

THE EMERGING CHURCH: HOMILETICS AND THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Confusion abounds concerning the emerging church and what falls under the metaphorical umbrella of the term. The following article summarizes the important elements that define so-called emerging churches in the area of homiletics and theology.

Introduction

As a movement, the Emerging Church is reacting against the artificiality of modern evangelicalism and responding to postmodernism. As Reggie McNeal explains, “The postmodern world will demand a new church expression, just as did the rise of the modern world.”¹ Viewing postmodern culture similar to that of the first century, the Emerging Church seeks to return to a more authentic, holistic Christianity.² Facilitated by the internet, the movement has grown into an international network of individuals and groups who are regularly interacting about the concepts they hold in common.³

Emerging Church Homiletics

The river of emerging churches divides into three streams. Doug Pagitt of Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis describes those streams as: 1) churches that have returned to the Reformation (Mars Hill in Seattle), 2)

¹ Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 5.

² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Blogger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 42.

³ John Drane, “Editorial: The Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (March 2006): 9.

churches that have made deep systemic changes, but are still church-centered and without theological changes (University Baptist in Waco and Mosaic in Los Angeles), and 3) churches that are kingdom-centered.⁴ Though some common homiletical approaches flow in each stream, distinctive differences arise.

Mark Driscoll of Mars Hill Church in Seattle models and promotes the preaching of the Reformation-style emerging churches. An unashamed five-point Calvinist, Driscoll reads authors like J. I. Packer and John Piper. He trumpets a return to a high view of God and Scripture. His preaching is generally expositional and long—often well over an hour. Pulling no punches about sin and the need for repentance, in secular Seattle he has become a phenomenon. *Salon* magazine Life Editor, Lauren Sandler, is an atheist. Yet she traveled the country for a year surveying what she believes is the beginnings of a great spiritual awakening in the youth culture. Evaluating Driscoll, she says, “Mark’s ingenuity, leadership, and reach has surely branded this young pastor the Jonathan Edwards of his age.”⁵ Sandler further states, “To say that Mars Hill is just a church is to say that Woodstock... was just a concert.”⁶

Plenty of other pastors preach Reformed doctrine in a biblical manner and do not avoid the subject of sin and the need for repentance. What makes the appeal of Driscoll’s preaching so strong to liberal, pluralistic, postmodern Seattle? Two things help. For one, Driscoll’s authentic passion for God and his glory cannot be hidden. For example, at a Gen-X conference he was scheduled to preach at a dinner, but instead prayed a prayer of repentance for about twenty minutes. Driscoll says:

But God showed me what the speakers were saying that robbed God of his glory. I saw that people were believing those things. And I knew God wanted me to come as an intercessor. So I started repenting. It just kept coming and coming, and it got to the place where I didn’t know what to do. I’ve never had anything like that happen before. And when I was done repenting of those things, I didn’t feel like preaching, so I walked away.⁷

⁴ Gibbs and Bloger, *Emerging Churches*, 42.

⁵ Lauren Sandler, *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement* (New York: Viking, 2006), 48.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁷ The Leadership Interview, “Warrior, Chief, Medicine Man: Learning about ministry’s ancient ways from those older—and younger—than ourselves,” *Leadership Journal* 21, no. 4 (Fall 2000): 48.

Driscoll's preaching attracts postmoderns for another reason. He connects with their culture. The church sponsors concerts featuring secular bands. Driscoll writes a column for the *Seattle Times*.⁸ Mars Hill worship music has an indie rock flavor.⁹ Driscoll preaches in jeans and an untucked shirt. He makes references to movies, music, and other elements of secular culture. Driscoll's stand-up comic humor also connects him with the culture. He says he learned his comic timing and skill by watching comedian Chris Rock.¹⁰ Driscoll learned well; he keeps his congregation laughing. In one message last year he referred to the fact that his wife was into organic food, but he was not. He said, "I said, 'Yeah, honey, that's cool, but you will still shave your armpits.'" After a pause for laughter to subside, Driscoll added, "If you're a hairy-pitted gal [Pause], enjoy being single."¹¹

