M. Andrew Gale

*Justice and Truth, Theology in the Context of Emerging Young Adults*

**Abstract**

Emerging young adult church planters face challenging epistemological shifts within their congregations. With the proliferation of postmodern critique, the word truth has lost sway and is being supplanted by the concept of justice. In this article the author details this shift, looking at truth within postmodernism and justice as understood by the emerging young adult generation. He then offers a call for a rediscovery of an evangelical theology of justice and suggests helpful actions emerging young adult church planters can engage in that bridge this linguistic gap to their peers.

**Keywords:** justice, truth, emerging young adults, church planting, North America

M. Andrew Gale is a Ph.D. Candidate in Intercultural Studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, KY.
Introduction

The global expansion of the church over the last two thousand years has been aided by the contextualizing of the gospel message as it traveled from people to people. Whether Paul at Athens or Peter with the Gentiles, the Christian message has been missionary in nature. The fact that Jesus spoke a language other than that of the sacred text which records his actions points to this phenomenon, called by Lammin Sanneh the translatability of the gospel (Sanneh 2009). The gospel message is contextualized as it whorls and weaves through cultures and peoples and finds its place in the hearts of new believers. This same contextualizing continues today, in subtle and less subtle ways. Within the emerging generation of Christian believers there is contextualizing taking place that is shaping church planting movements in North America. Emerging young adult church planters are challenged by the permeation of postmodern critique in the lives of those who sit in their pews (or folding chairs, couches, or stadium seating depending on the context). The change has affected both those who are joining church plants as well as those who are planting churches.

Like Paul and Peter before them, effective church planters today must understand the context within which they minister. To this end, engagement in church planting in the North American context amidst the emerging generation of young adults requires one to understand the theological shifts being made around the concept of truth. With the postmodern critique of absolute truth, the word truth has, in many places, been supplanted by the concept of justice. This shift is seen both in the growth of discussions around justice and the retreat or reworking of the use of truth. Whether cognizant of the shift or not, effective church planters often either succumb to the parlance of faith that is emerging in this generation or find creative avenues to engage and challenge places where these new iterations of theology are lacking. This article will trace the changes in theological emphasis among emerging young adults through two distinct, but connected strands of discourse. First, I examine the shifting epistemological paradigm of emerging young adults around truth, especially through the acceptance of the postmodern critique. Second, I explore the developments around the concept of justice within the context of emerging young adults. After laying these foundations, I offer what I see as a way forward for a church planter, which both embraces and challenges the developing theological perspective in light of cultural changes.
Emerging in a Postmodern Context

Emerging young adults have grown up in a culture that is discontinuously different than the culture of their parents (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011:37–38). David Korten, when describing the world in which his daughter grew up, expresses much the same that “by the scale of evolutionary time, this has been an instantaneous break with the previous human condition” (Korten 2006:8). Researchers point to numerous reasons for this unprecedented change, from technology to globalization. Certainly an amalgamation of many factors has contributed to the marked change in this generation, but one factor that consistently surfaces as a culprit is the influence of postmodern thought. Though evangelical circles have attempted to eschew postmodern cultural critique, they have not been immune to the cultural shift. One place this is most prevalent is among the emerging generation of evangelical Christians. On one hand, Christian millennials hear from some in the church of the dangers of relativizing truth in postmodernity, on the other, they recognize there has been a drastic shift in concepts of truth that demands contextualization within their peer group if the church is to grow and expand. In this section, I will offer a sketch of North American emerging young adults that sets the context for the rationale behind the shift away from the term truth. There are two distinct factors shaping the way truth has left the vocabulary of emerging young adults: loss of language and loss of location.

