



*Reformation*  
**REVIVAL**  
**JOURNAL**

*A Quarterly for Church Renewal*

---

VOLUME 14 · NUMBER 3 · 2005

## *FINAL THOUGHTS*

*John H. Armstrong*

**T**he term *emergent* might well prove to be useless within five years, if it has not become so already. I have no love for, or opposition to, the name itself. Like so many popular terms which have been coined to describe new movements within evangelicalism over the past fifty years, I am not even sure what this term means at times.

Emergent *thinking*, however, is here to stay, regardless of what we call it. Putting the label postmodern on such thinking only begs the question. It says nothing important and becomes a "scare term" that drives more and more people into their respective corners.

Emergent thinking is both a protest and a call for renewal. It seeks new ways of thinking and living. If the term *emergent* means anything it is a protest, albeit a reforming one. It protests culturally conservative evangelicalism's comfort with capitalism and consumerism. It protests its close association with the Christian Right. It protests the epistemological arrogance of modernism, so prevalent in evangelical theology over the past fifty years. It also protests the baby-boom accommodations that have made peace with the seeker-sensitive church and its pervasive impact upon the Christian faith.

Emergent thought sees postmodernism as a *necessary reaction* to cerebral, linear thought and the absolutism of modernity. It sees postmodernity as "an umbrella term for an attitude and approach to life, not a single identifiable philosophy or style" (Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer in *The Language of*

*the Emerging Church*, Zondervan, 239). Because it believes that a broad emerging culture is rising from a younger generation it is neither good nor bad in itself. It is an assumption that may be right (I think that it is), or it may be wrong. Time will tell.

The question we must all face is the one put to us several decades ago by the late theologian, Lesslie Newbigin: "What is involved in a genuinely missionary encounter between the gospel and modern Western culture?"



Emergent Christian leaders believe the Enlightenment project of reason and progress is over. The modern Western world is haunted by the emptiness it created in the name of science. The old modernism emphasized mechanistic explanations and analytical philosophies. This brought about, in the broad sense, what has been called "Enlightenment rationalism." It is this worldview, often assumed in various types of evangelical theological systems, that is being challenged by emergent thinkers.

I do not know a single emergent thinker who believes postmodernism is *the answer*. What they really believe is that postmodernism is the culture's earliest attempt to construct a new way of thinking and living. What these Christians believe is that the new postmoderns (or whatever you call young people under thirty-five in age) are "finders" or "experiencers," and thus open to a spiritually-charged, spiritually-defined universe.

Again, emergent thinkers realize there is a strong downside to this movement. They know, better than most actually, that these hungry postmoderns are turning to all kinds of alternative spiritualities besides Christianity. But they also know, firsthand, that there is an openness to the gospel as long as it is presented in ways that answer the question of what constitutes a meaningful "encounter" between the gospel and the culture.

These emergent thinkers believe Christian love requires a

distinctly missional response to the pioneers of postmodern thought. These paths might well lead to dead ends, just as modernism did, but "it is uncharitable for non-pioneers to condemn pioneers for trying and failing at something that at least needed to be tried. Finding better paths often involves failing at first attempts" (Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer in *The Language of the Emerging Church*, Zondervan, 240).

So, for these Christians, postmodernism is not a synonym for relativism, moral anarchy, or cultural/social rottenness. Again, "This easy dismissal of all things postmodern will serve to firmly entrench many Christians in modernity, and those who chose to stay in the modern bed will have to sleep there" (*The Language of the Emerging Church*, 240).

*Becoming Conversant with the Emergent Church*, a recent critique of emergent Christianity by New Testament scholar D. A. Carson, sadly falls into this very category of approach. Carson does a first-rate job in showing some of the philosophical errors of postmodernism. He even criticizes some aspects of emergent thought that should be criticized. In the end, however, he gives us a critique that will serve only to widen the chasm between the two positions. In short, his book does not foster serious and important dialogue. For this reason, we will offer a major interaction with Carson's book in the next issue of the journal (14:4).



I am often asked to evaluate revival and renewal movements because of my keen interest in these subjects. I am no expert. I take Christian theology seriously and I am a trained historian. But I feel like a curious child at times. One thing I do, with deep personal concern, is pay close attention to ideas, people, and information about the Spirit's work. I admit that I have a perspective. My perspective is shaped by past movements of the Spirit, as well as by contemporary thought and critical analysis.

So, is emergent a renewal movement brought about by the Holy Spirit? I believe so. This means we should expect it to

be flawed because of obvious human influences. It also means that we should expect this movement to bring many new people into the kingdom. It is the job of us all to encourage, by our prayers and Christian love every such work of God's Spirit. We should pray that this movement will come to an even greater end, namely the glory of Christ throughout the whole earth. This particular movement is far too new to warrant a conclusion that it will come to such a glorious end. I am praying, watching, and cheering for all those who call themselves emergent Christians. My hope is that they will be "wise as serpents and harmless as doves." I also pray that "boomers" like me will be true friends for "emergents" like these young Christians who are deeply concerned about the future of the church in the West.

It was not that long ago that I lived through the Jesus Movement, a much-discussed and often-maligned group of hippies who came to faith in Christ in large numbers in the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century. Only in recent years have historians actually studied that movement with some degree of serious historiography. The evidence is growing, with every new study, that the Jesus Movement really did inject a fresh newness of the Spirit into the American church.

Movements come and go, but the Spirit is continually renewing his people in faith, hope, and love. Let us at least begin here and then proceed to the serious discussion about emergent Christianity. I pray that this journal will contribute positively to the discussion, all the time fostering prayer for a healthy new movement of the Holy Spirit which is renewing the church so it will be more faithful to its Lord.