Each new generation needs a new generation of Christians to speak to it in its own cultural language. This has always been true, for an obvious reason. As time passes, things change. Language changes. Customs change. More importantly, ideas change. Unless, we engage those new ideas, we will be speaking into the air. Thus, all emerging generations need an emerging church with a fresh understanding of – and sensitivity to – the new culture.

According to emerging church pioneer Dan Kimball, the term “emerging church” simply refers to “churches who were focusing on the mission of Jesus and thinking about the Kingdom in our emerging culture.”

I was part of just such a generation of “emerging Christians” nearly 35 years ago. The year was 1973. The emerging church then was called the Jesus Movement. Emerging Christians were called “Jesus freaks,” hippies with religion.

Now more than three decades later much has changed. Airlines have receded, waistlines have advanced, and that which was new has become old. I am now the “establishment” to an emerging, postmodern generation that is both foreign and hostile to many of us. To reach it, we need a new emerging church for the same reason we needed the Jesus Movement in the ‘60s and ‘70s. It’s the same reason any foreign culture needs missionaries.

Effective cross-cultural ambassadors for Christ are alert for any artificial hindrances to the Gospel and try to remove them. They then try to blend in with the locals as much as possible. When you think of it, this is the goal of all productive missionaries – to get as culturally “near” as possible to those they’re trying to reach. The closer one is in the theologically neutral elements of language, customs, clothing, and culture, the fewer barriers exist to dealing with the underlying ideas that are contrary to the truth.

In fact, this was exactly the strategy of history’s most accomplished missionary, the Apostle Paul. Whether speaking to Greek or Jew, he tried to conform to culture as much as possible without compromising his own biblical values. “I have become all things to all men,” he wrote, “so that I may, by all means, save some” (1 Corinthians 9:22).

In order to “save some,” though, Paul did more than blend into culture in every way he could. He also had to understand, engage, and – in some cases – tear down the peculiar ideas of his generation that were hostile to the Gospel or else he was wasting his time.

This is true for ambassadors for Christ in any age. Nearly a hundred years ago, J. Gresham Machen, the last of the great Princeton theologians, wrote:

False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the Gospel. We may preach with all the fervor of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as anything more than a harmless delusion.

“There are inherent perils to this enterprise, however. Those who fight fires sometimes get consumed by them. New cultural ideas present new cultural threats for those who do not recognize their dangers.”
Paul warned us not to be taken captive to deceptive philosophical traditions of men that were not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8). This cannot be done unless we have a working knowledge of two things: the dangerous philosophies of men Paul warned of, and the life-giving truth of Christ that is their antidote.

The problem is, 21st century Christians are no more astute in either area than those of us who went before them. In the ‘60s, we properly understood that the church needed a certain flexibility of cultural expression. Yet we were too quick to abandon the wisdom of those who had gone before us and fell headlong into a host of perils. Finding the balance was a painful process of trial and error. As is often the case, the new wave embraced the future too eagerly, while the old guard held too tightly to the past.

This struggle cannot be avoided, it appears. New generations emerge for a reason. They are conceived in the midst of conflict between old and new. The new distains itself from the perceived shortcomings of the past and embraces the promises of a fresh way of thinking. The old, like MacArthur’s old soldier, doesn’t exactly die. Instead, it slowly fades away, fighting all the while as the new generation emerges to replace it.

This is the situation we find ourselves in now in the first decade of the 21st century, and it defines the missional challenge facing today’s emerging church. How do we contextualize the Gospel message for a new generation without either falling victim to its excesses or isolating ourselves from spiritual fathers who have so much to offer precisely because they fought similar battles a generation ago?

Here needs to be a fresh strategy to reach this new generation, agreed. We need the emerging church, in my opinion. Today’s diversity requires its diverse approach. Yet like the Jesus Movement before it, the postmodern emerging church faces the challenge of how to be culturally relevant without becoming captive to cultural ideas.

True to form for the old guard, I have my concerns. If the postmodern view of truth and knowledge bankrupts Christianity, and if it is itself a bankrupt view – points I have argued in previous issues of Solid Ground – then why is postmodernism so attractive to so many Christians, especially among the young?

THE 21ST CENTURY EMERGING CHURCH – WHAT AND WHY

Postmodernism holds an appeal for emerging Christians for a variety of reasons.

First, the emerging generation has a deep mistrust for the deliverances of modernity. In their view, the Enlightenment was a philosophical tidal wave that left a legacy of dogmatic absolutism, oppression of minorities, abuse of the environment, a detach ed and self-centered individualism, and despair.