The first factor shaping truth is the loss of language around the concept. This can be seen from the growing acceptance of the postmodern critique of truth as contextual (Webber 1999:23). Postmodernism is fundamentally a critique of its modern, positivist predecessor. With the rise of modern science, humanity began to use an epistemological framework of positivism that claimed “the purpose of science is to formulate universal and immutable laws” (Hiebert 1999:3). This positivist view became inextricably linked with Christianity, which utilized the foundation of universal law to validate biblical truth. God’s truth, then, was seen as something static, unchanged by the culture in which it was expressed. To speak of a contextual gospel was irrational. Postmodernism challenged the view that there are universal laws, instead suggesting that everything we know is shaped by our context, making even theology relative (Hiebert 1999:57). Though the depth of this critique of truth as contextual may not have made its way into churches, the foundation of truth being relative dramatically changed the epistemological foundations of emerging young adults who have been inculcated by postmodern thought in educational settings. For emerging young adults, truth is uncouth and often unknown.
Sociologist Christian Smith, author of *Souls in Transition* and *Lost in Transition*, has done significant research on the emerging young adult demographic and offers startling findings in regard to issues of truth. For instance, Smith writes emerging young adults have difficulty distinguishing between “objective moral truth” and “relative human invention” (Smith and Snell 2009:46). He goes on to say this is not because emerging adults are unintelligent, but because they only understand their world through their subjective self-experience. In his follow up book, *Lost in Transition*, Smith continues this line of thought suggesting many emerging young adults cannot distinguish between something being a moral truth and a person’s perception of that truth. He uses slavery as an example, saying that just because there were people prior to the abolition of slavery who did not see it as a moral evil does not change the fact that slavery is morally wrong. “The truth status of that fact does not depend on people’s subjective recognition or assimilation of it, any more than the existence of germs or the Grand Canyon depends on people knowing about it” (Smith et al. 2011:61). Smith says that in the postmodern climate in which emerging young adults find themselves, religion has lost any ability to make truth claims that it might have had in previous generations (Smith and Snell 2009:101).

Postmodernism is not the enemy, though. The problem arises in an understanding of the postmodern critique that all truth is absolute truth. Had Christianity not been so indebted to a modernist worldview it may have weathered the semantic debate with the word truth. Anthropologist James Bielo, writing on a group he terms emerging evangelicals (a group consisting of more than emerging young adults, but nonetheless dominated by them) describes them as represented by a unique interplay of modernity and late-modernity, or postmodernity. Bielo says this interplay can be seen in many aspects, not the least of which is the abstraction of youth from absolute truth (Bielo 2011:8). The world in which emerging young adults live has not completely accepted the postmodern paradigm, but the critiques of postmodernism have made a profound impact on the ways they view themselves and the world around them. As Brian McLaren, a pastor noted for his postmodern theological bent, states, “to be postmodern means to have experienced the modern world and to have been changed by the experience – changed to such a degree that one is no longer modern” (McLaren 2001:16).

How has the shift of postmodernism affected emerging young adults? There are many changes one can point to showing the prevalence of this shift. N.T. Wright suggests postmodernity encourages a cynical approach to life. He notes a rise in suicide among young adults “who had imbibed postmodernity through every pore” (Wright 2013:32). The Barna Group found emerging young adults are not likely to identify the bible as sacred scripture (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011:52).
The bible no longer holds a place of prominence in the lives of young adults. Admittedly, this has caused stress in churches as they stumble to find a footing within a demographic increasingly uninterested in the faith claims they espouse.

It is important to note here that there are many varied uses of the word truth. Some use it to refer to absolutes. Some use it more contextually, like a friend of mine who is an emerging young adult pastor and says in his sermons, “there is a deeper truth here.” He is not suggesting an absolute, but something that is worth more than a passing “amen.” My goal here is not to parse these different uses of truth, or the myriad others, but to bring to light the disparity in emotional reaction to this word. My friend recounted that he uses the word sparingly and dissimilarly than the generation prior. Words elicit feelings depending on our experiences with them. Depending on one’s upbringing, swear words catch our attention because we were taught not to say them. They were off limits. Saying a swear word in another language provides much less pleasure because of a lack of emotional attachment to that word. All of this is to say, regardless of whether Christian Smith is right about the moral truth of emerging young adults behaviorally, the word truth no longer has the positive emotional appeal to this generation that it had with generations prior.

Though the language of truth has lost sway in the emerging young adult community, this is only part of the dismal story for churches. For emerging young adults, truth has also experienced a loss of location, which is seen in their growing insecurity with the established church. Postmodernism brought with it a leeriness of institutions. David Kinnaman, president of Barna Research Group, suggests emerging young adults are more apprehensive of impersonal institutions, an apprehension leading them to approach the established church with caution (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011:14). This results in emerging young adults’ critique of institutional congregational structures (Bielo 2011:100). When voiced, their critique of the established church surfaces from what is seen as the commodification of people through the uncritical acceptance of American cultural values of consumerism. Institutions are seen as disembodied structures, not a framework of values through which the church can flourish.

