

School of Divinity

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P01998. – Supervised Research Essay 1

Looking beyond the labels

When reading of the Emerging Church movement (or conversation, as is often preferred), certain descriptions appear with regularity. These generally begin with ‘post’. Emerging Church can often be described as postmodern, post-evangelical¹, postdenominational², post-Protestant³, post-Christendom or even post-colonial⁴. At the heart of the matter, it seems, is a desire to distance expressions of Emerging Church from “inherited” expressions of church⁵. For example, Stuart Murray claims that “Christendom made Christianity conventional, predictable, uninspiring and dull. Given the character of its founder, this was some achievement!”⁶ At the heart of *this* is the criticism that traditional churches have failed to keep pace with changes in culture and society and represent an outmoded and irrelevant way of expressing faith matters. Emerging Church, by contrast, is considered to be culturally sensitive and contextually relevant.

Such an approach to describing Emerging Church by what it isn’t is fraught with problems, not least because expressions of Emerging Church cannot sever all ties with its past. To do so would leave it open to accusations of setting itself beyond the apostolic tradition of Church. Furthermore, a number of the ‘isn’t’ descriptions are geographically or politically contextualised. Or they are simply placed within a prevailing dominant context which is not necessarily universal in scope. In other words, any description of what Emerging Church is not is ultimately unsatisfactory. Any ‘post’ label is merely a starting point; the trigger for a reaction against whatever is felt to be

¹ Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical* (London: Triangle, 1995).

² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Communities in Postmodern Cultures* (SPCK Publishing, 2006), 37.

³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 38.

⁴ Brian D. McLaren, “Church Emerging,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2007).

⁵ Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Authentic Media, 2004), 253. Murray prefers the description ‘inherited’ as he considers the conventional labels of ‘traditional’ or ‘mainstream’ are both loaded terms.

⁶ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 276-7.

‘lacking’ in the inherited church from which a new expression seeks to ‘emerge’. The purpose, then, of this essay is not to assess all of these ‘post’ labels, but to fix on two in particular as they seem to me to present the broadest critique of inherited church and represent the broadest sense of current society and culture, at least in the developed western world. This essay will pick up the labels ‘postmodern’ and ‘post-Christendom’ and explore what is at the heart and purpose of Emerging Church as it engages with them. It should be noted that the essay does not aim to prove the validity and applicability of such labels for contemporary western society and takes them as read. There is no shortage of reading material on these issues. Also, for the sake of simplicity, the phrase ‘Emerging Church’ will be used as an all-inclusive, generic term to describe both the general movement (or ‘conversation’) and particular expressions of it.

The first area to be tackled is that of postmodernism as this seems to be one of the most consistent themes when anything is read about the Emerging Church. It appears to be a consistent thread because it is the primary area in which proponents of Emerging Church see the greatest failures of inherited church. Once again, it needs to be made clear that this essay is not a comprehensive survey of the characteristics and criticisms of postmodernism, but rather picks up the main criticisms raised by Emerging Church in this area.

In their survey of Emerging Churches⁷, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger attempt to distil the ‘marks’ of Emerging Church from all that they criticise of inherited church and all that they seek to do and be within the particular expressions of Emerging Church. Rather usefully then, the main criticisms are well documented by them. The seeds of Emerging Church first began sprouting in the 1990s as conversations began to spring up around the apparent disconnect between church and society. The root of the problem initially appeared to lie with more readily identifiable ‘generations’ – Gen-X, baby boomers, etc. However, it seemed to be the case that ‘generational’ approaches to ministry were not working as expected and it seemed to become clear that the real issue was a much wider “philosophical disconnect with the wider culture.”⁸ In other words, the problems facing church was not an age issue as such, but an increasing isolation from the culture surrounding it. As a 2004 report for the Church of England succinctly puts it, “This is a moment for repentance. We

⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*.

