

Evaluating the Emerging Church

The Emerging Church Movement is starting to get attention – and criticism.

For most of the past decade, the Emerging Church has received scant notice. In 2004, that started to change. Last February, Don Carson delivered a series of lectures evaluating the movement. Last November, *Christianity Today* published a cover article called *The Emergent Mystique*, followed closely an article in *Christian Century*. Popular books by Brian McLaren and Leonard Sweet have been sold well for years. More scholarly works are now starting to appear, both for and against. This year marks the release of Carson's book *Becoming Conversant with Emergent*. Discussion of the Emerging Church is taking place everywhere.

I find myself to be a bit of an apologist for the Emerging Church, not because I am blind to its faults, but because I believe that it has sometimes been misunderstood and unfairly criticized. As I hope to make clear, I believe we should be concerned about some aspects of the Emerging Church movement. However, I also believe that the Emerging Church has something important to say, and we need to engage in some of the questions raised by the movement without dismissing it prematurely.

Describing the Emerging Church

It is surprisingly difficult to define the Emerging Church. There is no coordinating group. Some argue that it is not even a movement, preferring the term “conversation”. Brian McLaren, “the de facto spiritual leader of the Emerging Church Movement” according to *Christianity Today*, states, “We don’t have a program. We don’t have a model. I think we must begin as a conversation, then grow as a friendship, and see if a movement comes out of it.”

The most charitable and lofty way to see the Emerging Church is as a second Reformation of Christianity. In *The Next Reformation*, Carle Raschke argues that the Emerging Church mirrors the events of the first Reformation, in which a philosophical shift in worldviews led to a re-understanding of the Gospel. It is not that the Gospel changed, then or now; it is that elements of the previous worldview obscured the Gospel. At its heart, the Emerging Church attempts to recapture a Biblical faith that is free of the vestiges of modernism, and that speaks to a changing world context.

In past decades, younger evangelicals found themselves dissatisfied with the dominant expressions of church. They became concerned that the church had, knowingly or not, sold out to culture. They believed that theology had become too reductionistic and propositional, that churches had become consumeristic and market driven, and that the Gospel had become more about a ticket to heaven than entrance into the Kingdom of God. They became concerned that too many churches had become inwardly focused.

The resulting discussion has not always been tidy. Some began using new forms of worship; other churches sprang up in houses, cafés, and even bars; others looked for less institutional forms of church. Theologically, pastors, scholars and others began to look for ways to articulate the Gospel in a way that was biblically faithful and less tied to the modern worldview.

As you can imagine, the experiment has succeeded in varying degrees. You can find extremism within the Emerging Church. You can find weak theology and compromise. However, these should not necessarily be taken as representative of the movement as a whole. You can also find some scholars and churches who are faithfully trying to answer the question, “How then shall we live in this context?” There is much that we can learn from this movement as we examine it more carefully.

Myths You May Have Heard About the Emerging Church

As criticisms arise, it is important that the criticisms at least be accurate.

Unfortunately, some have expressed criticisms that are based on misunderstandings of the nature of the Emerging Church. Other criticisms are true of elements within the Emerging Church, but not the movement as a whole.

First, it is not true that the Emerging Church is primarily about a change in style. Candles, liturgy, and style of music do not an Emerging Church make. Rob Bell,

pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church in Grandville, Michigan, states, “People don’t get it. They think it’s about style. But the real question is: What is the gospel?” The Emerging Church is, at its best, more about theology than it is about any particular style of church or worship. If it is only about style, it will have no lasting value.

Second, the Emerging Church does not believe that we should accommodate Christianity to culture. Because the Emerging Church is, in part, a reaction to changes in culture, some have suggested that it is simply trying to make itself more palatable to elements of our culture that are postmodern. On the contrary, thinkers within the Emerging Church argue that the shift in culture has revealed how modernity enmeshed itself with the Gospel. They realize that culture will never be a friend to the Gospel, and that postmodernism will present just as many problems as modernism did. Rather than embracing culture, they simply see it as the context in which we are called to think and live in obedience to God.

Third, the Emerging Church does not accept postmodernity as a philosophy. Postmodernism as a term is not especially helpful; it is imprecise and it has many definitions. Postmodernism can refer to art, architecture, or a complex and misunderstood philosophy. At a popular level, postmodernism is said to reveal itself by shifts from rational thought to emotion, from truth to experience, and from exclusion to inclusion. Postmodern values include tolerance, participation, and a reaction against propositional truth, individualism, consumerism, and hierarchy. Although this is a gross oversimplification, it is not difficult to spot

these trends within our culture. The Emerging Church is characterized by some of these values. For instance, it is more participatory and less individualistic and hierarchical. But it does not embrace all of these values, and it is a serious mistake to assume that the Emerging Church embraces all that is wrong within postmodernism, or postmodernism as a philosophy at all.

One of the most common criticisms of the Emerging Church is that it rejects truth claims. This criticism is based on the Emerging Church's embrace of narrative and poetry and its de-emphasis on propositional truth, and by its position that our knowledge is finite at best. An embrace of narrative and poetry, and an acknowledgement that our perspective is limited, does not necessarily lead to a rejection of rational truth. Indeed, the Bible itself comes to us in forms such as narrative and poetry, and we do well to see these (as well as propositions) as important in our understanding of truth.

The Emerging Church's suggestion that our perspective is limited does not necessarily lead to a rejection of truth either, and in fact is not unique to the movement. One of the most helpful statements I have heard on the subject of rational truth comes from Don Carson, who argues that we can know truly without knowing exhaustively. This, I think, is close to the Emerging Church's understanding of truth.

