Understanding the Emerging Church Movement: An Overview of Its Strengths, Areas of Concern and Implications for Today's Evangelicals[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the emerging church movement (ECM) in order to come to a better understanding of its strengths in the context of a postmodern society, and its areas of concern relating to matters of doctrine and ethics. The paper concludes with remarks concerning the emerging church Movement and some implications for today's evangelicals.

1.   Introduction

The emerging church or emergent church[3] is a diverse movement within Protestant Christianity that arose in the late 20th century as a reaction to the influence of modernism in Western Christianity. To emphasise its diffuse nature—with contributions from many people and no explicitly defined

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[3] Some scholars distinguish between the "Emer<u>gent</u>" and the "Emerg<u>ing</u>" Church (see Taylor in paragraph 2). I am aware of the fact that these terms are not always used interchangeably, but for the purpose of this article no distinction is intended.

leadership or direction—its proponents usually call the movement a "conversation". The emerging church seeks to deconstruct and reconstruct Christianity as its mainly Western members live in a postmodern culture (Kimball 2007).

According to Don Carson (quoted in Roach 2005), the emerging church movement (ECM) "arose as a protest against the institutional church, modernism and seeker-sensitive churches.... It has encouraged evangelicals to take note of cultural trends and has emphasised authenticity among believers" (Roach 2005).

Carson (2005b) indicates that at the heart of the Emergent Church Movement is the conviction that changes in today's culture signal that a new church is "emerging". He, therefore, argues that Christian leaders should adapt to this emerging church:

> Those who fail to do so are blind to the cultural accretions that hide the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new generation, the emerging generation.

Sam Storms (quoted in Theopedia 2007) notes that it is a *protest* against the "failure of [evangelicals] to recognize the demise and passing of so-called 'modernism' and the ascendancy of 'postmodernism' and the countless ways it affects both the larger culture and how we live as Christians and pursue ministry as the Church... It has an emphasis on narrative rather than propositions ('tell me your story, don't explain principles')."

To sum up, Bock (2006) states that the emerging church came into being largely as a result of a *protest* against the following problems with modernity in today's church that needed to be challenged:

1) There is a problem with modernity in its spirit of freedom and quest for human autonomy. This is a cultural value that needs to be challenged.
2) There is a problem with modernity in the dominance of the consumer culture and the way it can lead to compromise of values of the faith. This also drains the ability of the church to serve others selflessly. The missions' budget of many churches is a cause for concern and

shameful reflection. Many other resources could help make an impact as well. However, many of our resources go to things that do not advance the kingdom.

3) A problem with modernity is that efficiency and technology can depersonalise or overwhelm life (leading to the over-saturated self).

2.   Defining the emerging church

Given the diversity of the movement, "penetrating criticisms that apply to one part of it are sometimes inappropriate to some other part" (Carson 2005a:45). In other words, the emerging church is difficult to pin down. Carson, while writing his book, wrote that he had "not found it easy to portray it fairly" (Carson 2005a:9).

Taylor (2006) distinguishes between "Emergent" and "Emerging".

- *Emergent* is an organization or an official network of likeminded leaders and churches involved in one particular stream of the emerging "conversation".
- *Emerging*, on the other hand, is the term most often used to describe the much broader movement (or "conversation") of those seeking to incarnate and contextualise the gospel for postmoderns.

Ed Stetzer (2006), a missiologist with the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board, divides the Emergent Movement into three categories or sub-movements:

1) *Relevants:* seeking to take "the same Gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture." They seek to retain "the old, old story", but they might retell it in new language and with a different approach to worship, preaching, or church structure. In other words, this group wants to distinguish between what is essential to the Christian faith and what is not.

2) *Reconstructionists:* retaining "the same Gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church." For example, they promote house churches.

3) *Revisionists:* questioning and revising not just the church, but what most evangelicals would understand the Gospel to mean. Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones would fall into this last category.

What exactly is the "emerging church"? The following definitions have been presented:

> The *Emerging Church Movement* consists of a diverse group of people who identify with *Christianity*, but who feel that reaching the *postmodern* world requires us to radically reshape the church's beliefs and practices to conform to postmodernism (Kowalski 2007).

