

A RESPONSE TO ED STETZER'S "THE EMERGENT/EMERGING CHURCH: A MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE"

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I want to thank Dr. Stetzer for a stimulating and enjoyable treatment of the emerging church. I agree by and large with most of what he said. My comments below will reflect my appreciation for his approach and engage him on some significant questions regarding the emerging church.

LEARNING FROM THE EMERGING CHURCH

Dr. Stetzer and I would agree that the emerging church has a great deal to teach conservative evangelicals, but many of us just don't want to admit it.¹ For example, in being more of a postmodern, or at least antimodern, movement, the emerging church rejects seeing life as something akin to a scientific experiment or assembly line. It wants to see life as more organic; the best way to solve human problems is more organic. Thus, for example, the way one should engage in evangelism is not hitting someone with a five-step process or a four-page tract. Rather, one should engage in relational evangelism, seeking a more organic or natural approach. Similarly, for instance, the emerging church correctly—and biblically—sees the church as more of a living organism than a bureaucratic organization.

The emerging church also rightly wants to emphasize community over individualism. And I think the best parts of the emerging church want to emphasize authenticity. I fear we are seeing movement away from this. But there is still an emphasis on authenticity over against consumerism in some strains of the emerging church, from which we can learn. We can also applaud the emerging church's emphasis on justice and the alleviation of poverty, which dovetails with their stress on incarnationality. These are vitally important priorities for the church of Jesus Christ. The emerging church should be commended for their commitment to engaging the culture—not necessarily becoming just like the culture, but engaging it—particularly by engaging the arts, rather than by being anti-art and anti-culture and anti-intellectual.

¹I often distinguish between "emerging" church, which is broader and more concerned more with cultural relevance than postmodern theology, and "emergent" church, which I see as more tied to institutions such as Emergent Village. While the latter would center on leaders such as Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt, the former would include people like Dan Kimball and even the doctrinally conservative Calvinist, Mark Driscoll. My goal in this response is to deal not so much with the theologically and politically progressive emergent stream but more with some ecclesiological concerns I have about the broader emerging movement.

Emerging church practitioners should also be commended for their openness to tradition. This is something we saw more of in the early days of the emerging movement but are starting to see less of now. I think this observation is shown in Dr. Stetzer's paper, particularly his citation of Leonard Sweet, who worries about the emerging church stopping at liberalism and not going back to all 2,000 years of Christian tradition. There seems to be increasing ambivalence in much of the emerging church about reaching back and recapturing the tradition of the church in terms of Robert Webber's ancient-future initiative.² Thus, we might wonder if the emerging church is almost in danger of being only about futurism and not about the "ancient" part.

I appreciated Dr. Stetzer's comment that the emerging church emphasis on the Kingdom of God may mark a recovery lost in evangelicalism. If there's anything we can learn from the emerging conversation, it would be the emphasis on the Kingdom. I was interested recently to read Scot McKnight's positive review of Russell Moore's book, *The Kingdom of Christ*.³ I think there is a genuine opportunity for cross-pollination between people like McKnight and conservative evangelicals like Russell Moore, who are doing a lot of nuanced work on the Kingdom.

We should also be encouraged when we see the emerging church reject pragmatism (I hope it still does). That is one of the things that concerns me as the emerging church begins to become successful and certain strains of the emerging church begin to attract large numbers. I wonder if the emerging church will continue to be concerned about consumerism and pragmatism and the problems with the seeker-sensitive movement. We should also be thankful that leading voices in the emerging conversation wish to reject reductionism. This gets back to that modernistic, formulaic mentality—five steps to this, seven steps to a successful that, how to be a better you, and so on. It's important to note that the emerging church offers an antidote to this kind of simplistic, reductionistic thinking. Instead of reductionism, the emerging church wants to see things and do things holistically. Again, for example, they want to see evangelism in the context of relationality. This is important.

DOMESTICATING THE GOSPEL

Now I want to discuss some concerns I have about the emerging church (not necessarily things I disagreed with in Dr. Stetzer's paper). I agree with what Dr. Stetzer said about the movement running the risk of domesticating the gospel to emerging plausibility structures. This is important, because the genius of the emerging church at its beginnings was the fact that it was criticizing Bill Hybels and Rick Warren and the fundamentalists—and everybody—for domesticating the gospel to a modernist paradigm. It was either a modernist fundamentalist paradigm in the mid-twentieth century or a modernist evangelical

²See Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999).

