

Back to the Basics or Back to Egypt: Emergent is Dying...is Origins the Answer?

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Abstract

This paper explores the demise of the emerging church movement. Attention is given to key personalities that shaped the movement, their current view of the emergent movement, and a critique of the Origins Network, an *heir apparent* to emergent.

Introduction

When I was 11, I was introduced to *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. Over the next fifteen years, I read the series at least a dozen times. In 1987, as a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, it dawned on me that I had read and knew *The Chronicles* far better than God's word. As a result, I adopted the pattern of my grandparents, which was to read the Bible through each year. Twenty-two years later, with a growing familiarity with the God's Word, I am still taken aback by the number of times God's people sought to go "back to Egypt."¹

Some sixty-two times, God declared his desire to take his people "out of Egypt" and yet, again and again one reads, "Let us go back to Egypt." From Numbers 14:4, when the people cried, "Let us appoint a leader and go back to Egypt," to Stephen's testimony, declaring in Acts 7:39 "Our forefathers were unwilling to obey him, but pushed him away, and in their hearts turned back to Egypt," Scripture recounts the siren's call Egypt had upon God's people.

The phrase *Back to Egypt* describes the fallen nature that shuns truth and replaces it with images of greener pastures, new beginnings and a false utopia. After only a year in the wilderness, the Israelites reminisced of days back in Egypt, when, "...we sat by pots of meat and ate all the bread we wanted..." (Ex 16:3) and "We remember the free fish we ate in

¹ Ex 14:11-12; 16:1f, 17:3; Num 11:4-5, 14:3-4, 20:5, 21:5, Deu 1:27, 16:17, 28:61; Neh 9:17; Isa 30:2, 31:1, Jer 2:18, 42:15-44:30; Hos 8:13, 9:3; Acts 7:39. All biblical quotations taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003) unless otherwise noted.

Egypt, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic.” (Num 11:5)

Moving forward “three millennia and change,” Vince Lombardi was in his first year as head coach for the Green Bay Packers. “After five losses in a row, Lombardi pulled the team together for a stern talking-to. ‘You forget every basic fundamental about this game, he lectured. Then he picked up a ball and said: ‘Gentlemen, the basics. This is a football!’.”² Maybe something can be learned from Lombardi’s understanding of the importance of the basics.

Currently, several key pastors and church leaders who early-on embraced the Emerging Church, its ideologies, and practices, are now distancing themselves from emergent, emerging, and the various networks associated with the movement. This is happening at the very time the movement appears to be gaining mainstream acceptance.

For those who are abandoning the emergent movement, one possible heir apparent is the fledgling Origins Networks. This paper will explore the similarities, differences, and key personalities of Origins, and attempt to determine if this is another trip “back to Egypt,” or a true back to the basics return to the historical Christian faith.

The Emergent Movement

In the early years of the Emerging Movement (EM), the *conversation* (a non-threatening term used to describe theological and practical issues) focused upon “returning to the basics.” Early conversations frequently centered on house churches, applauding the fact that they did not extract 70% of the budget for staff and buildings. Other conversations included churches that met in coffee houses and other non-threatening locations, and the importance of bi-vocational leaders who contributed more to the church than they received. Later conversations dealt with training—could it be decentralized? How could technology assist young leaders? More questions seemed to emerge than answers, yet the emerging church proponents promised the conversation would lead to solutions.

Part of the solution involved a wave of new churches that embraced winsome approaches to engaging the culture, often drawing upon ancient forms and symbols as well as contemporary technology. To a lesser degree, some existing churches attempted to transition into the emergent movement and mold. Researchers Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger identified, to at least some extent, nine practices common to the

² Donald T. Phillips, *Run to Win: Vince Lombardi on Coaching and Leadership*, (St. Martins: New York, 2002), 92.

emergent movement in their book, *Emerging Churches*. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, (3) live highly communal lives, (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as creative beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.³

No-one really knows when the Emerging/Emergent conversation started. In 1969, William Kalt and Ronald Wilkins, two Roman Catholic leaders, wrote a two-volume book entitled, *The Emerging Church*. However, it has only been in recent years that any reference or connection between this book and the Emergent Movement has been suggested. In 1998, Spencer Burke launched his website, The Ooze, which became the entry point into the conversation for thousands, and was the primary watering-hole for the emergent conversation for several years.

