

Christianity in a Postmodern World

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Foreword

It had been a privilege to spend this past year looking into the emerging church movement and grappling with what it has to offer, especially in an Anglican context. My wife and I have had a wonderful time meeting new people, reading new books, and having some wonderful conversations.

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I would also like to thank all of the Churches and Individuals who were kind enough to spend time with us and introduce us to their world.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife who traveled with me and who has engaged me in discussion over the past year. This study belongs just as much to her as it does to me.

The Postmodern Challenge

Postmodernity

In order to properly understand the challenge of post-modernity, we must first come to an understanding of what exactly postmodernity is. Unfortunately, this can be a difficult task. The reason is that postmodernity is, by definition, the era that follows modernity. As yet, it is only an acknowledgment that there is a cultural and philosophical shift away from that which has come before. We are still in a transitional period, much like Dorothy was when she made it to the land of Oz. We can say, “we’re not in modernity anymore” but we don’t exactly know where it is that we have landed.¹

There are varying opinions on how long modernity itself has been around. The most helpful position, however, defines modernity as an era that started around the time of the renaissance rather than as a period in the midst of the twentieth century. This era is one characterized by the growing interest in the scientific method. Moderns believed firmly in scientific progress and felt that anything that advanced human knowledge was a good thing.

This elevation of the scientific was done at the expense of the spiritual. Because modern thinkers were convinced that everything had a natural cause that could be rationally explained through the scientific method, there was a denial of anything that appeared to be supernatural. One great example of this is Thomas Jefferson’s Bible. Jefferson was so sure that everything had a rational explanation that he used a pair of scissors to cut out anything in his Bible that appeared to be supernatural. In this way, things like demonic possession could be explained as mental illness, and any reference to miraculous healing was simply untrue.

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, 2.

One of the big changes that marked the beginning of postmodernity was the invention of the atomic bomb. When the first bomb was dropped in World War II it created a kind of destruction that had never before been seen. This caused many people to begin to wonder whether scientific progress really was progress. In the years that followed there was a growing awareness of how the science that had led to industrialization was also contributing to the destruction of the environment. This too led to a decline in the idea that any scientific “advancement” was a good one.

Epistemology

Epistemology is the study of how we know things. It is in this area that one of the most distinct shifts has happened. As I mentioned above, the modern world was heavily influenced by the scientific method. Because of this there was a real sense that there was such a thing as Truth (capital “T”) and that the way to know this truth was through the scientific method. When various interpretations of truth came to light, the thing to do was engage the opposing side with a debate. Each side using rational arguments to prove the opposing position wrong. This led to the creation of fundamentalist institutions to protect the Christian worldview from the predators of the modern academy.

In postmodernity there is a reduced faith in the idea that the rational scientific method is the only way we can know things. A postmodern thinker would believe that we can arrive at truth in many different ways. Truth has become more relative and has assumed a lowercase “t”. There is a real sense that culture has a major influence on truth, and that truth can be found through aesthetics and beauty in addition to science and reason.² Instead of settling clashes of absolute truth through rational debate, postmoderns are more likely to try to understand each other through conversation without an attempt to prove the opposition wrong.

One perfect example of this comes from observing the progression of the American (and Western) view of tolerance. When America was founded, one of the ideals was that it would be a country that gave freedom to practice whatever religion one wanted. Over the years, however, tolerance has turned into the idea that every person’s opinion has some truth in it. Thus many postmoderns view Jesus as the Christian pathway to the divine among many other pathways.

Narrative vs. Meta-Narrative

A meta-narrative is an overarching story that explains where it is that each of us fit into the world. Almost all cultures and religions have some form of a meta-narrative. For Christians we get our meta-narrative from the Bible, starting with Adam and Eve and the fall, progressing through the history of the people of Israel, and culminating in Jesus Christ as he came into the world and died on the cross to save us from our sinful nature. The meta-narrative that appeared in the modern era was largely a scientific one based on the idea of a universal religion, there was a singular truth, and each person or culture was striving to find it through their various religions and through science. There was a

² D.A. Carson. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 27.

sense that eventually we would all arrive at this one truth together. Unfortunately, this view rejected many of the basic tenants of the Christian faith.

