

Review of Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*

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Anderson RS 2007. *An emergent theology for emerging churches: theological perspective for a new generation of leaders*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship.

Judging by recent developments in evangelical blogosphere, *the emerging church conversation* appears to be making some impact among young evangelicals of the United Kingdom, North America, Australia and New Zealand, and perhaps South Africa. The phenomenon has also not gone unnoticed by several well-known leaders of the evangelical community, some of whom have written assessments ranging from balanced to severely adverse. Most of these evaluations of the conversation have expressed frustration that despite the prolific publications by the members and leaders of the conversation, there is a worrying lack of clearly articulated belief and practices of the conversation. This has no doubt hampered how pastors and leaders are able to guide others on how to relate to the conversation.

It therefore came as a matter of relief and excitement when I laid hold of Ray Anderson's book, written with the intention of providing a theological perspective for the new generation of leaders within the emerging church conversation. Anderson begins with an introductory title—'What has Antioch to do with Jerusalem' (p. 10), a title which to a significant extent provides the background and tone to the whole book. Anderson's thesis is that 'the Christian community that emerged out of Antioch constitutes the original form and theology of the emerging church as contrasted with the believing community at Jerusalem' (p. 21; cf. p. 74). Thus the conversation is hereby cast in the mould of the church at Antioch, the rest of the evangelical movement (or perhaps all other Christians) as 'the Christian community in Jerusalem' (p. 17). This provides a reasonable portrait of the self-understanding of the emerging church conversation—like the 'emergent

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church' of Antioch, the postmodern emerging church conversation is mission-oriented, messianic, revelational, reformational, kingdom-focused, and eschatological (p. 18). These features are then expounded in turns in the subsequent chapters.

Of much interest is the chapter in which Anderson discusses the hermeneutics of the emerging church conversation, titled, 'It's about the Work of God, not just the Word of God' (pp. 115-135). In my view, this chapter represents the most openly articulated précis of the approach that the emerging church conversation adopts in dealing with the difficult ethical questions of our day. Basically, Anderson argues that biblical interpretation should not just restrict itself to what the Bible says, but more so to what God is doing among the Christian community (p. 123). He cites two examples of this method with how some churches have dealt with the issue of women in ministry, and the treatment of divorcees in the church. Here Anderson articulates a theology of revelation which pits the 'word of God' with the 'work of God', an account which should attract a whole thesis to examine its validity (p. 132). Though this is not the place for such an examination, it suffices to say that Anderson's use of the term 'revelation' to describe postmodern, utilitarian interpretations of Scripture, admittedly, in the face of difficult ethical challenges, creates several problems for this reviewer.

That said, there are several elements of Anderson's rendition of the theology of the emerging church conversation which elicited my sympathies. Regarding the Christology of the emerging church conversation, for example, I find as welcome Anderson's call for a Christology of 'naïve realism' (p. 41), by which he appears to be rebuking the often artificial manner that some biblical scholars have tended to approach the historical Jesus question in the gospels. Regarding spirituality, Anderson's call for a renewed understanding of discipleship and spirituality that acknowledges the transforming reality of the Holy Spirit in the believer (pp. 64-67) is also agreeable, even if his implication that such an emphasis is new is perhaps an overstatement. I also concur with Anderson's call on the church to take social justice and poverty seriously (pp. 148-151); even though I am uneasy with his attempt to brand moral concerns such as abortion and homosexual practices as belonging to the realms of questions of social justice (pp. 153-154). I found Anderson's willingness to criticize sections of the conversation for adopting 'innovative methods' of worship which lack a 'compelling story of the gospel' (p. 85) as courageous and healthy.

The book is primarily directed to 'insiders' of the emerging church conversation, in which case it could have limited utility to 'outsiders'. Despite

its desire to open up several of the long held assumptions of theological discourse in the western hemisphere for debate, criticisms of the conversation have not always been welcomed by some members of the conversation with the humility that is needed at this stage. A critic from within the conversation could better achieve a 'hearing' than one from the 'outside'. This is not, however, to say that Anderson is the *bona fide* spokesperson of the conversation. Thus the challenge still remains that for several believers who are yet 'outside' of the emerging church conversation, having an accurate knowledge of what the conversation stands for and so providing a fair critique of it continues to be a baffling undertaking. I nevertheless recommend it to pastors and students who wish to know the specific beliefs of the conversation.

Much more serious than this limitation of the book, are my disappointments with some of the theological assumptions and direction of interpretation that Anderson adopts. One example might suffice. Anderson's sweeping caricature that the first century Jerusalem church *per se* as anti-mission, non-progressive obstructionists of Paul is more than an unfortunate hyperbole. I am afraid that in buying into this caricature, which is more commonly found in non-conservative circles of biblical scholarship, Anderson has built a straw man which is foreign to the New Testament. It is true Paul had significant opposition and problems with the Judaizers, who claimed to have had the support of the pillars of Jerusalem (e.g. Gal. 1-2; Phil. 3). Yet, that is not the same as saying that the 'pillars' of Jerusalem instigated such opposition. On the contrary, the evidence from 1 Corinthians and 1-2 Peter indicates that the 'Jerusalem pillars' were missional, and supportive also of Paul.

Furthermore, creating an artificial dichotomy between the two groups in order to cast a postmodern movement in the mould of Paul is, to say the least, an unfortunate hermeneutic. More seriously, branding the Jerusalem church as 'temple-centred and Moses driven messianic community' (p. 138) as an indirect means of placing critics of the emerging church conversation in a bad light does not augur well for the conversation. Finally, this rather early self-identification of the emerging church conversation with Paul may not be healthy to the conversation itself for, by claiming the garb of Paul, any Paul loving critic from outside the conversation will be disarmed and stifled. The eventual loser of such a one-sided dialogue could be the conversation.