



The Future or Fad?

A LOOK AT THE EMERGING CHURCH MOVEMENT

Last summer, while sitting at my desk at home, I got a call from a reporter from *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* on PBS, asking if she could interview me for a program on the emerging movement.

"I've been reading blogs for months, and I've attended emerging conferences, and I've read emerging materials," she said, "and I can't figure this thing out."

Finally, after reading my weblog, she thought she'd found an "expert" who could help sort the story out.

Her comment surprised me, because when it came to the emerging movement (EM), I was just as confused as she was. Not since the charismatic movement of the 1960s or the Vineyard movement of the 1980s has any movement in the church attracted as much attention, resentment, or confusion—and at the same time, seen such a positive reception—as the EM has during the first decade of this new millennium.

So what exactly is the emerging movement—or the emerging church as it sometimes known—all about?

It is a conversation about the future direction of the evangelical church in a postmodern world; it's a reaction and

a protest against traditional evangelical churches; and it's a conversation focused less on theological niceties and more on "performing" the gospel in a local setting.

"Emerging movement" is an umbrella term that refers to a group of churches, pastors, writers, and bloggers who are exploring the missional significance of culture, philosophy,

Describing the EM is a bit like trying to describe the Covenant—a movement in which practice varies widely from church to church and region to region.

and theology in a postmodern context. Within the EM is the Emergent Village organization, largely an American group identified with Brian McLaren, Ivy Beckwith, Tim Keel, Chris Seay, Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball, and Karen Ward, along with Andrew Jones (a.k.a., the "Tall Skinny Kiwi") who lives in the United Kingdom. Other emerging voices of sorts would be Rob Bell, author of *Velvet Elvis*, and John Burke, author of *No Perfect People Allowed*.

The Emergent Village is a leading voice but not the only voice in the EM. There are thousands of emerging

Christians in Germany, Scandinavia, and Asia, who often don't see eye to eye with the Emergent Village.

Some would describe the EM outside the U.S. as a highly effective grassroots attempt to reach others with the gospel through local efforts, Bible studies, house churches, and social services. Any description that does not acknowledge the worldwide scope of this movement will fail to see that it is far more than an American sideshow among disaffected evangelicals.

Understanding the EM

A fundamental conviction of the EM is the gospel should be lived out—proclaimed and performed—by a local community in a way that fits the local context. There is a commitment, in ways quite similar to Anabaptism, to a radical living out of the gospel—including commitments to economic simplicity and justice. In some cases this includes taking monastic vows.

Because the gospel adapts to various cultures and subcultures, how the gospel is proclaimed and performed varies dramatically from one place to another. That difference is the what the EM is all about: let the gospel be performed, they

Scot McKnight is Karl A. Olsson professor in religious studies at North Park University in Chicago.

say. Avoid conformity. “Catch us if you can” is sometimes the attitude.

This means that systematic criticisms will always fall flat and usually involve inaccurate but sweeping generalization. Describing the EM is a bit like trying to describe the Covenant—a movement in which practice varies widely from church to church and region to region.

D. A. Carson’s recent book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, misses the target because Carson criticizes the whole movement by focusing on one leader (Brian McLaren), one issue (postmodern epistemology—the theory of how one knows truth), and one problem (the postmodern denial of truth). The EM is more than McLaren, often not at all concerned with epistemology, and rarely (if ever) does it deny truth.

Instead of epistemology, the EM is concerned with ecclesiology—how to “do church” (to use this commonplace but inelegant phrase) in our current context. To flesh out this central characteristic, we will look at the “pro” features of the EM, the “post” features, and then offer some questions about the movement and its future.

The “pros” of the EM

First, the EM is pro-missional. This term “missional” is crucial. To be “missional” means embracing a holistic gospel, which is a gospel for the whole person (heart, soul, mind, and strength), for the whole society (politics, economy, culture, environment), and for the whole world.

