

Emerging Churches and the Gospel of Jesus Christ

By Reid S. Monaghan © 2007

Introduction

One might say that the last decade or so has been a bit interesting in terms of evangelical Christianity and its relationship to culture and the coming generations in the West. It has been a time of soul searching dialogue and conversation about all manner of issues. Many have realized that there have been immense cultural shifts in western culture which has brought us to a new situation for the life of the church. Gone are the days where the Christian faith was the dominant story in the common consciousness. Gone are the days where it could be assumed that most people had their lives, or at least their literary lives, shaped by the stories and text of the Holy Bible. Gone are the days when the gospel could be shared with the assumption that there were general shared meanings with terms like God, sin, salvation, Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven. This is reality today in many western cultures. Europe and Australia are perhaps further down this cultural trajectory, but America is not far behind in its popular conceptions of Christian ideas. Parts of America, segments of the west coast and the northeast, are every bit as secular and post Christian as the European nation states. What to do?

Intellectuals have long seen these shifts coming, but ideas take time to arrive across the horizons of the masses. Even longer to make it to populations who have valued cultural reclusion and isolation as much of the Christian subculture has since the early 20th century. Indeed, skepticism and rejection of certain ideas is as old as history but today we have seen a change in our cultural beliefs and values which has come across at all levels of culture. So what is the church to do? Some Christians in every era simply reinvent the faith to match the cultural ideas and sensibilities of the age. This was the case with 19th century liberal theology which did its best to put spiffy new clothes on Jesus and recreate him for the scientific age. What was left was a nice man, who taught nice things, whose followers invented fairy tales about him which were found “unacceptable to the modern scientific mind.” It was a Jesus that looked very much like his creators, but very little like the Jesus of Scripture. Other Christians choose to fight, to separate from the world and loft bombs over walls towards non Christian teaching and lifestyles. Others have taken a path of engagement, living among new cultural ideas while holding fast to the Christian gospel and seeking to reach people who are influenced by new mindsets. I think this actually happens continuously in every age and in the lives of countless Christians.

I think much of the conversation today around the church’s response to “postmodernism” or the “post colonial, post imperial, post Christendom” West has to do with how we relate Christ to culture today. Should the church join the “post” party? Should she pick up the medieval battle ax or the modernist howitzer and fight? Should she engage? And if so, what must change? What should emerge? Hence we arrive on the scene of contemporary western Christianity. Some desire a revision of all things to fit the current cultural milieu and ideas, others desire to pick fights – usually with Darwin or others who are navigating the hazy middle. Is that middle way a place of relevance with faithfulness? Or is it just another slow road to heresy?

The conversation that lives under the names “emerging or emergent” church is the story of people who have taken up the task to try to be the church in this era. There has been much deconstruction of “how we do church,” there has been much “generative friendship” and dialogue and many are charting various courses towards a new day for Christian faith. Some see a coming revolution which has little to do with churches. Others see a complete revision of all things – they fly the flag of the Emergent Village. Another sees a resurgence of reformed biblical teaching living as missionaries very much within the cultures of our day.

In this piece I have a few modest goals. First, I want to give a short history of some of the emerging conversation and the critiques being offered to the church today. In giving the history I will allow two views to talk about the various streams and movements making up the emerging church conversation. I will then talk about some of the good and bad coming from the discussion and will do this using the terms deconstruction and construction. Deconstruction is to take apart things we do, ask questions and prophetically call into question in order to bring change. Construction is to form praxis and doctrine, living and teaching. This perhaps may create new forms, but the goal is to take the eternal

and bring it effectively into the now. I find both deconstruction and constructive moves needed for true re-form to take place. In conclusion I will offer some thoughts as to a way forward with faithfulness and relevant church life in culture. But before we jump into a history of the emerging conversation, allow me to confess who I am and how I have been influenced in the emerging dialogue.

My story in brief...

