

Pre-modern fossils Can we learn anything from the Emergent Church Movement?

Why did the Emergent Church movement start? It didn't come out of thin air. In many ways it was a reaction provoked by several things that were weak in the Churches of the West. The life story of Brian McLaren, Steve Chalke, Alan Mann, Rob Bell and others shows a pattern. You can see it as well in writers such as Philip Yancey, e.g. in his books *Soul Survivor*, *What's so amazing about grace*, and *The Jesus never knew* as he explains how his faith survived the Church. I am not aware that he signs up to all the doctrinal protests of the emergent gang, but he clearly sees a lot wrong with American evangelicalism. Most of the criticisms that are being made are of the more fundamentalist end of the spectrum, and yet we would all have to be honest and say that our churches have been or can be fundamentalist as much as evangelical. So I think it is right to ask some searching questions in response to the Emergent protest, and to have a hard think about the spiritual health of our churches. Here are four questions:

1. Do our churches show spiritual and moral authenticity?

Sometimes as evangelical Christians we can use our church buildings as little forts to hide in and feel safe. We come to Church on Sunday, hear the word, sing the hymns, it is all routine and very unthreatening. A couple left our church to go to another church and told me 'Jim, we had to find a church where we felt comfortable.' Have we done that with our churches? Made them a place where people don't have to think, where they are passive receptors and often the ministry washes over them and never connects with life. I notice that compared with London, here in Suffolk after a service you don't get much spiritual conversation related to the preaching, however much it cuts into our lives. Can we say that our churches are noticeably godly lives? I am sure we do with some, but there is a gap between Sunday and Monday. Why is divorce so prevalent in the churches? Do our business folk work to a different work ethic to everyone else, or are they as ruthlessly commercial and individualistic as everyone around them? How many people in our churches show evidence of wanting to downshift and live a more simple lifestyle? They may have to now, but in the good times 3 years ago, wasn't it true to say that we were caught up in materialism as much as everyone else? These are questions for discussion. Don Carson describes a conversation he had at Heathrow with one of Steve Chalke's associates who was from Northern Ireland. *'he argued that in his brethren youth in Northern Ireland, he never heard any serious calls for peace in that troubled corner of the United Kingdom. If he had to choose between the call to peace and substitutionary atonement, he'd rather go with the former.'* Carson points out that this is

a needless antithesis, and typical of emergent doublethink, and he is right to say so. But perhaps the young man had a grain of truth there: Was there something morally inauthentic about churches that preached grace in the gospel but did not address the culture of sectarian hatred. Perhaps there are issues for us as well: we are largely silent on the issues of abortion, human trafficking, child abuse, and most of all that we do little to address the culture of drug abuse.

2. Do we understand the culture?

Our culture has changed radically in the last forty years, but our churches remain largely the same. We sing hymns 200 years old, the style of the service is much as it was in Queen Victoria's day. Our preaching has its own sub-culture, with certain kinds of illustrations and jargon. But how much do we try and interact with the culture out there? I hear discussions on Postmodernism at minister's conferences in London, but not here in Suffolk, and yet London is coming to Suffolk. A year or two ago I preached at Horham on the issue of Homosexuality, and over lunch in Worlingworth we discussed the issue, and Brian Ruscoe admitted to me that his neighbours were two gay men who were interior designers from London. Johnny Depp is rumoured to be buying a house in Suffolk! How are we going to relate the gospel to such people? Are we shocked by peoples' lifestyles, or do we try and get beyond that alienation to try and understand what makes people tick? Have we woken up to the fact that people in our churches may follow a pick and mix spirituality, and they may like a bit of what we have to offer, mixed in with plenty of other things, but we make no effort to understand or critique those other things. How often does our preaching touch such issues as mysticism, secularism, or the effects of globalisation on the church in the UK? We need to equip people to deal with the issue of tolerance which is really intolerance of anyone with truth claims. We need to equip our young people to understand other world views that are being expressed in the culture, such as in film or on the internet. The emergent church movement tries to relate to the culture by giving into it, by loving it too much, slipping their biblical moorings and letting the world shape the church. We can go to the other extreme, and be a pietistic huddle. If we do, more and more people will haemorrhage from our churches into all sorts of doctrinally weak and muddled forms of evangelicalism.

3. Have we been guilty of preaching an over-simplified gospel?

In his novel *The Chamber* John Grisham, himself a Christian, tells the story of a white supremacist who blows up the office of a black lawyer killing his children. The book is a meditation on the death penalty, and about whether this man should go to 'The Chamber',

the metal box in which he will be gassed to death. As the book nears its depressing end, the prison chaplain comes to pray with the condemned man. He presents the cross, and says that if the prisoner prays the sinner's prayer and confesses his sins and asks Jesus into his life, he can be sure he is going to heaven. The prisoner replies 'Is that it? Is that all I have to do?' What the pastor says is true, but it doesn't sound convincing to this man because he bears the terrible guilt of what he has done, and the cross has been presented to him as cheap grace, which he refuses to buy. The problem is that we have compartmentalised the gospel into four simple steps: 'God – sin - Jesus – faith'. The effect of this is that Christianity is easily privatised as the secular world would want it to be, and it is only there to take away sin, which is of course the most essential facet of the gospel. But what about the Lordship of Jesus? What about a changed life? What about the impact of repentance? Some of you may have heard Tim Keller from Redeemer Presbyterian Church New York speaking on this issue. He says that we need a larger framework for the gospel in our evangelism. We need to think in terms of 'Creation – fall – redemption – re-creation', teaching that the whole universe is under the rule of God as sovereign creator. We were created in his image, but have fallen into sin and that affects every area of life, creating the alienation and status anxiety that people have because they are alienated from God. The whole Bible is a story of redemption, reaching its climax in the cross, where Jesus redeems us from our sinful past to live a new life as a new community redeemed and shaped by grace, looking forward to the new creation when the whole of life will be renewed. He says that the earlier gospel presentations were very individual: needs based, and what's in it for me, pandering to the consumer culture. The emerging church gospel is the opposite, losing the individual and saying 'Come and join the kingdom programme' and heal the world of injustice, but they have no idea of grace and justification on the basis of penal substitution and swing towards a very moralistic works righteousness, a liberal legalism. Is our gospel presentation really presenting the riches of God's grace to a world that so desperately needs to hear it?

4. Are our church structures biblical and effective?

I have been very much helped by the thinking of Tim Chester of the Crowded House churches in Sheffield. I feel a sense of failure that we have not connected with young adults in our church, that those who have come along drop out after a few months and don't connect with the culture of church.

Do we share our lives with people? 1 Thess 3:8

Do we teach people to think and interact?

Do we help people understand the culture, and if not, where do we do that in the structures of our church?

Do we dialogue with non-Christians as Jesus did? Open air preaching Vs relational evangelism – I haven't got the time for that.