In the Postmodern world there is a distinct rejection of meta-narrative while at the same time affirming the idea of narrative. Thus, there are many narratives which are important within a particular community. Obviously this road can quickly lead to pluralism which is bad news for Christians as we continue to speak of the Christian meta-narrative. The positive in this situation, however is the fact that postmoderns could conceivably be open to the idea of the Christian narrative as true, even if they don't immediately accept it as universally true. It also allows for serious "conversation" based on our individual experiences of Christ. Thus the evangelical concept of a "testimony" or "witness" can be a valuable tool in this new era.

Emerging Church

What is it?

When I first heard about the emerging church movement it sounded interesting to me, so I decided to look into it further. The further I looked, however, the more confused I got. It seemed that no one was willing to define this movement for me. There were some common threads, but not all emerging churches shared all of the same threads.

In their recent book *Emerging Churches*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger also saw a set of common themes as they studied various people and churches. They finally came to the conclusion that if a church identified with a certain number of these themes, they were probably an emerging church. This may be the best approach in trying to identify what the emerging church is.

One thing that most of these churches will agree on is that we are entering a time of postmodernity as described in the first section of this report. Most will also agree that this postmodern shift will necessarily change everything, including the way that we do church. As might be expected from a group of people who identify with postmodernity, there is a general hesitation to fully commit to anything. Hence, most will define themselves as post-something, or post-everthing (post-modern, post-denominational, post-evangelical, post-catholic, post-protestant, etc.).

The other approach is to follow Brian McLaren's lead and include yourself in everything. This is essentially what he does in his recent book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, the subtitle of which reads, "Why I am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + charismatic/contemplative + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian."

In the midst of all this confusion, how are we to figure out what exactly this movement is? In the end, you really can't. And that is actually the point. These are people that are tired of wondering whether people are in or out. They would say that anyone who wants to be emergent is welcome. In fact, the most common way to describe emergent is "conversation" (this makes a lot of sense given that the postmodern world is much

more interested in understanding each other through conversation rather than proving each other wrong through debate). Picture a very large coffee shop with lots of people sitting around and discussing God, art, life, and culture and you will begin to get a sense of what this movement is.

The emerging church is a very large group of people loosely associated with one another all of whom are committed to hearing one another out. They share an association with Jesus Christ and they are genuinely interested in figuring out what a post-modern Christian actually looks like. It is actually impossible to describe the emerging church in terms any more specific than this...they themselves haven't yet figured out where this whole thing is going.

If you think about it, this actually makes a lot of sense. We have recognized a departure from what the world used to look like, but the only way to define this new thing is in relation to the old. We used to be modern, now we are post-modern. But I suppose it is never particularly easy to see what we are in until we get some historical perspective. The old saying, "hindsight is 20/20" is very applicable. This is why the movement is called *emerging church*. They don't know yet where they are going, and they don't want to define it until it emerges (maybe not even then).

Doctrine

Doctrine in the emerging church is very loosely defined. The reason for this is that it continues to allow the broadest spectrum of people to come and join in the conversation. You will find that many of the bright emerging thinkers are very well read in a variety of theological traditions. Many of them come from traditional, main-line denominations (Such as the Episcopalians and Lutherans) and others come from evangelical mega-churches. There are a few thinkers that seem to have influenced many within the emerging church culture (such as Walter Brueggemann and Robert Webber) but it would be hard to pin the culture down into any one previous tradition.

There do seem to be a few boundaries, however, even if they are loosely kept. The Nicene Creed is one document that most seem to look towards as a source of authority. In addition to this, there is a genuine interest to engage the scriptures in search of who Jesus was and what he wanted for his Church.

