

*THE EMERGING CHURCH: THE FRUITION OF EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY  
WITHIN EVANGELICALISM*

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## **The Emerging Church: The fruition of existential philosophy within evangelicalism**

Spencer Burke writes, “In recent decades, every major sphere of life has evolved to become postmodern—movies, literature, art, architecture, business, politics. Everything, that is, except ‘The Church.’<sup>1</sup>” However, there is a movement among evangelicalism seeking to address the postmodern challenge. This movement is called the emerging church.

In college, this author was introduced to philosophy. With a desire to learn more, he studied the history of philosophy and found several philosophers to whom he gravitated, including Kierkegaard, known as the father of modern existentialism. Existentialism caught his attention because it was rooted in Christianity, even though it later developed an atheistic branch. Years later, this author was introduced to the emerging church by reading Dan Kimball’s book entitled, “The Emerging Church.” He found Kimball’s affable style and many of his arguments quite compelling. He continued to explore the emerging church by reading blogs and books of those associated with the movement. However, as he read and engaged in discussions with others about the emerging church, he realized that much of what he heard sounded familiar—it sounded like existentialism. After exploring this connection further, he discovered just how influential existentialism has been, not only on the emerging church, but also on evangelicalism and postmodernism.

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<sup>1</sup> Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper. *Making Sense of Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 25

This paper will explore how philosophical existentialism has influenced both postmodernism and evangelicalism, creating fertile soil for the emerging church. A brief outline of some similarities between the emerging church and philosophical existentialism will also be given. It will then conclude with some important markers of orthodoxy which those within the emerging church should affirm if they desire to remain Christian.

Two disclaimers are in order at this point. First, the emerging church is a vast, hard to define movement, with ideas and beliefs that are constantly developing. Ed Stetzer has recognized three streams of the emerging church: Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.<sup>2</sup> While this paper explores the fruition of the whole movement, some of the specific critiques best fit the Reconstructionist and especially the Revisionist streams. Second, this author does not believe that everything coming from the emerging church is bad or wrong. The movement has given some important critiques of modern Christianity and some valuable insights into the present culture.

The intent of this paper is to make some historical and philosophical connections that may help those within the emerging church to better contextualize the movement in the broader scope of history, and help the movement avoid some of the fatal mistakes of the past.

### **Existentialism and Postmodernism**

Postmodernism did not rise out of a vacuum; it has been shaped by the philosophical ideas of the last two centuries, particularly philosophical existentialism. Postmodernism, like existentialism, is a reaction against modernism. Much like existentialism, postmodernism finds

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<sup>2</sup> Ed Stetzer, "First-Person: Understanding the emerging church," *Baptist Press* (Jan 6, 2006) [on-line] Accessed 14 February 2008; available from <http://www.scbaptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>; internet.

its expression in drama, literature, poetry, art, music, and philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Both elevate the internal subjective experience over against external objective truth. This is not to say that existentialism and postmodernism are identical, but many of the questions and answers from these two movements have considerable overlap, leading many to believe that postmodernism is merely the continuing conversation of existentialism. Gary E. Gilley writes, “It is from this fountain of existential philosophical thought that postmodernism has sprung. Postmodernity has adjusted and expanded the teachings of existentialism, but its connection is unquestionable...<sup>4</sup>” In his book, “Don’t Waste Your Life,” John Piper writes:

The passion not to miss the essence of life, not to waste it, intensified in college—the tumultuous late sixties. There were strong reasons for this, reasons that go well beyond the inner turmoil of one boy coming of age. “Essence” was under assault almost everywhere. Existentialism was the air we breathed. And meaning of existentialism was that “existence precedes essence.” That is, first you exist and then, by existing, you create your essence. You make your essence by freely choosing to be what you will be. There is not essence outside you to pursue or conform to. Call it “God” or “Meaning” or “Purpose”— it is not there until you create it by your own courageous existence. (If you furrow your brow and think, “This sounds strangely like our own day and what we call postmodernism,” don’t be surprised. There is nothing new under the sun. There are only endless repackagings.)<sup>5</sup>

Postmodernism is shaping the emerging church, and the seeds of postmodernity were sown by existential philosophy.

