

SECTION 2

THE EMERGING CHURCH, THE  
EMERGENT CHURCH, & THE FAITH  
ONCE DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS

“BELOVED, WHILE I WAS VERY DILIGENT TO  
WRITE TO YOU CONCERNING OUR COMMON  
SALVATION, I FOUND IT NECESSARY TO WRITE  
TO YOU EXHORTING YOU TO CONTEND  
EARNESTLY FOR THE FAITH WHICH WAS ONCE  
FOR ALL DELIVERED TO THE SAINTS.”

JUDE 3

# THE EMERGENT/EMERGING CHURCH: A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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While recounting his return to the West after serving as a missionary in India for decades, the late Lesslie Newbigin was unsettled by the accommodation of the Gospel to “existing plausibility structures.” Therefore, he set out to “rescue” the Gospel from perpetual inefficacy as defenders of the faith continued to give ground in debate.<sup>2</sup> Newbigin called on defenders of the “message” to resist domestication of the Gospel:

It is plain that we do not defend the Christian message by domesticating it within the reigning plausibility structure.<sup>3</sup>

Newbigin borrowed from Peter Berger in order to explain “plausibility structures” as “patterns of belief and practices accepted within a given society, which determine which beliefs are plausible to its members and which are not.”<sup>4</sup>

The Emergent/Emerging Church (E/EC)<sup>5</sup> often stands as something of a collective voice intent on calling attention to the ways in which contemporary expressions of Christianity have been domesticated. In doing so, it often provides a helpful critique. At the same time, like all movements before, it runs the risk of itself domesticating the Gospel to “emerging plausibility structures”—repeating the same error but in a new expression. This paper will explore its history and pertinent nuances stemming from the development of Emergent Village as one expression of the Emergent/Emerging Church. I will provide some observations as to its current state, particularly in relation to how the gospel engages culture. These interactions will lay the groundwork for offering a way to engage the positive

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally presented at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry conference entitled “The Emerging Church, the Emergent Church, and the Faith Once Delivered to the Saints” held on April 4, 2008.

<sup>2</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>5</sup>I am using “Emergent/Emerging” as this was the title of the conference where I presented this paper. Increasingly, some are making a distinction between the two. Some evangelicals are indicating that they are comfortable with Emerging, but uncomfortable with Emergent.

contributions of the Emergent/Emerging Church movement as well as avoid what I believe to be overly contextualized features of some within the movement.

Therefore, the perspective of this paper will be chiefly based on the work of a missiologist. Thus, the history, the values, and the practice of contextualization by those in the Emergent/Emerging Church movement will provide a framework to suggest bridges and boundaries for an evangelical engagement with the Emergent/Emerging Church movement.

#### LEAVING THE OLD COUNTRY<sup>6</sup>

While speaking at Westminster Seminary, Scot McKnight, of North Park College, offered an evaluation of the Emergent/Emerging Church (ECM) movement.<sup>7</sup> In his introduction he noted,

To define a movement, we must let the movement have the first word. We might, in the end, reconceptualize it – which postmodernists say is inevitable – but we should at least have the courtesy to let a movement say what it is.<sup>8</sup>

McKnight challenged critics to let those in the movement speak for themselves or at least engage in conversation until those being criticized would be able to say, “You’ve got it.”

Tony Jones, National Coordinator for Emergent Village, gives what many see as the best inside look at the ECM. In fact, Scot McKnight asserts all conversations about Emergent Village must now go through Tony Jones’ book,

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<sup>6</sup>Tony Jones, *The New Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). The subheading here is taken from Jones’ own telling of the E/EC story.

<sup>7</sup>Scot McKnight may well be considered one of the theologians of the Emergent Church. At the very least, Scot carries on a good many conversations with the more prominent members of Emergent Village discussing theology and praxis in relationship to the re-visioning of theology often present among “Emergents.” The following biographic information comes from his blog, [www.jesuscreed.org](http://www.jesuscreed.org). “Scot McKnight is a widely-recognized authority on the New Testament, early Christianity, and the historical Jesus. He is the Karl A. Olsson Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University (Chicago, Illinois). A popular and witty speaker, Dr. McKnight has given interviews on radios across the nation, has appeared on television, and is regularly asked to speak in local churches and educational events. Dr. McKnight obtained his Ph.D. at the University of Nottingham (1986).”

<sup>8</sup>Scot McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?” Westminster Seminary Audio presentation ([http://www.wtsbooks.com/product-exec/product\\_id/4959/nm/What\\_Is\\_the\\_Emerging\\_Church\\_and\\_Misnomers\\_Surrounding\\_the\\_Emerging\\_Church](http://www.wtsbooks.com/product-exec/product_id/4959/nm/What_Is_the_Emerging_Church_and_Misnomers_Surrounding_the_Emerging_Church)), 2006. The transcript of the audio may be found with the referred quote found on p.2 at <http://www.foolishsage.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf>.

I admit to some weariness with folks mischaracterizing emergent and emerging when we have had so many good studies mapping the whole thing. Well, now, the major debate is over. If you want to know what “emergent” (as in Emergent Village) is all about, here’s the only and best firsthand account: Tony Jones, *The New Christians*.<sup>9</sup>

McKnight’s characterization of Tony Jones’ work as definitive is not without detractors within the E/EC. As I have researched and written this paper, I have found that some differ (often strongly) with some of Tony Jones’ conclusions. Also, others have written (and are writing) other histories.<sup>10</sup> And not all see *The New Christians* as the definitive history. For example, well known E/EC leader Andrew Jones does not list *The New Christians* among his top five E/EC books.<sup>11</sup>

However, due to the limited length of this paper, my analysis will be truncated and will rely on Tony Jones’ work, with some modification. A broader treatment of the ECM would have to draw from sources outside of the United States, which I have not done to limit the scope of the paper. Furthermore, it would look back further than I have done. For example, Andrew Jones contends the beginnings of the ECM in Europe pre-date the same movement in the United States<sup>12</sup> and he also interprets counter-cultural church movements beginning in the 1960s to be precursors to the E/EC rather than the organizations and movements that become Emergent Village.<sup>13</sup>

That being said, we have used Tony Jones’ history for several reasons. First, Tony Jones admits his telling of the story is indeed just one story and that it is part memoir, part explication of the ECM as he has experienced. Second, D. A. Carson raised the level of focus on the EMC in his book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Carson critiqued Brian McLaren and Tony Jones, among others, and their identification with Emergent Village alerted many evangelicals to the ECM. Thus, for many, the ECM has been identified with Emergent Village.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Scot McKnight, <http://www.jesuscreed.org/index.php?s=conspirators>.

<sup>10</sup>See for example, Becky Garrison, *Rising from the Ashes: Rethinking Church* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007) and Phyllis Tickle’s forthcoming, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008).

<sup>11</sup>Andrew Jones, <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2008/06/emerging-chur-1.html#more>

<sup>12</sup>Andrew Jones, [http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/10/my\\_history\\_of\\_t.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/10/my_history_of_t.html). Jones writes, “I didn’t realize at the time that in the UK there were new models of church far more advanced than ours. But more about that another time.”

<sup>13</sup>Andrew Jones, [http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2005/03/emergant2\\_count.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2005/03/emergant2_count.html).

<sup>14</sup>This conclusion will be dated as Dan Kimball, Scot McKnight, and several others are discussion additional collaborations even as this paper is published.

Finally, Brian McLaren represents one of the most public figures in the ECM. Brian's association with Emergent Village raised its visibility as a key voice (particularly in the United States) for the ECM. Thus, for the focus and intent of this paper I have chosen to follow the story of the ECM as Jones tells it (with some revisions as detailed below).

Thus, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* bears the weight of its endorsers as "the" definitive "explication and explanation" of emergent.<sup>15</sup> In the first section entitled, "Leaving the Old Country," Jones offers his perspective on the history of the ECM. Tony helps the reader think through the reigning plausibility structures questioned by the group which eventually became Emergent Village and which also shaped the ECM.<sup>16</sup> The ECM reaches around the world, having a significant presence in the UK, Europe, Australia and around the world years before what we witness in the United States. However, again, I will focus on the expression of the Emergent/Emerging Church Movement in the United States.

A brief lexicon may help the reader. This material is taken from Jones' work:

**Emergent Christianity:** the new forms of Christian faith arising from the old; the Christianity believed and practiced by the emergents.

**The Emergent Church:** the specifically new forms of church life rising from the modern, American church of the twentieth century.

**The Emergents:** the adherents of emergent Christianity.

**Emergent:** specifically referring to the relational network which formed first in 1997; also known as Emergent Village.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Tony Jones, *The New Christians* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). The quotation is attributed to Phyllis Tickle on the dust cover.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 1-22.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., xix-xx. Following McKnight's conviction that to understand a movement is to let it speak until those who engage it hear, "You've got it," I will use the lexicon found in Jones' book. With that in mind, it is important to note the use of "The Emergent Church" may be a bit confusing to the readers, as old patterns would consider such a description to include something of a denominational structure. In this sense, there is no "Emergent Church." Instead, there are those in existing denominational structures who practice Emergent Christianity. Their network is a loose connection of people who share what will be referred to as an "ethos." Scot McKnight is helpful at this point when he notes, "*There is no such thing as the emerging "church." It is a movement or a conversation – which is Brian McLaren's and Tony Jones' favored term, and they after all are the leaders. To call it a "church" on the title of his [D.A. Carson] book is to pretend that it is something like a denomination, which it isn't. The leaders are determined, right now, to prevent it becoming anything more than a loose association of those who want to explore conversation about the Christian faith and the Christian mission and the Christian praxis in this world of ours, and they want to explore that conversation with freedom and impunity when it comes to*

Prior to the release of Jones' book, others had offered lexicographic help for understanding terms used by those considered "in" the Emergent/Emerging Church. For example, Darrin Patrick of Journey Church in St. Louis gave a presentation at Covenant Seminary in which one session was dedicated to a lexicon for conversations about emergent.<sup>18</sup> There is more than one good option for the vocabulary. However, this paper will follow Jones' terminology when the context relates to Emergent.

