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Rewriting Christians: A rhetoric analysis of emergent church texts

Frances Marie Suderman

REWRITING CHRISTIANS:

A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF EMERGENT CHURCH TEXTS

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

English Composition

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Approved by:

[redacted]

Juan Delgado, Chair, English — 6-9-10 Date

[redacted]

Brenda Glascott

[redacted]

Mary Boland

ABSTRACT

Consider the following: Does God know the future? Is homosexuality a sin? Are we sinners by nature? Reconsidering these same questions, what would it mean if they were asked by leaders within American Evangelical Christendom (A.E.C.)? These questions threaten A.E.Christian perspective because they challenge fundamental truths espoused by the Bible. The men asking these questions are part of a movement called the Emergent Church.

My thesis defines the Emergent Church movement and discusses how it is situated among A.E.C. Furthermore, this thesis explores how Emergent Church texts use the rhetoric of conversation to question established biblical foundations. Through conversation the Emergent Church uses discourse that differs from traditional A.E.Christian language. Within these differences postmodern threads emerge.

Thus, the theoretical framework for this study is Jean-Francois Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* where Lyotard defines language games. Through language games Emergent Church texts express new ideology about rules governing Christian narratives and suggest a

rewriting of the Christian story. Some Emergent authors doing this postmodern work are Rob Bell and Brian McLaren. My thesis provides an overview of selected writings by Bell and McLaren to rhetorically analyze Emergent postmodern moves.

Specifically, Emergents include their discontentment and disillusionment with Christianity through conversational questioning and draw the Christian faith into a state of crisis. They also exclude and question beliefs held dear to traditional A.E.C., causing disruption in the A.E.C. community. Ultimately, my thesis concludes that these postmodern moves can productively further A.E.C. by moving toward stasis with outside communities.

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To

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CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM: EMERGING VERSUS EMERGENT

From its inception, printed text has provided a way for society to communicate with, unite, and define communities as well as define and ascribe language for constituents within those communities. The production of print text has great influence on identities of individuals inside of particular communities. Some of the largest users of print text are religious communities. Beyond production of sacred texts such as the Koran, the Torah, the Bible, etc. each religion has its own shelf of texts that help shape and define the identities of its followers. The goal of many of these texts is to demonstrate approved behaviors for a given community. Focusing on evangelical fiction, Jan Blodgett writes, "Characters and plots embody not only an evangelical perspective but also advocate appropriate behaviors and solutions to problems" (Blodgett 1). Religiously affiliated texts are not merely suggesting how one should act or respond in crisis, they are in fact writing the identity of their followers. For this reason it is important to study how particular texts construct the practices, purposes, and values of a religion to see how

identities are altered and formed. In this thesis I will reveal the ways in which a particular community of twenty-first century Christian authors, called Emergents, are exploring, through text, Christianity and identity with new and interesting postmodern approaches.

Instead of creating definitive conclusions about what Christian Truth is, Emergent church rhetoric takes new, and I would argue postmodern, approaches to traditional American evangelical Christian rhetoric in postmodern ways by writing about individual struggles within the belief system of Christianity. From these approaches a new rhetoric has been created. It is a rhetoric birthed by discontented pastors and spans many ages, life places, and experiences. The rhetorical moves Emergents have chosen root them in the postmodern movement in astounding and controversial ways.

The profundity of these Emerging texts has generated much discussion leading to scrutiny from American evangelical Christians. In most fields of study, new thought and exploration is vital to maintaining relevance among experts. However, as new questions, like the ones mentioned earlier, enter the "field" of Christianity, American evangelical Christianity is threatened. Asking

these questions from inside the faith suggests that there can be new answers. If there are new answers then the biblical interpretations American evangelical Christendom relies upon change, and suddenly this Christianity's understanding of itself is on shaky ground.

Lyotardian scholarship studies postmodernism as a condition of knowledge, or way of thinking, that has changed "the game rules for science, literature, and the arts" (xxiii). Jean-Francois Lyotard, in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* identifies each utterance as a "move" within the game rules (or language games) of conversation (10). Dissecting this condition of knowledge requires a look at metanarrative wherein Lyotard defines postmodernism "as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). Whereas traditional American evangelical Christianity is founded on metanarratives (which will be explored in detail in chapter two), Emergent Church texts express new ideas about the rules governing Christian narratives and language that suggest a rewriting of the Christian story, both individually and on the whole.

Within Emergent Church texts, a common performative rhetorical approach presents itself, where authors point out Christians' flaws in ways that, in years past, would

have been directed exclusively toward the non-Christian. This new, uncomfortable Emergent Church presentation of Christianity illustrates Lyotard's definition of the postmodern: "The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself... that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (81). Emergents continue to use the form of written text to present unpresentable content. In their presentation Emergent Church authors propose that Christians become flexible in their relationship with Jesus Christ, other Christians, and non-Christians in light of postmodernism. However, the church has either been slow to embrace postmodern thought or rejected it altogether, which makes Emergent texts that engage postmodernism rhetorically radical.

In modern American evangelical Christendom the term postmodern is "the latest in a series of religious epithets... used to discredit ideas or people or organizations that fail to conform to certain theological or ideological standards" (McLaren, Church Emerging 142). With this view in place the term postmodern becomes unpresentable because it has been used as a derogatory

classification of those who are questioning Christian foundations. Yet Emergents continue to publish and use the term:

> In spite of the controversy around the term, and in spite of its wildly varying usages, I felt it still served a good purpose. I still feel that way, even though many of my religious friends persist in using the word as a synonym for absolute nihilism, mindless relativism, moral anarchy, and other rotten things. (McLaren, Church Emerging 142)

It is evident through the Emergent's persistent use of postmodernism that the essence of this worldview carries value that outweighs the negative synonyms it has been assigned.

Coming at postmodernism without attached preference or negativity, James K. A. Smith, author of *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?,* points out the perceived danger of postmodern theology but concludes that it is positive:

> the postmodern theologian says, "We can't know that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. The best we can do is believe." Why? Because to know would mean being certain. We know

> that such certainty is an impossible dream; therefore, we actually lack knowledge. We don't know; we can only believe, and such faith will always be mysterious and ambiguous. But this isn't a bad thing; quite the contrary, it is liberating and just. It is precisely when we think we know something about God that we start erecting boundaries and instituting discipline. (118-119)

An initial reading of this quote might suggest that Smith is moving to discredit Christ's sacrifice of himself for the atonement of the sins of humanity. However, he is not saying that the atonement isn't real, only that its validity, for postmoderns, lies in belief. Smith's distinction between knowing and believing suggests that certainty leads to dogma. In modern American evangelical Christendom definitive boundaries are what create religion and church practice, whereas Emergent Church texts remove boundaries and no longer require them as part of their work. Without boundaries, how does a church keep people in? How does it keep people out? With questions like these in play, the Christian's identity comes into question because

the lines that once defined their faith and gave them answers are being removed.

My thesis will examine how Emergent Church texts rewrite the Christian identity and how such texts challenge traditional American evangelical Christendom. I will use Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church*, a pivotal evangelical Christian text, to illustrate the rhetorical approaches used in Christian texts prior to the Emergent Church movement. My thesis will then examine radical writings of the Emergent Church, such as *Jesus Wants to Save Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile* and *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, through Lyotard's postmodern theory of language games and metanarrative. Lyotard's theory will assist my examination of how Emergent writers rewrite the Christian identity by reconstructing the rules that surround Christian rhetoric in an effort to adapt it to postmodernism.

These radical shifts enable Emergent authors to challenge monotheistic Truth assertions by engaging conversations about truth instead of arguing for consensus. These conversations break old rules and suggest new ones outside of traditional American evangelical Christian

institutions. This remaking through language games reflects Lyotard's claim that "the limits the institution imposes on potential language 'moves' are never established once and for all" (17). Thus, the Emergent Church attempts to push limits that have been cemented in traditional American evangelical Christianity. Other radical shifts break apart metanarratives to reframe the Christian identity because "the narrative function is losing its [operation performers], its great hero... its great goal" in postmodernism (Lyotard xxiv).

Such shifts challenge the staunch foundations of traditional American evangelical Christianity by calling traditional beliefs into question. These shifts present a paradoxical question: can Christianity be characteristically postmodern while traditionally Christian? If it can, fundamental tenets like Bible narratives and Truth may incur sacrifice requiring core changes. If it cannot, Christianity may be irrelevant in postmodern society, and ultimately, such irrelevance threatens the survival of the Christian identity in any form.

