

The Emerging Church

by *D. A. Carson*

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What Are We Talking About?

At the heart of the Emergent Church movement—or as some of its leaders prefer to call it, the “conversation”—lies the conviction that changes in the culture signal that a new church is “emerging.” Christian leaders must therefore adapt to this emerging church. Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation, the emerging generation.

One reason why the movement has mushroomed so quickly is that it is bringing to focus a lot of hazy perceptions already widely circulating in the culture. It is articulating crisply and polemically what many pastors and others were already beginning to think, even though they did not enjoy—until the leaders of this movement came along—any champions who put their amorphous malaise into perspective.

What Characterizes the Movement? *Protest*

It is difficult to gain a full appreciation of the distinctives of the movement without listening attentively to the life stories of its leaders. Many of them have come from conservative, traditional, evangelical churches, sometimes with a fundamentalist streak. Thus the reforms that the movement encourages mirror the protests of the lives of many of its leaders.

The place to begin is the book *Stories of Emergence*, edited by Mike Yaconelli. Most of these “stories of emergence” have in common a shared destination (namely, the Emergent Church movement) and a shared point of origin: traditional (and sometimes fundamentalist) Evangelicalism. What all of these people have in common is that they began in one thing and “emerged” into something else. This gives the book a flavor of protest, of rejection: we were where you were once, but we emerged from it into something different. The subtitle of the book discloses what the editor sees as common ground: *Moving from Absolute to Authentic*.

An example may clarify what the book is trying to accomplish. Spencer Burke used to sit in a plush third-floor office, serving as one of the pastors of Mariners Church in Irvine, California—“a bona fide megachurch with a 25-acre property and a \$7.8 million budget.” Every weekend 4,500 adults use the facilities, and the church ministers to 10,000 people a week. But Burke became troubled by things such as parking lot ministry. (“Helping well-dressed families in SUVs find the next available parking space isn’t my spiritual gift.”). He became equally disenchanted with three-point sermons and ten-step discipleship programs, not to mention the premillennial, pretribulational eschatology on which he had been trained. Burke came to realize that his “discontent was never with Mariners as a church, but [with] contemporary Christianity as an institution.”

Burke organizes the causes of his discontent under three headings. First, he has come to reject what he calls “spiritual McCarthyism,” the style of leadership that belongs to “a linear, analytical world” with clear lines of authority and a pastor who is CEO. Spiritual McCarthyism, Burke asserts, is “what happens when the pastor-as-CEO model goes bad or when well-meaning people get too much power.” These authority structures are quick to brand anyone a “liberal” who questions the received tradition.

The second cause of Burke’s discontent is what he calls “spiritual isolationism.” Under this heading he

includes the pattern of many churches moving from the city to the suburbs. Sometimes this is done under the guise of needing more space. Nevertheless, he insists, there are other motives. "It's simpler for families to arrive at church without having to step over a drunk or watch drug deals go down in the alley. Let's be honest: church in the city can be messy. Dealing with a homeless man who wanders into the service shouting expletives or cleaning up vomit from the back steps is a long way from parsing Greek verbs in seminary." Indeed, megachurches out in the suburbs sometimes construct entire on-campus worlds, complete with shops and gyms and aerobics centers.

The third cause of his discontent Burke labels "spiritual Darwinism"—climbing up the ladder on the assumption that bigger is better. The zeal for growth easily fostered "a kind of program-envy.... Looking back, I spent a good part of the 1980's and '90s going from conference to conference learning how to ride high on someone else's success." To shepherd a congregation was not enough; the aim was to have the fastest-growing congregation. "It was survival of the fittest with a thin spiritual veneer."

In 1998 Burke started TheOoze.com. The name of the active chat room is designedly metaphorical: Burke intends this to be a place where "the various parts of the faith community are like mercury. Try to touch the liquid or constrain it, and the substance will resist. Rather than force people to fall into line, an oozy community tolerates differences and treats people who hold opposing view with great dignity. To me, that's the essence of the emerging church."

Protest Against Modernism

The difficulty in describing the Emergent Church movement as a protest against modernism is partly one of definition: neither modernism nor postmodernism is easy to define. Even experts in intellectual history disagree on their definitions.

The majority view, however, is that the fundamental issue in the move from modernism to postmodernism is epistemology—i.e., how we know things, or think we know things. Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affective which, in turn, breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we "know" is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right. Modernism tries to find unquestioned foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge and then proceeds with methodological rigor; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist (it is "antifoundational") and insists that we come to "know" things in many ways, not a few of them lacking in rigor. Modernism is hard-edged and, in the domain of religion, focuses on truth versus error, right belief, confessionalism; postmodernism is gentle and, in the domain of religion, focuses upon relationships, love, shared tradition, integrity in discussion.

