

Why We're not Emergent by Two Guys that Should Be

By Kevin DeYoung and Ted A. Kluck

Chapter 3

Bible:

Why I Love the Person and Propositions of Jesus

In addition to these helpful postures, we refer to the Bible as a member of our community of faith—an essential member that must be listened to on all matters on which it speaks. . . . We believe the Bible because our hopes, ideas, experiences, and community of faith allow and require us to believe.

—Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*

Therefore let God-inspired Scripture decide between us; and on whichever side be found doctrines in harmony with the word of God, in favour of that side will be cast the vote of truth.

—Basil of Caesarea (ca. 329–379), *Letter to Eustathius*

I've never met a Christian who didn't like the Bible. No matter how liberal or conservative, mythical or literal, text-critical or traditional—no matter the approach, every Christian of every persuasion whom I have ever known or read has liked the Bible. And so do emerging Christians.

"I believe it [the Bible] is a gift from God," writes Brian McLaren, "inspired by God, to benefit us in the most important way possible: equipping us so that we can benefit others, so that we can play our part in the ongoing mission of God. *My regard for the Bible is higher than ever.*" Elsewhere he writes, "The Bible is an inspired gift from God—a unique collection of literary artifacts that together support the telling of an amazing and essential story."¹ Similarly, Rob Bell affirms "the Bible is the most

amazing, beautiful, deep, inspired, engaging, collection of writings ever.”² Doug Pagitt calls it “a member with great sway [in our community] and participation in all our conversations.”³ Emerging Christians dig the Scriptures.

But they also confess to having “mixed feelings” about the Bible.⁴ Emergent leaders want to move away from seeing Scripture as a battle ground. They don’t want to use the traditional terms—*authority, infallibility, inerrancy, revelation, objective, absolute, literal*—terms they believe are unbiblical. They would rather use phrases like “deep love of” and “respect for.”⁵ And they bemoan the fact that evangelicals, as they see it, employ the Bible as an answer book, scouring it like a phone book or encyclopedia or legal constitution for rules, regulations, and timeless truths.

The net result is that the Bible has taken on a different role in emergent communities. The Bible is not the voice of God from heaven and certainly not the foundation (foundationalism being a whipping boy among emerging Christians of a philosophical bent). Rather, the Bible spurs us on to new ways of imagining and learning. It is “not reduced to a book from which we exact truth, but the Bible is a full, living, and active member of our community that is listened to on all topics of which it speaks.”⁶ The Bible, for many emerging Christians, has been rediscovered “as a human product.”⁷ “The Bible is still in the center for us,” Bell explains, “but it’s a different kind of center. We want to embrace mystery, rather than conquer it.” Rob Bell’s wife, Kristen, continues the train of thought. “I grew up thinking we’ve figured out the Bible, that we knew what it means. Now I have no idea what most of it means. And yet I feel like life is big again—like life used to be black and white, and now it’s in color.”⁸

During this time of reimagining the Bible, Kristen Bell credits Brian McLaren with directing their thinking on Scriptural authority. “Our lifeboat,” Kristen continues, “was *A New Kind Of Christian*.” It’s here that McLaren first introduces us to his protagonist, Neo, who helps the bewildered pastor Dan Poole discover a new kind of Christianity and a new kind of Biblical authority. Neo explains, “When we let it [the Bible] go as a modern answer book, we get to rediscover it for what it really is: an ancient book of incredible spiritual value for us, a kind of universal and cosmic history, a book that tells us who we are and what story we find ourselves in so that we know what to do and how to live. That letting go is going to be hard for you evangelicals.”⁹ Through the lips of Neo, McLaren argues for a postmodern understanding of the Bible’s role in our churches—a role that is above propositions, beyond inerrancy, and behind the text.

