What's So Dangerous About the Emerging Church?
Selected Scriptures
GTY107

Hi, I'm Phil Johnson and I'm here in the studio with John MacArthur. And we've set aside the next hour or so to discuss a movement known as the Emerging Church. Now, John, that's going to be a familiar topic for a lot of our listeners, I know, because we get lots of questions about it. It's been about two years since Christianity Today featured a cover article about the Emerging Church Movement, they called it, I think, The Emergent Mystic. And for many evangelicals, I think that was November of about 2004 and for many evangelicals that was their introduction to this movement and this phenomenon known as the Emerging Church. And ever since that article was published, we have been getting a steady stream, an increasing stream of questions from listeners about this movement. It's become the number one thing we are asked for.

Now here's a sample of what we get, and I'll read this to you and then let you respond. This came to us by e-mail. "Dear Pastor John: I would like to know if you have any opinions regarding the so-called Emerging Church Movement. This movement seems to espouse a doctrine of Christian post-modernism. As this would seem to be a major contradiction to biblical truth, I'm concerned as to the effect of this philosophy on the church as a whole. Additionally, it seems many young people today are embracing this movement, including my own son. I'd like to know what you think and if you can suggest some resources for us that might help shed some light on the subject."

I know you've been watching this movement, John. In fact, last year you participated in a faculty lecture series at the Master's Seminary, evaluating the movement for students there and then some of the seminars at the Shepherds Conference for the past two years have dealt with the movement and its ramifications for church leaders. Today I want to give you an opportunity to answer some of the questions about the Emerging Church Movement that have come to us from our radio listeners because we want you to talk about this movement in laymen's terms for the average Grace To You hearer. And so we're going to give you an opportunity to say in the simplest possible terms what is wrong with the movement, what if anything is right with it, and what you think about the goals and the strategies of those who are at the forefront of this movement. And, as always, we want you to shine the light of Scripture on this movement and let's see how it fairs. So I've collected some of the questions our listeners have sent us and I've even prepared a few questions of my own. And if you're ready, we'll start with the first question I'm sure is on the mind of many of our listeners...what is the Emerging Church Movement and how can I recognize it when I see it?

JOHN: Well, I'd like to give a simple answer to that, I'll do my best to. The Emerging Church Movement is an amorphous sort of loose-knit association of churches that have decided that there is value, there is even virtue in uncertainty about Scripture. The bottom line in the movement is they believe that we aren't even suppose to understand precisely what the Bible means. And to me, that's the big issue. It is an attack on the clarity of Scripture and they elevate themselves as if this is some noble reality. They have finally risen to say we're honest enough to say, "We don't know what the

Bible really means. We can't be certain. We are...we're the truly spiritual ones." It has overtones of spiritual pride, a false kind of spiritual pride which they call humility. They say, "We're too humble to say that we know what the Bible means."

The bottom line, I think, in the movement is that it is a denial of the clarity of Scripture. It is a denial that we can know what the Bible really says. And as I said, it's amorphous because there's a mish-mash of approaches to this and a mish-mash of styles and things like that. But they have embraced this mystery as if it's true spirituality. And so, it becomes celebration of mystery, a celebration of ignorance, a celebration that we can't really know. I think it's just another form of liberalism. I think it's just another form of denying the clarity of Scripture. And I think there's a motive behind it.

PHIL: It's interesting you compare it to liberalism because the typical leader in the Emerging Church Movement would say what they stand for is post-modernism. And theological liberalism was...drew out of modernism. These guys say they're reacting to modernism. How would you respond to that?

JOHN: Well it's just another philosophy. Post-modernism is another bad philosophy. Modernism was a bad philosophy. Post-modernism is another bad philosophy. But in both cases, they assault the Scripture. Modernism made reason, human reason, the king. Reason was supreme in modernism. Thomas Payne, The Age of Reason, The Enlightenment, all of those things, the Renaissance. Out of that came the worship of the human mind and the mind trumps God. Now mystery trumps the Bible. The human mind trumps the Bible in modernism, mystery trumps the Bible in post-modernism. It is at the foundation an unwillingness to accept the clear teaching of Scripture. Scripture is clear, "A wayfaring man though he be a fool need not err." God holds us responsible for a right understanding of Scripture. We are liable before God for what we do with a true and right understanding of Scripture. These people, like the liberals, deny the clear teaching of Scripture. And I'm convinced that the reason they deny it is not because it can't be understood, not because it's unclear, but because they don't like what it clearly says. And that takes you back to John 3, "Men love darkness rather than light." The light is there, they hate the light, they run from the light. The issue is not that Scripture is not clear, it is crystal clear.

One of the big issues is homosexuality in the Emerging Church. They don't want to take a position on homosexuality. The Bible is not vague or obscure or oblique about homosexuality. It couldn't be more clear. A homosexual will not inherit the Kingdom of God...that's pretty clear. Homosexuality in Romans chapter 1 is a perversion that is manifestly when it happens in a culture, begins to dominate a culture, an evidence of divine wrath and divine judgment. So the Bible is clear. They don't want that clarity. They want to run from the light. Scripture is light, it is not darkness, but they like the darkness because their deeds are evil.

So I think the motive behind this whole Emerging Church thing, whether it's a conscious or unconscious motive, is discomfort over what the Bible really says, whether it's about the gospel or whether it's about sin, virtue...they don't like it and so the out is...Well, it's not clear. This is just another way to set the Bible aside.

PHIL: That all mirrors exactly what's happening in secular culture, doesn't it?

JOHN: Sure...sure.

PHIL: I mean, if you think about what you've just described, the ambiguity towards every clear statement of truth, that's pretty much what's going on even in the secular world, it's the reason Europe and the secular media and all seem to think everything is morally ambiguous, even the...we probably live in a time where the line between good and evil is as clear as it could be.

JOHN: Yeah, and I think this is...this is nothing new either. Every culture apart from the gospel and apart from salvation is anti-God. I don't care whether you're Hottentot, walking around with no clothes on in Africa, or whether you're a tribal person in Indonesia, or whether you lived in the fifteenth century, or whether you are in the Roman culture of the first century, all human society thinking culture is ungodly and anti-biblical.

