EDITED BY

BILL HENARD AND
ADAM GREENWAY

EVANGELICALS ENGAGING EMERGENT

A DISCUSSION OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH MOVEMENT

With Contributions by
Mark DeVine, Ed Stetzer,
Norman Geisler, Darrell Bock
and others

FOREWORD BY THOM S. RAINER

EVANGELICALS ENGAGING EMERGENT

A DISCUSSION OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH MOVEMENT

EDITED BY
WILLIAM D. HENARD AND
ADAM W. GREENWAY

FOREWORD BY THOM S. RAINER

B&H ACADEMIC
Nashville, Tennessee

ISBN: 978-0-8054-4739-2

Published by B&H Publishing Group
Nashville, Tennessee

Dewey Decimal Classification: 262
Subject Heading: EMERGENT CHURCH MOVEMENT\
POSTMODERNISM\CHURCH

Printed in the United States of America

4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 • 17 16 15 14 13 12

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

THOM S. RAINER

I AM EXTREMELY pleased that my friends Bill Henard and Adam Greenway accepted the challenge of taking a rigorous look at the Emergent Church. Much has been written on Web logs and argued over coffee regarding the Emergent and Emerging Church, but there is always room for an objective and informed examination of ideas when the gospel is at stake.

There is a cold breeze howling across the landscape of American Evangelicalism, and I am concerned it is chilling the hearts and minds of people desperate to hear an unadulterated gospel. Instead of hearing the depth of God's righteousness, His offense at our sin, His demand for justice, and His great mercy, grace, and forgiveness extended to us through the blood of Jesus, people in churches are hearing lukewarm spiritual porridge offered as a way to help them feel better about themselves. In a day when people need big thoughts about an infinitely capable God, they seem to be gathering to themselves teachers who tell them what they want to hear instead of what they need to hear, which is that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners.

Unfortunately what is too often happening in churches across America is that the cross of Christ is being "emptied of its effect" (1 Cor 1:17) because too many preachers are trying too hard to be clever.

I'm flipping through my Bible as I write this. There are so many verses that seem so deeply relevant to the conversation that follows in this book—and actually to all of life. Here are two passages:

> If anyone teaches other doctrine and does not agree with the sound teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the

> teaching that promotes godliness, he is conceited, understanding nothing, but having a sick interest in disputes and arguments over words. From these come envy, quarreling, slander, evil suspicions, and constant disagreement among men whose minds are depraved and deprived of the truth, who imagine that godliness is a way to material gain. But godliness with contentment is a great gain. (1 Tim 6:3–6)
>
> For to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is God's power. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the understanding of the experts.
>
> Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn't God made the world's wisdom foolish? For since, in God's wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of the message preached. For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom, because God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. (1 Cor 1:18–25)

These verses are so rich, but I will offer two observations. The first: it is vitally important that we draw sound doctrine from a comprehensive view of Scripture. We must see the Bible from beginning to end as God's story to graciously redeem godless people—through the cross of Christ—from a self-inflicted tragedy that results in an eternal and deserved hell. Doctrine becomes the stepping-stones that guide us from Genesis to Revelation.

The second truth is that we must not attempt to be wiser than God. The message of the cross—the propitiation of wrath; the imputation of righteousness—must be preached. It is the only

hope sinners have. Drift from this truth and we drift hopelessly away from the only anchor capable of saving us.

Thank you, Bill and Adam, for assembling this great group of scholars and churchmen to write about this critical issue. And thanks to all the writers for your contributions in this much-needed volume.

I pray that God will use this book as an encouragement to all who read it to commit themselves "to preach the gospel—not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect" (1 Cor 1:17).

Thom S. Rainer
President and CEO
LifeWay Christian Resources

INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM D. HENARD

IN ROB BELL'S *Velvet Elvis* he writes,

> Jesus at one point claimed to be "the way, the truth, and the life." Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions. That completely misses the point, the depth, and the truth. Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality. This kind of life Jesus was living, perfectly and completely in connection and cooperation with God, is the *best possible way for a person to live*. It is how things are.[1]

Bell correctly asserts that Jesus' statement quoted in John 14:6 is not about pitting one religion as better than another, but he misses the point completely in determining that Jesus was speaking solely with regard to "the best possible way for a person to live."[2] Biblically, faith in Christ is the only way for a person to live and not to perish (John 3:16).

Just a few pages later, he offers a provocative look at the virgin birth in asking, "What if tomorrow someone digs up definitive proof that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry . . . and prove(s) beyond a shadow of a doubt that the virgin birth was really just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in to appeal to the followers?"[3] Bell does affirm that he personally believes in the virgin birth, the Trinity, and the inspiration

[1] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 21 (emphasis added).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., 26.

of the Bible. The difficulty arises in the fact that he seems to think that the Christian faith does not find its foundation in these biblical truths. He rightly leads his church to ask the tough questions. Yet he creates a distinct problem, in that he does not seem to believe that any definitive answers exist.

I was watching television some time back and heard this statement, "Christianity is not primarily propositional truth; it is not primarily an experience; Christianity is primarily a conversation." Unfortunately, I did not watch the rest of the program to see how these statements would play out. Those arguments represent, though, the crux of where many find themselves within Emergent. They demonstrate clearly why Bell insists that the Bible should be interpreted as a communal book,[4] and why Doug Pagitt importunes that the traditional concept of preaching is nothing more than speaching.[5] The Emergent Church says preaching must be a dialogue, a conversation, not an insistence on personal interpretation.

This book purposes to be a provocative look at the Emergent Church. The task is not a simple one. Just defining "Emergent" provides an incredible difficulty within itself. Few of us like to be pigeon-holed into particular titles or labels. This fact holds true in most areas of the Christian life and theology. The old joke is that if you get five Baptists together you will have seven different opinions. To help with this dilemma, Ed Stetzer has provided an excellent means of defining Emergent and which streams will be addressed in this book.

Evangelicals Engaging Emergent is not intended to be an attack on the Emergent Church. The movement (or conversation) asks good questions, ones that the bridger generation[6] is pres-

[4] Ibid., 53.

[5] Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 18.

[6] See. Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville: B&H, 1997). Rainer identifies bridgers as ones who were born between 1977 and 1994. They encompass more than seventy-two million people. He names them bridgers for three reasons. First, their age group spans two centuries and two millennia. Second, they are bridging between a time of uncertainty and a time of hope. Third, the bridger designation fits the alliteration with builders, boomers, and busters. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation*, 2–3.

ently asking. It is true that bridgers make up one of the largest unreached people groups in America.[7] More specifically, George Barna estimates that 74 percent of teenagers have not trusted in Christ as Savior. While those in their teens are somewhat spiritual in their perspectives, the fact remains that "only one out of four (26%) . . . claims to be absolutely committed to the Christian faith."[8] Even within our own churches, 70 percent of those who constitute the student ministries end up dropping out of church sometime between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two.[9] That fact alone demonstrates that something is vitally wrong and must be addressed. The Emergent Church provides a tension that forces all of us to take a very hard look at our churches, our ministries, and our priorities.

Problems, though, do exist among some who serve as Emergent proponents. When theology comes into question, or when morality is sidelined because of cultural relativism, then serious issues do abide. It is the hope of the editors that those within the Emergent Church and those on the outside would read and learn from this book. The chapter authors are some of the best minds in the Evangelical world. All of us can learn from them. Many of them are personally reaching out to the younger generation and the leaders to whom they gravitate. They cautiously agreed to write their chapters because they did not want this book to seem to be a witch hunt. Yet they also recognized that the penchant for moral and biblical relativism must be addressed. With these thoughts and cautions in mind, this book is written.

[7] Ibid., 6.

[8] George Barna, "Teenagers Embrace Religion But Are Not Excited About Christianity" [on-line]; accessed 12 March 2008; available from http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=45; internet.

[9] Thom S. Rainer and Sam Rainer, *Essential Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2008), 15.

THE EMERGING CHURCH: ONE MOVEMENT—TWO STREAMS

MARK DEVINE

THE EMERGING CHURCH PHENOMENON continues to grow, both in numbers and in influence, and particularly among young Evangelicals.[1] In this chapter I shall provide an overview of the movement, attempt to define the movement by identifying distinctive values and goals at work within it, and argue that the movement includes two major streams. I shall contend that these two streams must be carefully distinguished if Evangelicals hope to develop approaches to the emerging movement in keeping with their own deepest evangelical commitments.

PATERNITY OF PROTEST

Major leaders within the emerging church have resisted the designation of the phenomenon as a movement. "Conversation" more closely suited their self-perception. But the volume of books, blogs, and bona fide communities of faith involved compels the acknowledgment that the emerging conversation has morphed into a full-blown movement—a movement that seems, in significant measure, to have sprung from seeds of discontent. Seeds were sown producing fragile plants (often within Evangelical churches), which were then nurtured but eventually found

[1] See for example, Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002).

themselves deprived of the spiritual water, sunshine, and nutrients needed for continued growth. This fated spiritual husbandry occurred largely within conservative congregations of various configurations from traditional PCA to Vineyard to the Assemblies of God to Southern Baptist churches of both mega and mini varieties and everything in between.

Many of these dissatisfied believers struck out on their own, at first in search of a new place to call home, but eventually on a quest to plant communities of faith themselves, communities responsive to the yearnings and hankerings left unsatiated within the congregations from which they emerged and those they subsequently sampled. These disgruntled seekers were largely white, twenty-something, and internet-savvy; and so they soon found each other in the blogosphere from Seattle, Washington, to Kansas City, Missouri, to Manchester, UK. And they found some older folks with whom to commiserate as well—preachers, pastors, and writers who could scratch some of their itches—people such as Brian McLaren[2] and Leonard Sweet,[3] Tim Keller[4] and Robert Webber.[5] Eventually some even caught John Piper[6] slipping up

[2] Brian McLaren was the founding pastor of the nondenominational Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Baltimore-Washington, D.C., region. He served in that capacity from 1986 to 2006. McLaren is a major influencer within the emerging church community and the author of many best-selling books, including *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); and *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

[3] Leonard Sweet is E. Stanley Jones Professor of Evangelism at Drew University in Madison, N. J., and the author of many books, including *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2007), and editor of *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

[4] Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Church on Manhattan Island in New York City, once responded to the question "Are you part of the emerging church?" thusly: "I don't think so. I didn't mean to be." Nevertheless, in this chapter I treat Keller as a major figure within the emerging church movement because, wittingly or not, his church, sermons, and writings provide models, encouragement, and guidance to an expanding audience of self-consciously emerging ministers.