Second, to emerging Christians conventional Christian churches provide little relief from these excesses. Evangelicalism is thick with problems, most – according to many emerging Christians – because of a slavish dependency on modernism.

Emerging Christians, then, are reacting to a church establishment that deeply offends them. They have been embarrassed by what appears to them to be systemic hypocrisy. They are unsettled by what they take to be indifference toward the poor, a fear of (and therefore hostility toward) diversity, and a dogmatism borne of religious conceit.

Third, many young people are attracted to the emerging church because certain sociological aspects are appealing. The emphasis on community, social consciousness, inclusiveness, and an absence of “arrogant” theological rigor, are all refreshing changes from what many grew up with.

Finally, the new generation of Christians has been profoundly influenced by the changing philosophical climate regarding truth and knowledge. Certainty is a luxury of the previous era. Humble skepticism and tolerance are now the operational concepts.

The driving force for many emerging Christians, therefore, is not orthodoxy, but orthopraxy; not right thinking, but right living – a practical “love lived out” way of life.

Much of this appeal was captured in a video clip I viewed of a sermon by pastor Doug Pagitt of Solomon’s Porch, an emerging church in Minneapolis that describes itself as “a community seeking to live the dreams and love of God in the way of Jesus.”

Listening to Pagitt and cruising the web site I felt myself drawn to the community, interaction, expression, freedom, spontaneity, and genuine affection the people seemed to have for each other at “the Porch.” Pagitt’s manner was especially winning, providing a unique appeal to many who feel out of place in more “conventional” churches.

I’m not endorsing this group (I actually have reservations about Pagitt’s doctrinal and philosophical views), but it does provide a snapshot of many of the emerging church’s attractive elements.

Interestingly, virtually everything creative and compelling about Solomon’s Porch I saw in the Jesus Movement 35 years ago. With the exception of guys with earrings, I thought I was viewing a clip from a time capsule from my own early days as a Christian.

Such countercultural efforts are as vital now as they were then. But the dangers are also the same – the emerging church cutting itself off from its past, reinventing the theological wheel, thinking it has discovered the poor and other social ills it alone seeks to heal, loving everyone as long as they agree theologically and culturally, and critiquing the established church by the culture instead of holding both the culture and the church accountable to the truth of the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

In order to do this last thing, one must believe there is such a truth and that it can be known. Herein is the rub. We were confident of this in the Jesus Movement. I see no such confidence now.

EMERGING VS. EMERGENT

At this point a critical distinction is necessary. I have been speaking in general terms about the emerging church, which is a broad and multifaceted group, culturally and theologically. Even so, two distinct streams seem to diverge. Scott McKnight, a friendly but thoughtful critic of the movement, distinguishes two major forces in the emerging church: a missional force and a postmodern force.

This difference, it seems to me, is one of method vs. message. The vast majority of those in the emerging church – as high as 90%, according to Kimball – are engaged in a cross-cultural mission, enterprising enterprise that aggressively seeks to contextualize the timeless message of the Gospels using methods more friendly to postmoderns.

This move alone has drawn fire from the old guard. In my opinion, much of this criticism has been shallow. Far too much blood is being spilt on inconsequentials: order of worship, style of preaching, type of music, seating arrangements, and the like.

Thought these functions are biblical, no particular forms are mandated. Most of these objections are little more than vindication of the
FOUR CONCERNS

For me, four concerns form the watershed: the truth/knowledge equation, the authority of the Bible, the work of the cross, and the Great Commission.

First, does Christianity give us an accurate picture of the way the world really is, and can we know it? This is just another way of asking if the claims of classical Christianity are true in the objective, correspondence sense.

Because there is little objectivity (here to be understood as “detachment”) regarding knowledge, some seem to think knowledge of the objective world is not possible. Truth may exist in the mind of “detachment” regarding knowledge, some seem to think knowledge correspondence sense.

The price to pay for this mistake is high. Remember, faith does not save. You are saved by the One you put your faith in, so you better invest that faith wisely. If you have an unshakable faith and your facts are wrong, then you have an unshakable delusion. And delusions don’t save.

Second, in what sense is the Bible God’s authoritative communication to us? (Scott Pruett’s comment on STR’s blog captures perfectly the emerging tale of two distinct emerging churches)

It seems to me that the Emergent movement is poised to split into at least two directions. One headed toward an amalgamation of theological liberalism and postmodernism. The other being a more raw, unpretentious, and informal expression of orthodox Christianity. Of course, the later is to be preferred, and so long as it is not condescending toward those who continue to appreciate (though not elevate) their liturgies and traditions, it may ultimately be a fresh wind in the body of Christ.

