

# CORNERSTONE BIBLE INSTITUTE INCONTEXT

By Dr. Gary E. Gilley

## The Emergent Church

If we are willing to give the emerging church “conversation” the most positive of spins, we would affirm that its leaders are highly desirous of reaching a postmodern culture with the claims of Jesus Christ. The emerging church adherents do not believe the modern church, whether in its traditional or seeker-sensitive form, is capable of communicating with a generation enveloped in postmodern thinking. Thus the emergent church has developed methods, techniques, forums, philosophical systems, and even theologies to connect with a subculture which the more traditional expressions of the church will never reach. On the surface this is commendable, but all is not as it seems.



Dr. Gary Gilley

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The name “emerging church” speaks of a church which is - guess what? -emerging from something. This means, it is coming out of the more traditional expressions and emerging into a postmodern expression. What it will actually become is still a matter of speculation; the emerging/emergent movement is not monolithic.<sup>1</sup> Some of the more conservative adherents, such as Mark Driscoll and Dan Kimball, would distinguish between emerging churches which would retain and promote many orthodox theological truths while adopting practices and methodologies they believe reach the postmodern generation, and emergent church figures such as Brian McLaren, Spencer Burke, Rob Bell, and Steve Chalke who call into question or deny cardinal doctrines.<sup>2</sup>

Emergent church leaders do not all agree on where the church goes from here, but they all believe that it must go somewhere because they believe the modern church cannot connect with the postmodern

mind.

Kimball suggests that the seeker-sensitive church, the church that chased the last generation’s culture, is already out of date: “The things that seeker-sensitive churches removed from their churches are the very things [postmodern] nonbelievers want to experience if they attend a worship service.”<sup>3</sup> Postmoderns want to reconnect to the past. They want traditions and religious symbols rather than slick excellence, polished performance, and state-of-the art structures found in modernity. That translates into a very different look and feel. For example, it is not likely that you will find a sign along the highway pointing to the First Baptist Emergent Church. Names like Baptist and denominational ties are too modern. Popular emergent church names are Solomon’s Porch, House of Mercy, The Rock, Jacob’s Ladder, Circle of Hope, Ikon, Vintage Faith, New Beginnings, and Mosaic. They sponsor websites like vintagefaith.com, emergentvillage.org, and theooze.com. The emerging church appears to be the latest flavor of the day in a church age which allows itself to be defined by its culture rather than by Scripture.

How does the Christian community go about chasing down the culture? Either through methods or message. The

emerging church does both. Beginning with methodology, the leaders of the movement view those of the under-thirty generation as profoundly spiritual. They are interested in religious experiences and feelings. They want a sense of the supernatural. They are not interested in systematic theology, tightly woven apologetic arguments, or logical reasoning, but they are attracted to spiritual mystery. The Baby Busters and Mosaics are tired of “church-lite,” consumer spirituality, church buildings that look like warehouses or malls, CEO pastors, educational programs structured like community colleges, and church services that are reminiscent of a Broadway musical. They want the transcendent.

So the emergent church loads up on the transcendent. There is a return to what Kimball calls the “vintage church,” which combines some excellent things such as singing of hymns, display of the cross, and reading of Scripture with (questionable, at best) medieval ritual, prayer stations, labyrinths, candles, incense, icons, stained glass, contemplative prayer, mantras, Benedictine chants, and darkness. Kimball makes the point that postmoderns want to experience God with all five senses - as the vintage church did. It should be pointed out, however, that the vintage church to which Kimball refers is not a return to the New Testament church. The vintage church has been waylaid by medieval Catholicism, which, we must remember, may have experienced the spiritual through the senses but, nevertheless was an apostate religion. Simply providing unbelievers with a religious experience, which they might interpret as an encounter with God, may do them more harm than good.

## Emergent Doctrine

If this were the end of the story, we might even find comfort in what is basically a reaction to the stripped-down model of Christianity that the seeker-sensitive church has given us for the last few decades. But, as Rob Bell is quick to inform us, “This is not just the same old message with new methods. We’re rediscovering Christianity as an Eastern religion, as a way of life.”<sup>4</sup> This is something new in the cultural-identifying churches. The seeker-sensitive church loudly proclaimed that it was fine-tuning the methodology but was not tampering with the message of the evangelical church (even though it was). The emergent church is concerned about methods, but many within the movement are even more concerned about the message. They believe that, theologically, evangelical Christianity has it all wrong. From the Scriptures, to essential doctrines, to the gospel itself, the church so far just doesn’t get it. And the emergent people include themselves in the same camp. As Brian McLaren states, “I

don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be saved?... None of us has arrived at orthodoxy.”<sup>5</sup>

Most emergent church leaders claim fidelity to the Scriptures as well as to the historic doctrines and even creeds of the church. This sounds good on the surface - but then they force these things through the filter of postmodern deconstruction, and what comes out are distorted and unrecognizable understandings of theology. Dan Kimball says that the church must “deconstruct, reconstruct, and redefine biblical terms.”<sup>6</sup> What that means and how it is done will vary.