One example of a critique of institutional congregational structures is the rise of new monasticism. New monastic communities are made up of emerging adults who relocate from their comfortable suburban cul-de-sacs to urban centers as a way of being incarnational in their ministry approach (Bielo 2011:111, 128). Will Samson explores the critique of congregational structures as commodifying people in a chapter on the rise of new monasticism in the United States among emerging young adults. Samson discusses the battle in evangelicalism between cultural accommodation, the fact that churches need to attract people in order to
maintain the infrastructure they have created, and counter-cultural movements like new monasticism, who feel called to live outside confining institutional structures (Steensland and Goff 2013:94–108). The enormity of church institutions and the way they seem to commodify people to maintain their viability makes the established church seem compromised, if not completely unchristian, to many emerging young adults. The growth of new monasticism in the United States is not unlike the growth of church plants among emerging young adults, both of which are uncomfortable with the incongruences they find in established churches. This is evidenced by the exodus of emerging young adults from pastoral roles in these churches and their movement toward smaller church planting networks.

At the same time, to assume emerging young adults are vacating the church in droves lacks nuance as well. As Robert Wuthnow explains, there are many sociological factors that affect a person’s church attendance. One example he offers is that women are more likely than men to attend church, so marriage often affects church attendance. With emerging young adults choosing marriage later in life, the return to church is also protracted (Wuthnow 2007:56). The question remains, what kinds of churches do these couples return to? It is these re-engage couples with whom emerging young adult church planters are connecting. As they do, the planters want the couples to know they recognize the deficiencies of the established church which can be seen through something as simple as a tagline, like a recent church put on Facebook, “Same Jesus, different kind of church.”

Though one might think church plants are simply substitutes for established churches and thus relocate truth inside their bounds, the inclusive approach of many young church plants makes them wary of using language that might alienate their peers or too closely align them with the establishment. Emerging young adult church planters must now wrestle with how to remain relevant within a community who no longer accepts the lingua franca of the church. For young church planters the way they do this falls on a large spectrum of responses. One option is to reorient how one defines truth. In these settings truth gets understood in new, often pluralized terms, mainly as personal enlightenment. One example of this is a church that has the concept of deep listening as a core value of their congregation. In describing how deep listening plays a part in their church they write that “deep listening is also about opening ourselves to alternative points of view and the experiences’ and truths of others.” Personal enlightenment language is bound within an individualistic, Western cultural framework, which resonates with young adults, but does not find much traction in biblical literature.

Another alternative is to allow a new word to emerge that replaces truth linguistically. Wuthnow describes this as spiritual tinkering, a mark of emerging
young adults (Wuthnow 2007:134–5). One commonly supplanted word for truth among emerging young adults, a correlation I will look at later in this paper, is justice. A recent church plant in Minnesota has a mission of environmental justice as their primary focus.6 Their tagline, in an image advertising the church on Facebook, reads, “Making space for Jesus + justice.” The website for the church looks much more like a community advocacy not-for-profit than a local congregation with forums on clean energy, climate change, and communities of color, and is targeted at other likeminded emerging adults. The lead pastor of the church was recently featured on Minnesota Public Radio with other theologians discussing the increasing engagement between faith and environmental issues. Environmental justice certainly has a place within the context of ecclesiology. My point is not to debate that, but to suggest a shift that is occurring in language where justice has supplanted truth, a word that is not mentioned in the current iteration of the church’s messaging.

Both of these churches mentioned above were featured in a recent New York Times article about young Methodist church planters with an environmental gospel (Oppenheimer 2015). Though I think churches such as these still represent the fringe and not the majority of church planting endeavors right now, they represent a shift that can be seen, even if more subtly, in mainstream church planting movements as well. This shift is away from language of truth and to a new language of justice. What is most striking about emerging young adults is not that they live without truth, but with unidentified truth. It is this unidentified truth that is often made manifest in the ways they approach justice. But before I explore the full movement from truth to justice, I want to look at the ways justice has been understood and re-engaged within the emerging young adult context.

