

The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists: Fast Friends or Future Foes?

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In this article Mark DeVine attempts to comprehend the emerging church movement and its implications for the Southern Baptist Convention. DeVine explores some of the difficulties of defining the phenomenon and the dangers of hasty attempts to do so. Two major efforts to comprehend the movement are examined: that of Southern Baptist Ed Stetzer and that of Fuller Theological Seminary professors, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. Conflicts between these alternative views are explored and the vexing issue of postmodernism is considered. DeVine especially highlights the reformed doctrine-friendly stream of the movement represented by Mars Hill Church and the Acts29 church planting network already drawing Southern Baptist attention and participation. He argues that this particular stream exhibits certain excesses and blind spots indicative of youth but also offers significant insight for the planting of doctrinally evangelical urban churches among a demographic typically resistant to the gospel.

“What about that cussing, drinking, Baptist preacher out in Seattle? Is he part of that emerging thing I keep hearing about?” Such an inquiry was my introduction to the emerging church movement. Or so I once thought. As bi-vocational pastor of a then declining urban Southern Baptist church, and faced with the sobering and depressing statistics tracking the prospects for such ministries, I cast about for answers. The preacher in Seattle was Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church where more than 6000 gather on a weekend to enjoy Indie Rock, hear sometimes sarcastic, calvinistic, humor-laced sermons, and to be led by a male only pastoral office within the urban core of one of the least Christian cities in the Western world. What is going on here?¹

¹ Visit www.marshillchurch.org and Mark Driscoll's blog, www.theresurgence.com. See also Driscoll's bestselling books *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out Without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) and *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons From an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

Little by little I discovered something called the emerging church movement, or is it the emergent conversation? Comprehension of contemporary, still developing phenomena often proves frustrating and elusive. But clearly, something is afoot. While it is impossible to gauge the size of the movement with great confidence, it is probably safe to say we are dealing with something quite significant—perhaps not a tidal wave, but not a mere trickle either. The volume of books and blogging alone indicate a movement involving communities of faith numbering at least in the hundreds in Britain and America and involving Christians from the full range of Protestant denominations from Anglican to the Assemblies of God, from Lutheran to Baptist.²

For a quasi-quick introduction to the emerging movement, I recommend two books and one article. The first book is *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* co-authored by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger.³ Among the numerous and proliferating examinations of the movement coming off the presses, this volume provides a comparatively superior window into the phenomenon by virtue of its heavy dependence upon primary source materials. Gibbs and Bolger's observations emerge inductively on the basis of extensive interviews with 50 actual leaders of emerging communities of faith in Brittan and North America. An appendix allows this same fifty to tell their stories in their own words.

The article I recommend appeared in the February 2007 edition of *Christianity Today* magazine: "Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today," by Scot McKnight, Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University (Chicago, Illinois).⁴ The second book is by Donald Miller, a young lay Christian raised in a Southern Baptist church in Texas, now a denizen of urban Portland, Oregon. The book is *Blue Like Jazz*, a college campus sensation that reached an Amazon ranking of "4"!⁵ This book offers a unique purview into both the "protest" mindset Donald Carson notes within the emerging movement as well as a conservative, orthodox, evangelical-ish impulse

² In addition to EmergentVillage and the Mark Dricoll blogs see also, www.tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com, www.internetmonk.com, Scot McKnight's www.jesuscreed.org, and www.dankimball.com.

³ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005).

⁴ Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today," *Christianity Today* 51.2 (February 2007): 35-39.

⁵ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003).

discernible among some emerging types. I now know that *Blue Like Jazz*, not Mars Hill Community Church, was my actual introduction to the emerging church movement.

Learning the Lingo

Whoever wants to understand the emerging church would do well to spend a little time negotiating the nomenclature maze first. “Emergent” refers to the network of interested leaders and laity who converse through the website of Tony Jones, Emergentvillage.com. Jones is a Princeton Ph.D. student whose forthcoming dissertation promises to combine insights from the work of Gibbs and Bolger with that of Jones’ own research and extensive travel to engage face-to-face with emerging community leaders around the world. EmergentVillage.com represents a “conversation” (their word) and not a church movement as such. The governing board of EmergentVillage includes Doug Pagitt (Solomon’s Porch, Minneapolis), Brian McLaren (formerly of Cedar Ridge Community Church, Baltimore-Washington D.C.), and Tim Keel (Jacob’s Well, Kansas City).