In 1999, the Emergent Village website was launched by Leadership Network, which later changed its name to Emergent. Around this time, the understanding that a movement was taking place was growing. At the time, I was a church planting missionary in California, and took part in many of these early so-called conversations. For many, 2009 marks the 10th Anniversary of the Emerging Movement. However, even after a decade, it is hard to define the movement. Some see the Emerging Church as driven by the internet—placing technology over theology. Others attempt to define the EM by its theology or methodology, still others, especially those outside the movement, such as D.A. Carson, by protest.⁴ In the past five years, some evangelicals, as a conciliatory gesture, have attempted to divide EM into two streams, Emergent (the liberal-moderate stream) and Emerging (the conservative stream).⁵ Ed Stetzer went one step further, viewing the Emerging Church as having three streams, the Relevantists, the Reconstructionists and the Revisionists.⁶ In 2007 Scot McKnight wrote about five streams to the

³ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: creating Christian community in postmodern cultures* (Baker Academic: Grand Rapids, MI, 2005), 44-45.

⁴ D.A. Carson, *Modern Reformation Magazine*, "Faith a La Carte?" (July/August 2005 Issue, Vol. 14.4).

⁵ Much has been written about the two terms, emerging and emergent. For example, Brian McLaren and D.A. Carson view the terms emergent and emerging as synonymous, whereas Mark Driscoll and Scot McKnight make a distinction between these terms.

⁶ Ed Stetzer and David Putnum, *Breaking the Missional Code* (Broadman & Holman Publishers: Nashville, 2006) 188-190.

movement.”⁷ What is clear is that, since 1999, countless websites, blogs, conferences, workshops, network meetings, books, and other forms of the conversation have caught the interest and attention of western Christianity in both the evangelical and mainstream traditions.

In 2004, I raised the following question to my church planting students. “Is the emergent conversation going anywhere?” At the heart of my question was the need to explore whether the EM movement was helping the church experience a radical rebirth of relevance or was this another case of leaders crying, “Let us go back to Egypt,” only to revisit the cultural bankruptcy of previous movements, such as Neo-Orthodoxy, Liberation Theology, and Christian existentialism.⁸ Five years later, many of the early adapters and key leaders in the movement seem to be saying, “Get out of Egypt and back to the basics.”

In January 2009, *Christianity Today* published an article entitled, “Emergent’s Divergence.” Brandon O’Brian wrote, “Emergent Village’s board of directors move to eliminate its national coordinator position (thus, letting go Tony Jones) marked the latest sign that the movement is either decentralizing or disintegrating.”⁹

The *Christianity Today* article was only one of the recent signs that the emergent movement, or EM, is unraveling. However, it was unique in that it was the first widely read indicator, and it was a print version rather than emergent’s preferred electronic format. Among leading blog editors, however, the devaluation of the emerging church movement has been raging for over a year.

On August 8, 2008, Andrew Jones, whose Tall Skinny Kiwi website is considered by many to be one of the most influential emergent websites, wrote, “Emerging Church. Music to some and fingernails on blackboard to others. Should we use this term or not as we launch another project?”¹⁰

⁷ Scot McNight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key elements of the most controversial and misunderstood movement in the church today,” *Christianity Today*, February 2007, Vol. 51, No. 2.

⁸ Rodney A. Harrison, Lecture on the emerging church. Course: Strategies and Methods for Starting New Churches, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kansas City, MO, May 10, 2004.

⁹ Brandon O’Brian, *Christianity Today*, “Emergent’s Divergence” January 2009, Volume 53, Number 1.

¹⁰ Andrew Jones, <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2008/08/emerging-church.html>, “Emerging Church: Use the word or Dump it?” Posted August 8, 2008, accessed September 1, 2008.