I will use the term "emerging" to describe the wider movement. One key difference rests with organizational expressions of the ECM, where Emergent Village (EV) would represent a more formal expression with events, local cohorts and publishing agreements. On many occasions, I will use the combination "Emergent/Emerging Church" (E/EC) when the distinction between Emergent and Emerging is less helpful and the context is the wider movement that takes in Emergent and Emergent Village in particular.

#### GENERATIONAL THEORY AND A NEW CHRISTIAN MARKET

The nexus for the story of the (E/EC) may be tied to generational theory and the market approach to church growth/planting, at least in its expression in the United States.<sup>19</sup> In 1986 Dieter Zander planted New Song in California as one of the first Gen X churches in the United States.<sup>20</sup> It would be another ten years before talk of Gen X churches gained traction. At the time, "targeting" for church planting referenced "Busters" or in Zander's terminology, "The People in Between." Ten years after the start of New Song, Zander wrote one of the first books on Gen X ministry, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters*.<sup>21</sup>

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*doctrine.*" (McKnight, "What Is the Emerging Church?" delivered at Westminster Seminary, October 2006,).

<sup>18</sup>Darrin Patrick, "Popular Terms of the Emerging Church," Covenant Seminary, October 22, 2007. The audio file may be found at <http://www.journeyon.net/sermon/session-two-popular-terms-of-the-emerging-church/>.

<sup>19</sup>Andrew Jones included Zander and generational ministry in his telling of the history, but also adds that there were other early expressions of the ECM present in the 1980s that were not widely reported. Jones wrote me, "My first emerging church effort was a coffee shop environment in 88-89 at an Evangelical Free Church in Portland... there were others in the 1980s but these people did not have book deals... so the history is skewed and inaccurate."

<sup>20</sup>Keith Matthews, Conference call recording with Dieter Zander obtained from ETREK Collaborative Learning Journeys, 2007. Information about Dieter Zander and New Song may be found at <http://www.newsongsd.org/253217.html>.

<sup>21</sup>Tim Celek, Dieter Zander and Patrick Kampert, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation: Insights and Strategies for Reaching Busters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

Dieter Zander attended the first Gen X forum at Colorado Springs in 1996 sponsored by Leadership Network.<sup>22</sup> Those in attendance at the Gen X forum discussed a number of issues. The following year, 1997, Doug Pagitt interviewed with Leadership Network to become the Young Leader coordinator. In addition, a group of about 500 met at Mount Hermon Conference Center in California as one of the key early meetings.

The third conference in this series took place at Glorieta, New Mexico, and was dubbed the Re-evaluation Forum. Pagitt planned this event which offered a variety of tracks and speakers. However, Travis contends (and Andrew Jones confirmed) that “the Group of 20” that became the seedbed of “Emergent” was actually post-Glorieta.

During and between these larger meetings, it appears from Jones that smaller informal meetings or networking sessions took place. From these developing friendships “emerged” what Travis calls “the Group of 20.” Jones’ telling of the story places the development of this group prior to Glorieta. Our research team confirmed the planning of the first “Gathering” at Glorieta by this small group was announced via a flier at the very first Emergent Convention in San Diego. Further, a reference to a “Group of 20” is applied by those outside that network.

The small group bore more resemblance to a G8 type group representing various smaller networks sharing “Emergent” sensibilities. Leadership Network concerned itself with facilitating a variety of “affinity” groups into networks. One of those networks included young leaders with an “Emergent” ethos. Though their perceptions in timing differ as to the emergence of a small “leadership” group, Travis’s and Jones’ accounts illustrate that the roots of what would become the (E/EC) developed through Leadership Network gatherings and the organizations goal of facilitating various networks for ministry.

Emergent Village represents the most organized iteration of a movement that initially sought to raise up the next Bill Hybles or Rick Warren. Tony Jones offers brief details of a meeting at Glen Eyrie Mansion just outside of Colorado Springs, CO.<sup>23</sup> The name chosen for the gathering of about a dozen young leaders, orchestrated by Doug Pagitt representing Leadership Network, was “Gen X 1.0.”

Several years would pass before the term “Emergent” would signal a significant move on the contemporary Christian landscape. The meeting in Glen Eyrie would eventually comprise a project referred to as “The Young Leader Network” and later “The Terra Nova Project.” Conversations occurred to purposefully identify ways to connect with the Gen X generation. From these discussions, considerations regarding cultural shifts developed which created new challenges and opportunities for the church.

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<sup>22</sup>Dave Travis (of Leadership Network) sent me an e-mail noting the timeline for the general meetings sponsored by Leadership Network, clarifying some perceived inaccuracies.

<sup>23</sup>Jones, *The New Christians*, 42-43. Tony acknowledges others would tell the story differently and notes he was not present at any of the early meetings. The timeline is really only relevant as it pinpoints certain participants” at a given meeting. A number of streams, threads, or influences contributed to “Emergent Village” and that is chiefly Jones’ point.

Moreover, these conversations led the group to conclude that Evangelical Theology was in need of “re-visioning.” Questions arose as to the success of the “Evangelical” project.<sup>24</sup> However, when Emergent Christianity sets its critical gaze toward the state of the Church, it often finds left and right categories polarizing, whereas at times I find these categories clarifying.

This desire to critique modern expressions of Christianity was often directed at Evangelicals. However, some in the emerging church are even-handed in their critique of the church. Not only do those in the Evangelical tradition face scrutiny, mainline churches do not get a free pass. As recently as last fall at the American Academy of Religion/Society of Biblical Literature (AAR/SBL) meeting in San Diego, Tony Jones sparred with Diana Butler-Bass over his frequent assertion that the “Mainline Church” is “dead.”<sup>25</sup> This has led to some controversy within the emerging expressions of some mainline denominations as many E/EC movements are a part of those structures.

Some characterize the prophetic call of Emergent Christianity to be nothing but angry rhetoric. I believe that a closer look at the unarguable decline of Christianity in the United States gives cause for us to reconsider the Emerging Church’s call rather than dismiss it out of hand because we do not like the tone. The loss of Christian influence in American culture must be born by all expressions of the Faith, particularly denominations who fail to take into account the changing cultural milieu while dreaming of a bygone day. As I have said of our own denomination, should the 1950s return we will be ready. Can it really be argued the issue is simply a matter of ecclesial structures? The (E/EC) suggests otherwise, and I believe that here they are at least partly right.

#### BEYOND CONSUMER CULTURE AND THE “HERMENEUTIC OF DECONSTRUCTION”

The framework for evaluating current practices and theology, by what would become the Emergent/Emerging Church, came during that Glen Eyrie meeting. After some discussion focused on marketing to Gen X, the meeting shifted. As Brad Cecil listened, he found the conversation lacking.<sup>26</sup> At a point where his body language indicated that he had not embraced the tone and direction of the conversation, he was asked for his input. Brad suggested that the issues were deeper than looking for style points with Gen X. Deep

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<sup>24</sup>I would agree with the need to evaluate the Evangelical movement and to conclude that it falls short of its promise, hence my affirmation of efforts such as “The Gospel Coalition.”

<sup>25</sup>Scot McKnight, Tony Jones and Diana Butler-Bass, “AAR Panel,” Podcast, 2007, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/aar-panel-part-1> and <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/aar-panel-part-2>.

<sup>26</sup>Brad Cecil, “Axxess”, web page background of ministry led, at times, by Brad Cecil, [http://www.axxess.org/?page\\_id=2](http://www.axxess.org/?page_id=2). Also view the powerpoint Cecil put together on the subject, <http://www.slideshare.net/knightopia/ministry-in-the-emergent-postmodern-world>.



cultural shifts indicated a need to look beyond matters of marketing to a new iteration of Christian consumer culture.<sup>27</sup>

Cultural analysis combined with ecclesiological, missiological, and theological responses led Cecil to refer to his reading and interaction with John (Jack) D. Caputo.<sup>28</sup> For Cecil, the way forward would be led by Caputo's "hermeneutic of deconstruction."<sup>29</sup> Caputo sought to put forth a way to retain orthodoxy while at the same time exposing the attachments and accommodations that existing forms of Christianity make to conform to the reigning plausibility structures. At a pivotal break in the meeting, a few soon-to-be prominent figures would look around the room and wonder just "who got it."

The turn this new group would make led to the early label, "angry young white children of Evangelicalism." Many who found the "hermeneutic of deconstruction" helpful for recovering the Gospel from the clutches of a consumer culture had not yet learned to temper their "discontent with grace." Many popular message boards contained scathing words directed at what was and is referred to as the "Institutional Church."<sup>30</sup>

One of the early places for those working through the critique of the Church was TheOoze. Spencer Burke left Mariner's Church convinced that ecclesial structures needed to be evaluated. One key issue was the disproportionate financial commitment to the "Sunday" event creating more of a consumer construct than a place for spiritual transformation and building community. Again, the entrance into theological conversations proved to be ecclesiology.

"TheOoze" community grew and many of the interactions on the message boards in the early days demonstrated much of the angry evangelical rhetoric. However, it became a key gathering point and connection place for leaders in the emerging conversation. It would also be the place where I first researched the movement. In 2001, I conducted a survey on TheOoze which focused on churches reaching postmoderns. That research was published in my book, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (2003).

Recently TheOoze celebrated its ten-year anniversary with the release of, *Out of the Ooze*. In the introduction founder Spencer Burke noted,

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<sup>27</sup>Jones, *The New Christians*, 42-43.

<sup>28</sup>John (Jack) D. Caputo retired from Villanova University and is now at Syracuse University, <http://religion.syr.edu/caputo.html>.

<sup>29</sup>John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Post-Modernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 19-34. Caputo considers healthy deconstruction to be a "hermeneutic of the Kingdom of God."

<sup>30</sup>For example, TheOoze message boards offered a place for the discontented to engage in conversation around themes questioning the future of the Church as institution, <http://www.theooze.com>.

