

The Essence of the Emerging Church

**Personal
Reflections
on the
Movement**

by Matt Costella

A FRIEND OF THE FEA recently sent me a flyer he received in the mail from a local Baptist church. Presumably an attempt to create interest in the church, this flyer contained the following words without any further explanation:

Vision for First Baptist
Paradigm Shift

- A. Moving from institutional ministry to missional ministry
- B. Moving from program driven ministry to relational ministry
- C. Moving from real estate ministry to community partnerships
- D. Moving from a perception of having it all together, to a place of restoration and healing.

When I received this information in the mail, I was in the process of attempting to define, analyze and critique the emerging church movement, and this brief outline is basically a perfect encapsulation of the very essence of this new, postmodern approach to ministry. As this flyer points out, emerging churches and church leaders are marked by a distrust and deconstruction of past church models and ministries; they are marked by an emphasis upon personal relationships rather than programs; they are characterized by a heavy emphasis on community and social interaction; and they often boast in their lack of certainty, of not "having all the answers."

Those who critique or criticize the emerging church movement are often guilty of grossly over-generalizing it. They sometimes have a stereotypical view of emerging church leaders or practitioners as those who are tattooed, pierced and grunge-like twenty- and thirty-somethings who enjoy church gatherings marked by a new age ambiance of incense, candles and Celtic crosses while surrounded by fellow worshippers engaged in meditative prayer. Others tend to stereotype emerging church leaders and practitioners as those who have no regard for the Bible or who do not believe truth exists or can be fully known. While these things *can* be true—and sometimes sadly are true—they

do not tell the whole story of what is the emerging church, and it is unfair to characterize the emerging church with such a broad brush. So, what is the "emerging church" movement? What is its theology, if any? What characterizes this movement or group of churches and leaders?

A few years ago, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* profiled an emerging church in the Philadelphia area and, in an attempt to define an emerging church, stated,

This new flavor of evangelicalism, with echoes of the Jesus Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and a dash of medieval ritual, is especially popular among young urban adults. It stresses tolerance, inclusiveness, social justice and environmental stewardship, and it shifts the theological focus from individual salvation to helping one's earthly neighbors. (*Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Emergent' Churches Seek a Looser Approach," August 8, 2005).

Brian McLaren, one of the key leaders, thinkers and theological writers in the emerging church movement, cited some characteristics of emerging churches in a column he wrote for the October 2005 issue of *Worship Leader Newsletter*. After describing how many emerging churches focus on context, community and smallness in size, he said other characteristics include:

... increased attention to the arts, a rediscovery of spiritual practices from Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions, a downplaying of denominational identity, and a strong social/global concern. ... Many are even dropping the term "church," and instead calling themselves "missional faith communities," seeking to distance themselves from the expectations surrounding the "C" word.

At a recent seminar I attended, McLaren said it is necessary to "listen to a thing and understand it" before criticizing it. Of course, in context he was referring to the emerging church. McLaren's plea is valid yet also ironic, for the emerging church is known for its ambiguity. Leaders in the movement, like McLaren, want critics to understand it before they criticize it, yet these same leaders boast in the fact that they do not even "have it all figured out" them-

selves and that their theology and practices could change at any time. It is a movement of people and churches that actually prefer to avoid any type of categorization—who do not want to be viewed as a “movement” and who do not want to be “painted with a broad brush,” that is, to be defined by broad generalizations. Dan Kimball, founder of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California, and a leader in the emerging church movement, writes,

There is no single model for the emerging church. Instead of one emerging church model, there are hundreds and thousands of models of emerging churches. Modernity may have taught us to look for a clean model to imitate. But in today's postmodern context, it's not that simple.

However, you can see striking patterns developing among churches that are connecting with post-Christian hearts and minds all across America, as well as in England. . . . There's no one-size-fits-all way of doing things, because you can't box-in the emerging church. It will be made up of large churches, small churches, and home churches, multiracial and intercultural churches, inner-city, rural and suburban churches. (*The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2003, p. 14)

Despite the difficult task of studying and critiquing the movement from a biblical perspective, this is what I am attempting to do in this brief article. I have attended conferences and seminars on the emerging church by emerging church leaders such as Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball, Mark Driscoll and others, and I have read many of their books in an effort to better understand where these men are coming from and where they are going. Yet the reader must understand that I do not claim to know everything about the emerging church. Neither am I attempting to provide a deluge of facts and quotes and citations of the writings of emergent practitioners and critics (others have already done this quite well). Rather, my intention for this article is to digest the information I have read, heard and observed as I have sat under the teaching of some of these leaders and to summarize in a few pages what I understand to be the essence of the emerging church from the perspective of a thirty-something with a

biblically-based, fundamentalist background, in an attempt to grasp, as much as possible, the heart and characteristics of this influential and growing movement.