A month later, Url Scaramanga posted a thread on the *Christianity Today* blog site entitled, “R.I.P. Emerging Church.” In his post, he notes several sources who suggest the Emerging Church will disappear.¹¹

On December 30, 2008, Jonathan Brink, Managing Director of Thrive Ministries, expressed concern about the health of the Emergent Movement in a piece he wrote for Emergent Village. In this article, Brinks notes, “Dan Kimball and Scot McKnight started a new network, the (tentatively titled) *Origins Project*...perhaps it was inevitable. For many it felt like a splintering of sorts.”¹²

Ironically, as the captains of the good ship “HMS Emergent” are issuing an S.O.S., mainline denominations are just now coming on board. The Presbyterian Church USA has launched its Emerging Worship Initiative,¹³ The United Methodists have set sail with *emergingumc*,¹⁴ and the Center for Action and Contemplation (CAC) of the Roman Catholic Church hosted the first-ever Catholic-Emergent conference in March 2009.¹⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention entered the conversation at the Convergence Conference hosted by Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, in September 2007.¹⁶ Talk about rearranging the deck chairs on a sinking ship.

Returning to the January 2009 edition of *Christianity Today*, O’Brian continues, “...several thinkers once associated with emergent, including pastor Dan Kimball and professor Scot McKnight, have formed a new network provisionally called Origins, dedicated to friends, pioneers, innovators, and catalysts who want to dream and work for the gospel together...”¹⁷

These leaders are sensing that the original verve of the emerging movement is gone. Gone are the meaningful conversations that, at one

¹¹ Url Scaramanga, http://blog.christianitytoday.com/outofur/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html, Christianity Today OutOfUR Blog, “R.I.P. Emerging Church,” Posted September 18, 2008, accessed March 1, 2009.

¹² Jonathan Brink, <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-state-of-emergence>, “The State of Emergent,” Posted December 30, 2008, accessed February 28, 2009.

¹³ Emerging Worship Initiative, Office of Theology and Worship, <http://www.pcusa.org/theologyandworship/whatwedo/emerging.htm>, accessed March 10, 2009.

¹⁴ *Emergingumc*, <http://emergingumc.blogspot.com/>, Posted January 30, 2006, accessed March 8, 2009.

¹⁵ The Center for Action and Contemplation, <http://www.cacradicalgrace.org/conferences/emer/>, accessed February 28, 2009.

¹⁶ Baptist Press, Conference Examines the Emerging Church, <http://www.baptistpress.org/bpnews.asp?id=26495>, Posted September 25, 2007.

¹⁷ Christianity Today, Vol 53:1

time, defined emergent. For example, web-traffic on the Emergentvillage.com, as of March 12, 2009, is down 44.9% from a year ago.¹⁸ These once meaningful conversations have been replaced with bitter debates about what is, and is not, emergent. However, the desire to foster creative discussion and to network remains.

A Critique of Origins

The earliest reference to the Origins Project was in 2004. At a church-sponsored conference, Erwin McManus, pastor of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, shared his vision of a new missional network. One participant wrote, “Erwin was candid about his thoughts on current church movements, especially the emergent church. He felt like the emergent movement was a reaction to the traditional church and not necessarily a reaction to God’s call for mission.”¹⁹ Since 2004, annual conferences under the Origins Project have been held. In 2008, the decision was made to launch a new network, and thus establish a new conversation. The Origins Update by Dan Kimball notes, “Origins is a network/community being birthed for those who are passionate about Jesus, Humanity and Innovation.”²⁰

The first distinction of the Origins network to the Emergent Movement is its theological mooring. According to the Origins website the movement consists of “Leaders, entrepreneurs, pastors, misfits, and artists who share a high view of Scripture and a radical commitment to evangelism while being faithfully committed to what is expressed in the Lausanne Covenant.”²¹ Unlike the Emerging Movement, which has fought hard to avoid absolutes—including faith statements—Origins embraces the Lausanne Covenant. Acts 29 is another network that with theological moorings—adhere to both the Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds. However, Acts 29 requires membership, dues, and a reformed

¹⁸ Web site analysis done by the author at Siteanalytics.com shows the unique visitors to Emergent Village was down 44.9% in the past 12 months. Source, <http://siteanalytics.compete.com/emergentvillage.com/?metric=uv>, accessed March 12, 2009.