[5] The recently deceased Robert E. Webber served as Myers Professor of Ministry and director of M.A. in worship and spirituality at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary in Lombard, Ill. Webber authored more than forty books on worship and *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Webber also directed the Institute for Worship Studies in Orange Park, Fla., and maintained the Web site AncientFutureWorship.com.

[6] John Piper is pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minn., author of many best-selling books, and director of Desiring God Ministries (see www.desiringgod.org).

and saying something relevant to emerging church concerns. But wait. Not so fast. Let's back up a little.

Scot McKnight, author, blogger, keen observer, and friend of the emerging church phenomenon, agrees that we are dealing with a protest movement.[7] But clearly, the emerging church is moving beyond its birthing in protest and nursing in discontent. Increasingly, its attention and energies are being drawn away from what it left to the actual work of building what it wants. Still, a brief examination of its original discontent illuminates much of what the movement has become and where it might be headed.

Much of the dissatisfaction experienced by the eventual leaders of the emerging church is indicated by reference to these four terms: *authenticity, community, mission,* and *mystery*. Each of these terms points to facets of discontent that would spawn the emerging church. Three additional terms, *culture, narrative,* and *the arts*, must also be included among the defining marks of the movement.

Where effective and relevant church planting is concerned, the emerging church considers culture of supreme importance, the significance of which can hardly be exaggerated. Narrative points to a prevalent re-thinking and exploration both of the proper way to approach the Bible and of the most adequate means for comprehending and communicating about ourselves and about history, especially the history of God's relationship to the world. Along with the element of protest or discontent, these six terms will provide the framework within which I shall attempt to provide an overview of the emerging church movement, offer sporadic critique, and suggest ways Evangelicals might think about and perhaps even engage this alternately fascinating and disturbing but also promising phenomenon. But first I will make a comment about the state of Evangelical engagement with the emerging church and attempt to define a handful of important terms.

ONE HAND CLAPPING

One of the most respected contemporary Evangelical voices has already spoken on the subject of the emerging church. D. A. Carson's publication of *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging*

[7] Scot McKnight's Web site is www.jesuscreed.org.

Church provides what I believe should and will remain a permanent contribution to Evangelical comprehension of the movement.[8] Anyone who has read Carson's treatment with care cannot fail to recognize how significantly my own understanding of the emerging church overlaps with and sometimes depends upon his insight and reasoning. So why another major treatment of the subject by Evangelicals? Because since 2005 the movement has grown, diversified, and shown itself composed of more dimensions than Carson recognized and capable of transmutations and trajectories Carson does not address.

My own contribution to the discussion involves less a correction of Carson than a call for an expanded view of what makes up the emerging church movement. I find little to dispute in Carson's treatment when he comments upon the *slice* of the emerging church his book examines. It is a big slice, an enormously influential slice, but a slice nonetheless. The result is that a major stream of the emerging church goes unnoticed. Especially important for our purpose in this volume is that the unacknowledged stream shares much more in common with Evangelicalism than the one Carson ably critiques and questions. The result is that widespread reading of Carson's treatment as a comprehensive examination of the entire emerging movement injects enormous confusion and miscommunication into discussions that inevitably include emerging church folk for whom the Carson critique just won't fit. These "other" emerging church believers read Carson and respond thus: "We agree and that's not us!"

My own attempt to comprehend the emerging church is depicted schematically in figure 1. I use the term *emerging* to designate the broad movement, the phenomenon as a whole. So *emerging* is the umbrella heading on the schematic. Within the broader movement I identify two major streams, the doctrine-friendly stream[9]

[8] D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

[9] Those associated with the doctrine-friendly stream include Tim Keller (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York), Mark Driscoll (Mars Hill, Seattle), Darrin Patrick (The Journey, St. Louis), Ed Stetzer (LifeWay Christian Resources and the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, the Acts 29 Church-planting Network, www.acts29.org), Matt Chandler (The Village Church, Denton, and two other locations

Figure 1

and a stream that presents along a range running from doctrine-wary to doctrine-averse.[10] Under the doctrine-friendly stream I have included two additional headings: Acts 29 and Tim Keller. Acts 29 is the name of the church-planting network founded by Mark Driscoll, also founding pastor Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington, and author of several best-selling books. Tim Keller, as mentioned above, is pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church on Broadway in Manhattan.

I highlight Keller, Driscoll, and Acts 29 not because the doctrine-friendly stream of emerging is reducible to these men and the ministries they lead. Many other names and ministries could be mentioned.[11] I give special prominence to these particular

in Texas), and Rafael Erwin McManus (Mosaic, Los Angeles). It seems that John Burke (Gateway Community Church, Austin, Tex.) may not fit neatly within either stream but seems much closer to the doctrine-friendly stream than doctrine wary/averse. Dan Kimball (Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, Calif.) seems involved in a heroic attempt to keep one foot planted within both streams. The same might apply also to Rob Bell (Mars Hill, Grandville, Mich.).

[10] Those associated with the doctrine wary/averse stream include Brian McLaren (formerly of Cedar Ridge Community Church, Washington, D.C. area), Doug Pagitt (Solomon's Porch, Minneapolis), Tony Jones (Emergent Village, www.emergentvillage.com), Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger (Fuller Seminary).

[11] Among Southern Baptists, for example, Ed Stetzer, a contributor to this volume, and Darrin Patrick, lead pastor of The Journey in St. Louis, deserve special recognition. Stetzer is the best sympathetic interpreter of the doctrine-friendly stream to Southern Baptists and The Journey provides perhaps the most vibrant ministry among Southern Baptists that

ministries and men because I believe both of them epitomize the doctrine-friendly stream and seem likely to exert continuing and growing influence within it, and because close examination of their writings, Web sites, and ministries provides an excellent introduction of this stream of the movement for anyone willing to take the time to look and learn. For those who know Carson's book, the justification for a new attempt at Evangelical engagement of the emerging church should be obvious—Carson's treatment passes over the doctrine-friendly stream of the movement.

Included on the doctrine-wary/doctrine-averse side of figure 1 is the term *Emergent*. Emergent refers to the Web site www.EmergentVillage.com operated by Tony Jones. Throughout this paper, *emerging* will designate the movement as a whole while *Emergent* will be employed synonymously with the doctrine-wary/doctrine-averse stream. Though this contingent of the movement includes a fairly significant diversity of voices, EmergentVillage.com probably provides the best single portal through which the major influencers within this stream can be accessed.[12]

I have already introduced the column of terms situated in the center of the schematic. Each of these terms indicates a defining area of interest and concern shared by the entire movement. When pastors, church planters, and writers from both streams articulate who they are as Christians and how they understand the nature and mission of the church, they do so in great measure through the employment of these terms along with concerns associated with them. Do the terms mean exactly the same thing on both sides of the divide 100 percent of the time? No, but the extent of shared meaning is certainly very strong and does, I believe, justify inclusion of both streams within the same emerging movement.[13]

epitomizes the doctrine-friendly contingent within emerging. Also among Southern Baptists, one might mention Erwin Rafael McManus, lead pastor of Mosaic in Los Angeles, Calif., which holds the Baptist, Faith, and Message 2000 as its confessional statement.

[12] Other significant Web sites that facilitate conversation within the emerging movement as a whole include: www.tallskinnykiwi.com; www.theooze.com; and www.internetmonk.com.

[13] An important next step in the comprehension of the emerging church should involve the testing of the extent of shared meaning these terms retain on either side of the divide.

But make no mistake; from an historic Evangelical standpoint (or even an orthodox Christian standpoint, for that matter), what separates the two sides is greater, or at least more fundamentally decisive, than what they share in common. Simply put, Christians for whom doctrine serves as an essential vehicle for Christian confession, a protection against heresy, a guide to the interpretation of Scripture, a connector to the historic church, an anchor for congregational stability, and a means for the nurture of Christian faith and practice, can never view its neglect, loss, rejection, or marginalization without alarm.[14] So evident has this difference between the two streams become that some doctrine-friendly leaders now hesitate to self-identify as "emerging" at all, preferring instead the term *missional*—a term we will examine more fully in due course. It is my contention that, notwithstanding the very real and unavoidable division that separates the two streams, too much of what defines the emerging church penetrates the thinking, outlook, self-understanding, and practice of the two streams to avoid the recognition that they are part of a single movement, not so much, as Scot McKnight has perceptively noted, a theological movement but an ecclesiological one.

THE PARTICULARS OF PROTEST

"Why I Hate Us," the heading of a category of posts on Southern Baptist Steve McCoy's heavily trafficked Web site, expresses the conflicted sentiments of many who are attracted to the emerging church but have maintained denominational affiliation.[15] Several recurring dimensions of dissatisfaction surface when emerging believers explain their quest for a new way of being and doing church.

