



Emergent: A brief introduction

Recently, I needed new glasses. So, I headed over to the local mall and was immediately confronted with a world of choices – choices that I can make as an empowered individual. It starts when you arrive. The mall has I-don't-know-how-many entrances and you can pick the one most convenient to you. If the parking lot is not too full, you can decide whether you're going to park near the doors or further away and get some exercise. Upon entering the mall, I consulted the mall directory and found that I could get my new glasses from at least three different stores. So I walked past each one, evaluated what I saw, and chose the one with the sale on. Walking in, I was greeted by a friendly sales person who introduced me to the hundreds of choices that I could make for the frames of my new glasses. Thankfully, I had my two oldest daughters with me and they were able to navigate those choices for me. Then I had to choose which package I would prefer for the glasses, did I want scratch resistant? Non-glare? If I went with the bare minimum, I could have my glasses in an hour; but if I wanted all the bells and whistles, the glasses would have to go to the lab in Toronto and it would be ten days. And there were all kinds of options in between. Just in the simple act of buying glasses at the mall, there were thousands of options that I, the individual buyer, could make. We could extend this to all kinds of other scenarios in our daily lives.

The mall and our consumer-oriented society which provides us with thousands of choices is paradigmatic for our culture. I no longer have to exist within the narrow confines of being the grandson of Dutch immigrants. I can beg, borrow, and steal from whatever is out there and all of it can be appropriated as part of my identity. So, sure, I still like croquetten and stampot, but let me also have my Scottish haggis, my Vietnamese pho', my Indian tikka masala, and even my Australian vegemite. Eclecticism is the new normal for many people born after 1970 and even for many born before.

Hand in hand with that eclecticism is narcissism. We blog, we Facebook, we Twitter, and whatever else we do, and we assume that everyone is interested in me and what I'm doing at this exact moment and how I feel and how I think. Maybe not everybody who does those things thinks that way, but that's the presupposition behind a lot of it. The world revolves around me. It's all about me.

These cultural phenomena have come to be embraced in large segments of Christianity as well, also in our own churches. But they come to fullest expression in what we call the *emergent church movement*. A precise definition of this movement is difficult. It's very diverse and those who identify with it resist the very notion of precise definitions. There is no one statement of faith that emergent leaders have crafted and signed, although Brian McLaren's *A Generous Orthodoxy* is considered by many to be an emergent manifesto.

Nevertheless, we can identify some key commonalities in those who identify themselves as emergent. There are common themes, protests, and shared ideas that we find with people like Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Leonard Sweet, Tony Jones, Phyllis Tickle, and others. Let me briefly identify seven of those commonalities:

Protest

The emergent movement is in the first place a protest movement. Most of its leaders have come out of fundamentalist upbringings and they're reacting against that. In a superficial way, they identify fundamentalism with modernist philosophy developed during and after the Enlightenment. So, there is also a protest against modernism and its associated evil: linear, propositional thinking. For emergents, much of what is wrong with Christianity can be traced back to the embrace of

systematic formulations of the faith, whether in ecclesiastical confessions or in systematic theologies. While some emergents affirm the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed, others (such as Tony Jones) find statements of faith to be “seriously alarming” because they set boundaries. Emergents would prefer to emphasize story and narrative over the formulation of dogmatic truths and propositions. For this reason, they describe their own movement as being a “conversation” or a “journey,” but never as a “theology.” Finally, they also protest the idea of the Christian faith as doctrine – they prefer to describe it as a life, they want to be known as “Jesus followers,” rather than Christians. They place the emphasis on ethics – it’s more important what we do as Christians, rather than what we believe. As a side note here, in this regard the emergents have not progressed beyond Charles Finney whose *Systematic Theology* is really a book of ethics. With his emphasis on the new measures, Charles Finney was as modernist as they come. With their focus on ethics, the emergents could almost be described as his latter-day heirs. But that as an aside...

Post-modern epistemology

How we know what we know, or theory of knowledge (epistemology) is at the philosophical heart of the emergent movement. I once had a conversation with a young brother who had fallen under the influence of emergent thinking. For him, doubt was a virtue and uncertainty a sure sign of humility. To be convinced of truth and to believe that there is public, objective truth was a sort of hubris that could not be tolerated. The emergent movement adopts a post-modern epistemology where foundationalism (the idea that the Bible gives us a foundation for knowledge) is rejected and scepticism is the end result. One can only talk about certainty and truth in subjective terms. In emergent circles, this epistemology is applied not only to theology, but also to biblical hermeneutics. Almost everything becomes subjective and personal – there are very few propositional truths in the Bible that apply to everybody in a universal way, some would say there are none – everything is up for grabs.

Mysticism

Leaders of the emergent movement are also proponents of contemplative spirituality or mysticism. Their favourite authors are people like Richard Foster, Henri Nouwen, Brennan Manning, and Thomas Merton. Turning away from the objective Word of God, they turn inward to subjective, mystical experiences. This explains why many emergent church groups are into “smells and bells,” using labyrinths, breath prayers, and so on.

Missional

“Missional” is a buzz-word these days. Many churches advertise themselves as being missional, focused on missions. The emergent movement is also big on being missional. At first glance, this looks like a great idea. Who wouldn’t want to be enthusiastic about missions? But for emergent Christians, the concept of “mission” is something far more nebulous than what many Reformed people will understand by that word. For starters, many emergent leaders are weak on the gospel. Brian McLaren, for instance, doesn’t want to discuss what he calls “the hell question.” He doesn’t want to discuss the question of what happens to those who don’t believe in Jesus Christ. For him, it’s more important that Christians go out and “*join Jesus in expressing God’s love for the whole world, to follow Jesus in his mission of saving love for the world*” (*A Generous Orthodoxy*, 125). He is more interested in good news that transforms the world in the here and now – an over-realized eschatology, or to use Martin Luther’s categories, a theology of glory. McLaren is not alone in this. Briefly, “missional” in the emergent church movement has more to do with liberation theology than it does with what the Bible teaches about mission.