Pooh-Poohing the Propositions

Few things are so universally criticized in the emerging church as propositions. For too long, emerging leaders argue, evangelicals have approached the Bible as an encyclopedia, a rule book, an answer book, a scientific text, an easy-step instruction book instead of the book that tells our family story.¹⁰ Consequentially, we end up looking at the Bible like an Easter egg hunt looking for propositions. This ends up killing the very book that is supposed to give us life. McLaren argues, “When we conservatives seek to understand the Bible, we generally analyze it. We break it down into chapters, paragraphs, verses, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, prefixes, roots, suffixes, jots, and tittles. Now we understand it, we tell ourselves. Now we have conquered the text,

captured the meaning, removed all mystery, stuffed it and preserved it for posterity, like a taxidermist with a deer head.”¹¹

There is one thing right with this statement and two things wrong. McLaren is right to criticize the impulse some of us have to dissect the Bible but not be transformed by it. That does happen. And no doubt, there are scores of freshly-minted seminary trained pastors who bore their congregations with endless word studies and the ins and outs of genitive absolutes.

But there are two things wrong with McLaren’s chastisement. The first is historical. Conservative American evangelicals didn’t invent parsing or versification or the minutia of exegesis. Read the early Church apologists, the Latin Fathers or the Greek Fathers, the Medieval Churchmen, the Scholastics, the Reformers, the Puritans, or the Pietists and you will Christians of all time everywhere pulling apart the words of Scripture. They are harmonizing texts, analyzing Greek and Hebrew words, and expounding on the jots and tittles of the Word of God. If evangelicals’ approach to Scripture makes them biblical taxidermists, then the hall of Christian history is lined with head after head of stuffed animals, because wherever Christians have considered the words of the Bible to be the words of God, they have sought to understand those words with every exegetical tool at their disposal.

McLaren considers our love affair with finding doctrinal formulations in Scripture to be an unfortunate product of the enlightenment. “Our sermons tended to exegete texts in such a way that stories, poetry, and biography (among other features of the Bible)—the “chaff”—were sifted out, while the ‘wheat’ of doctrines and principles were saved. Modern Western people loved that approach; meanwhile, however, people of a more

postmodern bent (who are more like *premodern* people in many ways) find the doctrines and principles as interesting as grass clippings.”¹²

Curiously enough, Hughes Oliphant Old, whose monumental series *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church* now runs into the thousands of pages, frequently comes to the opposite conclusion: it’s modern people who can’t stomach doctrine, not the premodern. For example, in commenting on the preaching of Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 375–444), Old writes,

No doubt there will be those who will abhor these heavily doctrinal sermons. Our day and age, still under the shadow of the Enlightenment, naively imagines that the doctrinal sermon is boring and that sermons like these must have been tedious. A less beclouded day will probably recognize this prejudice as a rather peculiar form of pietistic agnosticism. The history of preaching is filled with examples of great doctrinal preachers who drew enthusiastic, thoughtful, and, indeed, large congregations.¹³

Why can we only affirm the Bible as family story by denigrating the Bible as a book to be analyzed and theologized? Why not go the more historically responsible route and uphold the Bible as both?

The second problem with McLaren’s criticism is that it reveals the broader emergent distaste for propositions. Tomlinson’s sentiments are typical: “Post-evangelicals are less inclined to look for truth in propositional statements and old moral

certitudes and more likely to seek it in symbols, ambiguities, and situational judgments.”¹⁴ But why pooh-pooh propositions?

[Set as a callout:]

The vast majority of the Bible —whether in laws, letters, poems, or narratives—is made up of propositions.

A proposition is simply a statement that can be either true or false. “The lights are on.” “My name is Kevin.” “God is love.” These are statements that we can either affirm or deny. That’s the definition of a proposition. The Bible is certainly more than propositions; it has commands and questions too. But the vast majority of the Bible —whether in laws, letters, poems, or narratives—is made up of propositions.. Some are doctrinal formulations (“there is no one righteous”) and others are units of a larger story (“he took his staff in hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook”). On nearly every page of Scripture we read propositional sentences. So this cannot be what emergent leaders are objecting to.