COMMUNITY WITHIN AND WITHOUT

One set of concerns centers around what happens at church and what happens outside the walls of the church. Within the church,

[14] For an excellent exploration of the marginalization of doctrine among Evangelicals see David Wells, *No Place for Truth; or, Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

[15] Steve K. McCoy, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ill., is a significant Christian blogger who provides on his Web site "Reformissionary" (www.stevekmccoy.com) a helpful portal for engagement of the emerging movement.

emerging Christians lament the absence of genuine community characterized by authentic relationships. Tim Keel of Jacob's Well (Kansas City) longed to recover the relationship-rich community he had enjoyed in college that was lost once he settled into mega-church life. For many emerging Christians, church culture invited a certain mask-wearing artificiality while discouraging transparency and confession of brokenness and doubt. At the same time, the atmosphere of church struck many as disturbingly inhospitable to spiritual seekers who confront immediate pressure to conform to doctrinal statements without sufficient opportunity to explore, question, and reflect. The emerging church insists that the embodiment of the gospel be reflected both within the community of believers and in Christian presence and investment in the outside community, in the world, where Christ the Lord is also present and at work. Emerging churches attempt to provide safe places for unbelievers and spiritual seekers to consider the claims of Christ in an atmosphere characterized by patience and openness.

Though both streams share this two-directional pursuit, Emergent churches, in particular, decry what they call the us-versus-them mentality they find among Evangelicals. Some even reject formal demarcation between believers and nonbelievers, eschew formal church membership altogether, and assume a belonging-before-believing posture toward all comers. Conversely, many doctrine-friendly emerging churches attempt to provide a safe place for unbelievers while maintaining covenant-shaped, church discipline-regulated membership within their congregations. On a given Sunday at one of The Journey's (St. Louis) three worship sites, unbelievers may constitute up to 40 percent of those gathered, with some having maintained regular attendance for more than three years!

CULTURE AND MEANING

Disagreement between the two streams of the emerging movement is profound and covers many critical areas of concern that range from the ideological to the practical. Critics of the Emergent stream question their orthodox Christian credentials. For a time, the Emergent community dealt with these tensions mainly

by conversing among themselves and dismissing their Evangelical critics as either "Fundamentalists" or at least as trapped within supposedly outmoded modern categories of thought. Over the last three years or so, the antipathies between the two streams have sharpened and gone more public while, of late, signs of renewed dialogue and even cross-pollination between significant leaders on the two sides have also become evident. This should not surprise us, since the affinities and continuities shared by the two streams cover a wide range of issues important to both groups.

One significant and widely shared pattern of thinking centers around a cluster of linked convictions related to culture and meaning. The first is the conviction that the North American landscape is increasingly defined by identifiable and multiple subcultures. These subcultures may present geographically (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) but may just as well present in other ways (e.g., YUPPIES, DINKS,[16] artists, lawyers, the homeless, the working poor, online chatters, and gamers of various sorts). Second is the conviction that recognition of these subcultures and adaptation to them usually has profound, even determinative effects upon attempts to evangelize or plant churches within them. Why? Because culture exerts considerable effects upon the conveyance of meaning—meanings conveyed by both words and actions and thus bearing upon meanings conveyed in preaching, personal evangelism, worship style, and ministry strategies. Culture provides an essential key for anticipating the meanings conveyed where Christian ministry is pursued and the planting of churches is attempted.

This insight is not new. Effective international mission agencies long ago faced the futility of missionary efforts where culture is ignored or otherwise by-passed in the training of missionaries and the shaping of mission strategies.

Upon landing in Bangkok, Thailand, my entire family learned over the course of many weeks of orientation that about 85 percent of everything we naturally say and do either would or could be received as an insult to the Thai people we hoped to reach for Christ. Cross your legs and point your toe at the wrong angle in

[16] Young urban professionals (YUPPIES); dual income, no kids (DINKS).

the wrong place at the wrong time and chances for genuine communication collapse. Inadvertently, you may have just given the equivalent of "the finger" to the host population. Don't know the age or status of your neighbors and want to have significant influence among them? Forget it. Thais exist within highly intricate and complicated relational terrain shaped by ancient history and culture. One learns culture, adapts to it, or loses all possibility of even conveying an intended message, much less winning someone to Christ. But note this well! Before missionaries understood these things, gospel tracts were presented to smiling, nodding Thais who were counted as believers and recorded back home in the States as converts. Culture and meaning are inextricably linked. The certainty of this link is a defining conviction of the emerging church movement.

Third is the conviction that all authentic and effective Christian ministries are, whether consciously or unconsciously, contextualized within the culture they inhabit. They are indigenous to their cultural contexts. When genuine cultural contextualization takes place, real communication and authentic practice of Christianity becomes more likely, not least because shared meanings are conveyed; folks understand one another. Such indigenous ministry can arise in various ways. Ironically, highly effective and sustainable church planting tends to take place where little or no self-conscious attention is given to the need for contextualization. For example, leaders shaped from birth by the culture within which they minister do not require cultural orientation. As missionary consultant Ben Hess once told me, "the most successful church plants tend to be the easiest." While ministers already indigenous to a cultural context say and do things that are "just right" without even realizing it, an outsider must negotiate a treacherous cultural landscape to avoid giving offense left and right.

In Bangkok the optimal goal was to reach and train Thais who would then lead their own congregations with diminishing oversight from missionaries. Thus were missionaries taught by the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. The sooner a ministry becomes indigenous to its culture the

sooner it could spread like wildfire. Part of the explanation for the amazing rise and sustained strength achieved especially by Southern Baptists, but also by other Evangelicals in the South, was the utterly and unconsciously indigenous character of the ministries they planted within that cultural context. The leaders and those they evangelized were all of the same soil, and so the ministries produced proved organic to the wider culture—a recipe for just the kind of exponential advance of the gospel that occurred in the South. Indeed, as Martin Marty has noted, Southern Baptists became the Catholics of the South.

But with the increasing replacement of broad-based and deeply rooted cultural continuity in the South and elsewhere with multiple subcultures, no longer can the same words and actions or the same culturally conditioned ministries convey anticipated meanings as efficiently across great swaths of geography as before. Now evangelists and church planters must become "missionaries" in a new way right here in the good ol' US of A. The emerging church sees itself as attempting just this transition to a culture-aware and culture-sensitive approach to the spread of the gospel.

POSTMODERN OR POST-CHRISTIAN?

Informed by impressive primary source research and driven by admitted sympathy with the Emergent stream of emerging, Ryan K. Bolger and Eddie Gibbs articulate the convictions, values, and goals of that stream very well. All the more significant, then, is their frank use of the terms *postmodern* and *post-Christian* to describe changes that help explain and justify significant features of the emerging church. As Christendom gives way to post-Christendom, they contend, religion "is understood in terms of its sociological and psychological significance, discounting any claims to divine revelation and absolute truth." Coinciding with this change is the shift from modernity to postmodernity, representing "a challenge to the main assertions of modernity, with its pursuit of order, the loss of tradition, and the separation of the different spheres of reality, expressed, for example, in the separation of the sacred and the profane at every level."[17]

[17] Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17–18.

Proof of the alienation emerging generations feel toward church structures shaped by modernity are the growing numbers of self-identified Christians as well as other spiritual seekers who opt to pursue God or spirituality outside the church, viewing existing modes of church largely as hindrances to their faith.[18] Denominational disaffiliation among Christians, combined with increased disinterest in and ignorance of Christianity by nonbelievers, all contribute to the final dying out of the last vestiges of Christendom-like cultural characteristics and the deepening de-Christianization in the West. The profound cultural transformation taking place all around us, the emerging church contends, demands equally profound transformation of evangelistic method, strategies for church planting, and the overall mind-set of churches that hope to grow. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and a major influencer of doctrine-friendly emerging church planters and pastors, identifies three problems the postmodern context either creates or intensifies:

> First, there's a *truth* problem. All claims of truth are seen not as that which corresponds to reality but primarily as constraints aimed to siphon power off toward the claimer. Second, there's a *guilt* problem. Though guilt was mainly seen as a neurosis in the modern era (with the reign of Freud), it was still considered a problem. Almost all the older gospel presentations assume an easily accessed sense of guilt and moral shortcomings in the listener. But today that is increasingly absent. Third, there is now a *meaning* problem. Today there's enormous skepticism that texts and words can accurately convey meaning.[19]

One might add that, where the world of the arts and the world of spirituality are concerned, texts are increasingly approached as vehicles for the construction of meanings driven by the varied

[18] See Gibbs and Bolger, 21, but also George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2005), 1–38.

[19] Keller, "The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, ed. John Piper and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 108.

interests brought by the consumers of those texts. It could be that one of the most defensible claims to postmodern uniqueness relates to the notion of the constructability of meaning.

Is it true that growing numbers of artists of all kinds, including writers, bring less and less interest in conveying definite meanings when they create? Is it also true that growing proportions of the art and text-consuming population reflexively, and therefore unashamedly, construct meanings of their choosing? Would not widespread habituation to such construction of meaning justify employment of the term *postmodern* or some other term to account for such a watershed cultural transformation?[20] Audacious assumption of the prerogative to construct one's own meanings from another's "speech" (conveyed through whatever medium), whether in cahoots with author intent or not, marks a striking subjective appropriation of the objective denial of absolute truth. Seen in this light, the step from reflexive assumption of the constructability of meaning to the constructability of truth seems a short one indeed. That such phenomena would not result in deep and far-reaching implications for the proclamation of the gospel seems fantastic!

On the other hand, though considerable agreement characterizes descriptions of the contemporary cultural terrain by those who take postmodernism seriously, once attention turns to exploration of the implications of the postmodern context for evangelism, church-planting, and church renewal, consensus collapses. From the standpoint of Evangelicalism and orthodox Christianity, Emergents seem more anxious to affirm what they find in culture than they are protective of the gospel message where conflict between culture and gospel arises. The result is that the gospel itself must change, become less message and more way of life. Emergents, when viewed through Evangelical eyes, seem prepared to pretty much genuflect before the ostensibly irresistible proclivities and antipathies embedded within the postmodern psyche as

[20] In this regard, one of the most intriguing introductions to postmodernism continues to be Walter Truett Anderson's *Reality Isn't What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990).

they define it. For many Evangelicals, Emergent reasoning runs something like this: "Don't want absolute truth? Fine. Out it goes. Had enough of Evangelical fixation on Paul's straight talk regarding homosexual behavior? Don't worry; whenever Evangelicals are the offenders, count on a heap of affirmation from us and a fresh re-thinking of those issues."