How then do those who identify with the Emergent Church movement think about these matters? The majority of emerging church leaders see a very clear contrast between modern culture and postmodern culture and connect the divide to questions of epistemology. Some think that we are in a postmodern culture and therefore ought to be constructing postmodern churches. A few acknowledge that not everything in postmodernism is admirable and therefore want to maintain some sort of prophetic witness against postmodernism at various points while eagerly embracing the features of postmodernism that they perceive as admirable.

Brian McLaren, probably the most articulate speaker in the emerging movement, has emphasized, in both books and lectures, that postmodernism is not antimodernism. The telling point for McLaren and most of the other leaders of the Emergent Church movement is their emphasis on the discontinuity as over against the continuity with modernism. When McLaren speaks through the lips of Neo, the postmodern Christian protagonist of his best-known books (the New Kind of Christian trilogy), he can use "post-" as a universal category to highlight what he does not like: "In the postmodern world, we become postconquest, postmechanistic, postanalytical, postsecular, postobjective, postcritical, postorganizational, postindividualistic, post-Protestant, and postconsumerist." These books show how much what McLaren thinks "a new kind of Christian" should be like today is determined by all the new things he believes are bound up with postmodernism: hence "a new kind of Christian."

Much of McLaren's aim in his writing and lecturing is to explode the certainties that he feels have controlled too much of the thinking of Western Christian people in the past. But there is a danger in constantly exploding the certainties of the past: if we are not careful, we may be left with nothing to hang on to at all. Recognizing the danger, McLaren takes the next step by providing us with two definitions.

The first of his definitions is of philosophical pluralism, the stance that asserts that no single outlook can be the explanatory system or view of reality that accounts for all of life. Even if we Christians think we have it, we must immediately face the diversities among us: are we talking about Baptist views of reality? Presbyterian? Anglican? And which Baptist? Philosophical pluralism denies that any system offers a complete explanation.

The second definition is of relativism. It is the theory that denies absolutism and insists that morality and religion are relative to the people who embrace them. Lest Christians think none of this applies to them, McLaren draws attention to the ethnic cleansing of the Old Testament, to David's many wives, to injunctions against wearing gold rings.

If both philosophical pluralism and relativism are given free play, McLaren asserts, it is difficult to see how one can be faithful to the Bible. Yet absolutism cannot be allowed to rule: the criticism of absolutism is too devastating, too convincing to permit it to stand. So perhaps a culture plagued by absolutism needs a dose of relativism to correct what is wrong with it—not so much a relativism that utterly displaces what came before, but a relativism that in some sense embraces what came before, yet moves on. If absolutism is the cancer, it needs relativism as the chemotherapy. Even though this chemotherapy is dangerous in itself, it is the necessary solution.

If absolutism is not the answer and absolute relativism is not the answer, what is the Christian way ahead? Here McLaren finds himself heavily indebted to the short work by Jonathan Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: Lessons for the Church from MacIntyre's After Virtue*. This is surely what we want: we want to learn to live faithfully in a fragmented world. Absolutism plays by one set of rules. Real pluralism is like a large field where many games are being played, each game observing its own rules. This sort of pluralism is coherent. But we live in a fragmented world: we are playing golf with a baseball, baseball with a soccer ball, and so forth. This is not real pluralism; it is fragmented existence.

Doubtless a few small, coherent, communities exist—Hasidic Jews, perhaps, or the Amish—who manage to play by one set of rules, but the rest of us are mired in fragmentations. As a result, there is no coherence, no agreement on where we are going. Our accounts of what we are doing maintain the lingering use of the older absolutist language, while we find ourselves, not in genuine pluralism, but in fragmentation. In North America we have a memory of absolutist totalitarian Christianity and experience fragmentation. So our choice is whether to go back to this absolutist heritage or forward to something else. Can we weave a fabric that is not totalitarian and absolutist but avoids absolute relativism? The former returns us to the barbarities and is unconvincing in a postmodern age; the latter simply leaves us open to the marketers, for there is no coherent defense against them.

The way ahead, McLaren suggests, is very helpfully set out in David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*. Toward the end of the book, Bosch lists eight perspectives that speak to our situation and give us some direction:

1. Accept co-existence with different faiths gladly, not begrudgingly. It is not their fault if they are alive.
2. Dialogue presupposes commitment to one's position, so it is surely not a bad thing to listen well. Dialogue should be congruent with confidence in the gospel.
3. We assume that the dialogue takes place in the presence of God, the unseen Presence. In such dialogue we may learn things, as Peter does in Acts 10–11. Similarly, Jesus learns from his interchange with the Syrophenician woman.
4. Missional dialogue requires humility and vulnerability. But that should not frighten us, for when we are weak, we are strong. It is surely right, for instance, to acknowledge earlier atrocities committed by Christians, even as we remain careful not to disparage those earlier Christians.
5. Each religion operates in its own world and therefore demands different responses from Christians.
6. Christian witness does not preclude dialogue.

