

HOLY HELPS

EMERGENT CHURCH, THE

What is the “Emergent Church” movement? The Emergent movement is a protest movement. D. A. Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, wrote a book titled, “Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church.” In it he says, “The emerging movement is a protest... a protest against evangelicalism. I don’t think it is the next “Protestantism,” as some have claimed, but it is clearly an anti and protest movement.”

John Piper explains: “Emergent seems to be a reaction—among younger believers primarily, 20- and 30- somethings—to several things. In my judgment it’s not a very healthy reaction, though I can understand why it might happen.... On the other hand it’s a reaction to formalized doctrinal statements.”

That which is taking place re: the church is also taking place in other historic institutions. The “Occupy” movement is a protest movement and while not yet directed specifically at the church, it is an example of the growing attitude toward all institutions by the younger generation. In the future we will see more of the same.

From what is the movement emerging?

The President and Founder of the Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry, Matthew J. Slick, writes: “Those who are raised in a society that has largely rejected absolutes feel at home with the convenience of a “have it your way” belief system. They have “emerged” from stringent absolutes and prefer relativity in both truth and morals.”

This movement is emerging from the historic, traditional church which the emergent advocates say appears to be out of touch with the post-modern society. When reading emerging authors they talk about how a new church is evolving from a church that has, over the years, become ineffective and they are facilitating the emergence of a new church. They say that the old approaches to religion are being reevaluated and new more relative approaches are utilized to meet the needs of the unchurched. This is an outgrowth of the contemporary cultural mentality where truth is relative and aberrant behavior is accepted as normal.

Who are these “emergents”?

In 2005 sociologist Christian Smith (then of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and his colleagues conducted over 3,000 interviews with American adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17. Their massive study of adolescent religion in America was published in 2005 as *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. These young people have been labeled with various tags: “twenty-somethings,” “youthhood,” “adulthood,” and “extended adolescence.” Smith chose to use the term offered by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett — “emerging adulthood.”

Al Mohler, President Southern Baptist Theological Seminary comments: “The movement appears to be something of a generational phenomenon—a way for younger evangelicals to

reshape evangelical identity and relate to their own culture....Several of the movement's leaders document their own rejection of older forms of evangelical theology and church life. Some have rejected a Dispensational eschatology, while others contrast their new understanding of the culture with a previous experience rooted in fundamentalist separationism. ...Nevertheless, for most Emerging Church leaders, the movement appears to be an avenue for reshaping Christianity in a new mold."

Scott McKnight is Professor in Religious Studies at North Park University, Chicago, Illinois. McKnight was awarded the B.A. degree from Grand Rapids Baptist College (now known as Cornerstone University), a popular and witty speaker and author and identifies himself with the emerging movement. He wrote a tongue-in-cheek blurb about emerging Christians as follows:

"It is said that emerging Christians confess their faith like mainliners—meaning they say things publicly they don't really believe. They drink like Southern Baptists—meaning, to adapt some words from Mark Twain, they are teetotalers when it is judicious. They talk like Catholics—meaning they cuss and use naughty words. They evangelize and theologize like the Reformed—meaning they rarely evangelize, yet theologize all the time. They worship like charismatics—meaning with their whole bodies, some parts tattooed. They vote like Episcopalians—meaning they eat, drink, and sleep on their left side. And, they deny the truth—meaning they've got a latte-soaked copy of Derrida in their smoke- and beer-stained backpacks."

(Read more: <http://blog.beliefnet.com/jesuscreed/bio-scotmcknight.html/#ixzz1kgK0mH7R>)

What is "emerging"?

Jeffrey Jue, Assistant Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary, has written an analysis of the Emergent church movement titled "What's Emerging in the Church?" He writes: "According to many Emergent leaders, something old and new. But without accurately understanding the old, the new lacks the rigor and depth which can only be achieved through years of testing and refinement. Meeting the challenges of our contemporary culture is not an easy task. We must have the humility to admit that we cannot meet this challenge alone. Thankfully we are not historically isolated. We have a rich history of theological reflections and writings from which to draw from."