Justice and Emerging Young Adults

Justice has become a major theme in Christian emerging young adult communities. They sing about justice. Tim Hughes, a British worship leader, has a worship song called “God of Justice.” Popular Christian music is picking up on this with more songs related to social action and issues like poverty.8 Emerging young adults pay money to attend conferences about justice. The Justice Conference,9 put on by World Relief, is one example and takes place annually at different major cities. The conference started in 2010 and over 12,000 people have attended.10 At other conferences, even those who do not have a specific focus on justice, conversations of justice still abound. At a Passion Conference in Atlanta a few years ago, college students raised over three million dollars in just days to fight issues of injustice.11 They are starting not-for-profits working nationally and internationally on issues of
human trafficking, poverty, disease, clean water, and violence. Multiple CEO’s of major Christian development organizations (i.e. World Vision, International Justice Mission, and World Relief) have published books related to issues of justice with a goal of engaging this emerging constituency. Whether emerging adults, in general, are engaged in justice related issues is still debatable by some (Smith et al. 2011:228), but within Christian emerging adults circles, the interest in justice is present. But just as vital as recognizing the prominence of justice is understanding the foundation on which it rests. For emerging young adults, justice can be understood in two ways: grounded in equality and participatory nature.

In order to clearly understand the movement of justice in emerging young adults, one must look at the language of justice in recent decades. John Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* holds as one of the most influential texts on political philosophy of the 20th century. Rawls offers a view of justice as fairness, utilizing the social contract theory of Locke, Rousseau, and Kant (Rawls 1999:11). Rawls sets the foundation of the discussion on justice that others, like Robert Nozick, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Walzer, debate. Though John Rawls may not have celebrity-like name recognition within the emerging young adult generation, his theories of justice and language of equality and fairness have certainly influenced the way they interpret justice.

Emerging young adults value equality in many forms. Socially, they are more accepting of lifestyle choices and sexual orientations different from their own (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011:163). They are strong proponents of ethnic and gender equality. They want to repair broken relationships and eliminate global economic inequalities. Though a foundation of equality is not completely negative there are challenges. One philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, deals with the importance of differentiating between equality and justice by offering a theological perspective to discourses on justice grounding his justice in the concept of inherent rights (Wolterstorff 2008:11). One of the distinctions Wolterstorff draws between his theory of justice and that of his contemporaries is that his foundation of inherent rights is based in the worth of a person, a worth given by their connection to God, which in turn gives a person rights (Wolterstorff 2011:152–157; Wolterstorff 2013:137). Wolterstorff clearly differentiates between a view of justice as inherent rights and one of equality, which would coincide with a Rawlsian view, claiming there are times when justice is present that equality is not and when equality is present and justice is not (Wolterstorff 2008:14).

Emerging young adults will most likely not cite Rawls as the foundation for their concepts of justice as equality, so where does this sense of inequality come from? One major factor is the increased access this generation has that is
unprecedented in comparison to previous generations (Kinnaman and Hawkins 2011:43). With the help of the internet, emerging adults gain nearly instantaneous connectedness and the inundation of news and information.\textsuperscript{14} The globalizing world that emerging young adults find themselves in is marked by global interconnectedness where consistent contact and interaction is possible regardless of distance (Inda and Rosaldo 2008:4). Emerging young adults, possibly more than any generation prior, have the capacity to see and experience firsthand global inequality because of the heightened access. Globalization has challenged Christians’ assumptions about God and social justice (Wuthnow 2010:3). Globalization has brought to the fore the realities of global injustice and also created systems where travel to nearly any place in the world is feasible.