For this reason, I will explore the advancing postmodern reconstruction of Christians via postmodern

rhetorical strategies of legitimation. I will also explore the ways that the Emergent movement is embracing postmodernism through a Lyotardian lens, which identifies postmodern language games and shows the division of metanarrative, which is an illegitimate grand story, for the purpose of creating little narratives, or smaller stories, that are "the quintessential form of imaginative intention..." (60). It is with imaginative intention that Emergent authors attempt to present Christianity. I will examine what this postmodern transformation means for Christianity's future and look at how the movement is rewriting Christians by adapting to postmodernism. My analysis will contribute to notions about whether or not Emergent texts can exist as evangelical and postmodern, simultaneously and what is left to be discovered.

Writings are essential to the Christian faith. "Christianity, like Judaism, has always been a text-centered religion that envisions God as the living and creative 'Word'" (Brown 2). As a text-centered religion, Christianity relies upon and looks heavily toward writing. This positions Christian authors with great authority to influence and shape the Christian identity. Within the last twenty years a group called the Emergent Church has

published Christian works that shape identity by testing age-old approaches in postmodern ways. These Emergent writings add to the overall production of evangelical fiction. "Far from being an ephemeral anomaly, evangelical fiction has, in the last twenty years, grown into a multimillion dollar business" (Blodgett 1). It is interesting to point out that the Emergent church began forming and writing within the last twenty years, which links them as large contributors of evangelical fiction.

Before I move into this analysis, however, some background and definitions are in order. Who are the Emergents and how are they located within the Christian evangelical tradition? Emergents are a branch off of the Emerging Church. Although similar in nomenclature, they are distinctly different in approach. The Emerging Church is a movement that pays special attention to postmodernism in the way it presents evangelical Christianity. The movement was developed through a few key men, Brian McLaren, Mark Driscoll, and Donald Miller, who attended conferences held by an organization called Leadership Network. Founded in 1984, Leadership Network "[fosters] church innovation and growth through strategies, programs, tools and resources consistent with [their] far-reaching mission: to identify,

connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact" (Leadnet n.p.). The term "Emerging Church" came from Leadership Network's tag line, "Advance Scouts for the Emerging Church." The Emerging Church was not a new church sect but rather a community of Christians who had begun to notice the generational shift taking place around them:

> Since Leadership Network was hosting these events specifically focused on younger generations... it slowly began being used as a substitute word for what was once "Baby Busters" then became "Gen X" then "postmodern" then became "emerging". When we realized that the "Gen X" thing was not just an age-group but a cultural change, it shifted to "postmodern" which soon became totally misunderstood and equated with a "style" of music or ministry or worship service rather than a philosophical response to modernism - and most of us were not philosophers and realized we were over our heads trying to even explain it. So the word "emerging church" seemed safer and more non-age specific... So the term moved past a

generational focus to more of a cultural focus. (Next Wave n.p.)

The original intention of the Leadership Network community morphed from generational focus to a discussion of cultural implications as they relate to evangelical Christendom. Certain leaders within the American evangelical Christian church joined Leadership Network conferences to connect with one another and discuss what church is supposed to be and if/how/why postmodernity has something to do with the church. In particular, a man by the name of Mark Driscoll gave a keynote speech at one of the conferences held at Mt. Hermon in 1997 where he spoke on the shift from modernism to postmodernism and the worldview shift in relation to the church. Mark Driscoll quickly gained popularity as a result of this speech, and the network he was a part of continued to grow. During this time three specific men joined the network: Doug Pagitt, Tony Jones, and Brian McLaren. These men added new questions to the conversation: "Does God know the future? Does gender really come with distinctions? Is homosexuality a sin? Are we sinners by nature? Do we need to keep the doctrine of the Trinity because it keeps us distant from other religions?" (Driscoll n.p.). Asking these questions within Christianity implies that there are

missing answers; yet American evangelical Christendom has already answered these questions using the Bible as their foundation. Therefore, these questions place the American evangelical Christian perspective of biblical inerrancy into question because they challenge locating fundamental truths in the Bible.

The Reformation split established certain doctrines for Protestants:

> In identifying themselves as evangelicals, Protestants defined their break from the Roman Catholic Church as centrally concerned with the doctrines of *sola gratia* [grace alone], *sola fides* [faith alone], *solus Christus* [salvation by grace]. . . [and] *sola scriptura* [scripture alone]. . . (Brown 2)

The last doctrine, sola scriptura, is of particular interest because it reinforces the importance of the written word for Christianity. As the Bible continued to be reproduced and other spiritual texts were produced, Protestants found it necessary to establish the Bible's authority. The establishment of biblical inerrancy took place in the nineteenth century: "The doctrine of verbal, plenary inspiration and its corollary, biblical inerrancy,

solidified in the nineteenth century in response to the challenges of European biblical-historical criticism and American romanticism" (Brown 5). With new approaches like romanticism and historical criticism, the Bible faced scrutiny. In order to defend the Bible's validity new doctrines were cemented. Establishing the Bible as infallible means biblical answers are nonnegotiable. Thus, when Emergents begin asking questions for which the Bible has answers the corollary is that Emergents do not find the Word of God infallible.

This is where the Emerging church movement split. While "emerging church" referred to churches looking at their purpose and methodology in the current culture, the "emergent church" was discussing the theology behind the methodology (Next Wave n.p.). The theological discussion, which came about through the aforementioned questions, led to a new direction in what was "emerging" within these conversations and offered a new literary approach to biblical exegesis. Within evangelical texts the contention has never been over the Bible. When it comes to disagreement within Christianity, the argument is often between embracing versus rejecting culture:

> Followers of the evangelical tradition, beginning with seventeenth-century Puritans and continuing through twentieth-century televangelists, have contended with the discordant impulses of claiming the world for Christ and rejecting the world as Satan's domain. (Blodgett 11-12)

The vacillation for four centuries has been over whether or not to embrace the world, and consequently the current worldview, not on the theology behind evangelical church methods. In the last twenty years however, the Emergent church has done just that by questioning the Bible.

Mark Driscoll outlined the distinctive groups of the Emerging church in a speech delivered at the *Convergent Conference* at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary on September 21, 2007, where he identified three different streams- Relevants, Revisionists, and Relevant Reformed. What Driscoll has identified as Revisionists holds particular interest because he defines this group, also known as the Emergents (referred to as such from here forward) as the group who is "rewriting what it means to be Christian" and holding conversations "on whether God meant what He had said" (Driscoll n.p.). Among Emergent writings a few commonalities have surfaced: a dialogic approach

through conversation, a willingness to frame traditional American evangelical Christianity in new ways, and a discontentment with modern notions and practices of traditional American evangelical Christian church and religion.

Having identified three emerging branches and specified the Emergents as this project's focus, I will now define several key terms that will be used throughout this chapter and those following. First, American evangelical Christendom will be defined as Christians residing in American culture who believe in the Bible as the sole, literal word of God and who identify themselves as Protestant either within or outside of denomination affiliation. Evangelical in this context refers to Protestants who emphasize personal connection to God and biblical inerrancy. This is taken from the Reformation era where "Protestants first called themselves evangelicals during the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when Martin Luther's (1483-1546) followers in Germany adopted the name Evangelische Kirche, or evangelical Church" (Brown 2). The term evangelical is an outgrowth of Protestantism and an additional distinctive descriptor of one who identifies as Protestant.

Second, church has two meanings. Church will refer to groups of people who come together under common understandings of particular sect beliefs, i.e. Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Non-Denominational, etc. This definition of church is distinct from terms like "the church" or "kingdomlike church." During the Reformation Protestants associated with a larger group of Christians; "Repudiating the church hierarchy's claim to mediate between the Word and lay Christians, Protestants affirmed that they belonged to a priesthood that included all Christian believers" (Brown 3). So, where "the church" or "kingdomlike church" will refer to the Protestant sense of belonging that references all Christian believers (as in the Emerging/Emergent church), I will use the term church (without quotes) to reference the institution of church. Third, religion is much like the term church because it also has several connotations. Religion in the context of this project will refer to structured church practice as opposed to individual, spiritual commitment and practice.

Mark Driscoll has also offered definitions relating to the Emerging church. In his speech at the Convergent Conference Driscoll begins his description of Emergents by stating his deep concern. Driscoll does not identify

himself as an Emergent because he does not agree with, and is even angry about, the direction of this branch's interpretation of scripture. He founds his concern on the first book of the Bible (Genesis chapter three) where the serpent questions God's intention by asking Eve if God really said not to eat from the tree of good and evil:

> What I see in Genesis three is incredibly important because it shows us where history went askew and we were led by the serpent, which Revelation reveals as Satan our enemy, into error and folly and that is through a conversation. And the emergent church has positioned itself as a conversation... a conversation about things that God has said; a conversation about whether or not God meant what he said. (Driscoll n.p.)

The problem that Driscoll identifies is not conversation in and of itself, rather the problem is allowing and initiating conversation about God's intentions that place the "verbal plenary inerrancy and authority of scripture" into question (Driscoll n.p.). Driscoll goes on to say, "Of course I don't mind a conversation… but when God speaks we are not to converse, we are to obey" (n.p.). Obedience trumps conversation. By this statement it would seem that

conversation and questioning are limited within the Emerging church.