⁸ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 32. The thoughts contained in this entire paragraph are largely drawn from this entire section of Gibbs and Bolger’s work.

have allowed our culture and the Church to drift apart.”⁹ This is not the entire story however. As well as becoming increasingly disconnected with current cultural trends, Emerging Church criticises inherited church for colluding with the prevailing culture up until recent times. The church has ceased to be a prophetic voice offering critique of the culture and society in which it finds itself. “Western Christianity has wed itself to a culture, the modern culture, which is now in decline.”¹⁰ In this assessment we see both the cause and effect of Emerging Church’s criticism; inherited church is hanging on to an outmoded cultural context to which it should never have been hitched in the first place.

This, of course, raises further questions around how, and in what way, inherited church has colluded with modernism and how these practices are at odds with the ability to engage with postmodernism. We move on, therefore to consider some of these criticisms in more detail.

Perhaps one of the key criticisms of inherited church is that it has misapplied the *missio Dei*. Inherited church has, for many years, encouraged those outside the church to ‘come in’. It has done this through evangelism and outreach. It has engaged with the community around it, but nevertheless, the focus has always been to attract others in. There are sound ecclesiological reasons for this. The church is where God’s Word is proclaimed; it is where the sacraments are performed; it is where discipline and order can be maintained – all good indications of a Reformed-tradition church and congregation. Would it even be too much to suggest that without those who come into church, its financial resources would be under considerable strain? Emerging Church challenges this model to be turned on its head. “In emerging churches, for example, the direction of church changed from a centripetal (flowing in) to a centrifugal (flowing out) dynamic. This in turn led to a shift in emphasis from attracting crowds to equipping, dispersing, and multiplying Christ followers as a central function of the church.”¹¹ The question though is, “How is this a modern *versus* postmodern issue?” Modernism, Emerging Church proponents argue, has led to a separation of secular and sacred. Gibbs and Bolger assess this as follows:

The modern period was characterized by the birth of the idea of secular space, that is, the idea of a realm without God. Beginning in the fourteenth century... and accelerating...

⁹ Mission and Public Affairs Council (Church of England), *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Pub, 2004), 13.

¹⁰ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 29.

¹¹ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 50-1.

in the seventeenth... the modern period created a secular space and relegated spiritual things to the church... A consequence of the creation of the secular realm was modernity's penchant to break everything up into little parts for classification, organization and systematization. Thus in the modern period, many dualisms were introduced to church life that had not been problematic before: the natural versus the supernatural; public facts versus private values... faith versus reason... and the list goes on.¹²

Postmodernity (and Emerging Church), they suggest, “questions the legitimacy of these dualisms.”¹³ By encouraging an outward focus, Emerging Church seeks to re-sacralise those ‘spaces’ which have become disconnected from the church. In the context of church though, these spaces are not merely geographical, but are societal and community-based. Stuart Murray points out that:

Churches are emerging among science-fiction buffs, surfers, Goths, homeless people, transvestites, many ethnic minorities and youth cultures. They are emerging in cafes, pubs, clubs, mosques, workplaces and on the Internet. Recognising that in urban society networks are often more significant than neighbourhoods for human relationships, churches are reinventing themselves to engage with a changing world.¹⁴

This way of being church goes far beyond even traditional models of outreach and evangelism and, rather than encourage people to experience the sacred in a church building, with a worshipping community, seeks to provide a greater awareness of the integration of faith and life. Many missional models have attempted to be attractive (with the desire, as previously stated to bring people into church) by using culture to its own ends. Emerging church simply seeks to engage. Kester Brewin says that “rather than trying to import culture into church and make it ‘cool’, we need instead to become ‘wombs of the divine’ and completely rebirth the Church into a host culture.”¹⁵ Interestingly, Brewin’s criticism is also aimed at Emerging Church. In its own desire to be relevant and engaging, it faces the same pitfall as it claims inherited church has already fallen into – it colludes with culture rather than holding the tension of being in, but not of, the world. Ray Anderson offers a similar note of caution, saying, “When emerging churches set out to expand the

¹² Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 66-7.

¹³ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 67.

¹⁴ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 254.

