



## The Submergent Church

Three miles from where I live is Mars Hill Bible Church, a mega-emergent church in Grandville, Michigan. The church's pastor is the popular Rev. Rob Bell, author of the books "Velvet Elvis," "Sex God," and most recently "Jesus Wants to Save Christians." My purpose in this article is not to critique what Mars Hill is doing or what Rob Bell is saying – others have already done that very well.<sup>1</sup> But, as the saying goes, "when you point a finger at others, three are pointing back at you."

With church buildings on nearly every corner, the Grand Rapids area can hardly be described as "unchurched." Several NAPARC churches exist in this area, including 10 percent of all the URCNA churches. So why is Mars Hill attracting such crowds while many of our churches are struggling? Depending on your perspective, answers will vary widely. Rob Bell is a gifted speaker with a certain charm and charisma. True. Our entertainment-saturated culture makes their worship style attractive to many. True. People today lack discernment. True. People can worship there without feeling as though they are being judged. True. People can worship there "anonymously" without oversight. True. True. True. And we can give many more reasons why people flock to this church, or others like it.

Here's one other possibility: might it be that some go emergent because our churches are submergent?

A submerged church is a church that exists under the radar. For all its internal activity, it is virtually invisible to the community. Outreach, evangelism, and missions are budget items, but nothing more. A submerged church is lethargic, apathetic, self-focused, with a "we've arrived" attitude that refuses to evaluate itself or its ministry. It is a church satisfied with the answer, "that's the way we've always done it before." It is a church that takes "negotiable" things (*adiaphora*) and makes them non-negotiable, or refuses to deal with deficiencies in those things that are non-negotiable. It is a church that wears the cloak of "conservatism," but underneath is the corpse of traditionalism.

I would suggest that the real threat to non-emergent, conservative reformed churches is not the "emergent-church-movement" but the "submergent-church's-lack-of-movement."

I see this playing out in the following areas: the church and worship, the church and one another, and the church and the world.

### **The Church and worship**

To state it positively, our worship must be passionately God-honoring and Christ-centered in which we meet in covenantal, dialogue with our Creator and Redeemer. We, God's people, gather corporately before Him to bring praise, petitions, confession, and offerings while God speaks words of pardon and salvation, calling us to a life of faith and obedience. Negatively, our worship must avoid what God described in Isaiah 29:13 and repeated by Jesus in Matthew 15:8, 9: *"These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men."* These things are non-negotiable.

Jesus responded to the Samaritan woman's question about worship with these words: *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:23-24).

To worship “in spirit and truth” is, for Jesus, non-negotiable. What does this mean? William Hendriksen rightly explains it this way:

*“In such a setting, it would seem to us, worshiping in spirit and truth can only mean*

- a) rendering such homage to God that the entire heart enters into the act, and*
- b) doing this in full harmony with the truth of God as revealed in His Word.*

*Such worship, therefore, will not only be spiritual instead of physical, inward instead of outward, but it will also be directed to the true God as set forth in Scripture and as displayed in the work of redemption.”<sup>2</sup>*

This means worship is *not* entertainment. It is not tailored to draw a crowd. Nor is worship primarily evangelism. The purpose of worship is not to recruit unbelievers, but for believers sincerely to offer to God what is due Him, and to be instructed and fed by Him through word and sacrament. This was the practice of the New Testament church. They came together for worship and edification (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24, 25), then, in obedience to Jesus’ Great Commission, went out to evangelize the world. Worship was the “fuel” for evangelism.

If these things describe a vibrant, healthy worshiping church, then how is your church doing? Sincere worship (in spirit) is a difficult thing to evaluate. I do wonder at times what is happening in a person’s heart when we begin worship by singing “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty,” and it looks as though he is singing about his next dentist appointment. I cannot judge such a thing, but it *appears* as though there’s little praise going on. And, of course, with others the opposite might be the case. A person can *appear* to be very engaged when inside he is not. The elders can regulate worship so that it is done in truth, but they cannot make a hypocrite sincere.

Though only God can change hearts, the elders are responsible to ensure that our worship is done in truth. “Our preachers are faithfully preaching the whole counsel of God!” we say. “We have catechism sermons.” “The law is read each Lord’s Day.” As important as these things are in worship, there is more. What about your music? This ought to be a matter of real concern. The URC Church Order states in Article 39: “*The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.*” What songs are being sung from your second hymnal, or “floppy” book? Do they meet this criteria?