“Emerging” refers to the broader phenomenon of churches and religious communities about which participants within EmergentVillage converse but do not lead or control. These leaders and communities strive to create and nurture communities of believers found meaningful to the emerging generation, as they see it, the thoroughly postmodern generation. It is this broader, more diverse, and diffuse phenomenon that I am addressing in this paper.

What Exactly is Emerging?

So what defines this movement? Can we identify a set of indicators— theological, ecclesiological, or otherwise that define the parameters of the emerging church movement? Well, many emerging leaders articulate a desire to “do local church” in ways that take postmodern culture into account. But no uniform, consensually accepted definition of “postmodern” unites the practitioners. How could it? The word “postmodern,” by its very nature, eludes final definition.⁶ Serious attempts to comprehend changes suggesting some major cultural, epistemological, and historical watershed compels prerequisite classification of the term “modern,” which itself continues to resist consensus definition. Nor do the various emerging community leaders agree upon whether to embrace, oppose, or sift wheat from chaff when

⁶ For serious exposure of inadequate, hasty attempts to define postmodernism see Thomas Oden, *After Modernity . . . What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

facing the ill-defined postmodern culture. What unites them is the conviction that culture may and should be taken into account where the making of disciples and the planting of churches is the goal. Some emerging leaders sound like Luther in contrast to Zwingli in defense of the freedom they demand where practical matters of church structure, evangelistic method, or worship style are concerned: “where the Bible speaks, we speak; where the Bible is silent, we are free!”

Author Dan Kimball, pastor of Vintage Church in Santa Cruz California, represents a comparatively more conservative, doctrine friendly, self-consciously evangelical voice within the emerging movement. Note this title of Kimball’s, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights From Emerging Generations*. Kimball also authored *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for Emerging Generations* which includes contributions from Brian McLaren and Southern Baptist author of the bestselling non-fiction hardback book in American history, Rick Warren.⁷ Very sensitive to perceived, unfair stereotyping and caricaturing of the emerging movement, particularly where charges of doctrinal latitudinarianism arise, Kimball insists on his blog, “All the emerging churches I know believe in the inspiration of the Bible, the Trinity, the atonement, the bodily resurrection, and salvation in Jesus alone.” Yet Gibbs and Bolger can conclude, “Standing up for truth . . . has no appeal to emerging church leaders.”⁸ Go figure. The more I try to let the self-consciously emerging voices speak for themselves, the more obvious it becomes that, if something unifies them, it cannot be doctrine. Scot McKnight insists that the movement is about ecclesiology, not theology.

In their book *Emerging Churches*, Gibbs and Bolger identify three core practices that define all emerging churches: (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform secular space, and (3) live as community. Because of these core activities, emerging Christians also (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.⁹ We will touch briefly on a couple of these indicator activities as we go along.

⁷ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus But Not the Church: Insights From Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007). Also see Kimball’s *Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), and *Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.) Kimball is comparatively more conservative theologically than many of the Gibbs/Bolger types and represents the tensions concomitant with the occupation of a kind of bridging position within the movement.

⁸ Gibbs/Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 124.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 44, 45.

Authentic Communities Sacralizing Secular Space

The emerging Christians Gibbs and Bolger survey tend to use the words modern and postmodern to designate alternative ways of understanding social and cultural reality. The modern world, they contend, created the division between secular and sacred space and relegated religion to the latter. Emerging believers reject such a division and seek to re-sacralize secular space. God's claim applies to the whole world, thus his presence and lordship cry out for recognition and enjoyment everywhere and always. Futile modern attempts to keep God in his place, so to speak, invite attempts to turn Christianity into a strategy for personal happiness by believers who transition from the secular sphere into the sacred sphere and back again looking for help from God in the pursuit of their secular aspirations upon reentry.