Instead of drawing from "a rich history of theological reflections and writings", the leaders of the movement are evasive and at best vague about what they believe. Mohler comments in his blog of June 20, 2005: "When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this [Emergent Liberal] movement simply refuses to answer the questions." We are left to conclude that what is emerging is dangerous and at the very least questionable.

The Philosophy from Which the Emergent Church has Sprung.

D.A. Carson, in his book, "Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church", narrows the discussion to one person, Brian McLaren, and narrows the issue to postmodernist epistemology. (See Carson's book p. 187)

The philosophical basis of the Emergent Church is the philosophy of postmodernism. On June 26, 1999, I gave the keynote address at the 68th Annual Conference of the GARBC, held in Bellevue, WA. The following is an excerpt from that message:

“Michael Horton, writing in Modern Reformation Magazine about this paradigm shift says, “It is a shift that shapes every intellectual discipline as well as the practice of law, medicine, politics and religion.”

What is this shift, this new paradigm called? It is called, Postmodernism. In his book, “Postmodern Times – A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture” Gene Veith wrote, “As the twentieth century limps to a close and as we enter the third millennium, a new worldview is emerging. We see it in academia and in public opinion polls. We are entering the Postmodern age.”

While the Postmodern era is a period of time, Postmodernism is an ideology. The ideological postmodernist says: “There are no absolutes; there is no absolute truth or “true truth” as they term it. Truth is relative. Truth is what one chooses it to be. There are no moral standards. Nothing is verifiably right or wrong. If it is your custom, tradition or choice it is viable.”

To the Postmodernist the only philosophies that are wrong are those that believe in absolute truth. They say, “true truth is a fraud.” And to them, “The only sinners are those who still believe there is such a thing as sin.” (Veith)”

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, in their book “Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures” underscore the postmodern philosophy behind the movement. (Baker, 2005) Both Gibbs and Bolger are avowed emergents.

The Emergent movement does not focus upon the theological but the philosophical.

This McKnight admits: “The emerging movement is not defined by its theology. It doesn’t stand up and say, “Lookee here, this is our doctrinal statement.” To force the emerging movement into a theological definition is to do violence to it – it isn’t a theological movement and so can’t be defined that way.”

Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary writes: “The leaders of the Emerging Church Movement clearly understand themselves to be affected by, if not fully embracing of postmodernism... Postmodernism insists that truth claims must be presented in a humbled form, without claims of universal validity, objectivity, or absoluteness.”

D. A. Carson asks a crucial question: “Is there at least some danger that what is being advocated is not so much a new kind of Christian in a new Emerging Church, but a church that is so submerging itself in the culture that it risks hopeless compromise?”

From all that I have read re: McLaren and other principal leaders, the movement reflects the effects of the culture upon the church, changing it from without, not the church changing the culture. In the end, only by a careful look at what Emerging Church leaders actually believe

and teach will help answer the questions we may have about the movement. They have certainly given us plenty of material to consider.

The Principal Leader of the Movement.

Brian McLaren is considered the leader of the movement referred to as “The Emergent Church.” He pastors Cedar Ridge Community Church in Spencerville, Maryland. He is also an author, speaker and net-worker among innovative Christian leaders, thinkers, and activists. He is the author of several books, the latest “A New Kind of Christianity.”

Al Mohler wrote: “Though the movement has many formative leaders, McLaren is undoubtedly the most influential thinker among them. To a large and undeniable extent, McLaren has succeeded in branding the Emerging Church Movement.”

Scot McKnight, among others, identifies McLaren as one of the leaders of the movement. He gave a lecture titled: “What is the Emerging Church?” at the Fall Contemporary Issues Conference at Westminster Theological Seminary, Oct 26-27, 2006. In that lecture McKnight identifies him (McLaren) as one of the principal leaders of the movement.