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<sup>3</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, eds., *New Dictionary of Theology*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 243

<sup>4</sup> Gary E. Gilley, “Postmodernism Part 1-5” *Think on These Things Articles*, Vol. 8, Issue 7 (2002) [articles on-line]; accessed 16 February 2008; available from [http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/articles/articles\\_list\\_alpha.asp?alpha=P](http://www.svchapel.org/Resources/articles/articles_list_alpha.asp?alpha=P); internet.

<sup>5</sup> Piper, John, *Don’t Waste Your Life*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 14-15.

### **Liberalism, Existentialism, and Neo-orthodoxy**

As a movement within evangelicalism, the emerging church has found something within postmodernism that resonates. It may well be the common thread of existentialism running not only through postmodernism, but through evangelicalism as well. To trace this thread, one must first begin with liberal and neo-orthodox theologians.

Friedrich Schleiermacher is commonly referred to as the father of liberal Protestantism. In his formative years, Schleiermacher attended a Moravian seminary and was influenced by German pietism. Criticized for being too subjective and individualistic, pietism was a reaction against a perceived dead orthodoxy within German Lutheranism.<sup>6</sup> Schleiermacher, however, soon found pietism intellectually wanting. He moved to the University of Halle, where he began his studies in philosophy. Schleiermacher was challenged by the enlightened philosophers, especially the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, whose empirical philosophy seemed to render the knowledge of God impossible. Schleiermacher, reacting against Kant, sought a way to include the knowledge of God within the categories of modern philosophy. His solution was to create a new category of knowledge founded on religious experience. While his solution became highly effective in a culture of religious despisers, it moved the authority of the Christian faith away from the objective truth of Scripture to the subjective feelings of the individual. To Schleiermacher, the individual and corporate experience of redemption was more important than doctrinal propositions.<sup>7</sup> His denial of the truthfulness of Scripture and emphasis on religious feelings, combined with Albrecht Ritschl's emphasis on ethics, dominated Christian theology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This domination came to an end after liberalism was charged with compromise

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<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 516.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 619.

concerning the historical Jesus, and its human-centered optimism was dashed by the First World War.

In an attempt to move away from the failures of theological liberalism, twentieth century theologians such as Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann, whose theology came to be known as neo-orthodoxy, found a way forward in the philosophical existentialism of Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. Even though Schleiermacher's liberalism and Kierkegaard's existentialism were different, one commonality was the emphasis on religious experience. Concerning the connection of liberalism to existential neo-orthodoxy, Richard Muller writes:

To be sure, Barth and the theologians typically characterized as “neoorthodox” rejected much of the teaching of their liberal forebears, but this neoorthodoxy also held firmly to the existential and dialectical view of humanity that had arisen in the liberal context and to the liberal view that if the doctrines of traditional Christianity were to be made relevant to the modern world, they had to be reinterpreted in terms of the existential problems of modern man.<sup>8</sup>

Philosophical existentialism and the existential tendencies in liberalism assisted the neo-orthodox theologians in describing how one could experience God. To Karl Barth, the Bible was a witness to the Word, meaning that the biblical writers were not writing God's Word, but writing about their experiences of God. The Bible becomes the Word of God only when one experiences God through reading the experiences of the biblical writers.<sup>9</sup> In essence, Barth believed the Bible was not objectively or propositionally true, but was the means by which each believer could encounter God by the revelation of Himself in Christ. Emil Brunner concurred with Barth. Brunner taught that God could not be known in doctrinal statements, but only in a subjective, personal encounter with God which he called the “I-Thou” relationship. Rudolf Bultmann,

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<sup>8</sup> Richard A. Muller, “The Place and Importance of Karl Barth in the Twentieth Century: A Review Essay,” *WTJ*, Vol. 50. (1988): 127-156.

<sup>9</sup> Paul P. Enns, “Doctrinal Affirmations of Barth's Theology,” *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997): 562.

influenced by the existentialist Martin Heidegger, believed that to interpret the New Testament one must engage in ‘demythologizing.’ Anything supernatural or miraculous in the Bible was to be interpreted in light of human existence. Faith, to Bultmann, was a present existential encounter with God, not belief in specific doctrines about God.<sup>10</sup> The line of thinking raises the question of whether one can experience God through religions other than Christianity. Neo-orthodox theologians left themselves open to the charge of universalism, a charge that Barth did not deny.<sup>11</sup>

When reading books by those within the emerging church, such as Brian McLaren, the echoes of the existential neo-orthodox theologians can be heard. In fact, a perusal of some emerging church blogs and recommended reading lists will yield many references to Barth, Bultmann, and other neo-orthodox and existential writers.