³See <http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1106>. See also Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004).

paradigm in the late twentieth century, with the consumer church mentality, marketing of the church, and so forth.

I want to ask my emerging friends to think really hard about this issue: Are you in danger of domesticating the gospel to emerging plausibility structures? This is my greatest concern about the movement and the whole issue regarding how to minister to postmodern and emerging generations. I do not want to say “postmodern” generations, because most people are not necessarily postmodern, whether they are the Asian university students in my city or the country boys from the rural areas or inner city African-Americans or the wealthy individuals from very educated Episcopalian backgrounds or Kurdish refugees. Most people are not in the narrow “postmodern” niche that many in the emerging church seem to be targeting. We need to be careful that we don’t just become marketers to another (newer, hipper?) niche market when we think about how to deal with upcoming generations.

OVER-CONTEXTUALIZATION

I agree with Dr. Stetzer that the emerging church is in danger of over-contextualizing. I do n’t think they’re in danger of it; I think that’s what they’re doing. And I also appreciate his concern about the gospel becoming more about the cultural norms used to transport the gospel than about the gospel itself. This cuts both ways. Conservatives and progressives both need to listen to Dr. Stetzer on this and be wary, lest we think the gospel can be effective only if it is wed to the culture we like. I’m not a Southern Baptist, but I listen in on your conversation. I recently heard one of your seminary professors, Mark Coppenger, say that if a study came out proving that the best way to get souls into heaven was to dress up in a white leisure suit, white patent-leather shoes, and a red bowtie and suspenders and play an accordion in a nursing home, emerging church people wouldn’t do that, because they would think it was cheesy—they wouldn’t like it. Sometimes I wonder if Coppenger’s statement might be true.

There’s a great new book challenging the emerging church entitled *Why We’re Not Emergent, By Two Guys Who Should Be*, by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck.⁴ DeYoung is a pastor in a university town in Michigan, and Kluck is an ESPN sports writer who is a member of Kluck’s church. Both men are in their late 20’s. People who are interested in the emerging church should read this book. They talk about how, so many times, the emerging church is simply about what people like. Church planters from small town, Southern backgrounds are often cautioned about not simply transplanting “Just a Little Talk with Jesus” churches in the inner city because they like it and have come to identify the Christian faith with that particular subcultural expression. But I think everyone should ask this question: Are we making the church merely something we like? Are we really pushing a type of ministry because it appeals to our cultural preferences at the moment? The trouble with that is, what happens when the cultural preference changes in three to five years? This is something that applies to progressive and conservative evangelicals alike.

⁴Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent, By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

WEDDING FAITH TO CULTURE

We could learn from some of the critiques of evangelicalism outside conservative evangelical circles. I went to Yale Divinity School, which was anything but conservative evangelical. Rather, it was home to theologies as divergent as postliberalism, liberation theology, feminist/womanist theology, and so forth. The postliberal thinkers at Yale with whom I studied, like George Lindbeck, and some of their colleagues like Stanley Hauerwas, have a great deal to say to evangelicals from outside the movement. And we should listen. Some of these individuals agree with some of the theological points from the left wing of the emerging movement. But when it comes to ecclesiology and culture, what they are saying is that contemporary expressions of evangelicalism are mired in a tendency to marry the faith to the current culture—to the passing evil age—rather than tapping into the powers of the age to come, what Lindbeck would call interiorizing the Christian story.⁵

I think we have things to learn from some of these voices outside of evangelicalism—and some from outside conservative evangelicalism, like Marva Dawn and Jonathan R. Wilson. Again, some of these thinkers might tend to be more informed by some of the postmodern theory that undergirds emerging theology. But they are warning emerging evangelicals to be careful about the cultural and ecclesial issues at the heart of the movement. They sternly caution evangelicals about allowing consumerism, individualism, entertainment culture (whether highbrow, middlebrow, or lowbrow), and market considerations to shape church practice, to be the main thing we think will be effective in getting people to receive Christ. They say that the gospel is the power of God to salvation, not a particular style or affinity group consideration.