What is so interesting about this movement is the Emerging Church sanctifies the culture. The Emerging church sanctifies the post-modern culture as if it is legitimate and says if we're going to reach these people, we've got to become like these people. That's never been the biblical way...never. The Bible does not change. It's not a chameleon, it doesn't shift and change and adapt to culture. It confronts culture. It confronts an aboriginal culture. It confronts an ancient culture. It confronts a modern culture. It confronts every trend with fixed unchanging truth in every situation. And the Emerging Church not only is unwilling to believe the clear statement of Scripture, but it's unwilling to take the clear statement of Scripture and confront the culture. It wants to let the culture define what Christianity should be.

PHIL: It seems like as long as I can remember and even in my study of church history, this goes back for centuries, generations, there's always been an element in the church that thinks what we desperately need to do in order to reach the world is adapt our thinking and our language and everything to whatever is happening in the culture at the moment. This is just another expression of that, right?

JOHN: Yeah, why would we fail to understand that there are two opposite dominating world views? One is Satan and the other is God. Okay, we have a world view that is...that belongs to Satan and his children and the darkness. And we have a world view that belongs to God and His children and the light. And they are in absolute opposition to each other and there is no possible accommodation. That's..that's foundational in the Bible. That's as foundational as you can get. And the idea that somehow Christianity has to be reinvented to accommodate itself to any pattern of culture thinking, first of all, is blatantly wrong at its foundational level, and also it's, secondly, it's hopeless in its ability to actually do that because the culture moves so fast. What culture are they talking about? They're talking about a post-modern culture. Who does that involve? That involves, as you said in the beginning, young people primarily, so you can just axe everybody that's older than generation X, they don't connect with that at all. So now the Kingdom of God is only going to be exposed in this kind of fashion to this niche of people who are twenty and under. And by the way, the next five years of people coming along may have a whole different culture. So now we have planned obsolescence. So now we have marginalization.

I remember when...when the Crystal Cathedral, Robert Schuller, had figured out, you know, the real strategy, we're going to give them what they want. So he surveyed everybody and gave them what they want. Now we look at that thing and it's like an anachronism, it's like a...it's like a...it's like a dinosaur, no young person. I mean, you look at television, look at Robert Schuller, you see any young people in there?

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: You couldn't get...you couldn't get an eighteen-year-old to buy into that approach at all. It's...you can take the Willow Creek model, they had their little niche, they tried to move one generation down and they abandoned completely by their own admission, they abandoned the whole program after a number of years of trying it because they're so highly defined in their niche. So this is planned obsolescence.

I remember when...a metaphor for this, I was in Tulsa and I was looking at the Oral Roberts campus. They tried to make it as modern as possible.

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: and now it looks like a parking lot for old Star Wars space ships. It's so bizarre. And in an effort to be cutting edge and modern, they became completely obsolete.

PHIL: Out of date.

JOHN: Out of date. And that's what's going to happen to this movement. It's going to have its little tiny moment to try to corrupt the church and the next generation is going to have a completely different spin on what they want and this is going to be an obsolete kind of thing.

The thing that is not obsolete is the Word of God. The thing that's always relevant, always penetrating is the truth of God.

PHIL: You know, in fact as I surveyed just the past twenty years or so, there seem to be waves of this. The previous wave was the Willow Creek model, seeker-sensitivity, and all of that. In some ways, your critique of the Emerging Church Movement sounds very much like your critique of Seeker-sensitivity, Willow Creek and all that. How are these two movements similar, and how are they different?

JOHN: Well, it's the same philosophy. Give people what they want. And so, as people's wants change as the culture defines things, you change with it. I don't think the, for example, I don't think the Willow Creek people at the very beginning would say homosexuality is okay, because when they sort of launched their little niche, the big issue wasn't homosexuality, it was feminism. So they did buy into that.

PHIL: Okay.

JOHN: They bought in to feminism and he has his wife, they'll have his wife preach and he bought into Gilbert Belzekian's(??) Whole schstik about feminism, an he was his guru. Feminism was the hot deal and they were going to be relevant. And their relevancy meant we embrace feminism. The next wave is homosexuality. So the new deal is, you have people like Brian McClaren and all these other guys, Crissai(??)saying, "Sure we have homosexuals in our church, but we also have people who like chocolate and people who are overweight." They don't see a difference between that. So whatever the...whatever the current sin that needs to be tolerated in the culture is, they'll buy into. So

it's just the next wave of cultural accommodation redefining Christianity in terms that are acceptable to whatever the trendy sin is and whatever the trendy way of thinking is. But it's really the same thing. It's moving away from the Word of God to adapt to the society. In the middle, you've got Rick...Rick Warren who...who is a step from Willow Creek. His schstik is...is into success and getting people where they need to be in life, and feeling good and having a purpose and a goal. It's very, very man-centered. And he's sort of in the middle between those two things. But the trends are always about...let's find out what people want, let's find out what their hot buttons are. And they're always week on theology and they always set the Bible aside. Either they...they don't necessarily blatantly deny it, the Willow Creek people set it aside in favor of things that they think appeal to people, the Saddleback model does the same thing and so does the post-modern Emerging Church. The Bible's just not in the middle of it.

Now they throw Bible verses around like mad. They're all over the place. There's an article in the...recently I read about Rob Bell and it says that all of his teaching is sprinkled with Bible verses. Well, that's a ploy. What does it mean if you throw Bible verses around if you confess that, we can't know what they mean? What are you doing here? There's a certain deception, I think, in that.

PHIL: Humph...yeah, now I want to sort of wrap up some of these ideas about post-modernism so people can understand what we're talking about when you mention post-modernism. You more or less defined it as the embracing of mystery, or uncertainty. Can you...do you want to expand a bit on what post-modernism is?

JOHN: Yeah, look, let's just take modernism as a starting point and we can simplify the view of the world. You have modernism, before that you have pre-modernism, after that you have post-modernism. Modernism says this, there is truth. Make it simple. There is truth and we can find it by human reason...not revelation from God, not the Bible, but human reason. We can find the truth. Before that, pre-modernism which was basically the way of the world back to the beginning, right? I mean, that was the dominant philosophy from the beginning until the enlightenment. And pre-modernism said there is truth and it comes from God, it has a supernatural source. And whether you were a Christian, or whether you worshiped the gods of Egypt, or whether you worshiped the pantheon of Athens, or whatever gods you had, you believed in the gods, you believed that there were supernatural powers that created and defined life and truth and so that was pre-modernism. There is truth and it has supernatural source.

