

A PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE EMERGENT CHURCH

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In the mid-1990s I was a young church planter trying to establish a church in the city of Seattle when I got a call to speak at my first conference. It was hosted by Leadership Network and focused on the subject of Generation X. I spoke on the transition from the modern to the postmodern world and some of the implications this cultural shift was having on the Church. Other participants spoke on the various ways that emerging generations were changing and how the Church might faithfully respond.

That conference shifted in focus from reaching a generation to larger issues related to being the Church in an emerging postmodern culture. The general consensus among us was that a transition within the Church was taking place. Local churches were moving either from a Church 1.0 to a Church 2.0 model or from a Church 2.0 to a Church 3.0 model.

Church 1.0 is traditional, institutional, and generally marked by the following traits:

- The cultural context is modern.
- The church holds a privileged place in the larger culture.
- Pastors are teachers who lead people by virtue of their spiritual authority.
- Church services are marked by choirs, robes, hymnals, and organs.
- Missions involves sending Americans and dollars overseas through denominations and mission agencies.

As the Church 1.0 model becomes less popular, the Church 2.0 model becomes more prominent. Church 2.0 is contemporary, with the following traits:

- The cultural context is in transition from modern to postmodern.
- A culture war is being fought to regain a lost position of privilege in culture.
- Pastors are CEOs running businesses that market spiritual goods and services to customers.
- Church services use 1980s and 1990s pop culture such as acoustic guitars and drama in an effort to attract non-Christian seekers.
- Missions is a church department organizing overseas trips and funding.

Today, the Church 2.0 model is the dominant American church form, but is being replaced by yet another incarnation of the Church. The Church 3.0 model is emerging, missional, and bound together by the following traits:

- The cultural context is postmodern and pluralistic.
- The church accepts that it is marginalized in culture.
- Pastors are local missionaries.
- Church services blend ancient forms and current local styles.
- Missions is “glocal” (global and local).

Out of that conference a small team was formed to continue conversing about postmodernism and the overarching concern of what mission work would look like in the United States, including the implications for how theology and church are done. Until that time most of the discussion regarding missions related to Americans sending their missionaries and dollars overseas to interpret and convert foreign cultures. But, our small team believed that America was becoming as thoroughly secular and foreign to the gospel as “foreign” cultures and therefore needed its own missiological agenda. It was at this time that we began combing through the works of such noted missiologists as David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, and Roland Allen. We also began traveling the country speaking to various groups of Christian leaders about what it would mean if Americans actually functioned as missionaries in their own culture. We also had

many informal conversations with Christian leaders who were asking the same sorts of questions regarding the content of the gospel and the context of church ministry.

By this time Leadership Network hired Doug Pagitt to lead the team and organize the events. He began growing the team and it soon included Brian McLaren. The speaking team continued the conversation about the interface between postmodern America, the gospel, and the church for perhaps a year or so until the group disbanded for a variety of reasons. Most of us were in the middle of planting young churches and were struggling with the time it took to meet as a group, travel, and tend to our young churches and young families. Some of the men in the group spun out to start their own organizations and host their own conferences. Still others who were connected in varying degrees to the small team sadly disqualified themselves from ministry due to immorality.

Pagitt, McLaren, and others such as Chris Seay, Tony Jones, Dan Kimball, and Andrew Jones stayed together and continued speaking and writing together as friends. I left the team because my new church needed more attention and I also had growing theological differences with some members of the team, though most remained friends. McLaren, a very gifted writer, rose to team leader in part because he had an established family and church, which allowed him to devote a lot of time to the team. That team eventually morphed into what is now known as Emergent. This name has caused much confusion because there is a difference between what is Emerging and what is Emergent.

First, the Emerging church is a broad category that encompasses a wide variety of churches and Christians who are seeking to be effective missionaries wherever they live. This includes Europeans and Australians who are having the same conversation as their American counterparts. The Emerging church includes three distinct types of Christians. In a conversation with Dr. Ed Stetzer, a noted missiologist, he classified them as the Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists.

Relevants are theologically conservative evangelicals who are not as interested in reshaping theology as much as updating such things as worship styles, preaching styles, and church leadership structures. Their goal is to be more relevant; thus, appealing to postmodern-minded people. Relevants commonly begin alternative worship services within evangelical churches to keep generally younger Christians from leaving their churches. They also plant new churches to reach emerging people. Relevant leaders look to people such as

Dan Kimball, Donald Miller, and Rob Bell as like-minded leaders. The common critique of Relevants is that they are doing little more than conducting “cool church” for hip young Christians and are not seeing significant conversion growth. Within the Relevants there is also a growing group of outreach-minded Reformed Relevants, which look to men like John Piper, Tim Keller, and D. A. Carson for theological direction.

Reconstructionists are generally theologically evangelical and dissatisfied with the current forms of church (e.g. seeker, purpose, contemporary). They bolster their critique by noting that our nation is becoming less Christian and that those who profess faith are not living lives markedly different than non-Christians; thereby, proving that current church forms have failed to create life transformation. Subsequently, they propose more informal, incarnational, and organic church forms such as house churches. Reconstructionists, who are more influenced by mainline Christian traditions, will also use terms like “new monastic communities” and “abbess.” Reconstructionist leaders look to such people as Neil Cole and Australians Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch. The common critique of Reconstructionists is that they are collecting disgruntled Christians who are overreacting to the megachurch trend but are not seeing significant conversion growth.

Revisionists are theologically liberal and question key evangelical doctrines, critiquing their appropriateness for the emerging postmodern world. Reconstructionists look to such leaders as Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt as well as other Emerging Christians. The common critique of Revisionists is that they are recycling the doctrinal debates of a previous generation and also not seeing significant conversion growth.