REACHING THE EMERGING CULTURE: A STRATEGY

My own Christian journey has been deeply influenced by the late Francis Schaeffer. Though he addressed the failings of a modern world, he was very prescient in anticipating the needs of the postmodern one. Nearly 50 years ago he wrote, “Before a man is ready to become a Christian, he must have a proper understanding of truth, whether he has fully analyzed his concept of truth or not.”

Knowledge for the Enlightenment mind was limited to the facts of the material realm—the “lower story”– discovered by the empirical methods of science. Meaning, significance, value, and religion were relegated to an “upper story” leap of faith. Truths in the upper story were only “true for you,” what we now call “subjective truth.”

To address this confusion, Schaeffer coined the term “true Truth.” This is not a meaningless redundancy, but an attempt to repair a confusion spawned by modern distortions of the term and intensified in the postmodern era. “We are not saying what we are trying to say,” he argued, “unless we make completely clear that we are talking about objective truth when we say Christianity is true.”

If the early saints were not to think of God’s word as authority, they would be courting tragedy. The implications for the church are far-reaching for it may spell death for the church as we know it. Even if the church is not the church as we know it, it will be done away with. But pastor/teachers may no longer have the right to claim their word is God’s because they are not the authority that Jesus said is God’s authority. I say this because I think the whole church will be on the line, and I think it’s a clear and present danger. It’s a clear and present danger, and it’s a danger that is going to get a lot worse before it gets any better.
Further, Schaeffer knew that Christians had a powerful ally in this war of ideas: reality. In point of fact, man is made in the image of God and must live in the world God created. Though ideas change, the fundamental nature of reality does not. Though culture shifts, human beings stay the same.

“In practice then, we do have a point for conversation... There is common ground between the Christian and the non-Christian because regardless of a man’s [belief] system, he has to live in God’s world.”

Consequently, every person who rejects the truth of “the God who is there” must live in a contradiction between what he says he believes and the way the world actually is. He speaks of a world filled with morality, meaning, order, and beauty even though he denies the God whose existence makes such things possible.

Put more directly, everyone is already deeply convinced of the truth, even when he denies it. True, our culture is driven by a postmodern impulse, but deep down each of us is a common-sense realist. Those who are not are either dead, in an institution, or sleeping in cardboard boxes under the freeway.

Knowing this gives us a tremendous advantage whether we’re talking with an ancient, a medieval, a modern, or a postmodern. The key is to deal with moral relativism, for example, is realizing that for all the affirmations, no one really believes it. When I lectured at Berkeley I asked a question I pose frequently: Why do we all feel guilty? They knew better. Which makes my closing statement all the more powerful. “The answer to guilt is forgiveness. This is where Jesus comes in.”

I have asked this question countless times on campus. No one has ever stopped me afterwards and said I was wrong. They could not. They knew better. Which makes my closing statement all the more powerful. “The answer to guilt is not denial,” I said. “The answer to guilt is forgiveness. And this is where Jesus comes in.”

Schaeffer’s approach is simple. We can start with the truth of the world as each person already knows it to be, and the truth of her own lost condition, which she is already painfully aware of, and offer a solution that resonates with her deepest intuitions about herself and reality.

I am convinced that Schaeffer’s insights for the moderns of his time apply equally to the postmoderns of ours.

To begin with, the false understanding of truth must be dealt with. Schaeffer was clear on this:

“We are talking about real truth, and not something vaguely religious which seems to work psychologically... We are talking about real guilt before God.... We are talking... about real history, that the death of Jesus was not just an ideal or a symbol, but a fact of space and time.... Until he understands the importance of these three things, he is not ready to become a Christian.”

Three more things are then required for orthodox evangelicalism to become, as Schaeffer put it, “a thing of strength and beauty” to others.

First, since “true Christian faith rests on content,” “the full doctrinal position of historic Christianity must be clearly maintained.” Second, honest questions must be given honest answers, not merely exhortations to “just believe.” Third, there must be an exhibition in the church, individually and corporately, of God in our lives showing convincingly that Christianity is not just a set of doctrines, but an authentic way of life.

From the beginning this has been Stand to Reason’s way. Our guiding philosophy has been very simple: The Gospel is offensive enough; don’t add any more offense to it. But we dare not remove the offense inherent to the Gospel. His message must be crystal clear.

I will close with the words of one of my mentors, J.P. Moreland:

Postmodernism is a form of intellectual pacifism.... It is the easy, cowardly way out that removes the pressure to engage alternative conceptual schemes, to be different, to risk ridicule, to take a stand outside the gate. But it is precisely as disciples of Christ, even more, as officers in His army, that the pacifist way out is simply not an option.