Worship style and technology trends are not consistent in all emerging churches. Some have rock music; some have hymns. Some have all the latest gadgetry; some aim for simplicity. Yet one common trend in worship is a move away from entertainment and "show biz" to authentic worship. That does not rule out the use of symbols and drama. When Rob Bell planted a church in Grand Rapids, Michigan in 1999, he began with a sermon series in Leviticus. But he made the scenes from that ancient book come alive. He says, "We didn't just talk about the pictures, we experienced them. I covered myself with fake blood, built fires on the stage, climbed atop a giant wooden altar. We had 'priests' wearing linen ephods marching up and down the aisles and brought in a live goat for the Day of Atonement."¹²

The second and third emerging church streams are not so focused on preaching propositional biblical truth. In fact, Brian McLaren says, "Instead of an exercise in *transferring information* so that people have a coherent, well-formed 'worldview' (often an upbeat name for 'systematic theology'), preaching in the emerging culture aims at

⁸ Sandler, *Righteous*, 48.

⁹ Collin Hansen, "Pastor Provocateur," *Christianity Today*, September 2007, 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹ Mark Driscoll, "The Weaker Christian," sermon in the series, *Christians Gone Wild*, preached July 2, 2006 at Mars Hill Church, Seattle, Washington; Online at: www.marshillchurch.org.

¹² Rob Bell, "Life in Leviticus: Planting this church, I spent a year preaching through Leviticus, and (surprise!) it worked," *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2002), 46.

inspiring transformation."¹³ Thus many emerging preachers have moved beyond the inductive and deductive methods of dealing with Scripture to what they call the "abductive method"—"to seize people by the imagination and transport them from their current world to another world, where they gain a new perspective."¹⁴ Abductive preachers are urged to throw away their outlines and make sermons pointless. How does a preacher transport his listeners to this other world? Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer suggest using surprise, unpredictability, and story.¹⁵ That term "story" seems to be a significant one for those not in the Reformed emergent camp. Pagitt says, "Theology is not the story of God, and it is not our story; rather, it is the understanding that allows us to connect the two...But it must never be confused with the life of God or the story of God."¹⁶ At any rate, emergent leaders celebrate storytelling and emphasize narrative preaching.¹⁷

Some emerging preachers have taken a more radical approach. Their message time is so different that some are calling them "phd's" or "post-homeletical discourses."¹⁸ Brian McLaren describes it as "a shared practice among preacher and hearers...The preacher becomes the leader of a kind of group meditation, less scholar and more sage, less lecturer and more poet, prophet, priest."¹⁹ McLaren predicts that in this context preachers will be replaced by professional liturgists who will substitute the sermon for "a weekly experience of group spiritual formation."²⁰

Doug Pagitt has written extensively about this new type of "preaching" in his 2005 book, *Preaching Re-imagined*. He calls traditional preaching "speaching," and flatly says that it does not work.²¹ Instead, he suggests what he calls "progressional dialogue" in which "the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and the listeners, and substantive changes in the

¹³ Brian D. McLaren, *Emerging Values: The next generation is redefining spiritual formation, community, and mission*, *Leadership Journal* 24, no. 3 (Summer 2003): 36.

¹⁴ Leonard Sweet, Brian D. McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer, *A is for Abduction: The Language of the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2003), 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 31-2.

¹⁶ Doug Pagitt, "The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology," in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 123.