When combined with the emerging quest for an intensely communal practice of Christianity, the sacralizing of secular space results in, among other things, aversion to "drive-in" suburban mega churches in favor of smaller, especially urban enclaves where Christ's lordship has wrongly been neglected or denied. Surely the claiming of lordship over the entire universe harmonizes with the Scriptures' witness to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But does not the New Testament also recognize a certain legitimization (albeit perhaps proximate and provisional) of a distinction between secular and sacred realms in the time between the times in which we exist? Consider Paul in Romans 13 and 1 Timothy 2, Jesus' "render to Caesar," and the almost New Testament wide comprehension of the church, not as "Christianizing" the world as such, but as a witnessing, persecuted, pilgrim (resident alien) people headed for that city of its lasting citizenship. In any case, the current re-energized quest of militant Islam to "sacralize secular space" on a global scale offers a sobering reminder of the dangers lurking where grandiose, utopian hopes for this world take hold among people one faith or another.

Orthopraxy Trumps Orthodoxy

That the three core and six derivative emerging church indicators involve activities reveals a strong suspicion of doctrine in favor of ethics, the prioritizing of orthopraxy above orthodoxy. What you do matters more than what you believe. "By their fruits [not their theology] you shall know them." Fixation upon exacting precision in the articulation of an ever growing list of doctrines wastes energy better spent obeying God's commands and following the way of Jesus. On this score, the emerging critique of Evangelicalism mirrors many historic movements—e.g. monasticism (Francis), Methodism (Wesley), pietism (Spener), the

Navigators—in which the life of the church and the walk of believers had, in the eyes of would-be prophets, fallen so far below formal confessional commitments that only moral (not so much doctrinal) repentance could rescue believer and church from the judgment of God.

Missional and Welcoming

The identity of Gibbs/Bolger emerging churches is self-consciously missional. They understand the resacralizing of secular space through following the way of Jesus in community as a joining of God in his holistic, redemptive activity in the world. Thus, these emerging believers feel compelled to immerse themselves in the settings where they serve, relate to each other as brothers and sisters, and respond to the physical, social, and justice-related needs of their communities. In so doing, many of these emerging believers adopt a belonging-before-believing rather than an in-versus-out conception of church boundaries. Evangelical notions of conversion make them nervous. They tend not to use the phrase “being saved,” or to ask the question, “Are you saved?” They are much more comfortable with the historic language associated with progressive sanctification than with that associated with vertical, event-shaped, punctiliar conversion. They value sacrificial investment in the lives of those they would help and for whom they would model the way of Jesus and invite to join them in following Jesus. Where evangelism is spoken of as the proclamation of a message calling for decision, they tend to hem-haw and clam up.

Undoubtedly, the best window into the positive impulses shaping many of the emerging churches is found in the research provided by Gibbs/Bolger. But whether the core activities identified by Gibbs/Bolger truly illuminate the heart of the movement is not yet clear.

Brian McLaren

Donald Carson’s book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, has been rightly criticized for reducing the emerging movement to matters of epistemology and largely to published writings of Brian McLaren.¹⁰ Nevertheless Carson does, I think, accurately describe a

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). McLaren’s significant bestselling books include *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative, Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass,

major stream within the movement that Brian McLaren both represents and influences. McLaren, former pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in greater D.C. Maryland continues to exert wide influence through his bestselling books and worldwide speaking. Penetrating cultural insights together with a disarming personal style help account for McLaren's continuing appeal. His books offer unique insights into the emerging psyche. But what also comes through and what Carson accurately uncovers is the strong protest character shaping much of the emerging movement and highly questionable treatment of the Bible McLaren models for them.

Are the Gibbs/Bolger Emerging Types Liberals?

Technically no, they are not liberals in the historic sense of the word. For example, they do not contend for the separation of a supposed true gospel kernel from New Testament mythological husk. But they are liberal-ish in certain ways. Like the Protestant liberalism that developed between the appearance of Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Glaubenslehre* in 1822 and the publication Adolf Von Harnack's *What is Christianity?* in 1901, Gibbs/Bolger-type emergers exhibit marked preference for the Gospels as opposed to the epistles within the New Testament and chafe at theology-laced, seemingly ethics-devoid passages within the Gospels.¹¹ At times, their Jesus tends to be presented as the blonde-haired, misty blue-eyed, group-hug seeking Nazarene carpenter of Hollywood fame. Predictably, the one acceptable object of Jesus' ire tends to become the Pharisee dressed up and made to walk and talk strikingly like the conservative, evangelical, doctrine-loving, Bible-thumping target of the original emerging church protest.

