

A Snapshot of the Emergent Church with Interviews of Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and Ed Stetzer

Elton Toby Frost

Senior Director of Strategic Evangelism

North American Mission Board, SBC

Alpharetta, Georgia 30022

The purpose of this article is to define the Emerging Church Movement as the fourth and last strain of American Christianity to emerge during the twentieth century, and to describe its characteristics, strengths, weaknesses, and future directions from our fixed point in history, using selected popular books, participation in and contributions to Emergent websites, and interviews with three leading participants in the Emergent conversation. This movement is described as both a response to and a reflection of the emerging postmodern culture in which we live. Emergence is lauded for its relevance and creativity and cautioned for a tendency sometimes to equivocate biblical authority, theological fidelity, and holy living. Finally, this article challenges Christians to follow the example of this movement in thinking missionally about the new “foreign” mission field of postmodern culture we are confronted with in our own home.

Introduction

This article is the culmination of a study on the Emergent Church that was launched in July of 2006. It was designed to include an analysis of a selected bibliography of foundational books from the Emergent genre, multiple hours of visits to Emergent websites and blogsites, contributions to said websites, and interviews with recognized leaders in the Emergent Church. The descriptions, definitions, and conclusions of this paper are a “snapshot” of this movement as it currently presents itself.

The subject, scope, and style of this study necessitate this paper being slightly more informal. This is because there is not yet a large enough corpus of academic literature on this somewhat new movement. As far as style is concerned, Emergent works are sometimes very free in respects to classical methods of composition, but the temptation will be avoided to construct this article with elements that are too outside of the box,

although writing it in a more “postmodern” fashion was a consideration for a time!

A stylistic detail has to do with the way the terms, “Emergent,” “Emergent Church,” “Emerging Church Movement,” and the like will be designated. Some are concerned with the technical nuances of the differences in terms such as “Emergent,” “Emerging,” and whether it is valid to call this the Emerging “Church,” or whether the term “Movement” is to be preferred.¹ In the opinion of this writer, we are much too early in observing the Emergent phenomenon to insist on such technicality at this point. Thus, these terms will be used somewhat synonymously in this paper.

Also, there is some editorial disparity when terms such as these are used. Most scholarly articles do not capitalize these terms. Indeed, even on the Emergent Village website, references to this movement are more often than not left in the lower case. A significant number of authors are beginning to capitalize these terms, though.² This marks a move from the word “emergent” being simply an adjective describing a major stream of American Christianity to a more formal label or name. The word “Protestant” has made this pilgrimage, now being capitalized by most authors when used, both as an adjective and a noun. This practice of capitalization will thus be utilized in this paper for the various terms relating to the Emergent Church. It is hoped that this article will not only give readers an understanding of the Emergent Church phenomenon within their ministry contexts, but also will contribute to the overall Emergent conversation.

The image of a “snapshot” has been utilized to describe this paper. A snapshot is a still picture, not a video. It is an image frozen in time. Likewise, to describe the dynamic entirety of the Emerging Church Movement from its inception, with fully-formed predictions of future directions based upon a complete study of all pertinent literature, is outside the scope of this study. It is valuable, however, to show an isolated view of where Emergent seems to be at this point in time, based upon the readings and tasks selected.

A snapshot is not a panoramic view. It is limited in scope. In the same way, the author of this paper will frame his view of the Emergent Church

¹ Scot McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?” (Lecture presented at the Fall Contemporary Issues Conference, Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, PA, October 26-27, 2006).

² An interesting example of this is none other than D. A. Carson, who leaves these terms in the lower case in his book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), but begins to capitalize them in a journal article later that year. D. A. Carson, “Faith a La Carte?” *Modern Reformation Magazine* 14.4 (July/August 2005).

Movement, drilling down on certain key conclusions, based upon the study of a limited sampling of books, blogsites, and interviews.

A snapshot is simple to take and is frequently an informal picture of real life, rather than a formal portrait taken in a studio. For example, it would be imprecise to call a posed wedding picture a “snapshot.” The effort is being made here to study the Emergent Movement from a real-life perspective. This paper will thus be written from a real-life ministry context rather than a theoretical treatment written from the dusty recesses of a research library.

The “snapshot” terminology describes a visual depiction of reality, telling a story in a colorful and engaging way. American culture is still in the middle of the exciting “new thing” of the Emergent Church Movement. We may be too close to its beginnings to analyze completely and accurately its foundations. We are surely unable at this point to gauge accurately where it will go in the future. We can, however, state assumptions and predictions about this fascinating movement from our fixed point in history in a memorable and compelling way. It is hoped that this perspective will be valuable to fellow learners.

A photographic snapshot is made up of many components parts. Colors and shapes compose the picture. A mechanical device is employed to take the image. Creativity on the part of the photographer is also essential. Likewise, the picture that this article constructs will draw on a variety of sources. First, selected readings will be used to frame this study. These were chosen not because they are the newest, most creative, or latest to be written in the field, but because they are some of the most popular and useful for beginning students, as well as for those with more exposure to the literature of this movement.