“Brian McLaren, considered one of the more articulate leaders in the emergent church, has a lot of questions. And he hopes Christians won’t avoid those questions. In his new book, *A New Kind of Christianity*, McLaren questions conventional truths and calls for a major overhaul of the Christian faith.” (The Christian Post)

National Public Radio reported: “McLaren is rethinking Jesus’ mission on Earth, and even the purpose of the crucifixion.” (NPR Morning Edition)

Christianity Today quotes McLaren: “I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be ‘saved’? When I read the Bible, I don’t see it meaning, ‘I’m going to heaven after I die.’ Before modern evangelicalism nobody accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, or walked down an aisle, or said the sinner’s prayer. I don’t think the liberals have it right. But I don’t think we have it right either. None of us has arrived at orthodoxy” (“The Emergent Mystique,” Christianity Today, Nov. 2004, p. 40).

He says that he has: “...a strong conviction that the exclusive, hell-oriented gospel is not the way forward” (A Generous Orthodoxy, p. 120, f. 48).

In his books *The Secret Message of Jesus* and *Everything Must Change*, McLaren says that “the essential message of Jesus” is the kingdom of God, and this is “not just a message about Jesus that focused on the afterlife, but rather the core message of Jesus that focused on personal, social, and global transformation in this life” (*Everything Must Change*, p. 22).

McLaren says that the book of Revelation is not a “book about the distant future” but is “a way of talking about the challenges of the immediate present” (*The Secret Message of Jesus*, 2007, p. 176). He says that phrases such as “the moon will turn to blood” “are no more to be taken literally than phrases we might read in the paper today” (*The Secret Message*, p. 178).

In a podcast interview in January 2006 with Leif Hansen, McLaren said that if the doctrine of hell is true then Christ’s message and cross is “false advertising.” McLaren says in the interview: “Does it make sense for a good being to create creatures who will experience

infinite torture, infinite time, infinite--you know, never be numbed in their consciousness? I mean, how would you even create a universe where that sort of thing could happen? It just sounds--It really raises some questions about the goodness of God....The traditional understanding says that God asks of us something that God is incapable of Himself. God asks us to forgive people. But God is incapable of forgiving. God can't forgive unless He punishes somebody in place of the person He was going to forgive."

McLaren also said: "The church has been preoccupied with the question, 'What happens to your soul after you die?' as if the reason for Jesus coming can be summed up in, 'Jesus is trying to help get more souls into heaven, as opposed to hell, after they die.' I just think a fair reading of the gospels blows that out of the water. I don't think that the entire message and life of Jesus can be boiled down to that bottom line." ("The Emerging Church," Part Two, Religion & Ethics, July 15, 2005)

McKnight said in his Westminster talk: "What I see (sometimes) in emergent in the USA is Walther Rauschenbusch, the architect of the social gospel." There it is – admitted by an Emergent advocate. Yes, Scott McKnight is an Emergent. He said so in his speech: "I have publicly aligned myself with the emerging movement."

The aim of the movers and shakers in the movement is to reform the historical concept of the church, focus it upon the present, believing that the church has historically focused upon the future eternal state to the irrelevance of the church in everyday life. It is anti-denominational, espousing the idea of ecumenism; heavy on the social gospel and dismissive of the historic methods of evangelism and missions.

Their avowed purpose is to reform and reorganize the church, de-institutionalize it, revamp its methods of worship, preaching and evangelism. From all that I have read from Brian McLaren I have the distinct belief that the movement is an experimentation in reformation if not rebellion and revolution. Commenting on his latest book, "A New Kind of Christianity", The Christian Century comments: "[McLaren] has been hailed widely as one of the most significant religious leaders of our time, compared by some to the leaders of the Protestant Reformation....In articulating this longing and his disquiet with the status quo, McLaren strikes a chord with many."

McKnight said in his Westminster speech: "To be an emerging postevangelical is to be post-Bible study piety, to be post systematic theology." That is only one thing about Emergent that disturbs me.

Comments from Respected Christian Leaders.

