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Exploring the Emerging Movement
A summary and critique

Getting our Bearings

The purpose of this paper is to briefly explore the contours of the Emerging Movement (EM), highlighting the historical features that have shaped its development, then assessing its strengths and critiquing its weaknesses. This will be a difficult task, because the movement is broad, nebulous, and hard to define – there are no “emergent” denominations; no creeds or confessions; there is not even a consensus (yet) among EM thinkers as to exactly what it means to be emergent. Instead, there is a great deal of dialogue and discussion, and while the movement may still be in very early stages, its prominence is increasing rapidly. It may be best to view it as an ongoing “conversation”¹ between like minded Christians, about how the Christian church needs to change as it enters the 21st century. The coherence of the movement revolves around a commonality of methods or values (a “philosophy of dialogue”) more than a commonality of content.

All this to say, the EM is extremely difficult to describe, let alone critique. The complexity of the subject matter creates an obvious disadvantage for a short paper like this – because of time and space constraints, I will be forced to paint with broad brush strokes. This will make it easy for unsympathetic readers to disagree with any criticisms.² To offset this, I merely acknowledge my limitations and attempt to be explicit as possible about the assumptions I am making. This is meant to be a friendly critique – I find much in the EM that resonates deeply; but there are some things that concern me gravely. This paper merely describes my own perspectives on the EM, as someone from the outside looking in.³ As such, I hope that even those who disagree with my conclusions will nevertheless find my comments useful to better understand how their vision is being heard. To me, one of the most appealing features of the EM is their openness to dialogue.

Surveying the EM landscape, Brian McLaren readily emerges as one of the major voices.⁴ Other key figures include Doug Pagitt, Tony Jones, Andrew Jones, and Dan Kimball.⁵ D.A. Carson has mounted one of the most extensive critiques of the EM, focusing largely on epistemological problems which EM seems to inherit from postmodernism.⁶ Jeffrey Jue has also weighed in, pointing out problems with the way the EM periodizes history, improperly lumping the theological fruit of the Reformation into the basket of Enlightenment modernity.⁷ The conversation, it would seem, is quickly expanding. Consequently, I intend to focus most of my comments on the dialogue between McKnight, Carson, and Jue.⁸ I have chosen McKnight because he summarizes the EM well (sympathetically, yet not

¹McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church”.

² Interestingly, the nebulous nature of the movement insulates it from more detailed critiques as well. For example, many EM types are very unhappy with D.A. Carson's assessment: when he tries to address the movement as a whole, he is accused of making sweeping generalizations; when he criticizes specific details, he is accused of focusing too explicitly on one particular emergent thinker (McLaren vs. others), or one particular aspect of EM (epistemology). See Scot McKnight, “Emergence Divergence,” where McKnight says: “I think D.A. Carson's book is really 'becoming conversant with the emergent epistemology of Brian McLaren.’” I find myself wondering whether emergent thinkers have experienced much sustained intellectual scrutiny yet.

³I am operating from a Reformed theological perspective, with a deep passion for incarnational, gospel-centric mission exemplified by people like Harvey Conn, Manny Ortiz, Jack Miller, and Tim Keller.

⁴cf. Carson, *Becoming Conversant With The Emerging Church*, 157. Carson helpfully describes a number of other less known figures: Spencer Burke, Mike Yaconelli, Todd Hunter, Chris Seay, Dave Tomlinson, David Bosch, and Leonard Sweet (pps. 14-41).

⁵McKnight, “Emergence Divergence.” It should be noted that McKnight is an excellent EM resource in his own right, blogging voraciously on the EM, as he attempts to get his own arms around the EM and interact with many of the major players. He has also responded extensively to D.A. Carson's work.

⁶cf. Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 125.

⁷Jue, “What's Emerging in the Church?”

⁸It should be noted that much of the EM content is one the web rather than in traditional print; consequently, I will be referencing online resources extensively. Emergent Village (<http://emergentvillage.com>) provides an excellent entry point to the EM; the websites of Scot McKnight's (<http://jesuscreed.org>) and Andrew Jones

uncritically). Furthermore, he has interacted extensively with Carson's critique (as both friend and former colleague). In many ways he represents the most recent stages of the debate (he is current).

So what about the EM? What are emergents for? What are they against? What are they reacting to? And how do we assess the progress they have made thus far? These are the questions we wish to answer.

What is the Emerging Movement for?

In trying to describe what the EM is actually *for*, it is tempting to begin with Emergent Village's "four common values and the practices that flow from them:"⁹

1. *Commitment to God in the Way of Jesus*
2. *Commitment to the Church in all its Forms*
3. *Commitment to God's World*
4. *Commitment to One Another*

Unfortunately, lists like this tend to be reductionistic; who would actually be against these things? McKnight's own summaries begin here, but he fleshes out specific implications much more helpfully.

