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An Interview with Robert Webber, author of *The Younger Evangelicals*  
by Jordon Cooper

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*The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* by Robert Webber.  
Amazon.com Link: <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0801091527/theooze/>

I was waiting for Amazon.com to start shipping *The Younger Evangelicals* when I heard it was at my local Christian bookstore. Instead of waiting for Amazon, I stopped by the store and picked up a copy. *Ancient Future Faith* has been a very important book in my journey of faith and I was curious to see what Robert Webber had to say about those of us he labels the “Younger Evangelicals.” As I was thumbing through the pages of the book while waiting in line to pay for it, I stumbled across his [summary table](#) and it articulated much of the conversation that those of us in the evangelical church have been having over the years.

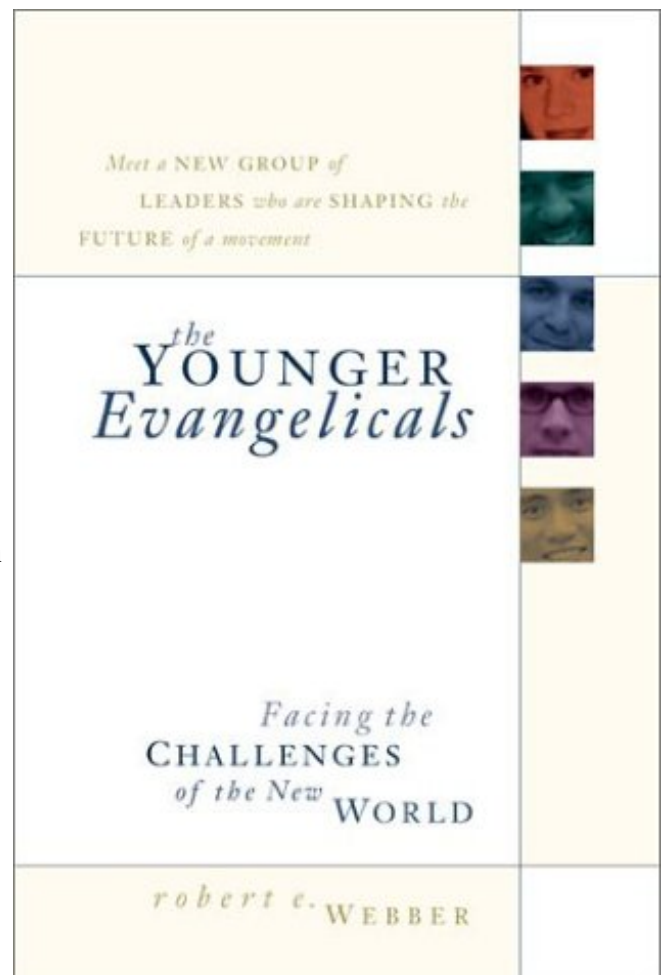
The book takes a look at the three dominant influences on evangelicalism today. The “traditional evangelical”, the “pragmatic evangelical”, and the emerging, “younger evangelicals”. The book revolves around explaining the values, conflicts, stories, and ministry of these three groups with most of the book focused on the younger evangelicals.

Instead of a full review for *The Younger Evangelicals*, I e-mailed Dr. Webber and asked if we could do an interview via e-mail with some of the questions coming from themes in the book. Here is the unedited interview.

**1) If I am a leader of pragmatic evangelical church who came from a pragmatic evangelical seminary who is now faced with what appears to be a very incompatible world, what advice for me? Where do I turn next?**

I think you have to look at this issue from an immediate and then a long-term perspective. The pragmatic churches have become institutionalized - with some exceptions. They responded to the sixties and seventies, created a culture-driven church and don't get that the world has changed again.

Pragmatics, being fixed, have little room for those who are shaped by the postmodern revolution. A clash is emerging. The younger evangelicals will not have a voice in the pragmatic, fixed mentality. Stay there and your spirit will die (there are some exceptions, pray for discernment). Many pragmatic churches, like old shopping malls are dying.



Very few people under 30 are in pragmatic churches. The handwriting is on the wall. Leave. Do a start up church. Be a tentmaker. Build communities. Small groups. Neighborhood churches. Be willing to let your life die for Jesus as you break with the market driven, culture shaped, numbers oriented, Wall-Mart-something-for-everyone church. Be an Abraham and take a risk. God will show up and lead the way.