Also like liberals, Gibbs/Bolger types are more comfortable with subjective views of the cross of Christ. Talk of the substitutionary atonement can be a turn off, and like liberals, they really despise Calvinism and tend to articulate more weakened views of God's governance of the universe, sometimes sounding Arminian, sometimes drifting into the language of Freewill Theism or even Whiteheadian process thought. Typical of some anti-Calvinists, they exhibit something of a congenital compulsion to keep incentives for "doing good" propped up securely.

But they are not identifiably liberal in other ways. They display a bit of a bad conscience at their marginalizing and neglect of Paul's pulsating

2001), and *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

¹¹ Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Adolf Von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (New York: Harper, 1957).

theology and Jesus' separation of sheep from goats. At such inconvenient interpretive cul-de-sacs, they tend to retreat into talk of mystery, paradox, and what not reminiscent of Bible-loving but Arminianism-friendly handlers of election and predestination passages: "Well I might not know what Ephesians 1 and 2, Romans 9, John 10, and the plethora of predestinarian passages from Genesis to Revelation mean, but I know what they don't mean!" Manly liberals of the Harnackian type do not talk this way. Instead, they buck up and declare the Bible to be mistaken and just move on to passages that suit them. I do not think most of the left wing of the emerging movement has gotten there yet.

Ed Stetzer

No single source rivals the work of Gibbs and Bolger in terms of detailed, diverse, primary-source-based research on the emerging church phenomenon. Any attempt to understand the movement must reckon with their impressive effort. Gibbs and Bolger admit that they are friendly observers of the movement and welcome many of the critiques, protests, and changes advanced by the communities they have studied. They are joined by other interested observers who bring, arguably, a more nuanced eye and more critical distance to the task. Former church planter, Ed Stetzer, now Research Team Director and Missiologist at the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, is one such observer. Stetzer, author of numerous books dealing with the relationship between church and culture and current trends in church planting, identifies three distinguishable streams within the emerging church movement: the relevants, the reconstructionists, and the revisionists.¹²

Revisionists

According to Stetzer, the revisionists not only embrace many of the cultural insights and ecclesiological innovations reviewed in Gibbs and Bolger's work, they want to re-think many historic touchstone doctrinal commitments and moral convictions that have shaped evangelicalism such as the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, and the gospel itself. Brian McLaren speaks one moment of his desire to nurture biblical communities and the next moment takes shelter in agnosticism where biblical teaching regarding homosexual behavior is in view. Stetzer applauds D. A. Carson's thorough exposure of the revisionist stream's

¹² Ed Stetzer, "First Person: Understanding the Emerging Church," available at <http://www.crosswalk.com/1372534/>.

heterodox doctrinal lapses but remains open to cultural insights to be gained by reading even McLaren.

Reconstructionists

The agenda of those Stetzer designates as reconstructionists focuses on radical critique of contemporary church structures. In pursuit of missional, authentic, incarnational, communal Christianity, these young emerging leaders seek liberation from the drag of buildings, budgets, and bureaucracies. They favor small house church settings, shared lay leadership, and freedom from distant unknown authorities disconnected from the missional context. Stetzer's response?

. . . if emerging leaders want to think in new ways about the forms (the construct) of church, that's fine—but any form needs to be reset as a biblical form, not just a rejection of the old form. Don't want a building, a budget, and a program—OK. Don't want preaching, biblical leadership, covenant community—not OK.

Relevants

Stetzer's "relevants" category designates doctrinally conservative, often calvinistic leaders within the movement who value their evangelical doctrinal identity but may reject the regulative principle often prized among reformed Baptists, and who are open to innovative experimentation where evangelistic outreach is concerned.¹³

Included among the relevants are the Mars Hill Church mentioned earlier and The Journey, a Southern Baptist Church in St. Louis. Also significant within the relevants stream is the Acts29 church planting network based at Mars Hill which conducts boot camps at various sites nationwide for the training and assessing of church planters, supports the planting of churches, provides mentoring for newly deployed planters, and helps to raise financial resources.¹⁴ Though Acts29 is non-denominational, according to vice-president Darrin Patrick who also serves as pastor of The Journey, around half of the church planters associated with the network are Southern Baptist. The theology is moderately calvinistic, elder leadership is male only, urban settings are targeted, and evangelistic fervor is front and center.