> The Emerging Church Movement (or the Emergent Church Movement) is described by its own proponents as "a growing generative friendship among missional Christian leaders seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (About Emergent Village, 2007).

From the above definitions, it is clear that the ECM has several strengths. In the next section, I shall examine some of these strengths.

3.   The emerging church's strengths in reading the times

3.1   Four values of the emerging church

Kimball (2007) points out that while practices and even core doctrines vary, most emergents can be recognised by the following values:

- *Missional living:* Christians go out into the world to serve God rather than isolate themselves within communities of like-minded individuals.
- *Narrative theology:* teaching focuses on narrative presentations of faith and the Bible rather than systematic theology or biblical reductionism.

- *Christ-likeness:* while not neglecting the study of Scripture or the love of the church, Christians focus their lives on the worship and emulation of the person of Jesus Christ.
- *Authenticity:* people in the postmodern culture seek real and authentic experiences in preference over scripted or superficial experiences. Emerging churches strive to be relevant to today's culture and daily life, whether it be through worship or service opportunities. The core Christian message is unchanged, but emerging churches attempt, as the church has throughout the centuries, to find ways to reach God's people where they are to hear God's message of unconditional love.

Taylor (2006) indicates that each of the above values of the emerging church contains an element of *protest,* since each one indirectly reveals its critique of the modern evangelical church. In other words, if the Emerging Movement values the above four characteristics, it is because they regard the traditional church as:

- full of fakery, not authenticity;
- individualistic and isolated, not missional;
- fixated on abstract doctrine, not narrative theology; and
- obsessed with the church, the Bible, or tradition, not Christocentric living.

3.2   Four values and practices listed on the Emergent Village website

The Emergent Village website (*Values and Practices* 2007) lists the following four values and practices as their "order and rule":

1) "Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus", which means
    - seeking to "live by the Great Commandment: loving God and loving our neighbors";
    - understanding "the gospel to be centered in Jesus and his message of the kingdom of God, a message of Reconciliation with God and among humanity"; and
    - committing to "a 'generous orthodoxy' in faith and practice— affirming the historic Christian faith and the Biblical injunction to love one another even when we disagree".

2) "Commitment to the Church in all its Forms", which means:
   - affirming "the church in all its forms—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal";
   - seeking "to be irenic and inclusive of all our Christian sisters and brothers, rather than elitist and critical, seeing 'us' where we used to see 'us versus them'"; and
   - being "actively and positively involved in a local congregation".

3) "Commitment to God's World", which means
   - practising "faith missionally, that is, we do not isolate ourselves from this world, but rather, we follow Christ into the world"; and
   - seeing "the earth and all it contains as God's beloved creation, and so we join God in seeking its good, its healing, and its blessing".

4) "Commitment to One Another", which means
   - "valuing time and interaction with other friends who share this rule and its practices";
   - identifying "ourselves as members of this growing, global, generative, and non-exclusive friendship";
   - making "an annual pilgrimage to an emergent gathering";
   - representing emergent well whenever we can; to exemplify the best of what emergent strives to be and do; and
   - staying "reconciled to one another".

Again, it should be noted that there is an implicit *protest* in each of the above values. Taylor (2006) indicates that, if the emergents are committed to the way of Jesus, the church in all its forms, the world, and one another, it is because traditional Christians are committed to the following:

- other things besides the way of Jesus;
- a narrow segment of the church, not all the church;
- their evangelical ghettos, not the real world; and
- their narrow slice of the church, not other Christians.

3.3   Positives traits in the emerging church that need to be qualified

Bock (2006) indicates that the strengths of the Emergent Church can also be seen in the following positives that need to be qualified in how they are applied:

1) Interpretation is never totally objective (everyone reads from a place and perspective). This does not mean that we cannot affirm what a text says. But it does mean that how we read and the lenses we bring may draw us to certain texts and cause us to miss certain texts.
2) Communities matter. There is more to faith than just walking as individuals before God.
3) Differing perspectives can teach. We can learn from the engagement that comes from disagreement, as there is always room to learn. (This is a two way street as others can learn from us.)
4) Interpretations need testing (There is an appropriate plea for a proper humility). Appreciating the Bible as the Word does not mean that our interpretations are automatically correct. Community can help to check us.
5) Pushing for authenticity is solid value.
6) Recognising one's social location is an important factor to appreciate in life (where we fit in the world and how that helps and blinds us).
7) The effort to evangelizing outsiders is stronger (especially those on the fringe).
8) There is a valuable probing links back to tradition. There is often better success with people on the edge because of the value of concentrating on this group. But there are also major problems.