I trust also that they are not objecting absolutely to any kind of propositions. For a statement rejecting propositions is, in itself, a proposition, just like a statement coming out against statements of faith (as per Tony Jones) is a kind of statement of faith.

The concerns with propositions, I fear, run deeper. “Christianity is a relationship with a person, not affirming a set of propositions” is how the concern is usually voiced. Or, “We worship the Word made flesh, not the words on a page.”¹⁵ This is the emergent concern.

And it's not new. In the first half of the twentieth century there were a group of theologians who fell under the broad heading of "neo-orthodox"—men like Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, H. Richard Niebuhr. They were saying things like, revelation "cannot be expressed in the impersonal ways of creeds or other propositions" and "faith is not a relation to...a truth, or a doctrine . . . but it is wholly a personal relationship."¹⁶ The neo-orthodox theologians of the last century, in their pre-emergent way, thought God could not properly be the subject of human knowledge and that belief in doctrinal revelation eroded personal faith in Christ. In many ways, when it comes to their understanding of Scripture, emergent leaders are the new neo-orthodoxy.

Three Propositions from Jesus

But the Bible forces no such distinction between faith in the Jesus revealed in the Bible and trust in the propositional statements revealed about Him. Consider a few examples from John's gospel. All three come from the lips of Jesus.

"I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins" (John 8:24).

Personal faith in Christ, for it to be genuine and saving, must have propositional content. We must believe that Jesus is the One ("I am he.") We must believe he is from above (8:23), the light of the world (verse 12), and sent from the Father (v. 16). We may think we have a wonderful relationship with Jesus and we may even love him, but unless we believe he is the Christ, the Son of God, we will not have life in his name (20:31).

“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:7).

The two are put side by side—Jesus abiding in us and His words abiding in us. They are two sides of the same coin. We cannot have an abiding relationship with Jesus without having His words abide in us too. And if we allow His words—commands, sentences, and propositions—to abide in us, He will abide as well.

“But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in them” (John 17:13).

Our fullness of joy is dependent on believing, embracing, and treasuring sentences that Jesus spoke. The sentences do not save us. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus save us. But without truth-corresponding propositions like “this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (17:3) and “I have manifested your name to the people” (v. 6) and “I am praying for them” (v. 9) and “all mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them”—without these precious theological statements communicated and understood by verbal utterances, the joy of Jesus will not be fulfilled in us.

[Typesetter: set as callout:]

Every word in every sentence in the Bible is inspired by God, authoritative, trustworthy, true, useful, and aids our joy in God.

I’m convinced that a major problem with the emerging church is that they refuse to have their cake and eat it to. The whole movement seems to be built on reductionistic, even modernistic, either-or categories. They pit information versus transformation,

believing versus belonging, and propositions about Christ versus the Person of Christ. The emerging church will be a helpful corrective against real, and sometimes perceived, abuses in evangelicalism when they discover the genius of the “and,” and stop forcing us to accept half-truths. Carl Henry is right: “The antithesis of ‘person-revelation’ and ‘proposition-revelation’ can only result in an equally unscriptural contrast of personal faith with doctrinal belief. It is now often said that belief in Christ is something wholly different from belief in truths or propositions. But to lose intelligible revelation spells inescapable loss of any supernatural authorized doctrinal assertions concerning God.”¹⁷

It is possible for Christians to esteem the Bible wrongly and equate the Bible with God. But it is not possible for Christians to esteem the Bible too highly. Every word in every sentence in every proposition or command or question in the Bible is inspired by God, authoritative, trustworthy, true, useful, and aids our joy in God. Despite their differing interpretations on some matters, Christians of various theological stripes in all ages have believed wholeheartedly in this previous sentence. My hope is that emerging Christians are not departing from it.

The Irrelevancy of Inerrancy

Inerrancy is the conviction that the Bible makes no mistakes. There are metaphors in the Bible, approximations, observational comments on the universe, free quotations, and various types of literature that must be read according to their own “rules,” not to mention questions of application, but there are no mistakes. The Bible is true in all that it affirms. Whenever we believe the Scriptures, we believe what is true.