Such surrender recalls the response of the great father of Protestant Liberalism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, to similar challenges. The Enlightenment, which found its apex and the beginning of its self-correction in the thinking of Immanuel Kant, denied the knowability of a metaphysical referent such as "God" by the human mind. Schleiermacher, in the face of this radical challenge, hoped to salvage as much of Christianity as possible. Thus he attempted to inoculate Christian theology against Enlightenment critique by abandoning any suggestion that Christian doctrine means to describe metaphysical objects of inquiry, including God. Instead, Christian doctrine would describe the content of the Christian self-consciousness, confident that what it found there necessitates acknowledgment of the truth of Christianity in much the same way as Kant's categorical imperative demanded acknowledgment of a moral divine being and an afterlife.

The ease with which some Emergents equivocate on an array of traditional readings of Scripture and either question the use of doctrine or abandon doctrine altogether is astounding. From comparative disinterest in the historicity of Scripture to dispassion for the doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone to congenital vagueness regarding homosexual behavior, Emergents evidence little answerability to either Bible or tradition. Emergent adjustment to postmodernism combined with distaste for the Enlightenment seems strikingly uncomfortable with major dimensions of the Christian past that predate Modernity and the Enlightenment.

Meanwhile, doctrine-friendly emerging pastors such as Mark Driscoll, Tim Keller, and Darrin Patrick manage to maintain intense interest in the implications of a postmodern, post-Christian West *and* commitment to fully orbed doctrinal statements, unashamed

embrace of both orthodox theology and Christology, protectiveness of Reformation recovery of bold objective notions of atonement, clear identification of homosexuality as sin, and opposition to abortion on demand. And they do this without alienating the twenty- and early thirty-somethings Emergents insist will not find doctrine-heavy ministries relevant.

Doctrine-friendly emerging types tend to treat postmodernism as a fluid phenomenon that offers guidance for the shaping of Christian ministries but that also uncovers new opportunities for the conveyance of ancient Christian truth. Emergents often treat postmodernism as some hegemonic cultural force that determines what growing proportions of the population can and cannot find meaningful. For them, postmodernism just rules out truckloads of traditional Evangelical ways of acting and speaking as irrelevant—especially where doctrine, propositional truth, exacting language, and demands for certitude are concerned. Such suggestions appear ludicrous as large numbers from the so-called thoroughly postmodern generations continue to find relevant what Emergents insist they cannot. It is amazing how weak commitment to the elasticity of meaning becomes (no matter when or where one was born) when a lawsuit or medical report or financial document crosses one's desk. No, all God's children remain capable of nuzzling up to warranted linguistic exactitude and the category of absolute truth.

POSTMODERN, POST-CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

Both streams of emerging identify profound implications of the postmodern, post-Christian context for evangelism. The enormity of the effects of cultural change upon evangelistic effectiveness is illustrated by the experience of one particular (now-failed) church plant of which I am aware. This congregation, passionate for the conversion of sinners, made evangelism the core commitment that would shape the church's identity from its founding. Accordingly, members, over the course of just a few years, knocked on upwards of seven thousand doors to share the gospel and literature from their church. The result? Some tiny percentage of the contacts

resulted in visits to the church. Of thousands encountered in the massive, labor-intensive door-knocking campaign, a total of three persons joined the church. And they were believers beforehand!

How should we account for such meager results from such a massive investment of time, energy, prayer, and actual verbal witnessing? Passionate defenders of such methods of evangelistic outreach may comfort themselves with various explanations. "Our responsibility is to share the gospel, plant seeds, not to convert sinners. Only God the Holy Spirit can convert the lost." Undoubtedly, such explanations do, to *some* extent, account for the apparent wholesale rejection of the gospel encountered by these dedicated witnesses. But the emerging church wants to go further and ask, "To *what* extent?" What if cultural factors render such approaches far less likely to be effective with increasing portions of the unbelieving population? What if the investment of time and energy in alternative approaches could have resulted in many more authentic gospel-sharing encounters? By authentic gospel-sharing encounter I do not mean only those in which conversion occurs. Rather, I mean one in which the gospel call to repentance and faith is actually understood and responded to one way or another.

The strength of the problems produced by postmodern culture varies greatly according to geography and subculture. This exacerbates potential miscommunication between emerging and nonemerging pastors, scholars, and church planters. The strength of post-Christian and postmodern cultural transformation is much greater in Europe than in the United States, greater in cities than in smaller towns and rural areas, greater in the Northeast and West Coast of America than in the flyover states, and greater among younger than among older demographics. When Tim Keller warns of the waning usefulness of some traditional evangelistic methods that Mark Cahill, leader of an evangelistic ministry based in Georgia, still finds effective, Keller's suggested changes may be misconstrued as a call to retreat from evangelistic zeal.[21]

Descriptive accounts of the character of postmodernism overlap significantly between the two streams of the emerging church.

[21] See www.markcahill.org.

Both welcome insights from Leonard Sweet, Alan Hirsch, Leslie Newbigin, and Stanley Grenz. But the import given and use made of these insights often diverges. Emergent thinkers are much more likely to argue that our actual comprehension of the gospel itself must change in a postmodern world. Thus, the Synoptic Gospels and parenetic passages come to rule the hermeneutical roost, while the apostle Paul with all his head-heavy theologizing becomes marginalized, and objective views of the atonement are displaced with subjective ones. For some, the doctrine of justification by grace through faith itself is viewed as either irrelevant or as an actual threat to the gospel. Famously, Steve Chalke characterized the substitutionary atonement as a case of cosmic child abuse.[22] And while Chalke's radical view does not characterize the entire spectrum of Emergent thinking, attitudes ranging from nonchalance to marked resistance to Reformation views of the atonement are the order of the day among them.

What are we to make of shared emerging interest in postmodernism juxtaposed with divergent assessments of the implications precipitated by postmodernism for ministry? Emergent thinking seems to repeat one of the fatal errors endemic to Protestant Liberalism from its inception in Schleiermacher's theology—the reflexive conflation of description with prescription. Both streams of emerging welcome accurate description of the terrain Christian ministry must traverse. But description must be distinguished from prescription. The content of the gospel cannot be read off the cultural milieu. God reveals it in His Holy Word. Divine diagnosis of the patient is already complete! Complete by none other than the Great Physician. Again, description is not prescription. Emergents seem to allow their comprehension of culture to dictate the shape relevant ministries must assume in ways the doctrine-friendly types do not. Thus, where Emergents are concerned, one learns to expect more politically correct approaches to culturally controversial issues.

Thus, on the homosexuality question, one encounters responses ranging from nonchalance to acceptance of homosexual behav-

[22] See D. A. Carson's treatment in *Becoming Conversant*, 182–87.

ior as an alternative lifestyle. And under the pressures of relativism and pluralism, one finds retreat from the exclusive claims of Christ and a bad conscience for proselytizing. Prophetic critique among Emergents seems welcome mainly where Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism are the targets.

Conversely, doctrine-friendly emerging churches display a marked willingness to confront and offend cultural norms where the truth of Scripture, as they see it, is at stake. Clear identification of homosexuality as sin, proclamation of the exclusive claims of Christ, conversion-seeking evangelism, and restriction of eldership to males characterizes many of these congregations. So, ministry-shaping alertness to culture? Yes. Reflexive accommodation of ministry and message to culture? No.

DIRECT EVANGELISM DELAYED?

One feature of much emerging church approach will likely raise concerns for many Evangelicals, namely, an increasing acceptance of a new kind of patience with those targeted for evangelization. The reasoning is as follows: Where a uniform culture replete with shared meaning prevails, perhaps sermons and disciple-seeking conversation should dovetail quickly into urgent pleas for saving repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ. But what if no such obvious shared terrain of meaning can be assumed? What then? Is there ever justification for delaying direct, conversion-seeking evangelistic appeal? Haven't we seen this all before? You know, the gospel is essentially reduced to matters of morality with perhaps a pinch of tolerance for idiosyncratic personal spirituality, but any insistence upon the need for faith in the saving death of Jesus and new birth are left behind.

But there are other strategic reasons for the delay. Many Evangelical mission-sending agencies have been so impressed by the methods and materials of New Tribes Mission that they have adopted them as their own. And the justification for delay of direct evangelistic appeal in some contexts by the doctrine-friendly emerging stream overlaps significantly with the New Tribes sensibility.

Remote peoples targeted by New Tribes share little in terms of worldview and conceptual framework with the missionaries seeking their conversion. Given such wide cultural and conceptual distance, immediate appeals to convert proved impossible. But New Tribes found that patient teaching, beginning with the book of Genesis and moving through the Pentateuch and the Prophets and only then to the New Testament over a period of weeks and even months, could lay a foundation for conversions on a spectacular scale. But they had to wait. Emerging churches may not face equivalent radical cultural disparity, but they still find that patience, leaving time for teaching and the development of a certain level of relational comfort and trust, often serves the interest of evangelization. Attempts to evangelize remote village-dwellers in Asia may call for a considered and cautious approach, but does prudent patience in Papua New Guinea commend similar patience in Pittsburgh? I think the answer of the emerging church is, sometimes.

AVERSION TO CONVERSION?

