

Response to Recent Criticisms

By Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Andrew Jones, Chris Seay

We continue to be amazed by the enthusiastic interest in the work of emergent, a conversation and friendship of which we are a small part. This conversation is bringing together a wide range of committed Christians and those exploring the Christian faith in wonderful ways, and many of us sense that God is at work among us. As would be expected, there have also been criticisms. A number of people have asked us to respond to these criticisms. These ten brief responses will, we hope, serve to clarify our position and suggest ways for the conversation to continue constructively for participants and critics alike. It is our hope and prayer that even our disagreements can bring us together in respectful dialogue as Christians, resulting in growth for all concerned.

First, we wish to say thanks to our critics for their honest feedback on our books, articles, speeches, blogs, events, and churches. We readily acknowledge that like all human endeavors, our work, even at its best, is still flawed and partial, and at its worst, deserves critique. We are grateful to those who help us see things we may not have seen without the benefit of their perspective. We welcome their input.

Second, we have much to learn from every criticism – whether it is fair or unfair, kindly or unkindly articulated. We pray for the humility to receive all critique with thoughtful consideration. Where we think we have been unfairly treated, we hope not to react defensively or to respond in kind, and where we have been helpfully corrected, we will move forward with gratitude to our critics for their instruction and correction. We especially thank those who seek to help us through cordial, respectful, face-to-face, brotherly/sisterly dialogue. As we have always said, we hope to stimulate constructive conversation, which involves point and counterpoint, honest speaking and open-minded listening. As a sign of good faith in this regard, we have invited and included the voices of our critics in some of our books, and as far as we know, have always treated these conversation partners with respect.ⁱ We have also attempted to make personal contact with our critics for Christian dialogue. Even though most of these invitations have not been accepted, we hope that the friendly gesture is appreciated.

Third, we regretfully acknowledge that in our thought, writing, and speech, we have at times been less charitable or wise than we wish we would have been. Whenever possible we will seek to correct past errors in future editions of our books; when that is impossible, we will make other forms of public correction.

Fourth, we respect the desire and responsibility of our critics to warn those under their care about ideas that they consider wrong or dangerous, and to keep clear boundaries to declare who is “in” and “out” of their circles. These boundary-keepers have an important role which we understand and respect. If one of your trusted spiritual leaders has criticized our work, we encourage you, in respect for their leadership, not to buy or read our work, but rather to ignore it and consider it unworthy of further consideration. We would only ask, if you accept our critics’ evaluation of our work, that in fairness you abstain from adding your critique to theirs unless you have actually read our books, heard us speak, and engaged with us in dialogue for yourself. Second-hand

critique can easily become a kind of gossip that drifts from the truth and causes needless division.

Fifth, because most of us write as local church practitioners rather than professional scholars, and because the professional scholars who criticize our work may find it hard to be convinced by people outside their guild, we feel it wisest at this juncture to ask those in the academy to respond to their peers about our work. We hope to generate fruitful conversations at several levels, including both the academic and ecclesial realms. If few in the academy come to our defense in the coming years, then we will have more reason to believe we are mistaken in our thinking and that our critics are correct in their unchallenged analyses.ⁱⁱ

Sixth, we would like to clarify, contrary to statements and inferences made by some, that yes, we truly believe there is such a thing as truth and truth matters – if we did not believe this, we would have no good reason to write or speak; no, we are not moral or epistemological relativists any more than anyone or any community is who takes hermeneutical positions – we believe that radical relativism is absurd and dangerous, as is arrogant absolutism; yes, we affirm the historic Trinitarian Christian faith and the ancient creeds, and seek to learn from *all* of church history – and we honor the church’s great teachers and leaders from East and West, North and South; yes, we believe that Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior of the cosmos and no one comes to the Father except through Jesus; no, we do not pit reason against experience but seek to use all our God-given faculties to love and serve God and our neighbors; no, we do not endorse false dichotomies – and we regret any false dichotomies unintentionally made by or about us (even in this paragraph!); and yes, we affirm that we love, have confidence in, seek to obey, and strive accurately to teach the sacred Scriptures, because our greatest desire is to be followers and servants of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. We regret that we have either been unclear or misinterpreted in these and other areas.

But we also acknowledge that we each find great joy and promise in dialogue and conversation, even about the items noted in the previous paragraph. Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have come to know what they believe and how they believe it by being open to the honest critique and varied perspectives of others. We are radically open to the possibility that our hermeneutic stance will be greatly enriched in conversation with others. In other words, we value dialogue very highly, and we are convinced that open and generous dialogue – rather than chilling criticism and censorship – offers the greatest hope for the future of the church in the world.

We regret that some of our critics have made hasty generalizations and drawn erroneous conclusions based on limited and selective data. We would welcome future critics to converse with us directly and to visit our churches as part of their research. Of course, they would find weaknesses among us, as they would among any group of Christians, including their own. But we believe that they would also find much to celebrate and find many of their suspicions relieved when they see our high regard for the Scriptures, for truth, for worship, for evangelism, for spiritual formation, and for our fellow Christians – including our critics themselves.

