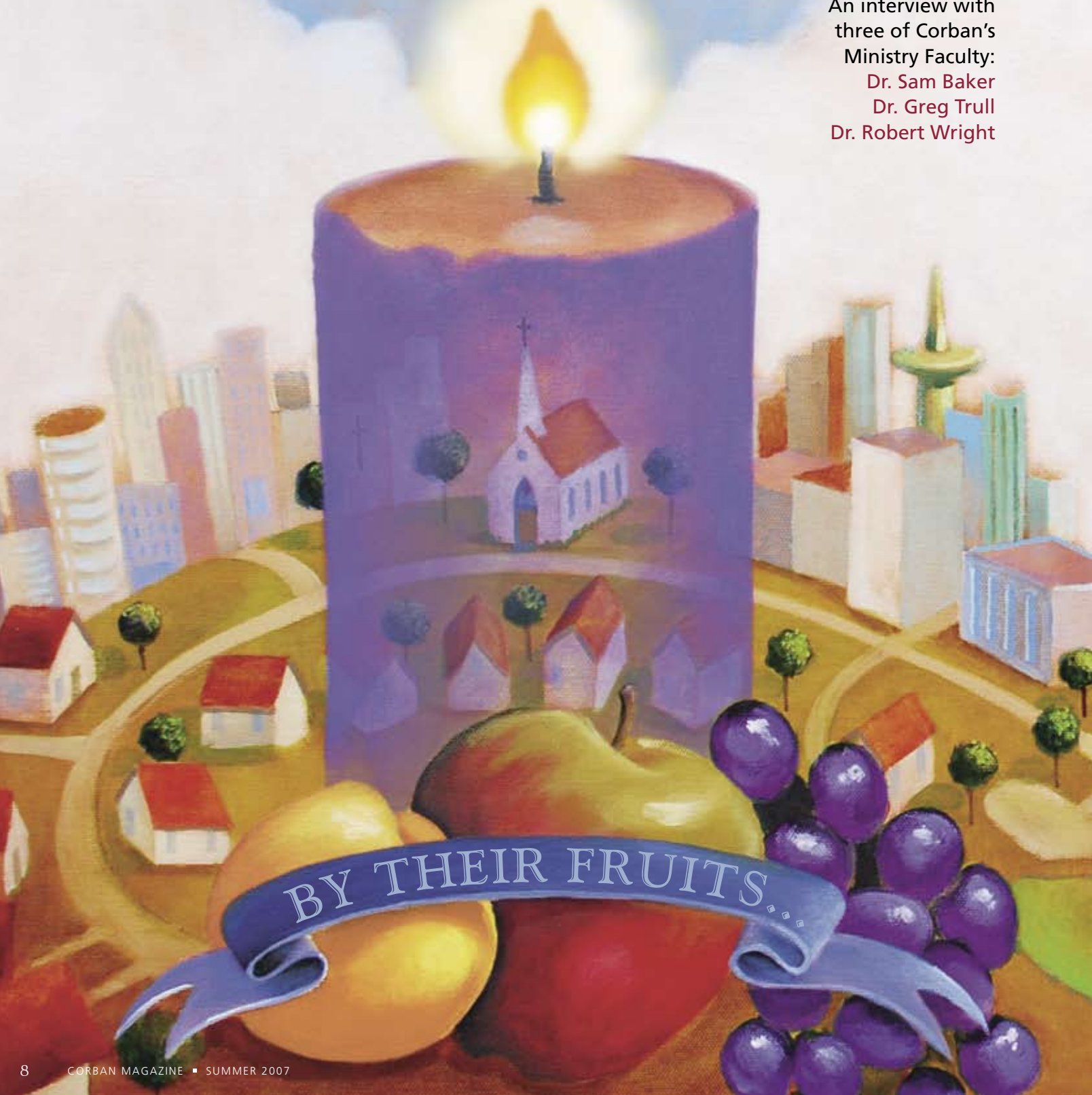


Understanding the Emerging Church Movement

An interview with
three of Corban's
Ministry Faculty:
Dr. Sam Baker
Dr. Greg Trull
Dr. Robert Wright



Every Sunday morning

across America, parking lots fill and sidewalks buzz with activity as Christians make their way into churches or community centers.