Also, by way of introduction, it is necessary to understand that, oftentimes, the emerging church academics or theologians go a bit further than the practitioners or church planters in regard to the extreme positions or new understandings of theology and practice. Just because one person embraces a certain view of Scripture does not mean that all emerging church leaders do. To say that one person possesses a low view of absolute truth is not to say that all emerging churches and church leaders embrace this same view. So, the first thing to realize is that the “emerging church” is not uniform in doctrine or practice. There are many different beliefs and opinions embraced by emerging church leaders and those who are associated with emerging churches.

So what is the emerging church if it is not defined by any one particular method, model or system of theology? The aforementioned quotes by the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and McLaren certainly do characterize much of the movement, but allow me to develop from my own perspective what I believe to be the essence of the emerging church.

1. The emerging church movement is a reaction — a reaction to the multitude of tragedies that have come upon the world during the past several centuries and the fact that our culture is where it is at today; and, it is a reaction to the great hypocrisy so prevalent in the professing church today. So, it is a reaction:

- to the world “as is” — full of people who are helpless; hopeless; aimlessly searching for answers to life's questions; discriminated against; poor, needy and hungry; self-centered; wronged by society and the professing church.
- to the church “as is” — focused on buildings and programs, loyal to denominations and institutions rather than Christ and relation-

ships with others, hypocritical, steeped in traditions of men rather than the will of God, legalistic.

As twenty- and thirty-somethings have witnessed the tragedies of the world and the scandals of a hypocritical church throughout their lifetime, they have shyed away from traditional churches and institutions and are disillusioned with authority and structure. Thus, the emerging church is an attempt on the part of younger Christian leaders to react to these realities by deconstructing the "old forms" of church, ministry and doctrine and reconstructing an "authentic Christianity."

2. **The emerging church movement is an attitude and a mindset**—of discontent or dissatisfaction with the way church has been done in the past and a commitment to changing how Christians “do church.” This is probably one of the most important aspects of the emerging church. It is an attitude, not a model. It is a mindset, not a method. Dan Kimball stresses this point at the beginning of his book *The Emerging Church*:

The emerging church is more of a mindset than a model. I have learned that emerging leaders have the same heartbeat. They realize something needs to change in our evangelical churches if we are to reach and engage the emerging culture. They realize we need to change how we think of the church, rather than merely change our forms of ministry. Emerging leaders are not afraid to remove the modern-ministry lenses we have been viewing "church" through and put on a new set to reexamine all we are doing. The emerging church must not try to simply replace the outer wrappings of our ministries. We must look at the inner core with a new mindset. (pp. 14, 15)

What makes a church truly an “emerging church” is the attitude and mindset of the church leaders and laity. The new (and sometimes old) forms and methods often employed in emerging churches are only a result of an already-existing mindset that church “as

is” must be set aside for church “as it is meant to be.” In fact, when asked “what is the emerging church?” at a recent “Emergence 2007” conference in Seattle, Washington, a panel of emerging church leaders all agreed that the essence of the emerging church is a quest to discover how best to “do church” today in a manner that works to reach the postmodern, post-Christian generation and touch their lives in a holistic manner. Each of the panelists conscientiously decided to find a pragmatic model of church and ministry that “worked” for them.

3. **The emerging church movement is an attempt**—to discover a new way of doing church that is free from the forms that brought about the “sins of the past” and to operate as a “praxis-oriented” community rather than a community that solely believes the “right things.” Thus, the emerging church is a pragmatic church. It sees the hypocrisy in the former models, practices and stated beliefs of churches and Christians (that is, a strong emphasis on believing the right things but not truly “living out the life of Jesus”), and it searches for a new way to make church “work” in the hearts and lives of professing believers. Also, emerging churches often utilize ancient and mystical practices of the past in order to connect the senses with the experience of worship.