4.   Four areas of concern about the ECM

In this section, an attempt will be made to discuss some of the areas of concern about the ECM, particularly those concerns about matters of doctrine and ethics. I have identified four areas of concern that I wish to explore: (1) the Bible, (2) the atonement, (3) truth, and (4) sexual ethics. In this section, an attempt will be made to provide a brief sketch of these concerns.

4.1   The Bible

There is a tendency in the ECM to underplay or underestimate the nature and role of Scripture in the face of problematic factors within the text. The tendency to speak of the Bible becoming God's Word in response, rather than being God's Word regardless of these factors, produces an imbalance, since what the Bible teaches is true, whether I embrace it personally or not.

> There is a power to the Word embraced that is worth highlighting. But the Word presents a reality that is whether I recognize it or not. The Word must remain a key basis for forming a worldview that reflects God's heart (Bock 2006).

On the positive side, one of the things about the ECM generally is that it stresses the *narrative* aspects of Scripture. As they rightly point out,

> Scripture is not just a big fact-book. It's not just a series of propositions and commandments. It's not even a systematic theology textbook. Scripture is a story of God's plan to save us. Postmoderns are much more attracted to instruction driven by story-telling than the traditional "three points and a poem" (Taylor 2006).

While the above argument for focusing on the *narrative* aspects of Scripture might be very strong, this in no way means that the details of Scripture are unimportant. By focusing on the *narrative* aspects of Scripture, the ECM is able to discuss "the big picture" without going into the details. However, God has given us the details of Scripture for a good reason. Not one word in the Bible is wasted.

Regarding the authority of the Bible, there is a great need in today's church for a *humble theology*. It is not a humble theology to undermine the inerrant, authoritative Word of God. God has a powerful Word that stands over and above us. We should submit to it. Mark Dever (2006) has said it well:

> What we need is humble theology—theology which submits itself to the truth of God's Word. "Liberal" theology—theology which does not view Scripture as finally trustworthy and

authoritative—is not humble before the Word. Churches which are tentative and decry dogmatism may sound humble, but it is not truly humble to do anything other than to submit to God's Word…. Christian humility is to simply accept whatever God has revealed in His Word. Humility is following God's Word wherever it goes, as far as it goes, neither going beyond it nor stopping short of it. The humility we want in our churches is to read the Bible and believe it—everything God has said, dogmatically, and humbly! It is not humble to be hesitant where God has been clear and plain.

4.2　The Atonement

The ECM writers often contend that the atonement is bigger than substitutionary atonement—the biblical idea that Christ acted as our substitute and graciously absorbed the wrath of God that we deserved. In this regard, the ECM writers are correct; there is more to the atonement than substitution. The Bible also refers to the cross in terms of his example for us (e.g., 1 Pet 2:21ff), or in terms of his defeat of his enemies (e.g., Col 2:13-15).

While it can certainly be argued that there is more to the atonement than substitution, it could equally be argued that penal substitution is the heart of the atonement. If we lose Christ's work of substitution and propitiation, we lose the gospel and are left with a theory of the atonement, which is completely untrue.

Tom Schreiner (2006) defines *penal substitution* as follows:

> The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy his justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God's holiness and love are manifested.

He goes on to express the vital importance of this biblical doctrine:

> The theory of penal substitution is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of the atonement. I am not claiming that it is

the *only* truth about the atonement taught in the scriptures. Nor am I claiming that penal substitution is emphasized in every piece of literature, or that every author articulates clearly penal substitution. I am claiming that penal substitution functions as the anchor and foundation for all other dimensions of the atonement when the scriptures are considered as a canonical whole.