Modernism comes along and says there is truth, we can find it with human reason. Forget God, forget the supernatural. So you have a few centuries...what?...a few thousand...a few hundred years, really...

PHIL: Of modernism.

JOHN: You have thousands of years of pre-modernism. You have a few hundred years, 250 years of modernism.

PHIL: About, yeah.

JOHN: Two-hundred and fifty years of modernism and at the end of that, because man is trying to find the truth and says it is in human reason and it's not from God, it's not in revelation, he thinks that

science is the key. He's going to apply his mind systematically, scientifically and come up with the truth. And sad to say, the world gets worse, the world gets worse than it's ever been. It's bad before modernism, it's worse during modernism. You have the totalitarian world, you have the people who think they now know the truth and they're going to be...they're going to be the dictators of the world so you have, as you've pointed out, fascism, Nazism, Communism, and the massacre of millions and millions and millions of people in the name of human reason, right?

PHIL: Right. Now that was all the product of modernism.

JOHN: All the product of modernism. This is the modern...this is the modern world, we have assumed what the truth is and this is it. And autocratic people like Hitler and Stalin and all the rest massacre people. Stalin kills 50 million. Hitler kills six million. And we all know the horrific story of that. Modernism doesn't work. The Berlin Wall comes down. Everything crashes. Coincidentally in the Reagan era, I don't think he had a lot to do with it, I think it was the seeds of destruction that were in the system and it crashes. And what's going to take its place? Well, we tried to find the truth through revelation, pre-modernism, that didn't get us anywhere. We got into the Dark Ages there. We tried to find the truth through modernism, through human reason, we didn't get it there either. Look what we ended up with...the massacre of millions of people is the legacy of modernism. And all these societies now trying to recover and find themselves coming out of that kind of thing.

Now the idea is post-modernism says, we give. There may be truth, but we can't know it. We didn't get it in our pre-modernism, we didn't get it in modernism. So this is the after the fact and the answer is there might be truth...some people would say there is no universal truth, there is no absolute truth, but not all...not all post-modernism would say that. Post-modernism will at least say we can't know it...we can't know what it is. It may be from God, but we can't know what it is. So we embrace mystery. Post-modernism says you have your truth, I have my truth, everybody has his own truth, truth is whatever you think it is, whatever you want it to be, it's intuitive, it's experiential...but it's not universal and it's not knowable, universally knowable.

PHIL: That's why these days the highest values, the sole-remaining virtues are things like tolerance, ambiguity, mystery...

JOHN: Yeah. Oh, Brian McClaren says ambiguity is really a good thing, and that's just complete post-modernism. Tolerance is the only thing left because if everybody's entitled to his own truth, and you hear this...you hear it on television, people say, "Well, this is who I am and this is how I live, and you've got to take me the way I am."

PHIL: It gives people a license to invent their own religion, really.

JOHN: Sure.

PHIL: And then no one is permitted to challenge it.

JOHN: And then to have self-esteem about it and to feel really good about it. And, of course, the Emerging Church comes along and they love this because this takes all the rules out. Then you can be a member of the church if you're a homosexual, if you're overweight, or if you like chocolate, and it's all the same. You can live any way you want to live. Ambiguity is wonderful if you want to sin

without any guilt. And I think that's at the bottom of this. They...they hate the light because their deeds are evil. Those are the words that came right out of the mouth of Jesus. They run from the light because they want the darkness. It's that simple. It's not that the Bible is not clear. All these philosophies, not withstanding, they all operate outside the realm of Scripture, right? Whether it's pre-modern, modern, or post-modern. It has nothing to do with the Bible. Those are all human philosophies.

When I was in college I...I took advanced European philosophy and studied the flow of philosophy. It didn't matter what the philosophy was and you could go through the whole thing starting in the pre-modern area with Socrates and Plato and Aristotle, and Phaeles(???) And you can march your way through the whole deal and you can come all the way to Decarte and flow through Haegler(?) And Kant and Kierkegaard and all that kind of stuff, it was all wrong. It was always wrong and it kept being wrong and even though it kept building on itself and altering and shifting and moving, it was all bogus...it was all error. And post-modernism is just another form of human error, another way to wrongly understand the universe, to wrongly understand reality.

And for the church to accommodate that is bizarre. If you were in the New Testament time, for example, if you wanted...let's say you wanted to be an Emerging Church in Paul's day, what would you do? How would you be an emerging Church then?

Well, you would say this is a world where everybody worships a lot of gods, so let's put up a bunch of idols in our church. Let's do this. This is a world full of homosexuality. The Roman world was rampant with homosexuality. So we've got to embrace that. There was, according to historians, there was a very, very far-reaching feminist movement where women were running around bare-breasted and carrying sticks and acting aggressive. If we want to really reach this world, this is how people in this world think, let's do that. That will be a good thing to do. Or maybe we could even go back further and let's say you're living in the Old Testament. What would you do in the Old Testament time to accommodate the culture? You'd put up idols, right? Maybe you'd have one of the priests of Molech come and talk in your meeting. Hey, let's have a priest of Molech come over and tell us how he does mysticism. Well this is exactly what the Bible forbids. This is exactly what God condemns. And in the New Testament this is exactly what John...keep yourselves from idols, you don't do that. It's all about separation. How can we come in this age and say what we want to do to really reach this age is bring in all the gods of this age, all the idols of this age and bring them into the church.

PHIL: And let's just have a conversation.

JOHN: Yeah, and let's have a...well, that's what the emerging people talk about. They say it's not a theology, we don't teach, we aren't pastors. The word "sermon" scares them. They hate that word. But they keep talking about the fact that we want to have a conversation. So it never has an end, it never has an objective. Nobody's right or nobody's wrong, it's just this unending conversation. It's just a lot of talk without a conclusion.