¹³ Simply put, the Regulative Principle states: "True worship is only commanded by God; false worship is anything not commanded." This was the Puritan's view of worship. Such a view insists that the church is meant to find direct justification for every facet of her worship. To go beyond Scripture in matters is sin.

¹⁴ Visit The Journey, Darrin Patrick pastor at www.journeyon.net and Acts29 at www.acts29network.org.

Leaders of these churches look to Tim Keller's ministry at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City as a model for the kind of thing they want to do. Keller, in his fifties, balding, and cutting a grandfatherly figure, preaches very straight conservative, biblical, calvinistic sermons in a low key manner quite different from the rollicking, hip, sarcasm-laced preaching Driscoll sometimes produces in Seattle. Started in 1989, Redeemer now draws over 5000 to its church on Broadway in Manhattan. Key Southern Baptist leaders are understandably intrigued.¹⁵

The protest contingent of angry white dropouts from conservative mega-seeker churches so prominent among Stetzer's revisionists, reconstructionists, and many of the communities highlighted by Gibbs and Bolger, make up a decidedly smaller fraction of these relevants' churches. At Mars Hill, Redeemer, and the Journey, membership is dominated by new, young, urban believers who, as a group, do not seem to have much of an axe to grind against any particular tradition. The median age within each of these congregations is around 29.

If we attempt to list convictions or values shared by the relevants it might include these: missional focus, authenticity, community, recovery of mystery and the arts, critical cultural immersion, recovery of biblical narrative, and, for the most "successful" (measured in numbers at least) congregations, embrace of the doctrines of grace and governance according to male-only elder rule. The missional focus and the cultural immersion mean that culture, while not viewed as benign, is not identified with purely negative scriptural notions of "the worldly." Instead, emerging leaders take on the burden of biblical discernment as they attempt to sift wheat from chaff where culture is concerned. Dimensions of a community's cultural landscape will be viewed variously as helpful, pernicious, or merely neutral. Getting this just right might not be easy, but the task must be faced. Otherwise the erection of unnecessary stumbling blocks to the gospel could unnecessarily hinder evangelism and church growth. On the other hand, cultural factors incompatible with the gospel and holy living left uncensored may in fact obscure the gospel and drag the church into biblical "worldliness."

Ideally, church leaders will be drawn from and thus be indigenous to the communities targeted for church plants. International mission agencies, including the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, learned this lesson decades ago. The most enduring contribution of the emerging movement could be its utter embrace and implementation of this principle of indigenous church planting here in the U.S., a nation increasingly characterized by multiple sub-cultures.

¹⁵ Visit Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Tim Keller, pastor, at www.redeemer.com.

Successful planting of a suburban church is no predictor of success in the cities. In most cases, city folk will have to plant city churches.

Ironically, Stetzer's emerging relevants point to seeker and purpose-driven churches of the suburbs as sad examples of the marginalization of doctrine and a caving-into-culture displacement of the gospel not unlike the kind of thing David Wells has so ably described.¹⁶ In many seeker churches relevants see expository preaching, preaching on whole books of the Bible, and deep teaching on the great doctrines displaced by christianized Boomer values such as self-help, career advancement, fascination with the business world, the accumulation of wealth, and the psychology of self-esteem. Evangelical critics of the relevants point to crude language spewed from the pulpit and an almost giddy, delayed-adolescent pride in the consumption of alcohol in some quarters.

I suspect the shots fired between seeker and emerging churches of the relevants type are partly on target but also partly wide of the mark. For one thing, the church growth movement, in both its seeker-sensitive and purpose-driven modalities, has some age on it, is not monolithic, and in many cases has listened to and learned from various criticisms leveled at it across the years. And people are being converted to Christ in these churches, often people who were not on the radar screen of the vast world of plateaued and declining evangelical churches, including Southern Baptist churches. In best case scenarios, seeker and purpose-driven churches have attempted to do exactly what the "right wing" of the emerging movement is now doing, plant churches indigenous to the community. As for critiques of the doctrine-friendly emerging churches, with a median age of 29 in many of them and with the leaders typically in their mid 30s (Keller at Redeemer is an exception), the blind spots and excesses of youth are to be expected—not excused, but expected.