In their book, *Why We're Not Emergent*, Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck agree that the distinct difference between Emerging and Emergent is that Emergents hold conversation. They also describe their frustration saying, "It's frustrating because the 'we're just in conversation' mantra can become a shtick whereby emergent leaders are easy to listen to and impossible to pin down" (DeYoung 17). Calling the Emergent conversation a shtick is an attack on the Emergent motive because it assumes that Emergents are employing a deceptive tactic in order to draw people toward their opinions and beliefs. This quote also reveals that part of the frustration is that Emergents can't be "pinned down." Not only is the use of conversation a problem, but it's also the way conversation enables Emergents to be evasive and avoid resolution.

Driscoll's speech, along with DeYoung and Kluck's book, make it clear that the Emergent branch of the Emerging church is not like the others. As "the other," the Emergent branch offers differing discourse on traditional American evangelical Christian perspectives. It is within these differences that postmodern threads emerge. That is

not to say the other branches do not entertain or discuss postmodernity. However, Emergents act out, or perform, their new approaches to Christian church in distinctly postmodern ways.

Some of the authors doing this postmodern work, as identified by Driscoll, are Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt. In this chapter I will provide an overview of some of Rob Bell and Brian McLaren's writings to set the stage for further rhetorical analysis of Emergent postmodern moves in subsequent chapters.

To frame the approach of Emergent authors it is important to explore their discontentment. Emergents are discontented with modern, traditional Christianity. At the beginning of *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* by Rob Bell, Mark Scandrette writes, "Many of us are frankly conflicted about our role in the body of Christ. Is the most effective way of change from the center or at the margins? When do we stay and when do we go?" (25). As evidenced by the purpose of the Leadership Network conferences, many Christian leaders question how to positively change the bad reputation of evangelical church but struggle with whether or not they should do so as insiders or as outsiders.. Brian McLaren, in his book *A New Kind of Christian* writes,

"...at the age of thirty-eight, I got sick of being a pastor. Frankly, I was almost sick of being a Christian" (XIII). He goes on to say, "Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision" (XIX). Again, the vacillation is between introspection and outward examination. Through these dissatisfied remarks, Emergents have come together under mutual feelings about how traditional evangelical church looks different from what was originally intended according to the Bible. I would argue that it is through these common feelings that Emergents have begun to look at Christianity in new ways: new ways that involve critical analysis of Christianity and express a willingness to explore alternative approaches.

A specific alternative approach these writers take is through dialogue. Bell's texts, for example, represent a progressive and dialogic style. Although there is only one authorial voice (one narrator) throughout his books, each one is progressive like a conversation. This is different from a traditional evangelical Christian text in that it does not present a list of points and then validate or Biblically found them. On the first page of chapter one in

Sex. God. Bell tells a story and then asks questions. He asks each question on its own line. This intentional format creates a dialogue effect by allowing the reader to take part in the text. It leaves space for thought and a sort of mental dialogue between lines. Similarly, in *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* Bell leaves plenty of gaps between statements. For example, he says, "I'm convinced having compassion is a better way to live," next line, "I'm convinced pursuing peace in every situation is a better way to live" (20), etc. Visually, Bell's texts create a sense of conversation where one person speaks and leaves a turn for the reader to think and respond.

Bell's texts are also dialogic in that they move toward a thought or idea. In *Velvet Elvis* each chapter is a "movement" toward Bell's goal of engaging people in thinking about church in new ways. He frames this in the introduction by saying, "This is the place that I write from: a place of joy and freedom, as a member of a community wanting to invite others to come along on the journey" (Bell, "Velvet Elvis" 14). This explicit invitation communicates that the text is intended to be a journey and not an answer book, which speaks to the interactive and progressive, or forward thinking, move of a

conversation. Whereas American evangelical print texts, such as advice literature, began as static and prescriptive texts:

> By the mid-nineteenth century, informally designated cultural arbiters... shared authority with clergy to referee participation in an evangelical textual community by offering readers explicit advice or embedding in the canon implicit rules for textual usage. Evangelical rules for reading assumed that canonical texts belonged to the entire Christian community, that members of this community should uniformly use texts to produce growth in holiness. (Brown 118)

Historically, evangelical religious texts began as instruction books, signaling its purpose of dictatorial description. Evangelical advice literature was created for a specific effect, personal adoption of growth in holiness. This is very different from the Emergent approach of offering a dialogic journey.

Another prime example of this progressive writing style is Brian McLaren's *A New Kind of Christian*. The book is literally a conversation back and forth between a pastor and a teacher. The interaction plays out in a back and

forth conversation like Plato's *Phaedrus* where a teacher leads a pastor into discussion and discovery about faith and spirituality. The teacher in McLaren's book is similar to Socrates in that he has the upper hand in the topic because he has already thought through the topic and has been through the struggle the pastor now faces, making him an authority on the topic. *A New Kind of Christian* follows much of the dialogic purpose because the communication style seeks to get at a pertinent issue, much like ancient dialogue where "oral exchange is valuable because it responds flexibly to *kairos*, the immediate social situation in which solutions to philosophical problems must be proposed" (Bizzell 81). For Emergent authors, the immediate social situation is the problem of church and religion in a postmodern society.

To engage this problem, Emergents make moves that question cemented views of the Bible. The best example of this is in *Velvet Elvis* where Bell suggests that Jesus was not born of a virgin. Right away sirens sound, gates lock, and armed forces are deployed, figuratively speaking of course. The virgin birth is not an aspect of Christianity to be questioned. Or is it? Bell writes,

> What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry, and archeologists find Larry's tomb and do DNA samples and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in. ("Velvet Elvis" 26)

Bell is entering this question into the conversation in order to proffer the following, "Could a person still love God? Could you still be a Christian" if the virgin birth were a myth ("Velvet Elvis" 26). Here Bell invokes a new method into this emerging rhetoric where he is willing to place fundamental tenets of Christian faith into new light and open new paths of discussion.

The rhetoric of the Emergent movement is characteristically postmodern in that it moves to establish, as opposed to reestablish, meaning behind the beliefs of Christianity that have been mystified by time and the cloud of religiosity. The implications of Emergent Christian postmodern rhetoric run deep. Both what Emergents choose to include and what they chose to exclude have great weight in American evangelical Christendom. By including their discontentment and disillusionment with Christianity,

the faith itself is drawn into question by members of its own community. The exclusion of things held dear to traditional American evangelical Christendom causes disruption and dissension among those who hold tightly to their traditions. Although I would argue that these disruptions are positive, they are disruptions nonetheless.

Furthermore, the Emergent's exploration of postmodernism as it relates to Christianity becomes dangerous because a postmodern worldview raises questions about absolute truth and positions truth as relative. In the worldview of postmodernism there is no basis for truth:

> While not exactly denying there is a "world" out there beyond our knowledge, postmodern thinkers typically deny that there are any features of this world which could function as independently existing *norms* or *criteria* for truth and goodness to which we could appeal. (Middleton 32)

The view that there is no independent criterion for truth is in stark contrast with Christian perspective. The danger lies in the relativity of truth because Christianity equates God with truth. In the New Testament of the Bible Jesus, who is also God according to the doctrine of the trinity in Christianity, identifies himself as truth:

"Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life'" (NIV, Jhn 14:6). The importance of this Bible verse is its suggestion that the person of Jesus Christ is not only a truthful being but that He himself is truth, which creates a standard and definition for truth. Through the lens of postmodernism, if God, who is equated with truth according to the Bible, is relative and only exists in as much as I find him relevant to my life, then who God is changes because He is no longer everyone's creator or the definition of absolute truth. So, while Emergent rhetoric engages with postmodern ideas it does not necessarily ascribe to all that it requires, especially where truth is concerned. The question of truth in these texts presents itself, but is not explicit on the whole, a choice I will later explore as an intentional move in McLaren's work.

Bell, on the other hand, makes an attempt at connecting the Christian truth to other truths saying, "To be Christian is to claim truth wherever you find it" ("Velvet Elvis" 81). Here Bell is attempting to open the door to the idea that truth doesn't only exist inside of Christian teachings and philosophies, which is another way Emergent texts begin to widen the discussion as opposed to narrowing it like most modern traditional American

evangelical Christian language does. For Driscoll, the issue of truth in relation to the Emergent stream lies within their contextualization of the Bible and perspectives of missiology (study of the church's mission). These specifics (Biblical contextualization and missiology) have links to postmodernism which will be discussed in chapters two and three.