In 1998, I decided to launch TheOoze.com as a place where people could come and share their questions, longings, and musings about the body of Christ. My desire was to create a place where honest and transparent dialogue about faith, culture, and ministry could happen.

Since that time, TheOoze.com has grown to over two hundred and fifty thousand visitors a month from more than one hundred countries around the world. Who are these people? They are people who love the church and desperately want to see her become the essential, life-giving-community that God designed her to be. They come from a wide variety of traditions, viewpoints, and cultures.<sup>31</sup>

Over time, the early phase of grumblings and complaints faded and the early conversations changed direction. Only offering critique would no longer be sufficient; it was now time to consider what contributions could be made to “see her [the Church] become the essential, life-giving-community that God designed her to be.”<sup>32</sup>

#### ORGANIZATIONAL TURNS

What would be the next steps? The organization of TheOoze illustrates a shift. Hierarchies are often anathema for those in emerging Christianity. The disdain is not against order as much as a conviction that responsibility be shared across a network. For example, TheOoze is maintained by a number of volunteers. Each area of content is managed in a way to include nearly anyone who would commit to participate.

Discontent with ecclesial structures represents a significant turn in the history of the Emergent/Emerging Church. From the collaborative structure of TheOoze to the loose network created by Doug Pagitt, the need to gather the growing group into more of a formal network began.

As noted, Leadership Network was the early sponsor of what would become the emerging Church. I recently spoke with Bob Buford about his “sponsorship,” and he was unhappy with what the movement had become. The gerund “emerging” showed up in one of the many taglines supplied on Leadership Network materials. In one iteration of the many taglines LN described itself as “advance scouts for the emerging church.” The reference to “emerging church” by LN is more coincidence than endorsement for any movement; more descriptive of Leadership Network’s development of “emerging networks” rather than “emerging church.” However, those who would eventually become leaders in the E/EC developed their network out of relationships forged via Leadership Network “networks.” That gerund (emerging) would eventually become a noun (emergent) and from relationships fostered by LN, a future movement would find its moniker.

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<sup>31</sup>Spencer Burke, *Out of the Ooze: Unlikely Love Letters from Beyond the Pew* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2007), 14.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 14.

Jones writes of the faltering relationship between the Young Leaders and Leadership Network. In a conference call, this fractured relationship was discussed and the group determined to create a more formal organization to promote constructive ways to “live the way of Jesus in a postmodern age.” The label “Emergent” rose to the fore as a metaphor for new growth on the forest floor “emerging” beneath the old growth.<sup>33</sup> The idea was to maintain the connection with Christian history and at the same time develop new forms to engage the postmodern shift in culture.

Leonard Sweet offered a similar conception with the “swing.”<sup>34</sup> In this image statement found on his website, Sweet borrowed from research which suggested that when a person “swings” he or she simultaneously leans back and presses forward. Application of this image called for a reaching back into Church history and a pressing forward into the future. The issue of contextualization would be an important component in analyzing this movement. Sweet became a popular Church Historian/Futurist in the early days of the Emergent/Emerging Church and, in many ways, encouraged the “Emergent Turn.”

Recently, it should be noted here that Sweet offered the criticism that the “turn” may have gone too far with Emergent. So far, he asserts—rather than reach back into 2000 years of Church history, Emergent stopped at the “liberal turn” wherein the Gospel became all social and no gospel. Sweet emailed me:

The emerging church has become another form of social gospel. And the problem with every social gospel is that it becomes all social and no gospel. All social justice and no social gospel. It is embarrassing that evangelicals have discovered and embraced liberation theology after it destroyed the main line, old line, side line, off line, flat line church.<sup>35</sup>

Interestingly, in response to similar concerns, Brian McLaren responds on Andrew Jones’ web log to the charges of embracing liberation theology and accompanying criticisms.<sup>36</sup>

Dan Kimball, one of the early members of the Emergent Village “coordinating council,” chronicled the use of the term “emerging” on his blog in April 2006. The irony

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<sup>33</sup>The metaphor of new growth emerging from the forest floor represents a common explanation of the attractiveness of “emerging” used in talks by many “leaders” in the E/EC.

<sup>34</sup>Leonard Sweet, “Image Statement”, <http://www.leonardsweet.com/imgstatement.asp>.

<sup>35</sup>Personal email from Len Sweet.

<sup>36</sup>Andrew Jones, “Brian McLaren Responds to *Everything Must Change* Concerns”, March 25, 2008, <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2008/03/brian-mclaren-r.html>.

lies in the title of Kimball's book, *The Emerging Church*.<sup>37</sup> Kimball notes he first heard the reference to "emerging" from Leadership Network which inspired him to use the term in the title of his book, published in 2003. Kimball notes that the domain names *emergingchurch.com*, *emergingchurch.net*, *emergingchurch.org* were all purchased between 2000 and 2001. (I registered *postmodernism.net* in April 2000 to be used as a resource for those seeking to reach this emerging culture. But, unlike Dan Kimball, I never used the domain.)

The Young Leaders Theology Group that became Emergent Village purchased *emergentvillage.com* and *emergentvillage.org* in June of 2001. These moves indicate an interest to "ramp up" public interest and the networking of and for those self-identifying with the "emergent/emerging conversation."

These networks coalesced into the formation of Emergent Village. Early on Emergent Village functioned as a loose network under the leadership of a "Coordinating Council." Those who participated did so voluntarily and without remuneration. The first "event" for this group took place at Glorieta Conference Center in New Mexico and was dubbed "The Emergent Gathering." Those who gathered for this event paid a small registration fee. Once again, the collaborative nature of the event found expression in the "breakout" sessions. Anyone who traveled to Glorieta could offer to host a session around the topic of their choice. The feel of the gathering was more fellowship than conference.

"The Gathering" was a small event but spurred a desire for larger conferences and more focused events. The need for partnerships to facilitate conferences and book publishing became apparent, and the first partner to step forward was Youth Specialties. Not only would YS offer a proven event planning team, but they also presented a viable publishing partner. YS and its founder Mike Yaconelli co-sponsored the first National Pastor's Convention in San Diego. Soon a parallel convention, referred to as "The Emergent Convention," provided an alternate "track" for National Pastors Convention attendees. The partnership was short lived as YS re-focused their energies on their core ministry to youth workers. The separation was amicable. For example, Mark Ostreicher often writes of his continued friendship with Doug Pagitt, as well as Tony Jones and others he met during the YS-Emergent partnership. As evidenced by the most recent event in February 2008, many connected with Emergent still make presentations at the National Pastor's Convention.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Dan Kimball, "Origin of the terms "Emerging" and "Emergent Church – part 1, [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origin\\_of\\_the\\_t.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html).

<sup>38</sup>Scot McKnight, Phyllis Tickle, and Tony Jones have all been associated with the Emergent Church on some level. Others at the conference could also be considered sympathetic. For example, Sarah Cunningham's book *Dear Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) expresses the ethos of the Emergent Church. An argument could be made that Erwin McManus also has written in a vein familiar to the Emergent Church "mood."

## ORTHODOXY OVER ORTHOPRAXY?

For many in the Emergent/Emerging Church, calls to rethink historic bi-polarities figure prominently into conversations, whether in conference talks or books written. Without question one of the marks that frames the values of the Emergent/Emerging Church and, as already noted, provides the door to theological re-visioning is “ecclesial discontent.” The heart of this issue turns on the practice of faith in Jesus and its relationship to right belief. For many in the Emergent/Emerging Church, the question of orthodoxy or orthopraxy is a false dichotomy. At the same time, they would be quick to note their experiences have witnessed a disconnect between right belief (orthodoxy) and right practice (orthopraxy). They often come across sounding as though right practice trumps right belief. I would contend that this is in itself an unnecessary bi-polarity. Yet, for those in the Emergent Church, practice is often considered a first order spiritual matter while doctrine is second order.

Donald Miller may be a popular example of the emerging church’s desire to emphasize orthopraxy (right practice). In *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality*, he tells the story of the “confessional.” In an attempt to connect with what was considered one of the most secular college campus populations in the United States at Reed College, Miller and others set up a confessional during a week of festivities around the campus referred to as Ren Fayre.

Dressed in monastic attire, they waited for students to approach the booth. Upon inquiry, students learned the group was not accepting confessions but making them. Miller and his band of confessors apologized to students for the bad practices they had endured at the hands of Christians. The group confessed by referencing events in Christian history that seemed to contradict the ethic of Jesus. While Miller and his group had not directly participated in the actions, they understood the perception created by these events which often left non-Christians questioning the veracity of a faith that forced, for example, conversions at the point of a sword.<sup>39</sup> They graphically demonstrated the difference between orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Brian McLaren provides another example. He considers himself something of an anomaly when it comes to the ECM. Rather than an early participant as a “young leader,” Brian instead responded to the invitation to participate though a full ten years or more older than the group assembled by Pagitt. His book *A New Kind of Christian* struck an early chord. The experiment in “fiction/non-fiction” gave voice to many young people who found their experience of life and faith in Jesus formed in more conservative, even fundamentalist, church settings. If *A New Kind of Christian* became the entry point for many to consider what would be the Emergent/Emerging Church Movement, Jones’ *The New Christians* serves as a description of how the movement developed along those lines. In that sense, the connection between McLaren’s *A New Kind of Christian* and Tony Jones’ *The New Christians* is unmistakable.

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<sup>39</sup>Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 113-127.

In 2006, McLaren published *The Secret Message of Jesus*. In the first chapter titled, “Excavation,” Brian notes a deepening disconnect between what he learned as a young Christian, and also preached as a pastor, and his reading of the Scriptures. He explains,

For me, these aren’t theoretical questions. I grew up in the church and heard wonderful stories about Jesus that captured my imagination throughout my childhood. Then in my teenage years, after a brief but intense period of doubt, I became intrigued by Jesus in a more mature way, and I began wondering what it means to be an authentic follower of Jesus in my daily life. In college and graduate school, although I went through times of questioning, skepticism, and disillusionment, I retained confidence that Jesus himself was somehow right and real and from God—even if the religions bearing his name seemed to be a very mixed bag of adherents like me often set a disappointing example.<sup>40</sup>

Here, a prominent figure in the Emergent Church points up not simply the dissonance between orthodoxy and praxis as an observer but also as a participant in the life of the Church.