I grew up outside of the Christian church. I had no religious life other than a few visits to a Baptist church at about age 4 and a few trips to mass with my Irish Catholic grandmother who thought we would end up in limbo if we died as unbaptized kids. My Dad had left the Catholicism of his youth while in college and no longer believed in Jesus. So, my brother and I were unbaptized Irish kids, a strange thing, but we really didn't care. In the 11th grade after reading a work by Voltaire, I think it was *Candide*, I declared myself a deist. A fun thing for a 17 year old to do - that allowed me to believe in science and keep god out of my life. It was at the end of my freshman year of college that I heard about the message of Jesus in the Bible. At the beginning of my sophomore year I began to follow him. I was on a wrestling scholarship at UNC Chapel Hill and studying physics when Jesus started messing with my life. I could have cared less if a church sung hymns, choruses or Christian rock stuff - to be honest I had never really heard much of it anyway. It did not matter to me whether a preacher wore a robe, a tie, flip flops or blue jeans. To be honest, church was weird for me culturally, but I was just happy to belong to Jesus. After college I married my best friend from UNC, Kasey Monroe, who I met as a soccer player for the big time UNC women's team. She grew up Southern Baptist, so she knew that world. After our wedding we went on staff with Athletes in Action, the sports ministry with Campus Crusade for Christ. We spent most of our time working with non Christians and Christians who cared to connect with non Christians on their campus.

My questioning nature and non Christian background led me to the intellectual traditions of the faith and I soon loved to read philosophy, theology and the history of both. I just had so many questions and I needed to learn. As we were involved with campus ministry and young folks I began to read web sites such as theooze.com, faithmaps.com and next-wave.com and began hearing about "the new thing coming today." Sometimes it went by "reaching Gen X" or "postmodern ministry", other times it was just a big complaining session about why the church sucked so badly. Usually it was we must change or die, we might miss the next wave, you better get with the new new thing, sort of stuff. This led to reading more and discussing postmodernisms: in hermeneutics, critical theory, philosophy, language etc. I read essays by Rorty, Derrida, Foucault et al...During this season I was also taking some philosophy classes at Virginia Tech and discussing critical theory with a friend who was doing doctoral work at Princeton seminary. At this time I also started reading Brian McLaren's web site and some of his books as he seemed to be on tour like a rock star talking about how everything had changed and we needed to be new kinds of Christians. At first I thought Christians were using the term "postmodern" to just describe doing church differently. People wanted to use incense and candles, use technology and bring back various forms of the long tradition of the church. Worship needed to be EPIC - experiential, participatory, image based and communal. That was probably all there was to it. It was then I realized there was much more going on and some were advocating changing just about everything. There were smart guys who understood postmodern thought and wanted to remake Christianity - all aspects of it - in the image of the current ideology of the day.

At this time I was asked to come be a pastor in the Nashville, TN area - for me a strange place where following Jesus was either a given or a pain in the neck to many with whom I talked. I met young Christians who grew up in church world and they loved to complain about "the way we do church." At times I could not tell if they even wanted to be Christians anymore - they sounded very much like some of the people I was reading in the emerging conversation. So I listened...we had some long meetings talking about stuff and I listened some more.

I began this thing called Inversion, a young adult ministry which began with a bunch of church people. I love the people of Inversion and they have become dear friends. I am writing this primarily because I care for their vision of Jesus. I have followed the emerging dialogue with some interest and on some days feeling like many in the conversation were my brothers, other days I hated the words I read. So I guess I am pretty ambivalent about all things emerging. Some things I find very helpful in the

conversation and other things I find horrendous. Yes, it is that polarized for me. I am no big player in the debate in that I have not sought to write books on the subject, nor am I a conference hopper or trying to be some big commenter on all the blogs. I have kept my head down in ministry, but slowly have come to some of my own thoughts within the dialogue.

Here is where I am - my theology is shaped by Scripture with a strong appreciation church history, hopefully with some humility in light of 2000 years of Christian faith. My heart is moved by Jesus' mission with lost people and I see things through that grid. I most align with the reformed resurgence, a movement of young pastors who love the Bible and think culture is not comprehensively evil just because it is outside of the church. Many reading this will judge my words because of who I am friends with or who I do not know...or where I am studying theology in my free time. It is a Baptist institution after all. I will be judged because I have not had a beer with Brian McLaren so I do not have the right to comment on his very public words. I don't care - I am a pastor who cares both about the church and culture, about thoughtful engagement and the reality of eternity as described by Jesus Christ. So my goals are to be gracious and truthful to the way I see things.

