its own principles ultimately justify itself any more than can the various metaphysical overviews against which the postmodern mind has defined itself."

So, what happened to man when he began to reject divine revelation and turned entirely to reason and the five senses? What happens when you exalt human reasoning above special revelation? Well, what happened is that the younger generation began to reject both spiritual and scientific truth, and we entered the post modern era. And what do post modernists believe regarding truth? Well, they believe that such a thing as absolute truth, cannot be known. Missler says, "Post modernism denies that absolute truth can be known, or even that it is desirable that it should be known. The process of learning or discovery is the important thing to postmodernity; the end point of this process should never be reached."

So, truth is not important to postmodernity. What is important is to the process of learning or discovery, even though you can never come to a point that says, "This is the truth." Ravi Zacharias says that this postmodernity has existed ever since the garden of Eden when Satan said, "Has God really said?" But go with me to 2 Timothy 2 (read 1-7). If that does not describe postmodernity, nothing does.

Missler gives Jim Leffel's five points describing our post modern culture.

1. Reality is in the mind of the beholder. Reality is what's real to me, and I construct my own reality in my mind.
2. People cannot think independently because they are defined - "scripted", molded - by their culture.
3. We cannot judge things in another culture or in another person's life, because our reality may be different from theirs. There is no possibility of 'transcultural objectivity."



4. We are moving in the direction of progress, but are arrogantly dominating nature and threatening our future.

5. Nothing is ever proven, either by science, history, or any other discipline.

So, what happens when the church seeks to minister to post modernists, and they do this by becoming like them? Well, then you have the emergent church. Then you have people like Brian McLaren and Rob Bell. What you have is people who were from conservative churches who are tired of conservative teaching. And these people, rather than dropping the faith, they change the faith to suit where they are going.

Now before we close I must mention one other area very briefly by way of warning. It is the *missional* church. Like the words emergent, with respect to the church and post modernism, this is a relatively new concept. It began in the liberal churches, maybe 70 years ago or so. But it has ever since slowly crept into what were once conservative churches. It is a whole new method of missions. Some may argue that the emergent church and the missional church are not the same, but I disagree, though I must quickly admit my knowledge is very limited on this subject yet.

So, with regard to the missional church, let me read you a part of an internet article: "It has become increasingly difficult to open a ministry book or attend a church conference and not be accosted by the word *missional*. A quick search on Google uncovers the presence of "missional communities," "missional leaders," "missional worship," even "missional seating," and "missional coffee." Today, everyone wants to be missional. Can you think of a single pastor who is proudly anti-missional?" End quote.

Last Sunday I told you about a Mennonite pastor who is involved in helping people in Liberia. Let me read some of that for you again, because this is missional in my estimation. The article in part says this: "Although they share their faith, their goal is not to convert people but

to help them to be what God wants them to be. They provide a holistic message which involves working with the people rather than preaching to them" end quote. That, it seems to me, is the missional church. And it seems to me, the gateway into post modernism, where eventually truth cannot be known at all.

CONCL: Well, I must close. We have looked at a number of terms that might be new to you but for our younger generation, you need to become familiar with them. For our ministerial students, let me encourage you to note these terms and keep your ears open. You may wish to begin researching these areas. And also, for our younger generation, there are many names you need to become familiar with such as: Mark Driscoll, Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Scot McKnight, Shane Claiborne and many others.

To our younger generation, I want to tell you that you will have to exceed the abilities of your parents in order to keep abreast of things and be able to see clearly what is right and what is wrong. But, you also have available to you methods of finding out things that far exceed what the older generation ever had. Your challenges will far exceed ours, but you also have available to you things some of us will never even learn to use.

And last young people, I want to challenge you, pay more attention to special revelation, the Word of God, than you do to your I phones and internet. Never minimize this one and only source of divine revelation. You need to study the Word and study the Word and study the Word.