#### “-MERGENTS”: THE BREADTH OF THE MOVEMENT AND THE MISSIONAL INFLUENCE

The movement has clearly grown in influence. For some, they believe that influence will grow dramatically over the coming years. Phyllis Tickle, currently Contributing Editor in Religion and former Religion Editor for Publishers Weekly, offered some reflections on her forthcoming book, *The Great Emergence*, in an Emergent Village podcast.<sup>41</sup> During the conversation Tony Jones points up the interesting advocacy Tickle has demonstrated toward the E/EC. For two consecutive years, in 2004 and 2005, Tickle spoke to those who gathered at the Emergent Convention. A quote from her forthcoming book offers her rationale,

While no observer is willing to say emphatically just how many North American Christians are definitively emergent at this moment, it is not unreasonable to assume that by that by the time the Great Emergence has reach maturity, about 60 percent of practicing American Christians will be emergent or some clear variant thereof.<sup>42</sup>

Once the ECM gained national prominence as a movement or conversation, observers and critics have attempted to determine the “theology of the Emergent/Emerging Church.” There are certainly diverging opinions on the theology of the emerging church.

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<sup>40</sup>Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville: W Publishing, 2006), 5.

<sup>41</sup>Emergent Village Podcast, 07/14/07, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/podcast/phyllis-tickle-interviewed-by-tony-jones>.

<sup>42</sup>Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008), 139.

Scot McKnight contends there is no theology of Emergent.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Don Carson considers Emergent to have left orthodoxy behind.

If Scot McKnight's admonition to let Emergent speak for itself is followed, then it may do well to consider the stated values of Emergent Village. The result would be the expression of an ethos assimilated into a variety of denominational, and so in many ways theological, constructs. The breadth of the Emergent Church ethos found in nearly every denominational setting makes it hard to consider the movement expressly theological. It may well lead to "re-visioning" theological formulations, but this appears to often be done so in the context of one's faith tradition. In a recent Emergent/C e-mail newsletter, National Coordinator Tony Jones and webmaster Steve Knight note,

We're not sure how it started to happen exactly, but people from many different streams of Christianity started finding some inspiration, hope, and community through Emergent Village—and then they started to find each other. Well, it's grown dramatically over the past couple years, thanks in large part to the Internet. We're thrilled about this, as people explore how the emergent experiment might take hold in the Petri dish of their own traditions/denominations.<sup>44</sup>

They go on to note "mergent" groups Lutheranmergent (Lutheran), Methodomergent (Methodist), Presbymergent (Presbyterian), Reformmergent (Reformed), Submergent (Anabaptist), Anglimergent (Anglican/Episcopal), Convergent (Quaker), and AGmergent (Assemblies of God/Pentecostal).<sup>45</sup> The Emergent Village website describes itself as "a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ."<sup>46</sup>

Applying adjectives to forms of Christianity may help understand nuances, but it often proves to limit the breadth of a movement. Embedded in the Emergent/Emerging Church ethos one will find a distinct missional thread. Some find confusion when examining current Christian moves. Is it "missional?" Is it "Emergent?" Is it "Missional Emergent?" Is it "Emergent Missional?" Or, "What does missional have to do with Emergent?"

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<sup>43</sup>Scot McKnight, "What is the Emerging Church?" Westminster Seminary Audio presentation ([http://www.wtsbooks.com/product-exec/product\\_id/4959/nm/What\\_Is\\_the\\_Emerging\\_Church\\_and\\_Misnomers\\_Surrounding\\_the\\_Emerging\\_Church](http://www.wtsbooks.com/product-exec/product_id/4959/nm/What_Is_the_Emerging_Church_and_Misnomers_Surrounding_the_Emerging_Church)), 2006. The transcript of the audio may be found at <http://www.foolishsage.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf>.

<sup>44</sup>Tony Jones and Steve Knight, "Emergent Hybrid Synergy: The Rise of the – Mergents", March 28, 2008, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/emergent-hybrid-synergy-the-rise-of-the-mergents>.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

<sup>46</sup>Emergent Village, "Home Page", [www.emergentvillage.com](http://www.emergentvillage.com).

The Emergent/Emerging Church cannot ignore the influence of the Gospel and Our Culture Network and its accompanying “missional conversations.” Alan Roxburgh has served as an interesting conversation partner for both the Emergent Church and the GOCN. He served as a contributor to *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* published in 1998. Roxburgh was also invited to some of the pre-Emergent Village conversations and to be a breakout session leader for at least one of the Emergent Conventions sponsored by Youth Specialties.

Biblical Seminary may provide a helpful example of how missional and emerging have blended. Alan Roxburgh served as consultant to Biblical Theological Seminary (BTS) as they were re-imagining their role as a place to offer theological education. His association with GOCN and the “missional conversation” bears a significant mark on the language and move BTS has taken. At the same time, John Franke represents one of the young theologians many in the Emergent/Emerging Church became familiar with at the release of *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* that he co-authored with the late Stanley Grenz. There is little doubt that Grenz’s conviction that Evangelical theology needed to be “re-visioned” has influenced those in the Emergent/Emerging Church.

Another figure offering input and consultation with BTS has been Tim Keel, pastor of Jacob’s Well in Kansas City, Missouri. Tim has served on the Coordinating Council of Emergent Village since the early days. His church has been considered by some to really capture the ethos of the Emergent Church and, at the same time, carry on the missional thread with great intention. Tim tells his story in his recent book, *Intuitive Leadership: Embracing a Paradigm of Narrative, Metaphor, and Chaos* published under the “emersion” imprint. Today, Tim serves as a Trustee of BTS.

#### WALKING THE TIGHTROPE: A CASE IN POINT

When the edges of the Emergent/Emerging Church garnered both attention and harsh critique, BTS made a conscious decision to maintain a place in the middle between the extremes of the Emergent Church and the Missional Conversation. Todd Mangum, Associate Professor of Theology and Dean of the Faculty, helped craft a statement expressing the place Biblical would stand. The statement reads in part,

“Emergent” is a loosely knit group of people in conversation about and trying experiments in how the people of God can forward the ministry of Jesus in new and different ways. From there, wide diversity abounds. “Emergents” seems to share one common trait: disillusionment with the organized, institutional church as it has existed through the 20th century (whether fundamentalist, liberal, megachurch, or tall-steeple liturgical) ... Biblical is seeking to come alongside the emergents as an evangelical friend that understands the disillusionment and wants to help. We’re trying to supply training that capitalizes on the strengths and helps emergents mature beyond the weaknesses. We’re unapologetically evangelical in our theology (not all emergents are), but because we’re generous and value the relationship (two virtues



that trump everything else typically for emergents), we can get along with emergents even with whom we disagree vigorously in theological conviction.<sup>47</sup>

While some view it as flirting with danger, BTS attempts what others consider the impossible. Their conviction rests with the need to explore the value of the “Missional Turn” in concert with those healthy prophetic voices in the Emergent Church for the good of the Church. In fact, Mangum presented a paper to the Theology and Culture Study Session of the Evangelical Theological Society in November of 2007 in San Diego titled, “Has Our Culture Changed So Much Really? (An Apologia for the ‘Missional Turn’)”. It is hard to escape the same sentiment expressed by Scot McKnight when he notes that Emergent Christians are seeking to live out the way of Jesus in a postmodern context—a clear missional concern..

The text of the BTS statement given by Todd Mangum does appear to distance the seminary in some sense from the Emergent Church. Other examples also illustrate the point. The Center for Emerging Church Leadership (CECL) has undergone a name change to, Catalyst for Missional Leadership (C4ML). My own role at BTS, leading their 2007 faculty retreat and serving as an adjunct faculty member, was expressed around their desire to be more “missional” and less “emerging.” Thus, some want to be missional but are cautious about being “emergent.”

The ethos of Emergent Village characterized by their identity statement cannot be viewed as anything other than an attempt to express the melding of “emerging” and “missional.” One could argue that “generative friendship” illustrates the move from hierarchical models of networking acutely important to the Emergent Church. And, “missional Christians” retains the understanding of the work of God in the world in existing cultural contexts. The impulse to contextualize the Gospel marks the Emergent Church as a “missiological turn” as much as it does a “theological turn.”

#### VALUES AND THE EMERGENT CHURCH

While the Emergent Church continues to speak for itself through those with platform and voice, it becomes increasingly important to see how its values reflect a framework for contextualization and creates an agreed upon “rule of life” out of which Emergents seek to live the way of Jesus. The values of the Emergent/Emerging Church illustrate a clear emphasis upon practice which they believe is missing in the more conservative forms of the Faith. For instance, Tony Jones identifies traits that he found as he visited a number of Emergent Churches across the United States. He begins laying these out by writing,

As a result of those category-defying characteristics, many emergents feel homeless in the modern American church. In 2006 I visited eight emergent congregations across the country. At each, I performed one-on-one interviews and facilitated focus

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<sup>47</sup>Todd Mangum, “Q & A with Todd Mangum”, October 6, 200, Catalyst for Missional Leadership at BTS’s website, <http://www.c4ml.com/wandering-off-course/10/>.

groups, listening for articulations of just what emergent Christianity offered these people.<sup>48</sup>

Three traits emerged during the interviews and conversations Jones conducted. First, a remarkable disappointment with modern American Christianity grounded in the polarizations experienced in the left-right divide. Second, these people evidenced a tortured desire for inclusion that transcended the warnings they would fall on the slippery slope into liberalism. Instead they gave themselves to the ideal considering the “other” as valuable human beings, even the enemy is in need of forgiveness. Third, despite the condition of the world, those with whom Tony talked shared a relentless hope-filled orientation. The Good News of Jesus is believed to be just that, Good News of hope that brings an end to war, poverty, and hunger. And, “emergents” believe that they should actively participate in sharing this hope for the good of the world.<sup>49</sup>

One may readily recognize the connection to the kinds of sentiment Jones discovered with the values given on the Emergent Village website. Each value is supported by both explanation and suggested practices which also call attention to the unnecessary disconnect between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. The values given on the Emergent Village website are a commitment to God in the Way of Jesus, a commitment to the Church in all its forms, a commitment to God’s World, and a commitment to one another. It would be a mistake to assume what these mean without reading the practices and actions supporting these commitments.