PHIL: Now I want to come back to this idea that preaching scares them, but before...before we get there, let me just follow up on something you said a minute ago about how it's just utterly absurd that the church would run after post-modern ideas. And yet on the other hand, and I agree with you, it's absolutely absurd that we would do that. It seems to me Scripture is clear that you don't ape the fashions of the world. On the other hand, both you and I came to Christ in an era where the chief enemy was modernism. And we came up in a kind of evangelicalism where the key enemy was

modernism. People understood that. Mainstream evangelicalism always stood against modernism. Here comes a movement that professes to be and claims to be a movement against modernism. You could see in a way why naive Christians would think this must be a good thing, it represents the death of modernism, that's always been the enemy of truth and so on. And in fact, some of these people would look at you, John MacArthur, and say, "You may not realize it but in resisting post-modernism, you are showing yourself to be a modernist." How would you respond to that?

JOHN: Well, the bottom line is you don't define somebody by what they're against. Being against modernism, or being against post-modernism doesn't mean anything. Being against any philosophy doesn't mean anything. What are you for is the issue. And therefore nothing...to say Im against modernism because modernism says that there's no divine source of truth. I'm against post-modernism because post-modernism says you can't know the truth, you can't be sure about the truth. I think both of those are wrong, I'm against them both. But I could be against them both and be an atheist. I could be against them both and...and be a Jehovah's Witness, that doesn't prove anything. That is just a silly sort of straw man kind of thing. To say that they're against modernism is meaningless.

Look, in the modernist environment, you either were not a modernist or you were one. There wasn't really any middle ground. Either the Bible was written by God and divine revelation was a source of truth or human reason was a source of truth. And so it was...it was a clear-cut world. I...I went to seminary during that era and we were in to modernism. We were trying to understand how we would defend the Bible against the attacks of the modernists who denied its divine authorship and inerrancy and all that. I understand that world. There was no such thing as sort of middle ground. You either believed the Bible was the Word of God, or you were a modernist. There wasn't a lot in the middle.. So we were all against modernism. And I think it's the same today. You either believe the Bible is the clear revelation of God, or you don't. And there, really for me, there isn't any middle ground. It either is the Word of God or it is not, and the bottom line is, it claims to be. And if its claim is bogus, if its claim to be the Word of God is bogus, then all its other claims are suspect. So...and if its claim to clarity is bogus, then all its other claims are suspect. So there's really not any middle ground in my mind. I mean, I admit I'm kind of a black and white person. But I'm convinced that as much as I was against modernism because it denied divine authorship of Scripture, I am against post-modernism because it denies divine clarity in Scripture. Don't tell me God has spoken but He mumbled.

PHIL: So the battleground has shifted in this sense...the modernist said, "We aren't convinced that God is the author of Scripture." A post-modernist could say, "Yes, I believe Scripture is the Word of God in some sense, it's just not clear." The effect is the same, isn't it? Because it eliminates any authority from what God said.

JOHN: Sure. And you could get there another way. You could get to the same point by misinterpreting it. And there have always been people who come along, whether in the modern era or the post-modern era, who mangle the Bible. You've got all the cults, and isms, and chisms and all the rest of the stuff that misinterpret Scripture. That's another way to negate the Word of God. That's another way to obviate its message. You can deny that it's from God. You can deny that it's clear. Or you can just misinterpret it.

But in every...and you...you pointed this out to me, my whole life has basically surrounded these attacks on Scripture. The modernist attack, denying its authority and inspiration. Then came what I called the Charismatic attack on Scripture which says, "Well, we believe the Bible but Jesus

mystically tells us what it means and we have more revelation, additional revelation, words of wisdom, words of knowledge, prophecies." That's an attack on the singularity of Scripture. Then came the psychological assault on Scripture which kind of came in from the side and said, "Well, you know, the Bible can help to sanctify people but not until they get psychologically oriented and psychology plays a big role. Well that's another attack on Scripture. Then came what I call the pragmatic assault on Scripture. The Bible...people don't want to hear the Bible. The Bible is irrelevant, you can't stand up for an hour and exposit the Word of God, you've got to tell them stories and blah, blah, blah. So you have the pragmatic attack on the Bible.

Now you have essentially the Emerging attack which is the attack on its perspicuity or its clarity. It's mystery and it's secretive and it's hidden. And this is wonderful, as I think Kristen Bellsripe(???)...Bellswiffe(????) said, "She used to think she knew what it meant when the world was black and white, now that she doesn't have any idea what it means, the world is full of color." So look, the Bible is always under assault. The Word of God is always under assault, right? Genesis 3, "Has God said," that's Satan's first ploy, he gets Eve to believe that what God said isn't true, that God is flawed, that she shouldn't believe what He said. You're not going to die...you're not going to die, that's not true. God lied to you, it's not true what it said. And that just goes on throughout all of history.

It doesn't...to me, you just rise to the defense of the Scripture in the sense that you keep teaching the Scripture. It...it can handle itself, it really can handle itself. And so instead of me trying to defend the Scripture by external defenses, the evidences, the apologetics on behalf of the Scripture, I just keep teaching it and it's a lion, you just open the cage and let it loose. And it is its own greatest defense.

PHIL: So, the worst thing we could do would be to capitulate to this and soften the edges of what really is clear in Scripture.

JOHN: Yeah, and I think the thing that you want to avoid in the Emerging Church, and people get caught up in this...well they like...they don't like the seeker-friendly movement because it's big business, because it's manipulation, because it's schstik, it's entertainment, it's a big stage show and the guy is a sort of variation of a quiz show host, clown, comedian, funny guy kind of thing. They don't like that. They want more mystery. So they go back to mediaeval Catholicism and they light a bunch of candles. You know, really it smells like orthodox, Greek orthodoxy, Russian orthodoxy kind of approach, milling people. I've been in a Russian Orthodox Church that there's no center, there's no focal point, there's no pulpit, there's no platform. There are these guys, they swing these censors and smoke and stuff rises and these really weird smells and they just..they walk in a little parade. I don't know if you've been to one, and they go behind a screen and then they walk back out and all the time the people...there are no chairs...I'm talking about Red Square in Moscow...no chairs, there's no where to sit down because there's...it's a parade of milling. And then people mill over here and they mill and then these guys walk around. This goes on for like a half an hour and they're making these weird chants.