The missional emphasis focuses on the kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. Being missional means living out the gospel so that the gospel is seen and experienced through that community. The EM invites us to be Christians, to follow Jesus, and to let others see the gospel in action. The gospel is performed as well as proclaimed. The EM often contends that people come to faith because they see the gospel and

experience the gospel and come to trust and love others who live that gospel out in their daily life.

The mission of the EM comes from the themes of the Gospels—especially the Magnificat of Mary in Luke 1, Jesus’s inaugural sermon in Luke 4, the Sermon on the Mount, the re-statement of Jesus’s mission to John the Baptist in Matthew 11, and the descriptions of the early Jerusalem community in Acts 2 to 4. For the EM, the kingdom vision of Jesus ought to be the missional focus of every local church.

A final feature of the EM concern with being missional is this: the mission of the Christian community is to

The EM is concerned with ecclesiology—how to “do church” (to use this commonplace but inelegant phrase) in our current context.

discover the “mission” of God in that local community and participate in that work of God. There is a robust humility in this view: the EM avoids thinking it is a group of the “right” people surrounded by a majority of “wrong” people. Instead the EM knows that only God is “right.” Our task is to find what “right” work God is doing and participate in God’s work.

Second, the EM is pro-Jesus. The EM is driven by a reaction to the theology that flowed from the ancient creeds into the Reformation and from the Reformation into the present evangelical culture. That theology is often abstract, systematic, and rooted in logic and reason. The EM wants to root its theology, which is more practical than it is theoretical, in the incarnate life of Jesus. It wants a theology that is shaped by relationship with the person of Jesus rather than rationality and systemic thinking.

So, the EM focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus and anchors what it does and believes in Jesus. The rest of the New Testament and Bible are read through the lens of the kingdom vision

of Jesus. When it thinks about politics, it goes to Jesus; when it comes to global relations, it goes to Jesus; when it thinks about economics and lifestyle issues, it goes to Jesus; when it thinks about racial tensions, it goes to Jesus.

Third, the EM is pro-church. The EM is pro-church in that it is ecumenical—not in trying to find doctrinal common ground, but in trying to find a common mission. Because it is focused on mission, the EM finds it much easier to cooperate with other Christians.

Central to this mission is exploring the great Christian traditions of spirituality and spiritual formation.

One finds people in the EM quoting Brother Lawrence, Gregory of Nyssa, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, John Stott, and Henri Nouwen. An example of this can be found in *The Sacred Way* by Tony Jones.

The EM, because it is not shackled by denominational worries, finds fruit in the whole Garden of Eden, that is, the church.

It is also pro-church in that the church is a community. Here again the EM is reminiscent of the Anabaptists or the Jesus Movement of the sixties and seventies, where Christian communities grew out of a radical commitment to the church as a community.

The EM’s focus is not on ecclesiastical structures or denominational politics, but on local churches incarnating the kingdom vision of Jesus in its local community for the good of the world.

The EM is openly and centrally concerned with the Christian faith as something personal at the local and deepest level. The whole person is to be challenged, and this explains the popularity of story-telling as a feature of EM worship and preaching. Story-telling invites both the preachers and those gathered to be authentic and tell the truth about their own story.

Which leads to yet another element of this pro-church focus—au-

thentic relationships. In his book, *No Perfect People Allowed: Creating a Come as You Are Culture in the Church*, John Burke, pastor of Gateway Community Church in Austin, Texas, explains how authenticity has shaped their vibrant and growing church.

Fourth, the EM is pro-culture. The EM is pro-culture in that it is concerned with the postmodern generation. Post-modernity, if you have followed any of the discussion, is nearly impossible to define. Essentially, it means that the “meta-narratives” (large stories that put the world together for us) are no longer viable because they can’t be proven rationally. Everyone and every group is entitled to their own meta-narrative. While postmodernism does not deny the value of a meta-narrative, it contends none of them can be proven to be true. The EM tends to celebrate the demise of meta-narratives, finding in this demise the opportunity for micro-narratives of local communities.