The illumination of these values takes many forms. For example, one may argue Scot McKnight’s recent book, *A Community Called Atonement*, serves both as polemic and apologetic for the conversations about the atonement among emerging Christians. In terms of apology, McKnight calls the reader to the various ways the atonement has been viewed in history and so emphasizes its breadth. As a polemic, McKnight reminds the reader of the necessity of the various perspectives on the atonement, lest in throwing out one view a person may develop as truncated a view of the atonement as they critique others of having.

One cannot deny the interplay between orthodoxy and praxis. Great risks are run when seeking one over the other. The Emergent Church considers it obvious that contending for doctrinal precision has not necessarily produced an embodied ethic—and I

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<sup>48</sup>Jones, *The New Christians*, 70. The “category-defying characteristics” is illustrated by an e-mail Tony received wherein a Christian manager at Starbucks responds in a conversation by saying, “You know what I hate about those emergent people? They love everyone.” This was in response to learning a group of Christians had befriended a lesbian barista in the store he managed, even offering a church to attend.

<sup>49</sup>Jones, *The New Christians*, 70-72. Jones concludes this brief section with a parenthetical caveat, “lists are dangerous, and emergents are rightly suspicious of them. These three characteristics of emergent Christians are not conclusive, nor are they necessarily provable – or disprovable. They are simply my intuitions based on scores of conversations with emergents, and I expect—and hope—that they will provoke much debate.”

believe few would disagree with them. They would assert that the critics dissect words quickly in an attempt to ensure “orthodoxy,” but that for them orthodoxy has not been compromised in favor of being relevant.<sup>50</sup> The curious, like the critics, look for marks by which to evaluate the Emergent Church.

PRACTICES, TAXONOMIES, STREAMS AND LAKE EMERGENT –  
UNDERSTANDING THE DIVERSITY OF EMERGENT CHRISTIANITY

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger set out to identify the Emergent/Emerging Church in their book *Emerging Churches: Creating Community in Postmodern Cultures*. The title of the book points the reader to consider the Emergent/Emerging Church in terms of its practices. Gibbs and Bolger identified nine characteristic practices. They note,

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.<sup>51</sup>

Based on their research, Gibbs and Bolger appear to indicate the formation of an “Emerging Church” tends toward these practices rather than an exclusive theological framework.

Even with the identification of nine practices observed by Gibbs and Bolger, the diverse expressions among Emergent/Emerging Churches frustrates the curious and the critic alike. Engagement with one Emerging Church does not necessarily stand for the evaluation of another.

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<sup>50</sup>D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). Carson chiefly interacts with his reading of Brian McLaren. He includes Steve Chalke in the conversation. Those familiar with Emergent-UK note Chalke is not considered part of the movement there. In his famous line, “Damn all false antitheses,” Carson asserts rather than deconstruct polarities offensive to the Gospel, McLaren creates false dichotomies that lead to a move away from, if not denying, the Gospel. Scot McKnight suggests Carson rightly contends “hard postmodernism” runs contrary to the Gospel (Westminster Seminary presentation noted earlier in this paper). But, McKnight goes on to illustrate there is no evidence Brian McLaren or others leading Emergent Village, for example, are indeed “hard postmodernists.” Rather, they are likely “soft postmodernists.” While the intent of this paper is not to debate the level to which some or all Emergents have embraced a philosophy of postmodernism, the contextual move will be important for understanding “taxonomies and streams” suggested by those hoping to engage Emergents and the Emergent Church.

<sup>51</sup>Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 44-45.

## MY TAXONOMY OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH

In January of 2006 I wrote, “Understanding the Emerging Church.”<sup>52</sup> I laid out a three-layered taxonomy originally written for my own denominational context. I hoped that it would help my co-denominationalists to understand the diversity in the Emergent/Emerging Church. Unashamedly, part of my objective was to create “space” for young pastors who considered themselves emerging but still held to the denomination’s theological statement.

My observation noted the diversity of this amorphous movement:

It’s been interesting to watch the emerging church conversation over the last few months. Important issues are being discussed. Unfortunately, like many conversations, good things are lumped together with bad and important conversations are lost in more heat than light.

My own observation as one who speaks at some events classified as “emerging” is that there are three broad categories of what is often called “the emerging church.” Oddly enough, I think I can fairly say that most in the emerging conversation would agree with my assessments about the “types” of emerging leaders and churches—and just differ with my conclusions.<sup>53</sup>

I dubbed the three groupings of the Emergent/Emerging Church as the Relevantists, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists. The article received surprising attention, not, I believe, because it was brilliantly written, but because it stated what others already saw—there was a wide diversity of what was called “emerging.” Andrew Jones, at the time the most prominent emerging church blogger, commented on the article saying, “Ed Stetzer gets it.”<sup>54</sup> I think it was simply a statement that there are levels “emerging” that need to be recognized.

To my knowledge, this was the first widely distributed analysis, however it was not the last. And, some were better than mine. Some borrowed and expanded on the article. Others created new approaches. But, new taxonomies emerged from Wes Daniels, Darrin Patrick, Mark Driscoll, Scot McKnight, and Andrew Jones<sup>55</sup> as noted on the website, “Who

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<sup>52</sup>“Understanding the Emerging Church”, Baptist Press article, January 6, 2006, <http://www.baptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>[http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/01/ed\\_stetzer\\_gets.html](http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2006/01/ed_stetzer_gets.html)

<sup>55</sup>Andrew Jones, <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2008/01/models-of-emerg.html>. Jones recently reminded me that he had written an earlier analysis and notes on his blog, “No one has ever quoted mine because no one has ever read it, at least not in the last 8 years. It was never published online, only in a Leadership Network magazine called *Next Generation*.”

In the World Are We?”<sup>56</sup> C. Michael Patton offers one of the most recent taxonomies of the Emergent/Emerging Church.<sup>57</sup>

Two years later, I see a few different nuances and might add an additional sub-category, but I still believe these categories helped provide a much needed catalyst for those hoping to understand this movement or conversation and not be so quick to dismiss any positive contributions.<sup>58</sup> In a recent presentation to the Evangelical Free Church of America Mid-Winter, I remarked,

Ultimately there is such diversity in what is called the emerging church from inerrantists, complementarians, verse-by-verse preaching of evangelicals to basically post-evangelicals whose faith would be unrecognizable to those who would be firmly in the evangelical movement. And yet they would all consider themselves emerging. Now the challenge is how do you have a conversation without understanding from where people come?<sup>59</sup>

Though taxonomies are limited and limiting, I believe they provide helpful frameworks for participating in the kinds of conversations needed when engaging any reform movement.

#### RELEVANTS

The first category of people associated with the Emergent Church, “Relevants,” is an admitted neologism.<sup>60</sup> These people attempt to contextualize music, worship, and outreach much like the “contemporary church” movement of the 1980’s and 1990’s. Their methodology may be considered by critics to be progressive. However, their theology is

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<sup>56</sup>Laura, “Hunting for Taxonomies”, January 15, 2008, <http://whointheworldarewe.blogspot.com/2008/01/hunting-for-taxonomies.html>. Identified as a student at Talbot Seminary, Laura lists the noted taxonomies. Others have been offered and a Google search reveals many “posts” or “articles” on the subject. Also, McKnight’s contribution, to be used in this work, takes a different shape than, say, my taxonomy and so will be used to illustrate the “streams” contributing to “Emerging Lake.”

<sup>57</sup>C. Michael Patton, “Would the Real Emerger Please Stand Up?”, February 15, 2008, <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2008/02/15/would-the-real-emerger-please-stand-up/>

<sup>58</sup>“Understanding the Emerging Church”, September 21, 2007, [http://blogs.life-way.com/blog/edstetzer/2007/09/understanding\\_the\\_emerging\\_chu.html](http://blogs.life-way.com/blog/edstetzer/2007/09/understanding_the_emerging_chu.html). In this blog post I admit, “I’d probably change a bit of it now. Yet, even though it was imperfect, I think it was helpful because it helped people to see that the Emerging Church has many “streams” to it.”

<sup>59</sup>Evangelical Free Church MidWinter Ministerial.

<sup>60</sup>“Understanding the Emerging Church”, Baptist Press article, January 2006.

often conservative and evangelical. Many are doctrinally sound, growing, and impacting lostness.

#### RECONSTRUCTIONISTS

“Reconstructionists” describe the second category. Largely concerned about existing church structures, these people emphasize an “incarnational” model and may find a home in the “house church” movement. My main concern with this group has been noted, “If reconstructionists simply rearrange dissatisfied Christians and do not impact lostness, it is hardly a better situation than the current one.”<sup>61</sup> The move appears to be one step beyond the Relevantists who maintain existing structures while innovating in worship and outreach.

#### REVISIONISTS

Those in the third category are the “Revisionists.” Most of the harsh critique is reserved for this group. I noted that some in this group have certainly abandoned evangelicalism. (And, I do not think that statement would be either “news” or “offensive” to those in this category.)

For this group, both methodology and theology may be re-visioned. My concerns include that some might dispense with the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, views of gender, and the very nature of the Gospel. It is at this point that many believe the move is similar to the mainline denominations years before, and I agree.