For some this extensive access leads to apathy, a sense that the troubles in the world are overwhelming and unsalvageable. But for others it brings to light issues propelling them toward action. Their desire for change has become a defining characteristic of emerging evangelicals (Bielo 2011:5). Brian Steensland and Philip Goff pick up on this characteristic, and in response are studying the changes happening within the evangelical Christian community as evangelical emerging young adults are living in this newly accessible cultural context. They suggest “consciousness-raising movements” have led to a wider awareness of injustices around the world including global inequalities, sex trafficking, and health-related illness (Steensland and Goff 2013:16). These “consciousness-raising movements” have the capability of rapid mobilization through social media, as evidenced by campaigns like “Kony 2012.” The Kony 2012 website calls the campaign the “fastest growing viral video of all time” and says it reached 100 million views in 6 days (“Kony 2012”). Access enables avenues by which they can create networks with other likeminded individuals and communities interested in their cause. A 2013 report on millennials showed that 65% receive email or newsletter updates from at least one not-for-profit (“The 2013 Millennial Impact Report” 2013). Increased access points to where a sense of inequality is derived; the second component of justice in emerging young adults is participation.

For emerging young adults, justice is not simply recognition of inequality, but must be accompanied by action on behalf of the marginalized. This desire for participation is evident in Christian emerging adults as well. Action-oriented faith is a definitive characteristic of emerging young adults (Webber 2002:94). When one places a strongly action-oriented theology of justice within the context of a generation marked by access and mobility, the outcome is a growing number of socially engaged young people. Participation is obvious when one sees the growth in short-term missions over the past few years, where some estimate 1.5 million
North Americans are participating annually (Ott, Strauss, and Tennent 2010:xii). Robert Wuthnow reports that “nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of active church members in the United States have traveled or lived in another country” (Wuthnow 2010:3). In another survey, Robert Wuthnow and Stephen Offutt found that of the people who were teenagers during the 1950s, 1960s, or 1970s only two percent indicated they had participated in a short-term trip. The percentage has grown to 12 percent for those who were teenagers in the 1990s (Wuthnow and Offutt 2008:218). Globalization has made participation in the lives of those living in unjust situations a reality for people in ways it has not been in the recent past.

A theological term for this embodied social activism that has been promulgated by emerging young adults is incarnation. Incarnation has defined certain segments of Christian emerging adults, like that of the new monastic movement. Though all emerging young adults are not engaged in new monasticism, incarnation can be seen in the language of participation in church planting movements as well. James Bielo mentions that emerging evangelicals see themselves as missionaries within their own context (Bielo 2011:118). Church plants use the language of incarnation to describe the ways they engage and participate within the community they are planting. Churches are even foregoing Sunday services in order to engage in community service.

Though equality and action are components of justice, they do not speak to the Christian foundations of justice. Attempts to be relevant can too quickly simplify critical aspects of theology. Kara Powell and Chap Clark write of interviews with emerging young adults asking them to define Christianity. Most of their respondents said loving others and a third of respondents made no mention of Jesus at all (Powell and Clark 2011:33). Central to actions of justice is the theological foundations of those actions in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The outcome of a highly practice-driven approach to justice with a theoretical foundation focused mainly on equality is a humanistic notion of justice tied to rights. In a context outside of the church this is, possibly, an acceptable definition of justice. The challenge becomes when the church attempts to engage in the discourse on justice without distinguishing how that discourse may differ within a Christian context. In some senses, the justice that is often engaged by emerging young adults, and to which emerging young adult church planters call their congregation, is a justice lacking a foundation of truth rooted in anything but humanistic abstraction.

A Way Forward

A North American music group has captured the movement of truth within their emerging young adult generation in a song called “The Truth is a Cave.”
The opening verse expresses:

I was young and naïve, as I was told so I believed.
And I was told there’s only one road that leads you home.
And the truth was a cave, on the mountainside.
And I’d seek it out until the day I died.

As the person grows up, their view of truth changes. In the second verse one encounters a less innocent lyricist showing the departure of truth from the comfort of abstract ideal to modernity where it becomes a concrete force:

I was bound and determined; to be the child you wanted.
But I was blind to every sign you left for me to find.
And the truth became a tool that I held in my hand.
I wielded it and did not understand.