What ties each of these types of Emerging Christians together is a missiological conversation about what a faithful church should believe and do to reach Western culture. However, beyond that there is little unity because there is widespread disagreement on what counts as faithful doctrine and practice.

Scripture commands us to “contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). Therefore, the truths of Christianity are constant, unchanging, and meant for all people, times, and places. But, the methods by which truth is articulated and practiced must be culturally appropriated and therefore constantly translated (1 Cor 9:22–23). If both doctrine and practice are constant, the result is dead orthodoxy, which the Relevants, Reconstructionists, and Revisionists are each reacting to in varying degrees. If both

doctrine and practice are constantly changing, the result is living heresy, which is where I fear the Revisionist Emergent tribe of the Emerging church is heading. But, if doctrine is constant and practice is always changing, the result is living orthodoxy which I propose is the faithful third way of the Relevantists, which I pray remains the predominant way of the Reconstructionists.

In some ways it seems that Emerging Christianity is essentially making up its mind again on almost every major doctrinal issue. What began as a conversation among a few people is quickly erupting into a conflict between many people over eight very important theological issues.

1. **Scripture.** This includes the divine inspiration, perfection, and authority of Scripture.
2. **Jesus Christ.** This includes his deity and sovereignty over human history as Lord.
3. **Gender.** This includes whether or not people are created with inherent gender differences, whether or not those gender roles have any implications for the governments of home and church, and whether or not homosexual practice is sinful. This also includes whether or not it is appropriate to use gender specific names for God, such as Father, like Jesus did.
4. **Sin.** The primary issue here is whether or not human beings are conceived as sinners or are essentially morally neutral and are internally corrupted solely by external forces.
5. **Salvation.** The issue is whether Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation and whether or not salvation exists for people in other religions who do not worship Jesus Christ.
6. **The Cross.** The issue here is the doctrine of penal substitution and whether or not Jesus died in our place for our sins or if He went to the cross solely as an example for us to follow when we suffer.
7. **Hell.** The issue is whether or not anyone will experience conscious eternal torment, or if unbelievers will simply cease to exist (annihilationism) or eventually be saved and taken to heaven (universalism).
8. **Authority.** This issue is perhaps the most difficult of all. Much of this conversation is happening online with blogs and chat rooms. However, as the conversation becomes a conflict, the inherent flaw of postmodernism is becoming a practical obstacle to unity because there is no source of authority to determine what constitutes orthodox or heretical doctrine.

With the authority of Scripture open for debate and even long-established Church councils open for discussion (e.g. the Council of Carthage that denounced Pelagius as a heretic for denying human sinfulness), the conversation continues while the original purpose of getting on mission may be overlooked because there is little agreement on the message or the mission of the Church.

The issue of authority also has very practical implications for the Christian church and home. The result is an ever-growing debate over whether men should lead their homes, pastors should lead their churches, and who has the right to preach, teach, or exercise discipline in the church.

As a pastor I find the entire conversation encouraging, stimulating, and frightening. What I find encouraging is the groundswell of interest among Christians who do not want to separate from culture like fundamentalists, or simply baptize culture like liberals, but want to earnestly wrestle over the nature of the gospel and how can it be most faithfully contextualized in culture. What I find stimulating is the growing focus on doctrine and the way it forces people to reconsider their doctrinal positions and dig more deeply since pat answers to tough questions are no longer sufficient. But, what I find frightening is the trend among some to drift from what I consider to be faithful conservative evangelical theological convictions in favor of a less distinctively Christian spirituality. The result is a trip around the same cul-de-sac of false doctrine that a previous generation spent their life driving around while touting their progress.

At present, the conversation has been going for nearly a decade and shows no signs of slowing down as more people are discussing these important missional matters. Without being able to come to resolution on these important matters, though, mission will simply cease. Scripture and history have repeatedly proven that the Holy Spirit works with power through the preaching and teaching of Scripture if it is focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Subsequently, men and women become convicted by the Spirit of their personal sin against their holy Creator and run to the cross where Jesus Christ accomplished the forgiveness of sins through his substitutionary death and bodily resurrection. Anyone who denies these essential truths of the gospel may very well understand their culture but they lack the ability to confidently and lovingly assert the truth, thereby inevitably

resulting in false gospels that lead people to the conscious eternal punishment of hell.

What started as a simple conversation nearly a decade ago by a handful of young pastors about how to do a hipper version of church has matured into a very serious conflict over what exactly it means to be a Christian. Consequently, American Christianity finds itself in one of those pivotal moments where history is being written for better or worse and we could see anything from a revival like the Jesus Movement of a previous generation or the decline of the Church as has already happened throughout Europe. Time will tell, and ultimately the decision will be made by thousands of pastors who shepherd their flocks and the dozens of pastors who shepherd those pastors.

In the end, I believe the conversation will result in multiple communities arriving at different conclusions and breaking off to have their own conversations, with their own Bible translations, leaders, books, magazines, websites, blogs, conferences, and model churches. That is already happening as new networks are forming and new church planting networks are establishing new churches with varying answers to the missiological questions. Over time, this may result in new denominations because inevitably systems must be put in place to serve a movement and somehow an umpire must be put in place to make decisions about what is and what is not acceptable doctrine and practice.

The only hope is a return to the true gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. The gospel must be unleashed in the world through the Church for the transforming salvation of sinners and their cultures. If the gospel is lost, as I fear it already has been among some Revisionists, then tomorrow will be a dark day for the truth about Jesus.