7. The “old, old story” may not be the true, true story, for we continue to grow, and even our discussion and dialogues contribute to such growth. In other words, the questions raised by postmodernism help us to grow.
8. Live with the paradox: we know no way of salvation apart from Jesus Christ, but we do not prejudge what God may do with others. We must simply live with the tension.

I have taken this much space to summarize McLaren’s views (articulated at a recent lecture) for a couple of reasons. One is because most sides would agree that McLaren is the emerging church’s most influential thinker (or, at the very least, one of them). Another reason is because while most leaders of the Emergent Church movement set up a relatively simple antithesis—namely, modernism is bad and postmodernism is good—McLaren is careful in this piece to avoid the obvious trap: many forms of postmodern thought do in fact lead to some kind of religious relativism, and McLaren knows that for the Christian that is not an option. He clearly wants to steer a course between absolutism and relativism, and he is more careful on this point than some of his peers.

Nevertheless, for McLaren, absolutism is associated with modernism, so that every evaluation he offers on that side of the challenge is negative. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a single passage in any of the writings of the Emergent leaders that I have read that offers a positive evaluation of any element of substance in modernism. But McLaren does not connect relativism with postmodernism. He appears to think of relativism as something more extreme (perhaps postmodernism gone to seed?), while postmodernism itself becomes the uncriticized matrix in which we must work out our theology. So while he dismisses absolute religious relativism (it cannot be said that he critiques it; rather, he recognizes that as a Christian he cannot finally go down that avenue), I have not yet seen from McLaren, or anyone else in the Emergent Church movement, a critique of any substantive element of postmodern thought.

Protesting on Three Fronts

The Emergent Church movement is characterized by a fair bit of protest against traditional Evangelicalism and, more broadly, against all that it understands by modernism. But some of its proponents add another front of protest, namely, the Seeker-sensitive church, the megachurch.

The degree to which this element stands out varies considerably. It is certainly present, for instance, in Dan Kimball’s *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. His recent book is praised by not a few pastors in the Seeker-sensitive tradition, doubtless because Kimball casts his work, in part, as the way forward to reach a new generation of people who have moved on, generationally and culturally, from the kinds of people who grabbed the attention of the Seeker-sensitive movement three decades ago. Although there are differences, the Emergent church leaders, like the Seeker-sensitive leaders in their time, are motivated, in part, by a desire to reach people who do not seem to be attracted to traditional approaches and stances—and the Seeker-sensitive movement is now old enough to be one of the “traditional” approaches. Pastors in the Seeker-sensitive tradition, then tend to see in the emerging church leaders a new generation of Christians doing the sort of thing that they themselves did a generation earlier.

Kimball’s book sets out how to go after the post-Seeker-sensitive generation. Much of his material goes over common ground. He offers a kind of popular profile of what he thinks postmodernism embraces: it accepts pluralism, embraces the experiential, delights in the mystical, and is comfortable with narrative, with what is fluid, global, communal/tribal, and so forth. Kimball then turns to how we should go about things rather differently. This includes an appendix on post-Seeker-sensitive worship. Here we must have much more symbolism and a greater stress on the visual. We should have crosses and candles. There might be an entire communion service without a sermon. The entire geography of the room may be different, with the possibility of different groups within the assembly engaging in different things at a time, and perhaps someone going off for a while to a quiet desk for a bit of journaling. The entire experience should be multisensory; the prayer corner may well burn incense. “Worship in the emerging church,” Kimball writes, “is less about looking out for what is on the cutting edge and more about moving back into our spiritual center with Jesus as our sole focus.”

Kimball offers us antithetical visions of modern preaching and postmodern preaching. In modern preaching, the sermon is the focal point of the service, and the preacher serves as the dispenser of biblical truths to help solve personal problems in modern life. Sermons emphasize explanation—explanation of what the truth is. The starting point is the Judeo-Christian worldview, and biblical terms

like “gospel” and “Armageddon” do not need definition. The biblical text is communicated primarily with words, and this preaching takes place within the church building during a worship service.

By contrast, Kimball writes, in the postmodern Emergent Church movement, the sermon is only one part of the experience of the worship gathering. Here the preacher teaches how the ancient wisdom applies to kingdom living; the preacher emphasizes and explains the experience of who the truth is. The starting point is the Garden of Eden and the retelling of the story of creation and of the origins of human beings and of sin (cf. Acts 17:22–34). The scriptural message is communicated through a mix of words, visual arts, silence, testimony, and story, and the preacher is a motivator who encourages people to learn from the Scriptures throughout the week. A lot of preaching takes place outside the church building in the context of community and relationships. Such preaching will be deeply theocentric rather than anthropocentric, and care should be taken not to insult people’s intelligence.