The move toward subjective inner feelings found in Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and in neo-orthodoxy has made an imprint on evangelicalism. Many twentieth century evangelical theologians drank deeply from the well of existentialism through neo-orthodoxy. E. Y. Mullins, who studied Schleiermacher, saw inward religious experience as an important fundamental category.<sup>12</sup> Mullins rejected liberalism’s view of the Bible, but retained a similar emphasis on religious experience. This emphasis introduced a dangerous drift in evangelicalism toward inward subjectivity and away from the authority of revealed Scripture. Mullins, who was the President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1899 to 1928, wrote an essay entitled, “The Testimony of Christian Experience,” which first appeared in *The Fundamentals*.

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<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*.

<sup>11</sup> Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*.

<sup>12</sup> Mullins not only influenced SBC, but broader fundamentalism and later evangelicalism.

This essay shaped fundamentalism and, later, evangelicalism. Albert Mohler, Jr., the current President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, writes:

The central thrust of E. Y. Mullins's theological legacy is his focus on individual experience. Whatever his intention, this massive methodological shift in theology set the stage for doctrinal ambiguity and theological minimalism. The compromise Mullins sought to forge in the 1920's was significantly altered by later generations, with personal experience inevitably gaining ground at the expense of revealed truth.

This theological shift moved the focus away from the historical events of Christ's redemption to the search for an ongoing personal encounter with Jesus in one's heart.

### **Existentialism and the Jesus Movement**

In the 1960's, this evangelical drift toward existential experience intersected with undistilled philosophical existentialism. The American universities and the counter-cultural 'hippie' movement were immersed in the existentialism of Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger. Drug use was encouraged to heighten one's inward experience in order to find meaning. During this time of chaos, the Jesus Movement emerged. This movement allowed young people to reconnect to their religious upbringing and reject the uncertainty and immorality of the sex and drug culture. However, the Jesus Movement remained thoroughly existential in its approach to the Christian faith. In the 1972 book, "The Jesus People," the authors write:

It is important to recognize that (the Jesus People) were (experience-oriented) before they became Jesus People. The word "trip" as used by the counter-culture and now by the Jesus People, is a synonym for experience: A "high" is an experience. To be high on drugs means to have a drug-induced experience. To be high on Jesus means to have a certain religious experience. When those in the counter-culture talk about being turned on to Jesus, they are referring to an emotional experience that, for them, has striking similarity to the emotional experience induced by drugs (164).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Enroth, Ericson and Peters. "The Jesus People," 1972. As quoted in, James T. Richardson and Rex Davis. "Experiential Fundamentalism: Revisions of Orthodoxy in the Jesus Movement," *JAAR*, 51 no 3 (1983): 398-425.

In the Jesus movement, religious experience was far more important than doctrine. Again, the authors of “The Jesus People” write, “The Jesus People are overwhelmingly—one could say exclusively—experience oriented.”

The Jesus Movement, and its underlying existentialism, had a lasting impact on evangelicalism. In the 1970’s, ministries such as Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel and Lonnie Frisbee’s House of Miracles Coffeehouse began to flourish. Coffeehouses sprang up all across the country, and songwriters like Larry Norman began what is now Christian Contemporary Music. Along with the emphasis on religious experience, the impact of contemporary music on church worship may be one of the Jesus Movement’s most lasting legacies.

Between the years of 1970 through 1974, the Southern Baptist Convention, recorded over two million baptisms, the majority of those being youth. In the 1970’s, Southern Baptist Seminaries also recorded an unprecedented increase in enrolment.<sup>14</sup> Many current but aging evangelists and pastors were impacted by, or came directly out of, the Jesus Movement. According to Alvin Reed, “The most significant identifiable result of the Jesus Movement on the Home Mission Board was the formation of the Office of Spiritual Awakenings, now headed by Henry Blackaby.”<sup>15</sup> Blackaby’s study entitled, “Experiencing God,” has influenced not only Southern Baptist life, but broader evangelicalism as well.