4. **The emerging church movement is a philosophy of thought**—built upon a post-modern understanding of life and authority (post-foundational; narrative) rather than a rationalistic or modern understanding of life and authority (foundational; propositional). Of course, this has a profound impact on the way we read and understand the Bible and thus the doctrines of the Bible. As McLaren stressed in a recent seminar, the focus of “authority” in the 21st century has shifted from a “wall” (that is, a fixed, foundational understanding of life and truth and doctrine) to a “web” (that is, an elastic and ever-changing understanding of life, truth and doctrine). In the “web” model, beliefs are flexible, in dynamic tension and corrigible. Philosophically, the emerging church has moved from a *knowledge*

approach to faith (and thus a focus on certainty) to a story approach to faith. While the Bible is essential in this model, it is not foundational (as was the case in the past).

The detrimental effects of this new philosophy of thought and understanding of authority can be seen in the emerging church's relatively new approach to the gospel. Many emerging churches emphasize the Gospels and the "story" of Jesus rather than the New Testament epistles and their propositional truth which is foundational to the church. The goal of the emerging church seems to be to "follow Jesus" and embrace His kingdom teaching at the expense of the apostolic instruction given to the church in the epistles and to deconstruct the old understanding of the gospel and re-discover the "true gospel" which involves holistic personal and social reformation. Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church near Grand Rapids, Michigan, said concerning the emerging church, "People don't get it. They think it's about style. But the real question is: What is the gospel?" ("The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November 2004).

McLaren believes the church has failed to "get the gospel right" all these years. In 2004, he told *Christianity Today*, "I don't think we've got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be 'saved'? When I read the Bible, I don't see it meaning, 'I'm going to heaven after I die.'" He added, "None of us have arrived at orthodoxy" ("The Emergent Mystique," *Christianity Today*, November 2004). He is calling for a new understanding of the gospel, claiming in his latest book *The Secret Message of Jesus*, as well as in a seminar I attended in San Diego, that the gospel of the kingdom is really the center of the gospel. This new view of the gospel places the responsibility of worldwide social reform (the "kingdom of God") in the hands of the church. It appears to be strikingly similar to the social gospel theology of Walter Rausenbusch at the turn of the 20th century. And, of course, he continues to call on Christians to seek and search for truth rather than claiming to know and possess the truth. "Our

call as followers of Jesus is to seek truth and walk in the way of love," McLaren stated at one seminar.

5. **The emerging church movement is a desire**—to "hear the stories of the marginalized" and "find a place for them at the table." The emerging church prides itself in being non-exclusionary. Therefore, it believes that one group does not possess all the answers (concerning life, truth, doctrine, etc.) and that our understanding should always be open to change as we listen to others. In fact, some emerging church leaders say the church must have the voices from the margins (the minority, the poor, the marginalized, those who have been discriminated against) in order to bring a "prophetic critique" to our assumptions, that is, to reveal where we are right and wrong in our understanding of life and theology.

To summarize, the emerging church movement is characterized by:

1. An intentional dissatisfaction with and disassociation from church "as is."
2. The deconstruction of traditional theology and practice—that is, a new and different way of viewing, approaching and understanding Scripture, the church, the gospel, evangelism, eschatology, etc.
3. An intense missional focus—an attempt to actually "live out" the faith rather than simply believing the right things; an understanding that rather than viewing the church as something we *attend*, it is something we *are* at all times in the world.
4. A fluid theology and view of certainty rather than a fixed understanding of theology and embracing of certainty.

Considering the state of the church and the world today, if we are to be honest with ourselves, we must admit that some positive aspects of the emerging church do exist:

First, leaders of the movement are acutely aware of the problem of church "as is." Hypocrisy, proof-texting, misunderstanding and misinterpreting Scripture, legalism,

personal bias and prejudice have marked the professing church for decades. Our own fundamental and evangelical churches have been gravely guilty at times of "teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" and thus "making the Word of God of none effect through [our] tradition" (Mk. 7:7, 13). Emerging church leaders are aware of this problem and are seeking to demonstrate an authentic Christianity void of hypocrisy, legalism and personal prejudice.

Second, it is clear that the leaders of the emerging church have a genuine desire to have a redemptive role in society; that is, they truly desire to be of help to unbelievers. Of course, sometimes their solutions are misplaced, and they emphasize the social needs of man to a greater degree than the spiritual needs. But the point is this: A true desire to help others is clearly evident.

Finally, the emerging churches do not shut out nor shun unbelievers simply because they do not think and act the same way Christians think and act. They realize that an unbeliever will think and behave like an unbeliever. They look for opportunities to interact with and befriend those who need Christ.

