

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

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In Baptist life, the emergent/emerging church baby seems to be the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Things were ginning along nicely—or so it seemed—until these young people starting experimenting with forms, traditions, and texts long since abandoned. They traded confrontational evangelism for a soft-sided relational approach. They lit candles, they dimmed the lights, they draped the windows, they wore flannel shirts, jeans, and flip-flops in the pulpit, *and then they removed the pulpit!*¹

They played guitars, which were tolerated, but then they unplugged their guitars and played—my soul, is that *beatnik* music? What are these kids up to? They read *liturgies*. They pray *written* prayers. They preach on political issues, and sometimes they do not preach at all. They rename our “Lord’s Supper” ordinance “Communion,” and center an entire worship service on it. Instead of passing the elements to the congregation, they make the congregation come up front *in front of everyone*. Then they renamed the Sunday worship service a worship “gathering” and started holding communion every week like those liberal Methodists (wait are the Methodists still considered Evangelical?). They sit in circles and think silence is a virtue, and dead air an invitation to the Spirit. To be honest, this all seems a bit *Catholic*.

They talk incessantly about community and use the word “like” often enough to make one think that all of life is analogous. They find tattoos acceptable—*on their women!* They tolerate alcohol as a beverage, divorce as a forgivable mistake, and they argue their opinions from an opposing view of biblical texts long since agreed upon by the majority. They tell us not to celebrate the conservative resurgence and demand that we embrace social justice issues like healthcare and environmental stewardship. Hmm, they’re starting to make a point, but my goodness, they seem angry.

Many of the emergent church’s advocates and practitioners express their anger toward the prevailing Evangelical culture. What? We bought them cars and gave them cable television? Ungrateful lot! That, or they are a gang of loose-knit prophets and we better listen.

On one hand, emergent anger is right to expose evangelical traditionalism that, by its gluttony on its own preferences, prevents the current generation from hearing the Gospel. On the other hand, emerging practices sometimes reflect a kind of theological adolescence and the typical petulance that spoiled adolescence brings. In the former case, emergent themes provide a welcome call to what Christ had in mind—holiness, good news, and

¹My tongue is in my cheek, here. You knew that, right?)

freedom from worldly pursuits. In the latter, the movement strays far from Christian dignity, and leads people *away* from Christ into a soup of syncretism.

Not all of what one might classify as Emergent is bad. Stetzer's three categories offer tremendous help in sifting the wheat from the chaff. His history of the Emergent movement, while a bit long, proves insightful and helpful in framing Emergent ideas. One rightly appreciates the calm tone of his paper. If anything, however, Ed's work may be too tame.²

This response refers to Ed's paper parenthetically, and hopes to add to the Emergent conversation. As a mild disclaimer, when I refer to Emergents in generalized terms indicating my agreement with their point, I am referring to the ones who hold to certain doctrinal orthodoxy. The sovereignty of God, the atoning death of Christ and his bodily resurrection, a high view of Scriptural inerrancy, and the necessity of a regenerate church seem to be good starting points.³ In places where I disagree, I attempt to be clear and welcome criticism.

IS EMERGENT TRYING TO GET A MISSIONAL FOCUS?

For centuries, Baptists were the ones leading the charge against church practices that held the Gospel captive. Baptists were the prophetic voice railing in the wilderness against anything out of square with the Bible. Stetzer's voice—backed by impeccable research—usually offers us a way through our Baptist blind spots. His calling card has not been his niceness. We commend him for taking a tone that purposely does not label or offend our Emergent brothers and sisters.

The issue that the Emergent church seems to bang its young head against is the lack of missional focus in the Evangelical church of North America. By missional—an old word thankfully resurrected by Ed—one may conclude the issue emanates from the idea that effective, evangelistic disciple making is the mission Jesus intended for his church. I am not at all sure they have become missional, however, for I do not see them crossing many cultural barriers. The focus of the Emergent churches seems to be on creating Christian gatherings united by affinity. Is that not the same thing that they accuse the traditionalists of doing? I will add more on this idea of affinity later in the paper.

² Ed Stetzer, "The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective," (paper presented at the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry Conference, New Orleans, LA, April 4, 2008).

³ For some reason, regenerate membership and discipline of church members is controversial today. I found the following sources helpful: 2008 SBC Resolution 6, "On Regenerate Church Membership And Church Member Restoration," <http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1189>; R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 59-61; and William M. Pinson, Jr., "Baptists: Regenerate Church Membership in Peril?" <http://www.baptistdistinctives.org/textonly10.html>.

