

THE EMERGING CHURCH:
AN EMERGENCY ASSESSMENT
BY AN EMERGING NON-EMERGENT

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*Whoever thinks a faultless piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be.
In ev'ry work regard the writer's end,
Since none can compass more than they intend;
And if the means be just, the conduct true,
Applause, in spite of trivial faults, is due.*

—Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism”

Christians who adhere to historic orthodoxy find themselves in a curious position with respect to the “emerging church.” Seminary professors, pastors, and other leaders encounter among those they serve both proponents and opponents: both those who are convinced that the emerging church movement is a beacon marking the bright future of the faith, and those who are convinced that it is a divisive insurgency propagating rank heresy and gross immorality. As is so often the case in the history of the Church, there is truth to both claims, and those seeking to understand how much truth lies where lack the benefit of the historical perspective accorded to those studying the Donatist controversy, the Reformation or the rise and fall of American fundamentalism.

Nevertheless, the sharp controversy which has emerged in the debate over the emerging church necessitates a careful look at this movement—especially for those in evangelical and traditional¹ churches where this movement addresses core aspects of theology, spiritual formation, and cultural identity. Although this movement is no more than a decade old, sufficient information exists to make at least an initial appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses and of the opportunities and threats it presents to communities committed to orthodox Christian belief and practice. A bit of recent history will be useful in understanding just from whence this movement is emerging.

Roughly eight years ago I sat in on a conference put on by the Young Leaders’ Network, the “GenX” division of the evangelical parachurch ministry Leadership Network. The featured speakers of this conference included Doug Pagitt, Mark Driscoll and John Franke—all on the same stage where Brian McLaren preached every Sunday as pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C.

How times have changed. McLaren has now passed on the reins of Cedar Ridge in order to devote himself to writing, speaking, and coaching. Franke has assumed the mantle of the late Stanley Grenz as the leading theologian of postfoundationalist evangelicalism. Driscoll has written Ichabod over just about everybody else in the room that day and has emerged as the leading voice of Emerging Anti-Emergents. Pagitt has continued to have a hand in leading what evolved from the Young Leaders’ Network through the TerraNova Project to be the modern-day Emergent Village. I, for what it’s worth, went from being a first-year seminarian working part-time on the staff of a large evangelical church to being the founding pastor of one of that church’s new plants where I get to try out many of the neat ideas that were being thrown around at this conference and so many others in the late 1990s.

These conferences, the books that went with them, and the figures that were associated with them were all sprung directly from the loins of late twentieth century evangelicalism. In other words, the emerging church emerged from the evangelicalism of megachurches like Willow Creek and Saddleback,

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of institutions like Dallas Theological Seminary and Trinity International University, and of denominations like the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in America. Dissatisfied with many of the exegetical approaches, ecclesial forms and cultural practices of their churches of origin, emerging pastors and theologians departed from their traditional evangelical forbears in the following significant ways:

EMPHASIS ON NARRATIVE QUALITIES OF SCRIPTURE

Evangelical preaching has traditionally been characterized by a strong emphasis on exegesis, with the Pauline epistles forming a virtual “canon within the canon.”² As most evangelical worship services give pride of place to the sermon, which may well take up more than half of the service, this phenomenon has fostered the tendency toward linear, logical progression from text to application, often served up with the aid of alliteration, acronyms and other mnemonic devices. Evangelical sermons tend to be systematic, thorough, neatly packaged and wary of ambiguity and mysticism.

In reaction to these tendencies, emerging churches have found themselves drawn to narrative and poetic portions of Scripture, especially the Gospels and the Writings (Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon being particular favorites), and have been unwilling to make clear what God seems to have left fuzzy.³ Emerging preachers have turned enthusiastically to the riches of patristic commentary, even to the allegorizing so strongly opposed by the Reformers. Preaching in emerging churches is often interactive, drawing out questions and comments from the congregation which in traditional evangelicalism was expected to sit attentively and take notes.⁴ Whereas the traditional evangelical preacher presents himself (not always self-consciously) as a fount of knowledge, wisdom, and holiness, emerging preachers tend to portray themselves as fellow pilgrims on a spiritual journey and speak openly of their own doubts, struggles, and failures.⁵

ENTHUSIASM FOR THE ARTS

The critique of evangelical worship on aesthetic grounds is no less powerful for its familiarity: neutral architectural spaces, the absence of symbols (most notably crosses), the abandonment of liturgical elements, transparent pulpits and dressed-down preachers who arose in response to what so many felt to be the empty formalism of traditional and mainline worship settings. For those who came to evangelical churches from these backgrounds, the absence of altars and stained glass may have been jarring, but it also afforded an opportunity to worship God without the distraction of those things they had associated with the “dead” churches they had left. It was felt, moreover, that unchurched non-believers would feel more comfortable if they were able to engage with the truths of the gospel in an environment similar to the movie theaters, school auditoriums, and corporate campuses in which they conducted the rest of their lives, and where the music presented in worship was similar in style and production to the music they listened to on the radio.