In the United States, the ECM is often associated with the name Brian McLaren. In the United Kingdom, Steve Chalke is an increasingly popular figure. A few years ago Chalke said the following about substitutionary atonement in his popular book *The Lost Message of Jesus*:

> The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed [as the doctrine of penal substitution makes it out to be]. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement "God is love". If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil" (Chalke & Mann 2003:182-183).

Notice what Chalke labels the doctrine of propitiation—that Christ removed the wrath of God by absorbing it himself—as "child abuse". Not only does Chalke think that propitiation is untrue; he also thinks it is immoral and reprehensible.

Brian McLaren suggests that Chalke's book "could help save Jesus from Christianity", which is not surprising since McLaren places the "cosmic child abuse" argument on the lips of one of his characters in his book *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (McLaren 2003:102).

Chalke and McLaren's approach to the atonement has led Don Carson (2005a:186-187) to write the following sobering words:

> I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.

Carson's concern takes us far beyond any debates we might have over music, candles, communal living, and culture. Such matters cut to the very heart of our faith. Is the wrath of God real? Does sinful humanity deserve God's just condemnation? Did Christ go to the cross to absorb and remove the wrath of the Father? Was he our substitute—our sacrificial lamb? Nothing should be more central to our lives than the gospel.

4.3   Truth

Sometimes the ECM is charged with not believing in "absolute truth". This charge is not entirely correct, since many within emerging churches indicate that they believe that truth exists, and that it is absolute.

Brian McLaren believes that "Christians should present Christianity through loving attitudes rather than logical arguments". Furthermore, "[t]he gospel is made credible not by how we argue and make truth claims. But it's made credible by the love and the good deeds that flow from our lives and our community" (McLaren, quoted in Roach 2005).

McLaren's statements indicate that proponents of the EC tend to reject a Christian faith that is made up of "logical arguments" and propositional "truth claims". Instead, those in the EC want to belittle the idea of arguing for the truth and logical consistency of the Christian faith, and simply *live* the Christian faith. Thus, what develops is a faith that is only lived while little attention is given to what one actually believes (Theopedia 2007).

However, biblical Christianity does not deny or belittle either of these two aspects: good deeds (life) and good doctrine (beliefs). Rather it encompasses the reality of living out that which one believes is true.

Postmodern churches tend to shun reductionist approaches to Scripture in which a story is reduced to doctrines and principles but stripped of its tension and human drama. A "reductionist approach" would be where a pastor looks at a passage and draws out, for example, that Jesus is indeed God from John 1:1. Those in the EC desire, instead, to focus on a practical approach to Scripture rather than one that draws out propositions (Theopedia 2007).

However, Carson criticises the EC movement for a reductionistic understanding of modernism and an inappropriate dismissal of confessional Christianity. He asserts that some emerging church leaders are "painfully reductionistic about modernism and the confessional Christianity that forged its way through the modernist period" and that they "give the impression of dismissing" Christianity. Carson argues that many thinkers in the movement shy away from asserting that Christianity is true and authoritative. He also argues that the ECM frequently fails to use Scripture as the normative standard of truth and instead appeals to tradition (Roach 2005).

4.4   Sexual Ethics

The danger of traditional Christianity is that homosexuality and issues like it are treated as especially bad, when all sin stains us before God (including gluttony, greed, lust, gossip, adultery, divorce, etc.; things we tend not to get as "worked up" over). The ECM is right to remind us that singling out particular sins is not biblical:[4]

> Attaining a balance here of love, compassion, outreach and ministry alongside a real moral need for change is something everyone in the church wrestles with. E/E [The Emerging/Emergent Church Movement] is right that all wings of the church need to develop how to communicate the move to holiness in all areas of life in a way that presents the gospel as good news (and not just highlight "special, serious" sins of our own choosing).… Even though some contend for a normalcy

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[4] It could, however, be argued that the Bible does, in fact, stress particular sins more than others (e.g., idolatry in the Old Testament and sexual sins in the New Testament).

> for these lifestyles, something the church needs to stand up against, the fact that the divorce rate in churches is pretty equal to those outside the church is a shameful fact for the church. We are far more comfortable (accepting?) of divorce than we are of issues like homosexuality (Bock 2006).

