The Emerging Church

Introduction

The church, both local and universal, is always influenced by the culture in which it resides. As a result, churches in America have gone through changes that correspond to changes in the American culture. Some of the changes are innocuous and are seen as suitable by almost everyone; air conditioning and indoor plumbing come to mind. Other changes can be more controversial such as musical genre, the use of multimedia, and especially preaching styles and content. The challenge for churches is to determine what changes are acceptable and what changes compromise the message of the gospel.

A growing list of influential thinkers and pastors argue that the postmodern era in which we live mandates a significant change in how believers do church. This movement has come to be known as the *emerging church* and has acquired a considerable following as evidenced both by the number of conferences held on the subject and by the numerous Web sites devoted to the issue. The leaders of this movement have written and spoken at length regarding the necessity for change and have enumerated the types of changes that the church needs to make to survive and thrive in the years to come.

The difficulty for outsiders trying to weigh their arguments begins with trying to define the changes that have occurred in our postmodern culture. Postmodernity is horribly difficult to define. Some see it as a loss of modernity's confidence in science and technology; others see it as something much deeper. One emerging church Web site uses a definition written by an English professor at a major university who writes that "Postmodernism . . . doesn't lament the idea of fragmentation, provisionality, or incoherence, but rather celebrates that.

The world is meaningless? Let's not pretend that art can make meaning then, let's just play with nonsense."{1}

Postmodernity is primarily an argument or protest against modernist attitudes and truth claims. The emerging church has picked up this protest by rejecting traditional ideas of authority, certainty, and rationality. Instead its emphasis is on what it calls *authenticity*. Feelings and affections matter more than logic and reason, one's experience more than propositional truth claims, and inclusion more than exclusion.

Brian McLaren is a leader among those who argue that radical change must come to the church or else our culture will deem it irrelevant. He writes, "Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, [and] untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial-strength version of it is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision."{2}

In this article we will consider what is good, what is not so good, and what is dangerous to the gospel of Christ in this church reform movement known as the emerging church.

What's Good About the Emerging Church?

If the emerging church is anything, it's sensitive to the culture around it. Its leaders are thoughtfully engaged in responding to what they believe are dramatic changes in our society. These changes include the rapid increase in ethnic and religious diversity and the arrival of instant local and global communication. At the same time, Western civilization has experienced a dramatic decrease in biblical literacy.

The leadership of the emerging church argues against those who are tempted to respond to these changes by clinging to a narrowly defined church tradition. They believe that idealizing a past era and allowing nostalgia to replace the hard work of contextualizing Christianity for today's realities would be a mistake. Instead, we should discover how

best to communicate the gospel to our increasingly postmodern world. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church,* D. A. Carson writes that "this is far more commendable than a cultural conservatism that acts as if the culture with which we are most comfortable (usually the one in which we grew up) is the only culture acceptable to thinking Christians, and perhaps to God himself."{3}

As I noted earlier, a key emphasis of the emerging church is authenticity. It argues that modernity has brought the church an unnecessary and unhealthy desire for absolute theological certainty which has led to an unbalanced focus on the theological propositions held by believers rather than on living an authentic Christian life. It has also led to a lack of humility regarding the limitations of language to communicate the mysteries of God's person and rule. The drive for theological precision has left the church divided and worn out, unable to offer the world a clear picture of the kingdom of God.

The emerging church is responding to what it perceives to be a lack of authenticity in our worship and Christian life in general. They would agree with Carson who writes, "Sermons are filled with clichés. There is little intensity in confession, little joy in absolution, little delight in the gospel, little passion for the truth, little compassion for others, little humility in our evaluations, [and] little love in our dealings with others."{4}

It has also rightly stressed the importance of community. Modernity offered a picture of human nature that highlighted the heroic individual. However, the Bible begins with a relational Trinity—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and sets the New Testament believer within the community of the church including all the "one another" admonitions given by its inspired authors.

The world is watching to see this community in action. As

Stanley Grenz writes, “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”{5}

Concerns About the Emerging Church

Among the many concerns that have been written about the emerging church, we will focus primarily on just two issues. The first is its one-dimensional portrayal of the modern era, usually seen as the time period between the Enlightenment and the late 1900s, and the other is its teaching regarding what we can confidently know as believers.

Some argue that the emerging church uses an incomplete description of the modern era and its impact on the church to build its case. D. A. Carson writes that the movement’s “distortion of modernism extends, in the case of some emerging church thinkers, to a distortion of confessional Christianity under modernism.”{6} Emerging church leaders paint a picture of the church in the modern era as having given in to the rationalistic excesses of the times. By doing so, they argue, it is guilty of committing the sin of absolutism, leading to an arrogance that resulted in a cold, emotionless orthodoxy. Drained of any passion, the church in the modern era became a shadow of what it should be. Although there are times where this in fact happened, the modern era is far too complex to reduce it, or the manifestation of the church in it, to such a simple portrayal.

Without going into too many of the names and ideas involved, it must be noted that the modern period has not been a monolith of science and reason. From Rousseau to Nietzsche, many have challenged the mechanistic model presented by Enlightenment thinkers and offered a different view of reality and human nature. These ideas also impacted the church during this so called “modern” era. While many sought a more

scientific faith and utilized the new tools of science to justify Christianity, others followed the lead of Søren Kierkegaard towards a more existential Christian life.

