

The Emerging Church

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What is the Emerging Church?

The emerging church is notoriously difficult to define with any precision:

“Even lists that attempt to characterize the emphases distinctive of emerging churches vary, and underscore the difficulty of dealing fairly with such diversity” (John Hammett, 2005: 3).

The ‘emerging church’ is not strictly a ‘movement’ (despite the use of the word by authors including Carson, Driscoll and McKnight) since it lacks any coordination, but a loose ‘conversation’ which has two dominant features:

a) A recognition of the need to engage with postmodern culture

“Perhaps the least controversial definition of the Emerging Church simply claims that its central premise is that churches must respond to postmodern culture” (Paul Doerkson, 2010: 4).

“the emerging movement calls the church to reject modernism and embrace the postmodern project of deconstructing the Enlightenment. Though most are not hard postmodernists – that is, they still believe in revelation – they value the negative project of postmodernism: the part that dismantles rationalism” (Belcher, 2009: 40).

“For almost everyone within the movement, this works out in an emphasis on feelings and affections over against linear thought and rationality; on experience over against truth; on inclusion over against exclusion; on participation over against individualism and the heroic loner” (Carson, 2005: 29)

b) A critical approach to late twentieth century forms of Evangelicalism

“They realize something needs to change in our evangelical churches if we are to reach and engage the emerging culture” (Dan Kimball, 2003: 14-15).

Those within the conversation protest against features of evangelicalism that (arguably) arose from modernity (Carson, 2005 and Belcher, 2009):

- Ecclesiology concerned more with forms and institutional survival than with engagement in mission
- Cultural conservatism and styles of worship that are not contextualised to the prevalent culture.
- Ineffective preaching.
- Seeker-sensitive churches.
- Tribalism.
- Seeing salvation narrowly in terms of getting saved and not enough on how they live as a Christian.
- The insistence that belief must precede belonging to the community of the church.

Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger (2005: 44-45) specify nine common practices of emerging churches:

“Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part on spiritual activities.”

This assessment is clearly largely positive, but the conversation also has its critics, especially within Reformed (Calvinistic) circles. D.A. Carson (2005: 45ff.) identifies a number of strengths in the emerging church:

- A desire to read the times
- A push for authenticity
- A recognition of the social location of faith
- A call to evangelise those who are left outside traditional churches
- A willingness to probe links with the broader Christian tradition.

Carson’s primary concern, however, is that the ‘movement’ places too great an emphasis on experience and not enough on absolute revealed truth. He contrasts (p.42) the emerging church (driven by a response to cultural shift) with the Protestant Reformation (driven by a desire to return to the Word of God). David Wells (2008: 2) expresses particular concern with where the ‘conversation’ is leading to, describing emerging churches as:

“transitional movements [...] stepping stones away from the classical orthodoxy of the earlier evangelicals and, however, unwittingly, toward a more liberalized Christianity. In due course the children of these evangelicals will become full-blown liberals, I suspect, just like those against whom their evangelical grandparents originally protested”.

Streams flowing into the conversation (McKnight, 2007)

1. **'Prophetic' or 'provocative'** – deliberately seeking to provoke by using (sometimes exaggerating) rhetoric similar to that of the Old Testament prophets. Others may prefer to call this stream 'protest'.
2. **'Postmodern'** – follows Doug Pagitt identifying three ways to relate to postmodernism: *to*, *with* or *as* postmoderns. "The vast majority of emerging Christians and churches fit these first two categories. They don't deny truth, they don't deny that Jesus Christ is truth, and they don't deny the Bible is truth" (paragraph 19). The third group speak of an end of metanarratives and the importance of social location in shaping one's view of truth.
3. **'Praxis-oriented'** – McKnight claims this is the most characteristic stream. "At its core, the emerging movement is an attempt to fashion a new ecclesiology [...]. Its distinctive emphases can be seen in its worship, its concern with orthopraxy, and its missional orientation" (paragraph 22). Considering these three dimensions:
 - *Worship* is creative, experiential and sensory.
 - *Orthopraxy* – how people live is judged to be more important than what they believe, so that the focus shifts away from correct statements of belief to a good way of life.
 - *Missional orientation* – participation with God in His redemptive work in the world and in particular doing this in community and with a holistic view of what God's work is.
4. **'Post-evangelical'** – the emerging church is a 'postmodern evangelicalism'. "The vast majority of emerging Christians are evangelical theologically" but "are post-evangelical in at least two ways" (paragraph 34):
 - a) A movement away from systematic theology in favour of theology that values narrative and that remains a conversation with no final systematic theology or settled statement of faith.
 - b) Scepticism about 'in and out' divisions between Christians and non-Christians.
5. **'Political'** – a concern for social justice, although he warns of the danger of losing a missional and ecclesial focus. In the USA this political stream often manifests in a tendency to vote Democrat.