That, in a nutshell, is the doctrine of inerrancy—no errors. Emerging Christians have little patience for inerrancy. This doesn't mean they think the Bible is full of errors (though it could). They don't outright reject inerrancy. They just find it a waste of time. Some prefer the term *inherency* to describe the Bible instead of *inerrancy*, because the Word of God is inherent in the Bible (the implication being the Bible in itself is not the Word of God). The goal, then, is to move beyond inerrancy.¹⁸

Again, let's affirm that the Bible reveals God to us and that the central piece of that revelation is in the person of Jesus Christ—whom we know next to nothing about apart from the Bible. And let us go on to affirm that we want more than information about God; we want to know God Himself. But why go out of our way to go out of the way of inerrancy? The once (and briefly) credible idea that Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield invented inerrancy has been shown to be resoundingly false. Scholars like John Woodbridge and Richard Muller have demonstrated convincingly that the doctrine of complete biblical truthfulness is not a Princetonian invention.¹⁹ Clement of Rome (30–100) described “the Sacred Scriptures” as “the true utterance of the Holy Spirit.” Polycarp (65–155) called them “the oracles of the Lord.” Irenaeus (120–202) claimed that the biblical writers “were incapable of a false statement.” Origen (185–254) stated “the sacred volumes are fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, and there is no passage either in the Law or the Gospel, or the writings of an Apostle, which does not proceed from the inspired source of Divine Truth.” Augustine (354–430) explained in a letter to Jerome, “I have learnt to ascribe to those Books which are of the Canonical rank, and only to them, such reverence and honour, that I firmly believe that no single error due to the author is

found in any of them.”²⁰ It was not modernism which invented inerrancy. It was modernism that undermined inerrancy.

[Set as a callout:]

What can we say about the Bible that we cannot say about any other book?

And postmodernism is avoiding it altogether. This is a mistake. The emergent church ought to pay attention to the wisdom of J.I. Packer.

Once I too avoided the word inerrancy as much as I could, partly because of the tendencies mentioned, and partly because the word has a negative form and I like to sound positive. But I find that nowadays I need the word. Verbal currency, as we know, can be devalued. Any word may have some of its meaning rubbed off, and this has happened to all my preferred terms for stating my belief about the Bible. I hear folk declare Scripture *inspired* and in the next breath say that it misleads from time to time. I hear them call it *infallible* and *authoritative*, and find they mean only that its impact on us and the commitment to which it leads us will keep us in God’s grace, not that it is all true. This is not enough for me. I want to safeguard the historic evangelical meaning of these three words . . . So I assert inerrancy after all. I think this is a clarifying thing to do, since it shows what I mean when I call Scripture inspired, infallible, and authoritative. In an era of linguistic devaluation and double-talk we owe this kind of honesty to one another.²¹

It’s all well and good to speak of the Bible as a wonderful, rich story, or an amazing collection of deep writings, or an honored conversation partner, or an in-living color book that is mysteriously beyond our comprehension, but what does all of this actually mean? Is the Bible the final word in matters of faith and practice? Can it be trusted in all that it affirms? Is it intelligible and knowable? Is it from God? What is its practical authority in the believer’s life? Is it ever mistaken? What can we say about the Bible that we cannot say about any other book?

The emerging church thrives on eschewing definition, of itself and of its theology. But doctrinal formulations happen for a reason. People wonder, “What do they mean by that?” And so we respond, with words, sometimes even ones that don’t appear in the Bible, in order to clarify what we think the Bible says. “This is what we mean, not this.”

I’m not sure what the emerging church believes about the Bible. And this concerns me. Burned-out evangelicals who go emergent and talk squishy about the Bible may still basically treat the Bible as if it were completely true and authoritative. This would be a fortuitous inconsistency. But what happens in the second generation? What happens when an erstwhile church planter with a few of Neo books under his belt starts doing church with a radical skepticism about the authority of the Bible and forms a people by musing on about how his community affirms the Bible (in part?), therefore making it “welcome” in their conversation? We can wax eloquent about the beauty of the story and how the Scriptures read us, but unless people are convinced that the Bible is authoritative, true, inspired, and the very words of God, over time they will read it less frequently, know it less fully, and trust it less surely.