Well this...this...this is mediaeval Catholic or orthodox kind of mysticism that they have brought in to, I think, create the illusion of mystery. And then they attach that to the Scripture as if the Scripture is this mystery and this hidden stuff. Look 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and 2, the Apostle Paul says, "We've taken the mystery out of this, you now have the mind of Christ." The mystery's out, the hidden mystery God has disclosed to you. This is a great statement and the Spirit who understands the things of God has made them known and the mystery's out. The mystery's gone. Paul even says,

"I'm an...I'm an apostle of the mysteries, the things that were hidden in the Old Testament time and are now revealed to you." So this idea of smoke and mirrors and mystery just meandering...if you go to one of those places, you take your lap top and you fiddle with it, and you drink a latte while some guy may be talking, you get up, you leave. You walk around. It's sort of like a modern techy version of Russian orthodoxy.

PHIL: Yeah, only they do have chairs, they're easy chairs and couches, but...

JOHN: Yeah, it's like Starbucks.

PHIL: Yeah, it's interesting how you describe that and it makes me think there is a lot in common between the Emerging Church Movement and neoorthodoxy.

JOHN: Oh, absolutely. The thing it has nothing to do with is the Bible, nothing to do with Christianity..it is an aberration. It is the new liberalism. It's...it's the new form of anti-biblical quote/unquote Christendom.

PHIL: Let me go back to what you said about preaching. If you think about the post-modern climate in which we live where tolerance and ambiguity and mystery and diversity and all these things are the virtues, the one thing that would probably be least likely to be found in an environment like that would be preaching.

JOHN: Right, because, first of all, nobody has a right to impose on anybody else their ideas. Since we don't know what it means, since we're too humble to say what it means, why would we teach? What am I going to tell you? If I am self-confessed ignorant, if I don't know what it means, if I can't know what it means, if to say that I know what it means is an act of pride, then I have nothing to say. That may be the best thing about the movement, that they really don't have anything to say.

PHIL: Except it seems to me like for people who have nothing definitive to say, they do an awful lot of talking.

JOHN: Yeah, but let me explain that. They're really, really aggressive at tearing down the church, tearing down historic theology, tearing down doctrines that are precious and sacred and have been a part of the church's life for centuries. That is...that's the lowest level of assault there is. Anybody can shred and destroy without having to build something back in its place. I have more respect for a heretic who says, "I don't believe that, but here is what I believe and let me show you why I believe this."

If you talk to a Jehovah's Witness, or you talk to a Mormon, or you talk to somebody in some aberrant approach to Christianity that has a theology, that has a system that has been put together and crafted, even though it's heresy or it's error, I have more respect for that than somebody who just comes in and shreds what people believe and walks out of that, leaving chaos everywhere. Because at least the person who teaches error and tries to defend it biblically, legitimizes the effort...if you know what I'm saying...legitimizes the effort to dig in. I can deal with that person. I can sit down and say, "Let me show you why you're wrong about that verse. Let me show you why you're wrong about that understanding. I'll take you to the Word of God and show you."

If you don't believe that you can know anything from the Bible, I can't do anything with you. So to me that's the lowest approach, just to dismantle something and then light a bunch of candles and offer yourself as the great new answer to the world's understanding of religion.

PHIL: That again is post-modernism in action. If you study post-modern literature, whatever, the thing you will learn is called deconstructionism.

JOHN: Yeah, and that's part of revisionist history. Deconstruct everything simply means dismantle what everybody's always believed. The egotism of it is pretty frightening, but yeah, revisionist history...now you can go to a university and be taught history and Columbus is going to come out to be completely different than we learned what he was and all the figures of history are manipulated and twisted around because truth is not the issue anymore. As an educator at the Master's College I get involved in these discussions. What is more important than truth is ennobling the dis...the heretofore disenfranchised masses who have been subsumed under the dominant European white male culture. And so in order to release these oppressed women and minorities, we have to reinvent truth because the liberation of these...of these abused people is more important than facts, since we might not have any reality about what facts are anyway. So history gets twisted, everything gets twisted. And this is what's being applied. This mentality of post-modernism is being applied to the Scriptures and to the church.

PHIL: In some ways, I think the Seeker-Sensitive Movement laid the foundation for disaster by minimizing Scripture and doctrine and all. And now a new movement comes along whose devoted to questioning everything and criticizing everything and deconstructing everything and the church is filled with people who have no foundation, no solid foundation of doctrine to fall back on.

JOHN: Yeah, and that's a huge problem. Some of the culprits in this, of course, you have to look at people like the Christianity Today people, and you have to look at Zondervan. Christianity Today is the flagship magazine that keeps promoting this. Zondervan Publishing which years ago was publishing Bible study tools, is now publishing all that they can get their hands on, it seems, of this kind of material.

PHIL: Yeah, they have a whole arm of their company that is devoted to just publishing.

JOHN: Yeah. And then you have You(?) Specialities Organization partnering with Zondervan to flood the world with this kind of material and aid and abet this tragic invasion. And that's what makes it so...so sad because they've embraced the post-modern world. They...the publishers have embraced post-modernism. "Hey, we all have our own truth, this is wonderful dialogue, conversation." The only part of the conversation they don't like is when you say, "That's wrong. That's sinful. That's undermining the Word of God." They don't want that part of the conversation.

PHIL: Let me...let me give you an example of what you're talking about here. I'm going to read you a quotation from a book, this actually was published in America by Zondervan. It's by a British post-modern evangelical author, he calls himself an evangelical. This quote that I'm about to read would really raise a fair question of whether the man is evangelical. The author here is Steve Chalk, the book is called The Lost Message of Jesus, and this book was highly controversial because of what he says about the atonement. And I want to read you just a brief section here and get your response to it. But this...this shows that some of the issues that are questions that are being raised, the

doctrines that are being attacked are not just peripheral or questionable issues, but some of the things that are at the very heart of what we believe and proclaim. This raises a fair question about the gospel and what did the cross mean? That's the very thing he's talking about here.

He writes this: "The fact is that the cross is not a form of cosmic child abuse, a vengeful father punishing his son for an offense he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement that God is love. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God toward human kind but borne by His Son, then that makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil."

PHIL: He's saying if you believe Jesus died as a substitute for sinners, then that's a form of cosmic child abuse...his words.

JOHN: God is a bad guy. Jesus is a victim. My response to that is that you couldn't be a Christian and say that. That's just...that's outright heresy. But the...the issue to me is what does this come from? Is this a...is this a...does he find Bible verses, texts of Scripture that led him to that conviction? That sounds like the language of an atheist, doesn't it?