¹⁵ Kester Brewin, *The Complex Christ: Signs of Emergence in the Urban Church* (SPCK Publishing, 2004), 70.

kingdom of God in the world, they need to have a resident theologian on board. Kingdom work is not just mission work, it is God's work. The work of God must be read and interpreted along with the word of God."¹⁶

Nevertheless, even with the caveats in place, it is difficult to fault a desire to "remove secular space"¹⁷ and ensure there are "no nonspiritual domains of reality."¹⁸ But herein lies one of the other dangers when inherited church is cast aside too readily. The danger lies in that word 'nonspiritual'. And here we also begin to include the issues associated with the second label – 'post-Christendom.' It would be overly simplistic and naive to suggest that the postmodern generation's rediscovery of the sacred means a renewed support for Christianity. Consider the following words of caution from Barry Taylor:

I think we should be aware that God's return is not a return to business as usual for religion, nor is it a wholesale embrace of traditional faiths by broader culture... God is both present and absent in that the return to God is not a return to the traditional concepts and ideas of God... Faith in the twenty-first century is not exclusively centered on concepts of God.¹⁹

The challenge then is to determine whether inherited understandings of the Christian faith can make the necessary jump from one label to another; from modern to postmodern, or whether Christianity needs to be re-imagined and repackaged in order to enable it to reconnect. Dave Tomlinson sums up the issues at stake when presenting faith in a postmodern context.

It is a world in which people reject truth claims which are expressed in the form of dogma or absolutes. It is a world in which dignity is granted to emotions and intuition, and where people are accustomed to communicating through words linked to images and symbols rather than through plain words or simple statements. It is a world in which people have come to feel a close affinity with the environment, and where there is a strong sense of global unity. It is a world in which people are deeply suspicious of institutions,

¹⁶ Ray S Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 2007), 117.

¹⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 67.

¹⁸ Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 67.

¹⁹ Barry Taylor, "Converting Christianity," in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2007), 164-5.

bureaucracies and hierarchies. And perhaps most importantly of all, it is a world in which the spiritual dimension is once again talked about with great ease.²⁰

In many respects it would be easy to begin to pick apart these assertions and cast doubt on their veracity, or, at the very least, the apparent strength of the claims. However, they will be allowed to stand as they appear to underpin much of what Emerging Church seeks to do as it engages with society. And in this respect, Emerging Church has sought to encourage people to express their spirituality through offering alternative worship styles, often found under the umbrella term of ‘alt.worship’. Within a broadly Christian context, worship draws from many and varied sources: from “ancient worship forms and contemporary culture and technology; multi-congregational and ‘menu’ churches offer diverse worship without rekindling past ‘worship wars’; contextual liturgies earth worship in local cultures; web-based exchanges and renewed interest in the arts are stimulating and resourcing innovation and creativity.”²¹ With such an eclectic mix to draw upon, there ought to be an expression of church which should suit everyone. Indeed, arguably, the ethos of Emerging Church may encourage a person to establish their own expression of church should there not be something which suits their taste.

However, this seems to satisfy the ‘spiritual’ dimension of people’s life, but it must be questioned whether it is an adequate expression of *Christian* spirituality. Post-Christendom has left many without a vocabulary of faith or even with the discernment to distinguish between faiths. With access to a vast store of information through the internet, and with no clear guidance, people will draw from any and all faith groups and so express their spirituality in whichever terms and concepts come to hand. It is not the Church’s position to lament this state of affairs. Indeed, it has the perfect example in dealing with it in the Apostle Paul’s speech to the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:16ff). It does mean, I would suggest, that it does place a greater responsibility on Church, whether inherited or emerging, to be clearer about what is Christian and what is not. This does not mean that church needs to be dogmatic, unemotional, word-based and so on. But it does mean that whatever expressions of faith are used, they must be tested by the ‘resident theologian’.

²⁰ Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 140-1.

²¹ Murray, *Post-Christendom*, 255.

For many theologians that means being ‘Bible-based’ – both in the sense of using the Bible and drawing its models from the Bible. “Biblical spirituality is not about contemplation; it is about reading and meditating on the word of God,”²² say Tim Chester and Steve Timmis. Elmer Towns and Ed Stetzer are even more sceptical. “Because we are using instruments from culture (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, a praise band, and clips from movies), are we moving farther from the light because we are identifying with cultural darkness?”²³ They do, however, leave the door open a crack by then asking, “Or are we bringing Jesus to them – sanctifying those tools and using them to expand the kingdom?”²⁴ It is clear that Emerging Church would answer a resounding “Yes!” to that second question.