Finally, as the person continues wrestling with himself or herself they recognize their inability to discover truth. The song ends with a demure, yet hopeful verse:

I was tired
Of giving more than you gave to me
And I desired
A truth I wouldn’t have to seek
In the silence I heard you calling out to me.
(The Oh Hellos, The Truth is a Cave)

Through the analysis thus far, I explored the epistemological shifts of postmodernity which left emerging young adults with limited language to express truth and no trusted location for it to reside. Next, I showed how discourses on justice in emerging young adults are grounded in equality and participatory in nature. As the word truth and its modern intonation has left a sour taste in their mouths, they have chosen, not unlike the lyrics to the song, to abandon the word. But, though the word may be abandoned, I think a more fluid understanding of truth exists in the foundation of their use of the word justice. Justice is fundamentally grounded in truth, but does not currently carry the postmodern baggage that is encompassed in truth. Thus, the movement toward justice can be seen through the lens of a seeking after truth in a world mystified by truth claims. Justice does carry some varied meaning outside of truth, the major variation being that justice
is often understood as action oriented, participatory. In this way, I believe justice is better clarified in the emerging young adult context as embodied truth. In this closing section I suggest two moves that could be made by emerging young adult church planters to engage with their peers and aid in both the health and expansion of the church in North America: the first is to rediscover an evangelical theology of justice and the second is to encourage further dialogue around justice through praxis in ecclesial contexts.

The first chasm to cross in order to engage emerging young adults is the rift between evangelical theology and justice. There are many factors that contributed to the move away from justice, but the shift can be seen clearly in the early twentieth century and the debates over the social gospel. The social gospel pushed language that favored social action where evangelicals favored language of individual sin and salvation. The move away from social action was exacerbated by the theological growth of premillennialism and its view of society as irredeemable (Woolnough and Ma 2010:10). Society was not worth saving, simply the souls of those one encountered. A view of salvation focusing exclusively on individual sin disregards structural evils and reduces justice to its spiritualized understanding (Mott 2011:3). This theological shift away from language of social action was paired with the growing fear of the linkage of language of justice and Marxist rhetoric. Within this historical context, the evangelical church disengaged from conversations about justice, as it was seen as subversive and anti-Christian, and focused on language of individual sin. Justice, then, became defined only in the limited view of justice as spiritual justification. Robert Webber suggests that the social activism of emerging young adults arises out of a reaction to the early anti-social action fundamentalism of the twentieth century (Webber 2002:26–30).

Though this history does not fully encompass the current stance of the evangelical church, what it means for emerging young adults is that many did not grow up in an ecclesial environment that discussed societal justice as a theological component of faith, but relied primarily on a spiritualized concept of justification. Though the immediate impact of this move away from justice was not felt, as young adults are re-engaging the language of justice, the church does not have a foundation for them to stand on. In that case, many emerging young adults look at secular understandings of justice as their barometer for theological justice without recognizing and wrestling with the underlying presuppositions of truth that make up any claim of justice. Justice as simplistic equality does not offer a biblical foundation of truth. Unlike its predecessors, what emerging young adults need is not for the church to say their view of justice is incompatible with faith and must be discarded, but that it is only partial and must be strengthened. Emerging young
adults must be reminded that relevance cannot replace depth. What is needed is not a retreat of theology from justice, but quite the opposite, the retrieval of a Christological, evangelical theology of justice.¹⁵

One of the concepts in theology that could aid in the rediscovery of an evangelical theology of justice, especially within emerging young adults, is the liberation theology concept of praxis (Gutiérrez 1988:11). Praxis as a theological concept requires that we start with action taken on behalf of the world, but it does not end there. Action may be the first step, but praxis requires movement toward theological reflection of that action. Reflection without action is verbalism, action without reflection is activism (Freire 2000:87–88). It is in the second step, from action to theology that emerging young adults remain stalled. They participate, but fail to reflect on their participation in light of their Christian faith. In this way they understand justice, but fail to move toward the truth that lies waiting behind it. The challenge for some in accepting a concept like praxis is the history within which it was presented. Liberation theology, much like the language of social justice, was born and bred in Marxist rhetoric. But the concept, in general, can be understood outside of those terms.

Miroslav Volf, in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*, wrestles with justice within the postmodern context. Volf suggests a way of approaching justice through praxis by what he calls “double vision,” a term he borrows from Nicholas Wolterstorff. Double vision is the ability to stand in one tradition and learn from others (Volf 1996:213). Volf goes on to say that “reflection about justice must serve doing justice. If ‘double vision’ has a legitimate place in Christian life, then it will not be something we do before engaging in the struggle against injustice but as we engage in this struggle” (Volf 1996:217). Volf recognizes the participatory nature of justice within the emerging young adult context and encourages a reflective participation that does not wait for sound theology before participating, but develops a theology as part and parcel to action.