So as we begin I want to look at a few ways some have described the emerging conversation - just picking these guys will tick some people off, but c'est la vie. So we begin.

Streams of Emerging Churches

According to Doug Pagitt

Doug Pagitt, is a pastor at Solomon's Porch an emerging church in Minneapolis, and on the guiding team of the Emergent Village. The Emergent Village is an organization who describes its dreams as "to join in the activity of God in the world wherever we are able, partnering with God as God's dreams for our world come true. In the process, the world can be healed and changed, and so can we."¹ In their book *Emerging Churches* Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger state how Padgett categorizes the responses to the current cultural context. Padgett describes three responses:

(1) a return to the Reformation (e.g., Mars Hill in Seattle); (2) deep systemic changes, but Christianity and the church are still in the center and theological changes are not needed (e.g., University Baptist Church in Waco and Mosaic in Los Angeles); and (3) seeing the church as not necessarily the center of God's intentions. God is working in the world, and the church has the option to join God or not. This third approach focuses more on the kingdom than on the church, and it reflects the perspective of Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis and characterizes what Pagitt would classify as emerging.²

So in Pagitt's thinking, some are returning to the teachings of the protestant reformation and centering these in the context of the contemporary culture, others are making systemic changes, changes in form, but not altering substantially the theology of the church. The third way, of which he is a part, is rethinking/reimagining everything with the kingdom of God at the center. The idea of the kingdom of God is an important theme to pick up on even at this early stage of this paper, we'll grab this again in an appendix at the conclusion of the article.

According to Mark Driscoll/Ed Stetzer

Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church and president of the Acts 29 church planting network³ follows the work of missiologist Ed Stetzer in his classification of the emerging church. Driscoll is an interesting case as he was very much involved in the late nineties with much of what became the emerging church movement. In the late nineties he was involved in something called the Young Leaders Network, a group seeking to reach out to Gen X and emerging generations. He spoke with a group of young pastors around the country on reaching young folks for Jesus and responding to the

¹ *Emergent Village*, (accessed September 27 2007); available from <http://www.emergentvillage.org/>.

² Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 43.

³ For the purpose of disclosure I am in the process of planting a church with Acts 29 and affiliated with the network.

shift to a postmodern world. Some of the pastors connected and moved on to start the Emergent Village with Brian McLaren, while Driscoll parted ways to focus on Mars Hill and church planting efforts. Anyway, with Driscoll/Stetzer there are three streams of emerging churches as well.⁴⁵

Relevants and Reformed Relevants

Relevants would be evangelicals who see the changing cultural milieu and desire to reach and/or keep the next generation in the church. They see no need to reinvent the church's theology but rather to re-present and live the faith amidst a postmodern culture. When speaking of this group Ed Stetzer remarks:

There are a good number of young (and not so young) leaders who some classify as "emerging" that really are just trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture. Ironically, while some may consider them liberal, they are often deeply committed to biblical preaching, male pastoral leadership and other values common in conservative evangelical churches.⁶

In addition, Driscoll includes those whom he calls "Reformed Relevants" who are concerned with reaching emerging culture but also have a reformed theological vision and look to men such as John Piper, Tim Keller and D.A. Carson as theological guides.⁷

Reconstructionists

Another group is broadly evangelical in theology but sees certain modern church forms such as the mega churches spawned by the seeker and purpose driven movements⁸ and sees problems for relating the gospel to people today. They do not like the willowback model and desire to reconstruct simpler more organic church forms such as house churches and neo monastic communities. Ed Stetzer has said something wise regarding the reconstructionists: *Don't want a building, a budget and a program? OK. Don't want the Bible, scriptural leadership, covenant community? Not OK.*⁹ The forms of these churches are very much biblical...as long as they remain biblical. God has given the church his Word, rightful authority to live in a community defined by the new covenant. As long as these remain – small, networked, organic churches are not only permissible, but can be a wonderful and effective expression of the church.