Text Messaging

Seventy years ago Karl Barth argued “The Bible is God’s Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it.”²² At the time, Barth was calling liberalism back to the Word, which was a good thing, but he pioneered a new approach in establishing biblical authority, which was not as good. The Bible, according to Barth, was not in itself the Word of God, but as God spoke in and through

the Bible, it became for us the Word of God. The Bible is only “derivatively and indirectly” God’s Word, he wrote.²³ The authority of the Word, therefore, resides not in the Scriptures which contain the very words of God, but in Him who speaks through the words of the text.

This neoorthodox view of Scripture is, wittingly or unwittingly, the view of many in the emerging church. Tomlinson explicitly relies on Barth, noting appreciatively that “Barth spoke of the Bible *becoming*, rather than *being*, the word of God.”²⁴ The late Stan Grenz, one of the most influential theologians in the emerging movement, wrote, with John Franke, something similar: “As we noted earlier, it is not the Bible as a book that is authoritative, but the Bible as the instrumentality of the Spirit; the biblical message spoken by the Spirit through the text is theology’s norming norm.”²⁵ According to Grenz and Franke, the text has its own intention which begins in the author’s intended meaning but is not exhausted by it. We must start with the original meaning of the text, but we are not bound by it. For God has spoken, but he still speaks. The words of Scripture, therefore, are not the norming norm but the Spirit speaking through the Scripture becoming the Word of God.

As a result, theology, for many in the emerging church, becomes something different from speaking the truth about God as revealed in Scripture. The task of theology, in the emergent model, is to express communal beliefs and values, to set forth that community’s particular “web of significance” and “matrix of meaning.” Christian theology, therefore, is the task of speaking about the God known in the Christian community. The church is really the new foundation. Christian theology is done by and for the Christian community as an ongoing conversation among those who have been

encountered by God in Christ and are attempting to clarify a mosaic of beliefs that comprise the interpretative framework of the community that the aforementioned encounter has called forth.²⁶

Confusing, isn't it? That's actually one of the flaws of the neoorthodox/emerging view of Scripture. What does this mean for the person in the pew? When they hear Scripture, are they hearing God speak?

[SET as callout:]

Does doctrine speak of what is objectively true and corresponds to reality, or does it merely set the rules of discourse?

Might they also get the Word of God just as authoritatively somewhere else?

Does that make the Bible one of many authorities in the community?

If the "norming norm" is the Spirit speaking through the text as understood by the Christian community, is the basis for what we believe and do as Christians nothing more than what our particular community says we should believe and do? And if so, is all knowledge nothing more than a social construct rather than a reflection of reality?²⁷

Does doctrine speak of what is objectively true and corresponds to reality, or does it merely set the rules of discourse and explain our belief mosaic?

Grenz and Franke are trying to answer the question "How do we know what we know about God?" The old answer, which they find hopelessly modern, is, "We know because it's in the Bible which is God's self-revelation in divinely inspired words." The new postmodern answer it seems to me, is less certain and less absolute. The postmodern answer is "We know what we know about God because it is the expression of our

community's understanding of the biblical message which the Spirit is speaking through the Bible in our called-out community." We end up with functional authority for the Bible that is dependent upon the community rather than intrinsic authority that is based on God having spoken.