First and foremost, the EM is *for a living faith in Christ*:

"The EM is deeply concerned with the 'character' of the Church for there are far too many of those who call themselves Christian and who go to church weekly (or more often) who are not following God in the way of Jesus and who see 'doing church' as 'going to a service on Sunday morning.' The Emerging Movement is a summons or an invitation for the Church to *live like followers of Jesus* in everything they say, do, and think. The Emerging Movement seeks to *model* that in its emphasis on relationships as the core of the work of God in the world today."¹⁰

In other words, faith should lead to action – "it is a movement concerned with praxis and not simply theology. If the older fashion was to define others by their *theology*, the Emerging Movement wants to be defined by its *behavior*."¹¹ Put simply, we are called to "be" as well as to "say."¹² At its best, the EM calls for the revitalization of the church through the spiritual renewal in the lives of believers.

Naturally, Christ plays an important role in this process: not only does Jesus exemplify the moral goodness and spiritual discipline which we should strive to emulate; he also models how we should relate to God (we exist for his glory) and to others (we are called to graciously welcome them into our midst, to pursue justice on their behalf). With such a Christocentric emphasis, the life and teachings of Jesus – particularly concerning the Kingdom of God – form the hermeneutical skeleton key by which we unlock all of Scripture: "The rest of the New Testament and Bible are read through the lens of the Kingdom vision of Jesus."¹³ The "way of Christ" drives our personal ethics.

(<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi>) are great resources for further exploration. (One wonders to what extent the rise of the EM has been made possible by new media like the Internet).

⁹Emergent Village, "Belong: Order."

¹⁰McKnight, "What is the Emerging Church?"

¹¹Ibid. Emphasis mine.

¹²Some EM proponents might prefer to say "we are called to 'be' *rather than to 'say'*" – for many in EM, there seems to be a decided anti-theology sentiment, often conflated with anti-modernism. To speak theologically (particularly in regard to systematics) is perceived to be modern.

¹³McKnight, "What is the Emerging Church? Pro Aplenty."

Second, the EM is *for postmoderns*. While there is much debate over the particulars, most emergents agree: postmodernism is not something to fear or reject (or to critique, if Carson's assessment of the EM is correct¹⁴); rather, postmodernism represents an inevitable culture shift, one which creates opportunity for the Gospel. Thus it is something to be embraced, because God is the one who is behind this climate change. The EM desires to be a destination resort for postmoderns seeking faith, a place where they can pull up a chair and feel at home. McKnight offers an important clarification at this point: the EM is not about radical or “hard” postmodernism – it does not deny the reality of “truth” or “metanarrative.” Rather, it merely recognizes our inability to “**prove** meta-narratives *on rational, independent, objective grounds*. In other words, it contends that the only way meta-narratives can finally be persuasive is if one believes in the meta-narrative itself. Faith is required for the meta-narrative to be truthful.”¹⁵

Not surprisingly, emergents often share the postmodern preference for narrative and story (creative, artistic), over and against modernity's taste for proposition and systematic (descriptive, dogmatic). In the EM, we also find a renewed appreciation for beauty, aesthetics, sensory experience, combined with a chastened confidence in one's own intellect. Many would be reluctant to claim full knowledge of truth; they would rather hear what others think, than see themselves as having all the “right” answers.

Third, the EM is *for the world and one another*. Emergents recognize that Jesus' gospel message was not merely intended to transform the spiritual dimension of our lives; real faith should change the world in which we live. If this is God's kingdom, should it not reflect the things that God values – his justice, beauty, and goodness? Consequently, the EM strives to live redemptively in our culture; the gospel must be both holistic and activist: “it is for the whole person (heart, soul, mind, and strength), and for the whole society (politics, economy, culture, environment), and for the whole world.”¹⁶

For emergents, Christianity is meant to be communal – not cloistered from the world, but living as an open community right in the midst of this world. As Christians, we are called not only to love one another well (eg. those who are also “in the camp”), but we should also love those who are still outsiders (eg. unbelievers around us). This has practical implications for the way communities of faith relate to those around them – unbelievers should be able to “belong before they believe.”¹⁷ In other words, rather than requiring people to come to faith before they can participate in the Christian community, EM churches seek to be inclusive, to invite unbelievers into their midst, as they are. This plays out in a number of ways: public meetings in secular settings, large numbers of unbelievers participating in worship (and sometimes even partaking of the sacraments¹⁸). The Christian community is real and distinct, but “the walls between the 'church' community and the 'local' community are permeable.”¹⁹

Fourth, the EM is *for church and mission*. This is closely tied to the previous point. Emergents recognize that the church plays a key role in the biblical story – when Jesus talks about Kingdom of God, the church is the destination which he has in view; the creation and formation of this new community is what the book of Acts is all about. Consequently, emergents maintain a high view of the church – both

¹⁴cf. Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 71, for a representative example: “Once again, we find broad-brushed condemnation of modernism, and the solution is postmodernism.”