CHAPTER TWO

POSTMODERNISM AND LEGITIMATION

When the new worldview of postmodernism enters the scene, Christendom faces a problem: Modern traditional evangelical Christianity has built up the Christian faith in light of legitimation through universal autonomous reason, trying to found its validity and credibility on a grand story, much like evolution, or the metanarratives of science. Out of this problem a distinction between the real and relevant arises; in a modernist worldview Christianity must be real, in a postmodernist worldview Christianity must be relevant. In other words, from a modernist standpoint Christians present Christianity based on evidence in order to convince outsiders, whereas from a postmodernist standpoint Christians can present Christianity as it relates to an individual's experience. In order to exist in the new worldview, evangelical Christianity has to assess itself in light of postmodernism, embracing a shift towards constructing itself through postmodern rhetoric. This shift, I argue, carries identity-changing risks.

Since 1971 evangelical Christian church attendance in the United States has been on a steady decline. In 1971 the number of people attending church was fifty percent (Ming 23). By the year 2000 it had declined to forty percent (Ming 23). In 1980 a man by the name of Rick Warren began growing a church, which he later named Saddleback Church. The very fact that a pastor would be able to grow a church in a declining population of church attendance is something worth noticing; and people did. Warren later wrote *The Purpose Driven Church* in 1995, which put into print the five purposes of the evangelical Christian church and Warren's methodology for how to go about paying attention to what God is doing in order to grow the church. As of 2006, Pastor Rick Warren's church has over eighteen thousand people in attendance (Ming 26). His book has also been instrumental in teaching other churches: "more than 200,000 church leaders from around the world have been trained in Saddleback's purpose-driven philosophy" ("Saddleback" n.p.). Rick Warren's work began the construction of a bridge between the worldview of modernism and postmodernism for evangelical Christendom.

Postmodernism

At the intersection of modernity and postmodernity, Jean-Francois Lyotard enters the conversation about worldview by taking up postmodernism in light of legitimation. In his book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Lyotard separates modernity and postmodernity where he "use[s] the term *modern* to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative..." (xxiii) and describes postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv). He further balances the scale by placing science with modernity and narratives with postmodernism. As mentioned in the worldview definitions above, modernism, much like science, has clear guidelines for founding truth. Similarly, a condition of postmodernism is a more relative outlook on truth just as narratives are subjective. This may seem contradictory since postmodernism is incredulous toward metanarratives. Thus, in order to iron out the seemingly confused definitions, it is important to define what Lyotard means by the word metanarrative.

Metanarrative, according to Lyotard, is not merely a story of grand proportions. Instead, metanarratives are

"false appeals to universal, rational, scientific criteria- as though they were divorced from any particular myth or narrative" and "deny their narrative ground even as they proceed on it as a basis" (Smith 68-69). While metanarratives are grand stories, for Lyotard they also include illegitimate foundations because they attempt to deny their method of proof. In section eight of *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard explains how scientists constantly recount their discoveries by way of narrative. Through this lens, science uses narrative to legitimate itself while claiming that it takes no part in storytelling. Furthermore, "the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own" (Lyotard 28). Understanding that modern science uses metanarratives as a move that postmodernists see as incredulous shows where postmodernists finds the scientific community's use of narrative illegitimate. When science uses a narrative to explain itself it will then turn around and deny the fact that it is using narratives because science must be based on fact and narratives are not viewed as factual means of proof by the scientific community. A postmodern worldview does not see narratives as invalid because it is not

concerned with validity, rather it sees a problem with metanarratives because "they do not own up to their own mythic ground" (Smith 69).

While a postmodern worldview does not seek to discredit science, it does find fault in the methods science uses to appear valid because science is limiting in that it only allows for denotation. In science statements are assessed based on how true they are: "Scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded. A statement's truth-value is the criterion determining its acceptability" (Lyotard 25). According to Lyotard, science only accepts what it finds true through the result of one conclusion. This method does not allow for narratives because narratives are not necessarily conclusive. Rather, narratives are connotative. This Lyotardian approach adds to our knowledge in that it reassesses stringent perspectives of science to advocate equal perspective for both science and narratives. Lyotard asserts the following:

> drawing a parallel between science and nonscientific (narrative) knowledge helps us understand, or at least sense, that the former's existence is no more-and no less-necessary than

> the latter's. Both are composed of sets of statements; the statements are "moves" made by the players within the framework of generally applicable rules; these rules are specific to each particular kind of knowledge, and the "moves" judged to be "good" in one cannot be of the same type as those judged "good" in another, unless it happens that way by chance. (Lyotard 26)

Science and narrative knowledge have their own unique moves specific to their purpose. When one field attempts to use its criteria to validate or invalidate the other's it is improperly and unjustifiably doing so because the other field does not adhere to the other's criteria.

On one hand, for Christianity, it seems beneficial to discredit science because it could mean biblical narrative would take precedence or that creation wins against evolution. On the other hand, it could then be argued that Christianity attempts to found itself on a grand story, the story of the garden. However, since Christianity does not deny its use of narrative, or story, as its form of legitimation it is not defined as a metanarrative. Although Christians believe these stories to be true, they still

agree that they are stories non-the-less. According to James K.A. Smith,

> Postmodernism is not incredulity toward narrative or myth; on the contrary, it unveils that all knowledge is grounded in such. Once we appreciate this, the (false) dichotomy that… others propose is dissolved insofar as the biblical narrative is not properly a metanarrative. (Smith 69)

Establishing that postmodernism is not incredulous toward Christianity is the first step in being able to examine a faith based belief system in light of the postmodern worldview.

However, before looking at Christianity through postmodern eyes, Lyotard has a few things to say about legitimation. In postmodernism there is a "central problem of legitimation" (Lyotard 8). Lyotard outlines two points in this problem: One, that "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge" (7) and that science is essentially in "competition and conflict" with the knowledge of narratives; and two, that "legitimation is the process by which a legislator is authorized to promulgate such a law as a norm," but that there is a circular problem where the legislator who legitimates knowledge needs

her/his power to be legitimated, thus "knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?" (8-9). Thus, for Lyotard, in a postmodern era science struggles with being legitimated because the facts espoused by science need a legislator, one to validate whether or not the facts are true. Yet, the legislator her/himself requires credentials in order to confirm or deny the facts of science.

Science has also fallen prey to the problem of legitimation in that it uses the very thing it rejects, narrative, to explain, make known, and validate its knowledge:

> [scientists] recount an epic of knowledge that is in fact wholly unepic. They play by the rules of the narrative game; its influence remains considerable not only on the users of the media, but also on the scientist's sentiments... The state spends large amounts of money to enable science to pass itself off as an epic: the State's own credibility is based on that epic, which it uses to obtain the public consent its decision makers need. (Lyotard 28)

Within science there is a need to validate its knowledge, much like any community, where justification is of great import. If a community cannot be justified, it risks losing power and followers. The problem is that "the language game of science desires its statements to be true but does not have the resources to legitimate their truth on its own" (Lyotard 28). The moment science uses narrative its work is undone and science becomes incredulous, just as religion does when attempting to use science when its foundation is narrative. For purposes of this thesis, this point shows how a field renders itself incredulous in postmodernism.

Yet, for science, narratives are equally incredulous because they "are never subject to argumentation or proof" (Lyotard 27). Narratives, however, do not presume to exclude science as part of its legitimation. Where "scientific knowledge requires that one language game, denotation, be retained and all others excluded," narratives "exercise their competence not only with respect to denotative utterances concerning what is true, but also prescriptive utterances with pretentious to justice" (Lyotard 25,31). Furthermore, "what characterizes narrative knowledge, [is] precisely that it combines both of these kinds of competence, not to mention all the others"

(Lyotard 31). Narratives play by all language games where Science chooses to validate only the denotative. This evidence points to the division between science and narratives. In the scientific view, narratives do not require fact checking, so to speak, and in the narrative view, science is not able to validate itself on facts alone, instead it resorts to narrative.

What this means for both science and narrative is that within a modern worldview they are each insufficient to each other because each requires legitimation by standards neither of them are willing to follow. Science is invalid where belief is concerned because it denies faith and resorts purely to fact for explanation. Narrative, or in this case Christianity (i.e. the Bible, stories of evangelism, etc.), is seen as invalid by science when it leaves scientific fact out altogether. The fundamental difference, however, is that science denies its need of narratives and narratives do not require science to be legitimate in the first place. This brings the problem, full circle, back to the legitimation crisis. Lyotard presents a postmodern solution, Legitimation by Paralogy.