Such acceptance of delayed evangelism leaves many Evangelicals uneasy and not without reason. The Emergent, doctrine-wary stream of emerging does display some of the conversion-averse tendencies that liberal Christianity lapsed into with such devastating consequences to itself and to the advance of the gospel generally. Scot McKnight has recognized this anti-evangelistic posture and sees it as a threat to the movement:

> I offer here a warning to you and to the emerging movement: any movement that is not evangelistic is failing the Lord. We may be humble about what we believe and we may be careful to make the gospel and its commitment clear, but we better have a goal in mind—the goal of summoning everyone to follow Jesus Christ and to discover the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit of God.[23]

[23] Page 26 of McKnight's address at Westminster Theological Seminary, October 26–27, 2006, as http://www.foolishsage.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf. See also his article "Five Streams

Again we see a major difference between the two streams of the emerging church movement. Surely few indicators herald the weakening, decline, and potential demise of a would-be church movement so certainly as the development of a bad conscience for proselytizing. Meanwhile, doctrine-friendly emerging churches have displayed an impressive ability to reach particularly gospel-resistant demographic sectors in cities, in the arts community, and among twenty- and thirty-somethings.

MISSIONAL VS. ATTRACTIONAL

Associated with the cluster of ideas related to culture and meaning within the self-identity of emerging leaders is a commitment to what they call *missional* ways of being and doing church. Though the term missional is not new, emerging church leaders employ the terminology in specific ways expressly intended to distinguish their way of being the church from alternate models. By *missional*, emerging church leaders communicate two interrelated ideas, one negative and one positive.

First, the negative. Missional models of church contrast with attractional models. Attractional congregations attempt to draw seekers to their churches by establishing and advertising relevant ministries within their target communities. Convinced that, upon wooing seekers across the worship center threshold, much of the task of reaching them is finished, disproportionate energy is invested in what goes on within rather than without the walls of the church. Some emerging leaders reject such strategies as a departure from the outward-focused, "go-ye-therefore" imperative of our Lord, while others argue merely that such attractional models cannot draw seekers from the subcultures they wish to target.

As a positive term, *missional* conveys at least one ontological conviction related to the church and one methodological consequence of that conviction. "I am the church" replaces the notion "I go to church." And just as significant, the notion "I send missionaries" is displaced by "I am a missionary." Missional thinking suspects that patterns shaping many current models of church

of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement," in *Christianity Today*, vol. 51, no. 2 (February 2007), 35–39.

have lost sight of the "go ye into the world" dimension of the Great Commission and may have drifted into a distorted, exaggerated comprehension of that other mandate, "be ye separate." Rather than encourage a pattern of activity in which believers flock to a location many miles from their homes where they "do church" and "are discipled," missional churches focus much more on the world outside the church, within the neighborhoods where members live, with a keen awareness of and jealousy for the lordship of Christ already operative there. They look not so much to "reach" the community for Christ in the sense of involving some slice of the community in their programs within the walls of their churches. Rather, they look to see the community transformed as believers engage those with whom they work, study, and play. Member-led missional-minded groups meet in homes and target the immediate neighborhood.

Emerging leaders contend not only that this missional mind-set coincides more faithfully to biblical patterns of following Jesus and being church, but also that it is vital for effective church-planting in a post-Christian, subculture-shaped landscape. Prospects under the age of 35, they insist, are largely immune to the kinds of attractional and program-configured ministries to which so many Baby Boomers have responded with such eagerness.

THE GREEK PHILOSOPHICAL BOGEYMAN

Some emerging church thinkers point to pernicious philosophical influences of Western philosophy upon Christianity visible already in the first and second centuries among Gnostic Christian sects. They argue that Greek philosophy in the West, running from Plato and Aristotle through Neo-Platonism, provided hermeneutical filters through which the Bible's message often suffered tragic distortion.

We can identify two major areas precious to the emerging church where the overcoming of Greek categories matters. First is the metaphysical disparagement of matter and thus of physicality so endemic to certain strands of Western philosophy. As opposed to the Greek philosophical dualism between flesh and spirit, Christianity, they argue, can distinguish between flesh and spirit while affirming both as dimensions of God's good creation.

The prologue of John's Gospel provides an excellent model. It unashamedly assumes and manipulates a given philosophical and linguistic tradition for the purpose of separating wheat from chaff within that tradition while also expressing something new. Thus the apostles' audience is first lulled into docility through reflexive agreement with these assertions:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were created through Him, and apart from Him not one thing was created that has been created. Life was in Him, and that life was the light of men. That light shines in the darkness, yet the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:1–5).

Given the shaping bequeathment of a fundamentally Platonic metaphysic and cosmogony, all this (and for that matter, vv. 10–13 as well) could be asserted without the slightest fear of ruffled feathers among the intended first-century audience. But then, in an Amos-like turning of the tables, verse 14 must fall like a thunderclap upon Greekified and either Gnostic or at least proto-Gnostic psyches—"The Word became flesh!"

In addition, the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul did not provide the best linguistic vehicles for the articulation of the Christian hope of bodily resurrection. The resurrected Jesus ran roughshod over large swaths of Greek conviction when He "took [broiled fish] and ate it in their presence," and when, in the face of doubts, He bade the disciples, "Look at My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself! Touch Me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you can see I have."[24] Ancient streams of disdain for the physical body present in the Greek tradition appear also in Paul's writings. Juxtaposed against Platonic yearning for release of the soul from the tomb of the body, the contrast with Christian sensibility seems striking indeed. The italicized words in the following Pauline excerpt amount to a direct assault upon such Platonic sensibilities:

[24] Luke 24:39–43.

> For we know that if our temporary, earthly dwelling, is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands. Indeed, we groan in this body, desiring to put on our dwelling from heaven, since, when we are clothed, *we will not be found naked*. Indeed, we groan while we are in this tent, burdened as we are, because *we do not want to be unclothed but clothed*, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life.[25]

All authors, including those who produced the New Testament, cannot but employ the philosophical and linguistic tools at hand, fraught as they are with the peculiarities attaching to time, space, and culture. But this inevitability did not trap the apostles John and Paul within the received field of meaning of words such as *logos*, for example. John exploits the anticipated meaning his audience attached to this word precisely in order to affirm, deny, and transcend aspects of that given field of meaning and thus have his way with it in order to teach something new, namely, the truth of God, not the outgrowth of any philosophy, including Platonism. That communication within any culture must employ the philosophical and linguistic tools available does not lead to inevitable genuflection before the ideological presuppositions admittedly embedded within that philosophico-linguistic machinery.

Emerging reading of Holy Scripture finds much justification for the affirmation of the human body and all things physical and earthly. Such affirmation coincides, they insist, with orthodox confession of the doctrine of the incarnation and points to profound implications touching the Christian life and, more specifically, the nature and mission of the church. These implications become conspicuous within the emerging church as two distinctive quests: (1) the quest to recover respect for the physical dimension of life in all its facets and (2) the quest to overcome strict distinction between the sacred and the secular.

[25] 2 Cor 5:1–4 (emphasis added).

LORDSHIP AND THE SECULAR REALM

Gibbs and Bolger's identification of "transforming secular space" as one of only three core practices of emerging churches highlights a defining feature of the movement.[26] They consider the sacred/secular split as a child of modernity tracing back to fourteenth-century scholastic philosopher/theologians William of Ockham and Duns Scotus. Sharp separation between ostensibly secular and sacred realms fails to take seriously both the lordship of Jesus Christ over the entire world and the kingdom living that lordship justifies and invites.[27]

Against politically correct relegation of spirituality to personal piety and private practice, emerging churches insist, along with Madeleine L'Engle, that "there is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation."[28] Thus, emerging churches, not unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer, call for a "Christian worldliness" and insist that true disciples of Jesus will "plunge into the tempest of living," recognizing that our God's concern extends to the nooks and crannies of everyday life along with its problems and struggles. Where the interests of the poor, sick, imprisoned, and indigent (the least of these!) are ignored or trampled upon, faithful Christian witness depends upon both word and deed. But surely collapse of the spiritual into the physical or the loss of any distinction between the sacred and the secular cannot easily assimilate major strata within the biblical witness where miracles occur, where Jesus prays "not for the world" and bids us "render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."

Nevertheless, when Jesus said "I give you a new command: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another," He connected the credibility of Christian witness to observable love. Thus Francis Schaeffer could contend that "we as Christians are called upon to love *all* men as

[26] Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 43.

[27] Ibid., 65–88.

[28] L'Engle, *Walking on Water* (Colorado Springs: Harold Shaw, 1980), quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, 65.

neighbors, loving them as ourselves" and "that we are to love all the Christian brothers in a way that the world may observe."[29]

In response to emerging church re-thinking of the relationship between the secular and sacred realms, Ray Anderson commends the writings of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer as resources that could undergird their commitment to be in the world, take responsibility for the world, and love the world in the name of Jesus Christ.[30] That the church's image in the eyes of the world needs addressing and that God lays obligation upon the church for the world has been noted by Evangelical theologians with no organic connection to the emerging church. Given the frequent expressions of suspicion toward doctrine and theology so prevalent within the Emergent conversation, Anderson's attempt to provide, as the title of his book indicates, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* is certainly welcome. And it is noteworthy that a significant array of influential Emergent leaders have provided endorsements of Anderson's volume.[31]

Yet Anderson, by referencing Barth and Bonhoeffer, offers a needed corrective to the collapse of the distinction between the secular and the sacred so often encountered within the Emergent conversation. Affirmation of Christ's lordship over the whole world and recognition that the church's responsibility for the world is grounded in and informed by that lordship does not require and need not result in the utter collapse of the distinction between the sacred and the secular in the Christian mind. When this collapse does result, Christian witness is threatened.

The Emergent conversation evidences genuine discomfort with the notion of Christian witness for several reasons. One such reason shares much with an insight Rick Warren has articulated, namely, that the world has come to view conservative Christianity as a BIG MOUTH shouting about what everybody is doing

[29] In Timothy George and John Woodbridge, *The Mark of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 2005), 19.

[30] Ray S. Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006), 194–95.