Despite some positive aspects, the emerging church has seen the problem with the contemporary church and world and, in general, has "overreacted"—it could be argued that in many respects, it has "thrown the baby out with the bath water." Yes, problems do exist in the world and church, but by erecting and formulating an entirely new form and foundation of thought and authority regarding the very essential elements of the Christian faith, the emerging church movement has delivered a profoundly negative, unbiblical and even unchristian understanding of vital biblical doctrines and practices. The emerging church's deconstruction of theology and doctrine has sometimes led to a new understanding of the Bible, which has led to a new definition of the gospel, which has led to a new focus of the purpose and mission of the church, which often entails a new system of eschatology, which, in the end, has led to a new picture of God. Ultimately, the emerging church, as a whole, is guilty of reviving

neo-orthodox existentialism in the church. The result? The emerging church has created a new view of God in our own image.

What should be our response as biblical fundamentalists to the rise and influence of the emerging church? What does the true church of Jesus Christ need to be doing today?

1. We need to realize that we are in the midst of a spiritual, social, moral and theological crisis, and the problems we face are coming at us from three directions—from the fundamentalist and evangelical church "as is," from the emerging church system of thought and from the unbelieving world in which we find ourselves.

- The current fundamentalist and evangelical churches are often guilty of shallow theology and of making the traditions of men the commandments of God. This, in turn, has only led to hypocrisy in the church and subsequent disillusion and disappointment. Many younger and older Christians have been "turned off" by the church, and although this is not a valid excuse for their bitterness, their arguments are sometimes quite legitimate.
- The emerging church system of thought has produced a new view of the Bible, the gospel, the church, etc.; and this is a major problem we must realize and address. At best, the emerging church is a modern theological and ecclesial trend that will soon pass; at worst, it is an apostate, perverted form of Christianity that has created a new God in man's image and is under God's curse (Gal. 1:6-9).
- As far as the world is concerned, we need to realize that we live in a "post-Christian" society. Many people today have no basic understanding of Christianity or Christian terms. Thus, the problems we face are real and multi-faceted. We must understand that we do live in a world

vastly different than it was only ten to twenty years ago, and it is only going to continue to change exponentially. Technology, multiculturalism, religious pluralism and world politics are continually in flux.

* As biblical fundamentalists, we cannot live the Christian life in the 21st century with our “heads in the sand,” so to speak, only concerned about our own small world and circles in which we find ourselves. We must educate ourselves concerning the crises in the world and church, and we must inspect and judge our own lives, churches and ministries to determine whether or not we might actually be part of the problem.

2. **We need to possess a proper view of Scripture and understanding of how to properly interpret it.** The foundational problem of the emerging church is its approach to God’s Word and its faulty hermeneutic. Nothing is more important to the 21st century believer than to know God’s Word and to understand how to interpret it and apply it to life. The only way we know about God’s person and work and His desire for His children is through His Word to us.

- **Concerning the Bible itself**—We must understand Scripture as the Written Word, which makes known the person and will of the Living Word. We must realize that the Written Word is completely true and that it “is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). God desires that we take the same approach to His Word as did the Thessalonian believers in the first century. The apostle Paul commended these saints: “For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the Word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the Word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe” (1 Thess. 2:13). The Bible is completely sufficient to make the believer everything God wants him or her to be (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Postmodern Christians often argue that viewing the Bible as God’s very Word to mankind and interpreting it in a literal way as propositional truth to be believed and embraced with certainty is a 20th century, rational and modern invention. Yet this is not the case. A careful reading of the New Testament makes it very clear that Jesus, Paul, John, Peter and other New Testament writers of Scripture believed in absolute truth and expected Scripture to be literally understood and believed with utmost certainty.

- **Concerning the gospel**—We must understand that we do not need to “figure out” what the gospel entails. The “good news” is that God so loved the world that He sent Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sin in our stead. We can receive the free gift of eternal life and a personal relationship with God through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ (Jn. 20:30-31; Acts 15:7-9; 1 Cor. 15:1-4). The good news is the ability to have spiritual life; it is the ability to possess fellowship and relationship with God; it is the ability to have victory over not only hell and death but also sin in the life as well. The gospel is not social reform or cultural renewal. God’s Word correctly interpreted and applied bears this out.
- **Concerning the church (its purpose and mission)**—We must understand the difference between the church gathered (discipleship; training) and the church scattered (evangelism). The purpose of the local church is spelled out in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in which he refers to the gifts God gave to the church. When saints gather together for fellowship and worship, they are to be equipped to do the work of the ministry for the edification of the body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). This is accomplished through the preaching and teaching of God’s Word. As these individual believers scatter into the world on a day-by-day basis, they are to minister as witnesses of the Light

in a world of darkness, looking for open doors of opportunity to build personal relationships with people and share the truth with them (Col. 4:3-6).