PHIL: It does.

JOHN: It sounds like the language of a flat-out anti-Christian pagan atheist mocking the cross of Jesus. That's mockery. That's...that's outright mockery. These people...and he thinks he's really cute and clever, this kind of stuff is going to shock people...and it does, that's why it stood out when you read it. But this is not even Christian thinking. There's nothing about looking at the Word of God there. There's nothing about trying to interpret the Scripture. This is more of what I was saying earlier. Bashing the truth, shredding the truth without having put anything in its place. Being cute and clever and novel and shocking and all of that and leaving people stunned but with nothing else. This is the worst kind of stuff because it sows seeds of doubt in the most fragile. This is a...this is the stuff that victimizes the children who are tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine. But that's not even Christianity, that is an attack on Christianity so to call yourself an evangelical and attack the heart and soul of the gospel.

But, of course, we would expect this, right? Because Jude says that the sad reality is, he says, "I would like to have written to you about our common salvation," as he starts his epistle, but he can't, as hard as he may have tried because he realizes that there isn't going to be a common salvation, or a common understanding of the gospel and salvation if they don't earnestly contend for the faith. Because unless you're going to battle for the truth, you're going to lose it since, he says, the heretics have crept into the church unawares. They're embedded, they're in the church, they're in the love feast, they're surrounding you. They're at the table. They're right there embedding themselves in the church. And that's where they do their damage. That's why he calls himself an evangelical. That's not an evangelical viewpoint, that's a heretic. And that's...and if you have this mass of quote/unquote professing Christian people that make up the large part of the church, the visible church, with no discernment, with no real theological understanding, then this stuff can be very, very seductive to them, very attractive to them. So see, if it's worded clever...cleverly...that's what makes Brian McClaren effective. He's...he's clever, deceptively clever to the uninitiated and the undiscerning.

PHIL: In a way, do you think there's an opportunity here though for those of us who love Scripture and are committed to what it teaches and want to proclaim it with clarity if we're clear in return? For example, the quote I just read from Steve Chalk is practically the polar antithesis of what Isaiah 53 says about the cross, that it pleased God to bruise Him. It was God who put Him to death. And if we proclaim that clearly, that's just as shocking, really. What Scripture says is shocking also. It's not the fact that this is shocking that makes it wrong, it's the fact that it's wrong.

JOHN: Right. No, I think that's a great observation. I think...sometimes I feel like what I'm preaching now is shocking just about every Sunday.

PHIL: And gets more shocking because the culture moves further and further away from....

JOHN: Yeah...yeah and as you know, our church is just filling up with young people, just pouring in. And I'm like stunning them with this straightforward biblical truth because it's so not post-modern, it's so fixed and inviolable and clear. It isn't ambiguous and it's...it's absolute. And this is pretty shocking if you're a student at UCLA or USC, in the universities in this area if you're coming out of the post-modern thinking of the world of their age group. It is...you're right, it is as stunning to hear that as it would be for an older evangelical to...to read Steve Chalk.

PHIL: I've watched you over the years respond to this sort of thing cause the Emerging Church Movement is not the first movement, obviously, that has come along and tried to blur the edges of truth. And wherever you see someone blurring truth like that, it seems like your instinctive response is to proclaim the truth with just that much more clarity.

JOHN: Yeah, why am I like that?

PHIL: I don't know, but I'm glad you are. I think Scripture commands us to...

JOHN: Well yeah, I think it's just because of that. I'm asking the question really rhetorically. I...I'm like that because I love the Word of God. I...I...look, I'm not under any illusions that God can't protect His truth, but I do know that I have been commanded in the Scriptures to guard that which has been entrusted to me. And the guardianship of the truth means that I will rise to the defense of biblical truth. That's part of the mandate of a pastor. That's...that's a responsibility we all have. And I...the truth is what I love, the truth is what I proclaim and the truth is what I will defend. It's not personal. I'm not mad at people. I'm not...I'm not trying to protect my own little space. It's all about the truth. And as long as I am here and God gives me breath, I'm going to look at those things that come against the truth and I'm...I'm going to point out the best I can that they are inconsistent with what the Word of God teaches. That doesn't make me popular in all circles, it creates just the opposite. But that's a small thing to me...as Paul said. I really don't care what the people think, I know what God has called me to do and what is the essence of my faithfulness to Him is to proclaim and to guard the truth.

PHIL: Would you ever join the Emergent conversation in order to hear your point of view...have your point of view heard by them, or is it better, do you think, to stand apart from a movement like this and confront them?

JOHN: Well I think I would probably be more than happy to address them any time they would invite

me. But that...I...I would do that in a Roman Catholic Church or an orthodox church or a Mormon church but so far I haven't had any invitation.

PHIL: As long as they didn't tell you what to say, huh?

JOHN: Yeah, look I'm not going to spend my whole life saying what I believe only to the people who already believe it, but I understand that this era today...there was a time years ago, I remember I was invited to a campus, a university campus, they had a Mormon, they had a Jewish rabbi, they had a Catholic priest and they had, I think it was a Hindu or something, and then they had me. And it was like let everybody pontificate on his deal and this... That wouldn't happen today, I don't think, because I don't they want to hear any dogmatism about anything from anybody.

PHIL: Right. Well it's happened a few times with you on Larry King, but you only get 30 second snippets at the most.

JOHN: Well, you know, that's a sound byte environment and Larry is the main guy and all the commercials have to play and they've got to do all the stuff they've got to do. So you never really get to process things the way you'd like to. And I think I'm there mostly for the agitation factor.

PHIL: But it sounds to me like what you're saying is your advice to a young preacher would be not to learn how to adapt your language to suit the post-modern generation, but to actually cultivate clarity and be definitive.