[31] Especially noteworthy are Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, Eddie Gibbs, Doug Pagitt, and Tony Jones.

wrong and screaming about hell.[32] Meanwhile, liberal Christianity is viewed as disproportionately focused upon meeting the social and physical needs of the world. A 2006 *Wall Street Journal* study indicates that, by almost any measure, conservative Christians outstrip liberals by a long shot in ministry to hurting people.[33] Still, in the popular perception at least, a division of labor seems to operate in which one branch of the church concerns itself with souls while the other branch attends to the body. The corrective, Warren believes, must involve keeping the proclaiming "mouth" but also reclaiming the "hands and feet" eager to respond to those in physical, economic, and social need.

Emergents also advocate the recovery of a warranted humility before the world where Christian proclamation is concerned. Pounding pulpits and shouting from street corners that we and we alone are the possessors and purveyors of the most precious truth known to humankind strikes Emergent sensibilities as somehow incompatible with a Savior who washes feet and keeps silent before a perplexed Pilate holding power to punish or set free. But the pursuit of humility in proclamation can go too far. It can lead to the toleration of a diversity too expansive to remain compatible with a Jesus who, though a servant *par excellence*, also knows Himself to be Lord, could say of Himself, "Before Abraham was, I am," and offered Himself as the *only* way to the Father. Note this from Ben Edson, leader of the Sanctus1 community in the UK and featured in Gibbs and Bolger: "We had a guy from the Manchester Buddhist center come to Sanctus1 a couple of weeks ago and talk about Buddhist approaches to prayer. We didn't talk about the differences between our faiths. We didn't try to convert him. He was welcomed and fully included and was really pleased to have been invited."[34] Gibbs and Bolger account for the mind-set thus: "Christians cannot truly evangelize unless they are prepared to be evangelized in the process."[35] Never mind that Buddhism

[32] David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 245; also "Interview with Rick Warren," *Larry King Live*, March 22, 2005.

[33] Arthur C. Brooks, "A Charitable Explanation," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 27, 2006.

[34] Gibbs and Bolger, 133.

[35] Ibid., 131.

is formally god-less—there is no god to pray to—but for Emergents so often critical of the seeker church, Sanctus1 sounds pretty seeker friendly for Buddhists!

Surely a quest to reclaim the church's responsibility for "loving in a way the world can see," and a posture that bespeaks a humility appropriate to all who know themselves to be blood-bought sinners, need not shirk its duty to proclaim the gospel. And the reduction of witness to nonverbal means cannot suffice. Jesus, Paul, Stephen, and who knows how many other "martyrs" (witnesses!) across the millennia, could have spared their lives if only they could have kept their mouths shut. But they could not do so and neither can we. Jesus was not divinely designated "the Word" for nothing. Yes, recognition of the duty to proclaim the gospel message remains politically incorrect and bound to bring offense where diversity and pluralism have become unquestioned behavioral pillars of polite society. But the content-full character of Christian witness as the proclamation of an unchanging message cannot be avoided.

Undoubtedly, the credibility of the gospel message depends upon walking the walk and not just talking the talk. But the truth of the gospel does not so depend. Ultimately, the church does not bid unbelievers "look at us" but "look at Him."

Christian loving care and service are not the thing itself but, as Barth would say, serve as parables that point to the true caregiver. The church must point away from both itself and the world. The true soteriological resources reside outside both. Proper acknowledgment of the sacramental potential of earthly things never imagines the capture-ability or dispensability of God's power and grace at the disposal of a church with its hands on the heavenly faucets.

Where a pronounced gap separates the witness of the church from her walk, the credibility of her message is proportionately undermined. And that is as it should be. Thus the unavoidable privilege and burden of witness serves as a constant call to repentance. Whatever else it might mean that we take up the ministry of our Savior and serve, in Luther's memorable terms, as "little Christs" to one another, woe unto us if we extrapolate too much from this

unity with Christ—so much that our unity with the Savior results in a displacement of the one mediator between God and man and identifies His body with the Head. There are vital dimensions of Christ's work with which we have no share. Luther could also say of Christ's model, "the example is too high. We cannot follow!" There are stations along the way of Jesus we cannot, were not meant to, and should not attempt to follow. However faithfully our lives together in community reflect our "having been with the Lord" (and He deserves to have this reflection be perfect), our burden remains that of reflection and witness. The world needs us, but it needs Him in ways that we cannot help.

RECOVERY OF NARRATIVE

Initially, the higher critical methodologies that traced back to the nineteenth century seemed to hold much promise for biblical theology. But ultimately, higher critical attempts to go behind the best extant manuscripts and reconstruct something more "original" foundered. The initial incentives that shaped the rise of both the canonical hermeneutic advanced by Brevard Childs and narrative theology associated with Hans Frei included exhaustion and frustration with "the loss of the Bible" amidst the labyrinthine, fanciful, and often speculative contortions of higher critical attempts to reconstruct Holy Scripture. The recovery of an intact Bible allowed for a fresh focus upon the literary genre most prominent within it—narrative.

The emerging church brings a heightened appreciation and protectiveness of the narrative form that shapes so much of the biblical witness. Faithful exposition of biblical texts should remain true to that narrative shape. Might not those who hold dear the authority of the Scriptures, who confess the Reformation *sola scriptura*, find much here to celebrate? At least formally, do not conservative Christians mean to test all things, including every sermon, every commentary, and every systematic theology by Scripture? The Bible is not a puzzle to be deciphered and decoded by either systematic theology or three-point sermons. Ought not the study of the exacting minutiae of background and archaeological materials, the intricacies of grammar and syntax and systematic theology

itself prove their Christian viability by the power to illuminate the meaning of the text, rather than by their displacement of the text or by becoming some permanent authoritative grids through which the text is to be read? Whenever systematic theology or loyalty to any particular tradition of interpretation results in the exaltation of a pantheon of approved interpreters or interpretations, the Reformation *sola scriptura* has been lost. Now, rather than assuming the proper posture of all true Protestants under the Word, we find a "standing-above-the-Word" that supposes to tame but may inadvertently silence it.

The critique and sometimes even rejection of propositional truth along with disinterest in the rise and development of doctrine and of systematic theology by some within the Emergent church goes too far. But both systematic theology and adherence to doctrine, when they do not function as they should, do pose certain risks to the very Word they should illuminate and defend. The emerging church phenomenon invites a needed exploration of the proper nature and limits of doctrine and systematic theology among Bible-believing Christians.

HISTORY OR STORY?

Certainly much of the talk about *story* among emerging leaders must strike the ears of many as quite vague and strange. What does it mean to "live into God's story"? I suspect it means something akin to what Edward Farley had in mind when he insisted that "in living out of the inherited symbols and narratives of one's faith, one isn't just applying dead truths to a living situation. Instead, one is embodying or incorporating oneself into a living tradition. That's a creative act and an interpretive act, an act of theological understanding."[36] The word *embodying* is important to emerging models of church. Where this desire expresses a quest to break out of head-heavy, scholastic modes of Christian identification into more holistic comprehension of the Christian life where theology and praxis go together, well and good.

[36] See the interview with Edward Farley at http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=366.

However, Emergent talk of *narrative*, *authenticity*, *story*, and *mystery* often seems to involve radical forms of retreat and reductionism vis-à-vis anything recognizable as historic, biblically grounded Christianity. I mean retreat from the inescapably historical dimension and consequent historical vulnerability of the Christian witness to the world. Inescapable because the church's witness has always known itself as anchored to the actual, sometimes visible in-break of God into history. Vulnerable because, for example, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless."[37] Such urgent concern for the historical accuracy of the biblical witness strikes many Emergent ears as a leftover irrelevancy of a modernity suffused with Enlightenment sensibilities. But for the church across the ages, such concern belongs to faithful preservation of the concrete intention of the apostle Paul, who predated the modern world by almost two millennia and who fairly represents attitudes prevalent within the earliest Christian communities.

Claims of first-century nonchalance regarding historicity cannot bear too close scrutiny. Modest exploration of the institution of slavery in the first century alone suffices to disabuse fair-minded inquirers of such notions. What one finds is a world replete with meticulous record-keeping and disputes about who said what when and to whom and when this or that happened or this or that document was sealed or transaction occurred and on and on.[38] So, no. Breezy, effortless assertions that New Testament authors were content with the community-nurturing power of history-disinterested "story" are fantastically ill informed concerning that world. While a post-Enlightenment mentality might insist that nothing less than a camcorder at the tomb could justified belief in the resurrection, current inability to reach back the two thousand years and set-up the camera tells us nothing about the intentions of the first-century authors who recorded what they witnessed.

[37] 1 Cor 15:17a.

[38] See for example, K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1987) and *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1994) and William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955).

PREFERENCE FOR PILGRIMAGE AND PROGRESSIVITY

Fascination with narrative and periodic overuse of the word *story* attracts emerging types for another reason: the desire to recover the "pilgrim" language of the Bible in the comprehension of both the Christian life and life as the body of Christ within the world. Tension between the "already" and "not-yet" aspects of salvation as well as between punctiliar and durative dimensions of the Christian life has proven endemic to Christianity because biblical authors employ the language of all four. The same apostle Paul who "runs a race" also insists that Christ "makes us alive" and "is" our sanctification. Peter can speak frankly of the "resident alien" status of believers making their way through this world, but also of their inheritance, undefiled, unfading, "kept in heaven for you." The same Jesus who bids us follow also knows that Nicodemus lacks and needs re-birth—an inconvenient concept where the durative language of journey and story are expected to carry the entire freight of meaning where the Christian life is concerned.

Grappling with these alternate conceptions of divine redemption and the Christian life surfaces periodically within the church. Various attempts to relate durative and punctiliar dimensions of the Christian life range from Eastern Orthodox fixation upon durative, progressive ascent toward perfection to Martin Luther's grace-protective fascination with the punctiliar, forensic, declarative heart of salvation. Lutheran apologist Gerhard O. Forde aptly captures something of the spirit of Luther when he defines sanctification as "simply *the art of getting used to justification*."[39] Such views exhibit zealous protectiveness of the grace-character of the whole of redemption. "To progress is always to begin again," Luther could say.[40] Here the Christian life is viewed more as a series of "starting all over" junctures characterized by repentance and faith than as a trackable progressive sanctification process that invites the notions of measurability, love-threatening comparison with others, and lapse into Christianized works of righteousness.