In its attack against modernism, the emerging church has condemned confessional Christianity as too abstract and rationalistic. Carefully constructed theologies, and those who build them, are set against a faith comprised of stories, proverbs, and mystery. Often, it is presented as one or the other, no compromise being possible. But is this necessarily the case? C. S. Lewis is one example of a Christian who defended the faith in formal, rational debates, and yet understood the power of story and the imagination.

The Problem of Knowing

This leads us into the second area of concern regarding the emerging church. How much knowledge about God, the human condition and salvation can we confidently possess? This question is directly tied to our concept of revelation. Do we have revealed propositional truth in Scripture, truth that can be understood and communicated, even cross-culturally, or are we limited to the emotions and relationships that only result from a personal encounter with God?

The most important criticism of the emerging church is its application of postmodern epistemology. Epistemology is the part of philosophy that asks, “How do you know that,” or “How do we know anything at all?”. Some in the emerging church movement have endorsed an extreme version of postmodern epistemology that creates an either/or view of knowledge that can be very manipulative.

First, they set the standard for knowing something to be true unreasonably high. They claim that either we know something exhaustively, even omnisciently as God knows it, or else our partial knowledge can only be personal knowledge, more like an

opinion rather than something that can be binding on others as well. Even worse, they argue that we have no means of testing to see how close what we think is true actually corresponds with reality itself. Since few of us would claim to have God's perspective or knowledge on an issue, they argue that we must admit that everything we claim to know is only a very limited personal perspective on the truth. In addition, what little we think we know is highly impacted, some say completely constructed, by the social group we participate in as individuals.

What this viewpoint does is make it impossible for anyone to claim that he or she knows something objectively, and that this objective knowledge is true or valid for everyone everywhere. If knowledge can only be personal knowledge, then the phrase "it might be true for you, but not for me" becomes reality for everyone and for every topic.

There are other ways of thinking about what we know that sets the standard for knowing lower and yet maintains the sense of postmodern humility that is attractive to many.

One suggestion is called the "fusion of horizons" model of knowledge. Just like everyone's view of the horizon is slightly different, everyone's understanding of an event or idea is slightly different because it's filtered through a person's experiences and perspective. For example, let's consider the case of a twenty-first century biblically illiterate person trying to understand Paul's message in Romans.{7} At first, there will be little overlap in how she and Paul understand the world. But what if she read the rest of the Bible, learned Greek, attended Bible studies, and read books about the first century Roman culture? Her understanding will never be exactly the same as Paul's, but slowly she will get closer and closer to his world and develop a clearer picture of what Paul was attempting to communicate. She may choose to disagree with Paul, but she will understand him.

If this were not true, it would make little sense when Paul writes in 2 Corinthians, “For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand.” The strong postmodern view of knowledge leaves us little hope that the knowledge of the gospel can be heard and understood.

Summary

Leaders of the emerging church argue that Christianity must focus more on authenticity and relationships and less on propositional truth or it will become irrelevant and ineffective. But is the focus on relationships and authenticity necessarily antithetical to propositional truth? Other church reform movements in America have worked to renew the church’s emphasis on building community and authentic worship without sacrificing truth along the way.

The Jesus People U.S.A. attracted a wide following in the 70’s because of their emphasis on relationships, commitment to communal living, and the rejection of what they perceived to be an overly materialistic culture. Although the movement included some fringe ideas, it has become part of the evangelical mainstream over the years and given churches another example of how to impact the culture with biblical truth.

Another significant movement, also driven by the need for authenticity and community, is the Fellowship Bible church movement of the ‘80s and ‘90s. Gene Getz’s 1975 book *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* gave an argument for grounding the activities of local congregations on the functions of the early church rather than on their forms. His thesis is that while the second chapter of Acts clearly communicates the critical functions of the church, the New Testament allows considerable freedom regarding how those functions are carried out. Getz’s attempt to discover the purpose of the church through what he calls the threefold lens

of Scripture, history, and culture resulted in a movement that has spanned the globe and helped to shift the focus of local worship towards intimacy within small groups and authentic worship. At the time, his use of various audio/visual tools for teaching from the pulpit and meeting in non-traditional facilities seemed quite radical. But his ultimate goal was for believers to break away from the calcified forms of doing church and to experience the fellowship and community that can be generated when we take all of the "one-another's" of Scripture seriously.

Another important contributor to this discussion was Francis Schaeffer. His book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* asked us to discern the difference between the functions of the church that are listed in Scripture and the forms that are used in different cultural settings. He wrote, "In a rapidly changing age like ours, an age of total upheaval like ours, to make non-absolutes absolute guarantees both isolation and the death of the institutional, organized church."{8} Schaeffer had a huge impact on the baby boomer generation without sacrificing the truth claims of Scripture.

Hopefully, the emerging church will find a place next to these past reform movements as it gathers attention and matures. However, if it continues to de-emphasize sound doctrine, it will find itself to be irrelevant and ineffective.

Notes

1. Mary Klages, "Postmodernism," University of Colorado, www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/pomo.html.
2. Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (Jossey-Bass, 2001), xi.
3. D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Zondervan, 2005), 49.
4. Ibid., 50.
5. Ibid., 169.
6. Ibid., 60.

7. Ibid., 116.
8. Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* (InterVarsity Press, 1970), 67.

© 2006 Probe Ministries