Emerging churches have found these sterile worship environments to be spiritually sterile as well and have enthusiastically embraced both traditional and contemporary artistry. Modern technology has allowed emerging churches to project prolifically images of icons, artwork and religious symbols. Moreover, emerging churches’ comfort with artistic forms has manifested itself in the frequent use, without any discomfort, of “secular” movie clips and special music when they are consistent with the messages being proclaimed in their worship services. Many emerging churches are actively involved with local artists and musicians, both Christian and non-Christian, and promote gallery showings and concerts that may not bear explicitly Christian content on the belief that God does indeed shine in all that’s fair.⁶

EMBRACE OF TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

Consistent with their Reformed roots, evangelical churches traditionally looked with skepticism on spiritual disciplines, non-verbal worship practices like extended periods of silence, non-rational approaches to prayer and “Catholic” practices such as the veneration of saints and the recitation of set prayers. In worship services detached from traditional liturgical practices, even The Lord’s Prayer is often neglected and is certainly not used repeatedly in private devotion. Communion is celebrated in most evangelical churches monthly or even less frequently, usually with grape juice rather than with

wine. Certainly there are exceptions to these trends: most notably, the practice of fasting which was encouraged by such notable evangelicals as Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright. And over the last two decades, proponents of spiritual disciplines like Richard Foster⁷ and Dallas Willard⁸ have gained an enthusiastic following among some evangelicals. But the evangelical embrace of these practices has been an awkward one at odds with the rational nature of evangelical piety.

Emerging leaders are far more comfortable embracing both traditional and mystical aspects of spiritual formation.⁹ *Lectio divina* has found wide use among emerging churches, as have such traditional practices as Lenten fasting, the recitation of creeds, regular celebration of the Eucharist (with wine, often good wine), and the stations of the Cross. The identification of a practice as “Catholic” is more likely to evoke a positive and inquisitive response among emerging churches rather than a hostile and skeptical one.

TRINITARIAN ECCLESIOLOGY

A major success of late twentieth century evangelicalism was its employment of small groups as a vital ecclesial component. Although much of evangelical churches’ evangelism and programming were designed to appeal to specific individuals or families, other aspects of church practice were designed to draw those same individuals and families into small groups where they would experience pastoral care, discipleship and community life. This emphasis on small groups is especially common in “megachurches” where it is logistically impossible for pastoral staff to directly shepherd everyone in such a large congregation.

Emerging churches have deepened and expanded on this trend, expressly situating the communal nature of church life in the theological locus of God’s triune nature.¹⁰ Some churches in the emerging movement have adopted a radical housechurch model in which individual small churches of a handful to a dozen families are understood fully to be local manifestations of the Body of Christ and are linked only informally to other such bodies.

AUTHENTIC ORTHOPRAXY

Deeply disturbing to most evangelicals is the fact that when it comes to holy living there is little difference between them and the non-evangelicals around them. On the whole, evangelicals’ rates of domestic abuse, divorce, use of pornography, time spent watching television, and dishonesty in business dealings are virtually indistinguishable from those of their neighbors.¹¹ Evangelicals tend to be more generous in both religious and non-religious charitable activity¹² but still donate at a level far below what could reasonably be considered generous, let alone sacrificial,¹³ and well short of the tithe that has traditionally been encouraged as a minimum level of giving.

Emerging leaders perceive these distressing facts to be symptoms of a deep theological problem, namely, the separation of orthodoxy from orthopraxy. Their critique of traditional evangelicalism is that its focus on getting the “right answers” combined with the robust Protestant doctrine of *sola gratia* leads to a situation where what matters is “getting saved” and then “winning souls.” Sanctification became separated from salvation and would receive attention only within a narrow band of conduct (usually with regard to sexuality and, less often, substance abuse). The resulting selective legalism has made evangelical churches, quite frankly, miserable places to be for those pursuing holiness, and emerging leaders have emphasized the holistic redemption lived out in the Spirit as the life made possible by the reconciliation purchased by Christ.¹⁴

These characteristics are shared by virtually all in the emerging church movement. However, a division has emerged within the emerging church, one which has grown especially visible only in the last year or two. The most important (yet most commonly missed) distinction to recognize in studying the emerging church is that between “Emerging Church” and “Emergent Village.” Indeed, it is on the grounds of the characteristics to be laid out below that sharp distinctions begin to emerge between what I will call the “evangelical” wing of the broader emerging church movement and the “emergent” wing which has adopted most or all of these characteristics.