Lyotard distinguishes between innovation and paralogy where innovation is a "command of the system" and paralogy

is a "move" (61). Before defining paralogy according to Lyotard, it is important to contextualize the word "move," which can be found in the description of language games. To define language games Lyotard draws from Wittgenstein:

> What [Wittgenstein] means by this term is that each of the various categories of utterance can be defined in terms of rules specifying their properties and the uses to which they can be put - in exactly the same way as the game of chess is defined by a set of rules determining the properties of each of the pieces, in other words, the proper way to move them. (10)

Language games are exchanges within conversation that adhere to a specific set of rules, whether those rules are defined by the players or not. Lyotard also states that without the rules, a language game cannot exist and that "every utterance should be thought of as a 'move' in a game" (10). Therefore, in the conventions already discussed (science and narrative), language games are a part of the ways a group individually uses utterance for its specific purpose. Returning to paralogy, and the solution, paralogy is

> the most effective (performative) strategy for achieving advances in both scientifically based and narratively based fields of research is the search for imaginative new insights into existing theories by noting anomalies and paradoxes. Paralogy... captures the elements of this individualistic search for new meaning in old language games. (Halbert n.p.)

So, in this search for legitimation, paralogy comes along to note new ways of looking at the old rules and stories that we have accepted and/or argued for so long. The approach of paralogy would then be to challenge the metanarratives, or grand stories we've always been told and to use the smaller stories, known as little narratives, which are "the quintessential form of imaginative invention" (Lyotard 60). An example of a smaller story might be a waitress's narrative to a friend about a hectic work night, a man's story of experiencing God through nature, or a little girl telling her mommy why she fell off her bike. In each case there is specific context in which the story teller and her listener engage in a language game.

The purpose of exploring metanarratives, legitimation, language games, and paralogy is to uncover some of the problems that exist between Christianity, a narrative belief system, and the ever present worldview of postmodernism. While the primary area of concern, legitimation, has been seen perhaps through the binary of science and narrative, it is important to note that within the formulated argument of science and narrative, from a modern worldview perspective, consensus has been a primary goal. Using metanarrative, the field of science and the field of narrative have attempted to legitimate themselves by trying to get everyone to "buy in" or come to consensus on the truth each field proclaims. However, consensus is insufficient in postmodern thought because "its only validity is as an instrument to be used toward achieving the real goal, which is what legitimates the system - power" (Lyotard 61). In postmodernism consensus only works to provide power, and power is not a goal in postmodernism. Both science and evangelical Christianity have asked people to believe their grand stories. The best example of this is the argument of creation versus evolution where the goal for each is consensus. In this argument each group believes the other to be wrong, which places one in the position of

subordination and the other in power, but not in the postmodern worldview.

Building a Bridge Between Modernism and Postmodernism

Having established an analysis of postmodernism, I will now examine how postmodernism was introduced into American evangelical Christendom via Rick Warren, a prominent Christian pastor and author. Rick Warren was able to defy the statistics of church decline by growing a church that surpasses most in attendance, even to this day. Reasons for this success can be linked to his foundational book *The Purpose Driven Church,* which offers a paradigm shift from looking outward to looking inward:

> The problem with many churches is that they begin with the wrong question. They ask "What will *make* our church grow?" This is a misunderstanding of the issue. It's like saying, "How can we build a wave?" The question we need to ask instead is, "What is keeping our church from growing?" (Warren 15)

By flipping the question around on the church and requiring the organization to look inward, Warren rhetorically shifts

the perspective from a congregation-focused practice to what is called "seeker sensitive" practice. The seeker sensitive method asks Warren's question: what does the church need to change in order to appeal to non-church attendees? This question marked a shift for traditional American evangelical Christianity because it introduced new ways of thinking about church purpose from a perspective that the church has their practice all right to an honest examination of what could be wrong with the church. In addition to being seeker sensitive, Warren suggests that "[t]he task of church leadership is to discover and remove growth-restricting diseases and barriers so that natural, normal growth can occur" (Warren 16). Using words like disease and barrier is significant because it suggests that "the church" has an infection and that within the church there are walls that limit growth. Warren's language is strong and necessary because he is trying to awaken new thought in a well established belief system. Furthermore, "the church" often perceives itself as having the answers and being in line with God's will and purpose, so when Warren suggests a problem from within he is decidedly calling perceptions of evangelical Christianity's rightness into question. Although the language is strong the approach

may seem passive because it waits for things to occur naturally, like waiting for the right wave. Yet, it requires an active extraction of growth inhibitors that bog down the church.

The Purpose Driven Church presents eight growth inhibitors, myths about mega churches that must be challenged in order to get beyond "conventional wisdom" and move toward growth (Warren 48). These myths are: attendance matters, large churches grow at the expense of smaller churches, it's either quality or quantity, the message and mission has to be compromised, dedication equals growth, there is one secret key to church growth, God only expects faithfulness, you can't learn from large churches. Warren offers strong evidence for why each of the aforementioned myths are ideas that the church needs to get beyond in order to grow warmer, deeper, stronger, broader, and larger (Warren 49). The move to suggest that there are myths that churches follow or subscribe to is a shift in the traditional approach to church philosophy. Even up to the Fundamentalist movement of the 1920's the discussion centered around "... two nearly opposing impulses, one to win the secular world through aggressive evangelism, and another to reject all worldly contracts through strict

separation" (Blodgett 37-38). Warren's approach on the other hand, is not debating submersion or rejection of the world. Instead he questions how "the church" itself may contain a problem, rendering it ineffective altogether.

This self examination, or introspection, of evangelical church and Christianity is largely a post *Purpose Driven Church* movement, which is evident in such contemporary titles as *I'm Fine with God… It's Christians I Can't Stand* by Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz and *Unchristian* by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. In the introduction to *I'm Fine with God… It's Christians I Can't Stand,* the authors assert that Christians "are bold and brash with their oddities. They seem intent on exposing and publicizing their own peculiarities" (7). Highlighted in this book are ten specific problematic peculiarities that hurt the image of Christianity, which are connected to polarizing issues that the authors propose to diminish. As Christians, Bickel and Jantz strive to show other Christians how to reduce these offensive stereotypes. This book engages the reality of these stereotypes to reveal their accuracy for the purpose of pushing Christians to change and harshly examines Christians, not non-Christians, by looking inward like Rick Warren's work. The book

Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why it Matters offers an outlook on Christianity that asks Christians to "deal with reality, even when it is embarrassing or hurtful" (9). This reality is presented by addressing several perceptions of Christianity with supporting statistics to then suggest how Christians might change these realities for the better. The book approaches the Christian image problem by pointing out the core issues surrounding evangelical Christendom. Part of what they found was that "[o]ften outsiders' perceptions of Christianity reflect a church infatuated with itself" (Kinnaman 14). Although Warren's book may not have eliminated the church's self infatuation, it did pave the way for self examination.

This idea of self examination, and what I deem as Warrenesque here, would appear to be what Middleton calls "homo autonomy" and is a condition for modern experience and thought. In modernity "[we] are *Homo autonomous*. Humans are independent, self-reliant, self-centering and self-integrating rational subjects" (Middleton 47). Furthermore, modernity prescribes to an idea of the autonomous self where

> reason allows a person to control his thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and intentions by evaluating each one, keeping and pursing those that are rational, and rejecting those that are irrational. Thus, the man of reason determines what makes up his self and therefore controls who he is. (White 70)

As introspective and self-reliant as Warren's work seems, it is actually postmodern in nature because it examines the church in light of how non-church goers view it. In postmodernism outside forces play a large role in determining the self,

> Postmodernism views selves, not as having an intrinsic nature or as autonomous and self-controlled, but as socially constructed. That is, the self is put together, and made what it is, by social forces larger than any single individual. (White 73)

The idea of a socially constructed self is similar to Warren's idea that the "seeker", or non-believer, should have a say in the construction of "the church". Furthermore, "With postmodernism no story can have any more credibility than any other. All stories are equally valid"

(Sire 174). In postmodern thought the self is rethought because its story has been revalued in light of other stories. In a way, Warren is working to revalue "the church's" story by reexamining its sense of identity and role in the world. However, Warren is careful to enter outsider opinions in order to remain true to "the church's" mission: "The church should be *seeker sensitive* but it must not be seeker driven. We must adapt our communication style to our culture without adopting the sinful elements of it or abdicating to it" (Warren 80). Warren's suggestion of balance brings the question of cultural relevance to the forefront because "the church" constructs cultural relevance as cultural submission, which implies compromise. This is why Warren is careful to state his awareness of the dangers of cultural influence while he petitions for cultural relevance. Warren presents a binary in regards to the evangelical Christian church and changing worldviews/culture by writing, "On the one hand we are obligated to remain faithful to the unchanging Word of God. On the other hand we must minister in an ever-changing world" (55). Thus, a problem is created where "the church" ends up responding in one of two extreme ways: "Some churches, fearing worldly infection, retreat into isolation

from today's culture," or "there are those who, fearing irrelevance, foolishly imitate the latest fad and fashion" (Warren 55). This binary creates the viewpoint that those who choose the latter (culture imitation) end up compromising the message of the Bible.

