



## The Emerging Church and the Way of Cain

*"Woe unto them! For they have gone in the way of Cain."*

Jude 11

The deceitfulness of the human heart is a truth recorded in Scripture and borne out in daily life. Believers discover it increasingly in their own lives as well as around them. One of the ways this deceitfulness shows itself is the love for the lie, especially the lie that we ourselves can determine how to serve God.

This lie has been promoted since the father of lies uttered it in the garden. It has had its countless followers, from Cain, Balaam, and Korah to the apostates in the Epistle of Jude.

### Experimenting with Christianity

A century ago, it was popular to say you were "religious," but not "spiritual." That meant that you did not take your Christian belief to the extreme, but you tried to live a religious life. Now, people like to say the opposite: *"We are spiritual,"* they say, *"but not religious."*<sup>1</sup> What they mean is that they feel themselves connected to the spiritual realm, but they don't want to align themselves with any traditional institution or form of worship, and certainly not one that claims to be the only right and true one.

As part of this development, people have begun to talk about the *"Emerging or Emergent Church."* In his very helpful book, Don Carson makes clear that the Emerging Church sees itself as the shape of the church to come, because a new culture is emerging.<sup>2</sup> It is a reaction, first of all, to what it thinks of as the traditional church, with its creeds and its emphasis on truth. Secondly, it is a reaction to the seeker-sensitive church, which especially targeted baby boomers. In fact, many of the leaders of the Emerging Church come out of the seeker-sensitive movement, and see themselves targeting the generation under 30. They reject "linear" thinking, such as adherence to confessions, and instead emphasize experience and other such modes (emotion, aesthetics). They emphasize inclusion rather than exclusion. While they see other churches emphasizing *"believing in order to belong,"* their frequent phrase is *"you belong in order to believe."* They promote a coming to faith *"by osmosis."* There is an emphasis on authenticity rather than absolutes. They do not fence the Lord's table, for that would be exclusionary.

In this experience of "belonging," people might actually come to faith. They stress narrative and community. Sometimes they link up with other movements such as "openness of God"-thinking, anti-consumerism, the theology for the oppressed, the New Perspective on Paul, etc. In terms of its beliefs, there is wide diversity. In terms of its methods, there is broad commonality.

### A New Kind of Christian

The Emerging Church movement, or conversation (as some call it), began to take off around 2001, inspired largely by a book, *A New Kind of Christian*, by Brian McLaren. It promotes itself as a *"spiritual renewal for those who thought they had given up on church,"* and documents the spiritual journey taken by two fictional characters (Dan Poole, a disillusioned evangelical pastor, and Neo, a high school science teacher) as they move from modern to postmodern approaches to Christianity. With Neo's help, Dan begins to discover that the form of Christianity that he previously adhered to was too deeply rooted in the era of modernity to survive the present cultural changes. Since then,

the movement has proliferated through books, and more so through conferences and the Internet. The main representatives are Brian McLaren, Dan Kimball, and Andy Crouch.

## **Post-Modernism**

According to Kimball, “*modernity dates from around 1500-2000*” and “*held to a single, universal worldview and moral standard, a belief that all knowledge is good and certain, truth is absolute, individualism is valued, and thinking, learning, and beliefs should be determined systematically and logically.*”<sup>3</sup> Postmodernism, by contrast, “*holds there is no single universal worldview. All truth is not absolute, community is valued over individualism, and thinking, learning, and beliefs can be determined nonlinearly.*”

According to Carson, the leaders of the Emerging Church movement have a facile grasp of postmodernism in its philosophical form. They have little understanding of how it relates to modernism, and especially how it is a form of modernism. Moreover, Carson argues, though the church has in many quarters fallen prey to modernism, the embrace of the absolute is not a modern concern alone. Propositional thinking is not something that emerged with “modernity,” but can be found throughout the Bible and down through the whole history of the church.<sup>4</sup>

## **Reformation or Reformulation?**

Probably the most important emphasis of the Emerging Church is on “reading our times” or “reading our culture.” Here is where they show their seeker-sensitive background. They have basically detected that the seeker-sensitive model does not appeal to the younger generation. Why is that? “Well,” the Emerging Church says, “It is because the younger generation is essentially post-modern, while the seeker-sensitive churches were modern. The post-moderns want to question tradition. The modern embrace it.”