One fascinating development is that nowadays the influence of Emergent Village (EV), and of

McLaren in particular as its leading voice, is increasingly felt not among evangelicals but among the mainline—"liberals," or at least those associated with them.¹⁵ This phenomenon has arisen in part due to the fact that EV and McLaren are offering messages of hope and purpose to communities, and especially their young pastors, which find these in short supply. But the increase in evangelical suspicion corresponding to the increase in mainline enthusiasm has followed a wave of vigorous repudiation of McLaren and his compatriots by influential evangelicals, such as pastors like Driscoll¹⁶ and scholars like D. A. Carson.¹⁷ It is the following tendencies in the "emergent" wing of the emerging church that have not been universally embraced within the emerging church and have indeed been fiercely opposed by some in the emerging movement:

ENGAGEMENT WITH LIBERAL AND POSTLIBERAL THEOLOGIES

Whereas quoting Karl Barth in a sermon will get you raised eyebrows in a traditional evangelical church, failing to quote him among emergent leaders may yield the same result. Hans Frei, a leading theologian in the "Yale School" of postliberal theology, opined that the dead ends of liberal theology would ultimately be opened up not by him or his colleagues like George Lindbeck and David Kelsey, but by engagement with evangelical theologians.¹⁸ Postevangelicals like Stanley Grenz have taken up this challenge, and many emerging leaders are following him and his disciple John Franke in an effort to construct a postevangelical theology on the grounds of a nonfoundationalist epistemology.¹⁹ Seeking to leverage the insights of postmodern thinkers, such postevangelicals have questioned the systematizing projects of modern evangelical (and liberal) theology, arguing that the contingent, incomplete, and imperfect nature of human knowledge demands a certain degree of epistemic humility when making truth claims. This project is often mischaracterized as relativism or as rejecting the idea that there is such a thing as truth. Rather, it argues that every human effort to apprehend what is true is inevitably going to be imperfect, and that beliefs must be held more or less loosely, depending on how well-supported they are by the matrix of community testimony (traditional and contemporary), lived experience, and engagement with competing paradigms. This approach, they argue, accurately characterizes what most of us do anyway, so it is better to "do theology" with integrity according to our fallen human nature rather than to pretend that we are making airtight arguments based on unshakeable foundations. Accordingly, the emergent wing prefers to speak of its project as a "conversation" and its theological engagements in terms of "exploration" rather than "quest."

REEXAMINATION OF TRADITIONAL SEXUAL ETHICS

An egalitarian position on women in ministry is the norm among most of the emerging church,²⁰ and it is held with the same firmness that characterizes the complementarianism of traditionalists and most traditional evangelicals. Far more controversial, though, is the openness which many emerging leaders have expressed toward homosexual practice.²¹ Generally speaking, this openness is expressed as a desire to explore whether those with "innate" same-sex desire should have their committed lifelong homosexual relationships honored and sanctified as parallel to heterosexual marriage. At this point, few leaders in the emerging church movement are advocating this position strongly, and none is encouraging adultery or premarital fornication.

EXPERIMENTAL ECCLESIAL FORMS

The practice of radical housechurches has been mentioned above; within the emerging movement a number of other experimental forms are being explored. The "new monasticism" is a movement among Protestants to establish vowed communities along the lines of traditional monastic communities, though not always requiring the vow of celibacy.²² Some of these communities are specifically oriented toward incarnational ministries of service, especially in urban areas.²³ A team-oriented or even radical congregational approach to leadership and authority is also being practiced in many emerging churches.

POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Given the predominant caricature of evangelicalism as dominated by a “religious right” political agenda, it is easy to forget that the political mobilization of evangelicals is a quite recent phenomenon. Jerry Falwell, perhaps the most recognized political activist of the “religious right,” was still preaching in 1965 that political involvement was a dangerous temptation for people who should be focusing on evangelism.²⁴ Many in the emerging church reject both the pietist and right-wing activist incarnations of Falwell, preferring instead to focus on issues like “creation care” (environmentalism),²⁵ “social justice” (concern about economic inequality) and, recently, opposition to the war in Iraq. Emergent Village has joined forces with “progressive evangelical” Jim Wallis’ Sojourners/Call to Renewal organization, of which McLaren is now a board member, mobilizing its adherents to support a political agenda of increased governmental redistribution of wealth, decreased military spending and support for other initiatives generally advanced by the Democratic party.