¹⁵McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Postmodernity.”

¹⁶McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Pro Aplenty.”

¹⁷cf. Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 13, 146. This is a recurring catch phrase in the EM; It will be interesting to see if it becomes a litmus test. For a more detailed critique on this concept, see my review of Rick Richardson's *Evangelism Outside the Box* at <http://seelifedifferently.blogspot.com/2005/04/evangelism-outside-box.html>.

¹⁸Ibid., 16-17, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absoluteness to Authentic*, 30-31.

¹⁹McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Pro Aplenty.”

local and universal. Christians need to be meaningfully involved in their local churches; they should also be ecumenically charitable, exhibiting a deep respect for churches in other traditions. This valuing of church is inextricably linked to mission – churches are not meant to social clubs or fitness centers, which exist simply to meet the needs and desires of their members; on the contrary, the church is a place where the drama of the gospel is to be “performed as well as proclaimed.”²⁰ The church is a witness to the world of what God is doing redemptively in the world.

Fifth and finally, the EM is *for unity through authentic dialogue*. A number of features lie embedded in this final statement. Emergents prize authenticity; they value being able to say what they think, to express their doubts and struggles without being condemned.²¹ Furthermore, they deeply desire to encourage others, and believe they can actually learn from them (even unbelievers!). Consequently, they generally exhibit a deep desire to listen respectfully, to respond carefully and graciously. In many cases, the EM values dialogue and relationship more than they value “being right” on a given subject.

This is extremely important, because it means that the EM finds its unity not in the content of their beliefs (particular doctrines), but rather in their commitment to Jesus (as the source of their praxis) and to one another (in dialogue and encouragement). In short, unity is based on a conversation about common interests, rather than any agreement on the particulars. This to me is one of the most distinctive features of the EM; it aims to establish unity through courteous conversation, to head off division by refusing to get bogged down in dogmatic details. Of course, it remains to be seen whether this approach can actually hold the movement together as it picks up momentum.

What is the Emerging Movement against?

We have seen some of the things the EM is *for*. But movements never arise in a vacuum – they always position themselves in response to other systems, beliefs, and practices. Consequently, we need to look closer: what is the EM *against*? Carson sees the movement developing along three fundamental lines of protest: 1) protest against traditional evangelicalism, 2) protest against modernism, and (in some quarters) 3) protest against the seeker friendly churches of the 90s.²² Once again, McKnight fleshes this out with a more detailed summary. The EM:

1. protests *too much tom-fakery* in traditional churches
2. *denounces the divisions* in the Church
3. sees *cock-sure certainty as a cancer*
4. refuses to separate *action from articulation*
5. wants *individualism absorbed into incorporation*
6. [its] *mindset is against marketing the gospel*
7. *despises the idea that the Church is what takes place on Sunday Morning*
8. *rejects the hierarchy and pyramid structure* of many churches
9. [says] *the social gospel cannot be separated from the spiritual gospel*
10. *wants to be Worldly ... in the Kingdom sense*²³

²⁰Ibid.

²¹I am impressed with their willingness to speak authentically about themselves, their own warts and imperfections; I wonder, however, if they are willing to speak equally authentically about about God, not just in regards to his love and mercy, but also in regards to his justice and wrath. My point here is that whenever we speak of “sin” (or fail to do so), we are simultaneously saying something about God. Some emergents seem reluctant to define sin or speak out against it; is this being authentic to the way God describes himself? Paul Vander Klay picks up on this very issue in “More on Emergent Stuff” as he comments on Jue's critique, (footnote 49): “As a pastor, McLaren in his heart is caught on the horns of what many pastors really wrestle with. What does the existence of hell say about God's character? McLaren sees the choices ... and wants a third option.”

²²Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 15-41.

²³McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Protest.”

This list should be fairly intelligible: the EM is tired of pious religiosity and elder-brother righteousness. It wants to ask tough questions and speak openly about spiritual failings. It despises denominationalism. It emphasizes the frailty of the human condition, the limitations of our knowledge, in contrast to past expressions which seem overconfident in having arrived at truth. It feels that our theological formulations have too often been disconnected from the way we actually live. It “wants to form communities of faith, not [just] individual Christians.”²⁴ It is against the idea of a simplistic gospel that can be nicely summarized as “Four Spiritual Laws.” It has seen too many “believers” whose lives are indistinguishable from unbelievers once they leave the church premises on Sundays. It is tired of authority structures and power plays within the church. It is appalled by versions of the Christian faith which see social activism as optional (or even evil). It rejects the fortress mentality and calls on Christians to boldly move back into the public square, not as visitors, but to settle down and live as lights in the midst of darkness.