Among these readings are included two foundational texts on the Emergent Church Movement, namely Dan Kimball’s *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*,³ and *A Generous Orthodoxy*⁴ by Brian McLaren. Kimball’s book emphasizes the ancient approach to Emergent, while McLaren seems to prefer its emphasis as a new response to our contemporary age. *Blue Like Jazz*⁵ is more of a popular book written by Donald Miller. He has become somewhat of the “bard” of the Emerging Church, giving readers a sense of the *ethos* and *pathos* of the Emergent phenomenon, and complimenting the *logos* of the first two volumes previously mentioned.

³ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁴ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁵ Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003).

A fourth contribution provides an important counterbalance to the three Emergent-leaning books cited above. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*⁶ by D. A. Carson takes a look at Emergent from the perspective of an outsider looking in. Although Carson has some good things to say about the value of this movement, his assessment is largely critical. Leonard Sweet takes a more integrated approach to this subject as editor of *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*.⁷ Essays by five modern Christian thinkers provide the make-up of this book. Brian McLaren and Erwin McManus become representatives of classic Emergent thought in this volume, though McManus is more biblical and understandable by mainstream Evangelicals. Andy Crouch writes as one of the best of young thinkers among Christians of our time. Michael Horton contributes from the perspective of an apologist for reformation theology, and Frederica Matthewes-Green provides great insight from her Orthodox background.

*Leadership Wisdom from Unlikely Voices*⁸ by Dave Fleming shows the evolution of the Emergent Church from its initial foundations as a theological, evangelistic, missiological, and ecclesiological movement to an all-encompassing culture affecting business principles, leadership philosophy, and even family life. In other words, Emergent seems to be moving from “how to do church” to “how to do life.”

Besides the readings, another component in the composition of this snapshot was multiple hours of regular and disciplined participation in Emergent websites and blogsites. These sites provide a view of the Emergent culture from a “real-time” perspective. A log of the participation in these websites has been submitted to Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.⁹

Other components of great value in this study were short interviews with recognized Emergent leaders. The content of these interviews are included below, at the end of this article. The first interview was with Brian McLaren, by all accounts the unofficial leader of the Emergent Church Movement. He is a speaker, writer, philosopher, artist, and until recently the pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in the Washington D.C. area. This interview can be described as “vintage” McLaren, as he came across as very “generous” in his tendency to be open to all views, and to reject very few ideas.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

⁷ Leonard Sweet (ed.), *The Church in Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁸ Dave Fleming, *Leadership Voices from Unlikely Places: People of Yesterday Speak to Leaders of Today* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

⁹ Submitted to Rodney Harrison, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.

Doug Pagitt is the controversial and cutting-edge leader of Solomon's Porch in the Linden Hills section of Minneapolis. Most attribute the coining of the term, "Emerging Church," to him. Although his views on the Bible, homosexuality, and politics would clearly be provocative to most mainstream Evangelicals, Pagitt's interview was surprisingly constructive and uncontroversial.

The third interview was with Ed Stetzer, Director of Research at the North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. Even though he could not be described as being part of the Emerging Church, frequently keeping a critical distance from this movement, he is still accepted and respected by the new generation of pastors who either embrace or are influenced by Emergence. This interview consisted of basically one question which asked for an evaluation of the Emerging Church Movement. The answer to this question provided an important frame for some of the conclusions of this paper.

In addition to the books, interviews, and web blog research, additional research became necessary to complete the snapshot. Issues and directions raised during the study created the need for familiarity and knowledge from other sources in order to develop and support the views being posited in this paper. These other significant readings were very valuable in providing context and are footnoted when directly applicable, although hundreds will not be cited.

From the components outlined above, the Emergent snapshot was formulated. Using the unique mix of sources studied, Emergent Church focus and perspective were achieved. Answers to the following questions will be attempted in this article: Historically, from where did this movement "emerge?" Where is it going? What are its characteristics? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is this snapshot of the Emergent Church an exercise in empty learning or a useful contribution to the ministry mandates in the Bible, specifically for ecclesiological leaders, and for the Christian community at large?

Definition and Characteristics

An assumption of this article is that readers will be familiar with the Great Commission passages in the Bible and in agreement with their priority.¹⁰ In light of this mandate, a study of the Emergent Church is a necessary and important element of the ministry contexts of most readers. If this movement holds the promise of helping to evangelize the people of North America and the world (or conversely, if it endangers the clear proclamation of the gospel through a loose handling of truth), it

¹⁰ Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 1:17; Luke 24:46-48; John 17:18; Acts 1:8.

is of vital importance to understand its origins, philosophy, methodology, and future direction. It is hoped that this article will be useful to readers, not only for their personal growth, but also for enhanced effectiveness and relevance in ministry.

This study may also be valuable in its contribution to the overall Emergent conversation. The book reviews, interviews, and this paper itself (in segments and as a whole) may be used in future articles, blogs, and other channels of communication to help others to understand and benefit from this movement.

Definition of the Emergent Church

The Emergent Church would not exist without the emerging postmodern age in which we live. Modernism with its worldview emphasizing science, absolute truth, and Western-style logic in thinking is quickly giving way to postmodernism which holds no specific worldview. Instead of adhering to an overarching “truth,” postmoderns instead accept “truths” with less of an objective standard, valuing a more intuitive approach.¹¹ It is in this cultural context that Emergent has “emerged.”

The Emerging Church exists to transform postmodern culture with the power of Jesus Christ, but with its “generous” orthodoxy, non-propositional approach to sharing the gospel, and mystical, feeling-based worship styles, the Emerging Church is also a reflection of the postmodern world it seeks to change. Not all, but some Emergents try so hard to communicate to the world that they begin to succumb to the world.