However, it is noticeable that in the places where Western culture is critical of traditional evangelical Christianity, so often, are the emergents. Take, for example, the issue of homosexuality. Here is what Brian McLaren (2006) recently said on this topic:

> Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say "it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us." That alienates us from both the liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection.

It is true that there is a time for charity and a time for deference. However, there is also a time for straight-speaking. In this regard, Taylor (2006) reacts strongly to McLaren's stance on this issue:

> What McLaren says here is foolish. I am not simply calling him names. I am drawing on the language of folly in Proverbs and elsewhere to offer you my measured biblical assessment. The Bible says many things, and some topics are clearer than other topics. Its teaching on homosexuality, however, is clear. It may not be popular, but it is not ambiguous.

The Bible also commends the idea of seeking truth and understanding (e.g., Prov 2:1-6). But the emerging church often makes *seeking* an end in itself, and Scripture condemns that line of thinking. So Paul condemns those who are "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7).

5.   Conclusion: some implications of the ECM for today's evangelicals

Do the above-mentioned concerns about the ECM apply to every church that is considered an emerging church? Certainly not! However, they do apply to a number of the most prominent leaders and popular churches. Much of the criticism against emerging churches would be quelled if those from within the movement arose and spoke clearly about these crucial issues, and criticised the abandoning of such central Scriptural matters.

When evaluating the ECM, it is important to remember the diversity within this movement. There is clearly a difference between what the "relevants" are doing and what the "revisionists" are doing. Speaking in generalities without acknowledging some of these distinctions within the ECM will paint an inaccurate picture and will hamper our ability to make a balanced assessment of the movement.

It is clear that the dividing line between the ECM and Today's Evangelicals is not as clearly defined as what one might have thought. For example:

- Although the ECM challenges, on biblical grounds, some of the beliefs and practices of evangelicalism, by and large it insists it is preserving traditional confessionalism but changing the emphases because the culture has changed, and so inevitably those who are culturally sensitive see things in a fresh perspective (Carson 2005b).
- Although some writers in the ECM continue to praise postmodernism and denigrate modernism in absolute terms, the movement's best thinkers occasionally warn against absolutising postmodernism. For example, Leonard Sweet rightly warns his readers not to embrace postmodernism, while most of his argument urges Christian living and preaching characterised by the anagram EPIC—we must focus on the

experiential, the participatory, the image-driven and the connected (Sweet 2000:xvii).

- Although Emerging Church leaders accuse evangelicals of being culture-bound to modernism, Evangelicalism has in many ways been a counter-cultural movement rejecting, for example, modernism's strict empiricism that disallows miracles or revelation. Only classic, theological liberals have accommodated modernism in all of its views (Kowalski 2007).

What does the above assessment of the ECM reveal?

- First, the ECM must be evaluated as to its reading of contemporary culture. Most of its pleas for reform are tightly tied to its understandings of postmodernism. The difficulty of the task (granted the plethora of approaches to postmodernism) cannot exempt us from making an attempt.
- Second, some emerging church leaders claim that changing times demand that fresh questions be asked of Scripture, and then fresh answers will be heard. What was an appropriate use of Scripture under modernism is no longer an appropriate use of Scripture under postmodernism.
- Third, granted that the ECM is driven by its perception of widespread cultural changes, its own proposals for the way ahead must be assessed for their biblical fidelity. In other words, we must not only try to evaluate the accuracy of the emerging church's cultural analysis, but also the extent to which its proposals spring from, or can at least be squared with, the Scriptures (Carson 2005a: 43-44).

What can evangelicals learn from the ECM? Amongst other things, evangelicals need to learn how to contextualise the gospel. Appropriate contextualisation means, "adapting my communication of the gospel without changing its essential character" (Keller 2004). In short, we must retain the essentials and adapt the non-essentials. In this regard, Walter Henegar (2007) issues the following challenge:

> Most important, are we building friendships with postmodern
> non-Christians, the type who bristle at the sight of steeple and

pew? Do we even *know* such people? Are we bringing the gospel to them in dialogue, listening for their responses so we at least know they understand? And if they place their faith in Christ, are our churches prepared to embrace them without requiring a second conversion into a church culture that may have less to do with the gospel than we're willing to admit?

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