Gibbs and Bolger summarize what the EM is all about by saying this:

“Emerging Churches are those

1. who take the life of Jesus as a model way to live, and
2. who transform the secular realm,
3. as they live in highly communal lives.

Because of these three activities, emerging churches

1. welcome those who are outside,
2. share generously,
3. participate,
4. create,
5. lead without control, and
6. function together in spiritual activities.

Boiling it down to once sentence: *Emerging Churches are communities who practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.*²⁵

Seen in this light, there is much that is attractive about the EM – I am for many of the things they are for, I am against many of the things they are against. Even more, I appreciate and seek to embrace their commitment to authentic dialogue. There is indeed much here that resonates deeply.

What are they reacting to?

At this point, we need to look deeper, seeking to understand the deeper structures, attitudes, and “-isms” to which the EM is reacting. Only by understanding the EM at this level will we be able to identify some of the reefs that lurks beneath these attractive waters. These categories are somewhat subjective (and certainly not exhaustive), but they should be representative. At the highest level, I see the EM reacting against two major movements: the first cultural/philosophical (modernism), the second religious (evangelicalism).

These two categories are closely connected. In many cases, the reason the EM has rejected the evangelical expression of the church is because they feel that evangelicalism has imbibed too heavily in

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵McKnight, “An Emerging Day” (emphasis mine) quoting an forthcoming book by Gibbs and Bolger, entitled *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. McKnight sees this definition as placing the EM squarely in the Anabaptist tradition.

modernity; if you reject the modern worldview, then it only makes sense (if you desire to be both authentic and consistent) that you will also reject the religious systems which are built upon it.²⁶ The EM is one attempt to salvage the Christian faith for postmoderns who still want to believe in Jesus.

Interestingly, the EM is almost exclusively an evangelical movement.²⁷ Carson notes that “Many of them come from conservative, traditional, evangelical churches, sometimes with a fundamentalist streak.”²⁸ This makes sense, when we consider that the hallmarks of twentieth century evangelicalism rest in its commitment to a rigid understanding of inerrancy, and its insistence on a simple gospel that demands an immediate response.²⁹

The rise of American postmodernity in the last part of the twentieth century has clearly undermined the first commitment, as archaeological discoveries and text critical developments have revealed that the history of the biblical texts is much more complicated than we might have first believed; if premoderns focused on the divine hand in Scripture, moderns found there the human element there as well, and postmoderns have recognized that the author's own perspective inevitably colors and shapes his message. Inerrancy as formulated and required by evangelicalism (and fundamentalism before that) seems out of step with the character of Scripture itself; attempting to locate inerrancy in the original autographs seems like something of an intellectual dodge – after all, we don't have the originals, and the closer we get to the originals the more evidence we discover for a complex textual history.³⁰ Worse, many who take such a position often seem to equate their interpretation of those texts to be equally inerrant. An evangelical understanding of rigid inerrancy is a hard sell these days.

Evangelicalism's second commitment – to a simple gospel – has likewise been undermined, not so much by the culture, but rather by the church being influenced by the culture. Far too often, those who profess belief in this “simple gospel” fail to live any differently than those who do not believe. American evangelicals are notorious for their compartmentalism (where one's religious commitments and one's daily life run on parallel tracks, and “ne'er the twain shall meet”). This dichotomy is clearly revealed by demographic research concerning sexuality, divorce, spending, etc. – in terms of behavior, evangelicals are virtually indistinguishable from their unbelieving neighbors.

Emergent pastor Spencer Burke puts it like this: “I've come to realize that my discontent was never with Mariners as a church, but contemporary Christianity as an institution.”³¹ Burke goes on to describe his discontent with evangelicalism using three basic categories. First, he rejects the atmosphere

²⁶I am not saying evangelical Christianity is in fact dependent on modernity here (although in many cases I agree with the emergent critiques); rather, I am simply noting that this is not an altogether unreasonable conclusion if you accept the basic premise.

²⁷McKnight, “Generous (Evangelical?) Orthodoxy: Preamble.”

²⁸Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 14.

²⁹Jue, class notes from “Church in the Modern Age”, 11/10/2005.