Stetzer versus Gibbs/Bolger

I noted earlier that I "had thought" my exposure to Mars Hill marked my introduction to the emerging church only to realize later that Donald Miller's bestselling book, *Blue Like Jazz*, had already brought me into that world. But not so fast. The taxonomy troubles where the emerging church is concerned go deeper. Gibbs and Bolger insist that Mars Hill is not emerging but Gen-X. About such churches Gibbs/Bolger contend:

. . . to generalize, the church services were characterized by loud, passionate worship music directed toward God and the believer (not the seeker); David Letterman-style, irreverent banter; raw, narrative

¹⁶ David Wells, *No Place for Truth: Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993).

preaching; *Friends* (the popular TV series) type relationships; and later, candles and the arts. The bulk of church practice remained the same as their conservative Baptist seeker, new paradigm, purpose-driven predecessors; only the surface techniques changed.¹⁷

So who is right? What we can say is that Redeemer Church in New York, Mars Hill in Seattle, and The Journey in St. Louis have been spectacularly effective at reaching precisely the demographic the heroes of the Gibbs/Bolger type churches insist will only respond to sufficiently postmodern-immersed and shaped ministries. Note the implied warning from Gibbs/Bolger:

We both [Gibbs and Bolger] believe the current situation is dire. If the church does not embody its message and life within postmodern culture, it will become increasingly marginalized. Consequently the church will continue to dwindle in numbers throughout the Western world. We share a common vision to see culturally engaged churches emerge throughout the West as well as in other parts of the world influenced by the Western culture.¹⁸

Gibbs and Bolger contend that young people now in their 20s and early 30s are thoroughly postmodern and will not respond to ministries shaped by “modernity.” Fine. How might we then identify ministries that “get it” and thus can help stem the ebb tide of dwindling numbers in the West? How about 5000 plus urbanites in their twenties and thirties streaming to church hungry for Bible preaching on the right and left coasts of America and 1600 in three locations in St. Louis? No, say Gibbs and Bolger. Yes, says Stetzer. Perhaps we should let the Stetzers and the Gibbs and the Bolgers duke it out on the nomenclature front. However the semantics “emerge,” we already see much that can inform evangelical church planting.

Barth/Bultmann Debate Redux

A dispute between Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann of yesteryear with a little bit of Paul Tillich thrown in might help us here. Bultmann complained to Barth that he had no notion of changing the gospel message. His only aim was to translate the gospel message into contemporary language. Barth responded that he had no problem with that, as long as the translator remembers his first task—accurate

¹⁷ Gibbs/Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 30.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

comprehension of the original to be translated, in this case, the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁹

It is just at this point that the mischief enters. Remember that Bultmann considered the question of the bodily resurrection irrelevant to modern men and women. Barth expected that once God got Bultmann out of the ground and to a standing position, the relevance of the bodily resurrection would likely lock in for Rudolf in short order. For his part, Tillich discovered that the word “God” had lost its relevance, and so he proposed an alternative—“the ground of our being.” Oops! That didn’t catch on, did it?

Once you set yourself up as the relevance police, the put-up-or-shut-up test becomes operative—*nicht wahr*? When your perceptions and prognostications don’t pan out, you find yourself running around frustrated that folks keep finding relevant what you just told them they couldn’t and shouldn’t. So, are Redeemer, The Journey, and Mars Hill emerging or not? The jury is out, but what we do know is that these communities of faith are concretely being found relevant by exactly the demographic deemed most resistant to church and gospel in the Western world. It is a fact that kids are dropping out of church in droves (especially from seeker and purpose-driven churches) when they reach their twenties. But churches like Redeemer, Mars Hill, and the Journey attract them. And they do so not with less Bible and theology compared to seeker and purpose-driven churches already ensconced within the Southern Baptist Convention, but with more.

Ironies

Scot McKnight, friend to the emerging movement, acknowledges the accuracy of Carson’s characterization of emerging (at least of the Gibbs/Bolger type) as a protest movement. The tie that binds the disparate sub-factions seems at times reducible to a plethora of conservative, evangelical seeker, and purpose-driven church irritants that came to tick them off within the traditions from which they emerged. Of course, protest can produce positive outcomes, e.g. Protestantism. But protest alone does not a church make. In much of the emerging literature and on the emerging blogs (especially of the Gibbs/Bolger type) one senses the lack of ecclesial memory, a certain vacuity of ideas, and a groping about for some connection to the wider Christian family. Preening, posturing, and pouting about the still elusive, still indefinable term “postmodern” cannot satisfy the yearnings for community,

¹⁹ See especially *Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann: Letters, 1922/1966* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) and Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 112-60.

authenticity, and relevance that ostensibly prompted the exit of many emerging believers from their former churches in the first place.