Writing in a limited word count Baptist Press article requires some simplification of the subject. The writing requirements do not allow for a research piece. However, in my presentation to the Evangelical Free Church of America MidWinter Ministerial event, I had occasion to illustrate these categories by suggesting where some people may be in the taxonomy. Mark Driscoll would fit in the Relevantist category. Driscoll himself borrowed my taxonomy and added a category for those who are Reformed.<sup>62</sup> Darrin Patrick modified the categories to include a different sub-category into which he felt more comfortable. Patrick and Driscoll participate in the Acts 29 Network and believed a further bit of distinction necessary for those who express their emerging impulse from a Reformed theological framework.

I talked with Dan Kimball about this taxonomy and he agreed that he would fit the Relevantist category. He quickly noted his understanding of the category was not merely an aesthetic issue—not about candles and coffee, a caricature largely pejorative and unhelpful.<sup>63</sup> Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt would fall in the “Revisionists” category.

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>Mark Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church”, *Criswell Theological Review*, 3(2) 2, 87-94.

<sup>63</sup>Evangelical Free Church of America MidWinter Ministerial, 2008.

Having talked to these men personally I do not think they would object to the idea they were “revisioning,” though all have indicated their disapproval of the article. It is my conclusions and evaluations that concerned them.

These extremes leave a large “middle” which once again points out the diversity among those generally classified as Emergents. When I first wrote this piece, Tony Jones objected to the categorization in the *Christianity Today* blog, Out of Ur.<sup>64</sup> However, I believe they help the rest of us gain some understanding of the diversity in the Emergent Church.

### STREAMS CREATING LAKE EMERGENT

In a 2007 article written for *Christianity Today*, Scot McKnight took a different approach describing the Emergent/Emerging Church. McKnight acknowledged he would himself fit in the broad movement. Rather than list a series of categories, McKnight wrote about “Five Streams of the Emerging Church.”<sup>65</sup> The metaphors of “streams” and “lake” may create more clarity regarding the difficult task of drawing out the features of the Emergent/Emerging Church, making it possible to understand the breadth of the movement by noting its themes.

According to McKnight, the five “streams” flowing into “lake” Emergent are: Prophetic (or at least provocative), Postmodern, Praxis-Oriented, Post-Evangelical, and Political. In his introduction, McKnight elaborates,

Along with unfair stereotypes of other traditions, such are the urban legends surrounding the emerging church—one of the most controversial and misunderstood movements today. As a theologian, I have studied the movement and interacted with its key leaders for years—even more, I happily consider myself part of this movement or “conversation.” As an evangelical, I’ve had my concerns, but overall I think what emerging Christians bring to the table is vital for the overall health of the church.

In this article, I want to undermine the urban legends and provide a more accurate description of the emerging movement. Though the movement has an international dimension, I will focus on the North American scene. . . . Following are five themes that characterize the emerging movement. I see them as streams flowing into the emerging lake. No one says the emerging movement is the only group of Christians doing these things, but together they crystallize into the emerging movement.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>[http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is\\_emergent\\_the.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html)

<sup>65</sup>Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church”, January 19, 2007, *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html?start=2>.

<sup>66</sup>Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church.”

The metaphor of streams and a lake help underscore the sensibilities informing and giving shape to the Emergent Church.

#### THE PROPHETIC

The Prophetic, or provocative, draws parallels to the Old Testament prophetic voice according to McKnight. The intent is to trigger an understanding within the hearer that things need to change. In the case of the Emergent Church, it is the church that is in need of such change. McKnight acknowledges the rhetoric is exaggerated, including his own on occasion. But, the hope is that the particular use of language will make the point and not cause divisions.

One illustration of an “over the top” use of rhetoric came in the 2003 Emergent Convention in San Diego. In one main session, a series of presenters were featured that declared some familiar features within the church “dead.” The intent was to point out that the way of doing youth ministry, children’s ministry, and even preaching needed to undergo radical change in most churches.

Another example would be Doug Pagitt’s “Preaching Re-Imagined.” Pagitt contends that the day has come for old forms of preaching to radically change. No longer should we depend upon one person to formulate a message. The community of faith preaches the message. One person may lead this “preaching” time, but the message flows from the organic movement of the people of God living out the way of Jesus today. Solomon’s Porch, the church Doug planted in Minnesota, attempts to live out this “re-imagined” way of preaching.

#### POSTMODERN

In a witty turn of phrase, McKnight describes the Postmodern stream,

Mark Twain said the mistake God made was in not forbidding Adam to eat the serpent. Had God forbidden the serpent, Adam would certainly have eaten him. When the evangelical world prohibited postmodernity, as if it were fruit from the forbidden tree, the postmodern “fallen” among us—like F. LeRon Shults, Jamie Smith, Kevin Vanhoozer, John Franke, and Peter Rollins—chose to eat it to see what it might taste like. We found that it tasted good, even if at times we found ourselves spitting out hard chunks of nonsense. A second stream of emerging water is postmodernism.

Postmodernity cannot be reduced to the denial of truth. Instead, it is the collapse of inherited metanarratives (overarching explanations of life) like those of science or Marxism. Why have they collapsed? Because of the impossibility of getting outside their assumptions.

While there are good as well as naughty consequences of opting for a postmodern stance (and not all in the emerging movement are as careful as they should be), evangelical Christians can rightfully embrace certain elements of postmodernity.



Jamie Smith, a professor at Calvin College, argues in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernity?* (Baker Academic, 2006) that such thinking is compatible, in some ways, with classical Augustinian epistemology. No one points the way forward in this regard more carefully than longtime missionary to India Leslie Newbigin, especially in his book *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Eerdmans, 1995). Emerging upholds faith seeking understanding, and trust preceding the apprehension or comprehension of gospel truths.<sup>67</sup>

McKnight values a description given by Doug Pagitt which describes three possibilities for those wishing to engage postmoderns.<sup>68</sup> Some minister to postmoderns, some minister with postmoderns, and others as postmoderns. The latter group tends to be the most heavily critiqued.

#### PRAXIS-ORIENTED

Another stream suggested by McKnight, Praxis-Oriented, illustrates the ecclesiological concern. Worship, orthopraxy, and missional comprise the three areas where McKnight suggests “Prax-Oriented” is on display.<sup>69</sup> From the call for sacred spaces, to a solid understanding of missional practice as a holistic redemptive move among Christians, the Emergent Church seeks to live out a consistently robust faith. Again, Solomon’s Porch provides an example. Rather than a pulpit with hard pews and everyone facing forward, those who gather for worship do so in the round—seated on couches and chairs scattered around the room.

For example, IKON, an emerging group from Ireland, provided a modern Tenebrae service at the Emergent Convention in Nashville.<sup>70</sup> Those who attended shared worship in a Presbyterian church. IKON created a sacred space for worship with candles, video, and original music. One may find a description of this service in Peter Rollins book, *How [Not] to Speak of God*.<sup>71</sup> The second part of Rollins’ book contains contemporary liturgies illustrating “Praxis-Oriented” worship.

#### POST-EVANGELICAL

McKnight describes Post-Evangelical as a move which dissents from current practices of evangelicalism in the same way that neo-evangelicalism was post-fundamentalist. However, as McKnight remarks, it is not a move away from theology—

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>[http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Main_Page)

<sup>71</sup>Peter Rollins, *How [Not] to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006), 77-85.

Frankly, the emerging movement loves ideas and theology. It just doesn't have an airtight system or statement of faith. We believe the Great Tradition offers various ways for telling the truth about God's redemption in Christ, but we don't believe any one theology gets it absolutely right.<sup>72</sup>

Post-evangelical in this vein is “post-systematic theology.” McKnight also notes a concern for the “in versus out” exclusivity practices of evangelicals. On the one hand, the concern is related to no one single Christian theology getting everything right. On the other hand, McKnight warns against a move to globalize this sentiment applying it to theology itself. He warns,

This emerging ambivalence about who is in and who is out creates a serious problem for evangelism. The emerging movement is not known for it, 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.

Personally, I'm an evangelist. Not so much the tract-toting, door-knocking kind, but the Jesus-talking and Jesus-teaching kind. I spend time praying in my office before class and pondering about how to teach in order to bring home the message of the gospel.

So I offer here a warning to the emerging movement: Any movement that is not evangelistic is failing the Lord. We may be humble about what we believe, and we may be careful to make the gospel and its commitments clear, but we must always keep the proper goal in mind: summoning everyone to follow Jesus Christ and to discover the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit of God.<sup>73</sup>

Does this post-evangelical turn lead some further than others? Certainly. For example, Spencer Burke wrote *A Heretics Guide to Eternity* in which he asserts that all may be born “in” and some “opt out” in regards to their eternal destiny<sup>74</sup> In this case the “in versus out” noted by McKnight is applied to evangelism for Burke.

The beginning point for Burke is that human beings are born “into” the family of God by grace and “opt out” by walking away. He maintains a commitment to total depravity but believes grace is the gift of God to all people who cannot do anything to overcome their sinful condition. The decisional commitment is to embrace grace and be faithful to it or to walk away from grace and be condemned. Burke would indeed consider it a danger to ignore the call to follow Jesus. And, yet, he re-formulates the lines along which that call is made. Rather than call for a decision to follow Jesus from the position of being “out,” the call is to embrace grace as someone already in and part of the covenant community.

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<sup>72</sup>Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church.”

<sup>73</sup>Ibid.

<sup>74</sup>Spencer Burke, *A Heretics Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 61.

Burke is just one illustration some are willing to go further than others in making the post-evangelical turn. Burke's view is not the view of all Emergents. In fact, Burke hints, it may not be his view in the future. He often notes, "If I am not embarrassed about something I said I believed yesterday, then I have not learned anything today."<sup>75</sup> The oft-used retort indicates the intention to dialogue without coming to a particular conclusion and remaining open rather than closed to conversation a trait noted by McKnight. However, this tact can be challenging and troublesome, as McKnight rightly warns.