Sources of authority aside, however, the ability to question is of a high value in this culture. Thus, traditional interpretations of the creed and the scriptures can be brought to the table, but these interpretations will be subject to lots of dialogue and questioning. This is where I think some careful consideration needs to be made. I think it is very important to create a safe and encouraging space for people to ask questions (this is the foundation of programs like the Alpha Course), while on the other hand maintaining the fact that Christianity is a religion that makes claims to absolute Truth. I fear that sometimes emerging churches are a little too hesitant to make these Truth claims.

Missional

The word "missional" has become quite popular on the emergent scene. This is a term that is similar to the old concept of mission, but it has taken on some new meaning

which marks a significant departure from the old. McLaren seems to have captured this new sense with the following words. To be missional is to, “be and make disciples of Jesus Christ in authentic community for the good of the world.”³

There have really been two separate ideas of what exactly Christian mission is. Conservative Christians have understood mission as captured in the great commission. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”⁴ In and of itself, this is a good and biblical thing to do. However, there has been a tendency to make evangelism into a “christian making factory.” The chief end being to persuade someone to mutter the sinners prayer and then add another notch to your belt.

On the other hand, liberal Christians have focused on issues of social justice. They see how much pain and suffering there is in the world, and they focus the efforts of their mission on removing as much of this pain as possible. There are plenty of Bible verses that we can use to back this up as well.⁵ These also are very good activities, but sometimes they are done in neglect of the fact that we are to go into the world and make disciples of all nations.

Here we have two different perspectives on what exactly the Christian’s mission in the world should be. The new concept of being missional combines both of these ideas. As McLaren said, we are to make disciples for the good of the world. For me, this ultimately ties into eschatology. The Kingdom of God is already here, but it is not yet here in all of its glory. As Christians we are all a part of the Kingdom of God, but we will not see the fulfillment of Jesus’ promises until he returns again.

So what are we to do in the mean time? We are to get as many people on board with the Kingdom of God as possible and then we are to motivate those people to make this present world look as much like the promised kingdom as we can. From my observations, missional Christianity manifests itself in three primary ways.

Evangelism - In emergent Christianity, evangelism looks a little bit different. Emergent evangelism would probably not be done on a street corner, handing out tracts. It would also probably not be done by meeting people with the specific goal of converting them and getting them to come to church. Emergent evangelism is highly relational, and the relationships that are built are built for their own sake. Out of that relationship can come a sharing of the Gospel because, as Christians, the Gospel has effected us so deeply that no person could build a relationship with us without seeing the light of the Gospel in us.

³ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 107.

⁴ Matthew 28:18b-20, *English Standard Version*.

⁵ Isaiah 58:6, and Matthew 25:31-46 to name a few.

When new people are brought to emerging churches, they are welcomed into the community, whether or not they have come to believe in Jesus. This is the complete opposite of what has always been done before. In the past, it has been necessary to be a believer before one is welcomed into the community of the church. The emergent tendency is to welcome people into the community of the Church in order that they might build relationships, feel loved, and eventually come to believe. In some cases, this is a full welcome to the extent that unbaptized persons are invited to receive the Eucharist, in others, it simply means that they are welcomed into the fellowship of the community and made to feel as though they belong there.

Social Justice - Emergent people tend to be very socially conscious. This can be seen in the recent excitement over the continent of Africa. Emerging Christians are seeing the AIDS crisis and they are seeing people starving, and they are seeing people dying from diseases that can be easily prevented or cured. But they are not only *seeing* these things, they are trying to *do things* to help. Relevant Magazine is one example of a group who is bringing lots of attention to the problems in Africa. They even dedicated one whole issue to the various problems in Africa, and they gave tangible ways that we as Christians can respond. Social consciousness can also be seen in the recent fair trade movement which many emerging Christians have latched on to.

Care for the Environment - The final aspect that I will point out is environmental consciousness. There seems to be a growing recognition of our responsibility for the environment among emerging Christians. The basic idea is that from the beginning God set humans on this earth to tend it and care for it. In other words, God has appointed us as stewards over his creation. Because of this, you will see many emerging Christians leaning towards biodegradable cleaning products, and organic food.