Classifying the emerging church

It appears that both those who are largely positive about the emerging church (Gibbs and Bolger) and those who express concern about it (Carson and Wells) fail to distinguish adequately between different parts of the 'conversation'. There is no widely accepted classification of emerging churches, but three approaches are worthy of mention:

- **Distinguishing 'emerging' from 'emergent'**

Several authors, including Mark Driscoll (2006: 21) and David Wells (2008: 15) find this distinction helpful:

- *'emerging'* – anyone involved in the conversation about how the church needs to adapt to postmodernity.
- *'emergent'* – the part of the conversation influenced by postconservative theology and wishing to rethink the core of evangelical theology.

Other authors (generally those Driscoll and Wells would label 'emergent') do not recognise this distinction and use 'emergent' to mean anyone involved in an 'emerging church'. The picture is complicated slightly by the fact that *Emergent* (or *Emergent Village*) is the name of an organised relational network founded in 1997 (including, among others, Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones).

- **Relevants, Revisionists and Reconstructionists**

Ed Stetzer recognises three broad groups within the conversation. Jim Belcher follows him and suggests examples:

- *'Relevants'* (e.g. Dan Kimball; Mark Driscoll) – seek to revise cultural expressions of church life to make them relevant to postmoderns but remain firmly evangelical, often conservative, in theological convictions.
- *'Reconstructionists'* (e.g. Neil Cole; Michael Frost; Alan Hirsch; George Barna; Frank Viola) – seek to revise structures and forms of church towards 'incarnational', 'organic' or 'house church' approaches but remain evangelical in their view of gospel and Scripture. Often influenced by Anabaptist and Mennonite thinking.
- *'Revisionists'* (e.g. Brian McLaren; Tony Jones; Doug Pagitt) – seek to revise both forms of church and understanding of the Gospel. No longer classically 'evangelical' in their view of Scripture and its authority although they often continue to self-designate as evangelical. Equates to what Driscoll and Wells call 'emergent'. A key distinguishing feature of this group (according to Pagitt) is that they no longer see the church as central to God's purposes in the world (see Gibbs and Bolger, 2005: 42).

- **‘Foundationalists’, ‘Deconstructionists’, ‘Augustinians’ and ‘Emerging Peace Church’**

C. Wess Daniels (2008) proposes a four-fold classification based on philosophical influences:

- *‘Foundationalist’* (including Mark Driscoll; Dan Kimball; Erwin McManus) – believe in a theological foundation that should not be re-considered.
- *‘Deconstructionists’* (e.g. Brian McLaren; Doug Pagitt; Tony Jones; Peter Rollins) – influenced by the deconstructionism of Caputo, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard and, therefore, truly postmodern.
- *‘Augustinian’* or *‘Pre-Modern’* (e.g. James K. Smith; John Milbank) – drawing on Augustine and Thomas of Aquinas, understand postmodernism not in post-Nietzschean terms but in Renaissance terms akin to Stephen Toulmin.
- *‘Emerging Peace Church’* or *‘Open Anabaptism’* (e.g. Rob Bell; Jarrod McKenna; Shane Claiborne) – influenced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and John H. Yoder. Equally critical of modernity and postmodernity and emphasise Christ’s example of non-violence, love for enemies and care for the poor.