Now that the postmodern context of Emergent has been noted, there still remains the need for a concise definition of the movement itself. Some Emergent authors have themselves been challenged in their attempts to provide a definition. Dan Kimball seems to give up trying and just states that there is not a single model for this movement, and that Emergent is more of a mindset than an objective “thing” that can be defined. He does, however, intimate that “missional” is usually in the mix of characteristics.¹² Emergent critic D. A. Carson prefers to list characteristics of the Emerging Church rather than providing a clear definition. Donald Miller never slows down enough to provide a definition as his stories depict the attitude and actions of Emergent in the motions of everyday life. Fleming’s leadership book assumes that readers are fully familiar with Emergent culture, so of course no definition is forthcoming in his book.

¹¹ Kimball, *Emerging Church*, 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14-15.

In the absence of a cogent definition from the works consulted, the attempt will be made in this article to provide one: “As the fourth and last strain of American Christianity to make its appearance in the twentieth century, the Emerging Church is a movement that seeks to reach postmodern culture in relevant ways with the message of Jesus Christ through new modes of thinking in ecclesiology, missiology, and evangelism.”

Characteristics of the Emergent Church

True to the postmodern culture in which it was spawned, the Emergent Church is a study in contrasts. The best way, then, to define Emergent may be to outline the sometimes conflicting characteristics of this movement.

The Emerging Church is both positive and negative. This trait is illustrated as we see this movement emphasizing two shades of the Protestant Reformation, namely “protest” and “reform.” The first characteristic of Emergent is highlighted by critic D. A. Carson as he describes it as a protest growing out of discontent with “contemporary Christianity as an institution.”¹³ Although Carson may overstretch in his proposition that protest is the *primary* descriptor of this movement, this quality is indeed present and noticeable in Emergent writings. Far from only protesting, however, this movement also seeks to reform, or more accurately “revolutionize” or even “replace” the Christendom as we know it today with a new and positive force.¹⁴ It is thus a positive as well as a negative movement.

The Emerging Church reflects both unbiblical and brutally biblical elements. Postmodernism has been both the friend and enemy of Emergent. It is a friend by infusing this movement with relevance, nuance, and understanding of culture. Postmodernism has become an enemy of the movement, though, with its subjective and even suspicious approach to truth. It is no exaggeration to say that a few leaders in the Emerging Church have become relevant to the point of near-heresy, succumbing to new thinking about salvation, holy living, marriage, and sexual identity. Some of this new thinking is quite contrary to God’s word.

We are at the same time challenged by the sometimes brutal biblicism of Emergent. With its emphasis on apostolic, ancient, and pre-Christendom ecclesiologies and practices, many within this movement

¹³ Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 14-25.

¹⁴ Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 6-9.

work to break the brass serpent of “contemporary” styles and mores that traditional Christians have looked to for comfort, challenging them instead to gaze with brutal honesty at the ancient word of God as it speaks to the contemporary.

The Emerging Church is both ancient and new. Closely related to the dialectic detailed above, is the Emergent Church emphasis on both the very old and the very new. Many in this movement desire a return to a time before the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Before Constantine became a Christian, the church was a revolutionary, radical, and counter-cultural social movement. After Constantine's conversion, Christianity became the status quo, occupying the town square instead of being relegated to the fringes of society. With this newfound acceptance, though, came, in the view of many in Emergent (and many Christians outside of this movement, as well), a fat, lazy, and hypocritical church. It became flooded with pagans and nominal Christians. Its doctrines were hardened. It *became* culture, rather than being *relevant* to culture.

According to many in the Emergent Church a return to an apostolic, and even messianic, form of Christianity is needed. Kimball refers to this as “vintage Christianity.”¹⁵ Others in Emergent, however, see elements of this movement as being absolutely new. According to them, the culture in which we live is unprecedented, thus a new wine with new wineskins required.¹⁶

The Emerging Church is both gentle and severe. There is a certain passive-aggressive personality type that one notices in the Emerging Church Movement. It is both “in-your-face” and gentle in its approach. It is gentle as it engages non-Christians in a non-confrontational manner. Emergent adherents sometime take a more direct and polemical approach with other types of Christians, though. Some Emergent blogsites are full of vitriolic verbiage, not against Satan or culture, but against Christians, mostly traditional Evangelicals.

As one can ascertain, the sometimes conflicting characteristics of the Emergent Church Movement place it clearly within a postmodern context. An attempt to describe this movement within a historical framework will be done in the section below.

History to Present

New expressions of the church have always been “emerging.” The Roman Catholic Church “emerged” from the persecuted Jewish form of Christianity with the conversion of Constantine. The Protestant

¹⁵ Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*.

¹⁶ Doug Pagitt, interview by Elton (Toby) Frost, October 4, 2006: full transcript below.

Reformation was an “emergent movement” as it moved from the Medieval Church with its superstition and corruption. Evangelicalism “emerged” as a response to the theological liberalism of the late nineteenth century and, to a lesser extent, as an answer to the Pentecostal movement that started in the early twentieth century.¹⁷

Some have attempted to make Emergent and the Protestant Reformation equals,¹⁸ but when one considers the unique situation of those times past, attempted comparisons with the worldview(s) of today largely fail.¹⁹ As in the definition of the Emerging Church Movement stated above, a better description might be that it is the fourth and last major strain of American Christianity, the first three being Pentecostalism, Evangelicalism, and The Jesus Movement, which burst on the scene during the twentieth century.²⁰ It is not within the scope of this study to describe these movements in detail, but a short introduction to the three will be attempted.