Christian cultural imitation had been well underway by the time Warren published his book. At the end of the twenty-first century Christians had adopted their own television programming and various and sundry Christian businesses (Blodgett 39). In doing so, evangelicals were creating their own version of the world: "By the 1970s, evangelicals had established not only a network of educational and mass media institutions, but had used these institutions to create a virtual cultural umbrella" (Blodgett 39). Under this umbrella "such organizations allow evangelicals to enjoy the benefits and status markers of the secular culture without totally identifying with the culture" (Blodgett 40). This approach allowed Christians to enter the culture with their own branding but did not consider how the culture saw them.

Warren counter attacks this problem by offering a third option to the imitation versus isolation binary: infiltration (236). Infiltration is described as the

healthy balance of using the culture's language and customs while maintaining the mission of God. The rhetoric here suggests that "the church" put on the camouflage of the culture's language in order to represent Christianity in familiar ways. *The Purpose Driven Church* proffers the issue of cultural relevance and in doing so enters a new consideration into the way evangelical Christian churches think, discuss, and write about how a person is to be an evangelical Christian the current culture.

Identifying the postmodern thread of cultural consideration within Warren's work shows a willingness to use a postmodern worldview in order to frame "seeker sensitivity." Worldviews are the lens through which we see the world. Thus, it is important to outline the differences between a modern and a postmodern worldview. Modernism holds to and relies upon that which can be known. Middleton and Walsh confirm this in their book *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, saying, "According to the modern worldview we know what reality is, and we know how to investigate, understand and control it" (20). In the modern worldview there is a very tangible sense of reality. This is very different from the postmodern worldview. Where modernist views claim to know what is real and true, postmodernist

views do not necessarily adhere to what modernism has identified as true: "The postmodern worldview asserts that reality isn't what it used to be, that the self is multiple and decentered..." (Middleton 77). Here reality comes into question and cannot be figured out using the same old methods. There is a third worldview in need of mention here: the biblical worldview. The worldviews of modernism and postmodernism look at reality through what can or cannot be known and the relativity of that knowledge, but a biblical worldview defines what is real through interpretation of God's word, known as the Bible. "At its most fundamental level, the biblical worldview understands the world, and all creatures within the world, to stand in a relationship of covenant to the Creator" (Middleton 148). This worldview situates people in relationship to God, whether it is the presences or absence of relationship, God is a part every being's world.

As challenged by authors such as Rick Warren, it has become apparent that worldviews have significant influence on how others perceive evangelical Christianity. Warren specifically challenges biblical worldview by asking "the church" to consider how the world sees them. Another author who challenges the notion of a biblical, or Christian,

worldview is Brian McLaren. In his book *A New Kind of Christian* he writes,

> No model- no matter how resplendent with biblical quotations- can claim to be the ultimate Christian worldview, because every model is at the least limited by the limitations of the contemporary human mind, not to mention the 'taste in universes' of that particular age. (McLaren 36-37)

Thus, any model Christianity would adopt as its measuring stick with which to judge life and mission would be at the very least tied to the worldview in which it was born. Even McLaren's work is subject to the same critique, which arguably makes his case stronger because he is willing to write from a postmodern worldview under his own assertion that his views are cast in light of current perspective.

As McLaren finishes this chapter, he frames his conclusions by illustrating how past worldviews are marked by icons that now appear to us as artifacts would in a museum: "Ironically, the very stone buildings that expressed the belief that their medieval version of Christendom would last forever now mock that belief because today, when we visit them in Europe, they seem to us like

museums" (38). The fact is, as McLaren points out, medieval ways of life are not relevant to the historical era of modernity just as modern ways are becoming irrelevant to postmodernism.

Just as modernism marked a decided shift in thought and led to the emergence of the modern church of the late nineteenth century, Tony Jones, Brian McLaren, and Rob Bell have begun to mark a shift in thought leading to the emergence of postmodernism in "the church."

CHAPTER THREE

EMERGENT POSTMODERN RHETORIC

Emergent church authors have entered the world of modern American evangelical Christendom primarily through narratives in the form of books and public speaking. Having identified the postmodern definition of legitimation, language games, metanarrative, and paralogy according to Lyotard, I will begin with the question of legitimation and how it is taken up by Emergent authors through narratives. This discussion will move into Emergent language games as they relate to the social bond of Christians and those outside of Christianity, leading to Emergent approaches in postmodernism. Emergent sources I consider here will be books by prominent Emergent leaders whose topics address Christians explicitly.

Piggybacking off Jurgen Habermas, Lyotard identifies a legitimation crisis where "legitimation becomes visible as a problem and an object of study only at the point in which it is called into question" (Lyotard viii). Modern American evangelical Christendom faces a legitimation crisis when it meets postmodernism in two ways: when insiders or outsiders of Christianity question its fundamental tenets and when

those within the belief system attempt to "evangelize" or share their beliefs. In both instances, modern American evangelical Christendom relies on a "rightness" that it founds on the Bible and is a modern approach. As part of the questioning of the Christian faith, the validity of the Bible comes into question, among other things, where Christianity is legitimated through modern approaches of metanarrative by taking humanity back to the inception of sin in The Garden of Eden. It is modern in the sense that it looks to a grand story and seeks consensus.

A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey by Brian McLaren is a fictional narrative that takes up the discussion of Christianity's legitimacy in postmodernism. This particular Emergent text does its work through dialogue between two friends. One is a former pastor and the other is vacillating between continuing or ending his service as a pastor. The book is intended to be a journey that encourages conversation about Christianity. McLaren writes, "It is my hope that these imaginary conversations will prompt you to engage in real-life ones and that those conversations will take you where these cannot" (XXII). From this introductory statement, McLaren spells out his goal of modeling a conversation around some

polarizing topics with the expectation that these conversations are incomplete and require further exploration. The mere suggestion of discussion, versus definitive conclusion, already separates this text from a modern Christian text. Where most modern Christian texts are trying to get at specifics within Christian faith and attempt to do so through the metanarrative of the Bible, Emergent texts like McLaren's are more interested in the exercise of discussion.

In order for McLaren to open epistemological discussions of non-Christian religions, Biblical interpretation, homosexuality, salvation, etc., he positions his characters, Dan and Neo, as friends. In some ways it is simpler to draw out a person's beliefs by pitting him/her against someone with opposite opinions because in moments of tension a person usually holds firm to his/her beliefs and understandings. Furthermore, in an exchange between non-friends, conversation can turn to defense and will continue only as long as each participant is willing to play by the language game rules, whether the rules are declared or undeclared. Yet in a conversation between friends, a relationship is at stake where tone is considered in light of the relationship.

As McLaren's characters approach the subject of "other religions" (meaning those that are not Protestant), the relationship between these two characters is brought to the fore when Dan responds to Neo with cynicism:

> Neo, what does a guy like you say about other religions?"... "Dan," he said, "I feel that my goal in life is to help people love God and to know Jesus, not to hate the Buddha or disrespect Muhammad..." "So," [Dan] responded, with something like cynicism in [his] voice, "you're more or less a pluralist, then. Whatever people believe is OK, as long as they're sincere. That's certainly a popular and convenient attitude." "Dan, I don't know what you intended, but the tone of your voice brings back some pretty bad memories for me. It seems like we just switched gears from two friends talking sincerely and openly to... a kind of inquisition. Did you mean to sound that way? Are you testing me? Is that what this conversation is all about? (McLaren 8)

Within the exchange Neo notes Dan's cynicism. Neo reminds Dan, in a gentle way, that his tone conjures bad memories of past attacks and then questions his motives as a way of

re-contextualizing the conversation, which is situated within a friendship as opposed to this being an exchange between acquaintances. Having established in chapter two that legitimation is reached through paralogy which is made up of little narratives that are "the quintessential form of imaginative intention..." (Lyotard 60). We can see here that McLaren uses little narratives situated among friends to imaginatively reinvent Christian ideals. Additionally, the way the author contextualizes his characters in relationship with one another reveals an understanding of how quickly these topics can become emotionally heated. More importantly, this conversation frames Emergent rhetoric as open and progressive, instead of defensive and antagonistic, again, because it situates these topics among friends.

The openness of Emergent rhetoric is not all implied. Further along on the same topic of "other religions," Neo is asked his position on evangelism, to which he responds:

> Instead of saying, "Hey, there're wrong and we're right, so follow us," I think we say, "Here's what I've found. Here's what I've experienced. Here's what makes sense to me. I'll be glad to

share it with you, if you're interested."

(McLaren 62)

In this example there is a presentation of views to a willing participant. Neo goes on to illustrate his response using the analogy of a dance where there are no winners or losers, only moving participants. The rhetorical move to offer thought instead of stance when it comes to other religions or belief systems creates a conversation around the topic of opposing religions as open and fluid.