Seventh, we have repeatedly affirmed, contrary to what some have said, that there is no single theologian or spokesperson for the emergent conversation. We each speak for ourselves and are

not official representatives of anyone else, nor do we necessarily endorse everything said or written by one another. We have repeatedly defined emergent as a conversation and friendship, and neither implies unanimity – nor even necessarily consensus – of opinion. We ask our critics to remember that we cannot be held responsible for everything said and done by people using the terms “emergent” or “emerging church,” any more than our critics would like to be held responsible for everything said or done by those claiming to be “evangelical” or “born again.” Nobody who is a friend or acquaintance of ours, or who agrees with one of us in some points, should be assumed to agree with any of us on all points. Nobody should be held “guilty by association” for reading or conversing with us. Also, contrary to some uninformed reports, this conversation is increasingly global and cross-cultural, and because North Americans are only a small part of it, we urge people to avoid underestimating the importance of Latin American, African, Asian, European, and First Nations voices among us.

Eighth, we are aware that there is some debate about whether we should be considered *evangelical*. This is a cherished part of our heritage, but we understand that some people define this term more narrowly than we and in such a way that it applies to them but not to us. We will not quarrel over this term, and we will continue to love and respect evangelical Christians whether or not we are accepted by them as *evangelicals* ourselves. However others include or exclude us, we will continue to affirm an evangelical spirit and faith by cultivating a wholehearted devotion to Christ and his gospel, by seeking to join in the mission of God in our time, by calling people to follow God in the way of Jesus, and by doing so in an irenic spirit of love for all our brothers and sisters.

(We hope that those who would like to disassociate us from the term *evangelical* will be aware of the tendency of some in their ranks toward narrowing and politicizing the term so that it only applies to strict Calvinists, conservative Republicans, people with specific views on U.S. domestic, foreign, military, or economic policy, single-issue voters, or some other subgroup. We pose no threat to these sincere people, nor do we wish to attack or discredit anyone, even though we do not wish to constrict our circle of fellowship to the parameters they propose.)

Ninth, we felt we should offer this encouragement to those who, like us, do not feel capable of living or explaining our faith in ways that would please all of our critics: if our work has been helpful to you, please join us in seeking to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace by not becoming quarrelsome or defensive or disrespectful to anyone – especially those who you feel have misrepresented or misunderstood you or us. As Paul said to Timothy, “The Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, patient when wronged.” In addition he warned Timothy not to develop “an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions, and constant friction.” The apostle James also wrote, “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.” We believe it is better to be wronged than to wrong someone else; the Lord we follow was gentle and meek, and when he was reviled, he didn’t respond in kind.

Instead of engaging in fruitless quarrels with our critics, we urge those who find our work helpful to pursue spiritual formation in the way of Christ, to worship God in spirit and truth, to

seek to plant or serve in healthy and fruitful churches, to make disciples – especially among the irreligious and unchurched, to serve those in need, to be at peace with everyone as far as is possible, and to show a special concern for orphans and widows in their distress. We should keep careful control of our tongues (and pens or keyboards), and seek to be pure in heart and life, since this is “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless.”

With millions suffering from hunger, disease, and injustice around the world, we hope that all of us – including our critics – can renew our commitment to “remember the poor” (Galatians 2:10) rather than invest excessive energy in “controversies about words.” “They will know you are my disciples,” Jesus said, not by our excessive disputation, but by our love. Words and ideas are essential, for they often set the course for thought and action, and constructive dialogue is needed and worthwhile, but we cannot let less productive internal debates preoccupy us at the expense of caring for those in need.

Tenth, we should say that along with a few critiques, we are receiving many grateful and affirming responses to our work. Respected theologians and other leaders have told us, either in private or in public, that they are grateful for the emergent conversation and that they stand with us and support us. We are frequently told that people sense God graciously at work in the emergent community. We hope that those who see problems will not overlook the signs of God’s presence and activity among us, just as we do not overlook our many faults, including those pointed out by our critics. Only time will tell what the full outcome will be, but in the meantime, we welcome the prayers of both friends and critics.

We must once more thank both our critics and those who affirm our work, because we know that both are trying to help us in their respective ways, and both are trying to do the right thing before God – as we are. At the risk of redundancy, let us state once again that we welcome conversation with all who desire sincere and civil engagement over ideas that matter.

If you would like to be involved in the emergent conversation and friendship, we warmly invite you to visit emergentvillage.com. And feel free to pass this response on to others for whom it may be helpful.

ⁱ For example, see sidebar comments and multiple perspectives in *The Church in Emerging Culture*, *The Post-Evangelical*, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, and *The Emerging Church*. We hope that our critics will consider this or similar approaches to encourage and model respectful Christian dialogue.

ⁱⁱ Dr. David Mills, professor at Cedarville College, has responded helpfully to one recent critique. His response is available at http://people.cedarville.edu/employee/millsd/mills_staley_response.pdf.