

A RESPONSE TO ED STETZER'S "THE EMERGENT/EMERGING CHURCH: A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE"

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Dr. Ed Stetzer has impacted a generation of church planters in North America and around the world. I am glad to be one of those church planters. Having taken several church planting classes while going through seminary, I devoured his church planting books. Now as a professor, I am privileged to offer this response to Stetzer's presentation. In this response I really do not have much to argue against him. Rather, I would like to reiterate some ideas he has already highlighted but paying special attention to the theological and philosophical challenges of the Emergent Church. Following this, I will offer a simple model by which church planters and pastors may build on the past while continuing to evangelistically engage the culture in the future.

I believe it is important to note two aspects of the Emergent Church.¹ First, I consider the Emergent Church to be, at its foundation, a reaction to the modernistic tendencies of the contemporary church. Modernism and postmodernism are primarily western intellectual movements. Other parts of the world where the church is growing exponentially, in China and Africa for example, have historically seen little effects of modernism and postmodernism because they have not been through those movements. Today, however, the effects of postmodernism are slowly saturating all cultures to one extent or another because of better communication technology.²

¹I use the terms *emerging* and *emergent* synonymously, as does Stetzer, unless a distinction is made. D.A. Carson, in his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, apparently prefers to use the term *emerging* to describe both emerging and emergent groups. Carson is correct in stating that those who still held to orthodoxy but wanted to be missional tried to use the term *emerging* to note their affinity with the emergent church. Already, however, the term *emerging* is waning because the emerging church has already emerged. See D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 13-14.

²For some reading coming from differing perspectives on this general topic, see Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences for a Postmodern World* (London: Routledge, 1996); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986); Alister McGrath, *The Future of Christianity*. Blackwell, 2002 (London: Routledge, 2001); and Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

What would be considered the so-called “modernistic” tendencies of the contemporary church that are identified by those in the Emergent Church?³ These tendencies would include dogmatic interpretations of Scripture, hierarchical organization, and inflexible doctrine. But the complaints of the Emergent Church concerning the contemporary church go beyond theology and into methodology. At this point, one must make a distinction between the Emergent Church and those who merely wish to be more missional in methodology. Stetzer has correctly pointed out the differences between the two. The point I wish to emphasize is that Emergents critique both the theology and methodology of the contemporary church.

An example in evangelism will help clarify my point. Emergents critique the evangelism methods of the contemporary church by saying that one cannot necessarily do “evangelism” because evangelistic presentations, by nature, state that one party is wrong (the non-believer who is going to hell) and one party is right (the believer who is going to heaven). Emergents say that such presentations are based upon dogmatic interpretations of Scripture and cannot stand. On the other hand, those who are orthodox in theology but missional in methodology state that while such dogmatic interpretations of Scripture are correct (leading to the belief in the exclusivity of Christ for salvation), the *method* by which the evangelistic presentation is made is too modernistic for a postmodern generation. Instead of handing a person an evangelism tract, going through a series of questions, and then saying a prayer to receive salvation, one must listen to the *story* of postmoderns and develop a relationship with them before necessarily “presenting the gospel.”⁴

Furthermore, I believe the Emergent Church is secondarily a reaction to the perceived non-engagement of the culture by the contemporary church. The modernistic tendencies of the contemporary church have become too outdated for the postmodern generation. A reformulation must happen to re-engage the culture. As Stetzer noted, they say we must jettison both theology and methodology to reach the culture.⁵ I will address this particular concern in the last part of my response.

³cf. chapters 4 and 5 of Carson’s *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*.

⁴For a critique of contemporary church evangelism from an emergent perspective, see Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost, *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003). In this work, Hirsch and Frost emphasize the postmodern characteristic of community and its influence on evangelism. In other words, the church is a community inviting others to come join that community. The difference becomes *how* Emergents prefer to invite people in to the community. In the congregational tradition, a person professes faith and then becomes a member of the community. Hirsch and Frost propose that a person needs to become a member of the community in the beginning to explore Christianity and the story of Christ. Then, they *may* profess faith, but at least in the beginning people are given the opportunity to experience the community of believers.

⁵Brian McLaren wittily argues for a change of both theology and methodology in his books. cf. *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001) and *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

So, what can we learn from the Emergent Church? First, I believe we must hear them in their cry to engage culture and to have a missiological focus within the church. I believe Emergents are correct that the culture has changed too fast for the contemporary church to keep up with it. We must evaluate our methodology to better engage the culture with the gospel of Christ. However, I believe this is the only thing we can learn from them because Emergents go too far in sacrificing orthodox beliefs. We cannot give up the doctrinal traditions and confessions we have held to in the past. Mark Driscoll, who once was part of the Emergent group but has since parted ways with it, says we must engage culture with one hand open and the other closed. The closed hand holds to the orthodox teachings of the faith while the open hand engages with the culture and contextualizes the never changing gospel with an always changing culture.⁶

I believe Driscoll's illustration is very accurate. We are always in a process of contextualizing the gospel. The church through the centuries has done contextualization. Every time the gospel is taken to a new people group, contextualization occurs. Every generation contextualizes the gospel for its age grouping. In a sense, every time I meet a person on the street and present the gospel, I am contextualizing because I am placing the gospel in words that that person understands. The wording I use for a gospel presentation in the rich, Caucasian, suburban area of the city will be quite different than what I use for a person in the inner city. My point is that contextualization is a natural part of preaching the gospel.