Revisionists

Driscoll categorizes this stream as theologically liberal who have and are openly questioning key evangelical doctrines. Much of the revisionist's project is reimagining or repainting actual Christian teachings in order to fit the current culture. The most active voices in this stream are the leaders of the Emergent Village – the aforementioned Pagitt, Brian McLaren, Tony Jones and mainline pastors such as Karen Ward. McLaren's forthcoming book and tour is entitled "Everything must change" – the revisionists say this with a startling literalism. They really are out to change Christian teaching to reflect the current age.

⁴ Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Reflection on the Emerging Church," *Criswell Theological Review* 3, no. 2 (2006).

⁵ Ed Stetzer, *Understanding the Emerging Church* (Baptist Press, 2006, accessed September 29 2007); available from <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406>.

⁶ *Ibid.* (accessed).

⁷ Driscoll.

⁸ Seeker churches would be represented by the Willow Creek Association and typically hold services for "seekers" where felt needs are the primary topic of preaching, religious symbols have been largely removed from worship and the Sunday service plays host to drama and engaging musical performances. Bible teaching and the Lord's Supper typically take place in a midweek context for believers. Purpose Driven churches are patterned after the work of Rick Warren and Saddleback Community Church where specific target audiences are focused upon with church growth principles and the church are built on four the "purposes" of worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and missions.

⁹ Stetzer, (accessed).

Emerging vs. Emergent

It is perhaps helpful to differentiate between two terms used in discussing the evangelical response or engagement with the current culture. The terms *emerging* and *emergent* describe very different movements who have responded in different directions to the culture realities in the West. The term emerging has been used to describe how the church should contextualize (connect and communicate) the gospel in emerging cultures. So many would accept being called an emerging church if what is meant is the following:

- We are called to be missionaries in culture, not isolationists who separate from those we are called to reach with the gospel.
- A real shift has taken place in western culture – it is not all to be embraced but we must be awake to the changing ideological and pop cultural frameworks around us.
- A view that in some ways we need to deconstruct some current church paradigms which are ineffective and dying off in Western culture.
- That there is not an eternal culture which has come down from heaven, one that is shaped by certain sensibilities from Europe and America. Some of the music, forms, dress, idiom, etc. are no longer understandable to many non Christians today and change is needed.
- Many are being led by converts to Jesus who were not bound to a tradition and are at home in the native culture of America yet called out by God to holiness and forward in mission by inerrant Scripture.
- They love the church and think ecclesiology (theology of the church and its structures) is very important.
- They believe the church is God’s Plan A in the process of taking the saving gospel to all peoples.

Many who might not reject the term emerging are theologically conservative yet culturally engaged. They are very home in biblical teaching and contemporary culture. They see truth as transcendent, propositional and revealed in Scripture, but also personal in that we encounter truth in Jesus Christ.

As mentioned before, *Emergent* is led with some similar concerns but has sought to reimagine theology to be in line with the cultural idea of the moment. All theology is to be temporary and ever changing.¹⁰ The analogy that Doug Pagitt has used is that in every era the church must create a theology that dances well with the culture. Salsa needs a certain type of music, as does a waltz. Each culture needs to remake a Christianity to dance well with its own ideas and imagination.¹¹ My question is who is leading the dance – revelation from a transcendent God or the god of my cultural imagination. It seems for the Emergent crowd that culture, tradition and Scripture are all on equal footing in the dance. You mix them up and come up with something for the current day. I find this deeply troubling, but I am getting ahead of myself.

So this is how the discussion is being talked about from two different visions of the church moving into the 21st century. But why did the conversation “emerge” in the first place. To understand this let us look at some of the questions which are being asked by this generation and how this led to some helpful deconstruction. So let’s go off into the woods of deconstruction and ask some questions? Why is the church so jacked up and beautiful, troubling and divinely loved by God as the bride of Christ. The church is still God’s Plan A in his redemptive purposes in the world, but she is in process.

Deconstruction, Deconstruction...What’s Your Function?

Sometimes you just need to take a few steps back and look at the “whys” behind what we are doing. It is very easy for us as Americans to domesticate life, tame it for our enjoyment and then fall to sleep in the boredom of our own creation. I think we even die in our safety and self orientation and sometimes don’t even know it. The church can be no different. We can be doing things for years and not really

¹⁰ Robert Webber and others, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches : Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 121-123.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 128-129.

know why we are doing them. Lines that we walk in become deep ruts and ditches; sometimes it seems like you can never get out unless something drastic takes place. The questions many have asked in the emerging conversation surround many issues and they have not all been received well by those in positions of evangelical power. Many people do not like change; it is threatening. Many people also do not like people who ask critical questions about what we are doing. Yet I think questions are necessary for growth, for reform, for learning and for making good and helpful change.