### **Existentialism within Evangelicalism**

Through the influence of liberalism, neo-orthodoxy, and the Jesus Movement, existentialism now permeates modern evangelicalism. Most evangelicals do not know the

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<sup>14</sup> Alvin Reid, “The Effect of the Jesus Movement on Evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, 30 no 1 (1995): 45.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

meaning of existentialism, but the language of existentialism is heard in everyday conversations. It is heard when a Sunday School teacher nods to each person in the room and asks, “What does this verse mean to you?” or when someone says, “*I feel* God wants me to do this.” It is heard in the hymnody in phrases like, “You ask me how I know he lives: He lives within my heart” and when we sing countless other contemporary worship songs that focus on the inward experience of the believer. It is common for evangelicals to look for an inner subjective feeling or an inner voice for guidance, rather than looking to the wisdom that comes from the objective Word of God. A faith influenced by existentialism will search for God within, be led primarily by feelings, downplay the importance of doctrine, and ultimately put one on the path away from historical Christianity. This is not meant to imply that the Christian faith is devoid of feelings and experiences, but inward feelings must be a response to and kept in check by the truth of God’s objective Word; otherwise, it can easily become idolatrous. God is looking for those who would worship Him not just in spirit, but in truth as well.

Up to this point, evangelicals have affirmed the objectivity and truthfulness of Scripture, in spite of the existentialist influence. However, as one examines the emerging church, it appears that evangelicalism’s underlying existentialism, planted by Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, watered by neo-orthodoxy and the Jesus Movement, and incubated in the rays of postmodernism, is sprouting into full bloom.

### **Existentialism and the Emerging Church**

Philosophical existentialism and the emerging church have striking similarities. Both began as a protest against enlightenment philosophy. According to Gerald Kreyche, “Existentialism is necessarily a protest against the status quo and the established order, whether

that order be a philosophical, political or a religious one.”<sup>16</sup> The *New Dictionary of Theology* says, “Essentially existentialism is a revolt against rationalism, with its stress on reason alone, for its failure to progress beyond the obvious, its lack of engagement with people, and its ignoring of their real needs.”<sup>17</sup> In a similar manner, the emerging church is a protest against the established order, particularly the established order of modernism that proceeded from the enlightenment. One can hear this protest in writers such as Brian McLaren, when he states, “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.”<sup>18</sup> Existentialism and the emerging church both view modernism as the primary problem.

Another commonality between existentialism and the emerging church is the move toward internal subjectivity. In a reaction against the perceived dead orthodoxy of Denmark’s state church, Kierkegaard emphasized the subjective nature of salvation. He believed that the most important thing was not doctrine, but personal experience.<sup>19</sup> Carl Henry writes, “Existentialists distorted the requirements of biblical thought by their emphasis that the objective existence of God is antithetical to Christian experience and abrogates the need for personal decision.”<sup>20</sup> Concerning the emerging church D. A. Carson writes, “For almost everyone within the movement, this works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear

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<sup>16</sup> Gerald F. Kreyche, “The Impact of Existentialism on Christian Thought,” *Religious Education*, 60 (1965): 424.

<sup>17</sup> Ferguson, *New Dictionary of Theology*, 243

<sup>18</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), XIX

<sup>19</sup> Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*.

<sup>20</sup> Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), *Dialectical Existential Theology*.

thought and rationality; on experience over against truth...”<sup>21</sup> Along these same lines, Mike Yaconelli (who is often quoted in the emerging church) stated that the biblical stories “are not about what happened. They’re about what’s going on inside us. They’re about the deep hiding places in us that show up and reveal not only us, but God’s fingerprints in our lives.”<sup>22</sup> The emerging church, like existentialism, moves the Christian faith away from the history and doctrines of the Bible toward an inward subjectivity.