³⁰For example, scholars have long noticed that LXX version of Jeremiah was significantly different than the Hebrew version of the Masoretic Text. The traditional explanation has been that the LXX was corrupt; however, the version of Jeremiah discovered at Qumran matches the LXX, strongly suggesting the presence of an alternate textual tradition for Jeremiah. Similarly, recent work in Psalms studies suggest that the psalter itself has undergone a textual development over time, not only in terms of arrangement, but also with some redactional insertions and editing. The Deuteronomic history shows further evidence of a redactional hand. Furthermore, the way the New Testament itself appropriates the Old Testament (often giving OT passages an eschatological interpretation that seems to be missing in the original historical-critical first reading) seems to suggest a developing history of interpretation. None of these issues prove inerrancy is wrong, but they do suggest that the traditional evangelical understanding of inerrancy fails to fully explain the evidence. For further reading on this topic, see Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*.

³¹Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 15, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence*, 29.

of “spiritual McCarthyism,”³² where any disagreement with those in the church power structure is met with forceful opposition and intolerance: the only options are to submit or leave. Those who stay often find their identity in the fact that they agree with the leaders, and in the affirmation that often accompanies that. Burke tells us clearly how he sees this: “Spiritual McCarthyism is about idolatry – about finding righteousness in something other than Christ. Every time I put on a mask for the sake of my reputation or career, I’m guilty of a sin far more serious than not believing whatever I’m supposed to believe.”³³ Second, Burke reacts against an increasing “spiritual isolationism”³⁴ in the church – abandoning the messiness of the cities to move to the upper-middle class sterility of the suburbs: clean, neat, tidy on the outside, but behind the facade there is spiritual and relational deadness. Third, he finds he can no longer stomach “spiritual Darwinism,”³⁵ the trend in which the church adopts a corporate mentality: bigger is better, grow or die, success is measured by having more in your flock than your fellow pastors do.

Jeffrey Jue looks at Burke’s protest as a reaction against the fundamentalism and dispensationalism inherent within evangelicalism.³⁶ EM types might be more apt to see themselves as rejecting incipient ‘legalism’ to embrace a more tolerant inclusivism. We can probably think of other less technical descriptions: emergents are often unhappy with unchecked authoritarianism, rampant individualism and consumerism, the unabashed corporatization and secularization of the church. Most people acknowledge that these characteristics are becoming increasingly common in the evangelical church, especially in churches that have embraced the “church growth” model of ministry. Wikipedia picks up on this theme, suggesting that “the Emerging Church may be seen both as a reaction to and a continuation of the Saddleback/Willow Creek movement which achieved great success in the 1990s using a ‘seeker-friendly’ approach.”³⁷ Many emergents have experienced the disconnects firsthand, and are finally getting to the point where they no longer feel honest in a typical evangelical setting. It is worth noting that many of these criticisms correspond remarkably well to how non-Christians view the church; Carson points out that whether we agree with the EM or not, at the very least we should acknowledge that they read the culture well.³⁸

Of course, the EM is also reacting against modernism. The nature of this reaction, however, is slightly different. The heart of postmodernism lies in the rejection of enlightenment certainty. For McKnight, “this means the Emerging Movement’s embrace of a ‘proper confidence’ or a ‘chastened epistemology’ is the embrace of our human condition, of our need for humility in what we say ... only by trusting in God, and living in the way of Jesus, and by living out as a community of faith, do we strike home in truth.”³⁹ This sounds commendable; the EM (along with many postmoderns) seems to be rejecting the modern intellectual arrogance that has often permeated both the academy and the church.

Some in the EM go further, however, rejecting any claims that we can know absolute truth: the quest for certainty is viewed as a fruit of the Enlightenment; absolutism is blamed for nearly every evil in the past 300 years.⁴⁰ Carson notes, however, that while postmodernism originated as a scholarly

³²Ibid., 16, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence*, 29.

³³Ibid., 17, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence*, 31.

³⁴Ibid., 17, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence*, 32.

³⁵Ibid., 18, quoting Spencer Burke from Mike Yaconelli, ed., *Stories of Emergence*, 34.

³⁶Jue, “What’s Emerging in the Church?”

³⁷Wikipedia, “Emerging Church”.

³⁸Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 45.

³⁹McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church? Postmodernity.”

⁴⁰Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 71. To be clear, this criticism does not apply to all; Carson is speaking most specifically about McLaren here. Many EM types stress that theirs is a “soft” postmodernism. At the very least, however, they should acknowledge that the EM does not by definition preclude a much “harder” postmodernism. Some (like McLaren), seem particularly uncomfortable making strong claims to truth, especially in places where

movement in the European intellectual circles,⁴¹ many of those embracing postmodernism here in America (particularly in the EM), display a rather shallow intellectual understanding of the movement: “The one 'ism' about which some appear to find it almost impossible to say anything positive, especially in the publications of emerging leaders, is modernism (as they understand it).”⁴² Similarly, “Of all the Christian writers who explore postmodernism, none is quite so modernist – so absolutist – as the emerging church leaders in their defense of postmodern approaches.”⁴³ In the words of one observer: “The Emerging Church is obsessed with itself.”⁴⁴