[39] *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Donald L. Alexander (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1988), 13.

[40] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans*, The Library of Christian Classics, trans. and ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 15:128.

In some cases emerging attraction to the imagery of pilgrimage marks a welcome attempt to recover biblical witness to the ongoing work of the Spirit within believers and the church. In other cases, we find conspicuous discomfort with the God who is pleased to break into our world and our lives vertically, in a flash as it were, calling sinners to definite and temporally locatable repentance and faith. That the response to the call of Jesus involves a bridge-burning, risky, whole life-committing act of repentance and faith was not invented by Evangelicals but spoken by the Savior and Lord with whom we have to do. Where fixation upon a past conversion experience yields disinterest in holy living, it is the conversion experience that is called into question, not conversion as such or in itself.

MYSTERY AND THE ARTS

In his best-selling book *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren lets Walter Brueggemann give expression to widely shared views within the emerging church:

> The gospel is . . . a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened and trivialized, and rendered inane. Partly, the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned. But more than that, our technical way of thinking reduces mystery to problem, transforms assurance into certitude, revises quality into quantity, and takes the categories of biblical faith and represents them in manageable shapes. . . . There is then no danger, no energy, no possibility, no opening for newness! . . . That means the gospel may have been twisted, pressed, tailored, and gerrymandered until it is comfortable with a technological reason that leaves us unbothered, and with ideology that leaves us with uncriticized absolutes.[41]

This from a book whose title identifies the pursuit to which Brueggemann calls the church—*Recovery of Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World*. As it stands, this challenge from Brueggemann should find a welcome among many Evangelical Christians. Where

[41] McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 162.

theology and doctrine treat the Bible as a puzzle to be solved and is, thus, by implication, superseded and displaced by systematic theology and doctrinal construction, faithfulness to the Bible has been abandoned and the authority of the Bible has been skirted. Where sermons and worship and prayers instruct but fail to inspire, provoke wonder and awe, and stir up surprising convulsions of confession and repentance, biblical Christianity cannot flourish.

But clearly, the emerging quest for the recovery of mystery seems to be driven by more than one interest. Where very long lists of doctrines are asserted with equally high confidence, emerging church leaders tend to be skeptical. They suspect that more humility and nuance should attend declarations of Christian truth—humility and nuance in keeping with both the limits of what can be known on the basis of Holy Scripture and in keeping with author intention where narrative, poetry, and song provide vehicles for divine revelation. Certainly, Bible-believing Christians should welcome such quests for more appropriate proportionality between confidence and recoverable author-intended meaning. Welcome also is the realization that narrative, poetry, and song intend nothing less than the conveyance of not only historical, moral, and ontological truth, but also more.

The ransacking of biblical texts for the extraction and construction of context-devoid doctrinal assertion often does violence to God's Word. Left within their inspired contexts, many biblical passages retain their intended power not only to inform (and this power should by no means be minimized or gainsaid!) but also to evoke and inspire in ways that transcend the power of language to express directly. Might not divine employment of poetry, song, and narrative derive precisely from the fact that He intends to convey both effable and ineffable dimensions of truth? When one reads a sermon Charles Spurgeon once preached, no doubt much is there to be gained. But how much is missed to which only those in attendance had access? It is this kind of thing the emerging church is trying to get at in its hankering after the arts. This need not imply that ineffable dimensions of meaning are superior

to or might be happily detached from the effable, but rather confesses that what believers gain from the Bible (and this by divine intention) includes more than they can tell with words alone.[42] Exhibit A from the Bible: the Psalms! Similar interests account for emerging concern for the aesthetic features of worship spaces and a new hunger for liturgy. Both can serve to facilitate the sense of transcendence and antiquity appropriate to the Christian faith and connection within a global and historic body of Christ.

Still, concerns arise when the category of mystery becomes a haven for doubt and denial at odds with ascertainable certainty provided by the biblical witness. Christian proclamation must attempt to avoid going beyond what is written, but also to avoid falling short of what the Bible makes clear where dogmatic assertion and covenant-defining confession are concerned. When narrative theologians assure us that the "story" of Christ's bodily resurrection retains its community-creating and hope-nurturing power regardless of its historicity, the sphere of healthy humility and warranted doubt has been left behind. Instead we are confronted with excessive and spineless post-Enlightenment-intimidated retreat from requisite Christian confession.

Do we not see in the Emergent stream of emerging a fairly recognizable, presupposition-heavy agenda shaped by the values and aims we have identified and largely praised? To what extent does the Emergent church bob and weave where direct biblical critique calls into question various dimensions of their vision? Do they not lapse into vague appeals to postmodernism and mystery suffused in an elasticity of language and meaning that the greatest artists eschew as strongly as the most unreconstructed Fundamentalist one could find?

The two great and indispensable mysteries of Christianity are explored in the doctrines of the Trinity and of the person of Jesus Christ. But these mysteries find their ground and justification in certainties, not in doubts—certainty that God is both three and one, certainty that Christ is both fully divine and fully human. Anchoring in what is revealed and thus certain justifies, directs,

[42] For an excellent treatment of ineffable knowledge see Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1983).

and regulates believing comprehension and enjoyment of the mysteries to which they point.[43]

Aversion to doctrine arises periodically in the history of the church and usually with good reason. When a community's list of nonnegotiables extends beyond a certain point, even Jesus appears too liberal to gain admission! But doctrine-averse movements often fall victim to a particular blind spot—blindness to the truism that the depth of all communal fellowship (whether Christian or not) is to some significant degree proportional to the depth of shared conviction. Current depths of fellowship within the Emergent stream are not rooted only or even especially in their "openness" but in the shared convictions that already operate like doctrines among them. These Emergent nonnegotiables are imbedded in the central column of terms that appear in figure 1. And this dogmatism is nothing to be ashamed of. What is needed is acknowledgment of these subterranean dogmas without which no rich and vital fellowship can endure.[44]

QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As we have seen, overlap between the two streams of the emerging church movement includes a wide array of convictions and goals touching matters of both identity and practice. Shared readings of culture and common instincts about the significance of culture result in extensive areas of agreement. Yet divergences in theology and mission between them may prove more profound and enduring than the affinities that bind them. And in case after case, the doctrine-friendly contingent appears much more recognizable as a development within the historic, orthodox stream

[43] A helpful treatment of the nature of language in this connection is found in C. S. Lewis, *The Seeing Eye: And Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Ballantine, 1967), 171–88.

[44] Moderates and liberals of the late controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention designated themselves as the freedom party and conservatives as the party of doctrinaire intolerance. Helpfully, Nancy Tatom Ammerman, an unashamed Baptist liberal, called for acknowledgment that both sides of the debate bring nonnegotiable conviction to the fray and that neither side (including the liberals) would knowingly hire professors to teach at SBC seminaries who could not affirm a hefty chunk of those beliefs. See Ammerman's *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University, 1995).

of Christianity and thus also as a likely partner for Evangelicals. Undoubtedly, the Emergent, doctrine-wary/doctrine-averse contingent should and will disturb the sensibilities of Evangelicals who cherish both their own historic theological formation and their unashamed commitment to conversion-seeking evangelism.

I would encourage Emergents to consider whether the original discontentments that shaped their quest for a new paradigm of church-planting might be functioning in ways at odds with their stated desire to root themselves within historic Christianity and to welcome help from any quarter in the Christian tradition. Do we not see a bit of a baby-out-with-the-bathwater reflex among them? Are the goals pursued by the Emergent church—community, authenticity, culture-sensitive church planting of missional churches, and recovery of narrative, mystery, and the arts—truly threatened by clear confession of the substitutionary atonement, conversion-seeking evangelism, and enjoyment of the vital service doctrine has provided to the church from its inception? Does not the effectiveness of the doctrine-friendly stream among twenty- and thirty-somethings call into question Emergent recoiling at these features of conservative Christianity in the name of postmodern culture and relevance?

Emergent leaders, freshly freed up from the restrictive confines and heresy-hunting exclusivity they experienced among Evangelicals, now relish the opportunity to seek spiritual resources within Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Well and good. But if you don't like doctrine, watch out! Back up the truck! These traditions are up to their necks in dogma. Where do we find models of rich, biblical, sustainable ways of doing church devoid of doctrine or lacking the building of institutional structures able to preserve gains won during spiritual awakenings and theological watersheds? Nowhere.

I suggested to one prominent Emergent pastor that, from an historical standpoint, his community of faith, given its despising of doctrine, might not merit the designation of *church*. I wondered whether what he had on his hands might turn out to be more of a way station—a safe place for spiritual seekers of a certain age and imbedded within a particular cultural matrix to consider whether

they wish to pursue biblical Christianity or not. This pastor did not disagree and indicated that such a notion did not bother him in the least. But it is interesting to see some of the Emergent congregations (especially those that have enjoyed significant growth) move from a doctrine-devoid existence to mere doctrine-wariness, nervously taking on the Apostles' or the Nicene Creed. The most influential thinkers within the Emergent church often identify the dangers of doctrine in convincing fashion. But can they account for the felt need for doctrine exhibited by some churches who also share the sensibilities most prized by the Emergent church?

MOVING FORWARD BY LOOKING BACK

One very hopeful and potentially self-correcting feature observable among many of the leaders across the entire spectrum of the movement is the declared openness to the whole Christian tradition, the desire to learn from the witness of the body of Christ extended in both time and space. They wish to avoid a lapse into one theological ghetto or another that would threaten to shut them off from fellowship with other Christians and destroy the unity of Christ that must concern all Bible-loving believers.

