

The Emergent Church Movement I

Post-modern jelly:

Understanding the Emergent Church Movement

In the years in which many of us have been in ministry, big movements have swept across the evangelical scene, many having their roots in American evangelicalism. The signs and wonders movement of John Wimber, the Prosperity gospel movement, the seeker sensitive/purpose driven church movements, the Toronto blessing, have all drawn their crowds in their time, packing out conference centres and keeping Christian publishers in business. Today we are going to consider another movement, The Emergent Church movement (or 'conversation'. I mention those other movements first because in many ways it is a protest against different aspects of all of them. The emergent church movement is a reaction against the culture of 20th Century Christianity in America, and in that sense it is defined more by what it is not and what it does not believe, than by what it affirms with conviction. My aim this morning is to try and define the movement or conversation for you, based on the writings and blogs of some of its main spokesmen, and to explore the ways in which they have deviated from the gospel, so that we can understand what is going on in evangelicalism among those who are ready to leave it. Then this afternoon I want to speak more about our response and how the movement presents us with strong challenges as churches.

To try and do justice to the conversation is far from easy; it is like trying to nail jelly securely to the wall. So lets start with some definitions to help us chart our way.

Definitions

A great deal of the debate turns on our epistemology, our theory of knowledge, our understanding of the way we know things. Here are three rival epistemologies:

Pre-modern. This is the world view that held sway before the enlightenment. This is the view taught by Calvin in the Institutes, and is the worldview of the Bible. It starts with God. God exists, and he knows all there is to know, which means that what we know is but a tiny part of his knowledge. What we do know is known because God has revealed it to us. Wrapped up together here are such doctrinal issues as creation and providence, God's omniscience and his omnipotence, and the idea of truth at the heart of God as the God who speaks the truth. The universe is 'open' in the sense that God can intervene by miracle or prophesy and change the natural way things work. The problem for pre-modern epistemology was that it left a lot of room for magic and superstition, which multiplied in mediaeval Europe.

Modern. From the seventeenth century onwards modernism began to take hold in intellectual circles. It is generally agreed that it started with Descartes, who was trying to relate to his atheist friends. He said that we must doubt everything in order to find a firm foundation, and from there build our understanding of the world. Starting with man, he settled on his famous formula 'I think, therefore I am.' Man is the given in the argument, not God, and God may be the conclusion of the argument. We search for data, and use human reason to analyse it in order to find the truth. Certainty is desirable and attainable. The scientist has his results, the historian has his facts, the biblical scholar has his text which he can study objectively and find out by human reason what it really means. This truth is universally true in all ages. Now, of course, as the enlightenment progressed, it bred atheism and is seen from our vantage point, post-Darwin and in the age of Dawkins, as being anti-Christian. In this sense modernism has made people think of the world as 'closed', with no God to intervene in any supernatural way. Theological modernism therefore had to demythologise everything supernatural in the Bible and talk about our idea of God as the ground of our being rather than God Almighty.

Post-modern. Post-modern epistemology starts the finite 'I' rather than with God, but the 'I' of the individual is only one of many different individuals, each of them different. Each individual, and each group of individuals, has a context, a culture that shapes the way they think and the way they act. Post-modernism got going in the 1960s as a rebellion against the cold certainties of the modern era. Modernism had given us two world wars and the nuclear arms race, so should we trust it any longer? When placed under scrutiny many of the certainties of modernism 'deconstruct'. The foundations are only the product of finite human minds affected by their culture, there is no ultimate truth, and often modernism has mutated ideas into a brutal parody of what they originally were, so foundations must be treated as suspect. There are methods of finding the truth, but one method may be as good as another. We have our way of reading a text and finding its meaning in the west, but who is to say that that is better than the Arab reading or the Indian reading. So modernism and its cold certainties are to be rejected because they produce absolutism and that is used to manipulate people, to impose on another person's culture, and to do untold damage: Nazism, Communism, and Western Imperialism would all get blasted here. Where modernism became increasingly atheistic, postmodernism is open to spiritual things, especially spiritual experiences, but without a compass to lead the way. So eastern mysticism is just as valid as reading the Bible, and any claim to Christian uniqueness is not the done thing.