Carson's point is that many emergents seem to be postmodern more from convenience than from intellectual conviction – he grounds this charge squarely in their fundamentalist roots, which have often been decidedly anti-intellectual. I believe he may have a point here. For all its flaws, modernity is intellectually rigorous – it requires a tremendous amount of work to understand western philosophy and theology; once we become convinced that truth is unattainable, how many of us are truly willing to “pay our dues” to understand and evaluate the products of modern thinking? Perhaps this is why postmoderns in general seem intellectually sloppy at times – not only with their handling of epistemology⁴⁵ and history,⁴⁶ but also with their understanding of scripture and theology.⁴⁷ At times the EM (and American postmodernism, for that matter) feels like just another savvy ad campaign, counter-cultural pop theology for desensitized moderns who are looking for the next big thing.

Possible Lines of Critique

I want to be clear at this point. There is much that is positive about the EM, and I have tried to describe the movement in way which emergents themselves will affirm. Furthermore, I believe that many of their explicit criticisms of modernity and evangelicalism are not only insightful and valid, they are also pertinent to our Reformed communities of faith. I believe we in the Reformed traditions are far more modern than we often realize; the EM can provide much needed correctives here, if we are willing to dialogue with them. That said, space and time constraints force me to focus my comments at this point to some problems that I see in the EM.⁴⁸ We have already hinted at some potential problems.

Carson offers a first line of critique by focusing on the EM's epistemology (we have touched on this above). In a nutshell, he feels the EM has not been critical enough of itself in its embrace of postmodernism. This may not be that surprising if Carson is correct in his assessment: “A good deal of the discussion of this book could be recast as a debate between the claims of truth and the claims of

Scripture speaks harshly about things (eg. hell, homosexuality) that are not popular in contemporary culture. Postmoderns find the idea of a loving Jesus very attractive; they are much less enthusiastic about a Jesus who will judge. The EM needs to clarify: is it bold enough to make truth claims which unbelieving postmodernists reject outright?

⁴¹Ibid., 81.

⁴²Ibid., 68.

⁴³Ibid., 85.

⁴⁴Omelianchuk, “Emerging Church: Who Cares?”

⁴⁵cf. *ibid.*, 104-116 for Carson's critique of postmodern epistemology.

⁴⁶In “What's Emerging in the Church?” Jue states, “What McLaren and other Emergent leaders and scholars have failed to do is carefully examine the historical sources as well as the writings of other historians who have contested the neo-orthodox historiography.” In other words, they haven't done their homework.

⁴⁷cf. *ibid.*, 180, where Carson summarizes his critique of McLaren's *Generous Orthodoxy*: “Every chapter in this book succumbs to the same elementary analysis. Every chapter has some useful insights, and every chapter overstates arguments, distorts history, attaches excessively negative terms to all the things with which McLaren disagrees ... and almost never engages the Scriptures except occasionally in prooftexting ways.” This last comment cuts to the chase: the EM exhibits little hermeneutical self-awareness.

⁴⁸I do intend to address how I think the EM critiques of evangelicalism and modernity apply to the Reformed camp, as well as suggest a way for mutual progress, but it will have to wait until Christmas break.

experience.”⁴⁹ McKnight himself seems to recognize the weight of this concern: “Is the overwhelming biblical witness to Truth something that is embraced by the Emergent Movement?”⁵⁰ If the EM wishes to be taken seriously by those who are not yet fully committed to postmodernism, it must do a better job of critiquing that postmodernism and demonstrate that it does take seriously the truth claims of Scripture; it must show us how it discerns what is “true.”

Jue opens up a second line of critique, focusing on the way the EM has periodized history. In a nutshell, he argues that they tend to see “scholasticism [as] a form of theological rationalism perverted by Aristotelian philosophy.”⁵¹ In other words, emergents view most Reformed systematic understandings of Scripture as a product of the same Enlightenment quest for certainty which postmodernism has already rejected. Scholasticism, counters Jue, describes the method, not the content, of their theology – the content of the Reformation (including its concern for truth) actually bears a deep continuity with Medieval (and even pre-Modern) thinking. There is a reason why the early church of Acts was called “*The Way*” (cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9,23; etc.) – they were *known* for their very strong truth claims about Christ, about what it meant to follow him (cf. Mk 8:34), and what it meant to reject him (cf. Acts 4:12). Furthermore, the EM often misunderstands how Reformers viewed reason: it is a servant of faith, not that which establishes or proves faith.⁵² The Reformation is not in conflict with Augustine, who says “I believe in order that I may understand.” I think both Jue and Carson are right in this regard: the EM needs to evince a more critical reading of history.