The indisputable reality for now is that Southern Baptists and, for that matter, all Evangelical churches are sliding toward evangelistic irrelevance and our speed is increasing. To be missional is to be evangelistically relevant; it is to be on the *mission* of our Lord; it is to *make disciples*. If anything, Southern Baptists might need to get a little *madder* than Emergents—the SBC needs to get mad enough to change its evangelistic apathy.

IS THIS ABOUT THE IRRELEVANCE OF THE PREVAILING CHRISTIAN SUB-CULTURE?

None of us is very good at following Jesus, who was always humble, loved everyone, told the truth, never shied away from criticizing arrogance (even when it wore religious robes), and he always tried to bring outsiders into the kingdom. All Christ's disciples, including Emergents, can use another tablespoon of humility, but we can also speak the truth about the official religion of our land: nominalism. Critical statements that Emergents make against stagnant ecclesiastical forms are on the mark, and any person who walks with the Lord sees the same problems.

Hooray for Tony Jones! The mainline church *is* dead (5). It is as dead as Paris Hilton's little dog in a Louisiana swamp (the thing may still be swimming, but the end is just a matter of time). Someone should stop calling them mainline, and turn that title on Southern Baptists—we're the new mainline with acres of church property periodically occupied by decreasing numbers of graying Christians doing not much other than arguing about whether or not we're declining.

Of course, we do not like the tone of Emergents (5). They offer correction where none was requested. Have they not read Dale Carnegie? Have they no Southern gentility, no manners, no courtesy? No, they do not because they are mad. Their anger stems from watching the church of their youth become less and less evangelistic. The American Evangelical church no longer wins souls at a rate consistent with people who claim to be in step with the Holy Spirit. They ought to be mad. *We ought to be mad!*

Research indicates that nine out of ten Evangelical churches are just as dead as the Mainliners are. Traditionalists criticize Emergents for supplanting biblical teachings with culturally attuned practices, but one wonders why Traditionalists fail to remove the log from their eyes. They eat at the other end of the same trough, the one labeled "Let's Do Church Like it's 1965."

Perhaps the better question concerns not Emergent churches overload on culture, but their record of accomplishment on making disciples. Do Emergents show a track record of people whose lives mirror Christ's more than they mirror the world? Do their churches actually create community, do they escort people from hell to heaven, are their environments healthier, are their prayers answered, their divorce rates low, or their children drug-free? Do they just talk a lot and argue about nonessential issues like most Evangelical churches?

None of us is very good at Scriptural living. We do not accurately reflect the cross event to our world. We do see a few rare individuals who live without much regard for themselves over others, and when we do, we can be sure that either the mainstream church or the prevailing culture will not accept them. One side will brand him a flaming liberal and

the other side will brand him a raving fundamentalist. One thing is sure, however, when Len Sweet calls your theology “liberal” you may need to scale it back a bit (8-9).

Stetzer observes that, “The nexus for the story of the Emergent/Emerging Church may be tied to generational theory and the market approach to church growth/planning,” (3), which was exactly the point I made in the public response at the Baptist Center. Emergent seems to advocate a church for likeminded folks; it is for those who celebrate cultural homogeneity if you please. On that note, one wonders: Is it marketing (“we go to the new, cool church up the street”) or is it language (“we belong there because we understand what the leader is saying”)? With the latter in mind, it is important to realize that Emergent seems to be something of a reformation movement (or several reformation movements) within the Evangelical church. Emergents still operate from within, evidenced by their choices of language, use of media, and even the places they hold meetings.

CAN WE FIND THEIR EVANGELICAL ROOTS?

How odd is it that the initial meetings took place in Colorado Springs and Glorieta (4)? This reformation started in two of the most traditional Evangelical environments on the planet. One might have thought they would have found a garage in Seattle or San Francisco, if not an independently owned coffee shop next to an organic food store in Vancouver (all of which sound more fun than Glen Eyrie to me).

Ed’s metaphor of new growth emerging from the forest floor beneath the old stalwarts works but needs development (8). In nature, the old, healthy growth protects the new, tender new growth. Moreover, the new growth is of the same DNA and will—if allowed to grow—look exactly like its parents.

In American Christianity, the new forms look radically different from the old and many times carry different DNA. What we see may be of a different strain than us, so we need to question and test it.

On the darker side—and this is a dark forest, is it not?—old growth can easily attract diseases and parasites. The old churches are dying. As though an old tree could snuff out a sapling, many older congregations seem to try to prevent new churches from springing up. We see such cannibalism even when the new church is born from the same roots as the old ones. The old tries to cut off resources to the new; using them instead to keep the older, similar-styled and in need of revitalization congregation going. The problem is that if one is really interested in expanding Christ’s kingdom, he finds little data to support revitalization over new growth.