However comforting it may be, postmodernism is the cure that kills the patient, the military strategy that conceals defeat before the first shot is fired.... And it is an immoral, coward’s way out that is not worthy of a movement born out of the martyrs’ blood.

I think he’s right.

Your partner for the truth,

Gregory Koukl
President, Stand to Reason

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**PUTTING YOUR KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION**

- To be good ambassadors for Christ we must have a working knowledge of two things: the dangerous philosophies of men Paul warned of (Colossians 2:8) and the life-giving truth of Christ that is their antidote. This will help us recognize the dangers new cultural ideas present and keep the church true to the message of the Gospel even when employing new methods.

- Use the four watershed issues: the truth/knowledge equation, the authority of the Bible, the work of the cross, and the Great Commission to understand where any movement within Christianity stands.

- Remember that Christians have an important ally in this war of ideas: reality. Human beings must live in the world God created.

- To reach our postmodern culture keep in mind the tactical question: “Why do we all feel guilty?” The answer to guilt is not denial, the answer is forgiveness. This is where Jesus comes in.

2 J. Greshem Machen, What is Christianity? (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 162, as quoted in William Dembski and James Kushner, Signs of Intelligence (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), 59
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 137.
6 Ibid., p. 139.
7 Ibid., p. 189.
8 Ibid., p. 146.
9 See STR’s “Ambassador’s Creed” at str.org
10 J.P. Moreland, “Truth, contemporary Philosophy, and the Postmodern Trum,” plenary address to the Evangelical Theological Society, November 2004
**STR SPEAKERS’ SCHEDULE**

### JULY
- **2-3** Vanguard University, Irvine, CA 10 a.m. & 7 p.m. each day Topics: “Essential Ambassador Skills,” “Faith Is Not Wishing,” “Any Old God Won’t Do,” “Bad Arguments against Religion”
- **13** Summit Ministries, Manitou Springs, CO
- **17** Living Oaks Christian Church, Newbury Park, CA 8, 9:30, 11 a.m. Topic: “Relativism: Feet Firmly Plants in Mid-Air” Contact: www.livingoaksc.com
- **22-29** Evangelical Free Church, Santa Clarita, CA 8:45 & 10:30 a.m. Topics: “Essential Ambassador Skills” and “What Would Jesus Think?” Contact: (661) 252-1600

### AUGUST
- **1-2** Summit Ministries, Manitou Springs, CO
- **20** Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, CA 7:00 p.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (949) 609-8006 or www.saddleback.net
- **25** South Valley Christian Church, San Jose, CA 5:00 p.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (408) 972-4377
- **26** South Valley Community Church, Gilroy, CA 8:45 and 10:30 a.m. Topic: TBD Contact: (408) 848-2363

### B.rett Kunkle
- **JULY**
  - **9-13** Stand Together Camp, Lindale, TX Topics: “Worldview Training” Contact: (903) 258-4631
  - **27** Global Mission Church of California, Diamond Bar, CA Topics: “Truth and the Real World, Why I Am a Christian” Contact: (909) 456-5471
- **AUGUST**
  - **3** Global Mission Church of California, Diamond Bar, CA Topics: “Truth and the Real World, Why I Am a Christian” Contact: (909) 456-5471
  - **21, 28** Westside Vineyard Christian Fellowship, Los Angeles, CA 7:00 p.m. Topic: “Tactics in Defending the Faith” Contact: (310) 391-7366 or vcfwestside.org

### Steve Wagner
- **JULY**
  - **6-10** Focus on the Family Institute, Colorado Springs, CO Topic: “Abortion: From Debate to Dialogue” Contact: (800) 281-6426
- **AUGUST**
  - **9, 16** North Coast Church, Vista, CA 7:00 p.m. (four-week course) Topic: “Staying Christian in College” Contact: (760) 724-6700 or www.northcoastchurch.com/ncu/
  - **19, 26** Bel Air Presbyterian Church, Bel Air, CA 10:30 a.m. (four-week course) Topic: “Evolution & Intelligent Design” Contact: (818) 788-4200 or www.belairpres.org

**As additional dates are scheduled, they will be posted on our web page at www.str.org**
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Embracing moral relativism undercuts our morals and impacts how we treat others. If our moral standard is undercut and distorted, striving for moral improvement becomes nonsensical. But as Christian parents and youth leaders we desire that our kids continue to grow, recognize their own failings, and strive to improve. In this culture prone to moral relativism, how can we help them?

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