CONCLUSION

What, then, is to be made of this emerging church movement and the divisions emerging within it? It would appear that the evangelical wing of the emerging church represents the next generation of evangelicalism; while late twentieth century evangelicalism will remain popular among the baby boomers who constitute the core of its constituency, the core of the twenty-first century church will likely take on many of these emerging characteristics. Yet the emergent wing of the emerging church movement is quite possibly a different story. Emergent Village has been described as a bridge between evangelicalism and liberalism—or, more accurately, between postevangelicalism and postliberalism—yet McLaren states in a recent book:

[W]e do not see ourselves as *the emerging church*—meaning a slice, sector or division of the church that is roughly analogous to “the charismatic church” or “the seeker church.” Instead, we see ourselves as *the church emerging*, meaning a growing edge of the church at large in all its forms.²⁶

In other words, McLaren would reject the kind of taxonomy I have attempted above, preferring instead to see himself and his compatriots as representing—indeed, incarnating—the leading edge of the Kingdom’s incursion into enemy territory. The audacity of this claim is breathtaking, but McLaren is, after all, both a boomer and an evangelical, a deadly combination when it comes to humility.

Whether or not McLaren’s prophecy turns out to be true remains to be seen. It is more likely that a movement adapting to the theologies and styles of mainline Protestantism will ultimately find itself sharing their fate, though perhaps not before sharing in their significant institutional resources. The enthusiasm and sense of purpose characteristic of evangelicalism are not likely to persist when uprooted from their firm foundations. Yet it is also possible that, in sparking renewal among the mainline churches, McLaren and his colleagues will indeed draw them across the bridge that the emergent wing may yet incarnate (notwithstanding his own protestations to the contrary). One hopes that the vowed communities and radical movements of the emerging church will offer the same kinds of examples and resources to the broader church that such communities have offered throughout the history of the Church, faithfully incarnating their particular communal vocations in service to Christ and His Body.

Whatever comes of these developments, surely the proper course for sober and thoughtful believers is that they bear in mind the long view of temporal history. God in His wisdom allows His people an astonishing degree of latitude to experiment with the call to be His people; yet He in His mercy does not allow the less fruitful endeavors to flourish. It is, as always, incumbent upon each community of believers to test everything, clinging to the good and rejecting the bad (1 Thess. 5:21-22), and to have a sense of historical perspective when devising such tests. As the wise rabbi Gamaliel noted of the apostles, “If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-9). May God’s people follow his example of prudence and patience...avoiding his practice of flogging the suspects while awaiting the outcome (Acts 5:40)!

¹ By “traditional,” I mean those churches which adhere firmly to orthodox faith commitments and traditional liturgical practices, such as the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communions, traditional Anglicans, and the many smaller denominations and communions such as the Communion of Corpus Christi.

² Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 270-83 for a thoughtful discussion of this phenomenon.

³ For an extended meditation on this approach to Scripture and its benefits for pastoral ministry, cf. Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005).

⁴ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

⁵ Spencer Burke with Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 35-45.

⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 65-88.

⁷ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperCollins, 1978).

⁸ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), and *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁹ Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) was the first in a long line of books laying out this vision of incorporating traditional worship practices into contemporary services rather than simply “contemporizing” traditional elements, as had been done in late twentieth century evangelicalism (such as setting traditional hymn lyrics to catchy contemporary tunes). Webber's influence is such that “ancient-future” has become accepted shorthand for describing worship services making significant, meaningful, and respectful use of both traditional and contemporary elements.

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf has proven especially influential among many in the emerging church; cf. his *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹¹ A concise and stunning collection of these data may be found in Ronald L. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

¹² Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares: America's Charity Divide—Who Gives, Who Doesn't, and Why It Matters* (Basic, 2006), 31-52.

¹³ Sider, 21.

¹⁴ Tony Jones, “A Hopeful Way Forward: Theology of Practice, Practice of Theology,” pages 171-3 in Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope: Key Leaders Offer An Inside Look* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

¹⁵ Brian McLaren, “Hope and Obstacles,” a talk presented at the Emergent Mainline Conversation, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Ga., January 30, 2007.

¹⁶ Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*

¹⁷ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹⁸ Hans Frei, “Response to ‘Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,’” *Trinity Journal* 8 (Spring 1987), 21.

¹⁹ Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001). For a critical response to Grenz and Franke, cf. R. Scott Smith, *Truth & The New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Crossway, 2005).

²⁰ A significant exception to this tendency is found in the Reformed wing of the emerging church, whose most prominent spokesman is Seattle pastor Mark Driscoll.

²¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Last Word and the Word After That: A Tale of Faith, Doubt, and a New Kind of Christianity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 184-5.

²² Karen Ward, “The Emerging Church and Communal Theology,” in Robert Webber, ed., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

²³ Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

²⁴ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 238.

²⁵ Cf. the 2003 “What Would Jesus Drive?” campaign of the Evangelical Environmental Network (www.creationcare.org) and the 2006 “Climate Change: An Evangelical Call To Action” campaign of the Evangelical Climate Initiative (www.christiansandclimate.org).

²⁶ Brian McLaren, “Church Emerging,” pages 142-51 in Pagitt and Jones, eds., *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 149.