The terms ‘authentic’ and ‘authenticity’ are scattered throughout the many books and blogs of the emerging church. One blogger states, “To me, ‘emerging church’ is simply ‘authentic church.’” However, the term and concept of authenticity was commonly used by the existentialists. James Parks writes, ““Authentic Existence” is a technical expression within existential philosophy and psychology. An authentic person is one who has a clear sense of his or her purpose in life.”<sup>23</sup> The need for authenticity was an important theme in Kierkegaard’s book, “Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing.” Existentialism and the emerging church both place an emphasis on the importance of authenticity.

Kierkegaard and other existentialists believed the Christian faith was not based on reason or propositional truth. Kierkegaard dismissed the importance of propositional truth in leading one to faith. Like the existentialist, the emerging church downplays the necessity of propositional truth by emphasizing the Bible as narrative rather than a book containing factual propositions,

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<sup>21</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. (Grand Rapids. Zondervan, 2005), 29.

<sup>22</sup> Mike Yaconelli, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1993) as quoted in D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. (Grand Rapids. Zondervan, 2005), 21.

<sup>23</sup> Park, James. “Authenticity Bibliography,” Existentialism [on-line] <http://www.tc.umn.edu/~parkx032/B-AU.html>; internet.

and by rejecting the need for a systematic theology. Some in the emerging church also imply that the historical propositions of the Bible are unimportant. For example, in Rob Bell's latest book, "Velvet Elvis: Repainting The Christian Faith," Bell seems to suggest that one could still be a Christian even if an archaeologist discovered that Jesus' real father was named Larry and the virgin birth was a myth concocted to appeal to religious cults. Therefore, propositional truth is unimportant to the both the emerging church and to the existentialist.

An important concept in existentialism is the idea that "being precedes essence." This is a reversal of the classical thought that one's essence shapes one's being. For example, the biblical notion is that the essence of humanity's fallen nature shapes human existence. However, the existentialists conclude that humanity first has being and then human essence follows. This distinction is important to the existentialist because if essence comes before being, then humanity must conform to a prescribed existence rather than freely shape one's own existence. Jean Paul Sartre writes, "If man, as the existentialist conceives him, is indefinable, it is because at first he is nothing. Only afterward will he be something, and he himself will have made what he will be." This concept gives the existentialist the freedom to set aside traditions and standards in order to choose his own value and purpose in life.

Many in the emerging church have adopted a similar view, with one slight variation: they have moved the concept of "being preceding essence" from the individual to the community. This means that a Christian community is free to define its own essence. Traditions, values, and doctrines can be discarded or morphed according to the dictates of the community. This is why many traditional beliefs and values are being questioned by the emerging church, such as original sin, the nature of the atonement, Christian exclusivism, and homosexuality. Even when the Scriptures are clear on certain topics, the community can dismiss them as outdated. Some

within the emerging church are committed to the idea that the community is free to shape itself according to its own dictates rather than allowing the Scripture to shape the community. This is a variation of the “being preceding essence” of the existentialist.

Kierkegaard, and the theological existentialists that followed, emphasized Christian living. To Kierkegaard, salvation meant that one does not become a Christian, but that one must be on the journey and strive to live the Christian life.<sup>24</sup> The focus was not on the indicative of who a person is in Christ, but on the imperative of ethical Christian living. In a similar way, the emerging church deemphasizes doctrine and emphasizes ethics. In “A Generous Orthodoxy,” Brian McLaren praises James William McClendon’s *Systematic Theology* for beginning with ethics. McLaren states that, “...practices of humility, compassion, spirituality, and love—which develop only in community—are more essential to a good and healthy theology, more primal and important than scholarship, logic, intellect.” McLaren then writes, “McClendon engages doctrine, but he doesn’t present doctrine as a list or outline of information to be conveyed. Rather he presents doctrine as a practice of the church...” In essence, church doctrine should be derived from ethics and Christian living. One hears this same emphasis in other writers in the emerging church when they elevate orthopraxy over orthodoxy. The emerging church and the existentialist both agree that ethics is the Christian’s primary concern.

Other comparisons can be made, but this brief comparison shows how closely related the emerging church is to philosophical existentialism. Truly, there is nothing new under the sun.

### **An Appeal to Orthodoxy**

The danger of philosophical existentialism is that it has cast away an essential anchor of the Christian faith—the Bible as the trustworthy, objective Word of God. It should be no

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<sup>24</sup> Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology, Theology of Soren Kierkegaard*.

mystery, then, that what once began as a Christian movement to correct the perceived errors of modernism quickly drifted from the faith and fell into errors of its own.