As the culture has shifted and the influence of Christian faith has waned there have been several approaches to culture.¹² Some evangelicals have continued in a culture war where certain social ills are fought through rhetoric, protests and political engagement. Others have questions whether declaring war on those to whom we are called to reach is a wise decision. Ed Stetzer compares the culture to someone's house and thinks we need to engage with culture not simply yell at it.

*Preaching against culture is like preaching against someone's house—it is just where they live. The house has good in it and bad in it. Overall, culture can be a mess—but (to mix metaphors) it is the water in which we swim and the lens through which we see the world. And the gospel needs to come, inhabit, and change that and every culture (or house).*¹³

If culture is someone's house, maybe we should engage with it, come over once in a while, and perhaps even move into the neighborhood. This however has its concerns as we are called by God to maintain our distinctive calling as Christians to holiness and discipleship to Jesus. We are called to live in culture but yet still live counter culturally as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Hence many started asking questions about how we might do this relevantly and faithfully. So deconstruction and the asking of why was very much a part of the early days of emerging evangelicals and many of these questions proved helpful in showing us just how culturally captive the American church had become. Or as Nancy Pearcey entitled a chapter of one of her recent books "When Christianity met America—Guess Who Won?"¹⁴ Now onto some questions and the asking of "why?"

Helpful Questions

Question – Why do we not care more about the poor? The Scriptures and Jesus talk so much about this as a focus and a test of genuine faith for the people of God?

The emerging conversation has brought out the important Scriptural issues of justice and mercy to the poor, ground long ceded by many evangelicals to "liberals who just preach a social gospel." There are many moral issues which challenge us in every age. Should we not be living to serve and help the poor, oppressed and marginalized in society? Even those who think that the issues of abortion and sexuality to be of high importance must realize that there are also other moral issues in our communities today.

Additionally, is there not a witness to be had in culture simply by doing good to others. Is this not the impetus of Matthew 5:16? That our good works would be visible and would lead to the praise of God? How are we helping the good of all people, not just representing "our causes" – is there a common good we can serve in the name of Christ and a proper view of good works in culture as a part of the church's witness. Why did so many evangelical churches flee to the suburbs and leave the inner cities? Do we care about the plight of America's urban centers and the urban poor? Has the church become captive to one political party?

¹² Many have written at great length about these matters so I will not repeat those discussions. Many have been helped by and engaged with the five options spelled out by Richard Niebuhr in his work *Christ and Culture*. *Christ against Culture*, *Christ of Culture*, *Christ above Culture*, *Christ and Culture in Paradox*, and *Christ Transforming Culture*. Basically the tension is found in not wanting to compromise with the culture, nor be completely isolated from people who live in culture.

¹³ The above quote is from Ed Stetzer, *Church and Contemporary Culture—Always a Challenge* (Catalyst, 2007, accessed October 2 2007); available from <http://www.catalystspace.com/content/monthly/detail.aspx?i=1198&m=01&y=2007>.

¹⁴ Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth : Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004), 273-294.

Many evangelicals such as Robert Lewis¹⁵ have championed good works in our communities as a compelling witness to the gospel in our day. Others such as John Perkins and the Christian Community Development Association¹⁶ have pressed us further urging relocation, reconciliation and redistribution to serve broken communities and rebuild the walls of our cities. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, has stated forcefully if the church does not recover the biblical vision of caring for the poor, she will be utterly ineffective in the post Christian urban centers of America.

Question – How do we apply the principles of biblical missiology (reaching out to others with the gospel) to the emerging North American mission field?