Along with those definitions I would want to add two more related definitions,

Fundamentalism and **Evangelicalism**. Fundamentalism was a label that attached to some evangelical Christians in the early years of the twentieth century because of the publication of a number of booklets on the 'fundamentals of the faith.' Essentially these would be

expressing views we would agree with, but over the 20th century fundamentalism became a label to distinguish the more extreme groups in the evangelical world. John Stott in his book *Evangelical Truth* makes the following comparisons:

Fundamentalists	Evangelicals
Anti-intellectual	All truth is God's truth
Excessive Biblical literalism	Text and context
Mechanical inspiration	Double authorship
Direct application	Cultural transposition
Second degree separation	True Christian unity
World renouncing	World critiquing
Racial separation	Racial equality
Evangelism only	Evangelism and social responsibility
Premillennialism	Undogmatic about the future

Why do I labour this distinction? Because much of the emergent movement reacts against the culture of fundamentalism, and swings away from it to other extremes. Understanding what they are running scared from is vital to grasping what this movement is about. Often they seem to be rebelling against the worst excesses of fundamentalism and in the process rejecting the gospel that is at the heart of evangelicalism. There is a pendulum swing in motion here, and many emergent types seem to be clearer about what they reject than about what they affirm. So lets try and define the Emergent Church Movement (!)

Is all that emerges really Emergent?

The emergent church movement is a response to changes in the culture. They say that a new culture is emerging in our post-modern world, and that new expressions of church need to emerge to relate to it. Churches need to change to adapt to the culture. Of course, the culture changed rapidly from the 1960s onwards as a post-modern culture took root. Strange then that we should be having this conversation only now, and that a new kind of church should only have emerged in the last 10-15 years.

Some people would say that the whole '**seeker sensitive**' movement of the 1980s is part of the emergent church conversation. Bill Hybels and others encouraged us to think about how we can restructure our church services to be sensitive to the needs of post-modern, unchurched people. But I don't find key elements of the protest of the emergent churches in Bill Hybels or Rick Warren, and some emergent leaders are very critical of them and their methods. Over the past ten to twenty years there have been other evangelical groups that have been thinking radically about the way they do church. For example the '**Crowded house**' churches in Sheffield with Steve Timmis and Tim Chester, have rethought church

along the lines of a network of small groups meeting in homes. But Tim Chester makes it quite clear that their churches are not part of the emergent movement, and are evangelically conservative.

Christian Associates International is another group that sets out 'To reach the unchurched through the multiplication of high-impact leaders and high-impact churches.' Many of its churches, such as **Mosaic** in Glasgow, will operate in a way that is quite alternative and would seem weird and 'hippie' to us. This is how they explain themselves on their website:

Mosaic is a wayfaring group of Christ-followers that gathers regularly and informally. We value festal and celebratory gatherings in harmony with times of quiet reflection. While we are learning to express Christian Community in ways relevant to the 21st century, we also embrace helpful ancient practices. Following the Celtic tradition, we are a grassroots community of faith that fosters relationships shaped around the life and practices of Jesus Christ as revealed in the Old & New Testaments of the Bible. We want to know Jesus intimately and pattern our lives after his.

Their website suggests they are evangelical in doctrine but radical in the way that they do church, with a Celtic mindset that is suspicious of authority structures. I don't think that makes them emergent as such.

Soon after he became Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams set up a new initiative called **Fresh Expressions**, encouraging Anglicans to find fresh expressions of church in the community. So new services are held in different environments, such as the Farmhouse Church in Kesgrave which meets in the local pub. A national website provides resources to bring together people who want to learn from each other. Because this is Anglican, it includes the best and worst of the CofE, some doctrinally evangelical, some liberal, some charismatic, some just Anglican. I don't think that makes 'Fresh Expressions' in and of itself emergent, though quite a number of emergent types will show up there.