What is also clear, arguably as a consequence of its modern approach, is that inherited church likes to present a nicely packaged, systematised presentation of the Christian story where everything fits together neatly – the “A-Z of Everything You Need to Know about Life, Death and Eternity.”²⁵ However, Tomlinson goes on to suggest that neatly packaged “New Testament Christianity” is a fallacy and the “pre-packaged gospel is really a systematized stringing together of lots of little pieces which in their original context were presented as they stood, without being fitted into a coherent theme.”²⁶ He goes on to draw on a thought from Walter Brueggemann that “we must offer ‘a lot of little pieces out of which people can put life together in fresh configurations’”²⁷ and concludes that “evangelism should no longer function as a kind of religious sales operation, which often depersonalizes the individual being evangelized, but instead be understood as an opportunity to ‘fund’ people’s spiritual journey, drawing on the highly relevant resources of ‘little pieces’ of truth contained in the Christian narrative.”²⁸ Such an approach goes a long way to defeating the objections of the likes of Chester, Timmis, Towns and Stetzer. Not all worship is a multimedia extravaganza, nor is it devoid of ‘the word’. Brewin says that it is “about allowing people to use

²² Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping Around Gospel and Community* (Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), 137.

²³ Elmer L. Towns and Ed Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light: Biblical Boundaries for the Emerging Church* (Moody Publishers, 2004), 91.

²⁴ Towns and Stetzer, *Perimeters of Light*, 91.

²⁵ Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 142.

²⁶ Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 142.

²⁷ Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 142. The thought of Brueggemann is taken from Walter Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (London: SCM Press, 1993).

²⁸ Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, 143.

their gifts so that they can worship with integrity.”²⁹ This seems to draw deeply on the idea of worship as ‘sacrifice’; an opportunity for individuals to bring their gift offerings to God. Perhaps the greatest fear of inherited church then is that the highly trained, competent, ‘intercessor’ pastor or minister becomes less relevant. This need not be the case if, once again, Ray Anderson’s caution about keeping a theologian to hand is heeded.

Where then does this brief dip onto the ‘post’ labels of Emerging Church bring us? It seems clear that society and culture is indeed undergoing a change in philosophical worldview (even though this claim has not been fully explored within this essay). Even if the degree and extent to which this is true is debated, it is also clear that, within the Christian community, a response is being mustered either to a perceived lacking in inherited church or to a perceived need in society. Labels such as postmodern or post-Christendom can only ever be starting points for the debate on how to respond to the challenges faced by the Church in contemporary society. However, what lies behind them are serious issues which are worthy of deeper exploration. The change from a modern to a postmodern outlook has precipitated a watershed with the Church teetering on the brink. The problem is that there is still a significant part of society (and the Church) embedded in the modern outlook. Emerging Church sees inherited church as being unwilling to face a new reality, yet that new reality has not yet impacted on many still within the inherited church. Inherited church sees Emerging Church as abandoning its historical roots and diving, unthinkingly and uncritically, into the pool of postmodernity. Neither picture is accurate or helpful. Inherited church will ultimately engage more fully with whatever cultural context it finds itself in, not least because more and more people within the church will share that outlook (this does, of course, assume that the traditional models of church do not disappear entirely through contextual irrelevance). Emerging Church, as it matures, will look for more places from which to draw its liturgical and experiential riches and its historical roots would seem to be an ideal place from which to draw.

In closing I would return to a comment by Dave Tomlinson who speaks of ‘funding’ people’s spiritual journeys. It seems clear to me that there is a ‘dynamism’ in both inherited and emerging churches. Inherited church has not come to an utter standstill and continues to move forward. The ‘mass’ in inherited church means that changing direction takes time and so there will always be a

²⁹ Brewin, *The Complex Christ*, 126.

place for pioneering ministries moving into new territory. Emerging Church often likes to think of itself as a 'conversation', with itself and with its cultural context. It would serve all sides well if the conversation included inherited church, as that 'cultural context' has not yet disappeared, and as both expressions of the Christian faith continue to move forward together.

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