With the shifting of ideas in Western Culture, many are urging that we see North America as a mission field. Much of Europe today is already a place which desperately needs the replanting of the gospel in that soil. Many parts of America, the Pacific Northwest and the Northeast, are almost as unreached as any place in the world. Many in the emerging conversation have reshaped the role of church as a missionary people in culture. In my opinion, this is the very nature of the church and it is a return to the life and function of the church in the apostolic era. The work of men such as David Bosch, Darrel Guder, Leslie Newbigin, George Hunsberger, Roland Allen and Ed Stetzer have been influential in thinking through how to be the church and engage our culture as missionaries. Though these men are not of the same theological species, their work on being missionaries in culture has been appreciated by those in the emerging discussions. Mark Driscoll's first book, *The Radical Reformation*, is a popular level treatment of how the church might live as missionaries in culture. Or as he put it, how do we live out a radical reformation, reaching out without selling out the biblical gospel.¹⁷

Question – Why do we have such a consumerist mindset in much of modern evangelicalism?

We agree that the faith is much too precious to reduce to bumper sticker and coffee mug slogans. Sometimes the arms race of building multimillion dollar facilities with a food court just like the mall can be a bit much. Much of the mega church movement has driven serious thought out of the pulpit, theological reflection banished from much of the church's discourse and dealing with the complex questions of life in the 21st century has been replaced by three point slogans which do not help when talking about Jesus with real and thoughtful non Christians. Hence, the emerging conversation has reacted against much of the consumerist peddling of holy things and the lack of engagement with God. I personally spoke to a friend recently whose father in law had visited a conservative Anglican community and a mega church. The man, an unbeliever, responded...one seemed more about God, the other seemed more about catering to the people there. He liked both but the difference was striking. Much of the emerging response to the mega church is overstated, angry and reactionary. Case in point is Bill Kinnon's *The People Formerly Known as the Congregation*.¹⁸ It is not always a charitable rant and it is a bit full of gross generalizations. If you read it and are part of a church that might be in his crosshairs, you might even get a bit angry. But you should listen at least to what is being articulated. On many occasions I have personally sat with young Christians and heard quite similar frustrations and concerns.

Questions – Why are we so infatuated with our individuality? Is the church not a community of people called together by God?

I find the rejection of a radical individualism and the focus on true community in the church to be helpful. God has always had "a covenant people" made up of individuals, not simply individuals who simply relate privately with God. One cannot even take one step to obey the teaching of Jesus and the apostles if sitting alone in a room by oneself. To love, to forgive, to live in unity, to not

¹⁵ Robert Lewis and Rob Wilkins, *The Church of Irresistible Influence* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001).

¹⁶ See the excellent book John Perkins, *With Justice for All* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1982).

¹⁷ Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation - Reaching out without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2004). See chapter 1, eat, drink and be a merry missionary.

¹⁸ Bill Kinnon, *The People Formerly Known as the Congregation*(2007, accessed March 2007); available from http://www.kinnon.tv/2007/03/the_people_form.html.

grumble, to encourage, to rebuke, to build up, to correct, to confess, to repent, to preach the gospel...it means will live in community with the family of God. That community has structure and leaders but it should not be a community of hierarchical power, but of humble and obedient servants under a great King. The emerging conversation has turned into a mob of opinion without any authority present – perhaps a sort of hyper Protestantism – but this excess does not minimize the biblical emphasis on the church as a covenant community.

Question – Did Christianity Begin in the 20th century? Or are there long and biblically faithful traditions that we can look to for guidance and practice?

There has been a deep desire to connect to the past and the great tradition of the Christian faith throughout the ages. The love for connection to our ancient teachings has expressed itself in many ways among those emerging. You hear terms like vintage, creed and sacred buzzing among this generation. I think this is a good thing – we should want a vintage Jesus, value the ecumenical creeds and see God and church as holy and sacred in a world that is so soaked in the profane.

Question – Do not the arts matter for the glory of God?

The reformation and rediscovery of the arts by Christians in the emerging world is also a prominent trend. Many artists sense a deep reflection of the glory of God as creatures made in the image of the most creative Creator. Again, there are excesses. Some exalt tradition over Scripture with anything found in history given a place in the church. Some artists may neglect biblical truth for the following of existential moments and unguided mystical feelings. There are pitfalls and dangers, but I find the rediscovery of church history and the arts to be a positive thing which has emerged.

Question – Is the Gospel Just About Going to Heaven when I die?