¹⁷ Sweet, McLaren, and Haselmayer, *Abduction*, 205-7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁹ McLaren, "Emerging Values," *Leadership*, 36.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 18.

content are then created as a result of this relationship.”²² In practice at Pagitt’s Solomon Porch, progressional dialogue primarily involves two things. Pagitt meets with a group of church members on Tuesday night and discusses the sermon topic with them to get their input and insights. Then during the worship service itself, after he speaks on the subject for a while, he then invites others in the congregation to share their thoughts and insights.²³ Dialogue occurs between the pastor and the members and between the members themselves. It is progressional in that the “message” may evolve and even take an entirely different direction as the discussion progresses. Pagitt sees that as acceptable because he views the concept of “the priesthood of believers” as sanctioning anyone present to “preach,” thus reworking past ideas of pastoral authority.²⁴

An additional trend in this radical stream of emerging church “preaching” appears to be the abandonment of application. These emerging preachers value the process more than the point, the journey more than the destination. Pagitt makes a distinction between application and implication. Application is predetermined by the preacher for the hearer; implication arises spontaneously in the hearer in response to the “story.”²⁵ Pagitt likes implication because he thinks it has a sense of “What should *we* do?” instead of “What should *I* do?”²⁶ Besides being less individualistic, substituting spontaneous implication for predetermined application lets the hearer struggle. Pagitt thinks that frustration and destabilization is a good thing.²⁷

Authenticity runs deep in the preaching of all emerging church streams. The preachers do not usually dress up. They speak in common, everyday language and avoid a “preachy” tone. They talk freely about their own weaknesses and let themselves get emotional when appropriate. Their illustrations and applications (when they make them) relate to everyday experiences and situations.

Preaching in emerging churches has one other thing in common. It is tailored for the pluralistic culture it is trying to reach. It respectfully welcomes those from other religions and backgrounds. Emerging preaching does not put down other religions, but points out the distinctiveness of Christianity. Mark Driscoll has been inspired by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York. After the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the percentage of non-Christians attending Keller’s church surged to nearly thirty percent. How

²² Ibid., 23.

²³ Ibid., 24.

²⁴ Ibid., 152.

²⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁶ Ibid., 99.

²⁷ Ibid., 100-102.

did Keller keep them coming? He writes, "I don't directly make the naked claim 'Christianity is a superior religion,' and I certainly don't malign other faiths. Instead, I stress Christianity's distinctiveness...I preached, 'Christianity is the only faith that tells you that God lost a child in an act of violent injustice. Christianity is the only religion that tells you, therefore, God suffered as you have suffered.'"²⁸

What can we as preachers in traditional churches learn from the emerging church? We can be more authentic in the way we speak. We can share more weaknesses and get sincerely emotional. Our illustrations and applications can turn toward everyday situations. Additionally, we can speak with sensitivity to those sitting in the congregation who might be of another religion or of no religion. We can recognize that someone out there that we are trying to reach might be of a different political party, a different lifestyle, a different background than most everyone else and thus add persuasiveness to our speech.

Emerging Church Theology

Is Emerging Church theology orthodox? The answer depends on which stream of the movement one is examining. That differences exist is obvious. In his chapter in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, Driscoll writes, "I have also been greatly concerned by some of the aberrant theological concepts gaining popularity with some fellow emerging-type younger pastors."²⁹ In his response to Driscoll, Pagitt says, "in many ways we are telling different stories of Christianity."³⁰

Representing the Reformed emerging stream, Driscoll not only believes orthodox doctrines, but he articulates them extraordinarily well. The basic doctrines of a trustworthy Scripture, a triune God, and a substitutionary atonement are extremely important to him. He even provides a creative approach to try to reconcile unlimited and limited atonement. Driscoll is not afraid to speak of hell.³¹ Incredibly, Driscoll will camp out on the details of these doctrines for months at a time. He writes, "For example, I preached a three-month series on the atonement with the sermons lasting well over an hour, and I saw our attendance swell by over eight hundred in the first three weeks as people wept throughout the sermons, confessed their sins, and gave their lives to

²⁸ Tim Keller, "Preaching Amid Pluralism: Elevating Christ in a culture that seeks all religions as equal," *Leadership Journal* (Winter 2002), 34-5.