That is not to say that traditional churches should spend their money on new churches haphazardly. Strategy is important, and orthodoxy is still more important. At the point of doctrinal fidelity, much of what is in the Emergent camp has disconnected from the Bible. As I mentioned earlier, when Len Sweet labels your theology as too liberal, you have a problem (9).

He (Sweet) is right in calling for a repeal of Emergent's social gospel tendencies. The Social[ist] Gospel of the early twentieth century (Rauschenbusch) was wholly inconsistent with the full message of Jesus, and it died. Liberation Theology (Gutierrez, Boff, Cone) came of age in the 1980s, and is similarly not the Gospel at all, but a revised socialist wolf dressed in churchy sheep's clothing. Both movements were reactions against the excessive lack of compassion displayed by the wealthy, aristocratic, controlling Christians of their day. While the foundation of the Social Gospel and Liberation Theology are biblical ("treat people justly"), their methodology and conclusions are not only wrong, but also dangerous ("steal from the rich and give to the poor").

In a sense, Emergents come across with the same left-leaning reaction against the wealth, privilege, and consumerist tendencies of American Evangelicals. They have a point. Much of what one observes in American Christendom is more American than Christian. When it is easier to raise money for a new recreation center at the Evangelical Church of Anytown than it is to house and feed AIDS orphans in Africa, one wonders about our priorities. For several years, I have noticed that Baptist churches repave their parking lots and Baptist agencies fund unreliable church revitalization schemes while bi-vocational Baptist church planters file for welfare. Many of the Emergent leaders have planted churches. Do you see the connection and root of their anger? On my latter point at least, may we please acknowledge the righteous foundation of Emergent *Evangelicalism*?

IS IT ABOUT FALSE POLARITY AND RIDICULOUS ASSUMPTIONS?

I appreciate Ed's observation of the false bi-polarity between orthodoxy and orthopraxy (10). The former should lead to the latter, but it does not always. Much of the Evangelical system (especially our leadership training institutions) assumes that if we get enough good information in the heads of young leaders they will make the right decisions. That is, of course, ridiculous. Some of the smartest people in the world do some of the dumbest things.

It may be that the Emergents have seen the reality of the modernist monastic system and found it wanting. They are the first generation to live under a media-charged postmodernist education and they like it. Perhaps they embrace the flip-flopped notion that one belongs before he or she believes, and, therefore, orthopraxy precedes orthodoxy. If so, then one must "join" his or her church before he becomes a regenerate member of it. Those of us schooled to make a cognitive and cathartic decision of agreement before we can unite with a group find this exactly backward thinking. We cannot make sense of it, and they—thinking as they do—cannot make sense of our perceived rigidity. They cannot imagine head or heart agreement with anything until they live inside it and know its presuppositions. Time will tell if the new system bears fruit.

Mangum makes a big point on the disillusionment of Emergents (quoted by Stetzer, 14), but who thinks this is news? Evangelical churches have a bold line of disillusioned prophets dating back before the modernist controversy. Notable names include Oswald Chambers, C. S. Lewis, A. W. Tozer, Carlyle Marney, and W. A. Criswell. All of them voiced loud disillusionments over the apathy and consumerism of the American church. A better

historian than me will likely think of two or three disillusioned Christian leaders that represent every generation since Timothy's.

Perhaps Ed will agree with me that Emergents (the ones friendly to the Bible anyway) are not really all that new or rebellious, but well within the boundaries of ancient Christian tradition. We who follow Christ need some brothers and sisters to courageously tell us when we stray from the path even if their thinking is new and different. Elders are not always right, and conservatives are not always right. A little humility before the texts of Scripture will go a long way in freeing the church from useless traditionalism, and welcoming new saints.

DO THEY SEEK AN ECCLESIOLOGICAL STRUCTURE?

At some point, one might identify the marks of the movement as a series of conversations about ecclesiastical structure and governance, ideas of mission and praxis, evangelistic conversion and regeneration, biblical authority and which texts to emphasize, and how (or if) one disciplines a body of believers. Excellent! These are the very categories over which the church has struggled for millennia, and will continue to struggle until Christ returns (which is likely another point over which Emergents will struggle!).