Kimball, who is on the conservative edge of the emerging spectrum, believes there exists a core of doctrines (those found in the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds and a few others) which we can proclaim with certainty. Others on the opposite end of the spectrum, such as Spencer Burke and Brian McLaren, would disagree, saying that our old theological systems are flawed and something new is needed. “I meet people along the way who model for me, each in a different way, what a new kind of

Christian might look like. They differ in many ways, but they generally agree that the old show is over,” writes McLaren, “the modern jig is up, and it’s time for something radically new.... Either Christianity itself is flawed, failing, untrue, or our modern, Western, commercialized, industrial strength version is in need of a fresh look, a serious revision.”<sup>7</sup>

Rob Bell chips in to make certain we understand that these men are talking about more than methodology: “By this I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music, sharper graphics, and new methods with easy-to-follow steps. I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived and explained.”<sup>8</sup> How far is Bell willing to take all of this? Which doctrines can be changed, altered, or even eliminated before we no longer have the Christian faith? Apparently nothing is off limits. While personally claiming to affirm historic Christian theology, Bell writes that it would not bother him to discover that we have been wrong all along concerning the basic elements of the faith. For example, if it could be proven “that Jesus had a real, earthly, biological father named Larry... and that the virgin birth was just a bit of mythologizing the Gospel writers threw in..., could you still be a Christian?”<sup>9</sup> Bell doesn’t see a problem. As a matter of fact, if our faith depends on such doctrines, “then it wasn’t that strong in the first place, was it?”<sup>10</sup>

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What doctrines does Bell regard as dispensable? In this brief statement alone he sees as superfluous the virgin birth, the incarnation, the hypostatic union of Christ, and the inspiration of Scripture (since the Gospel writers lied about the person of Christ). Of course, like dominos, as these doctrines fall, they take others with them, not the least of which would be the substitutionary atonement since a mere man could not die for our sins. In one stroke of the pen Bell has undermined the whole Christian faith, but he sees it as a non-issue. To Bell, and to many other emergent leaders, Jesus is not the way and the truth, if by that we mean He is the embodiment of truth and the only way to God. No, to these men the “way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.”<sup>11</sup> We could continue to live the “Christian life” without the truth of Scripture. We could still love God and be a Christian, because what we believe is not important. The only question is, “Is the way of Jesus still the best possible way to live?”<sup>12</sup> It is not about what we believe, Bell would insist: “Perhaps a better question than who’s right, is who’s living rightly?”<sup>13</sup>

However, Christ-like living is a fruit of salvation, not the cause. We can “be” moral and decent people and not be Christians, but we cannot deny or ignore the true historic, biblical person and work of Jesus Christ and be saved. The emergent church has turned this truth on its head. Mark Oestreicher, president of Youth Specialties, makes these comments in *The Emerging Church* which are not only dangerously close to a denial of the gospel itself but actually cross the line:

Does a little dose of Buddhism thrown into a belief system somehow kill off the Christian part? My Buddhist cousin, except for her unfortunate inability to embrace Jesus, is a better “Christian” (based on Jesus’ descriptions of what a Christian does) than almost every Christian I know. If we are using Matthew 26 [sic] as a guide, she’d be a sheep; and almost every Christian I know personally would be a goat.<sup>14</sup>

Space does not allow further discussion of the emerging church in this article. For more, go to: [http://www.svchapel.org/resources/articles/read\\_articles.asp?ID=122](http://www.svchapel.org/resources/articles/read_articles.asp?ID=122).

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1. Some of the best known leaders include: Tony Jones, the National Coordinator of Emergent; Spencer Burke, Founder of the Ooze; Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church, Seattle; and founder of the Acts 29; Karen Ward, Pastor of the Church of the Apostles, Fremont, Washington; Erwin McManus, pastor of Mosaic in Southern California; Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Donald Miller, Leonard Sweet, and numerous others.

2 See [Wikipedia.org/emerging-church](http://Wikipedia.org/emerging-church), p.3.

3 *Ibid.*, p.115.

4 *Christianity Today*, p.38.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

6 Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), p. 178.

7 Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), pp. XIV-XV.

8 Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2005), p. 12.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 20 (cf. p. 21).

12 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

14 Kimball, p. 53.