Fluidity and openness are important in argumentation because they allow for movement away from stasis. Sharon Crowley, in her book *Toward a Civil Discourse,* states that "People sometimes resort to intimidation and harassment, rather than rhetoric, when their beliefs are challenged by their recognition that others hold differing beliefs" (31). Instead of entertaining conversation or invoking rhetoric into religious discussions, arguments can become emotionally charged with anger and threats. Crowley suggests that "partisans may not know that it is possible to frame propositions in such a way that a disagreement can achieve stasis and hence open the possibility of exchange" (30). Stasis makes way for exchange by placing opposing sides on level ground. Within Crowley's analysis of liberal

and fundamentalist rhetoric this unknowing is due largely to the differences in how each approaches argument, where liberal argument relies on "empirically based reason and factual evidence," fundamentalist "rely instead on revelation, faith, and biblical interpretation to ground claims" (Crowley 3). The differences between fact and faith are similar to what I have outlined in chapter two of this thesis between scientific fact and religious narrative. I mention Crowley's work here because it is "... a new wave of scholarship that looks at American religion from the perspective of English studies..." (Glascott n.p.). While Crowley is looking at political rhetoric, I have suggested that the arguments between science and Christianity, in modernity, are weighted the same. Science faults Christianity for lack of factual evidence and Christianity views science as faithless. Science aside, similar contention has carried over into the debate between Emerging and Emergent church rhetors. The Emerging church seeks innovation in postmodern society but the Emergent church uses postmodern moves to engage society. So, the argument between Emerging and Emergent falls short of stasis because the Emerging church is unwilling to

accommodate postmodernism under the assumption that they will have to adhere to the notion of multiple truths.

Furthermore, the dominant voices of the Emerging church, such as Driscoll, characterize Emergents as liberals: "the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity" (DeYoung 16). Here the Emerging church has decidedly marked the Emergent movement as liberal, which directly links back to Crowley's work. In some ways it seems possible for the liberal/fundamental argument to become interchangeable with the Emerging/Emergent argument. On the Emerging side a line has been drawn to separate themselves from Emergents. DeYoung says,

> I share a few pages about myself only to demonstrate that you can be young, passionate about Jesus Christ, surrounded by diversity, engaged in a postmodern world, and reared in evangelicalism and not be an emergent Christian. In fact, I would argue that it would be better if you weren't. (15)

Here DeYoung describes himself as sharing many traits of an Emergent to strengthen his argument that even though he

shares these qualities he is not an "emergent Christian." The very fact that the Emerging church finds it necessary to dedicate entire books toward why not to be Emergent communicates that one, Emergents are a threat and two, that the Emerging church seeks consensus, not stases, by pitting itself against Emergents.

For Lyotard, the solution to the postmodern legitimation crisis is paralogy to which he adds: "the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation seems to be inadequate" both as "an agreement between men" and "a component of the system... as an instrument to be used toward achieving the real goal, which is what legitimates the system - power" (60-61). Here Lyotard is founding the inadequacy of consensus on the fact that consensus is often used to prove a point for the purpose of gaining power. As discussed in chapter two of this thesis, postmodern views determine that each field of knowledge (science, narrative, etc.) has its own language games and that each field attempts to specify how the other should behave based on their criteria. The goal in postmodernism is not consensus because each language game is valid in and of itself, removing power by leveling the playing field. As illustrated through McLaren's text, the goal explicitly

stated in the introduction and illustrated through his characters is not to reach an agreement of what postmodern evangelical Christianity looks like. Instead, the purpose is to discover, explore, and engage difficult topics faced by people who choose to participate in this belief and its language games.

The move to position Christians as friends and not opponents, reframes controversial topics for Christians. The concept that Christians have deep relationships with people who hold differing views is not new. However, the modern position has encouraged the difference to remain, whereas the postmodern Emergent view invites new discovery. New discovery suggests that neither person's mind is made up, that no one has it all figured out. Positing players on the same side of the language game affects Christian identity and how a Christian views the goal of "religious" discussion.

A similar thread is found in Crowley's explanation of liberal rhetorical theory. As a way of getting beyond taking sides or being pitted against one another over battle lines, liberal rhetoric removes sides:

> Liberalism forgets or erases the we/they relation that necessarily informs the political. Liberal

> rhetorical theory assumes that all members of a democratic polity will be willing to examine and weigh contending positions in a rational fashion, aiming for compromise where this is possible and settling for tolerance where it is not. (Crowley 21)

Weighing differing positions removes the emotional attachment one may have to her/his opinion that quickly escalates into heated "wrong versus right" arguments. This open rhetoric seeks compromise and tolerance instead of consensus much like the conversations between Emergents.

In addition to situating his language games in the context of a same side relationship, McLaren also engages the topic of the Bible as a modern scientific text. As addressed in chapter two of this thesis, "the biblical narrative is not properly a metanarrative" (Smith 69) because it is comprised of little stories and does not deny its use of narrative. However, in order to contend with science, modern evangelical Christendom uses the Bible as a scientific text, although it is a narrative, from which to base Christianity's validity for the semblance of consensus:

> Our modern age has predisposed us to only a limited range of postures with the Bible. It's all objective analysis and forensic science, always trying to prove something. It's all about a kind of aggressive conquest of the text- reducing it to something explainable by our preconceptions, turning it into moralisms or principles or outlines or conclusions of proofs or whatever. (McLaren 57)

Approaching the Bible with objective analysis means there is something to prove. If the goal of the Bible is proof, it becomes like science by creating conclusive evidence for how one should behave, who God is, what we make of the biblical story, etc., which assumes that we can know based on our methods of reasoning and ignores that as a text the Bible is interpreted. The use of the Bible as a scientific method of drawing definitive conclusions about Christianity's legitimacy leads us back to the inadequacy of consensus. Consensus, according to Lyotard, is never reached (61). Thus, reducing the Bible to a humanly explainable text leads to a limited consensus of who/what/why God is. It is limited because our understanding is confined to our human ability to

understand. This modern tactic of deciphering God suffocates discovery because it assumes God has been discovered. If God has been discovered, what more is there to do but argue for His existence? In modernism God is a deity to be explained and argued for/against; whereas in postmodernism God becomes accessible through personal discovery and questions about God's existence are less important. In postmodernism the Bible no longer needs to contend for its validity in light of science because it is sufficient according to its own language games. Meaning, these fields of knowledge have nothing to argue. Removing argument problematizes the Christian faith in that a Christian is left with the task of rediscovering purpose behind religious conversation since it has been arguing for validation against science for so long.

There is a moment in *A New Kind of Christian* where Neo meets a Jewish man on a ferry boat ride. Neo and the man end up discussing religion. The man's encounter with Christianity was less than positive; he describes Christianity as "a force for evil in the world" (McLaren 63). The Jewish man's perspective was largely shaped by rejection and televangelists. Neo's response to the man was "sadly, that there was too much truth to his statement"

(McLaren 64). Immediately Dan questions why Neo didn't defend "the faith." To which Neo replies,

> Why defend the indefensible? The man already thought well of Jesus- that's the important thing. I just wanted to give him further evidence that the Spirit of Jesus is not behind the craziness he saw on TV or the conclusionism he experienced as a child of the horror he saw in the Holocaust... The best thing I felt I could do was simply to agree with him... Christianity isn't salvation, that's for sure! (McLaren 64)

Here McLaren illustrates the importance of discovery, not of defensiveness. Neo sees how defending faith, Christianity, or televangelists would have furthered the notion of "conclusionism," which, as stated earlier, can never be reached. Thus the productivity of Neo's conversation becomes his willingness to agree (because he genuinely does) with the Jewish man in an effort to provide him with an exception to his experience.

In light of Christian identity, the aforementioned postmodern Emergent approach shows that the goal of religious discussion is not debate and consensus, it is discussion and discovery. This view alters Christian

identity because it causes one to continually rethink her/his faith based on new ways of interacting and engaging differing and changing views. In modernity, the difficulty is that faith is in competition with science for legitimacy. As faith and science compete, access to either side is limited by experts, as previously explored through scientific promulgation in chapter two. However, in postmodernism, Emergent authors obtain legitimation through imagination; imagination, according to Lyotard, "allows one either to make a new move or change the rules of the game" (52). The flexibility described in Lyotard's definition of imagination creates accessibility to postmodern knowledge, which is being performed by Emergent authors through the ways they situate conversation and allow for discord. Furthermore, gaining access to postmodern knowledge means "that the data is in principle accessible to any expert: there is no scientific secret" (Lyotard 52), making the data available to both non-Christian and Christian alike.