²⁹ Mark Driscoll, "The Emerging Church and Biblical Theology," in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

Jesus.”³² Such orthodoxy has caused Driscoll to part ways with some other emerging leaders. In 1995 he began traveling around the country speaking for Leadership Network, out of which grew Emergent Village in 2001. Suspecting that its leaders wanted to revise orthodoxy, Driscoll separated and went another direction. He was right; Emergent Village leaders did begin to advocate an experimental, open approach to theology.³³

But a middle stream of theology flows between the Reformed stream and the radical stream. For example, John Burke is a “practical theologian” at Gateway Community Church in Austin, Texas. He writes, “I must firmly anchor any emerging theology in the revealed Scriptures.”³⁴ He echoes Driscoll when he says, “One fear I have for the emerging church is that we will cut loose from the anchor of the authority of the Scriptures in hopes of relating to our relativistic culture.”³⁵ Yet Burke’s passion is that our theology leads us as Christian communities to serve hurting people with compassion. He states, “Honestly, I’m not interested in internal church debates about who has the right or wrong form of theology or Christian practice if the outcome doesn’t impact a hurting, broken world.”³⁶ However, a concern about Burke’s theology arises later in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, when in his response to Ward, he seems to be weak concerning salvation being exclusively through faith in Christ.³⁷ Dan Kimball serves as the pastor of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California. Along with Burke, he also appears to belong in the middle stream of emerging church theology. He still considers himself to be a conservative evangelical, yet as an emerging church leader he says, “We must rethink leadership, church structure, the role of a pastor, spiritual formation, how community is lived out, how evangelism is done, how we express our worship, etc.”³⁸ Kimball wants the freedom to ask “dangerous questions” about Scripture and comes up with fewer answers

³² Ibid., 35.

³³ Hansen, “Pastor Provocateur,” *Leadership*, 46.

³⁴ John Burke, “The Emerging Church and Incarnational Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 52.

³⁵ Ibid., 61.

³⁶ Ibid., 52.

³⁷ Karen Ward, “The Emerging Church and Communal Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 189.

³⁸ Dan Kimball, “The Emerging Church and Missional Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 86.

than he used to have. His theological certainty confines itself to the statements of the Nicene Creed. In his theological journey he has replaced his previous ideas of eschatology, women in ministry, and a number of other things with new ideas. Nevertheless, he is passionate about leading his people to do Bible study. However, he wants that Bible study to have an outward focus on ministering to the world. Therefore, he tells his congregation he wants them to be “missional theologians.”³⁹

Pagitt represents the radical stream of emerging theology. His chapter in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches* flaunts orthodoxy. Coming from a thoroughly postmodern mindset, Pagitt states that theology is meant to be temporary and is always contextual. Since we are in an age of rapid change, we can expect our theology to be evolving and changing significantly. Evidently, Pagitt’s has. Once an evangelical, he now appears to be post-evangelical. Speaking with liberal terms, he says the church is not the center of God’s activity on the earth, the world is. So we should join him in his kingdom work in the world.⁴⁰ Pagitt says we need to change the way we understand truth and authority, and to “draw new conclusions about sexuality,” even considering “new ways of being sexual.”⁴¹ Citing Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle and the fact that electrons can be explained as both wave and particle, Pagitt says we should be less certain about theology.⁴² No wonder that in his response, Driscoll compares Pagitt and other radical emerging leaders to social gospel liberals, who err by equating change with progress.⁴³

Brian McLaren joins Pagitt in the radical stream of emerging church theology. D. A. Carson considers him to be “the emerging church’s most influential thinker.”⁴⁴ Part of that influence stems from his surprising position as a regular columnist for the otherwise evangelical *Leadership Journal*. Influenced in part by David J. Bosch’s *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, McLaren agrees with Bosch that “The ‘old, old story’ may not be the true, true story, for we continue to grow, and even our discussion and dialogues contribute to such growth.”⁴⁵ Wishing to keep his position of influence among evangelicals,

³⁹ Ibid., 90-105.