Eclectic

I don’t have to say much on this point because the subtitle to Brian McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* says it all:

“Why I am a missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal/conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative (notice how mystical has to come back in

'contemplative'), *fundamentalist/calvinist, anabaptist/anglican, methodist, catholic, green, incarnational, depressed-yet-hopeful, emergent, unfinished Christian.*"

Like a shopper at the mall, McLaren (and again, he's not unique in this) goes to the religious buffet, he makes a choice here and a choice there, takes a little bit of this and a little bit of that and doesn't really care if the little bit of this actually contradicts the little bit of that. You see, the law of non-contradiction is part of Western linear thinking and if you've scrapped that, anything goes.

Narcissistic

A Generous Orthodoxy is a painful read. Brian McLaren is obsessively absorbed with himself and his thoughts and his experiences. The supreme judge of what is right and wrong is no longer the Word of God, but the supreme self. That ties back into the influence of post-modernism. D.A. Carson (and he's not the first one) points out that post-modernism is actually a misnomer. It's better to call it late modernism, because at the end of the day it's not really all that different, especially in its basic presuppositions. In his book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Carson writes,

"Post-modernism remains the bastard child of modernism and shares its fundamental weakness: it begins with the 'I,' the finite self. In this sense, post-modernism, like the modernism that spawned it, is methodologically atheistic – or more generously put, it takes no account of God at the beginning of its deliberations" (122).

Carson is dead on and his words are worth noting. Beginning with the finite self is symptomatic of pretended autonomy, rebellion against God, failing to allow God's Word to have the first word, let alone the last word.

Poor handling of history and theology

Finally, emergent leaders are notoriously poor in their handling of history. They have certain traditions, especially contemplative ones, that receive sympathetic and careful treatment. But when it comes to traditions that are seen as problematic, there is a lot of sloppiness. Even when someone like Brian McLaren is trying to demonstrate how he has appreciation for Calvinism, he still makes mistakes with basic historical facts. For instance, he states that Calvin became a pastor at eighteen years old and wrote the *Institutes* when he was twenty-five, a book McLaren characterizes (or better: caricatures) as being a "*lean and pure intellectual system.*" Rob Bell wrote in *Velvet Elvis* that "*we got the Bible from the church voting on what the Bible even is...*" Carson and other critics have been relentless in pointing out the sloppy way that emergent writers not only deal with history and questions of historical theology, but also with theology itself. Shallowness, reductionism, anachronisms, the creation of false antitheses – all of these undermine the credibility of emergent leaders.

Analysis and influence

The influence of these writers is, quite frankly, troubling. Emergent books are not being sold in isolated corners; instead these are the big sellers in many Christian bookstores. Emergent leaders are also effective in using technology – they not only use blogs, and on-line forums, but also videos on YouTube (think here of Rob Bell and his Nooma video series). Emergent thinking has made significant inroads into Christian post-secondary institutions.

We need to be aware of this movement. Not only because of what it is doing in the broader Christian context, but because of what it's doing already in our churches and in our immediate context. As an example, take the recent runaway best-seller *The Shack*. In many ways, *The Shack* is an emergent parable and it's been especially popular with the emergent crowd. Its writer, Paul Young, doesn't belong to any church, and just does spiritual things his own way. Church is optional – classic emergent thinking. There were and are many people in our churches who read *The Shack* and recognized it as heretical and could tell you why. But there were others who read it and just didn't like it and couldn't really nail down what the problems were. But then there are also

others who read it and thought it was great, life-changing even. That is a serious problem, even if it is just a few.

It's also a problem that some of our young people are reading emergent stuff and listening to emergent speakers and being influenced in this direction. We need to be aware that this movement is putting some pressure on our people. Especially when you're growing up in a narcissistic culture which encourages eclecticism, the pressure can be strong, even overwhelming to take that kind of approach to spiritual matters. Capitulation will result in not only the eclipse of the authority of our Reformed confessions, and not only the undermining of Word and Sacrament ministry, but most significantly of all the erosion of the very foundations of our faith in the Word of God. We can't afford to take things for granted. For instance, we can't afford to take our Reformed, biblical epistemology for granted. This is something that we may need to emphasize more in our preaching and teaching – the fact that we can have certainty in our knowledge of many important things because we have revelation from God and we are created in the image of God. We don't need to have a philosophy class from the pulpit, but certainly we can certainly draw this out in a simple way when we're preaching on Lord's Day 6 or Lord's Day 7, dealing with how we know and how we find certainty in spiritual matters. Of course, other venues can also be used for this, for instance, the adult education class.

My observation is that the emergent movement is becoming the new normal in much of North American Christianity. Mega-churches are on the decline. Evangelicalism is nearly theologically bankrupt and the emergent movement is ready to slide in and take its place, just as liberalism overtook pietism in a previous century. Despite the allegedly postmodern veneer, emergent is ultimately regurgitated, gussied-up liberalism, the liberalism that H. Richard Niebuhr famously described as being a

"God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."

Of course, there is nothing new under the sun, but to address these trends and their impact on our people, we need to be aware of what's taking place around us.

WL Bredenhof

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