Thus Evangelism, Social Justice, and Stewardship over God's creation are all parts of what it means to be missional in the emerging context.

Sacred vs. Secular

For centuries Christians have tended to place things in two basic categories; sacred and secular. In the past this distinction has primarily been made in the area of the arts, but recently I have seen a rise in "sacred commerce" with people starting businesses with the express intent of being "Christian". This has been particularly true in the evangelical mega-church culture where people try to avoid the secular world as much as possible.

Many in the emerging churches have been questioning this notion, believing that it is a false dichotomy. Theologically they see God as a creator and they think that a large part of being made in the image of God is that we each have a creative side. Thus they believe that any act of creation on our part participates in that divine creativity. This means that it is not uncommon to see "secular" works of art and music being used in emergent worship services. You will also frequently see "worship stations" in an emergent worship service that will engage our creative side through painting, making music, and storytelling. One of the best examples of this is the recent trend of the "U2 Mass" which replaces traditional hymns and praise songs with songs from the band U2.

Apology for Church History

Part of questioning that goes on in the emerging culture is a questioning of Church History. There has been much discussion on the topic of all the evil that has been done by the Church in the past (take the crusades as the prime example). Instead of trying to explain these things away, many emergent Christians have confronted it head on and have attempted to ask the world for forgiveness on behalf of Christians in the past. One example of this can be found in a book called "Blue Like Jazz" by Donald Miller. In one part of this book he describes an experience that he and his friends had on a college campus where they built a confession booth and then confessed to everyone who came in that the Church has not always followed the example of Christ in the way that it is supposed to.⁶

Ancient-Future / New Monasticism

One of the key phrases in the emerging church is "authentic christianity." This involves being an authentic Christian, but it also means engaging with authentic christian spirituality. One way that this has been done is by getting in touch with ancient christian forms of worship and then trying to contextualize them and interpret them for a postmodern world. Karen Ward from Church of the Apostles, Seattle has done some wonderful things with this concept. She has created a Church based on the concept of New Monasticism. Thus instead of being the pastor (the church is co-sponsored by the Episcopal and Lutheran churches in Seattle) she is the abbess. She has placed a high emphasis on things like daily prayer, liturgy, the mass, and community. All these are ancient ways of being a Christian, but she has given them a contemporary spin and helped them to make sense to postmodern people.

She is not alone in this concept. There are many such churches that are engaging the monastic model. One big strain of this is the 24-7 prayer movement which has taken off both in America and in Europe. In this movement groups of people gather together to create prayer rooms that are prayed in 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. People have come from all over to visit these prayer rooms and spend time in their communities.

As far as I can tell, the term "Ancient Future" comes from a man named Robert Webber who has written a whole series of books on the topic. These range from "Ancient Future Faith" to "Ancient Future Worship."

I believe the popularity of the "Ancient Future Church" comes from the transcendence of the ancient forms of worship. The mystery of bread and wine becoming body and blood. The beauty of gregorian chant and icons. All of these things are very popular in a culture where epistemology is no longer based on the scientific method and meditation and prayer have become valid sources of truth. These practices offer ways that people can experience God instead of studying him. This is one of the big advantages that Anglicans will have moving into the future. If we capitalize on our liturgical and transcendent roots I think we will attract many postmodern people. The key, however,

⁶ Donald Miller. *Blue Like Jazz*, 118.

will be to help them move beyond transcendent experience to engage the scriptures and the traditional teachings of the Church.

Simply Church

As my wife and I traveled around the world last year visiting many of these emergent communities and engaging many emergent thinkers. One thing that really surprised us is that much of what seems to be so cutting edge is really just Church. Yes, there is a good bit of “out of the box thinking” going on. But at the end of the day, emergent churches are just communities of people whose lives have been impacted by Christ and who want to dig in and figure out what it means to be an authentic Christian. They want to take the faith that they grew up with and find a way to make it their own. They want to practice the ancient faith in a way that makes sense to them. They want space to wrestle with their own questions of faith without being criticized for doing so.