Areas of Concern

One of the tests of the Emerging Church will be how it responds to criticism. Some of that criticism, described above, may be based on misunderstandings, or might not be true of the movement as a whole. Some of the criticism, undoubtedly, will be find its mark. It is important to realize that there are dangers inherent in what the Emerging Church is trying to do. Humility and the ability to receive correction will be important.

I do have some concerns about the Emerging Church. There is some theological flabbiness present in corners of the Emerging Church, as there is in parts of evangelicalism. A willingness to re-examine theological beliefs should be welcomed, but it can also be dangerous if not handled carefully.

There is also the danger that the Emerging Church, in reacting against perceived problems within traditional evangelicalism, can go too far. It is easy to slip into negativism, and to see the traditional church as the enemy. There are many within the Emerging Church who have been bruised by more traditional forms of churches, and who have not yet come to embrace all that is right within evangelicalism. Movements that begin, at least in part, in reaction to another are always in danger of reacting too far.

I earlier argued that the Emerging Church does not adopt all postmodern values. While this is true, it does adopt some of them. For instance, it can be anti-individualistic, which is a necessary and Biblical corrective to the individualism

that has characterized much of our society over the past century. It is anti-consumeristic, which is a necessary correction to the materialism that characterizes most of North America. The Emerging Church needs to continue to examine these values, and to subject them to the light of Scripture. For instance, the Emerging Church tends to value a lack of hierarchy. It would be easy to lose the Biblical emphasis on the role of Christian leaders if the anti-hierarchical value is taken too far.

The Emerging Church can be guilty of the very mistakes it is trying to avoid. It is not yet clear that it will succeed at capturing the essence of the Gospel without finding itself enmeshed in culture, any more than (in their understanding) the modern church did. It is not hard to find examples of weak theology in parts of the Emerging Church. It will therefore be important for the Emerging Church to receive criticism without being defensive. There are some hopeful signs that this might take place.

Learning From the Emerging Church

At the heart of the Emerging Church is the Reformed conviction summarized by the phrase *semper reforma* (Latin for “always reforming”). This conviction means that the church should be open at all times to God’s reforming. We should, at the very least, open ourselves to some of the questions being raised by the Emerging Church.

It is true that you do not have to become a member of the Emerging Church to do this. Duane Litfin, president of Wheaton College, correctly states that Carl Henry challenged the evangelical church on some of the same issues more than half a century ago.

Nevertheless, we should welcome a call to faithfulness no matter where it comes from. I have learned from the Emerging Church in four areas:

1. The Gospel

One of the most important questions to answer is, “What is the Gospel?” You would think that the answer would be clear. The Emerging Church reminds us that we should not reduce the Gospel to something we accept so that we go to heaven. It is that, but it is far more. It is time to recapture the three tenses of salvation: past (saved from the penalty of sin), present (saved from the power of sin), and future (saved from the presence of sin). We could benefit from greater emphasis on the Kingdom of God and its implications for all of life, including life in this world.

The Emerging Church suggests that modern presentations of the Gospel may be too propositional, too reductionistic, and too focused on the individual. It is not that the propositions aren’t important; it is just that they aren’t enough. Some forms of evangelicalism teach, “If you pray this prayer, then Jesus will be your personal Savior.” This, along with many other evangelistic presentations, does not capture the richness of the Gospel and the Kingdom, and comes dangerously

close to reducing salvation to a decision. Any attempt to grasp the Gospel in a way that is faithful to Scripture and the life and teaching of Jesus should be welcomed.

2. Consumerism and Pragmatism

It is ironic that many churches have been making changes to become more attractive to the unchurched at the very time that many of the unchurched are longing for the very things that we have removed. Dan Kimball, author of *The Emerging Church*, argues that culture is now post-seeker-sensitive: people are not interested in well-rehearsed drama sketches, entertaining and formulaic preaching (“Four Steps to Greatness”), secular songs, or padded theatre seats. They are hungry for the spiritual and authentic, with God in his rightful place. Reggie McNeal, author of *The Present Future*, warns that culture has become more spiritual than church.

The Emerging Church challenges us to rethink the consumerism and pragmatism that has entered the church. It rejects being market-driven, and reminds us that advertising campaigns and business techniques are not match for the power of a group of people called by God and following Christ in the power of the Spirit within a community.

3. Justice

God cares about the salvation of those who are separated from him by sin. He also cares about the AIDS pandemic in Africa, the poor who live in our

neighborhoods, and the environment. The Emerging Church reminds us that we are agents of reconciliation in this world, and that we do not need to choose between social action and evangelism.

4. The Church

The Emerging Church calls for us to revisit our ecclesiology. It reminds us that church is not a place one attends; it is a community to which one belongs. It challenges us to measure deployment into the community as much as attendance at church, and warns us against being inwardly focused. It suggests that we welcome fresh expressions of the church: to understand that the Biblical essence of what it means to be the church may take different forms in different settings. It suggests that house churches and other forms of church may not only be valid but necessary. One study calls these mission-shaped churches.

I am cautiously hopeful. I am grateful for those who are honestly and thoughtfully attempting to construct a faith in the twenty-first century that is, as Robert Webber describes, biblically rooted, historically informed, and culturally aware. The Emerging Church is far from perfect, and I hope that fruitful dialogue between the Emerging Church and its critics will take place in the coming days. It is my hope that the Emerging conversation will continue.