John McArthur comments: "The Emerging Church Movement is an amorphous sort of loose-knit association of churches that have decided that there is value, there is even virtue in uncertainty about Scripture. The bottom line in the movement is they believe that we aren't even supposed to understand precisely what the Bible means. And to me, that's the big issue. It is an attack on the clarity of Scripture and they elevate themselves as if this is some noble reality. They have finally risen to say we're honest enough to say, "We don't know what the Bible really means. We can't be certain. We are...we're the truly spiritual ones." It

has overtones of spiritual pride, a false kind of spiritual pride which they call humility. They say, "We're too humble to say that we know what the Bible means."

Al Mohler comments: "McLaren is also honest about the fact that he lacks any formal theological education. As a matter of fact, he seems rather proud of this fact, insinuating that formal theological education is likely to trap persons in a habit of trying to determine right belief....When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this [Emergent Liberal] movement simply refuses to answer the questions. (From Al Mohler's blog June 20, 2005)

D. A. Carson argues, "This (movement) works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationalities; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion; on participation over individualism and the heroic loner."

John Piper adds: "If you Google the emergent church you'll find some emergent websites. You'll notice that they don't like statements of faith. They don't like them because they say that they alienate people. They push people apart instead of relationally nurturing people to come together. So that's the flavor. It's not defined. There is no list on "this is what it means to be emergent." It's just kind of a general reactionary movement.... The issue is their attitude towards truth. I'm deeply concerned about it, and I think that it will be the undoing of the emergent church as it has come to be. They don't believe that truth itself is an objective propositional thing that has a yes and a no. Nothing is ever either/or, good or bad, right or wrong, ugly or beautiful. It's all vague. I've talked with some emergent types and tried to understand even their concept of truth, and you can't get your hand around it."

J. I Packer: "We are not entitled to infer from the fact that a group of people are drawing nearer to each other that any of them is drawing nearer to the truth."

Ravi Zacharias and R. C. Sproul. On March 13, 2008, Zacharias, Mohler, and Sproul had a joint discussion. The comments of Sproul and Zacharias:

R. C. Sproul: "When Christians make confessions of faith propositionally and say 'here we stand this is what we believe'. The emergent church has a built-in allergy to that don't you think?"

Ravi Zacharias: "Vance Havner who had a very sharp wit with his one liners, made the comment years and years ago when he was around. He said "when the tide is low every shrimp has his own puddle." This Emergent Church? is another one of these puddles. And it makes me wonder. There is seriously... with these men and women who are the progenitors of it, were they bored with God? What brought this about? You know, what brought this methodology into a theology? When you write a book like "The Secret Message of Jesus"? [by Brian McLaren] What?!?! 2,000 years have gone by now suddenly he's found the secret to it, we didn't know it? This is so bizarre, but you know the problem is that we got non-critical people listening to this stuff and they absorb it. When you read Brian McLaren every chapter dies the death of a 1,000 qualifications... At the end of it you wonder what he really believes

and maybe something on Monday something else on Tuesday. He's an anti-doctrinaire doctrinaire doctrinizing individual always postulating doctrine while he's anti-doctrine."

Summation

I would line up at the front of the line of those who believe that we can "do church" and "be church" better. However, I have serious doubts about the Emergent Movement and believe that it is more divisive than doctrinaire, more corrupting than correcting, more rebellion than remedial. Out of the current dialog some good may come. If it causes thinking and acting that strengthens the church, well and good.

However, the leadership that Brian McLaren and others of his ilk provide and because of statements they have made and the direction in which they propose to go erect signs that scream: "Warning! Danger ahead!" There is little respect evidenced for the 2,000 years of the church's history and God's blessing upon the perpetuation of the church through the centuries. Man's view of the church is quite different than God's view. Admittedly, anything that humans are involved with will be imperfect from man's viewpoint. God's view, however, is:

"Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

(Ephesians 5:25-27)

I will conclude with a McKnight comment from his lecture at Westminster: "There is a giant elephant in the middle of the Church's living room. It is the emerging church movement and it is a definite threat to traditional evangelical ecclesiology." I agree. So let's clean out the church's living room!

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***"Be not the first by whom the new are tried,
nor yet the last to lay the old aside."***

(Alexander Pope, An Essay on Criticism, English poet & satirist (1688 - 1744))

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