



Faith Pulpit

The Emerging Church: The New Worldly Church

What are we to think of the emerging church movement? Does it have any validity? What are its dangers? In this issue of the Faith Pulpit, Dr. Douglas Brown of Faith Baptist Theological Seminary combines careful analysis with Biblical understanding to show us the hazards of this movement and how to help people avoid being enticed by it.

The emerging church (or emergent church) is an elusive movement.^{[1](#)} Attempting to understand and explain the emerging church is admittedly difficult. However, the movement is impacting the church today and needs our attention. This article will give an overview of the emerging church and offer some basic critiques.

What is the emerging church?

Leaders and proponents within the emerging church seem to relish the fact that the emerging church eludes defining. Much of their literature is intentionally slippery and vague, often raising more questions than answers. Most resist the label of a “movement” and prefer to use terms such as “conversation,” “journey,” and “narrative” to describe the emerging church.

Part of the difficulty in explaining the emerging church is its wide diversity. It crosses denominational boundaries (since it is both interdenominational and nondenominational) and national boundaries (since it is international). In addition, emerging churches represent a wide assortment of theological positions (ranging from evangelical to liberal) and an even more extensive mixture of methodologies (everything from house churches to alternative worship).

So what is the emerging church? Scot McKnight summarizes: “Emerging catches into one term the global reshaping of how to ‘do church’ in postmodern culture.”^{[2](#)} Reducing the emergent church to innovative and unconventional methodologies would be a mistake. It goes deeper than just

methodology. The emerging church movement marks a philosophical and social shift to make the church relevant to postmodern society.

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger offer this nuanced definition:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.³

Ultimately, I believe those involved in the emergent church generally can be divided into two basic groups: evangelical and liberal.⁴ Evangelical emerging churches still embrace the gospel and generally hold to the fundamentals of the orthodox faith. They essentially intend to minister “to” and “with” postmoderns. Individuals like Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, and Donald Miller fall into this group.

The more liberal wing of the emerging church tends to deny (or at least seriously question) the essentials of Christianity. This “thicker” form of the emerging church (sometimes labeled “Emergent”) is a liberal “reformation” to overthrow conservative evangelicalism and fundamentalism. This is a new face of theological liberalism made relevant for postmoderns. Basically, Emergent leaders intend to minister “as” postmoderns. Individuals such as Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Marcus Borg, and Rob Bell fit here.

How did the emerging church emerge?

In order to understand the origin of the emerging church, one first has to understand a bit about postmodernism. Western civilization can basically be divided into three eras since the rise of Christianity. First was the era of pre-modernism. Prior to the Enlightenment, people generally believed in God and saw the Bible as revelation and authoritative. Those in the church and academy operated under pre-scientific presuppositions. Truth was viewed as knowable and objective. The Enlightenment changed this worldview and inaugurated the modern era.

Under modernism, human reason became the accepted authority, and the supernaturalism of the Bible was rejected. Truth was, however, still knowable and objective. René Descartes’ conclusion, “I think, therefore I am,” epitomized the modern era. Eventually rationalism led to the rise of empiricism and the scientific method, which resulted in the historical-critical method and the divide between the sacred and secular.

Throughout the twentieth century, post-modernism arose as a result of existential philosophy and a growing dissatisfaction with modernism. Under postmodernism, truth was no longer objective since people’s pre-understanding prohibited them from finding truth. The individual became the authority;

one created truth as he or she perceived it. The greatest ideals of postmodernism were pluralism, tolerance, pragmatism, and moral relativism.

The emerging church seeks to revolutionize the church by reaching or accommodating postmodern culture. Emerging leaders view the traditional church (in its many forms) as essentially modern. They credit the decline of the church in Western civilization to its worldly allegiance to modernity. Since we now live in a post-Christian culture, the church must change. Hence, the emerging church is first and foremost a protest movement against the traditional church.

Proponents often consider the emerging church as “post-evangelical.” Scot McKnight explains: “The emerging movement is a protest against much of evangelicalism as currently practiced. It is post-evangelical in the way that neo-evangelicalism (in the 1950s) was post-fundamentalist.”⁵

What are emerging churches like?

So what is so different about emerging churches? They are reaching primarily urban (or suburban) Gen-Xers and Millennials (people born after 1964). The most notable churches are growing at incredible rates. Consider Rob Bell’s Mars Hill Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which meets in a renovated mall. With virtually no advertisement they opened with nearly 1,000 people attending their first meeting. In less than ten years, more than 10,000 attend each weekend.⁶

These churches should not be confused with seeker-sensitive churches (such as Bill Hybel’s Willow Creek Community Church or Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church). The market-driven model is part of what emerging leaders are reacting against. Interestingly, the converse is not true: many seeker-sensitive churches have begun to adopt emerging methodology because it pragmatically works. Those involved in the emerging church movement, however, value authenticity over pragmatism. They consider seeker-sensitive churches to be worldly because they embrace modernism.