At first blush, it sounds like a mark of piety to make the Spirit speaking through the Word (and creation and each other and other venues perhaps) the authority rather than the text of Scripture. It always scores a rhetorical victory to accuse evangelicals of bibliolatry, of worshiping the Bible rather than the Christ of the Bible, but it almost always misses the point. Every Christian I know who believes the Bible is the Word of God worships the Christ he finds in the Bible, believes in this Christ, prays to this Christ. These Christians also happen to believe that God not only speaks to them through the Bible, but that God's words are recorded in the text of Scripture. Isn't this what Paul meant when he called the Scriptures "the oracles of God" and breathed-out by God (Rom. 3:2; 2 Tim. 3:16)? Isn't this what Hebrews means when it quotes from the Old Testament saying, "The Holy Spirit says" (Heb. 3:7)? Didn't Peter hold to a verbal, plenary view of inspiration when he asserted that no prophecy of Scripture came from the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20–21)? Didn't Jesus assume intrinsic authority in the actual texts of Scripture when he quoted Deuteronomy to the Devil in wilderness with the words "it is written" (Matt. 4:1–11)? Wasn't Jesus trusting that the words of Scripture were the very words of God when he quoted Genesis 2:24 and assumed that words of the text were the words of the Creator (Matt. 19:4–5)?

For every fundamentalist who loves the Bible more than Christ, I'm willing to bet there is one emergent Christian who honors the Bible less than Christ did. I fear that what starts out as a fancy way of coupling postmodern jargon with biblical authority quickly leads to a loss of confidence in the word of God—a lost confidence that prevents preachers and evangelists from establishing doctrine, ethics, and gospel truth with the words “It is written.”

Beyond Foundationalism

All of the philosophical wrangling aside, this is all I mean, and most non-philosophers mean, by saying the Bible is our foundation.²⁸ We mean the Bible settles our disputes. The Bible tells us what is true. Our thinking about God, ourselves, and the word should start with the Bible and never contradict the Bible. In that sense, what's so wrong with calling the Bible our foundation?

McLaren claims (via Neo) that what's wrong is that the Bible never speaks of itself as the foundation. In one case, the church is, in the second Jesus is, and in the third Peter is, “but unless I'm mistaken, the Bible never calls itself the foundation.”²⁹ Besides betraying the kind of biblicism McLaren elsewhere decries—can't we call the Bible the foundation without finding the word in Scripture?—the fact of the matter is the Bible is called the foundation. Or at least that's how Protestants since the Reformation have understood Ephesians 2:20. The “household of God” is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets,” Paul writes. The Reformers understood that in one sense only Christ is the foundation (1 Cor. 3:11), but they also believed that the church is built on

the once-for-all, non-repeatable foundation of the teaching of the apostles and prophets which we have preserved in sacred Scripture.³⁰ So yes, the Bible is the foundation of truth for the church.

A Firm Foundation?

Not only do many emergent leaders reject the Bible as the foundation of Christian theology and reflection, they are also skeptical of our ability to understand the original intent of the biblical authors. Since words are only symbols, the truth in the Bible must be seen as ambiguous and in need of constant reinterpretation.³¹ The Bible is open-ended. All we can do is tell people what we think the Bible means—give them our version.³² Somebody has to decide which Bible verses apply and which don't.³³ “The real authority does not reside in the text itself, in the ink on paper, which is always open to misinterpretation—sometimes, history tells us, horrific and dangerous misinterpretation. Instead, the real authority lies in God, who is there behind the text or beyond it or about it, right? In other words, the authority is not in what I say the text says but in what God says the text says.”³⁴ All we have are interpretations.³⁵

Of course, in one sense this is true—a truism, in fact. It's like the old preacher's joke “Sorry to use so many personal stories about myself, but they're the only kind of stories I have about myself.” As soon as we open our mouths or punch our keyboards with an original thought, we are giving our version of things. Every sermon and every commentary and every blog that has ever been written about the Bible has been an interpretation of sorts. And sometimes those interpretations are wrong or tentative.