Firming the Jelly

It seems to me that the defining characteristic of the emergent church movement is **protest**. In his book *'Becoming conversant with the emerging church'* Don Carson defines this protest at three levels. Many of the noted leaders of the movement have something to protest against in their own story. Brian McLaren and Rob Bell in the US, and Jason Clark, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann in the UK, all show a similar pattern. They grew up in that end of the evangelical world that tended towards the fundamentalist, and they have rebelled against their upbringing. They protest against the pat answers they were given, and the individualistic gospel that says 'Just pray this prayer and you will be saved' and doesn't lead to a changed Christian life. They protest against the abuses of the pastors who operate like chief executives and rule their churches like their empire. They say churches have become

power-based institutions divorced from New Testament Christianity. They also protest against modernism, with all its cold certainties. Modernism is about truth, certainty, absolutes and rational thought, and the emergent types protest against such certainty as breeding arrogance and the desire to control. In a post-modern culture we have to be much more humble, to listen to other traditions, to be prepared to admit that the church might have been getting it wrong for 2000 years, to reinvent and rethink in radically different ways to relate Jesus to a new generation. They also protest against the megachurches of the seeker-sensitive era. These churches set out to do church differently to the traditional evangelicals (e.g. Grace Baptists!), but as pragmatic evangelicals wedded to what works to reach the baby boomers, they bred a kind of Church that is stripped bare of the spiritual and is very man-centred and needs-based, and the emergent types would say that those churches lack spiritual authenticity. It is their protest against the pragmatism of the megachurches that makes some emergent types swing towards alternative kinds of worship and mystical spirituality.

Four Doctrinal protests

There are some of the protests of the Emergent movement that we might want to agree with, and perhaps we can learn from, and we will discuss those this afternoon when we try to apply this to our own churches. But I want to spend the rest of my time exploring where this mood of protest has taken the Emergent Conversation doctrinally. It is at the theological level that we start to identify the movement properly, and I believe it is only fair to label people as 'Emergent' (with a capital 'E') if they agree with the theological earthquakes promoted by people like Brian McLaren, Steve Chalke and Alan Mann. There are plenty, but I would want to isolate just four.

1. The Bible and truth

Remember that modernism loves foundations and truth claims, but post-modernism rejects foundations and says there is no absolute truth; that we are all affected by our culture and our perceptions. That means that when we come to the Bible, Emergent leaders reveal their true colours. At first sight they sound like Evangelicals. Brian McLaren says this in *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

'I believe [the Bible] is a gift from God, inspired by God, to benefit us in the most important way possible: equipping us so that we can benefit others, so that we can play our part in the ongoing mission of God.' (P177)

But in the same book he claims that the Bible is not

'a look-it-up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people...into a new way of life...And it challenges us: to be truly biblical does not mean being preoccupied with some

golden age in the ancient world and God's word to people back then. It means learning from the past to let God's story, God's will, and God's dream continue to come true in us and our children.' (P171)

Can you see his method there? He sets up a man of straw, saying that traditional evangelicals want to live in the past, which we don't. We believe that what God spoke then addresses us now, but to know what he is saying to us now we must understand the setting in which God's word was given. He also suggests that he has made this great new discovery, that the Bible has a grand narrative. Come with the Emergent churches to explore that narrative and let it give insights for our own story. But never suggest that the Bible is there to give us propositional truths and moral certainty. We need to lose the arrogance of claiming that we can know anything absolutely, because only God is omniscient. We have to admit the limits of our finite minds. And so a false antithesis is set up: God knows everything absolutely, but we know next to nothing, at best getting little glimpses of the truth. As Evangelicals we have to answer that antithesis by saying that God's omniscience meets us in our spiritual ignorance with his revealed truth of Holy Scripture. All scripture is God-breathed, and it thoroughly equips the man of God for his ministry so that he can '*preach the word*'. And that word is expressed in absolute terms by Paul: '*the word*', propositional truth on which our faith is built without error. It is God's final word. But to an Emergent type, the Bible has no timeless, absolute message.

They would say that the Holy Spirit leads the Church as a community to reinterpret the Bible for their own age. We must start with the original text of scripture and what the original authors intended it to mean, but that does not bind us. God has spoken, and he still speaks, making the words of scripture become 'The Word of God for us today.' This is the 20th Century Barthian approach to scripture. The authority is not in the God-breathed text but in the Church as it is apparently moved by the Holy Spirit to see something new or different in the text or story of scripture. Of course, if there are parts that are hard to understand or that don't suit our society, you humbly plead the limits of your understanding and say that maybe someone else will understand them better many generations from now. So McLaren's *The Secret Message of Jesus* starts like this:

For many years I have been seeking something. You might call it a spiritual quest or maybe a personal obsession. The goal of my exploration is to understand Jesus – and, in particular, his message. No, I don't think I can contain him in my little brain. It's not so much that I'm trying to get his great big message into my little head; it's more that I'm trying to get my little head fully into Jesus' message.'