There is a proper emphasis about Jesus saving us from sin, death and hell. But should we not teach how to live in the way of Jesus now? Are we just waiting around to die or for the rapture? We do not want to treat the gospel as a get out of hell free card that does not affect the way we live now. It seems that many evangelicals are living no differently than the rest of the world, but are secure in that they have a heavenly passport in their pocket. Are there more gospel implications for living an eternal kind of life now that is more than mere sin management?¹⁹

These have been good questions asked by many in the emerging church conversation. In many ways they have been a move of deconstruction—the asking of why and poking holes through some of the idols of contemporary church life. When the church gets too comfortable I believe God graciously sends some questioners. In my opinion much of the deconstruction has been immature, angry and ungodly, the voice of the children of fundamentalist leaning churches who were never allowed to speak. To be quite honest some of my own questioning has not always been presented to others in a kind and gracious manner. Yet I hope some will see that the struggle to be faithful to the biblical Jesus should result in caring about justice, caring about the poor, caring about the good of our neighbors (temporally and eternally), not making our faith a marketed trinket for religious consumers, living in authentic community, connecting with our shared church history and the arts have all been good byproducts of the emerging conversation. But guess what. You don't need postmodernism or any other cultural mood to derive these – we just have to look to and follow the Jesus of Scripture. But that is hard for us as GK Chesterton once observed, "*the Christian ideal has not been found tried and found wanting it has become difficult and left untried.*"²⁰

However, once we ask our questions we must know where to look to find our path in the future. Do we look to ourselves or to Scripture? Do we build something in our own image or do we follow Christ into culture with God's revelation in Scripture as the authoritative rule and guide? This is where many in the emerging conversation have taken a path deeper and deeper into the woods and in my opinion are

¹⁹ This language is taken from the first two chapters of Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 1-60.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Image Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2001).

losing their way. All things being built today are not equal and many have deep and troubling consequences for the gospel and the souls of women and men.

Construction – What Now Should We Build?

- Who is Jesus?
- What is the Gospel?
- What is your view of homosexual practice?
- How do you view the atonement...do you think the substitutionary view is in error?
- Is Hell a reality?
- What is the role of Scripture in your community?
- What do you believe?
- What do you teach?
- How will we live?

These are reasonable questions many people in the emerging world have simply not answered concretely or directly. The spirit of our age is one of postmodern deconstruction, indirect teaching, subversive narratives, etc. Yet our calling to our brothers and sisters in Christ is not to deconstruct them, evade them or subvert them. It is to love them. The apostle Paul taught the ancient Corinthian Christians that the nature of ministry is that by *the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God.*

Once the questions are asked, solutions must be given. We must live and teach and preach Jesus in this culture and much of the emerging dialogue has brought forth deep concerns with what is actually going on under the surface in the ideas and teaching of certain men. The emerging crowd echoes over and over again that one voice does not speak for all. This of course is true. Yet when certain men teach certain things and begin to construct a new Christianity, a new gospel and go on tour to tell the world, men involved in the conversation have a duty to the church to speak. Many over the years have waited for certain men to begin to state what they really believe in ways people can understand. People have begun to build their new emergent views and the picture I see is becoming more and more troubling. In recent days the leaders of the Emergent Village have actually published some of their ideas with some clarity. Doug Pagitt in *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches*, Brian McLaren in a *Reading of John 14*, the *Secret Message of Jesus* and the new *Everything Must Change*. In addition, Rob Bell has had both Pagitt and McLaren in his pulpit, articulated a questionable hermeneutical framework,²¹ and has openly stated that, though he believes in it, the virgin birth of Jesus is not essential to maintaining faithful Christian doctrine.²²

In this final section I will focus on some things I see in the new construction work which I find as a deviation from Scripture. I will quote the actual words of some of Emergent's teachers under some of my own headers and share why I think these issues are so important. A thorough engagement of all these issues requires much more rigor than I can provide here, so I refer anyone to the footnotes for deeper study. It is with sadness that I see much of what is being proffered today. Most of the time in the form of blogs, books and conferences a new gospel is being presented which is couched in half truths and therefore incomplete and deadly. It is to the generation which I love and pastor that many of these things are pitched. I write this with no joy of heart.