Recognition that the call of our Lord must transform our lives is not new, is a good thing, and does undoubtedly inform significant parts of emerging church aspiration. Recognition that fixation upon doctrine can function as a letter that kills is also not new, is a good thing, and does shape the sensibility of many emerging church leaders. But here the “left wing” or theology-averse contingent of the emerging movement may suffer from more than a little naïveté regarding a certain prerequisite for the deep, authentic, sustainable community for which they yearn. That prerequisite is shared conviction. For over two millennia, various forms of formal, confessional, doctrinal articulation have proven necessary for the establishment, nurture, and protection of deep fellowship. Why?—Because the depth of fellowship depends, to a certain extent, upon shared beliefs touching both theology and practice. I may assess my relationship with my neighbor as peaceable, harmonious, even as affirming, especially if my knowledge of them remains scant and superficial. But the moment I learn that they belong to a cult requiring the crucifixion of cats over a pyre on Saturday nights, I instruct my children to steer clear. “Familiarity breeds contempt” did not achieve aphoristic status for nothing.

McKnight may be correct that emerging is best understood as an ecclesiological/praxis movement, not a theological movement. Such a view certainly helps to account for the wide diversity of theological identities (or lack of a theological identity) represented within the movement. Still, as McKnight admits but seems to make little of, because the movement has to do with Christ, Bible, and church, it is inevitably, though perhaps unwittingly, theological. For my money, unwittingly theological movements are the worst kind. They tend to wax whiny and persnickety defending the cherished liberation from doctrine and theology they are just beginning to wallow in. But exactly to the extent that Christ, Bible and church animate their aspiration, so will doctrine and theology ineluctably insinuate themselves within their ranks.

SBC Controversy Redux

Happily, a recent attempt to make freedom from doctrine the heart of a sustainable ecclesiological vision is available for analyses—the now defeated moderate/liberal contingent of the late brouhaha within the Southern Baptist Convention. The conflict was construed by some as a choice between freedom of conscience and Islamic-like Christo-facism. The liberal protagonists suffered repeated shocks as messengers to

successive SBC conventions gave them the thumbs down. Following a decade of defeat at the hands of democratic, denominational self-governance, the left-wing attempted to “sort-of” separate and sustain itself under the flag of freedom and doctrinal latitudinarianism; “Jesus is Lord” would suffice as the confessional minimum for the new fellowship. Within one year, matters ranging from the role of women in ministry to race relations to matters of war and peace found their way into the growing ideological identity of the “freedom” folks. The longer people stay together, so it seems, the more convictions they turn out to have! Longtime sociologist of religion and liberal Baptist herself, Nancy Ammerman, understood the distortions endemic to any comprehension of the Baptist conflict in terms of freedom versus dogma.²⁰ Both sides were always defined by rather longish lists of identifiable convictions; theological, ethical, political, and otherwise. And what’s more, these ideological proclivities turned out to matter to the liberals in just the same way as they had to the conservatives. Neither group would knowingly employ professors in their seminaries who could not affirm a hefty chunk of their own doctrinal and ethical biases.

What does this have to do with the emerging movement of the Gibbs/Bolger type? It suggests that the sustainability of its sub-factions will prove proportional in significant measure to their ability to face and know themselves as theological entities, and not as mere suggestive experimenters in praxis and things ecclesiological.

Perhaps more likely is that the influence of the Gibbs/Bolger contingent of the emerging movement will mimic (only on a smaller scale) that of the charismatic movement in relation to established churches and denominations. Thus, the emerging movement may not result in a denomination or even in many sustainable local churches, but will instead serve as a conduit for certain ideas, values and emphases back into established churches.

Aversion to Conversion?

Certainly the lack of evangelistic zeal and even distaste for evangelism on principle among some does not presage growth, strength, or stability for the left-wing, doctrine-averse contingent within the movement. Scot McKnight rightly laments the absence of an evangelistic impulse among so many emerging communities:

²⁰ See Ammerman’s penetrating analysis of the controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention in Nancy Tatum Ammerman, *Baptist Battles: Social Change and Religious Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995). Ammerman drew praise from major protagonists on opposite sides of the conflict.