In today's progressively diverse culture you may not see or experience many of the traditional aspects that you associate with going to church. The word "church" might not be on the building's signs. Instead of heading off to Sunday school, children may go to an interactive "learning lab" and meet with adult mentors during the week. Small groups may gather to critique a film, learn about photography and sustainable farming; and worship may encompass singing, silence, film, and painting.

Although gatherings attract several hundred attendees per Sunday and boast a healthy budget, its leaders may intentionally reject the idea of constructing a church building in favor of meeting in a public school or other non-religious facility.

Does this sound different? Good, say emerging church leaders, who feel that western Christian churches must recapture the importance of "planting churches that are a cultural fit for their time and place." As this movement reaches a decidedly young, postmodern demographic, it is characteristic of an array of congregations known as the "emerging church movement."

The movement has attracted much attention over the last five years, due, in large part, to its attempts to square with postmodern culture. As emerging thinkers all over the world revamp—and often throw out—traditions, reactions have been strong. Responses range from glowing reviews to scathing criticism from pulpits, in the electronic media, and in books and magazine articles.

Some Christians may find themselves sorting through the philosophical and theological landscape, wondering, "Are these changes good?" and

"How should I respond to the emerging church?"

Three of Corban's ministry professors who've paid special attention to the subject—Professors Greg Trull, Bob Wright and Sam Baker—say the movement is so diverse that some emerging Christians are preaching the Gospel while others are convoluting its core. Thus, they urge each Christian to use Scripture to sift the new practices they encounter for their inherent truth and motive.

"The complexity of the world we live in requires us not to be simplistic—either by jumping onto a trend's bandwagon or by rejecting things out of hand," Dr. Trull says. "Life is not that simple, and God wants us to be diligent and discerning."

Postmodernism and the church

One of the emerging church movement's most well-known and controversial authors is Brian McLaren, the English-professor-turned pastor who founded Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington D.C. area. In his books, including the recent *A Generous Orthodoxy*, he argues that evangelicals must shake off the shackles of a modernist mindset that he says limits our faith.

He points out that secular philosophers moved beyond modernism, with its roots in the Enlightenment, many years ago. After 200 years of depending on humanistic rationalism to find truth, thinkers began theorizing that humankind is unable to know truth at all. As products of our environment, culture and language, our experience of the world is subjective. We are not as rational as we once thought. This new way of thinking—postmodernism—has influenced everything from education to music to politics.

Now, says McLaren, the church must respond. Postmodernism has lessons for the church. Among them: we should focus on "right living" rather than puzzling over theological points, we should take a more mystical approach to experiencing God rather than trying to cognitively define Him, and we should stop acting like we have the corner on the market when speaking to people of other faiths.

Phil Johnson, executive director of Pastor John McArthur's website, *Grace to You*, disbelieves that postmodernism is somehow a solution, an antidote, to modernism. He



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—Dr. Sam Baker, Corban Professor of Bible

also disparages the idea that evangelical Christianity and modernism were ever friends.

“Modernism at its very core and inception was an overt attempt to subvert and defeat the truth of Scripture with humanistic rationalism. Modernism failed and failed miserably,” he says. “Postmodernism is not really a significant departure from modernism; it is just a similar attempt to subvert and defeat the truth of Scripture by glorifying irrationality and by portraying all truth as hopelessly paradoxical, ambiguous, unclear, uncertain, unimportant...”

Corban’s Dr. Bob Wright is glad Christians are finding the shortcomings in modernist thinking, but he cautions against accepting postmodern thinking as some kind of cure-all for the faith—a kind of jump-from-the-frying-pan-into-the-fire reaction.

“Members of the emerging church are asking the right questions. I question whether they’re coming up with the right answers,” he says.

Behavior vs. belief

For Dr. Sam Baker, the crux of his concern about some emerging churches is a tendency to emphasize behavior (orthopraxy) over belief (orthodoxy). He and other traditional theologians hold that Christians first believe—understanding the nature of God, sin, salvation and sanctification—and from that flows Christ-like behavior.

“The problem comes when we put the cart before the horse, when we put orthopraxy before orthodoxy,” Baker says. “You’ve got to have right-thinking; it’s tethered to right-living.”

Many emerging church leaders contend that the world is full of Christians who hold correct beliefs but don’t practice Christ-like behavior. They react against evangelicals who seem more interested in debating the finer points of theology than serving other believers and the world.