## POLITICS

Politics describes the last theme in McKnight's five streams. His autobiographical insertion in the piece is a helpful description,

I have publicly aligned myself with the emerging movement. What attracts me is its soft postmodernism (or critical realism) and its praxis/missional focus. I also lean left in politics. I tell my friends that I have voted Democrat for years for all the wrong reasons. I don't think the Democratic Party is worth a hoot, but its historic commitment to the poor and to centralizing government for social justice is what I think government should do. I don't support abortion—in fact, I think it is immoral. I believe in civil rights, but I don't believe homosexuality is God's design. And, like many in the emerging movement, I think the Religious Right doesn't see what it is doing. Books like Randy Balmer's *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* (Basic Books, 2006) and David Kuo's *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (Free Press, 2006) make their rounds in emerging circles because they say things we think need to be said.<sup>76</sup>

His words do not come without warning. Just as Leonard Sweet comments about the Emerging Church making the same mistakes that leading mainline denominations have made in the past (which leads to a social gospel that is all social and no gospel), McKnight also sounds a word of caution.

Brian McLaren writes about, and in many ways represents, this stream in *Everything Must Change*.<sup>77</sup> His association with Jim Wallis and Sojourners regularly earns critique as trading the Gospel for politics. McLaren desperately wants Christians to consider the "big questions" people are asking today because he believes that the Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to these issues. McLaren cajoles the religious right for forsaking these larger matters.

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<sup>75</sup>Spencer Burke, an oft-repeated mantra by Burke in keynote addresses, breakout sessions and radio interviews. Used in conversation for an ETREK Collaborative Learning Journeys Course at Biblical Seminary based on his book, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations About God, Community and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>76</sup>Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church."

<sup>77</sup>Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

(McKnight's warning about exaggerated rhetoric may apply here.) Speaking at the Emergent Convention in Nashville, McLaren comments that sometimes extreme moves in thinking and exaggerated rhetoric become useful means—something of a spiritual chemotherapy for the perceived cancer of modern accommodations to the Gospel.<sup>78</sup>

Categories and themes noted by observers and insiders help those hoping to engage the Emergent Church. One underlying issue gleaned from the variety of taxonomies, streams and critiques centers on the practice of contextualization by those in the Emergent Church. McKnight chose to describe this matter in terms of a prepositional relationship to a postmodern culture with to, as, and with. Another way exists to broaden this spectrum—a missiological contextualization framework.

#### FROM TOO LITTLE TO OVERDONE – A CONTEXTUALIZATION SCHEME

A key missiological question as it relates to the Emergent Church regards contextualization. I believe it is unfair to say that the emerging church jettisons theology. I have found emerging churches to be more theologically-shaped than traditional and contemporary churches that came before them. This is not to say that I agree with all the theology, but it is disingenuous not to acknowledge this as a theological movement. The missiological perspective offers a way of seeing any movement as it carries the Gospel to a given cultural context. The missiological question may well offer an evaluation of the Emergent Church from an angle creating better differentiation than taxonomies and streams.

#### C – WHAT?

Greg Allison presented a paper, titled “An Evaluation of Emerging Churches on the Basis of the Contextualization Spectrum (C1-C6),” to the Evangelical Theological Society on November 17, 2006.<sup>79</sup> Allison takes the categories I wrote of—Relevants, Reconstructionists, Revisionsists – and applies them to the spectrum of contextualization. The place of beginning for Allison was the contextualization spectrum posed by John Travis (a pseudonym) in 1998 published as, “The C1 Through C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of Christ-Centered Communities Found in Muslim Context.” He writes,

At the heart of my proposal is the conviction that the emerging church phenomenon is, in part, a contemporary attempt at contextualizing the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ in a changing (postmodern) world. If this is the case, then the emerging church phenomenon (1) bears some similarities with contextualization efforts carried

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<sup>78</sup>Brian McLaren in a breakout session at the Emergent Convention in Nashville, 2004.

<sup>79</sup>Gregg R. Allison, “An Evaluation of Emerging Churches on the Basis of the Contextualization Spectrum (C1-C6)”. November 17, 2006, Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Society, Washington, D.C..

out in the past, and (2) manifests a spectrum of embodiments that are contextualized from a lesser to a greater degree.<sup>80</sup>

Allison may well have captured the missiological interest in the Emergent Church.

The abbreviations of the C1-C6 were modified by Allison to reflect the application to the British and North American contexts.<sup>81</sup> The spectrum offered by Allison suggests the following distinctive characteristics, which may be applied to the Emergent Church. I will discuss Allison's modification represented by Cm1-Cm6 where "m" represents "modified."<sup>82</sup>

"Cm1" represents Christ-centered communities that would be described as traditional using outsider language. The use of the terms insider and outsider in this context relate to the peculiar culture surrounding a given Christ-centered community. Therefore, outsider language would be those talking about life and faith in "churchy" terms, the language of Zion. For example in Allison's matrix a Cm1 faith community would include churches where some people may be very entrenched in a postmodern worldview but use language outside that (postmodern) culture. Allison writes,

These churches are very traditional and reflect traditional Christian culture, liturgy, activities, etc. A huge cultural chasm, especially because of (but not confined to) linguistic distance, exists between these churches and the surrounding community.<sup>83</sup>

The Cm2 category describes a traditional church using insider language. This level of contextualization may pair with the Relevant category in my taxonomy and in the "to" spectrum for those wishing to engage postmoderns as noted by Doug Pagitt. These people use language from a postmodern worldview, but the religious vocabulary is still distinctively Christian.

Contextualization in Cm1 and Cm2 categories comprise predominantly traditional forms. A shift begins to occur at the Cm3 level. Those in the Cm3 category exhibit a Christ-centered community using insider language and religiously neutral insider cultural norms. Religiously neutral forms may include folk music, ethnic dress, artwork, etc. The aim is to reduce the foreignness of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms.

If Cm1 and Cm2 reside in the Relevant category, then the Cm3 level most certainly describes this group. These people engage in postmodern culture—it is the water in which they swim. It is the lens through which they see the world. At the same time, they are only using certain permissible cultural forms. They are careful about issues where there might be

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<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 1.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid.

confusion. Allison places Mars Hill in Seattle, where Mark Driscoll is the pastor, and Apostles Church in New York City in the Cm3 category.

The next level, Cm4, moves further. These people form Christ-centered communities using insider language and biblically permissible cultural forms as well as postmodern forms. Each of the first three levels refers to believers as Christians. In this group, the common Emergent idiom “followers of Jesus” or “Christ followers” is prevalent. This level may parallel the Reconstructionist category which I created and the “with” focus noted by Pagitt. Those in this category are deconstructing and reconstructing in postmodern culture, being careful in most cases to use only biblically permissible forms. Many conservative evangelical mission agencies (including the International Mission Board<sup>84</sup>) view Cm4 as the limit of contextualization. Allison places Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, where Dan Kimball is the pastor, in the Cm4 category.

For myself and many evangelicals, the next two levels cross the line into over-contextualization. The Cm5 level forms Christ-centered communities where participants see themselves more as postmoderns who are Christians rather than as Christians living in a postmodern milieu. Allison places ReImagine in San Francisco, led by Mark Scandrette, in the Cm5 category.

The high end of the spectrum, Cm6, encompasses small Christ-centered communities of secret underground believers. Allison notes Cm6 communities “eschew many/most of the activities, attitudes, traditions, even doctrines of the Cm1-Cm5 communities.”<sup>85</sup> Allison places Monkfish Abbey in Seattle and IKON in Ireland, mentioned earlier, in the Cm6 category.

The Emergent Church began with a cultural consideration, “How will we reach Gen X?” Existing forms would not be able to capture this generation, even if there were a “boomerang” experienced like the “Boomers” returning to church years earlier. The turn came about when Brad Cecil observed that the cultural shifts were too dramatic to simply adjust the aesthetics of worship styles and outreach methodologies. The ecclesiological question gave way to exploring the theological foundations for existing forms and structures. The Emergent Church set out to contextualize the Gospel by taking apart (deconstructing) and implementing new forms (reconstructing) to facilitate the advancement of the Gospel during a period of erratic, discontinuous change.<sup>86</sup> On occasion, these moves have left some in the Emergent Church perilously close to “abandoning the Gospel” as noted by D. A. Carson. I believe the move, in some cases, may be more a “neglect of the Gospel” than abandonment. It is often not a denial, but in my opinion, often a dangerous lack of emphasis.

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<sup>84</sup><http://imb.org/main/news/details.asp?StoryID=6197>.

<sup>85</sup>Allision, 6.

<sup>86</sup>The phrase “discontinuous change” is described by Alan Roxburgh in *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

## EVALUATION

Can anything good come from the Emerging/Emergent Church? What boundaries should be set when considering engagement with the Emerging/Emergent Church?

**BRIDGES, CONTRIBUTIONS, BOUNDARIES AND GUIDELINES**

Christians always engage new cultures—whether they cross an ocean in the case of foreign work, or the culture changes around them in the case of the postmodern shift. The Emergent/Emerging Church Movement may be more than, but it is not less than, a contextualization movement. Care must be taken when considering this movement from a missiological perspective—such engagement has some bridges and some boundaries.

**BRIDGES FACILITATING ENGAGEMENT**

Bridges that engage the Emergent/Emerging Church may be developed through a consideration of important lessons from early engagement with the movement. Evangelical leaders may wish to write off all things “emerging” and proclaim that Brian McLaren is wrong because he uses the title, “Everything Must Change” (a statement made by one well known apologeticist, demonstrating he had not read beyond the title). However, young evangelical pastors do not write off all things emerging. I have spoken to young leader gatherings in many denominations (Southern Baptist, Evangelical Free, Church of God, Wesleyan, Assemblies of God and others)—and they are talking about the Emerging Church. At the Evangelical Free Midwest Ministerial, a third of those attending indicated they use the term “emerging” to define themselves—and, yes, this is Don Carson’s denomination. Thus, some principles for responsible engagement should be considered.

First, the Emerging Church Movement cannot be ignored. As noted earlier, the E/EC finds expression within nearly every denomination in the United States. Some expressions may be more formal than others, but the movement has attracted attention widely.