There is much we can't understand, but let's try and make of it what we can! If we can understand a few bits, we will have done well. Later on he implies that whether the story is true doesn't matter. The issue is whether it gives you meaning:

In my search to understand Jesus and his message, as I peeled back the layers of theology and history, seeking to find the core of Jesus' message, I increasingly realised that at the heart of everything there is a story, a deep and grand story. Some might call it a myth, and others might call it factual history. Either way, it is a story that gave meaning and shape to life. (V26)

To put it another way, truth doesn't matter so much as meaning, finding things that are meaningful to us and our generation. What does not have meaning for us can be discarded or ignored.

2. The God we can't believe in.

For most of us in the UK, the publication of *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann was probably the first time the Emergent Church movement had shown up on the radar. Mostly it has attracted attention because of statements about the cross, but you need to read the book as a whole to understand the errors that lead to that. Fundamentally it mishandles the doctrine of God. Chalke and Mann elevate one attribute of God above all others so that it becomes the trump card. The statement 'God is love' must be the central, defining principle of our understanding of God, and all other attributes must be understood in the light of this. They explain it in these terms:

The Bible never defines God as anger, power or judgement – in fact it never defines him as anything other than love. But more than that, it never makes assertions about his anger, power or judgement independently of his love. So, though we read about his various attributes, in reality they are, as Karl Barth points out, never more than 'repetitions and amplifications of the one statement that God loves.'

The fact is, however else God may have revealed himself, and in whatever ways he interacts with the world he has created, everything is to be tempered, interpreted, understood and seen through the one primary lens of God's love. (P63)

There are some extraordinary claims there. The Bible does define God as a God of power: his name is *El Shaddai*, God Almighty, and he is known as God Almighty before he is known as the covenant Lord YHWH (Ex.6:3). Yes, he is '*slow to anger and abounding in love*', but the two go together and one does not trump the other. Passages such as Rom 1:18-32 is an entire passage dealing with the revelation of God's wrath without making any mention of his love. Heb 12:29 quotes Deut 9:19 saying '*Our God is a consuming fire.*' Chalke and Mann attack such ideas of holiness as wrong, and quote extensively Jonathan Edwards' sermon 'Sinner sin the hands of an angry God' before roundly condemning it. They suggest that Moses could not look on the face of God and live because God's face was wrung with pain. 'No one could bear to see a face wrung with such infinite pain and live.' (P59) This is a novel and somewhat absurd interpretation, flying in the face of so much of scripture that speaks openly of God's holiness and his wrath. To answer their contention that love is the defining

attribute, we would have to say that if there is one defining attribute of God, particularly in the OT, it is his aseity: he is the God who is, uncreated and underived: '*I am who I am...I am YHWH*'. This is the basis of his holiness, his otherness. All other attributes flow from that. Of course, that includes God's power and wrath as well as his love and his grace. If we allow one attribute to trump the others we are not being faithful to the whole of scripture.

3. Hell, justice and violence.

Chalke and Mann also have a problem when it comes to the question of sin. They blame Augustine for inventing the doctrine of original sin, and say that we should see humanity not as 'steeped in original sin' but as 'inherently made in God's image and so bathed in original goodness.' (P67) They say that Augustine's thinking was a grave error that has dogged the church for centuries.

Alan Mann has discussed the issue in more detail in a recent article *Understanding Sin, Recognising Shame* in the Bible Society's magazine *The Bible in Transmission* (The Chief Executive, James Catford, is top of the acknowledgements in *The Lost Message of Jesus*). His article is a great example of Emergent Church theological method. You start with a biblical concept such as sin as transgression, admit it is biblical, but then add that this is highly simplified, or just one way of approaching the subject. You then say that it doesn't fit with where people are at now, pull in some contemporary secular replacement, and without actually denying what scripture is teaching, you ignore it and replace it with your preferred option. It also helps to parody biblical doctrines so that you have a man of straw to knock down. Here is how he does it.

The fact is, both Testaments view sin as a much more complex phenomenon than the 'sin as crime' model allows for. Indeed, honest observation might conclude that most people we know (Christian or not) are not utterly depraved, evil, rebellious, hubristic individuals. They are probably a bit lost, life-questioning, soul-searching, generally good, but not quite feeling good enough, unsatisfied, 'there's something missing', kinds of people.