⁴⁰ Doug Pagitt, “The Emerging Church and Embodied Theology,” in *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* (ed. Robert Webber, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 119-138.

⁴¹ Ibid., 130-140.

⁴² Ibid., 141-2.

⁴³ Ibid., 144-7.

⁴⁴ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 35.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 34.

McLaren is slippery in his theological responses. Carson reports that in answer to a question about the issue of homosexuality, “McLaren asserts that there is no good position, because all positions hurt someone, and that is always bad. Moreover, homosexuality may be seventy-five different things...it is not entirely clear that what we mean by homosexuality in any particular instance entirely lines up with what the Bible says about homosexuality.”⁴⁶ In a message entitled “Acceptance/Diversity” which was preached at the church he founded, McLaren speaks extensively about homosexuality with sympathy, but never ventures to state his own theological conclusions about it. He admits that he has those conclusions, but simply refuses to share them.⁴⁷

McLaren is equally slippery on the subject of salvation. He writes, “Instead of ‘If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would spend eternity with God in heaven?’ the new question seems to be, ‘If you live for another thirty years, what kind of person will you become?’”⁴⁸ In McLaren’s book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, after a discussion of heaven, the ostensible author, Dan Poole, asks about those who reject the grace of God. McLaren’s character, Neo, responds, “Why do you always need to ask that question?...Isn’t what I just described to you enough?”⁴⁹ No, it is not enough, but in this subtle way McLaren tries to make us feel guilty for even asking him about hell.⁵⁰ Does McLaren believe that penal substitution happened in the atonement? Though not overt about his denial, McLaren endorsed *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke who writes, “the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father punishing his Son for an offense he has not even committed...If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.”⁵¹ Carson responds, “I have to say it, as kindly but as forcefully as I can, that to my mind, if words mean anything, both McLaren and Chalke have largely abandoned the gospel.”⁵² In his review of McLaren’s book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Al Mohler agrees. Speaking of McLaren, he says, “He claims to uphold,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 34-5.

⁴⁷ Brian McLaren, “Acceptance/Diversity,” sermon in the series, *Inside/Out: Living Out Our Values*, preached July 3, 2007 at Cedar Ridge Community Church, Spencerville, Maryland; Online at: www.brianmclaren.net/archives/multimedia/podcasts.

⁴⁸ Brian McLaren, “Emerging Values,” *Leadership*, 36.

⁴⁹ Carson, *Becoming Conversant*, 168-9.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 185.

⁵² Ibid., 186.

‘consistently, unequivocally, and unapologetically’ the historic creeds of the church, specifically the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. At the same time, however, he denies that truth should be articulated in propositional form, and thus undercuts his own ‘unequivocal’ affirmation.”⁵³ Mohler quotes McLaren, “People who try to label me an exclusivist, inclusivist, or universalist on the issue of hell will find here only more reasons for frustration.”⁵⁴ Thus McLaren is determined not to clearly articulate his views on salvation and thereby get caught and labeled as liberal.

One primary theological theme surfaces among all streams of emerging church thought—that theology and practice should be wed. Emerging leaders are justifiably reacting to an orthodox evangelical Western culture that has born too little spiritual fruit. Instead of functioning in true community, we largely isolate ourselves from each other. Typically, church members rarely appear in each other’s homes sitting at each other’s tables. Additionally, we too infrequently model Christ’s love by focusing on serving the needs of our community and our world. Instead, we too often focus on meeting our own needs and entertaining ourselves. We evangelicals would do well to listen to the emerging church by refocusing and restructuring to develop true community and missionality.

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⁵³ Al Mohler, review of *A Generous Orthodoxy*, by Brian D. McLaren, Posted April 23, 2006 [Cited 8 Nov. 2007]. Online: <http://galatiansc4v16.wordpress.com/2006/04/23/al-mohler%E2%80%99s-thoughtful-rev...>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

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