JOHN: You know, I would be so bold as to say this, I don't...I don't even think a person should go to a church that isn't answerable to a doctrinal statement. If you're going to a church that doesn't have a doctrinal statement, you need to get out of there because you're at the whim of a guy who can invent anything he wants any time. This entrepreneurial approach to the church is a very serious breach. "We need to hold to the faith once for all delivered to the saints." There needs to be accountability to a mature godly eldership that aren't just guys raised by the entrepreneurial leader in the church. We need to be...we need to be faithful to a doctrinal statement, to historic doctrine, to what has been stated through historic doctrinal creeds. This flash in the pan, invent your own deal entrepreneurial approach to the church is very, very serious. You know, in Calvin's day if you preached without being ordained, they put you in prison, they were so protective of the truth. I don't think people should even be in a church unless that church is anchored to a historic doctrine and there are...there is an association with or a fellowship with. That's one of the reasons we have the Shepherds' Conference, there's so many independent churches that we need to network these guys so they sense accountability to other preachers and other teachers who hold to sound doctrine. They need that accountability as well as that fellowship and that association. And the thing about the Emerging Church is there are no rules, there is no doctrine and there's no official connection, right?

PHIL: Right.

JOHN: It's completely amorphous, every guy does exactly what he wants to in his own eyes. And that is very, very dangerous. And when one of those guys comes along and says, "Well we do it our way and they do it their way," that's really dangerous stuff. You mean to tell me that you got it right after 2000 years? You're the guy who got it right? Can everything in the past, dump everybody in the present, it's your deal, you're doing it your way. I think God has been faithful to protect His truth and

to pass it down through the centuries in the hands of gifted, godly men and churches and it's articulated in creeds and doctrinal statements and books and things like that. These guys don't want anything to do with that. They want the freedom to shape their own Christianity to suit their own whims.

PHIL: A few years ago, it's probably been fifteen years ago, so this was before there was ever any idea of the Emerging Church on any kind of wide scale, you wrote an article called, "What does it mean to me?" where you critiqued the common practice of people in Bible studies to sit in living rooms full of people and just go around the room and each person says what does this verse mean to me. You critiqued that trend. Doesn't it seem that the Emerging Church is actually just the institutionalization of that methodology? That's what...

JOHN: Yeah, I guess with the exception that we don't know what it means so maybe we should say the Emerging Church is what I think this might mean to me.

PHIL: Remove all the dogmatism from it.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: Is this...do you think this is another fad that will quickly go away, or what do you think the long-term ramifications...

JOHN: It has nothing to do with the Bible. It has nothing to do with the true church. It has nothing to do with real Christianity. It has nothing to do with the Holy spirit and therefore it has nothing to do with God. Is that a fad? Sure it's a fad. It's just more pop religion. Does that mean that these people none of them are Christians? I think there are probably some people in here...in this kind of movement who may be Christians who are seduced by this in their ignorance they are the children tossed to and fro, carried about by every blowing wind of doctrine, which is a terrible situation. And then to elevate that as if that's real spiritual nobility is sad. But I think it is faddish because post-modernism is faddish. It will have a short shelf life, shorter than ever because everything exhausts itself faster in an explosive media environment. Because you run everything to its limit, you exhaust every option faster. You've got thousands of years of pre-modernism, hundreds of years of modernism, maybe a few years of post-modernism and I don't know what is going to come next.

PHIL: Maybe the Lord will return.

JOHN: Yeah.

PHIL: In fact, as you look toward the future, just the past generation or so, the Evangelical Movement, particularly in America but really worldwide, has been ravaged by a series of these fads. The Seeker-Sensitive Movement, and all the various fads like Purpose Driven books and Jabez books.

JOHN: And what's in common with all these, Phil? What's in common in all these is the downplaying, if not the absolute disappearance of theology. That's what's common to all of them, whether you're talking about the Willow Creek which is the Seeker thing back up one generation to Schuller, or back up one generation to Norman Vincent Peale, back up one generation to Harry Emerson Fosdick and

take it back to the great Presbyterian controversy in the U.S. Harry Emerson Fosdick who denies Scripture is the father of Norman Vincent Peale, who is all positive thinking. He is the father of a neoorthodox named Robert Schuller who uses the lingo that sounds familiar but infuses it with all different meaning. He told me that personally in his own conversation with me. The father of Schuller is Norman Vincent Peale, the son of Schuller is Bill Hybels who buys in to methodology rather than theology which gives birth to Rick Warren which gives birth to the Emerging Church. And a common thread in all of it is the downplaying, the depreciation, the diminishing of theology, of biblical interpretation and the priority of the Word of God verse by verse being taught and being preached.

PHIL: Exactly. It's left the Evangelical Movement without any kind of boundaries or definition though. There is no coherent, cohesive movement called evangelicalism anymore. That word has lost its meaning.

JOHN: Sure...sure.

PHIL: So what do you see as the future?

JOHN: Well what could it be if you don't...if theology isn't the issue? Then now evangelical as a word describes a broad kind of undefined, non-specific connection to Christianity.

PHIL: And every man does what's right in his own eyes.

JOHN: Right. But the bottom line is, just look at any kind of movement, whatever it is, and see if historic sound doctrine and faithful exposition of the Word of God is at the center. And if it's not, you've got problems. Even if it looks like a traditional church, right? You've got traditional churches where they still sing some old gospel songs and the preacher preaches a 30-minute evangelistic message. Those people may have no more discernment than somebody in an Emerging Church cause there's not a substantial theology, there's no a faithful exposition of the Word of God at any kind of depth. And so that contributes to people's susceptibility to these other movements which the style of which is more appealing.

Okay, let's say you're an 18-year-old kid or 20-year-old kid, you're at the university, you're up to your neck in post-modernism, but you've gone all your life to, let's say, a Baptist church where you hear the same old evangelistic sermons, you sing the same old hymns. And you watch people live a sort of superficial Christian life and you grew up...and it was a little bit legalistic and maybe it was...it was not powerful, you know, and the Word of God wasn't captivating, and all of a sudden along comes a guy at school and takes you off to an Emerging Church and they're smelling things and doing candles and it's cool and the guy's really anti-church and he's whacking all the stuff that you thought was dumb about your church, and it's just...he's shredding your experience...and you're saying, "Yeah, yeah, that's exactly right, I hated that organ and that old soprano singing every other week. It never had any effect on my life." And you buy in to the deception of this thing. That's who they're capturing. I don't think it's nearly as appealing to the non-churched people as to the marginally churched young people. In fact, most of the leaders in the Emerging Church Movement are those guys that grew up in a traditional church that didn't have a lot of depth or breadth and they reacted to the superficiality and somewhat maybe even the legalism of it. They're the ones that have been the architects of this thing.