Jue goes on to suggest that the EM could simply shift the starting date of the modern age forward and narrow the intellectual roots to the early Enlightenment philosophers.⁵³ This, he asserts, would allow them to retain their basic critiques of modernism without condemning much that is good (according to us) in Reformation theology. While this may sound good at first blush, I believe it is shallow, failing to appreciate fully the weight of the emergent critique of modernity.

First, Jue seems to draw the same type of hard line that he criticizes EM types for drawing – he draws it slightly later, to be sure, but it is still a hard line nonetheless. If the Reformers share a deep continuity with those who preceded them, might we not also expect lines of continuity with those who followed after them? For example, many of the Enlightenment thinkers who embraced rationalism (who Jue willingly labels “modernists”) were themselves raised on the Reformed faith that Jue seeks to retain; while some of them did reject the faith outright, many would have seen themselves in continuity with those who came before, as those seeking to preserve the orthodoxy by contextualizing it afresh. It seems to me that if the EM is guilty of oversimplification in their periodization, we do not really solve that problem simply by adjusting the starting dates of modernity to neatly exclude our pet period. If we find in the Reformation a continuity with what came earlier, we should also acknowledge the continuities with what came after where they exist. We cannot neatly periodize in either direction.

⁴⁹Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 218.

⁵⁰McKnight, “DA Carson and the Emergent Movement, Part 7.”

⁵¹Jue, “What’s Emerging in the Church?”

⁵²cf. Turretin, *Institutes of Eclentic Theology, vol. I*, 24, where Turretin clearly denies a normative role for reason: “The question is whether it [reason] is the first principle from which the doctrines of faith are proved; or the foundation upon which they are built, so that we must hold to be false in things of faith what the natural light or human reason cannot comprehend. *This we deny.*” (emphasis mine).

In the same breath, Turretin points out that we also can undervalue reason: “In this controversy, there is an error on both extremes. They err in excess who attribute to reason in matters of faith more than its due (as the Socinians). The err in defect who underrate it (as the Anabaptists, Lutherans, and papists).” This is particularly interesting in light of McKnight’s conclusion that the EM is an anabaptistic movement.

⁵³Jue, “What’s Emerging in the Church?”

Second, Jue's proposal assumes that EM types would actually *like* to retain Reformed theological expressions which our tradition holds dear. I suspect most within the EM have little taste for this, because many in our Reformed heritage actually *do* seem to overemphasize the certainty to be had through reason. The same Turretin who cautioned us to properly value reason, is also quite certain that the existence of God can be “irrefutably demonstrated against the atheists”⁵⁴ (in nine pages, no less!), and that the world was created in Autumn, rather than in the Spring.⁵⁵ These are precisely the type of conclusions that make the EM uncomfortable with systematic theology. We see too little appreciation for human limitations in regard to the “good and necessary consequences” which are used to construct the system – while Turretin may not be a “modernist” according to Jue's definition, he nevertheless seems just as confident of his “logical inferences” as he is sure of a substitutionary atonement. There is no sense of proportionality, and this strikes postmodern thinkers as both arrogant and wrongheaded. Similarly, we also need to recognize that many in the Reformed traditions have been just as guilty as dispensational evangelicals of placing great confidence in our “systems” while our personal experience of practical piety has been weak or nonexistent. The EM is firmly against both of these (intellectual arrogance, and faith without deeds), and we in the Reformed circles need to acknowledge the weight of their critiques. Too often we have been overconfident in our conclusions, under-interested in matters of social justice and personal spirituality. We have “taught as doctrines the laws of men” (Mt 15:9).

As a third line of critique, I believe the EM needs to think critically about its hermeneutic, about how it reads Scripture. Yes, emergents exhibit a greater interest in narrative and story, but they actually approach the text in a manner that reveals deep continuity with their dispensational roots. It seems to me they still deal with “the story” at the level of individual pericopes or historical books. For all their claims of “soft” postmodernism, there is still not much “meta” in their narratives. Practically speaking, this means they have merely shifted their focus from more doctrinal passages (Paul) to more micro-narrative passages (Gospels, Acts). But they seem to demonstrate little awareness of a biblical theological / redemptive-historical approach which finds its meta-narrative coherence in all of Scripture. They do not seem to have discovered the Grand Story into which all the individual pieces of Scripture fit. They love “the Way of Jesus” but do not seem to understand how it represents a rich culmination and fulfillment of what comes before (all the way back to the Garden); they desire to live out “the Kingdom of God” but do not seem to appreciate how Paul, the Epistles, and Revelation explicate that kingdom, fleshing out what it looks like in the life of the church. Furthermore, they demonstrate a remarkable insensitivity for the Reformation principle of “Scripture interpreting Scripture.” As an example of this, consider how McKnight (in good emergent fashion) ponders the reality of boundaries in the church:

There never has been a time, to my knowledge, when the Church has been really good at being genuinely boundaryless and borderless and unprejudiced. The mandate of the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28 — that in Christ there should be neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, and neither male nor female — has never really become customary for the Church. ...