Some EM thinkers suggest that the Christian faith is one such meta-narrative that can’t be proven true. There is something dangerous and something healthy in such a claim. It is dangerous if it means Christian faith is just a preference rather than the truth, but it is healthy if it means (as many Christian theologians think it does) that Christians have to accept their fallenness and their limited grasp of truth and live with less than certainty on many issues.

The EM is also pro-culture in that it emerged and is shaped by a youth culture. Some of the leaders of the EM were (or still are) youth ministers. The EM is in the cultural flow with the newest ideas and methods and fashions and ideas. Services for the EM gatherings can be quite bizarre for a traditionalist—filled with such things such as walking through labyrinths, sitting in couches in the round, having informal and participatory conversations with the preacher, or with having many things go on at the same time during the service—all features of a youth culture that has learned to live

by multi-tasking.

Finally, the EM is pro-sensory worship. This is perhaps one of the most notable features. Many in the EM form and shape worship “gatherings” in order to foster sensory experience in worship. In doing so, they draw from deep and ancient Christian traditions. Candles, incense, darkness, labyrinths, physically acting out various features of the Christian message and experience, even complete silence are some of the specific features of EM worship.

Why? Because they believe that we are to worship God with heart, soul, mind, and body. The EM is drawing on ancient traditions of the church.

An important word here for EM worship is participation: the EM worship opposes seeker-friendly entertainment-oriented weekend services and calls for a smaller, more intimate, and participatory form of worship.

The “posts” of the EM

By “post,” I mean “beyond” and “after” chronologically—in the way a computer is “post” typewriter. It does not have to suggest “better.” What it does mean is that the EM is “here” and no longer “there” and it is quite happy about the change or shift.

First, the EM is by-and-large post-evangelical. Dave Tomlinson, vicar of St. Luke’s Anglican Church in North London, has described this idea in his book, *The Post-Evangelicals*, published in the UK in 1995 and in North America in 2003. The EM has plenty of former evangelicals or still-evangelicals-and-not-all-that-proud-of-it.

But being post-evangelical is not enough for the EM. It is also post-liberal. The EM wants to get beyond the old and feisty divisions of much of contemporary Christianity.

Second, the EM is post-doctrinal statements. The EM refrains from establishing its identity on the basis of creeds, and here taps into the Pietistic strain of the Covenant. The EM is more interested in talking about what they do and how they embody the

Christian faith. An EM website will often include a “rule of life” or a “missional statement” and often will not have “what we believe.”

The EM folk I have encountered are creedal Christians, but they want their creed to be what Brian McLaren describes (in the words of Hans Frei) as

Recommended Reading

Books

Emerging Churches
Eddie Gibb and Ryan Bolger
Baker Academics, 2005

Generous Orthodoxy
Brian McLaren
Zondervan, 2004

A New Kind of Christianity
Brian McLaren
Jossey-Bass, 2001

No Perfect People Allowed
John Burke
Zondervan, 2005

The Post-Evangelicals
Dave Tomlinson
Zondervan, 2003

Blogs

www.theoblogy.blogspot.com
(Tony Jones)

pagitt.typepad.com
(Doug Pagitt)

www.tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com
(Andrew Jones)

www.emergentvillage.com
(Emergent)

JesusCreed.org
(Scot McNight)

a “generous orthodoxy.” Yes, the EM is orthodox, but its missional focus permits it to be more generous in its appreciation of other theologies.

From the outset, the EM has been a conversation rather than a “movement” or a “church” or a “denomination.” Theological statements are easily turned into monuments and statues,

and the EM wants even its theology to be conversational. The EM is a dialogue between Scripture, tradition, and culture, and it asks the Holy Spirit to carry the day so that what is affirmed is both scriptural and relevant, both ancient and future. It doesn't expect its articulations to be absolute or final, and so it strives for a conversational approach to theology itself.

The EM prefers global theological affirmations and the classical creeds rather than denominationally shaped theological creeds, and the reason for this is clear: the EM is a missionally shaped ecclesiology that seeks to unite Christians for the sake of unleashing the gospel to change the world, rather than a theological movement designed to demand conformity on specific theological issues.