It seems that significant segments of the Evangelical world, perhaps disproportionately Reformed Evangelicals, are susceptible to such unhealthy separatist tendencies. The expansiveness of vision that informs emerging church identity could bespeak a warranted modesty and teachableness appropriate to us sinners who serve as undershepherds of God's little flocks. Willingness to learn from all Christian voices, testing all things by Scripture, also seems especially welcome, given the great shift of Christian vitality to the Southern hemisphere, together with the ever-increasing post-Christian character of the Western world.[45] We Bible-believing Christians need each other, and we need all the help we can find as we attempt to respond to the Great Commission of our Lord in these changing, complicated times.

That the entire spectrum of emerging leaders and influencers evidences serious interest in the history of the church is striking,

[45] See Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University: 2007).

refreshing, and surprising, given that the very heart of the emerging movement centers around the desire to plant and nurture viable and relevant communities of faith here and now. One hopes that this willingness to move forward while looking back can save the emerging church from the pitfalls endemic to what Timothy George has called "the cult of contemporaneity." Past efforts by the church to achieve felt-relevance through myopic analysis of the present with no anchor within the "whole story" of God's activity through the centuries have caused the church to lose its depth and often even its connection to the living but ancient gospel it wishes to propagate.

The doctrine-friendly stream of the movement appears uniquely poised to benefit from serious engagement with the history of the church. This seems true not least because so much of this wing of the movement knows itself to be anchored within a part of that tradition, typically the Reformed tradition. Mark Driscoll, Tim Keller, Ed Stetzer, and Darrin Patrick evidence unashamed gratitude for and indebtedness to Reformed theology and its impressive contribution to the Church. But they also exercise great freedom to dialogue with a variety of traditions and to learn and find resources from a wide array of believing voices from the past. Such rootedness combined with openness bodes well for the future of this stream within the emerging movement.

On the other hand, the pattern of engagement with the Christian past on the Emergent side of the movement raises red flags on several fronts. To a significant degree, Emergent openness to Christian tradition appears to be grounded in its rejection of the strong us-versus-them attitude encountered in Evangelical churches. Upon leaving these separatist-inclined contexts, many are anxious to break free from the tendency to, as Scot McKnight has expressed it, "other" or in contemporary parlance "diss" so many confessing Christians from so many segments of the Church, both past and present.

It should be said that, despite this fresh zeal for happy fellowship and conversation within a global and historic Christian family, Evangelicals present targets for caricature, condescension,

and lecturing from many among the Emergent contingent of the movement. All too often, one encounters a reflexive dismissiveness of Evangelicals as Pharisees. Indeed, it is sadly ironic that, within a community that sometimes prides itself on its openness and its insistence that humility be recognized as a distinctive mark of genuine discipleship, the "othering" of Evangelicals functions a bit like a badge of identity for some.

Nevertheless, Emergent engagement of Christian tradition is not limited to a rebellious, protest-inspired plunge into all things once denied to it. That the past is viewed as a rich resource for contemporary Christian leadership seems clear from review of Emergent books and blogs and is perhaps best epitomized by the widespread appreciation of Robert E. Webber's writings and the "Ancient Future" note they strike.

But while Emergents are happy to make eclectic, discriminating use of the Bible and the tradition, they display little awareness of being answerable to either. One gets the sense that, for Emergents (as for some "numbers-equals-success" practitioners within the church growth movement) values and goals are presupposed—the Bible, tradition, or whatever other sources may appear promising are exploited according to their usefulness for the advance of an agenda birthed elsewhere.

We touch here probably the crux of the antipathy not only between the two wings of the emerging movement, and not only between Emergent and Evangelicalism, but between Emergent and the whole stream of orthodox Christianity stretching back at least to Nicea but arguably to the earlier controversies involving Montanus and Marcion. The discomfort with doctrine within Emergent may well signal a more fundamental attempt to break free from authority as such.[46]

I say "may," first of all, because Emergent resistance to doctrine might be a result of an unnecessary and unconscious baby-out-with-the-bathwater tendency to look askance at most everything attaching to the faith communities from which they emerged and

[46] See perhaps the most formidable effort to discredit and call to move beyond categories of authority in Edward Farley, *Ecclesial Reflection: An Anatomy of Theological Method?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 3–165.

now wish to critique. If so, their sometimes naïve dismissal of the importance of doctrine may prove less central to their identity than it now appears. Secondly, does not the history of the church suggest that some sort of historically recurring pendulum swing back and forth between head-heavy, doctrine-loving, scholasticizing Christianity and heart-enamored, community-centered, doctrine-wary, Christian-life-fixated Christianity is inevitable? And are not many of the Emergent critiques of the contemporary church needed? I think so. But unless Emergent can give a coherent answer to the question, "By what authority do you teach and live thus-and-so?" the specter and threat of not only human-centered but also human-constructed idolatry looms.

GO YE VS. BE YE SEPARATE

Faithful response to the gospel includes both world-denying and world-affirming impulses. Given the Bible's inclusion of both, it is not surprising that the demand to discern the true nature, extent, and relationship between these impulses has thrust itself upon the Church from the beginning. The same Yahweh who elects and separates out for Himself a peculiar people for covenant privilege also promises to make them a light and blessing to all the nations. The same Jesus who came not into the world to condemn the world but to save it also encouraged his disciples to lay up treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and thieves do not break in and steal. The same New Testament that bids believers "be ye separate" also enjoins "go ye."

Sympathetic readings of the emerging church movement should detect within it a fresh prophetic call to fulfill the "go ye" dimension of the divine imperative. When emerging leaders survey contemporary models of church in the West, they notice certain tendencies toward retreat from the world, the presence of a kind of embattled, frightened, and escapist mind-set that too often keeps proclamation of the gospel bottled up behind the walls of the church and person-to-person engagement with the culture and the lost world to a minimum. Driven by zeal for the advance of the gospel and church-planting and undergirded theologically by a renewed emphasis on the lordship of Christ, the emerging church

looks for every possible means to engage this world with the message of its Lord. Surely this is a good thing.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

To the extent that Phillip Jenkins's extraordinary findings and prognostications published in his 2007 book *The Next Christendom*: *The Coming of Global Christianity* prove accurate, they probably provide some of the most vital data we Evangelicals should consider as we look to the future. Relocation of the center of gravity of global Christianity to the Southern Hemisphere, combined with a North America composed of proportionately fewer Evangelicals, herald profound transformation of the cultural landscape where ministry must occur—transformation that proclaimers of the gospel and planters of churches can ill afford to ignore. Does not a landscape thus altered commend a shift away from remaining vestiges of Christendom-thinking to something very much like the kind of missionary or "missional" mind-set called for by the emerging church?

Underlying motivations of doctrine-friendly emerging leaders coincide significantly with one of the original motivations of the seeker- and purpose-driven tributaries within the wider church-growth movement, namely, the impulse to see the gospel advance within communities, neighborhoods, and segments of the population largely untouched by or impervious to existing models of church and evangelistic approaches. Yet having gained from observance and consideration of these efforts, these doctrine-friendly emerging churches seem comparatively more protective of core orthodox, evangelical theological commitments than either seeker or purpose-driven models.

In a 1989 attempt to discern the most pressing challenges facing Southern Baptist theological educators, Timothy George also uncovered two of the most pressing concerns raised by the emerging church from an Evangelical standpoint. The first is a concern that confronts Evangelicals by the Emergent stream within the

movement: "A church which cannot distinguish heresy from truth, or no longer thinks this is an important thing to do, has lost its right to bear witness to the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ who declared Himself to be not only the Way and the Life, but also the only Truth which leads to the Father."[47] Emergent attitudes toward the value and significance of doctrinal truth range from striking disinterest to patronizing condescension to acute aversion in which doctrine is viewed as a pernicious threat to the "gospel" they wish to advance. Unless and until the concern George raises is satisfactorily addressed, Evangelical interest will likely remain restricted to matters touching the analysis of culture, while calls for a theological awakening among Emergents will remain appropriate.

But where the doctrine-friendly emerging church world is concerned, perhaps Evangelicals should ask themselves a few questions related to the obverse side of George's first contention, addressed to Southern Baptists but relevant also to all Evangelicals as they examine the emerging church:

> For Southern Baptists, at this stage in our history, the burning theological need is the ability to distinguish the central affirmations of the faith from the peripheral, adiaphorous issues which have become so divisive in our time. . . . [A] church which has become obsessed with the marginalia of the faith will soon find itself shipwrecked on the shoals of a fractured fellowship.[48]

Of course one man's marginalia is a another man's nonnegotiable truth, but the first point here is to acknowledge, precisely for the defense of the gospel, the common interest all Evangelicals have in achieving optimal success in the distinguishing of primary, secondary, and tertiary issues. This task of discrimination is rarely easy and is never fully completed. But surely the desire to remove every unnecessary stumbling block to the advance of the gospel should be a goal all would share.

[47] From George's paper "The Future for Theological Education Among Southern Baptists," presented to the Southeast regional meeting of the National Association of Baptists Professors of Religion, March 10, 1989, 18.

[48] Ibid.

How should Evangelicals respond to emerging church pastors and planters who combine exemplary zeal for the conversion of souls with crystal clear confession of core theological commitments ranging from the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christological consensus spanning Nicea and Chalcedon to the justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone? Should not unashamed confession of core doctrines combined with evident zeal for church-planting and conversion-seeking evangelism justify an assume-the-best posture and a measure of patience where emerging church speech and practice raise concerns among Evangelicals? I think so. Albert Mohler's advice to Southern Baptists who would contemplate partnership with the wider Evangelical world could just as easily apply to Evangelicals who contemplate engagement with the emerging church. Thus, let us engage the emerging church with "an irenic, bold, and convictional posture which combines concern for orthodox doctrine with a spirit of engagement with the larger world and a missionary mandate."[49]

[49] From Mohler's chapter, "A Call for Baptist Evangelicals & Evangelical Baptists: Communities of Faith and a Common Quest for Identity," in *Southern Baptists & American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H, 1993), 239.