¹⁹ Brian Orme, An Uprising: Origins Conference, [http://www.the-next-wave.org/stories/storyReader\\$330](http://www.the-next-wave.org/stories/storyReader$330). Posted June 6, 2004, accessed February 10, 2009.

²⁰ Origins Update, <http://originsproject.org/?p=661>, “Origins blog.” Posted August 31, 2009, accessed September 3, 2009.

²¹ Origins, <http://theoriginsproject.org/>, “Origins home page.” Posted December 22, 2008, accessed March 11, 2009.

theological position.²² Ironically, visitors to the Origins website are already posting their thoughts, some suggesting the Lausanne Covenant is too vague, while others argue that the Covenant is too constraining.

Another distinction can be observed from the key players in Origins. Dan Kimball, Dave Gibbons, Rick McKinley, Mark Batterson, and Erwin McManus pastor congregations that are theologically conservative and evangelical. So far, none of them have left the pastorate out of dissatisfaction with church or in order to devote “full-time” to the movement.²³ Other members of the team include Scot McNight, a conservative evangelical professor and Skye Jethani, blog editor for *Christianity Today*.

Nevertheless, Origins has much in common with the Emergent Movement. Using Gibbs’ nine practices, it could be said that Origins is promoting the emergent agenda. Origins invites “Missionally-minded people from different backgrounds who use different methods in different cultural contexts but share the same experimental passion and risk-taking heart for serving, loving, and helping people connect to God through Jesus.”²⁴ The openness to experimentation, risk-taking and different backgrounds, cultural contexts and the use of diverse methods is similar to the Emerging Church. As noted earlier, the network is open to “misfits, and artists...”

The primary communication media for Origins is the internet. Twitter, Facebook, and, to a lesser degree, websites, have brought Origins into the limelight, much as websites and messaging boards did for the Emergent Movement.

Another common theme is “cost.” The Origins Network is hosting a series of conferences called “Catalyst” at \$289 per registrant plus \$129 for the “Origins Labs.” Thus, the succession of conferences to explain, promote, and disseminate information continues in the spirit of the Purpose Driven and Seeker Sensitive conferences of the contemporary church and the Emergence conferences of the emerging church.

So, is the Origins Project helping leaders return to the basics of the Christian Faith or is it another example of God’s people wanting to return to the false utopia of Egypt? The key players would claim the former. I would argue for the latter.

²² Acts 29, <http://acts29network.org/plant-a-church/application-process/>, accessed March 11, 2009.

²³ Several Emerging Church leaders have left the local church to pursue consulting emergent ministries, including Spencer Burke, Jonathan Campbell, and Brian McLaren.

²⁴ Origins, <http://theoriginsproject.org/>, accessed March 11, 2009.

In 2002, “What is wrong with Contemporary” was the focus Darren Rowse’s early (and popular) blog, LivingRoom.²⁵ Most of the reasons listed for Gen-X’s rebuff on the contemporary church (the movement having been institutionalized, having gone mainstream, becoming exegetically and theologically bankrupt, and baby-boom generation driven) could today be transposed upon the Emergent Movement by simply updating the generational tag. In the same way, I would postulate that in ten years (or less) another new movement will appear. In hindsight, these movements are often more evolutionary than they are revolutionary.

I applaud the fact that the leaders of the Origins movement have restored theological and evangelistic absolutes as essentials to the conversation. However, what I believe is ultimately needed is for pastors and church leaders to equip members with a sound ecclesiology that is rooted and grounded in Scripture. Knowledge of the cultural and historical events that have shaped, and sometimes deformed the church, are important backdrops, but can become superfluous to a biblical ecclesiology. Is embracing the latest and greatest network, movement or conversation really staying on the cutting edge? Or is it responding to the never ending call to return to Egypt? Is the church really in need of a new playbook? I believe is it time for pastors and teachers of the Word to prepare a good lecture that begins with, “Ladies and Gentlemen, the basics. This is a church.”

²⁵ Darren Rowse, http://www.livingroom.org.au/blog/archives/what_is_wrong_with_contemporary.php#comments, “What’s Wrong with Contemporary Worship,” Posted December 9, 2002, accessed December 23, 2008.