Third, the EM is post-Bible-study piety. One of the more vocal forms of evangelicalism is what Stanley Grenz called "conservative piety." It finds expression in such movements as InterVarsity Fellowship and many evangelical Christian colleges. This kind of piety focuses the Christian life on Bible reading, Bible studies, Sunday-school classes that teach the Bible, sermons that focus on exposition of Bible texts, and it delights in Bible conferences—you get the picture. There is a lot of Bible in this form of spirituality.

The EM is "post" this form of spirituality. Not because it doesn't read the Bible or believe in the Bible or preach from the Bible, but because it believes that the Bible is to be read formationally and not just informationally. It believes that the Bible is God's gift to us not so we can figure it out but so we can live missionally, so we can work for the kingdom of God on earth (as it is in heaven). The EM finds problems with the sort of piety that emphasizes too much personal Bible *study* and not enough Bible *living*. Pietism—the theological movement that gave birth to the Covenant—was always concerned as much with living as it was with knowing.

"Potential problems" of the EM

With these "pros" and "posts" on the table, let us turn to the potential problems lurking in the shadows of the EM.

First, the EM, in spite of all its talk about being "for the world" and "for the church," tends to be a niche-seeking ministry to white, middle-class postmoderns. There are signs of change, but my read is that it is in need of expansion.

Second, the EM will fight the same problem that the liberal-fundamentalist divide always has fought—maintaining balance between Christian gospel work and creation-only social work. A holistic gospel is only "whole" when it is shaped by faith in Jesus Christ, "social" justice is only "just" when it is shaped by what God says is right and pure and good and loving and holy. The fact is that it has not been easy for any group in the church to be balanced when it comes to creation justice and Christian gospel.

Third, the EM will also have to grapple with the rest of the New Testament, not just the Gospels. The movement has yet to interact at a serious level with Paul's extraordinarily powerful adaptation of Jesus's kingdom message in Romans, where it is re-fashioned as a gospel of redemption with sin and justification at its heart. A Jesus-first theology is fine as long as it is not a Jesus-only theology.

God, in his wisdom, inspired more than the Gospels. One of the most important texts in the early Church—devoted to how the first-century early "emerging" Christian church should interact with the Roman world—is 1 Peter. I've almost seen nothing from the EM about 1 Peter. Here is a text waiting for their analysis. And, one should not forget the significance of the letter to the Hebrews. It, too, expressed Christian theology within the Roman culture while also turning the gospel against that culture. So, while I embrace the focus on kingdom in the EM, a Christian theology will invite other

"metaphors" to the table to develop a well-rounded conversation.

Fourth, the EM has to deal with theological coherency. If there is anything ancient about the church it is its theological articulation: creeds didn't jump up from behind and hijack the church. Creedal formulations began with the Shema of the Old Testament and emerged rather naturally in the development of the early churches. The EM will eventually have to settle on some theological tenets.

To be sure, the EM wants to focus on praxis. But, the necessity of living out one's theology is not a groundbreaking idea. It is older than Moses. Therefore, any simplistic either/or approach to theology and practice will not fly with the universal church. So, there is a challenge for the EM to live up to its claim to be continuous with the church and articulate at some level its "theology." No one is asking the EM to produce a systematic theology. Instead, for this to be a charitable conversation, the EM will need at least to declare its colors—what it believes about what Christians everywhere and always have believed.

An appeal

Like any new movement, the EM—like the seeker church and the charismatic movement before it—has been seen as either the next big thing or as a threat to traditional Christianity. Neither of these assessments rings true.

The EM is a post-evangelical group of young Christians who are doing what they can to get the church back in line with the kingdom vision of Jesus. My suggestion is that we listen and learn what the Spirit is saying to the church.

The reason I make this suggestion is that I cannot think of any denomination in the world more in tune with the heart of the EM: a missional gospel that seeks to live out the gospel in such a way that evangelism is what the church "is" as much as what the church "says." That, I think, is as Covenant as it gets. □