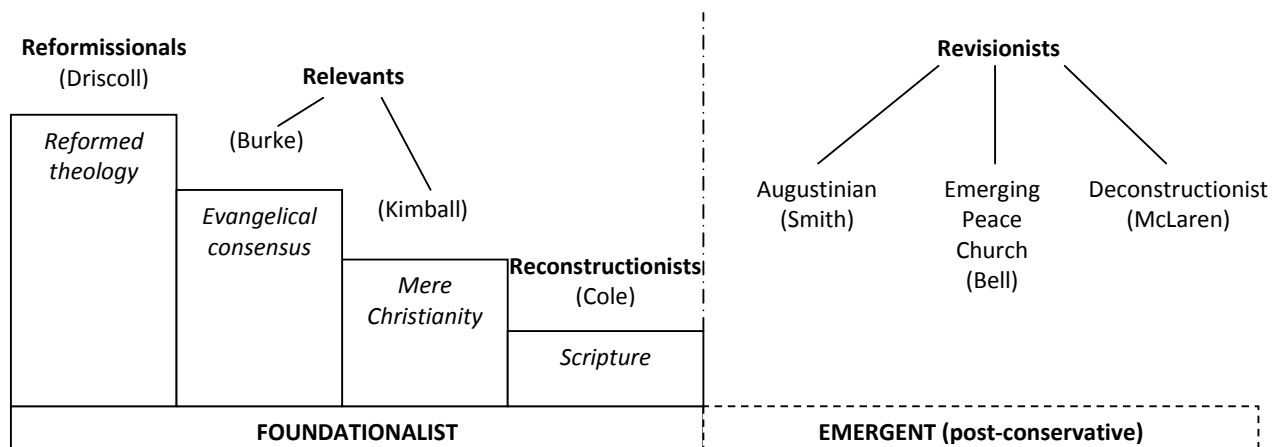
Stetzer’s classification is helpful in distinguishing between ‘Relevants’ and ‘Reconstructionists’ within the non-emergent part of the conversation (some classifications tend to omit the ‘Reconstructionists’), while Daniels’ scheme reveals the diversity that exists within the ‘emergent’ part of the conversation but fails to include the ‘Reconstructionists’ (his ‘Foundationalists’ are roughly equivalent to Stetzer’s ‘Relevants’). Where Stetzer’s classification is weak is in failing to recognise the significant diversity among ‘Relevants’ in terms of what theological basis they appeal to (what foundation they recognise to use Daniels’ terminology). This diversity among ‘Relevants’ is evident in Robert Webber’s analysis of the theology of five leaders within the emerging church (2007: 199) although none of the five are ‘Reconstructionists’:

- Mark Driscoll represents “a Reformed Biblicist theology with which most traditionalists would by (*sic*) happy”.
- John Burke, “affirms all that any evangelical holds but is looking for new ways to make it real” (p.199).
- Dan Kimball, “wants to go back and find unity in the common faith of the Nicene Creed” (p.199),

He clearly distinguishes these three contributors from the remaining two (who would qualify as ‘emergent’ by Driscoll’s definition), saying that, “Doug Pagitt and Karen Ward, more edgy than the others, are asking us to find language, symbols, and actions that connect with this generation”. Based on Webber’s insights we can propose the following modification of Stetzer’s classification (adopting Driscoll’s own term ‘Reformissional’ to describe his strand):

	Theological core	Practical ecclesiology akin to	Example(s)
Reformissional	Reformed theology	Magisterial Reformation	Mark Driscoll
Relevants	Evangelical consensus	Pragmatic Evangelicalism	John Burke
	‘Mere Christianity’ (Scripture plus creeds)		Dan Kimball
Reconstructionist	Scripture	Radical Reformation	Neil Cole; George Barna and Frank Viola; Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch
Revisionists	Postconservative theology	<i>Tends to be minimalistic or experimental</i>	Emergent Village (Doug Pagitt; Brian McLaren; Tony Jones)

Incorporating this table with Daniels’ classification we may propose the following schematic view of the conversation. The key point in this scheme is what foundation theology rests upon:



In reality, core theology (especially views on the centrality of the church to God's purposes, the nature and authority of Scripture and the scope of salvation) and practical ecclesiology (how the church should be structured) should be regarded as independent variables. The complexities of any classification are revealed by considering some other names that do not appear on the chart above (especially when the question of self-designation comes into play):

- Steve Timmis and Tim Chester (authors of *Total Church* and leaders in *Crowded House* in Sheffield) – they are similar to the Reconstructionists but share a Reformed theology with Reformissionals.
- Rob Bell (author and leader of *Mars Hill Church*) – in his core theology Bell has much in common with the Revisionists but he leads a mega-church.
- Jim Belcher claims to advocate a “third way beyond emerging and traditional” which he calls ‘deep church’. His core is Mere Christianity or the ‘Great Tradition’, but his practical ecclesiology is effectively akin to the Magisterial Reformation since he includes insights from the Bible and tradition.
- Shane Claiborne (2010), despite being included in Daniels’ classification, rejects the label ‘emerging’ largely because he sees the conversation as ineffective in social and missional engagement.

The key addition in the practical ecclesiology of all these examples (both in the table and the individuals listed above) is that they seek to add a missional focus to their approach to church.

Key questions for the emerging church

1. Given the fundamental differences between emergents and non-emergents, is ‘emerging’ really meaningful?
2. Is this conversation simply a case of Western (white) self-indulgence or does it have global significance?
3. Has the ‘postmodern’ moment passed and is the church in danger of lagging behind once more?
4. Will it embrace hard postmodernism and so reject Scripture as revelation or accept Scripture as authoritative?
5. Will it continue to be primarily deconstructionist and protest oriented or become truly missional?
6. Will it be dominated by cultural adaptation or move towards being church transculturally and biblically?

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