...it is a fact that in most parts of the world and throughout most of Church history, the Church has operated with segregation at each of these levels that the Apostle Paul raised as critical: ethnic, socio-economic, and sexual. Suburban churches and urban churches rarely achieve demographic sameness when it comes to comparing society and local community of faith.

The emerging movement is no exception...⁵⁶

⁵⁴Turretin, *Institutes of Eclentic Theology*, vol. 1, 169-177.

⁵⁵Ibid., 442.

⁵⁶McKnight, “An Emerging Challenge.”

McKnight then turns to the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:31-36 (“as you did/did not do it to the least of these, so you did/did not do it to me”) and asks this: “The question for the Emerging Movement is this, and it is the question the Lord will someday ask it and each of us: How did you respond to the least of these?”⁵⁷ McKnight's analysis strikes me as typical of emergent thinkers: he takes seriously the teachings of Jesus; he looks carefully at the practices of the church; he observes that churches often create boundaries and barriers; and he even finds a passage which suggests the church should in fact be boundaryless. This is commendable. But what McKnight has failed to do (at least in this particular instance) is to consider the teachings of Scripture as a whole. He has taken Galatians 3:28 as his hermeneutical control; he does not seem to consider that elsewhere Paul specifically tells us *to* enact boundaries – he draws distinctions between men and women, between teachers and non-teachers; he charges us to guard doctrine; he actually calls for people to be put out of fellowship in places.

The point here is not about quibble over McKnight's conclusion – rather, I believe this example illustrates how the EM's emphasis on praxis over systematics inevitably leads them to draw conclusions without first asking the hermeneutical questions about how all the passages fit together, about how we make sense of the whole. In fairness, McKnight believes I overstate my case here, pointing out that he has sufficiently defined his own hermeneutic elsewhere. He acknowledges, however, that the EM is often fuzzy in this regard: “I can't say I know the EM hermeneutic – but I would hazard to say that the Bible is processed through Jesus and the way of Jesus.”⁵⁸ My point is simply that the EM has not shown how it is possible to draw any conclusions at all (in regard to praxis) without first engaging in some form of systematic thinking (either implicitly or explicitly). Everyone who draws conclusions from the biblical story necessarily has a hermeneutic (a method for determining how the parts fit together in the whole). Unfortunately, emergents seem quite content to leave their hermeneutic unexpressed and thus unexamined. The EM needs to be more critical of itself in this area.

This leads to a fourth line of critique which is similar. The EM tends to frown on systematic or propositional expressions of truth. In many ways, the EM reminds me of evangelicals who embraced the phrase “no creed but Christ.” This is one of those phrases that sounds meaty at first blush, but ultimately fails to carry water. The problem, of course, is that everyone has a creed – everyone has a core content which they believe to be true (and essential). The only real question is whether they will express those credal commitments explicitly or not, and how they will deal with the inevitable disagreements that arise when their core beliefs finally surface. Often, the only option for the dissenter is “Agree or leave.” This was the case in evangelical churches; I see no reason why it will not also be the case in EM churches.

Fifth and finally (and this is more of a question than a critique), I wonder if the EM has fully considered the implications of locating their identity in a philosophy of relationship rather than in a particular content. It seems to me that there are other examples of groups whose identity is cultural rather than credal – Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, and Jews come to mind. In many cases, these groups have struggled to maintain the kind of personal, experiential spirituality which the EM seems to desire. How will the EM keep itself from drifting into secular liberalism? How will the EM avoid accommodationism?

In conclusion, then, we have seen much of what the EM is for, what they are against, and what forces they are reacting to. I wish to conclude by reaffirming that there is much in this movement which I find very appealing; I think we in the Reformed movement need to listen to and appreciate their critiques. At the same time, I think emergent types need to do a better job of critiquing their own movement. At its best, the EM is refreshingly honest; at its worst, they sometimes sound a little too postmodern, a little too

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Ibid. McKnight sees himself in distinction from the EM here, and might well disagree with the conclusion I am drawing in this paragraph (at least as it applies to him). I appreciate his efforts to clarify his position; I still feel, however, that this particular article illustrates the broader EM tendency – that is where my real quarrel lies.

uncertain of anything. At times, emergents sound like they believe more than they are willing to say, and when that happens the result is very inauthentic. At some point (if it keeps growing), the EM is going to have to get more specific about how to determine who is in and who is out, and I hope this process will force them to think more critically about their epistemological and hermeneutical commitments. In the meantime, we in the Reformed community need to be more willing to get involved in the conversation. I believe we have much to contribute, and we just may learn something while we are at it.

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