He takes no time to look at the different biblical words for sin, and bases his conclusions on observation of society, while cleverly setting up a straw man – no one believes in *utter* depravity. Then, further on he says that traditional understandings of atonement don't work for the chronically shamed. They need cleansing rites and ritual rather than verbal acts of confession and repentance. He does say rather patronizingly that sin, guilt and atonement still works for some people, but the implication is that the rest of the post-modern world can move on and ignore what is true for traditionalists.

Commonly among the emergent leaders, they all express problems with the doctrine of hell. Brian McLaren, in an audio talk available from his blog given at an emergent convention in 2003 called 'Power in ways we don't understand', describes a conversation with his teenage Son Brett.

'It just seems to me that the whole thing boils down to two options. Either Christianity is true and everyone I love is going to burn in hell for ever, or it's not true and life is completely meaningless. That is the choice that contemporary Christianity faces the world with. Something about that doesn't seem like the good news of Jesus. Our contemporary approach to the gospel starts with the personal, and we work really hard to move into the communal, and if we work hard enough we can get into the global. What if we reverse the polarity, and then work down to the communal and finally the individual. It involves a deconstruction and a reconstruction around different issues.'

You can find similar comments made by Rob Bell of Mars Hill Church, Grand Rapids, bewildered that anyone wants to believe in hell, and since no one would want to believe in it, then do we really need to? Again the method is clear: this is a doctrine that is repugnant to our age, so we had better find ways to get rid of it, to declare it no longer needed, or at best, just not to mention it even if some folk still quaintly believe in it.

4. 'Cosmic child abuse'

If we can be selective in our use of scripture, we play up God's love and play down his wrath, and we discount the importance of sin and doubt the reality of hell, it follows that the cross needs to be 'deconstructed and reconstructed' by the Emergent movement. The idea that God was punishing his Son in the place of others becomes unacceptable because every previous step in Emergent theology has been wrong. The most famous rejection of vicarious penal substitution was in *The Lost Message of Jesus*' and it is important to quote Steve Chalke and Alan Mann at length to counter the charge that evangelicals are quoting him selectively:

On the cross Jesus took on the ideology that violence is the ultimate solution by 'turning the other cheek' and refusing to return evil for evil, willingly absorbing its impact within his own body...Just as a lightning conductor soaks up powerful and destructive bolts of electricity, so Jesus, as he hung on that cross, soaked up all the forces of hate, rejection, pain and alienation all around him. (P179)

John's Gospel famously declares, 'God loved the people of this world so much that he gave his only Son'...How then, have we come to believe that at the cross the God of love suddenly decides to vent his anger and wrath on his own Son?

The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement 'God is love'. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil. (P182-3)

Similar views seem to be expressed by Brian McLaren in *The Secret message of Jesus.* He does not reject penal substitution outright, but his statement of the atonement is very similar. The cross was absorbing violence not venting it, and exposing the evil of the Roman empire, drawing its sting. The most we can say of the cross is that it is God coming into our world to stand with us in our suffering. The problem is that this version of things is even more difficult to accept. How can I be comforted that Jesus absorbed violence if today the world is still full of violence? It seems supremely ineffective. The cross has achieved nothing. We are still in our sins, and facing a holy God, but with no hope.

In response we have to say that we must read the whole of the biblical witness to the achievement of the cross, and understand atonement language by remembering that Bible words have Bible meanings – sacrifice, redemption, propitiation, reconciliation – and we understand them from the context in which they are used. We have to come to terms with the language of OT sacrifice being applied to Jesus and his cross, that *'the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all...he was pierced for our transgressions... he himself bore our sin in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.'* There is no escaping vicarious penal substitution if we are to be faithful to scripture.

Don Carson concludes his analysis of McLaren and Chalke by saying 'I have to say, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.' Why does this matter to us? Because they are being widely read, and they will charm large numbers of poorly taught 'gospel-lite' evangelicals into their errors. On the fringes of our churches are many Christians who will listen to what they have to say, who will go to Spring Harvest and hear them, or who will read books influenced by them. If we do not understand the movement and its errors now, and do not let that shape our preaching and our discipling of young Christians, then we have not prepared our people for the doctrinal challenges of the next 10-20 years.