**2) Interactive worship is talked about constantly at conferences and in books yet much of postmodern worship is accused of being "modern with candles". For a church culture that is used to worship as a spectator sport, what does interactive worship look and feel like?**

Big Question! First there is no such thing as postmodern worship. There is only biblical worship in a postmodern culture. The only way to face off with postmodern philosophical, ethical and spiritual relativism is through a radical biblical message of the uniqueness of Jesus, the absolutes of Christian ethics and a radical spirituality rooted in Jesus who does for us what we can't do for ourselves. A postmodern setting demands relationship, participation, community, symbol, servanthood and the like. The radical renorming of biblical priorities coupled with an absolute rejection of slick marketing, showy worship and phony verbal games precede the birth of an honest, genuine, authentic community passionately engaged with being the truth. Here is where we need to go. Get there and God will show us the style most in keeping with the spirit as our lives and worship witness to the rule of Christ over the nations of the world. First crawl, then walk and God will get you running.

**3) What is the role of seminaries in the education of younger evangelicals. Also, how does their role change as the younger evangelicals distance themselves from denominations?**

Most seminaries are still committed to the rational epistemology of modernity. Evangelical seminaries are still apologetic in outlook trying to prove God, prove the bible, find the authorial intent, badger people into the faith through reason or manipulate them into the church through well crafted worship shows. These seminaries will gradually serve a world that no longer exists. There is a need to wake up and acknowledge how rapidly culture is changing. Today's culture - secular spirituality, pagan religions, ethical relativism looks like the first three centuries. The church grew then because it had an exclusive message to die for, a community to live in and an evangelism that grew strong Christians through a rigorous process of Christian formation. In seminaries today many of the courses of study are on technique, CEO management, psychology, marketing and the like. Christianity is becoming defined by non-Christian disciplines. There is a need to reverse the trend and define the world and all its disciplines by scripture. There is a need to assert once again the counter-cultural nature of the faith. Christianity needs to tell the world its story. I teach in a seminary that is not driven by business and market. We struggle. We wrestle. We turn people inside-out and outside-in - but we have only begun and have a long way to go (Northern Seminary, Lombard, IL, [www.seminary.edu](http://www.seminary.edu)).

**4) Can you talk about some of the differences between the Constantinian church of the modern world and the "Ecclesial" church of the younger evangelicals. Do you see churches transitioning from one way of thinking to another or is the leap to great?**

The Constantinian church is beholden to civil religion. It acts as the chaplain to society. It's quite dull and doesn't have much to offer by way of radical commitment to community, relationship and counter-cultural values. The Ecclesial church seeks to be incarnational - the presence of Jesus in the world. It's emerging primarily in the city - reclaiming the neighborhoods through neighborhood house churches. Think of planting a church in the neighborhood where Eminem grew up. This is where the younger evangelicals are headed. Most suburban churches are either traditional or

pragmatic and serve the middle and upper class. There is a place for that, of course.

**5) Some prominent evangelical authors are suggesting that postmodernity poses a threat to Christianity which can't survive without the ideas and values of modernity. How do you respond to that?**

These authors are probably addressing the philosophical, ethical, and spiritual relativism. And they do so in the old rational way of defending ideas. God's Kingdom is not the Big Idea, it's an embodied reality. This is why the church must become increasingly counter-cultural. It must embody the Kingdom in its neighborhood and call people into a new way of life. Actually, I welcome postmodernity. It is the antithesis of Christianity. Maybe these leaders fear postmodernity because it challenges a faith that has become culture-dependent. Break from modernity and become free to be Christian in a counter-cultural way. Then there are revolutions that demand we rethink our style and mentality - i.e. communications, science, globalization, to name a few. These revolutions are not a threat to the faith. They are a challenge. They demand a thoughtful engagement, not a counter movement (such as a retreat into modernity, for example).

**6) When you look out to the future, what do think the North American evangelical church is going to look like 25 years from now?**

It is really anybody's guess. Because the church always interacts with culture and because we cannot predict cultural change its very difficult to say. Let's say that terrorism continues to be on the rise, that militant Muslims continue to dominate the scene, penetrate most of the world and engage in hostilities. The people who will be able to deal with this situation the best will be those committed to a counter-cultural Christianity. Christianity will be less national, less culturally formed. It will be smaller pockets of communities in neighborhoods. The church will focus on people, not buildings, on community, not programs, on scripture study, not showy worship. Biblical symbols such as baptismal identity and Eucharistic thanksgiving will take on new meaning. The church will be less concerned about having an eschatology and more committed to be an eschatological community. This kind of community will reach out to a broken world to offer healing of broken lives and service to the poor and needy. Denominational barriers will break down, racial barriers will disappear, a new equality between men and women will appear. By turning their backs on the politics of churchmanship people will restore the politics of Jesus. I already see this happening in "seedal" form among many younger evangelicals. Perhaps God is preparing this generation for a time of persecution and the collapse of the world as we now know it.