Analysis

I still see some real positives with much of the emerging ministry that is going on. These are people that have a real heart for their culture. They also have some very good thoughts on what it means to reach out to a culture and engage it. They would say that you are not just dealing with postmodernism, but postmodernism in seattle or pittsburgh or london. You have to understand the particular manifestation in the particular context. Cookie cutter doesn't cut it. you cannot simply copy what someone else is doing, you need to create for yourself.

They are also doing some very innovative things with liturgy and tradition, connecting them with our culture in our time. I think there are some important things to learn from this.

I also really love the emphasis on being authentic to what the scriptures tell us to do. We cannot follow some parts of the bible without also paying attention to the other parts. You have to engage the whole. This has really helped me come to grips with social justice and environmentalism as not just a “liberal thing.” They are also doing a good job in trying to break down unhelpful categories such a liberal and conservative because they are too narrow and can cause unnecessary prejudice.

The real problem that I see is that sometimes emerging churches engage culture so much that the message of the Gospel is at risk. It can be easy to get distracted by the cultural aspects and to forget that there still is an unchanging Gospel that we need to proclaim. The play between theology and culture is interesting, but if a theological truth is a Truth, it is not something that we can change. Thus an authentic witness of the Christian faith as presented in the Creeds becomes very important. We can discuss ways that we can contextualize the Gospel for presentation in a different culture, but we cannot change the message itself. Thus we need to be very careful with just how far we allow questioning to go. Questioning should be encouraged, but the ancient truths and moralities of the faith also need to be proclaimed and upheld.

There is one strain that I find a lot of hope in, especially as an Anglican. That is the strain identified by a book called “The New Faithful” by Colleen Carroll. Here she de-

scribes a trend within many traditional denominations (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, etc.) where younger people are embracing very traditional forms of worship and morality. These would be Roman Catholics who love the Latin Mass and strive to abide by the traditional teachings of the Church on topics such as abortion, birth-control, and divorce. I believe the reason why these traditional forms of Christianity are doing so well is that they unashamedly speak absolute truth into a culture that is yearning for it. This world is a pretty bleak one without a confident faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, I believe that if more Churches would teach traditional Christianity, young people would begin to flock.

Where does the issue of questioning fit in? As Christians we should always be open to people's questions and struggles with the things that we teach. Jesus never said it would be easy to be a Christian, and the message of the Gospel is a difficult one to hear. But there is also a real hope to be found there. Hope that we can find salvation in the midst of this sinful world, and hope that there is a resurrection when we do finally die. When people ask us questions about the faith, we should be ready to give them solid, traditional answers instead of watered-down half truths. Then we must allow for the Holy Spirit to change their hearts because this is the piece that we can never do on our own, no matter how hard we try. In the end, I think the Christianity that is emerging is the same one that has been around for 2000 years. The fields are ripe for the harvest if we are willing to go and be workers in the vineyard.

Resources

People

Ian Adams - MayBe - maybe.org.uk

Jonny Baker - Grace - jonnybaker.blogs.com

Doug Pagitt - Solomon's Porch - web.mac.com/pagitt/iWeb/PagittBlog/Home.html

Holly Rankin-Zaher - happydaydeadfish.blogspot.com

Karen Ward - Church of the Apostles (COTA) - submerge.typepad.com/submergence/

Pete Ward - King's College, UK

Churches

Church of the Apostles - apostleschurch.org

Grace - freshworship.org

MayBe - maybe.org.uk

Moot - moot.uk.net

Three Nails - threenails.org

Solomon's Porch - solomonsporch.com

Books

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Websites

alternativeworship.org

emergingchurch.info

emergentvillage.com

rejesus.co.uk

relevantmediagroup.com

Videos

Nooma - nooma.com