Too often elders are unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate the songs being sung, while being equally unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate new songs being written. The conviction seems to be: old hymns must be good (some aren’t), and anything contemporary must be bad (some aren’t). If, in your church, C. Austin Miles’ *In the Garden* has greater appeal than Stuart Townsend’s *In Christ Alone*, you have problems. The former, written in 1912, makes allusions to the scene of Mary meeting the resurrected Jesus at the empty tomb, though this can be easily missed by the singer.<sup>3</sup> Beyond that allusive imagery, the song can hardly be said to “*faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity.*” In comparison, the latter, written in 2001, does much better reflecting biblical and confessional truth.

This refusal to do the hard work of evaluation is either due to laziness, stubbornly clinging to personal taste, or a fear of man that is greater than a fear of God. Whatever the case, it is a mark of a submergent church.

In some circles, one gets the impression that the only God-sanctioned instrument for worship is the organ. Any effort to integrate other instruments to accompany the singing of God’s people is, at best, met with suspicion, and, at worst, fiercely opposed. By demanding organ only, we raise taste and tradition to the level of commandment, making what is negotiable non-negotiable.

When we will not discuss these matters, when we are unwilling biblically and confessionally to evaluate the various aspects of worship, the church has submerged into tired, worn-out traditionalism.

## The Church and one another

Scripture speaks clearly, and obviously God takes seriously, how we relate to one another in the body of Christ. Notice the following passages:

Hebrews 10:24-25: *“Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together.”*

Romans 12:9-10: *“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”*

Galatians 6:1-2: *“Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”*

Galatians 6:10: *“Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.”*

In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus instructs us how to deal in a godly way with someone who sins against us. Added to this, Peter says, “And above all things have fervent love for one another, for *“love will cover a multitude of sins.”* (1 Pet 4:8)

Our relationships with one another must be characterized with love, encouragement, building up, restoring, forgiving, warning, and admonishing. Does this describe you and your church? In some “conservative” reformed churches there appears to be an undercurrent of anger, bitterness, and possibly even hatred – a condition that will negatively affect your fellowship, your worship, and your witness.

This is contrary to the will of God for His church:

Ephesians 4:31: *“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you.”*

Hebrews 12:15: *“...looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;”*

Galatians 5:15: *“But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!”*

Where these things exist in the body of Christ, they must be dealt with. Believers need to love one another enough humbly to admonish one another. Elders need to love Christ enough to deal firmly with those who would ravage His bride. Where such ungodliness remains unchecked, people will inevitably go somewhere else while that church submerges into irrelevance.

Another issue in submergent churches is the congregation’s attitude toward the leadership of the church, toward its pastors and elders. Christ gave the church pastors and elders *“for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.”* (Ephesians 4:12) And Paul instructs elders to *“take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”*

These verses, and many others, are indictments against the all-too-pervasive distrust of leadership today. The individualistic, anti-authority mindset of the world is alive and well in the church. *“Who are **they** to equip me? I don’t need shepherding.”*

These attitudes are often focused on the minister who becomes the target. *“Pastors come and go, but the congregation remains.”* With that attitude, one has no reason to listen to the pastor. He is seen as the hired hand rather than Christ’s ambassador to the flock (2 Corinthians 5:20). That

sinful attitude allows one to ignore Paul's instruction: *"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine"* (1 Timothy 5:17).

Where these unbiblical attitudes toward office-bearers exist in Christ's church, the leaders will not be able to lead with any effectiveness, and the church will submerge into irrelevance.

## **The Church and the World**

When Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica, he began by commending them for their witness: *"And you became followers of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became examples to all in Macedonia and Achaia who believe. For from you the word of the Lord has sounded forth, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place. Your faith toward God has gone out, so that we do not need to say anything."* (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8)

As the church of Jesus Christ, our calling is to worship and make disciples. We make disciples within our church body through education and instruction (Bible studies, catechism, Sunday school, etc.). But, sadly, this seems to be where the vision of some churches ends. We are, indeed, to be diligent in training our children and be diligent in studying God's Word and growing in our knowledge and understanding. But our calling is more than this. Our vision must be greater. We are to go to the nations and make disciples: *"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'"* (Matthew 28:18-20).