Second, critics must be on guard against bearing false witness. When the contemporary church movement gained the same kind of traction across denominational boundaries, many critical words were spoken, many of them false. The E/EC has not been able to escape the same kind of criticism. In regards to the contemporary and the emerging church movements, it seems that many struggle with the ninth commandment in evangelicalism—a shame when we evangelicals hold to the inerrancy of Scriptures that list that very commandment. If you are going to speak out against a movement, learn about it. Then, you can speak with wisdom and clarity—for there is much that needs critique in the church, including the emerging church.

Third, many have embraced the E/EC movement uncritically. If evangelicals intend to remain evangelical and hold to biblical fidelity, no movement can afford to be embraced without careful evaluation. There is much to be concerned about in the E/EC movement. For example, I have little disagreement with Don Carson’s analysis of Brian McLaren. (One

of the reasons I recently joined the faculty at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was because of my appreciation of Don.)

Fourth, reading one book or hearing one speaker considered to reside within the Emergent Church does not constitute interaction. Too many have undertaken partial engagement. While D. A. Carson rightly evaluated Brian McLaren in his book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, many would be quick to point out that McLaren does not represent the diversity that is present in the Emergent Church. In other words, you cannot become conversant with the emerging church by reading only Brian McLaren (with a little Steve Chalke) particularly when you only read about them and you do not read them.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS

Scot McKnight considers one of the streams of the Emergent Church to be the “Prophetic.” Many believe that Evangelicalism has not delivered, and it would be difficult to argue against that point. The Prophetic aspect within the E/EC may provide needed correctives.

First, the emphasis upon authenticity cannot be overstated. Dishonesty about sin and our own failings leads most to believe all is well. Too often, the temptation is to clean up our history, heritage, and personal experiences. We find it difficult to abide the late Mike Yaconelli, who considered real spirituality to be messy.<sup>87</sup> Instead, we put on a façade to the world and to one another, hiding our own foibles and idiosyncrasies—our own sin.

Second, the E/EC emphasis on the Kingdom of God may mark the recovery of a lost treasure in Evangelicalism. The covenantal-dispensational rift relegated conversation of the Kingdom of God to the sideline. *Everything Must Change* by Brian McLaren offers a vision of the impact of the Kingdom of God, on what he sees as the key issues facing the world. While there may be disagreement on the extent of the Kingdom of God and how it is expressed, one cannot escape the call to consider Jesus’ obsession with the Kingdom of God.<sup>88</sup>

Third, the missional turn in the E/EC provokes a regular reference to the *Missio Dei*. The theological underpinning of the “God who sends” prompts those in the Emergent/Emerging Church to pursue contextualization; understanding the *Missio Dei* is larger than the *missio ecclesia*. This move does not exclude the Church but locates the missional turn in the very nature of God. Misused however, this contribution can also be weakness, as noted later.

Fourth, the E/EC rejects reductionism. Sometimes, emerging leaders have chosen interesting terminology to illustrate this contention. For example, the phrase “atonement only Gospel” is a euphemism that the work of the atonement is broader than ensuring a

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<sup>87</sup>Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

<sup>88</sup>Russell Moore’s *The Kingdom of Christ* is an excellent look at the Kingdom of God from a conservative evangelical perspective.



person misses Hell and gains Heaven. Scot McKnight uses the language of a “holistic” Gospel. That is, a call to see Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection as vital to our relationship with God, self, others, and the world.<sup>89</sup> Modern reductionism concerns only the personal relationship with God.

Fifth, similar to John Piper’s call in *Brothers We Are Not Professionals*, the Emergent/Emerging Church rejects pragmatism. The charge is often made that modern churches look more like businesses with CEO’s than bodies of Christ with God-called pastors. Managing the church becomes akin to marketing goods and services to a Christian subculture.

Sixth, the E/EC promotes holistic ministry. Jesus not only asserted that He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10), but He also drew attention to a ministry of justice (Luke 4). Some consider that the road the Emergent/Emerging Church is taking to live out this second mandate may well become its undoing. Time will tell. However, Christians must find a way to join Jesus and His mission—to seek, to save, and to serve in such a way that also preserves theological integrity.

#### BOUNDARIES

Critical evaluation of any movement not only evaluates contributions, but it also requires the consideration of boundaries or areas of caution. The same is true for the E/EC. As an evangelical, there are some areas that concern me and I would suggest boundaries are needed.

First, one of the risks run by those in the Emergent/Emerging Church, who press very close to over-contextualization, appears to be an underdeveloped ecclesiology. Here, the concern relates to those who have an over-developed sense of the Kingdom of God, that in some writings all but eliminates the church. The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the wisdom of God will be made known through the church, not without it.

Second, over-contextualization skews the necessary boundaries and, more often than not, gives way to syncretism and a loss of the uniqueness of Jesus, the Christ. The answer does not lie in resisting contextualization. Rather, maintaining the Scriptures as the “norming norm” militates against going too far in our desire to bring the Gospel to bear on the various cultures in which people minister—postmodern or Muslim. The accompanying danger of over-contextualization means one makes sin acceptable and calls it an attempt to engage culture.

Third, some seem to have an apparent fear of penal substitutionary atonement, a fear of the cross as understood by evangelicals and other historic Christian traditions. Some in the E/EC point out that there are multiple theories of the atonement. However, it appears at times that this diminishes the import of substitutionary atonement. This criticism may not be universalized in the Emergent/Emerging Church, but it is present nonetheless. And, it has become an issue in broader evangelicalism, as some in the Emergent/Emerging Church

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<sup>89</sup>Scot McKnight. *A Community Called Atonement*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 9.

have challenged existing views of the atonement. For example, in my interview with Brian McLaren, he indicated that he talks about the atonement as having many facets. Yet, when I pressed if the penal substitutionary atonement was one of the clubs<sup>90</sup> (views) in his bag (understanding of the atonement), he agreed. Yet, for most evangelicals, the penal substitutionary atonement is the view they would mention first.

Fourth, the Emergent/Emerging Church is not immune to promoting caricature. Those in the E/EC often resist caricatures assigned to them, but they seem willing to make exaggerations regarding those whom they critique. Wrestling with and through movements requires maintaining the integrity of the ninth commandment. Caricatures can be misrepresentations, and their use can border on lying.

#### CONVERSATION AND THEOLOGY

Acknowledging contributions and forming boundaries creates the need to establish “conversation” guidelines when engaging the Emergent Church or any reform movement. It is essential that we contend for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Yet, contending must be accompanied by contextualization, as Paul considers it important to become all things to all people so some might be saved (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). A biblically faithful church living in and contextualized to emerging culture will look different than a biblically faithful church that is living in and contextualized to modern culture. If those ministering in the world deny the reality of contextualization, the Gospel becomes more about the cultural norms used to transport the Gospel than the Gospel itself. In the end, we risk losing the Gospel.

When the Gospel becomes solely about the norms created around it, it leads to what missiologists call “nominalism.” Nominalism is almost always rejected in the next generation. The Gospel has to be re-born, become indigenous, into a new culture. The nature of the Gospel does not change. The language around the Gospel may change, but the Gospel does not change. Methodologies may change; our understanding of the Gospel may even deepen; but the Gospel does not change.

The Emergent/Emerging Church provokes different ministry paradigms in new contexts, as alertness to cultural changes necessitates building new bridges to the lost. Evaluating those matters about which contentions will arise involves the hard work of differentiating between preferential matters and non-negotiable issues. Too often, lines have been drawn along preferential patterns.

In a denominational context, the charge to contend also requires compassionate love intent on coming alongside those who may walk too close to the edge of orthodoxy. The missiological perspective gives aid to this process. Since many come close to the edge of orthodoxy via the route of contextualization, familiarity with the missiological perspective of any movement may create a humble orthodoxy or proper confidence. From this position, all

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<sup>90</sup>Here the reference to “clubs” is found in Scot McKnight’s analogy found in *A Community Called Atonement*.

can be strengthened to carry on the mission of God in the world, regardless of changing cultural milieus.

At the end of the day the incredible cultural shifts that exist require contextualizing the presentation of the Gospel and how we live it out in culture. The narrative of the early missionaries in Acts reveals a number of small stories that support the larger story of the Church's growth and the expansion of the realities of the Kingdom of God. Each of these stories illustrates an unchanging Gospel contextualized within a particular context, from Jews and God-fearers to polytheists and philosophers. In each case the Apostle Paul showed with great skill how the Gospel proves itself powerful across cultures. As the Spirit gave life via the contextualization of the Good News of Jesus, the Christ in diverse arenas, lives were transformed.

The Emergent/Emerging Church calls attention to the rapid cultural changes and the accompanying diversity that exists in our world and, without question, the United States. Yes, good has come out of the E/EC and its call to view the Church as something other than a purveyor of religious goods and services. The call to "be" the Church, to live an embodied ethic, and to engage the world by pointing to the King and the Kingdom is always needed in any age and any day—it is the *semper reformanda* call.

But, with any reform movement, history has demonstrated the perils of pressing too far. We cannot give up nor give away the Gospel under the rubric or rouse of contextualization. We must contend for the faith once delivered to the saints. We must stand for biblical truth; truth that can be known, known through language, and believed. We cannot afford to waffle on doctrine, and we cannot refrain from the call to holiness.

New creations live in redemptive, healing relationships with God, others and the world. The only way we may bring the reality of the King and the Kingdom to bear on the world is by standing for the truth of the King and living as his subjects—without reservation.

## CONCLUSION

To end where we began, Christianity always runs the risk of adopting the plausibility structures of the culture in which it is currently embedded. Contending for the faith and contextualizing the Good News means always considering countercultural moves. Rather than becoming like the earthly powers, we must be in position to speak to the powers, whether they are structures in our culture, in our churches, or in our denominations. Building countercultural communities of faith who stand for the truth and contextualize the Gospel would be the proper response to any reform movement in any age. May we follow the Spirit into the "emerging" day—where we who are new creations in Christ lovingly contend, faithfully contextualize, and authentically live as citizens of the Kingdom of God.