Pentecostalism was the first strain of American Christianity to emerge in the twentieth century. Most ascribe its beginnings to the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. It was and is characterized by an emphasis on an experience with the Holy Spirit resulting in great energy and vibrancy. The movement of Pentecostalism reflected its newness in new theology, new publishing companies, new churches, and even new denominations. This movement also affected already-existing denominations through the charismatic renewal movement. World-sweeping in its success, Pentecostalism in its variety of forms presently claims over five hundred million adherents worldwide.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Evangelicalism responded to liberalism’s naturalistic presuppositions and radical reinterpretation of the nature and meaning of scripture, and to the emotionalism and undisciplined theology of Pentecostalism, by insisting upon fundamentals of the faith that true Christians must hold. Although it produced new schools and copious amounts of literature, it was largely a movement within already-existing denominations.

The decade of the sixties then ushered in the Jesus Movement, a unique form of Christianity responding to the cataclysmic changes of the times. Not only confined to the “Jesus Freaks,” who saw Jesus as the embodiment of the idealism, love, and pacifism of the times, this became

¹⁷ Brian McLaren, interview by Elton (Toby) Frost, October 4, 2006: full transcript below.

¹⁸ Phyllis Tickle, foreword in *A Generous Orthodoxy* by Brian D. McLaren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 9-12.

¹⁹ Pagitt interview.

²⁰ Ibid.

a broader-based student movement finding expression in colleges, church youth groups, and the military as well. Unlike Pentecostalism and Evangelicalism, the Jesus Movement did not produce an infrastructure to sustain and spread it. Not as many new denominations, churches, and schools trace their beginnings to the Jesus Movement. Other than music, the “new wineskins” to hold the “new wine” of this movement never materialized. This could be the reason that the Jesus Movement largely failed (or ultimately succeeded, depending upon one’s point of view). Contrary to the opinions of most who hold that this movement dissolved because churches rejected it, the real reason may have been the tendency of at least a large minority of churches in existing denominations to accept and absorb it.²¹ As the fourth and last of the new movements within American Christianity in the twentieth century, the Emergent Church has developed and grown as we have entered a new millennium.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths of the Emerging Church

The Emerging Church contributes much. It is relevant, creative, and new. It attempts to engage lost people in new ways. It connects with the unreached on many levels. It is experimental and entrepreneurial, proposing creative solutions to the problems of lostness, lack of intimacy with God, and the lack of authenticity in Christendom. Thus, this movement is willing to try new methods, risking failure in order to have the opportunity for success. At its best the Emerging Church is evangelistic, with a heart for the radically unchurched. One obvious strength of Emergent that sometimes goes unmentioned is the fact that it focuses on young people, a group that since the 1970s has been increasingly unchurched.

Weaknesses of the Emerging Church

The strengths of this movement as outlined above can also be mentioned as its weaknesses as well. It is relevant, but some would say relevant to the point of compromise. It is creative, but its creativity by some of its adherents has extended to the point of near-heresy. Emergent is new, but sometimes so new and innovative as to overextend to the point of irrelevance, contrary to the relevance that it so desperately seeks. It adopts new methods, but at least one of its authors admits to changing the message as well.²² It connects with the unreached but sometimes

²¹ Ibid.

²² Brian McLaren, essay in Sweet, *The Church in Emerging Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 191-200.

never gets around to converting the unreached. For example, upon visiting the website of Cedar Ridge Community Church one immediately notices the small thumbnail pictures along with the “stories” (Emergents love narrative) of selected members of the church. Upon clicking on the thumbnail pictures and reading the stories, this author was not able to find one personal testimony of a person that was not “churched” before coming to Cedar Ridge. Surprising is the lack of “radically unchurched”²³ people that this church and other Emergent Churches are currently reaching, although this may be an unfair assessment because of the newness of this fledgling movement.²⁴

Future Directions

The Emerging Church is still developing. It is thus difficult to predict where it may end up. Its future is in jeopardy if it becomes just a lifestyle Christian phenomenon with relevance only to young urban hipsters. Attempts are being made, however, to widen the scope of this movement to other people groups. McLaren reports that in 2006 he visited every continent except Asia.

It also faces an uncertain future if it ends up losing its energy and dynamism in the overexposure by publishers who see lucrative opportunities in producing copious numbers of mediocre books and other ancillary resources, not for any real contribution, but only for sales of products from the Emergent perspective while it is still in vogue. On the other hand, if this movement fails to institutionalize and produce its own infrastructure (books, theology, churches, schools, and even “denominational” networks), it will dissolve as the Jesus Movement did.

Finally, a dim future awaits this movement if its creativity and love of all things innovative and new causes it to drift away from settled biblical truth and toward theological liberalism and social compromise. This looming danger on the horizon has been noted by many.

A positive future awaits the Emerging Church, however, if it continues to move towards missional relevance. By “missional” is meant the ability to “read the culture and translate ministry into a biblically faithful and culturally appropriate expression of church.”²⁵

²³ Term coined by author Alvin Reid in *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are and How to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002).