A submergent church lacks such a vision. Its vision is one simply of maintenance. *"As long as we have regular worship services and good preaching; as long as Bible Studies are offered (whether or not I attend is beside the point); as long as I'm visited when I'm sick – then the church is healthy."* Such a church is completely focused on itself. It views ministry as nothing more than a "religious cushion." As C. John Miller writes:

*The local church was intended by Jesus to be a gathering of people full of faith – strong in their confidence in Him – not a gathering of religious folk who desperately need reassurance. Perhaps seeking personal comfort is not wrong in itself. But it is desperately wrong when it becomes the primary reason for the existence of the local church. When that happens, the local church is no living fellowship at all, but a retreat center where anxious people draw resources that enable them merely to cope with the pains of life. The church then becomes a religious cushion.<sup>4</sup>*

For the maintenance church, right doctrine is something to be taught, but not lived. It views our reformed doctrine defensively, as something simply to preserve and defend rather than to proclaim and promote. The vision for missions and evangelism goes no further than contributing money in the offering plate (and often without thought or prayer as to its destination).

We need to change that vision. Jesus said we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). If that is who we are, then let's *be* that. Our vision should be offensive, not defensive. We have the truth of the Almighty Creator God. We have the good news of free sovereign grace – a message this world needs desperately to hear. Our vision must be to advance that truth in order to change lives and conquer sinners for Christ. Our churches need to take responsibility for reaching the unreached rather than assuming this responsibility belongs to others.

We can begin to change our vision by raising our children to have hearts for missions and the lost. A couple from our church spent several weeks at an orphanage in Kenya this past summer. When they returned they gave a presentation to our church on a Wednesday evening. I made sure my children were present. Afterward, we picked up a photo and information about one of the boys in the orphanage named Moses. Now, at every supper, my children pray for Moses. They are acquiring a global vision for the spread of God's kingdom.

Our youth programs need to be intentionally service-oriented rather than consumer-oriented. Instead of constantly providing activities and pizza for our children, let's search and find projects for them to help others and serve. There might be an older couple in your neighborhood whose yard is covered with leaves that need to be raked and bagged. There may be an inner city organization that needs volunteers. Let us train our children to think about and care about things beyond themselves, to love their neighbors, and to gain a global vision.

Our churches should consciously consider sending out missionaries. In the URCNA there is a surplus of ministers and candidates. Jesus said the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37), yet He has supplied our small federation with an abundance of laborers. Our church polity recognizes that it is the responsibility of the churches to call those who labor in foreign missions. **But there are very few who have actually done it.** Churches need to acquire a global vision and send missionaries.

Our churches should consciously consider church planting. Some "conservative" reformed churches are actually growing numerically. Praise the Lord. Now what? The tendency is to build a bigger building, increase the annual budget, and try to maintain. The result is that the pastor and elders become burdened – too often over-burdened – with the inevitable increased needs that arise within the body so that there is no time or energy to engage the community. As a result, we are frenetically active within the "church walls" while we are invisible to the world. Our churches need to recognize when this is happening and look for biblical ways to remedy this. One such remedy is church planting.

When we are engaged in such meaningful and significant activities, the inevitable human weaknesses within the church body will be more easily overlooked. Instead of fights, anger and bitterness, our focus will be on greater things. Our vision will be concerned with the reputation of Christ and the advancement of His Kingdom.

I suspect that like so many other "movements" in church history, the emergent church movement will eventually submerge into nothing more than an interesting footnote. My fervent prayer is that our Reformed churches, who have received such a blessed inheritance, will not only be "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), but also "*a city that is set on a hill that cannot be hidden*" (Matthew 5:14).

Now that would be truly emergent.

Derrick Vander Meulen

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For critiques on Bell's "Velvet Elvis," I recommend "*Postmodern Liberalism; Repainting a Non-Christian Faith*" by Rev. Casey Freswick (Reformed Fellowship, 2005); and Rev. Dale Van Dyke's online article entitled, *Jumping off the Mark: A Review of Rob Bell's "Velvet Elvis"* <http://harvestopc.org/index.php?page=articles>.

<sup>2</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, Volume I. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953) p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Miles' account of the writing of this hymn can be found in *101 Hymn Stories* by Kenneth W. Osbeck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1982). p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, C. John. *Outgrowing the Ingrown Church*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) p. 20.