

The Flaws of a Fad-Driven Church, Part 4

Ephesians 4:14

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As New Fads Emerge

According to the cover article in November's *Christianity Today* [2004], the next big fad is already on the horizon. It's the "Emergent Church" movement—seeker-sensitivity gone to seed. It's Saddleback for postmodernists—Willow Creek to the tenth power, for the pierced and tattooed generation. The most influential people in the Emergent Church movement are people who have consciously and deliberately abandoned the authority of Scripture.

Like all good postmodernists, Emergent Christians hate clarity and precision. They despise authority, and they detest certainty. They say they don't want answers; they want mystery. They don't want to be preached to; they want a conversation. They don't want to have to judge whether something is orthodox or heretical, true or false; they want to create their own spiritual reality, and they want to be affirmed while they do it. Unfortunately, the evangelical movement has plenty of people who are willing to affirm all of those things.

At last year's Emergent convention in San Diego, one of the speakers, Doug Pagitt, pastor of an Emergent Church known as Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, told Emergent church leaders he is convinced preaching is no longer a viable methodology for worship or evangelism in a postmodern world. "Preaching is broken," he said.

Postmodern people don't trust authority figures. They don't want to hear someone stand up and expound the Word of God. It's unhealthy, he says. It's abusive. "Why do I get to speak for 30 minutes and you don't?" he asked.

He went on: "A sermon is often a violent act. . . . It's a violence toward the will of the people who have to sit there and take it."

Let me say this: That epitomizes the direction all these fads are moving. The fad-driven church cannot be a church governed by the Word of God. If you get your direction by seeing which way the winds of change are blowing and following the prevailing trend, you are being disobedient to the clear command of Ephesians 4:14, which instructs us not to do that.

The way the wind is blowing these days is not good. The doctrine of justification by faith is under

attack on several fronts. In England at the moment, there's a huge controversy brewing because one of the most popular and well-known young British evangelical media figures—a man named Steve Chalke, published a book last year titled *The Lost Message of Jesus*. In it, he attacks the doctrine of original sin. He denounces the principle of penal substitution, suggesting that the doctrine of substitutionary atonement as evangelicals have historically understood and proclaimed it amounts to “cosmic child abuse.” He insists that God would never punish His Son for other people's offenses. On page 182 of the book, he asks, “How have we come to believe that at the cross this God of love suddenly decides to vent His anger and wrath [against sin] on His own Son?” How have we come to believe that? I'll tell you how I came to believe that: because the Bible says so (Isaiah 53:10): “It pleased the LORD to bruise Him; *He* has put Him to grief. [He made] His soul an offering for sin.”

The problem is, in the contemporary, fad-driven evangelical culture, almost no one is left who is both equipped and willing to answer a view like that. Someone decided several years ago that the word *propitiation* is too technical and not user-friendly enough for contemporary Christians, so preachers stopped explaining the principle of propitiation. Now that this idea is under attack, we have a generation of leaders who don't remember what it meant or why it's important to defend. And the overwhelming majority of British evangelicals have rushed to Steve Chalke's defense, claiming his critics are just overweening negativists who are behind the times and out of touch with this postmodern era. The leadership of the evangelical alliance in England are busy wringing their hands about the “tone” of the debate and the “unity” of their movement—and frankly if things follow the historical pattern, ultimately very little will be done to stem the tide of heresy this book has already unleashed. (And you can be sure that the same ideas will be making the rounds of the evangelical movement in America soon. There are frankly already lots of people in American evangelicalism who are eager to challenge the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. This has been one of the main items on the Open Theists' agenda for several years.)

Something seriously needs to change in order to rescue the *idea* of historic evangelicalism from the contemporary evangelical movement. And here's what needs to change: A generation of preachers needs to rise up and be committed to preaching the Word, in season and out of season, and be willing to ignore the waves of silly fads that come and go and leave the church's head spinning.

Scripture is better than any fad. Preaching the Word of God is more effective than any new methodology contemporary church experts have ever invented. I don't care *who* thinks preaching is “broken.” If we would get back to the clear proclamation and exposition of God's Word, everything that's broken about contemporary preaching would be fixed.

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