While I believe the Emergent Church can teach us a great deal about engaging the culture, it has already gone too far in abandoning the orthodox truths of the faith. Those in the Emerging Church will always have a struggle to maintain orthodoxy in their beliefs and relevancy in their methodology. But, should not Christ's Church *always* be evaluating how it can maintain and defend the faith while at the same time contextualizing it for the culture?

In an attempt to answer this question, I wish to present my own illustration of how I believe this can be done. All illustrations fail when pressed too far; however, I want to offer the image of a three-legged stool on which the church must sit. One leg represents a theological aspect, another leg represents a historical aspect, and the last leg represents a missiological aspect.

The theological leg of the stool represents the unchanging truths of the Gospel. The Emergent Church has clearly moved away from the orthodox confessions of the faith. Emergents merely have reformulated old heresies for a new generation. One can clearly see the effects of postliberalism and anti-foundationalism in such Emergent thinkers as Brian McLaren. These⁷ influences allow them to reformulate doctrines and beliefs in any form they choose. Jesus merely becomes one option out of many in choosing a way to heaven.

⁶See Mark Driscoll's video on the Desiring God website: http://www.desiringgod.org/media/video/2006_National/national2006_driscoll_interview3.mov.

⁷A prime example of postliberal and anti-foundationalist theology can be found in George Lindbeck's book *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1984).

In similar fashion, many prefer to choose experience over truth and allow their experience to become the criteria for how they determine truth.

I admit that the descriptions I have just given are oversimplifications of Emergent theology. Nevertheless, the truth of Christ transcends any arguments over modernity/postmodernity and experience/truth. The gospel of Christ is both propositional *and* experiential. Emergents and postmoderns are longing to have a “spiritual experience” with a Higher Power of some kind. Christ, who is Lord over every other higher power, provides the ultimate experience. At the same time, Christ is also the grounding of all truth. He is the living embodiment of truth. Therefore, one cannot separate truth from experience. The two go hand in hand. The theological leg of this three-legged stool does not change, regardless of the culture and times. The truth and experience of Christ may be contextualized and communicated in a new way, but the foundational truths of the gospel will never change.

The historical leg of the stool represents the connection to the past that I believe contemporary churches must have. By connections to the past, I am referring most specifically to theology, liturgy, and history. The Emergent Church has both continuities and discontinuities with the past. For example, its tendency is to ignore the doctrinal traditions that have been passed from one generation to the next. At the same time, those in the Emergent Church often repeat the confessions of the past (especially the Apostle’s Creed), but ignore older hymns in favor of contemporary choruses. In either case, one cannot ignore the great truths and traditions that have been passed down.

In the same manner, church history cannot be ignored. Many Emergents want to go back to the times of the early church, as is exemplified in the book of Acts and shortly thereafter. They are attracted to the rawness and adventure of the first saints, especially the saints’ reliance upon the power and work of the Spirit before doctrine and heresy supposedly became debatable. But, a natural progression always exists to any movement or institution, and that is what I believe we see with the early church progressing from an organic movement to an organized church. We cannot ignore the other 1900 years of church history to get back to the early church because we miss important events and doctrinal formulations that came from those events. In time, those doctrinal formulations were expressed in the creeds and confessions, as mentioned earlier. It took several centuries just to express the doctrine of the Trinity in the correct terms, such as with the Council of Chalcedon in 451. Such a time period and the fruits of that time period do not need to be overlooked or else we will fall back into the same heresies.

The contemporary church can use history and traditions to show how to progress into the future. Regretfully we do not have a laboratory for theology and church planting. We go straight from the textbook to the real world for most applications. Nevertheless, history provides for us a laboratory to see the victories and mistakes of past generations that can help us move clearly into the future.

Last, the missiological leg shows us how to take the unchanging truths in the first leg, appreciate the heritage passed to us in the second leg, and apply all of it to our contemporary culture. The chief issue for the missiological leg of the church is how far we contextualize the gospel. Stetzer cited Gregg Allison’s paper given at the 2006 meeting of the Evangelical

Theological Society. Perhaps Allison's paper is one of the most helpful presentations that have been done to understand the Emergent Church. While I have no simple solution to offer as to how far is exactly too far in contextualizing the gospel (though I personally would not be comfortable with anything beyond C4), the point I want to draw is that we must be careful of the boundaries and limits. We cannot become too much like the culture to attract the culture to the gospel. The gospel is able to attract persons to faith on its own through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Regretfully, I feel that too many church planters and pastors believe that they have to become like the culture around them to attract persons from that culture. This leads to planters and pastors being something they really are not. Postmoderns are looking for authenticity and can see through the charade and contemporary styling of a church that is merely trying to be trendy with no substance. Yet, we will always live in the tension of bringing the unchanging truth of the gospel to an ever changing world.

The three-legged stool illustration becomes most important in the missiological aspects of the church because I believe we must keep all three legs in balance. We cannot be too heavy on the theological or historical legs or else we live in the past and never reach the present culture. We cannot be too heavy on the missiological leg because we fall into the dangers of over-contextualization and lose our ecclesiastical heritage.

In conclusion, I believe that the Emergent Church is a trend that will come and go. Church planters and pastors who have fallen into the "Emerg-ish" camps must remember that another movement will come to take its place. As mentioned before, we can always learn lessons from movements. I believe the Emergent Church teaches us to continually re-evaluate how we are reaching the culture. Nevertheless, we must maintain a balance on the stool so that we never compromise our Great gospel or our Great Commission.