- **Concerning the kingdom (eschatology)**—We must understand that the kingdom of which Jesus spoke and proclaimed is not something we are to establish on earth but something God will establish yet future. This does not give us permission to abuse God's creation, but we must not change our focus from the spiritual needs of man to the physical needs of man (or the planet) either. The New Testament epistles clearly spell out our duty upon this earth with the time God has given us, and while "creation care" should be in our minds, it is not to be our focus as believers.

- 3. **We need to truly understand *why* we believe *what* we believe.** During the past century, the church has created an army of people who know all the right answers but who cannot explain *why* they believe *what* they believe or *why* they do *what* they do. When challenged as to whether or not something is truly scriptural, many Christians today either cannot give an answer, or they simply parrot the "one-liners" delivered to them by their pastors or church leaders. This kind of "Christianity" is completely foreign to the New Testament church that received God's Word in truth (1 Thess. 2:13), searched God's Word in an effort to discern truth from error (Acts 17:11), knew how to live their lives as a result of their understanding of God's Word (1 Thess. 4:1-2) and defended the truth from the inroads of error.

- 4. **We need to "do evangelism" in a relational way.** This is where, I believe, the fundamentalist church has "had it wrong" and the emerging church sometimes "has it right." Historically, our churches are so wedded to forms of evangelism that seek instant results and conversions rather than taking the time to get to know people, gain their trust and answer their

questions. True, this will not grow our churches as fast as we would like, but it allows the Holy Spirit the opportunity to convict the heart of the unbeliever and will bolster our churches with true believers rather than unregenerate "converts." We must evangelize as Jesus did with Nicodemus and the woman at the well of Samaria—He took time to talk with them, to answer their questions and to declare the truth in an attitude of love and compassion.

- 5. **We need to understand the role of "certainty" in relation to truth.** Of course, we do not have all the answers, nor should we claim to have all the answers. An attitude of humility—sometimes lacking in fundamental and evangelical churches—must always be a hallmark of the child of God. Yet throughout Scripture, we find exhortations to "steadfastness" and "certainty," to "keep the faith" and to be "established." The apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2:12, said he as an apostle of Jesus Christ was not writing to the church according to "the spirit of the world" but rather from "the spirit which is of God." Why was the Holy Spirit communicating to him the truth we find in the letter to the church at Corinth? Paul continues: "that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God." In other words, Scripture is the very Word of God, and it is written to us so we might know *what* God would have us to know. The apostle John also said the words written in his epistle were written so believers would know they possessed eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13). Earlier in John's first epistle, he exhorted the believers to "try the spirits whether they are of God" (1 Jn. 4:1) and then told the recipients of his letter that the Word of God as given by the New Testament apostles and prophets is the measuring rod by which believers can know the difference between truth and error (1 Jn. 4:5-6). Today, we are called upon by God to be "humble" yet "certain" of the truth He has given.
- 6. **We need to refuse to make the traditions of men the commandments of God** — in other words, we need to realize that it is possible for us to "[make] the

Word of God of none effect through [our] tradition" (see Mark 7:13). In many churches, we go through the motions simply because "this is the way it has always been done." Some of our methods and forms can be (and probably should be) changed without sacrificing fidelity to God's Word. We must not find ourselves trapped into tradition, and we must especially avoid trying to find biblical justification for such man-made tradition. This type of "religiosity" has adversely affected the world and the church and is one reason why the emerging church has crept onto the scene.

At the end of his life, the apostle Paul could write to Timothy, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). How could Paul end his life with such an assertion? First, he was never ashamed of God's message even though he had suffered greatly as a result of the message he proclaimed. Second, he never feared the opinions of men. He knew the world would increase in wickedness, yet he still exhorted Timothy to "preach the Word" despite the fact that the world would hate his message. Third, Paul never allowed the world to dictate his standards for ministry. He remained steadfast and unmovable in the Lord's work and never changed God's message or allowed pragmatism to define his philosophy of ministry. Finally, Paul never tolerated doctrinal error or spiritual complacency. In order to obtain the approval of our Lord in all our ministry endeavors, we, too, must "fight a good fight" and "keep [guard; observe and do] the faith" in an attitude of love. May God help us to accomplish this tremendous task in His strength. □