To contend with Emergents on a fair plane, it helps to know their idea of what the Gospel proposes. Jones says it is about, "Good News of hope that brings an end to war, poverty, [sic] hunger in which they should actively participate for the good of the world" (quoted by Stetzer, 16). Is that the Gospel? Really? I think it's a bit deeper than material comfort, don't you?

The Gospel is the good news that Jesus gives people power to cheat death. Humanity stands justly condemned to hell for our rebellion against God. God's Good News proclaims Jesus' death as payment for our debt, and all that he requires of us is that we stop fighting him (C. S. Lewis's metaphor for repentance).

What Jones proposes, if I understand him correctly, is a return to the failed social gospel of the early 1900s. Yes, I agree that the Gospel offers hope for an end to humanity's moral ills, but only *after* people walk with Christ can one have any hope in that hope. Sane people do not base their hopes on wishes, but on realities of the new creation and the renewed mind that one receives the Holy Spirit's filling presence. To hope in anything that does not depend on the manifestation of the Holy Spirit is smoke.

Ed's three-layered taxonomy is the gold nugget readers seek (18). Emergents will not like the categories (no one likes to be categorized by others), but they stand the tests of fitness and simplicity. I agree—as you may have guessed—that we have much to learn from the Relevants and much from which to push back against the Revisionist[a]s (so-framed so by me because of their similarity to failing theologies of liberation).

Evangelicals should universally celebrate the Relevants' embrace of mystery in worship gatherings. Do not all Christians long for God's unexpected actions? Do we really enjoy knowing on Saturday precisely what will happen in church on Sunday? Is God that

boring, or is it us who, being boring at heart, have *tamed* him, even killed him as Nietzsche warned? Of course we cannot tame or kill God, but the prophets tell us that when we try, he will leave us alone to our boring selves, let our crops fail, let our animals be stillborn, stunt our growth, (plateau our churches?). If Relevants bring back mystery by using something as simple as candles, and throw in a heaping dose of hospitality with something as cheap as a cup of coffee, may their tribe increase.

IS MCLAREN EVEN WORTH OUR TIME (OR THEIRS)?

Ed spends some ink on McLaren's knock of "the religious right for forsaking these larger matters," his code words for issues of social justice (25). Is McLaren even worth rebutting? Is he an historical as well as theological revisionist? Perhaps I have not read him well enough. Perhaps I misunderstand him, or perhaps his education did not include a study of conservative Christianity's stands against abortion (how could you miss it, Brian?), consumerism, absentee fathering, workplace slackness, substance abuse, redefining gender and marriage, social engineering, worthless educational systems, violence, and the media driven cult that celebrates all things crass and base. I read enough of McLaren to know he is not my enemy and that he hopes to solve virtually the same list of social problems as me. His big sounding rhetoric seems akin to Hauerwas's—grabbing attention with a punch then spending forty pages to tell me that the obvious meanings of his words are not the meanings he intended. Please. I have better things to do than decipher code.

For the same reason, Ed thankfully corrects Carson's accusation that Emergents forsake the Gospel (28). We are better off to say that *some* members of the Emergent camp abandon the Gospel, and we can add that some members of the conservative Evangelical camp seem to abandon it right along with them (how many so-called conservative churches go a year or more without a single conversion?). It is one thing to critique a theological stream such as conservatism, liberalism, or something in between, and quite another to slander it. Please, let us not slander one another (29).

AT THE END OF THE DAY, ISN'T THIS JUST A CHRISTIAN AFFINITY GROUP?

A thought that continues to roll around in my mind is that Emergents just started a bunch of new churches for people like themselves. People who attend Emergent churches are either in rebellion to orthodox Christianity (nothing new there), or they are trying to practice Christianity in a way that makes sense to people of like sensibilities (nothing new there either). Emergent churches are simply revisiting the trends previously established by liberal, conservative, moderate, Bible-teaching, snake handling, seeker-sensitive, purpose driven, house network, cowboy, and any of the other of the thousands of contemporary church expressions of the past several generations. In that sense, Emergent ecclesiology is *church for people like themselves*. It is an affinity group not much different from the churches that went before it.

Like all the ones who went before them, unless Emergents focus on the Gospel of Jesus *above all else*, their churches will die off. Some future generation will decide that they want newer churches for people like themselves. Perhaps, that is exactly what Jesus

intended. It may just be that he wants his churches unified on doctrinal essentials, but diverse on their cultural expressions of how that doctrine plays out in styles of worship and social emphases.

Dr. Stetzer deserves our appreciation for a good paper on a movement that bears scrutiny. Moreover, Emergents deserve our love and help as they try to take the Gospel to their generation. Who knows, we might answer each other's questions.