²⁴ Elton T. Frost in Weblog Participation Diary, September 13 through October 8, 2006. Transcripts submitted to Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

²⁵ Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006), 20-21.

A Concluding Personal Word

“The world I learned to reach in seminary twenty years ago no longer exists!” These words from a pastor friend have riveted me since I first heard them last year.

I recently took part in what might possibly be the most unique father-daughter mission outing ever planned. DragonCon is one of the largest fantasy film, pop culture, and science fiction conventions in the world. Multiplied thousands of people converge on Atlanta dressed up as their favorite comic book or film characters to enjoy concerts, attend seminars, visit exhibits, trade comic books, and play fantasy games.

My daughter, Perry, and I decided to attend DragonCon to present Christ at this four-day event. We used the JoePix strategy, taking photographs of the conventioners in their costumes and uploading the pictures to an Internet site. Subjects then can go to the website to retrieve their photos, engage Christians, and learn more about the gospel. Witnessing opportunities abounded. There were so many people. They were so far from God. Yet, they were so fascinated with our message of Jesus Christ. In this crowd, where rebellion was the status quo, we were the strangest characters of all with our JoePix t-shirts, hats, and cameras!

Never have I been around a more eclectic crowd. Where else in the world can one go and hear a concert by a new age Celtic band and see hundreds of elves, Romulans, zombies, storm troopers, and Disney characters doing the Macarena to Irish music? As I walked around this sea of humanity in a four square block area of Atlanta, the words of my friend echoed again in my mind, “The world I learned to reach in seminary twenty years ago no longer exists.”

In an international missions context, my denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, is positioned to understand reaching new types of people. We know that, on the foreign field, we must engage new cultures on their turf. We must learn, appreciate, and accept them without losing the essentials of our faith. We must be relevant in communicating to a variety of cultures without conforming to them. We also must reach these people groups with the gospel of Jesus Christ without obscuring their cultural distinctives. We must be missional, exegeting culture and exalting Christ in appropriate ways without succumbing to the world. Southern Baptists get it—at least on the international scene.

Across town from DragonCon, a large metro Atlanta church recently held a Global Missions Conference. This conference was a well-planned event with around one-hundred missionaries from all over the world in attendance. Participants hosted parties in their homes with missionaries present to tell their stories. Sunday School classes and other small groups featured presentations on the customs and practices of different countries. A highlight of the weekend was a missions-themed worship

service on Sunday morning. My favorite part of the conference, though, was the big missions fair that evening. Tables were set up with exhibits about people groups from around the world. People were fascinated by the unusual foods and by the missionaries who wore the traditional costumes of the people they were called to reach. As I walked from exhibit to exhibit I thought of the unique costumes and culture of the new “tribe” I had visited at DragonCon.

You see, the emerging postmodern culture that we encounter in North America is as new and exotic as many on the foreign mission field. But sometimes, instead of celebrating the missionaries and pastors to this culture, we react to their unique style with caution and criticism. Why don't we invite them to set up their tables at the missions fair so we can hear their stories and experience their (and our) new culture? *But as we lengthen the cords of acceptance of new styles and new ideas, we must not forget to strengthen the stakes of biblical authority, theological fidelity, and holy living as we forge into “foreign” territory with the gospel.*

“The world I learned to reach in seminary twenty years ago no longer exists!” I now realize that this statement is accurate. But this was also true when a young woman missionary named Lottie Moon went to a new world she knew nothing about. She endured criticism for adopting some of the dress and culture of that China to reach people for Christ. She served faithfully. She gave her life. And she made a difference.

We must be more like Lottie as we go about reaching and keeping our own continent for Jesus Christ. We must make evangelism “good news” again to the world, both globally and locally. We are challenged and reminded by the “new kinds of Christians” in the Emerging Church Movement who remind us that we must begin to think missionally about our own home.

A Short Conversation with Doug Pagitt October 4, 2006

FROST – Many people have compared the rise of the Emergent Church to the Protestant Reformation. Would you characterize the Emergent Church Movement more primarily as a protestant (protest) movement, or a reformation (reform) movement?

PAGITT – In history, we will probably be looked at as one of the American movements. The three we most resemble are Pentecostalism (1906), Evangelicalism (1930s-1940s), and the Jesus Movement (1960s-1970s). Emergent is its own category with reflections of all three of these movements rather than the Protestant Reformation. Of the three, the

Emergent Church Movement is probably more like Pentecostalism, not resembling it theologically, though. I say this because both Pentecostalism and Emergent radically changed directions and thinking about missiology, evangelism, ecclesiology, and theology all at the same time, with great energy and synergy. The times of the Protestant Reformation were so different that the cultural backdrop makes it more difficult to compare it to Emergent. At its best, Emergent is not concerned with either protest or with reform, but with moving forward.

FROST – But doesn't the term "Post-Evangelical" or even the term "Emergent," terms you frequently use in your books, tie you to the past?

PAGITT – Yes. This is the problem with explaining where you are in relation to where you have been and to keep moving forward. People in the Emergent Church movement say Evangelicalism was a great place to start but we want to keep moving forward.

FROST – Is the evangelical foundation of Emergent the reason why many on blogsites refer to themselves as "Recovering Fundamentalist" or "Recovering Evangelical?" Why are there so many more "recovering fundamentalists" on these sites than "recovering liberals," many of whom I would suspect come from churches just as abusive?