The emerging church movement is in danger of the same fate. One may affirm the need for faith, but if that faith is not grounded in objective truth, it, too, will fall into error. One of the major errors that the emerging church seems to be copying from the existentialists is the reduction of Christianity to a system of feelings and ethics, ultimately placing Christianity on the same level as all other religions. When this occurs, the religious feelings and ethical behaviors of those in other religions can then be recognized as legitimate avenues of truth. This drift toward universalism is already surfacing in the emerging church. Brian McLaren writes:

“...I don’t hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don’t hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish and Hindu followers of Jesus.”

A follower of Jesus, in this case, is one who follows Christ’s ethical example. This is why the substitutionary atonement is being questioned by many within the emerging church. It isn’t necessary for Christ to die in one’s place if one can be accepted by God simply by following Christ’s example

The only remedy to these errors is to move from the existentialist hermeneutic of feelings and ethics to an unwavering commitment to the objective truth of God’s Word. It is this Word that reveals the absolute moral depravity of mankind, and the need for the forgiveness of sin and the imputed righteousness of Christ. It is also the Word that helps us avoid mixing the categories of justification and sanctification.

When one affirms the objective truth of the Bible, one also affirms the historical reliability of the Bible. The events in the Bible are not mythical narratives or good stories to

inspire one to live more ethically or to give one peaceful feelings; they are historical events that ultimately point to Christ. The historical narratives in Scripture are meant to be believed as historically true. For example, as proof of the resurrection, the Apostle Paul did not appeal to his internal subjective feelings; he pointed to the many eyewitnesses of the historical event.

A main topic of conversation within the emerging church is the need to be missional. Some fear that many in the emerging church seek to become like the world in order to gain the world's approval, believing that if we dress in the latest fads, use the same lingo, drink the same beer, and smoke the same cigars, the world will think Christians are cool and want to become one. This characterization may be unfair, but the truth behind this is that many in the emerging church have lost faith in the power of the kerygma—the Gospel proclaimed. In Romans chapter one, Paul declares that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. Later in Romans, Paul explains that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. The goal of being missional, then, is proclaiming the pure Gospel, not getting the world to like Christians. If one denies the Bible as the objective Word of God, one will untimely lose faith in the power of the kerygma to save.

God used the biblical writers to reveal essential doctrines about Himself and the world. However, if propositional truth is denied, essential doctrines of the Christian faith become meaningless. Believing right doctrine has always been foundational to the Christian faith. The church wrestled with difficult doctrines, such as the nature of Christ and the Trinity, but the desire was always to be biblical. Biblical doctrines are objective truths to be believed and a means by which to measure all truth claims. This is not a modern view of Scripture; the early church fathers argued this same point. John Chrysostom, in one of his sermons, said, “Regarding

the things I say, I should supply even the proofs, so I will not seem to rely on my own opinions, but rather, prove them with Scripture, so that the matter will remain certain and steadfast.”<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, in order to remain orthodox and continue in the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, the emerging church must make a clear break with the internal subjectivism of existentialism and postmodernism by affirming the absolute necessity of the objective truth of God’s Word. The extent that those within the emerging church have abandoned the historicity, kerygma, and/or doctrines of the Scripture is the extent to which they have departed from the Christian faith.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this paper was to show the connection between the emerging church and philosophical existentialism. Existentialism has had a profound effect on both philosophy and theology for the last two centuries. Existentialism not only laid the foundation for postmodernism, but became latent within evangelicalism through the influence of liberal theology, neo-orthodoxy and the Jesus Movement. These existential tendencies in the culture and in evangelicalism created the fertile soil of the emerging church.

The purpose for making this connection is not to condemn the emerging church, but to better contextualize the movement within the broader scope of history. This may assist the emerging church in avoiding some of the fatal errors of the past. The hope is that what ultimately emerges out of the emerging church is the true historical Christian faith, a faith uncompromised by the vain philosophies of men.

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<sup>25</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *On Repentance and Almsgiving*. Translated by Gus George Christo. The Fathers of the Church, Vol. 96. (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press), 118.

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