Often they claim the badge of “reforming.” In his book, *Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren claims to be, among other things, Reformed. What this means, however, is that the church must be always reforming, and reforming as our culture is developing. He has also adjusted the Five Points of Calvinism in a revealing way: Triune Love; Unselfish Election; Limitless Reconciliation; Inspiring Grace; Passionate, Persistent Saints. These may be catchy phrases, but do not at all delineate the gospel in a biblical and Reformed manner. It is telling that total depravity is absent. When sin is not sin, grace can never be grace either; this is no Reformation, but mere *Reformulation*.

## **Worship**

In *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millenium Culture*, Leonard Sweet says, “*Postmoderns want a God they can feel, taste, touch, hear and smell — a full sensory immersion in the divine.*”<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Emerging Church has vigorously sought to move the prevailing patterns of Christian worship in a more experience-based direction. This has been encapsulated in Sweet’s own catchy acronym: EPIC — (E)xperiential, (P)articipatory, (I)mage driven, and (C)onnected.<sup>6</sup> Thus, there is a return to liturgical traditions, especially the performative, dramatic, and ritualistic.

A local congregation in Grand Rapids that embodies the emerging emphases writes this on their website:

*“From songs to readings to silent meditation, through ancient hymns or rock and roll or — dare I even say it country music, we want to connect with God in as many different ways as there are different people and different sides of the Almighty. We’re barely scratching the surface. But we believe that God is actively redeeming and healing this planet, and he has invited everyone of us to join him in this revolution.”*<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that the Reformed principle of Word-regulated and simple worship is the opposite of what the Emerging Church is about.

## Two Spiritualities

Despite what its representatives claim, the Emerging Church has not left the Enlightenment behind. David Wells notes that this spiritual revolution is in fundamental harmony and continuity with the Enlightenment, not in conflict with it. It is the autonomous self-determining how a person ought to feel, think, and live. Sin is not understood vertically but horizontally. We do not conceive of sin as guilt, but rather as shame. We understand it in relational terms, and thus our view of salvation is also correspondingly relational. We basically conceive of salvation as “therapy,” and engage in “therapeutic pragmatism.”

Because man was created in the image of God, it is not strange that people would crave spirituality. This is true especially in our society where we have everything to live with, but nothing to live for.<sup>8</sup> That man mixes his own recipe for spirituality, however, is part of the problem.

Throughout Scripture, we see two kinds of spiritualities — the true and the false. From the story of Cain and Abel’s offerings on, the whole Bible contrasts man-made religion with the divinely revealed religion. What was Elijah doing on Mount Carmel? He unmasked the vanity and wickedness of a self-made spirituality. What were the prophets doing when they called the people away from their vain oblations? What did Christ do when he railed on the Pharisees praying on the street-corners? What did Paul do when he unmasked the Galatian heresy? Throughout the Bible, God draws a line through all of man’s self-produced spirituality and writes over it all: vain and condemnable.

May God save us and our children from going down the path made by the Emerging Church — to any degree. The Emerging Church will come and go; until Christ’s return, other similar movements will come and dress up the same error in different garb. We should not be ignorant of this (2 Peter 2), but contend earnestly for the true faith (Jude 3). The only real protection against false spirituality and religion is the true. May we arm ourselves with the Berean spirit and especially know and retain the biblical spirituality of Abel, who “*obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts*” (Heb. 11:4).

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<sup>1</sup> David Wells, *Above all Earthly Powers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 127-128. I want to thank Mark Raines and Maarten Kuivenhoven, both students at PRTS, for their papers on the subject, which helped me gain clarity on what is at stake in the Emerging Movement.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 57-58.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, *Conversant with the Emerging Church*, chapters 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Soul Tsunami: Sink or Swim in New Millenium Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), xxi.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.mhbcmi.org/about/history.php>, accessed October 9, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to Rev. Maurice Roberts for this thought, which I heard him say in a lecture at PRTS.