PAGITT – Probably this is because of sheer numbers. There are just not as many liberal converts. Also, liberalism doesn't reward entrepreneurial people. Evangelicalism has always rewarded spunk, so there are many more Evangelicals participating in Emergent.

FROST – Unlike your forward-looking form of Emergent, some would say that Emergent does not move forward, but instead is a radical backward-looking movement to pre-Christendom, apostolic days. Would you characterize the Emergent Church Movement as the discovery of a new paradigm or the rediscovery of an old paradigm?

PAGITT – Emergent has become diverse enough where it is becoming difficult to put a single descriptor around it. Some are enamored with an ancient motif. The turnkey for them is that Christianity in the twenty-first century means a return to the first century. But also there is a stream that looks for things that are consistent through time such as loving your neighbor and being in community with one another.

FROST – Is it time to describe these diverse streams within the Emergent Movement?

PAGITT – In my opinion we are still five to ten years off. Eddie Gibbs has made a stab at it, though.

FROST – Many publishers now use logos and brands for their Emergent books. Is this a sign that Emergent has peaked and is on its way out? Should we get ready for Emergent cup-cozies, t-shirts, and Bible covers?

PAGITT – Organization shows the next stage of the movement. Evolution and social movements have the characteristic of codifying a particular expression. This needs to take place in order for other expressions to respond to it and grow out of it. The Jesus Movement never staked its place in history with organization, so its different streams either dissolved or were absorbed into existing churches.

FROST – As you know there are many emergent-leaning SBC churches with young cutting-edge pastors, but they are a small minority of our over 45,000 churches. In your opinion, can the Emergent Movement teach anything to mainstream SBC churches? What one thing can SBC churches glean from Emergent?

PAGITT – Paul’s vision was that the promise of Abraham is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus. Paul held the faith that some day the thing you hope for is fulfilled. I would say to SBC churches that the things that come after us really are the fulfillment of Paul’s hope. Things don’t end when the traditional SBC expression is less appealing to culture. See yourself in the new expressions of Emergent. Look for similarities rather than differences. Distinctions are important but we are all better off finding similarities.

A Short Conversation with Brian McLaren October 9, 2006

FROST – Would you characterize the Emergent Church Movement as a protest movement, a reform movement, or something entirely different?

MCLAREN – That’s a little hard to answer except to say “all of the above.” Most Emergent churches are protestant, but there is a fascinating conversation happening with some Roman Catholics. In my view, the Protestant Reformation was Christianity “emerging” from the medieval era into modern era. Similarly, Roman Catholicism was Christianity “emerging” from being a persecuted, loosely-networked Jewish offshoot into being the official religion of the Roman Empire. The process of Emergence is constant as the church deals with emerging realities. A

number of people do not like what we are doing because they try to reduce it to one thing or another—calling it just a protest movement, for example.

FROST – Is the criticism of the Emergent Church by many really just a criticism of the culture in which we live, and, by extension, a criticism of churches who speak to this new culture in new ways?

MCLAREN – I think that’s a large part of it. Among all different Christian communities there is the clash where some think of “church” as exciting and new, and others think of “church” as unchanging and always predictable. Some want the church to lead us into a better future, and others want the church to preserve precious things from the past. Again, we need a both/and, not an either/or.

FROST – You have engaged in extensive international travel this year. What have you found? Is Emergent a uniquely American movement, or does it have value to the international community?

MCLAREN – Actually in many ways the Emergent Movement is stronger in Latin America than North America. It is growing stronger in Europe and Africa. I have not been to Asia yet, but there is growing interest and involvement worldwide. My main interest is not in spreading a North American movement abroad, but in learning from what God is doing around the world, and increasing levels of communication and mutual encouragement and edification.

FROST – What is the value of the Emergent conversation to SBC churches, especially the ones who are more traditional or seeker in make-up? Is there a value in the Emergent conversation to them?

MCLAREN – Southern Baptist churches have been at the forefront of understanding missional relevance. SBC missionaries go around the world to many cultures, and they understand that you have to indigenize. You must enter a culture without judgment in order to understand it, and then you must incarnate the gospel in word and deed into that culture, so the gospel can be a liberating and transforming agent within it. So in this way, Emergent is similar to what the SBC is doing abroad, but we’re doing it at home; we’re grappling with ways to faithfully incarnate the gospel in the emerging culture. I guess you could say, in Baptist terms, that we’re a hybrid of international and home missions; we’re using the missiological methods learned in the mission field abroad and applying them to new cultural groups here at home.

FROST – Luther was rejected by the Roman Catholic Church, and a new paradigm thrived as churches reorganized communities and codified their convictions. The Jesus Movement found its way into existing churches and largely faded without a distinctive organizational model (except for Calvary Chapels). Would it help or hurt the Emergent Church Movement to be fully accepted by North American Christianity as we know it? In other words, does Emergent want to be fully accepted?

MCLAREN – For many complex reasons, Luther was not accepted by the Catholic Church when he tried to bring reform. Those complex reasons include an increasing doctrinal rigidity in the late Middle Ages, political and scientific and economic realities in sixteenth-century Europe that tempted the church to become overly fearful and reactive, and even Luther's peculiar personality. We do not know all the reasons. But before Luther, the Roman Catholic Church showed an amazing capacity to embrace and include reform movements. Saint Francis and Saint Patrick were both radical innovators who were to a great degree accepted, so their influence was able to bring renewal and transformation within the church at large—an influence that continues today. But Protestant churches are usually not like this when it comes to new things. Whenever there is a lot of newness or diversity they tend to choose sides and have insiders and outsiders.