Praxis is also experiential and thus embraces the theological tendencies of this generation. Robert Wuthnow says that for Christians today truth is not founded in institutions or tradition, it is experiential (Wuthnow 2010:16). Robert Webber noted this shift even earlier, expressing it as a move from systematic doctrine to a narrative, context specific theology (Webber 2002:83). Praxis, which should happen within ecclesial settings, also offers correctives to one-sided views of justice by challenging churches that fall at either end of the spectrum in regard to justice. For those whose conversations around justice are only in a spiritualized sense, praxis pushes social action and requires a theology that recognizes the role of the reign of God on earth. For others who have utilized justice dissected from its Christological
foundation, praxis forces a view of justice that reflects theologically. Praxis, in essence, offers a way to meet in the middle and create a language for discourse.

Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice warn Christians that “one of the greatest dangers facing work for justice and peace birthed within a Christian vision is the gradual detachment of that work from its unique Christian roots and vision” (Katongole and Rice 2008:139). Emerging young adults are starting new churches because they do not see a theology from established churches that embrace the complexity of their world. And emerging young adult church planters often suffer from the same frustrations of the established church as their peers. Church plants attempting to engage the emerging young adult community must be willing to engage in dialogue about justice, but also not be afraid to move that conversation toward the foundation of justice, truth. Praxis that fails to reflect theologically is not praxis, but simply good works. Justice, in its full, Christological understanding, does more than simply offer temporary relief, it points to a truth that is living water. Church planting that understands its context will exude praxis, it will join emerging young adults in the work of caring for a hurting world, but will do it in a way that continuously reflects on that work in light of faith. We should encourage emerging young adults to seek out justice, in its full understanding, grounded in the biblical narrative. Recognizing truth within justice and finding ways to reflect, write, theologize, and express that truth in light of their faith while living in their postmodern context will be the next major task for this emerging community of believers.

End Notes

1 Emerging young adults are commonly identified as those persons born between 1980 and 2000. There are many terms scholars use for this generation (millennials, generation y, mosaics). Each of these is formulated out of a specific understanding of the emerging young adult community. I am choosing to simply identify them as emerging young adults to avoid the specific categorizing others have applied.

2 There are significantly divergent opinions in scholarship about whether society finds itself in postmodernity or late/liquid modernity. I am choosing to use the term postmodernity in this article to highlight the confliction with modernity that is found within the emerging young adult context, not to endorse or oppose a specific theory.

3 In a presentation of this article I was asked about the relevance of Brian McLaren and other early emergent church writers for current emerging young adult church planters. Though McLaren may not have the readership that he did a decade ago, the foundation of critique of the institutional church that he levied then still has ripple effects in current church planting efforts. If anything, this can be seen in the fact that the postmodern paradigm that McLaren espoused in his writings is
accepted as normative in many church plants. The impact of McLaren's theology among emerging young adults, as well as similar writers in that genre like Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, seems to me to still be present.


8 For example: Matt West’s song “Do Something.”


10 This number was given prior to the most recent conference and can be found at: http://www.thejusticeconference.com/pdf/TJC15 PARTNERAPPLICATION Form.pdf (Accessed September 19, 2015).


13 Though Rawls’ justice is distinctively distributive in nature, the importance of his connection for this discussion is the language of fairness and equality that clearly shaped his argument. Justice as fairness can be seen in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the contemporary expression of this view of justice is found in the writings of Rawls.

14 The increase in information and access within the emerging young adult community are factors in their actions toward justice, but one question that should be explored more is why they are factors. Is it simply because they see more injustice and want to be involved? One word I heard time and again from emerging young adults about the reasons they engaged in issues of justice was guilt. Guilt, no doubt from increased access, is a major motivating factor, but not one that has the power to sustain action in the face of complexity and difficulty.

15 One first step might be, as suggested by other theologian, to reclaim a place for justice in the New Testament by reviewing and expanding research on the uses of δικαίωσύνη (Mott 2011; Wolterstorff 2008).
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