We should stop and think, for example, about Marva Dawn's statement that evangelicals have a tendency to reshape the church according to consumer tastes and entertainment culture. She says that this tendency "reinforces the idolatrous way of life that worship is intended to expose, disarm, and conquer."⁶ This critique from many outside conservative evangelicalism urges evangelicals to take the emphasis off the gospel as commodity, where you just sell the gospel, you seal the deal, and there's no service after the sale. They want to put the emphasis on the fact that the gospel is a life-shaping practice, that the church is a community of God bringing people in through the structures God has given us in his New Covenant.

Allow me to give another, more lengthy, quotation from Jonathan R. Wilson's recent book, *Why Church Matters*. He offers some cautions to Brian McLaren and the emerging movement. In discussing McLaren's sharp criticisms of the seeker-sensitive, megachurch mentality, Wilson says the following:

⁵cf., e.g., George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984), 62.

⁶Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 98.

The critical edge he exhibits toward modernity dulls quite a bit as he turns his attention to the postmodern. His approach to postmodernity begins to resemble [Rick] Warren's approach to modernity. Just as modernity is unproblematic for Warren, postmodernity appears to be unproblematic for McLaren. . . . Similarly, the ecclesiology conveyed by [the] holiness [or set-apartness of the church] . . . is muted at best in McLaren's work. There is little to nothing about the church set apart or called out as a people by God. McLaren pursues a vigorous critique of the relationship between modernity and Christianity, but even here the problem with modernity seems to be less that modernity is an expression of "the world" and more that it is passé and thus any ministry that presumes the culture of modernity will be outdated. But even more significant than the absence of the "set-apartness" of the church is the absence of its set-apartness to God. In contrast to [Charles] Colson and [Ellen] Vaughn, who begin and end their ecclesiology with the fear of the Lord, McLaren's ecclesiology seems driven by the fear of irrelevance. Now, if the church has been called out to live for the sake of the world, then irrelevance is a form of unfaithfulness. But fear of irrelevance is not the foundation of ecclesiology, the fear of the Lord is.⁷

COUNTERCULTURAL COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

I don't have any easy answers when it comes to being the church in a changing culture. But I think we need to go back to Lesslie Newbigin's caution, and be careful not to let modern-day American plausibility structures—with their consumeristic, niche-marketing and individualistic sensibilities—to shape how we worship and serve the transcendent God. And that means the pop 1980s sensibilities of my generation, or the hip, edgy sensibilities of people who live in lofts in New York or Seattle. We also have to be attentive to the ways that these plausibility structures will erode the church's ability to sustain the faith over generations as it has for two millennia across cultures. We need to think about more than just closing the sale and getting people converted—conforming to the marketing notion of getting people to close, to sign on the dotted line, and make a commitment. We need to think about the eight-year-old and the eighty-year-old. We need to think about intergenerational covenant faithfulness that will stand the test of time.

Dr. Stetzer says that early Christianity "illustrates an unchanging Gospel contextualized to a particular context from Jews and God-fearers to polytheists and philosophers." I am sure he is right. However, I want to be careful not to over-interpret early Christian contextualization. I would be hard-pressed if I were a contemporary church growth consultant who travelled in a time machine back to the first centuries of the Christian church. Whether I was a seeker-sensitive or emerging-style consultant, either one, I would want to know immediately why the churches weren't using, in their worship, the music, drama, dance, and images of their very pagan, multi-cultural, and pluralistic Greco-Roman cities. I would want to know why they were so puritanical in their cultural conservatism when all about them were radical pagan cultural forms. In short, I would

⁷Jonathan R. Wilson, *Why Church Matters: Worship, Ministry, and Mission in Practice* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006), 151-52.

wonder why people like Paul and Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria were spending so much time preaching long sermons and worrying about details of the Lord's Supper and writing long treatises about the dangers of pagan cultural practices. I would want to counsel the early churches to shed these backward practices and become more like the cultures around them to build a bridge for the gospel.

I liked what Dr. Stetzer said about the need for Christians to build truly countercultural communities of faith. We all need to heed this wise counsel. The key is to figure out how to be truly in the world, profoundly engaging the culture, while not being of the world—being truly countercultural to win the world. This is the challenge for the emerging church, and it is the challenge for us all.