Now applying this to the Emergent conversation, institutions in my view are not bad in themselves. It's the "things" that are institutionalized that can be bad. For example, if you institutionalize racism, reluctance to change, too much conformity to culture, dominance of the people by a few elite dominating leaders, etc., then you've institutionalized things that are contrary to the gospel. But again, institutions themselves aren't bad—they're necessary. We should respect institutions. But we should also view them somewhat as we view the new wine of the gospel's relationship to wineskins in the Bible. We need wineskins. We cannot have wine without them. But we must have new wineskins to contain new wine. The wine is what counts most—the dynamic mission of the kingdom of God—not the wineskins. Or to put it differently, you fit the shoe to the growing foot; you don't force the foot to conform to the shoe.

FROST – Would you characterize the Emergent Church Movement as the discovery of a new paradigm or the rediscovery of an old paradigm?

MCLAREN – This is a classic case where the answer is "both." Our entire ethos as Protestants and Evangelicals and Christians in general

always involves going back—back to the Gospels, back to the Old and New Testaments as a whole—but going back to gain resources so that we can then keep moving forward in mission. In many ways we can go back in history to see examples of this “emergent thing.” As I mentioned before, Saint Patrick and Saint Francis are examples. John Calvin is an excellent example. He was only nineteen or twenty when he became a pastor. He finished his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* by the time he was twenty-five. He realized that the inherited systems for explaining the faith were not adequate to his time and place. So he boldly went back to the Scriptures, and based on what he found there, he dared to differ from medieval articulations and articulated the faith in new ways. There’s this dynamic tension between going back and going forward. Some people’s discomfort with Emergent may come from the fact that for the first time we are living in a global economy with an interconnected global culture requiring new ways to think, organize, and relate. So much is new and challenging, and even frightening—from nuclear weapons to global warming to the internet to the mixing of people of so many different religions in one city or even neighborhood. I’m not surprised that many people react to all this with fear and a desire to recapture the good old days—of the 1950s or 1590s or whatever.

FROST – What in your opinion has been the most important, valuable, or distinctive contribution of the Emergent conversation to the church?

MCLAREN – The most valuable contributions are the many young leaders who are committed to theology and evangelism. They are reading theologians from around the world and grappling with how the gospel should take shape. They aren’t just reading North American and English theologians—they’re reading Africans and Latin Americans and Asians and Europeans, and this is broadening their horizons and helping them to see the Scriptures from a less culturally-bound perspective. They are also looking back historically and seeing ways our understanding of the gospel has been shaped, developed, and even compromised at times by our own modern Western culture. This simultaneous engagement with theology, history, and contemporary global cultures positions them to make significant contributions to the church at large. So, young leaders who passionately care about a thoughtful, biblically-rooted theology and who are equally committed to making disciples . . . they are Emergent’s greatest contributions, in my opinion.

FROST – In your opinion, does the cultural move from modernism to postmodernism advance or detract from our quest to fulfill the Great Commission in our time?

MCLAREN – I would say both. The greatest holocaust in human history happened in the sixteenth century when colonizers went to Latin America. It is estimated that fifty million people were killed by effects of colonization. And the Catholic Church legitimized it. Even though a whole continent was “won” for Christ, a lot of our problems today are a consequence of the Christian faith and how it was spread. And it wasn’t just the Catholics who made terrible mistakes during the modern era. For example, the Protestant church has at times been a bastion of racism, and this continues in too many places today. As part of our response to postmodernity, we Christians must come to terms with the lack of authenticity in our past. If we don’t deal with our dirty laundry from the past, I think we’ll struggle in the emerging context. But if we can deal openly and honestly with our past failures, I believe we will find enormous opportunities to serve God and love our neighbors in the postmodern, postcolonial world.

FROST – How does the propositional approach to Christianity (sharing the Four Spiritual Laws, for example) relate to the mystical, spiritual, narrative approach to Christianity of Emergent? How would these approaches work together?

MCLAREN – This question is so important and multilayered that I couldn’t even begin to respond with the depth the question deserves. Just to mention one area—because of religious broadcasting and publishing, people today have access to all kinds of messages from televangelists and radio preachers and authors, some for the better, some for the worse perhaps. If all people needed were information and propositions about God, they have amazingly broad access to that kind of information already. But what people need first is not just information: they need a relationship with a caring, authentic, transparent Christian to see how that propositional message works. They need to see propositions incarnated in the biblical story, and in the lives of people who are living by that biblical story. If someone comes to them like they are selling life insurance or aluminum siding and just dumps the information on them, that says to them that they are not loved and Christ is not legitimate. Postmoderns do care about truth but can’t forget the fact that those proclaiming the truth have committed terrible injustices. So, to accept propositional arguments from Christians is morally abhorrent to them until they see the quality of our lives—as Jesus said, they need to see our light shining in good deeds before they’re ready to glorify our God. Of course I believe in propositional truth. Any statement is propositional truth. Even the statement, “I don’t believe in propositional truth” is a

proposition—so arguments about propositional truth can become absurd very quickly. But the truth of God can never be limited to propositions—it always is expressed in incarnation and action and relationships as well. An awful lot of superficial things are being said in the various arguments about propositional truth, and we need to reach down to deeper levels of understanding. In the end, if we focus on 1 Peter 3:16-17, we'll get the right balance. Peter says we need to have gentle and respectful relationships with people who don't yet believe. We must always be ready to understand the questions people ask us, so we can gently and respectfully and intelligently answer them. I guess you could say that truth without a relationship is like a cargo plane without wings, and a relationship without truth is like a cargo plane with nothing to carry and nowhere to go.