PHIL: You know, I think most of our listeners, the majority of them are lay people in churches where within the next few years, if not already, they are going to be under pressured to adopt and embrace some of the methodology and style and coolness of the Emerging Movement. How would you counsel them to respond if in their church there are leaders who are promoting this kind of thing?

JOHN: First of all, I would say this, if your church is really committed to sound doctrine, if it's really committed to the exposition of Scripture, it's going to be committed to historic theology. And in itself that...that should have some control because it's going to revere the past. It's going to honor the past. And that becomes some kind of a controlling factor.

If you're in a church that is just grabbing every new fad that's coming down the line, they're more committed to methodology than they are to theology. There may be some exceptions to that, but to me methods are a non-issue. It's...it's...it's about the Word of God and where there is a church anchored to the Word of God, they make changes very slowly because they revere the tradition, they revere the historic theology, they revere the Word of God and their changes are conformed more by that. So if your church is jumping on every bandwagon, the real issue there is that there's a lack of that great depth and continuity of holding to historic doctrine and that the sound teaching of the Word of God that should be the controlling factor. It's a symptom when churches jump quickly from one fad to another.

And I'll tell you how it happens, it's so sad. It happens very often in the transition among pastors because it's hard for pastors to make that shift. So the pastor leaves and somebody says, "Let's get a guy who is on the new edge." He comes in, these guys are very ambitious, they want to build the mega church, all their heroes have big, big, big effective deals. They come in, they can't pull it off in their town, you know, Visalia, or Hocus-Pocus, Texas, they can't pull it off. So they shred the church in a year or two and then they leave. And then the church is sitting there, having been led down the primrose path like the Pied Piper and they've all walked off the end of the pier. And they don't know where to go. That's the scenario. But what holds the church is that strong, strong biblical doctrinal foundation. When it's not there, it's very hard to prevent those trendy things from captivating people. And they do it with good intention...we're going to win more, reach more, and all that.

PHIL: Let me ask you one last question and kind of give you an opportunity to answer this at length in any detail you want.

JOHN: I answer everything at length, don't I?

PHIL: But I want you to preach here because I want to ask you about the perspicuity of Scripture, the clarity of Scripture. You started by characterizing the Emerging Church Movement as a movement that is infatuated with mystery that is elevated ambiguity. I think it was Brian McClaren who said, "Clarity is overrated." And I know you don't feel that way and, in fact, I would say probably the outstanding thing about your preaching in my assessment would be the clarity with which you teach. And you've told me many times that it's because you believe Scripture itself speaks clearly. Tell us what Scripture says about its own perspicuity.

JOHN: There are a lot of telling...telling texts, but I'll just give you one little insight into that. Jesus comes into His ministry and He starts to teach and speak to the crowds in Israel and He says things to them like this, "Have you not read? Have you not heard what Scripture says? Do you not

understand the Scripture?" And He indicts them again and again and again for their failure to understand the Old Testament and therefore to see its fulfillment in Him. He doesn't say to them, "Oh look, I know why you're having a really tough time with Me, because the Old Testament is so hard to understand. There's so much mystery there. Why would I ever expect you to understand that I'm the fulfillment of that?" He never said that.

He says...He indicts them, "Search the Scriptures, they are they which speak of Me." What's wrong with you? It's as clear as it can be. We would look at the Old Testament and say, "Oh, you know, who could ever understand that?" Jesus says to these people, the common run-of-the mill hoi polloi in the crowd, you need to understand the Old Testament because it speaks of Me. Search the Scripture, it's all there.

That...that is the testimony of Jesus to the clarity of the Old Testament to the degree that He holds them accountable for its accurate interpretation. And He never said anything other than that.

I'll even go a step further. The Apostle Paul writes Romans and he writes Galatians basically to Gentiles. They have no understanding of the Old Testament whatsoever. They don't know anything. They don't even know there is an Old Testament until they are told that. And yet he builds these massive cases of understanding the Christian gospel based on the sacrificial system on the foundation of the Old Testament both in Galatians and Romans where the Law plays this huge role in any understanding of the gospel with an expectation that they could read the Old Testament and make the clear connection of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. He writes the Corinthians and in chapter 3 makes this amazing contrast between the Law and the Spirit, between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. And that's written to Corinthians, that's written to Gentiles.

So even pagans could read the Old Testament and understand it. You would think also that the Romans would be expected to understand the book of Romans, right? That they're coming out of a pagan environment, they're converted Gentiles and they're supposed to fully understand the book of Romans. Well what does that...what are these Emerging Church people saying to us, that we can't understand we who are Christians who know the Old Testament and the gospels and the New Testament? We can't understand what Paul meant when he talked about justification? Steve Chalk is trying to tell us this is some kind of child abuse when we understand exactly what God did in putting Christ on the cross, it's crystal clear.

So I think the expectation of Jesus and the expectation of the Apostles was that people could understand it. Another thought, everybody that received the New Testament letters was a new Christian. Romans wasn't written to scholars, it wasn't written to seminary professors. It was written to a congregation of people who could hear it read and understand it. That's clarity. And the expectation was they were accountable to understand it and to apply it. And Paul even says at the end of his letters that you need to hear what I have written and you need to obey and my passion and my prayer for you is that all of this truth will...will capture your heart, that you will increase, he said to the Philippians, in knowledge and understanding he says to the Colossians, he said it to the Ephesians. So I think the testimony of Scripture itself is to its own clarity. And to come along and say that the Bible is not clear is then to accuse God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Scripture itself of claiming something for itself that it can't deliver. That's pretty serious.

PHIL: John, I know I speak for lots of our listeners when I say thank you to you for all the work you do in helping to make Scripture clear and understandable for all of us and thank you for your study

and diligence and thanks for this hour. This has been very informative.

JOHN: Well, Phil, thank you and I know you know all these things very well and you're sharing the same convictions that I have. And together we're going to endeavor to be faithful and to keep this ministry faithful to these very truths. And the dominating truth is that God's Word is supreme.

PHIL: Thank you, John. And for those listeners who are interested in following this subject up further, I want to mention that you've got a new book coming out that deals with many of these issues, interacts with some of the writings of the leaders of the Emerging Church Movement on various fronts. The book is called The Truth Warand it's scheduled for release in the spring of 2007, so watch for it and be prepared for that.

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