The emerging movement is not known for [evangelism], but I wish it were. Unless you proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, there is no good news at all—and if there is no Good News, then there is no Christianity, emerging or evangelical.²¹

And McKnight may even be underestimating the problem. Note this from Ben Edson, leader of the Sanctus1 community in the UK and featured in Gibbs/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.²²

Gibbs and Bolger attempt to account for the mindset thus: “Christians cannot truly evangelize unless they are prepared to be evangelized in the process.”²³ Never mind that Buddhism is formally god-less—there is no god to pray to—but for a movement critical of the seeker church, Sanctus1 sounds pretty seeker friendly for Buddhists!

Equally serious looms the simple truism that few things foreshadow more certainly the shrinking, weakening, and threatened demise of a would-be Christian movement than a bad-conscience about proselytizing. Witness the fruit of anti-evangelistic zeal among the mainline denominations that once dominated the religious landscape of America. Here in the Western world, we do not normally need to join anything or invest time, tithe, and talent for the sake of freedom of conscience—we have that already. If we choose to enter bridge-burning, covenant-shaped alliances at all it tends to be driven by the discovery of shared values, goals, and yes, theologies with likeminded believers. To the extent that this or that sub-species of emerging phenomena lack these things, its viability will prove unsustainable. To the extent that emerging churches come to develop and own such old fashioned essentials of real and lasting communion, well then, the ephemeral sheen of abstract freedom and tolerance where core doctrines are concerned will have faded, and defining theological and ecclesiological parameters will land them smack in the middle of the rest of us.

²¹ Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” 38.

²² Gibbs/Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 133.

²³ *Ibid.*, 131.

Should Southern Baptists Care?

Southern Baptists should care because we are already variously reacting to, being influenced by, and participating in the movement. Like the charismatic movement, the emerging church movement seems bound to permeate the thinking and practice of significant cross-sections of every Christian tradition in the West and probably beyond, especially within urban contexts. And the free church structure of Southern Baptists ensures ease of experimentation and cross-pollination with even the flimsiest of passing trends; witness clown ministries, country music churches, fire engine baptisteries, and preaching puppets.

Default construal of Baptist life by outsiders as hidebound and backward-looking will not stand too close scrutiny. Widespread adoption of seeker-church methodologies alone bears witness to how Southern Baptist church leaders are able to be influenced profoundly. Wherever the lure of potential numerical growth dangles, numerous Southern Baptist knees go wobbly. For many Baptists (and this points to a great strength and a great vulnerability among us), numerical growth covers a multitude of sins. The emerging movement is likely to be with us for awhile and to insinuate itself at both the ideological and methodological levels. We would do well to avoid quick and dirty caricatures that either naively embrace or dismiss this phenomenon.

Since 1994, Baptist statesman Jimmy Draper, now retired President and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources (the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention) and former president of the SBC, has taken aggressive steps to highlight the need to listen to, reach, and develop young leaders for service within the SBC. After conducting nationwide meetings designed to connect with young leaders, Draper concluded that young leaders were disconnecting from the SBC. Through Draper's influence and sponsorship, *The Young Leaders Summit* met in connection with the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention in 2005 followed by a second meeting convened at the convention in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 2006. Draper continues efforts to understand and connect with younger Southern Baptist leaders. Commenting on the popularity of web blogs, Draper encourages young Baptist leaders: "Keep blogging," and "Be nice. Don't judge motives. Celebrate the diversity that we have . . . If you're not careful, you'll be as narrow-minded as you think some of us are."²⁴

I expect that many Southern Baptists committed to church planting and grieved at the continued resistance to the gospel within the sprawling megalopolises of our increasingly urbanized nation will follow the phenomenon known as the emerging church movement with keen

²⁴ Available at www.lifeway.com/weblog/jimmydraper/.

interest. I hope that, along with Draper, many of us will listen carefully to the doctrinally evangelical young leaders with a heart for evangelism and church planting. I expect that the emerging church movement will yield much that Bible loving believers must reject. But I also believe it could yield much sound wisdom and practical insight that will help us reach new generations for Christ and plant healthy churches in the very heart of cities once given almost completely over to the devil. Time will tell.