FROST – If denominations make a contribution to the church in the future, what, in your view, would they have to look like? Or, in your opinion, does the concept of “denomination” have no place in the future?

MCLAREN – Denominations are inevitable. They are simply relational networks. They are a family, preserving history and distinctives. But we do have to get beyond sectarianism. We have to get beyond the dominating or intimidating idea that everyone else has to capitulate to our opinion and submit to our way of doing things. Positive things happen in flexible missions structures as have characterized the SBC in the past and are appearing in Emerging churches. In the emerging world, I think denominations will behave more like networks and less like hierarchies. Again, Baptists have this non-hierarchical value in their history, and it's a precious thing I hope Baptists never lose.

A Short Conversation with Ed Stetzer November 6, 2006

FROST – What is your evaluation of the Emerging Church Movement?

STETZER – I am not sure there is a movement. There are many conversations and organizations under the umbrella of what has been called the “Emerging Church.” But, let me give some thoughts and express my mixed feelings.

It is not a big secret that I have written some things that well-known Emergent leaders do not like. I have the unfortunate distinction of having

been called “unhelpful” by the head of Emergent.²⁶ However, there are also some who think that anyone who says something kind about some Emerging Church leaders must be apostate. My hope is that we can be discerning enough to see the good as well as the bad, and to know the difference.

I want pastors who lead biblically-faithful churches in emerging culture to be in the SBC. I think that when we start throwing around labels without discernment, we will “preach them out”—much like we did to many contemporary church leaders in the 90s. I just don’t think we need another purge of biblically-faithful, God-centered churches that do things differently than we do.

I do think that there is some serious theological error in part of the “Emerging Church” and I have written about it. We need to speak clearly when the clear teaching of Scripture is disregarded or misunderstood. Furthermore, there are some Emerging churches where there is solid theology but an unhealthy emphasis on Christian liberty (language, alcohol, etc.). We need to speak honestly about the need for discernment and maturity in such contexts. But, most importantly, we need to rejoice when we find a biblically-faithful church in emerging culture, just as we would a biblically-faithful traditional church or a biblically-faithful Purpose-Driven church.

FROST – It seems that there are different types of Emerging Church people? Are there?

STETZER – I think so. Some of the well known writers do not really represent everyone involved. There is a great diversity of people who call themselves “Emerging.” Some I would be comfortable with, others greatly concern me (see D. A. Carson’s book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, for some of those concerns).

I do believe that some are taking the same gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture; some are taking the same gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church; some are questioning and revising the gospel and the

²⁶ http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html
http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2006/05/is_emergent_the.html.

church. I have identified three arenas in which emergent leaders are working.²⁷

First, there are those I call “relevants.” These are young (and not so young) leaders who some classify as “Emerging” that really are just trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture. Ironically, while some may consider them liberal, they are often deeply committed to biblical preaching, male pastoral leadership and other values common in conservative evangelical churches. The churches of the “relevants” are not filled with the angry white children of evangelical megachurches. They are, instead, intentionally reaching into their communities (which are different than where most Southern Baptists live) and proclaiming a faithful biblically-centered gospel there.

Secondly, there are those I refer to as “reconstructionists.” The reconstructionists think that the current form of church is frequently irrelevant and the structure is unhelpful. Yet, they typically hold to a more orthodox view of the gospel and Scripture. Therefore, we see an increase in models of church that reject certain organizational models, embracing what are often called “incarnational” or “house” models. They are responding to the fact that after decades of trying fresh ideas in innovative churches, North America is less churchied, and those who are churchied are less committed. If reconstructionists simply rearrange dissatisfied Christians and do not impact lostness, it is hardly a better situation than the current one.

Lastly, there are those I identify as “revisionists,” many of whom are being read by younger leaders and perceived as Evangelicals. They are not—at least according to our evangelical understanding of Scripture. We significantly differ from them regarding what the Bible is, what it teaches, and how we should live it in our churches. I don’t hate them or question their motives and I won’t try to mischaracterize their beliefs. But, I won’t agree with them. “Revisionists” are questioning (and in some cases denying) issues like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementary nature of gender, and the nature of the gospel itself. This is not new. Some mainline theologians quietly abandoned these doctrines a generation ago. Does that mean we cannot learn from them? Certainly not. I read mainline theologians like Marcus Borg and George Lindbeck like others in the

²⁷ A summary of Stetzer’s work is at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>; <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>.

past read Karl Barth. These are good thinkers, but deeply wrong on issues I hold as important. I read many Emerging Church writers the same way. They ask good questions, but I am driven to Scripture for the answers.

Let's affirm the good, and look to the Scriptures for answers to the hard questions. And, yes, let's graciously disagree when others hold views contrary to our best scriptural understanding of God, Bible, and church.