Occasionally in my preaching I will admit, “I’m not exactly sure what this means, but I think this is the best option.” Postmodernism, if it has done nothing else good (and it has), has reminded us of our own finitude. But does this mean we are left with a Bible that is completely open-ended, practically unknowable, and subject to constant change?³⁶

Obviously, my answer is no. In his classic work defending authorial intent in text, E.D. Hirsch points out, “Certainty is not the same thing as validity, and knowledge of ambiguity is not necessarily ambiguous knowledge.”³⁷ In other words, just because you are sure about something doesn’t make you right, and just because you know you could be wrong doesn’t mean you are. To be sure, words and sentences and paragraphs are sometimes ambiguous and open to different understandings, which is why humans disagree on so many things (although words are still the most precise means of communicating ideas that we have). But this doesn’t mean that one understanding is not the right one or at least better than the others. Nor does this mean that we can’t plausibly determine which is the correct understanding, even if we can’t determine the meaning of a text with complete omniscience.

Finding the Right and Wrong Meanings

So for emergent leaders to keep mentioning slavery and all the things Christians have gotten wrong from the Bible is self-defeating. They are demonstrating their belief that texts have meaning and that they have determined what is that correct meaning (namely, that slavery is wrong). Unless we are God, we must always hold out the possibility that we have understood something incorrectly. Christians have misread the

Bible before, and we'll do it again, I'm afraid. But that doesn't mean we can't hold on with firmness to biblical truth, nor even that we can't consider some matters of interpretation settled. The biblical authors were humans who grew and changed and learned and yet they didn't hesitate to write about what they *knew* and were *convinced of*.

Emergent authors are really no different. They still write books. They still use language to communicate ideas and trust implicitly that the people reading their books and blogs will understand what they mean to say. McLaren has uncovered “the secret message of Jesus” and Chalke has found “the lost message of Jesus,” so these guys must be figuring something out from the Bible. When McLaren wants to make a point about creation he argues that we need to read the story as a Jew, not a Greek—that's the right way to read the text.³⁸ When Bell reads “I am the way, the truth, and the life” he knows that Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than others; he was just showing the best possible way for a person to live.³⁹ So there are still right and wrong meanings from the text. It seems that when emergent authors want to contest traditional beliefs (in, say, hell, exclusivism, and propitiation) they cry “all we have our interpretations,” but when they want to make their points (say, about hell as a metaphor, inclusivism, and kingdom living) they argue “you've been misreading the Bible, can't you see?” It seems there is a meaning in the text after all.

Truth in Meaningful Words

The heart of the matter is this: Does the God who created us also know how to speak to us? Is He able to communicate truth to us through words in a way that is

meaningful and understandable? The answer assumed on every page of Scripture is “yes.” God spoke to patriarchs, prophets, and priests, and when the words God spoke were written down the people treated those words as the sacred oracles of God. When the people were taught the meaning in those inspired texts (and they obeyed), there was rejoicing (Nehemiah 8:1–12). When no one instructed them from those words, the people suffered (2 Chronicles 15:3). At one point this written revelation was called the Law, then the Law and the Prophets, then the Gospels were added, and then the Epistles, until we finally have what we call the Bible.

At each of those stages what was written was considered by God’s people to be authoritative and demanding of our obedience, because the words written down came from the very mouth God.

Isn’t it strange, C.S. Lewis wondered, that the Law would be the Psalmist’s delight (Psalm 1:2)? Respect or reverence we might understand, but delight? Who delights in law? And why? Lewis explains: “Their delight in the Law, is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian’s delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.”⁴⁰

In our world of perpetual squishitude, why offer people more of what they already have—vague spirituality, uncertainty, and borderline interpretative relativism? Why not offer them something hard and old like the law in which we delight, and dare to say and believe “Thus saith the Lord.”

NOTES

1. Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 177; Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 75.

2. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 42.
3. Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 114.
4. Ibid., 107
5. Ibid., 74.
6. Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 32.
7. Rob Bell quoted in *Christianity Today*, “The Emergent Mystique,” November 2004, 38.
8. Ibid.
9. See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 52.
10. Ibid.
11. McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 79.
12. Ibid., 77
13. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 119.
14. Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 94. Mark Galli, who writes one of the side bars for the book, makes the point that post-evangelicals like Tomlinson, are “less inclined to look for truth in propositional statements and old moral certitudes,” and then Galli adds, “except when making statements like this!”
15. For example, Sally Mogenstaler (in *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], 224), in arguing for “knowing-by-narrative” instead of “knowing-by-notion,” says, “And in entering the drama of their stories, we engage with the Person of God, not just the principles of God.”
16. Niebuhr and Brunner, respectively, quoted in Carl F. H. Henry, *God Revelation and Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1979), 3:431, 436.
17. Ibid., 436. From the Roman Catholic side, Avery Cardinal Dulles (*First Things*, “The Orthodox Imperative” [August/September 2006], 33) sounds the same note. “The Scriptures and the creeds testify to certain essential facts: that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, rose from the dead, and sent the Holy Spirit upon the community of believers. These and other events committed to language, belong to the Christian creeds and are inseparable from the Christian faith. A non-propositional understanding of revelation contradicts the tenor of the Holy Scripture and the earliest confessions of faith, which describe particular historical events of crucial importance for faith.”
18. See Carl Raschke, *The Next Reformation: Why Evangelicals Must Embrace Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 115–143.
19. See John Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982); Richard Muller, *Holy Scripture: The Cognitive Foundation of Theology, Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).
20. The string of quotations come from Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* vol. 4 [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1979], 368ff.
21. J. I. Packer, *Truth & Power* (Wheaton, Ill.: Shaw, 1993), 50–51.
22. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), I.1.109.
23. Ibid., 117.
24. Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 113.

25. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Westminister John Knox, 2007), 69.
26. Ibid., 232–33. For a critique of Grenz and the “postconservative” school of theologians and philosophers, see *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss, and Justin Taylor, eds. (Wheaton: Ill: Crossway, 2004), especially D.A. Carson’s essay “Domesticating the Gospel: A Review of Grenz’s *Renewing the Center*” (33–58).
27. Carson, “Domesticating the Gospel,” 51.
28. *Foundationalism* is an epistemological term that philosophers and theologians use to describe how we know what we know. Postmoderns reject foundationalism, while conservative evangelicals tend to be comfortable with a modest foundationalism. The technical use of the term is not necessary for this discussion.
29. Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), 53.
30. As D. A. Carson has pointed out, emerging church leaders, unlike the Reformers, are calling for change because the culture has moved. The Reformers, by contrast, were calling for change because the church had moved away from the Bible. “Reformed and always reforming” was not a motto giving license for continual doctrinal innovation, which is how I’ve heard *semper reformada* used a hundred times. It was a rallying cry to keep going back to the Scriptures so that by them the church may be reformed and always reforming.
31. Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 115.
32. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 46, 55.
33. Ibid., 58.
34. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, 50.
35. According to Bell, nobody really gives you the Bible straight. They just tell you what they think it means (54). At times, Bell seems to be simply advocating some interpretative humility. At others times he makes the whole process of discerning biblical truth sound willy-nilly and downright impossible. “Somebody in your history decided certain Bible verses still apply and others don’t” (56). Scripture alone sounds nice, “but it is not true” (67). Bell’s reason for rejecting *sola scriptura*? The fact that “we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is . . .” In one sentence Bell brushes aside centuries of the Protestant understanding of the canon—the church did not vote on the books of the Bible, but she recognized the authority these books already possessed in the churches by virtue of apostolic authorship or connection.
36. For example, McLaren argues that the Bible is so rich and multi-layered that new resources are constantly drawn out, “so that the message itself changes because the message changes its context, which is to say that the message itself changes by addressing new situations and problems and opportunities in new ways”; McLaren, *The Church in Emerging Culture*, Leonard Sweet, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 210. Therefore, it’s an insult to the riches and depths of the gospel to say that it cannot change. But as Horton points out in the same book, is there no catholicity? Does multi-layered mean have to mean multiple or changing message?
37. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), ix.
38. Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 52.

39. Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 21.

40. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Glasgow: Collins, 1961), 55.