Shifting from a rhetorical analysis of Brian McLaren's postmodern approaches within American evangelical Christendom, I will now examine the work of Rob Bell, another prominent author within the Emergent branch. Specifically, I will look at his book *Jesus Wants to Save*

Christians: A Manifesto for the Church in Exile, which imaginatively reinvents the Bible by identifying key themes throughout the smaller stories that make up the whole of the Bible. Perhaps the most striking thing about Bell's book is its title. Initially, the title is shocking because it proffers the notion that Christians need saving, while the modern view is that Christians are already saved. To get below the surface of this title, it is important to define what Bell means by the term "exile," since that is the state requiring a manifesto; according to Bell, "Exile is when you forget your story" (44). He continues his definition by saying, "Exile isn't just about location; exile is about the state of your soul... Exile is when you find yourself a stranger to the purposes of God" (44-45). Thus, exile is not merely being forbidden to return to ones homeland. Exile, in this context, refers to a spiritual and mental state when one who knows God forgets who God is and what God's purposes are. People who neglect God's purpose is who Bell suggests needs saving. This is a shift for the Christian identity because it requires introspection and reevaluation of God's "will." Evaluating God's will is a common religious element of modern American evangelical

Christianity that requires attention but not an overhaul like Bell suggests.

Exile, being disconnected from God's purpose, is strongly linked to story. Leading up to the definition of exile, Bell has described how the Israelites, of biblical times, have moved from Egypt to Sinai to Jerusalem to Babylon. In each place the story of the Israelite's physical movement is told in seemingly modern ways. These stories are told chronologically with history that originates from the Garden of Eden. However, this is not wholly a modern move. Instead, it involves the modern. According to Lyotard, modernity exists within postmodernity:

> The 'post-', in the term 'postmodernist' is in this case to be understood in the sense of a simple succession, of a diachrony of periods, each of them clearly identifiable. Something like a conversion, a new direction after the previous one. I should like to observe that this idea of chronology is totally modern. It belongs to Christianity, Cartesianism, Jacobinism. (Defining the Postmodern 171)

As Lyotard explains, there is a succession that takes place within this worldview that begins at modern chronology. This means that postmodernity contains modernity in that it comes after it in time. Bell begins his manifesto by creating a modernist overview of Biblical heritage. This presentation draws Christians who are familiar with Biblical narrative into a common understanding in order to move into postmodern views.

Before explicating the transition from modern to postmodern in Bell's writing, it is important to examine how and why the postmodernist does this. Lyotard continues his explanation of postmodernism by saying,

> Since we are beginning something completely new, we have to re-set the hands of the clock at zero. The idea of modernity is closely bound up with this principle that it is possible and necessary to break with tradition and to begin a new way of living and thinking. Today we can presume that this 'breaking' is, rather, a manner of forgetting or repressing the past. That's to say of repeating it. Not overcoming it. (Defining the Postmodern 171)

In modernity, humanity strives to learn from the past in order to avoid "history repeating itself." However, in postmodernity, the point is to reset time in order to start new ways of living and thinking. Thus, the modern idea of breaking from the past resides within the postmodern goal of beginning something new. Over the course of the biblical stories that Bell recounts, several themes arise to move readers into new ways of living and thinking: God liberates and hears the cries of the oppressed (52, 32) and "God is looking for a body, flesh and blood to show the world a proper marriage of the divine and human" (43). These two characteristics of God are important because they reflect God's recognition of oppression and desire to connect with humanity. Both of these ideas are presented through modern retellings to lead "the church" to new ways of thinking and living. This suggests these new ideas are postmodern in that they use their own methods and narratives, and offer new thought by repeating history, not overcoming it.

Bell outlines how the old humanity has been oppressed (slaves in Egypt) and that as soon as they are relieved of their oppression they forget the story of how they were once slaves and how they were freed, placing them in exile from God. In exile from God, the old humanity then

oppresses a different group of people and "in just a few generations, the oppressed have become the oppressors" (Bell 39), and history is repeated. Since God seeks to rescue the oppressed, he cannot connect relationally with the oppressors because they are carrying out the antithesis of God's character. Therefore, in order for God to connect to humanity the past must be redone. Redone and not overcome because we cannot overcome oppression on earth; however, we can approach it differently and become a new humanity.

"The new humanity is not a trend" (Bell 156), but not for the same reasons Rick Warren identifies. Where Warren specifically addresses cultural relevance, Bell is creating a new distinction saying, "when sameness takes over, when everybody shares the same story, when there is no listening to other perspectives, no stretching and expanding and opening up - that's when the new humanity is in trouble" (156). The restrictions of homogeneity are often brought about within the confines of religion, in which case religion becomes an attempt at making a community the same in order to be legitimate. So, God and postmodern thought have a common enemy, and it is not science. Rather the enemy for both is incorrect use of that which a community

relies upon for legitimation. In postmodernism, Lyotard explains how the way science attempts to legitimize itself through metanarratives is incredulous. The enemy in postmodernism is not science itself but the way science tries to make itself valid. In the same way, Bell describes God's enemy not as Christianity but as Christianity's use of religion:

> When God is on a mission, what is God to do with a religion that legitimizes indifference and worship that inspires indulgence? What is God to do when the time, money, and energy of his people are spent on ceremonies and institutions that neglect the needy? (Bell 46)

Here the enemy is the way "the church" validates its closeness to God by using resources to reinforce religion and not to serve people. Within the worldview of postmodernism false legitimation is a problem just as it is for Bell. Bell's contribution to the rewriting of Christians contains the same problem where Christianity tries to legitimize God through religion; where religion is more of a novelty or show piece for the sake of appearing to be legitimately Christian. For the Christian identity, another shift takes place. In the old humanity, and in

modern American evangelical Christianity, religious structure provides explanation and familiar ancestry; but in the proposed new humanity the structure of a religion that ignores the oppressed and repeats history cannot fulfill a legitimate connection to God.

Other writers within the Emergent movement also suggest that the goal of Christianity is not religion, but commitment to God. In *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, Ray Bolger writes, "churches must now establish that their primary allegiance is to the reign of God - not to American congregational forms of religion" (Bolger 138). The problem of religion is a recurring theme among Emergent writings, as seen in both McLaren and Bell's writings. Emergents see religion as an inhibitor to the purpose of following Christ. One of religion's illegitimate turns in Christianity was made when American evangelical Christendom reacted to modernity by attempting scientific legitimation of what is naturally a narrative (the Bible). In doing so, the Christian religion entered the legitimation crisis with science. To combat this, Emergents are telling their stories of faith and taking risks by allowing questions and entering conversations on topics that religion has already resolved. These moves are rewriting the Christian identity

in rhetorically creative ways that closely align with postmodernity.

According to Lyotard, "All modern forms of knowledge... legitimate themselves by making explicit appeals to some type of universal standard" (Dickens 4). Within the Emergent movement, a universal standard is not assumed nor pushed as an agenda. Instead, there is allowance and encouragement of the questioning of a universal standard. Where modern society seeks to legitimize a universal standard,

> Postmodern society is... defined in terms of radical heterogeneity characterized by a proliferation of creative discoveries in the arts and sciences and a corresponding decline of ideological hegemony in politics and social life. (Dickens 4)

As illustrated above, Emergent writings reject dominant religiosity. They do this with extreme creative moves through their narratives and in doing so coincide with the practices and approaches of a postmodern society. This is not to say that Emergents solely identify as postmodern. Instead, I have established that Emergents are rewriting the Christian identity through postmodern approaches that

are progressive and forward thinking toward a more open form of Christianity. As Bolger states,

> A kingdomlike church follows God's mission into the world because that is where God's mission is located. Such a church does not seek to create a "come-to-us" structure and convince others to become members - God's reign is much bigger than the membership rolls of local churches. (134)

This quote reflects a broad perspective of church where membership is devalued in comparison to the larger context. Furthermore, it speaks against a "come-to-us" mentality that connects back to some of the postmodern foundations that Rick Warren helped to establish (seeker sensitivity).

In addition to the postmodern moves contained in this quote, it is important to note that some traditional language is used: such as "kingdomlike" and "God's reign." As discussed earlier, postmodernism breaks from the past by way of repeating, not overcoming. Therefore, this reuse of traditional sounding terms links Christians back to their history. The term "kingdomlike" looks familiar to Christians because they understand it in terms of God's kingdom. There is also a common understanding of God's omnipresence and omnipotence within Christianity that is

understood by a term like "God's reign." Using this language coincides with postmodern moves that partially reside within modernity.

Through postmodern moves, examined in the writings of Rick Warren, Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Ryan Bolger, Emergent texts have created a new rhetorical discourse that engages American evangelical Christendom through conversation. I would argue that these conversations are not harmful to the faith community of American evangelical Christendom. Instead they make Christian taboo topics accessible both in and outside of Christendom. There is still much work to be done on this topic. Remaining questions for further exploration include, but are not limited to: What does it means to be post-evangelical? Is there such thing as a post-church? Can or how does Christianity recover from its participation in the modern legitimation crisis? These questions are as important as the discovery of postmodernism within Emergent writings because they continue the open conversation that these texts demand.

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