What cannot be overlooked in Kimball’s book, I think, is how much of his analysis is specifically directed against churches in the Seeker-sensitive tradition. For example, some of his suggestions—such as insistence that sermons should be theocentric and not anthropocentric, that they should not insult the intelligence of the hearers, that instruction in the Word should go on throughout the week and not be confined to public services on Sunday, and what we should aim for in kingdom living, one could easily find in Reformed exhortations, perhaps in the pages of a magazine such as this.

Other parts of Kimball’s advice, of course, could not similarly be aligned. Yet the fact that so much of what he has to say can be aligned with many serious voices within traditional Evangelicalism suggests that most of the time the “implied reader” of his book is not the more traditional evangelical church, but Seeker-sensitive churches. In Kimball’s view, they too are out of step with the culture and fall under the curse of modernism. Moreover, if, as we have seen, several of Kimball’s individual suggestions as to the way ahead are reminiscent of stances taken within parts of traditional Evangelicalism, the structure of his thought, taken as a whole, is distinctively postmodern.

What Should We Be Asking?

This is but a sketchy introduction to the Emergent Church movement. What have we learned so far and what questions should we be asking?

From these summaries of the stories of many of the leaders of the emerging movement and the survey of some of their publications one point stands out rather dramatically. To grasp it succinctly, it is worth comparing the Emergent Church movement with the Reformation, which was, after all, another movement that claimed it wanted to reform the church. What drove the Reformation was the conviction, among all its leaders, that the Roman Catholic Church had departed from Scripture and had introduced theology and practices that were inimical to genuine Christian faith. In other words, they wanted things to change, not because they perceived that new developments had taken place in the culture so that the church was called to adapt its approach to the new cultural profile, but because they perceived that new theology and practices had developed in the church that contravened Scripture, and therefore that things needed to be reformed by the Word of God. By contrast, although the Emergent Church movement challenges, on biblical grounds, some of the beliefs and practices of Evangelicalism, by and large it insists it is preserving traditional confessionalism but changing the emphases because the culture has changed, and so inevitably those who are culturally sensitive see things in a fresh perspective. In other words, at the heart of the emerging reformation lies a perception of a major change in culture.

This does not mean that the Emergent Church movement is wrong. It means, rather, three things.

First, the Emergent Church movement must be evaluated as to its reading of contemporary culture. Most of its pleas for reform are tightly tied to its understandings of postmodernism. The difficulty of the task (granted the plethora of approaches to postmodernism) cannot exempt us from making an attempt.

Second, as readers will have already observed from this short survey, the appeals to Scripture in the Emerging Church literature are generally of two kinds. On the one hand, some Emergent church leaders claim that changing times demand that fresh questions be asked of Scripture, and then fresh answers will be heard. What was an appropriate use of Scripture under modernism is no longer an

appropriate use of Scripture under postmodernism. On this gentler reading of Evangelicalism's history, traditional evangelicals are not accused of being deeply mistaken for their own times, but of being rather out of date now, not least in their handling of the Bible. On the other hand, the Emergent Church's critique of modernism, and of the Evangelicalism that modernism has produced, is sometimes (not always) so bitter that Evangelicalism's handling of Scripture can be mocked in stinging terms. This is not meant to imply that this is true of all emerging pastors.

Third, granted that the Emergent Church movement is driven by its perception of widespread cultural changes, its own proposals for the way ahead must be assessed for their biblical fidelity. In other words, we must not only try to evaluate the accuracy of the Emergent Church's cultural analysis, but also the extent to which its proposals spring from, or can at least be squared with, the Scriptures. To put the matter differently: Is there at least some danger that what is being advocated is not so much a new kind of Christian in a new Emergent Church, but a church that is so submerging itself in the culture that it risks hopeless compromise?

Even to ask the question will strike some as impertinence at best, or a tired appeal to the old-fashioned at worst. I mean it to be neither. Most movements have both good and bad in them, and in the book from which this article is taken I highlight some of the things I find encouraging and helpful in the Emergent Church movement. I find that I am more critical of the movement because my "take" on contemporary culture is a bit removed from theirs, partly because the solutions I think are required are somewhat different from theirs, partly because I worry about (unwitting) drift from Scripture, and partly because this movement feels like an exercise in pendulum swinging, where the law of unintended consequences can do a lot of damage before the pendulum comes to rest.

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The emerging church is a Christian movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries that crosses a number of theological boundaries: participants are variously described as Protestant, post-Protestant, evangelical, post-evangelical, liberal, post-liberal, conservative, post-conservative, anabaptist, reformed, charismatic, neocharismatic, and post-charismatic. Emerging churches can be found throughout the globe, predominantly in North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. while