**7) As you travel around and see a lot more of the church than many of us, what things do you see that concerns you and what things give you hope?**

What gives me hope is the younger evangelical as stated above. What concerns me is how satisfied the traditional church is with its enmeshment with modernity and how proud the pragmatic church is with its market success, business orientation and entertainment worship. Obviously there are exceptions. These are some fine traditional and pragmatic churches that are honestly wrestling with the emergence of the new world. And there are some twenty-something's who want to make their mark in the traditional and pragmatic communities. The lines cannot be clearly drawn.

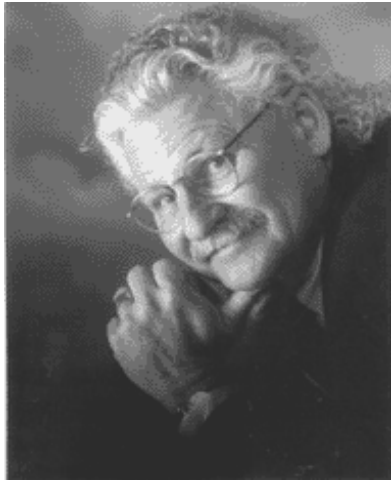
**8) Any words of encouragement to churches wrestling with the transitions you mentioned in the book.**

Jordan Cooper told me about a church struggling with their identity and said the church is using The Younger Evangelical book as a "guide to discuss and shape where they are going." He said "it has

been a great experience for them.” Most churches need information that provides a clear understanding of the issues and how they are addressed by the traditional, the pragmatic and the younger evangelical leaders. These differences are significant. The book provides a way to quickly understand the issue and states with equal clarity the theological persuasions that inform the choices churches make. The book isn’t full of easy answers because we live in a complex world. But the book helps people work through the ambiguities and provide clarity and hopefully unity of direction.

a.) *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the challenges of the new world.* (Baker, 2002) can be purchased through your local bookstore or by calling the Institute for Worship Studies at 630-510-8905. \$16.00.

Watch for my new free newsletter starting in January and continuing monthly on [www.ancientfutureworship.com](http://www.ancientfutureworship.com)



Dr. Robert E. Webber is the William R. and Geraldyn B. Myers Professor of Ministry at Northern Seminary in Lombard, IL. He is also the President of the Institute For Worship Studies and Professor of Theology Emeritus at Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL. Dr. Webber has lectured on worship in nearly every denomination and fellowship, and has authored or edited more than twenty books on worship including the eight volume work, "The Complete Library of Christian Worship". His most recent books include: *Planning Blended Worship* (Abingdon, 1998), *Ancient-Future Faith* (Baker, 1999), and *Journey to Jesus* (Abingdon, 2001). You can find him on the web at [www.ancientfutureworship.com](http://www.ancientfutureworship.com).

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The chart comes from Robert Webber's book, [The Younger Evangelicals](#) and does an excellent job of showing some of the differences between the moderns (traditional and pragmatic evangelicals) and the postmodern (the younger evangelicals)

Scroll down for chart.



	<b>Traditional Evangelicals 1950-1975</b>	<b>Pragmatic Evangelicals 1975-2000</b>	<b>Younger Evangelicals 2000-</b>
<b>Theological Commitment</b>	Christianity as a rational worldview	Christianity as therapy Answers needs	Christianity as a community of faith. Ancient/Reformation
<b>Apologetics Style</b>	Evidential Foundational	Christianity as meaning-giver Experiential Personal Faith	Embrace the metanarrative Embodied apologetic Communal faith
<b>Ecclesial Paradigm</b>	Constantinian Church Civil Religion	Culturally sensitive church Market Driven	Missional Church Counter cultural
<b>Church Style</b>	Neighbourhood churches Rural	Megachurch Suburban Market targeted	Small Church Back to cities Intercultural
<b>Leadership Style</b>	Pastor centred	Managerial Model CEO	Team ministry Priesthood of all
<b>Youth Ministry</b>	Church-centred programs	Outreach Programs Weekend fun retreats	Prayer, Bible Study, Worship, Social Action
<b>Education</b>	Sunday School Information centred	Target generational groups and needs	Intergenerational formation in community
<b>Spirituality</b>	Keep the rules	Prosperity and success	Authentic embodiment
<b>Worship</b>	Traditional	Contemporary	Convergence

<b>Art</b>	Restrained	Art as illustration	Incarnational embodiment
<b>Evangelism</b>	Mass evangelism	Seeker Service	Process evangelism
<b>Activists</b>	Beginnings of evangelical social action	Need-driving social action (divorce groups, drug rehab)	Rebuild cities and neighbourhoods