“Experience does not prove that those who believe the right things live in the right way,” emerging theologian Scot McKnight writes in *Christianity Today*. “No matter how much sense the traditional connection makes, it does not necessarily work itself out in practice. Public scandals in the church—along with those not made public—prove this point time and time again.”

Sitting around a table, Baker, Trull and Wright agree that the Bible clearly calls Christians to both right thinking *and* right living. It’s true, they say, that Christians can get caught up in mental exercises rather than focusing on their relationship with God.

“The extreme of rationalism is that we worship the Bible instead of the God of the Bible,” Baker concedes. However, he adds that it is unwise to preach about good works without sharing, clearly and often, the secret to that spiritual fruit—the salvation of Jesus Christ and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

That crucial question, of course, is what makes someone a Christian. The trio of Corban professors point to the Bible’s requirement for salvation, which has nothing to do with “good works.”

The appearance of ancient rites

Because the emerging church movement is a collective in the truly postmodern sense—grassroots-style, personal-choice focused, leader-light—it is often difficult to define. Emerging churches don’t belong to a convention or organization. Their beliefs and worship styles often differ widely.

“You do have people who are deeply entrenched in postmodern thinking, but you also have people who are conservative theologically who are adopting emerging church outreach,” Trull says.

A common thread, though, among many emerging churches is a re-introduction of mystical ancient

rites used by Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. These 21st-century Christians are creating environments for experiencing God by walking through labyrinths, conducting contemplative prayer, lighting candles and adopting other ancient practices.

The inclusion of some of these practices is disconcerting to Wright. While serving with his wife, Rita, as a missionary in the Amazon for 20 years, Wright was distressed by the mixing—or syncretism—of Christian and pagan practices in the local Catholic churches. Among other things, he noticed churches hanging fetishes and building up their church doorways to satisfy the pagan belief that evil spirits would “trip” and be unable to enter.

“This is not biblical,” he says. “I always told the believers down there to judge everything by the Word.”

As his students question the introduction of ancient rites, Baker sends them to the Bible and urges them to ask questions as, “What does this practice accomplish?” and “Does it matter *how* I conduct this practice?” For example, the emerging church movement has stirred believers’ interest in meditation, which the Bible clearly promotes. But Christians should understand that biblical meditation calls for intentionally engaging one’s mind with God’s truth and Scripture, where the popular New Age version urges adherents to empty their mind, focusing on breathing or a mantra.

Conversely, Baker notes, “I want to be careful not to throw the baby out with the bath water.” He points out that some people have found these practices to be beneficial to their faith. “We should ask ourselves, ‘Does it transform me into Christ’s image?’ If it does, it has merit. Orthopraxy should serve as a means to an end, not an end unto itself.”

Embracing the essentials

As Christians search for answers in the debate over the emerging church, we should first turn to God and His word, say Trull, Wright and Baker.

Change can be a good thing. Contextualization—presenting God’s truth in a way that is understandable to a particular culture—is necessary. For 2,000 years, Christians have shared the Gospel with people of wide-ranging histories, values, traditions and beliefs, and there’s no reason to give up the Pauline challenge in I Corinthians 9:22 to “become all things to all men” in the 21st century.

But when has a body of believers gone too far in embracing the postmodern culture around it? That happens, says the trio, when a church moves away from the essentials of Christianity: when it no longer clearly preaches personal



Professors Dr. Sam Baker, Dr. Greg Trull and Dr. Robert Wright discuss the various approaches of authors and their books on Postmodernism and the church.

salvation, when it downplays the deity of Christ, when it allows the social gospel to supersede believers’ vital relationship with their Savior, and when it teaches that knowing God and his truth is somehow impossible.

As Christians wrestle with the emerging church movement, they should rejoice in the opportunity to grow in their faith by seeing daily life through the lens of the precious gift God has given us in the Bible. That journey of critical thinking and prayerful consideration is something from which a believer can benefit, explains Trull.

“We don’t want to think for people. We want to train people to have their lives shaped by the Bible,” he says. ■

— BY CHRISTENA BROOKS

Recommended additional reading:

Reclaiming the Center, Crossway Books, edited by Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth and Justin Taylor.

A compilation of 13 authors who share their views on Postmodernism and the church.