Worship at emerging churches is widely divergent. Some practice “alternative worship,” including using just about every kind of music: classical to death-metal rock. Others attempt to revive ancient early church practices: house churches, communal meals, candlelight services, and prayer benches. Unfortunately many of these worship practices are closer to the medieval church rather than the apostolic church.

Creativity and an appreciation for the arts are celebrated in these circles. They are also technologically savvy and use the internet with great skill. Among the emergent churches, authoritative expositional preaching is generally rejected and replaced with narrative preaching (using stories as opposed to propositions) and dialogue (where everyone brings their understanding to the text). Each person can thus join the conversation to share his or her personal story or narrative. Programs are secondary; relationships take priority.

Emerging church mission involves a holistic emphasis of redeeming society and creation too. This emphasis translates into something quite similar to the social gospel (which fundamentally alters the gospel from personal redemption to merely social reformation) and, for some, environmentalism. McKnight, who considers himself part of this movement, explains that leaders in the movement are left-leaning in their politics for social justice. While he does not want to deny the need for personal redemption, he praises Walter Rauschenbusch's original vision for the social gospel.²

How should we evaluate the emerging church?

Without claiming mastery of the emerging church, I would like to offer two critiques:⁷

Relevancy to culture

Discussions about the emerging church bring the issue of the church's relevancy to culture to the forefront. On one hand, the emerging church is to be applauded for its desire to reach postmoderns. Their evaluation of culture and postmodernism can be helpful for anyone postmodern.

On the other hand, many in emerging circles seem to have "thrown the baby out with the bath water" when it comes to the gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:19–27 Paul explained the need for relevancy and contextualization to those to whom he ministered. Yet he knew that the preaching of the cross was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Cor. 1:18–25). Paul never changed his message to somehow "click" with the current crowd. He realized that the message of the cross brought the aroma of life to some and the aroma of death to others (2 Cor. 2:14–16). In addition, Paul explicitly warned about altering the preaching of God's Word to accommodate the world's itching ears (2 Tim. 4:1–5). The emerging church is ultimately worldly because of its uncritical embrace of postmodern culture.

Hermeneutics

Leaders within the emerging church movement promote a postmodern hermeneutic that I believe greatly undermines God's Word. Emerging leaders argue for the "hermeneutics of humility," which asserts that we cannot know any propositional truth absolutely. Therefore, Christians should exercise humility in interpreting God's Word and systematic theology because anyone could theoretically be wrong.

This approach sounds noble. But in the end, this postmodern approach to God's Word can lead to reader-response approaches to the text, polyvalence (multiple meanings), and ultimately uncertainty of anything theological. Two specific examples illustrate the danger of this approach to the Scripture. First, several within the Emergent wing are questioning the substitutionary death of Christ. Second, some also refuse to condemn homosexuality (as well as other sexual sins) as aberrant behavior.

Where do we go from here?

The impact of the emerging church is changing the face of evangelicalism. Since emerging churches strive for cultural relevancy, they will likely continue to change with the culture. So the paradigm shift is far from over.

How should we as fundamental Baptists respond to the emerging church? As with any new ministry trend, the emerging church should force us back to the Word of God. If Scripture was sufficient for Paul who ministered in the polytheistic world of the first century, then it is sufficient for us ministering in postmodern times (2 Tim. 3:16, 17). God's people living in postmodern cultures need to be grounded in sound doctrine.

My biggest concern is with the next generation in our churches. Are we preparing our young people with the Biblical worldview and epistemological grounding to handle the postmodern abyss? Parents and pastors need to disciple and equip their youth so they can face this new threat. Postmodernity will continue to present new sets of questions and problems for our young people to navigate. The question is whether we are meeting this challenge.

Works Cited

1. Many distinguish between the "emerging church" and the "emergent church." Scot McKnight states, "Emerging is the wider, informal, global (church-centered) focus of the movement, while Emergent is an official organization in the U.S. and the U.K." (i.e., the Emergent Village) ("Five Streams of the Emerging Church," Christianity Today (February 2007), under <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html> (accessed June 2, 2008). Mark Driscoll, one of the founders of the Emergent Village, no longer identifies himself as "emergent," but instead opts for the term "emerging."
2. McKnight, "Five Streams."
3. Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 44, 45.
4. Mark Driscoll makes this same distinction but further divides the evangelical wing into three "lanes." Driscoll is following E. Stetzer's three branches: the relevants, the reconstructionists, and the revisionists ("First Person: Understanding the Emerging Church," under <http://www.crosswalk.com/1372534/>, accessed June 2, 2008).
5. McKnight, "Five Streams." See the discussion in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 34-39.
6. According to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mars_Hill_Bible_Church (accessed June 2, 2008).
7. For a critical look at the emerging church, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

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