²¹ Jeff Robinson, *Engaged by the Culture: Michigan Megachurch Goes Egalitarian* (Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, September 27, 2004 2004, accessed October 3 2007); available from <http://www.cbmw.org/Blog/Posts/Engaged-by-the-culture-Michigan-megachurch-goes-egalitarian>. For more on redemptive movement or trajectory hermeneutics see Wayne Grudem, "Redemptive Movement Trumps Scripture" in *Evangelical Feminism, a New Path to Liberalism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006).

²² Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 26, 27. For a review of Bell's book see Dale Van Dyke, *Review: Velvet Elvis - Repainting the Christian Faith*(accessed October 3 2007); available from http://www.reformation21.org/Past_Issues/2006_Issues_1_16_/2006_Issues_1_16_Shelf_Life/February_2006/February_2006/148/vobld__2030/pm__338/.

Concerns ...

Concern – The rejection of biblical truth and propositional revelation for a postmodern epistemology and theory of language.

Conception of Truth – Many in the revisionist stream have rejected the idea of truth in which our beliefs can be said to correspond to reality “as it is” and report an objective state of affairs. That truth is the articulation of reality. I should say that they have not “rejected” the idea of truth, rather they have taught that only God knows capital T Truth while we are left knowing only local, constructed perspectives on truth that are created in community.²³ For those interested in the epistemological debates involved here (debates about how we come to know things, discussions of the nature of truth) I recommend picking up *Reclaiming the Center, Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*. Finally, D.A. Carson has compiled a massive list of Scripture focusing on the importance of truth and even a humble certainty of certain things taught in the Bible.²⁴

Propositional Revelation – historically the church has taught that the Old and New Testaments are the infallible inspired writings which are the Word of God in written form. Our understanding of sacred texts as written revelation means that language must be capable of conveying his meaning to us. To say otherwise is tantamount to saying that God’s word is lost when his prophets and apostles conveyed them in human language. Though it is limited in its ability to comprehensively describe God, language is sufficient to the task for which God created it. God desires to be known and he has made himself known in Scripture. We submit to this revelation as authoritative. One particular person thought speaking and writing was an adequate facility to convey the truth of God. His name is God – Here are the words of the Father and the Son.

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, **“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”** 6 And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Revelation 21:5-7 ESV – Emphasis added

13 But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. 14 I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 15 I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one.

John 17:13-15 ESV – Emphasis added

I will agree that there are times in which all people, including Christians, use truth for the purposes of power, personal agendas and all other manner of oppressive behavior. I think we all need more humility. Additionally, we can acknowledge the difficult task of hermeneutics without turning to constructivist views of knowledge. Yet one can have certainty of Christian truth without having arrogance or being domineering and this truth is conveyed in language; we see this exemplified in the life of Jesus himself. Finally, John Frame makes an excellent argument for Christian certainty in his essay of the same name. Our certainty is centered in revelation from God in his Word. I’ll give Dr. Frame the last word here:

²³ Brett Kunkle, *Essential Concerns Regarding the Emerging Church* (Stand to Reason, 2006, accessed September 25 2007); available from http://www.str.org/site/DocServer/Essential_Concerns_Regarding_the_Emerging_Church.pdf?docID=1441. Kunkle interacts mainly with Pagitts view from two books – *Preaching Re-Imagined* and *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*.

²⁴ D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church : Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 188-199.

Secular philosophy rejects absolute certainty, then, because absolute certainty is essentially supernatural, and because the secularist is unwilling to accept a supernatural foundation for knowledge. But the Christian regards God's word as the ultimate criterion of truth and falsity, right and wrong, and therefore as the standard of certainty. Insofar as we consistently hold the Bible as our standard of certainty, we may and must regard it as itself absolutely certain. So in God's revelation, the Christian has a wonderful treasure, one that saves the soul from sin and the mind from skepticism.²⁵

Concern – The rejection or questioning of the penal substitutionary nature of the atonement is heartbreaking as this removes the heart of the gospel.

The nature of the atonement, what was accomplished by the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus has been questioned for centuries. It is no small matter as atonement for sin is a core issue throughout Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament the Levitical system was given as a foreshadowing and type for the ultimate sacrifice for sin which would be provided by God himself. Even a cursory reading of the book of Hebrews demonstrates that Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God, our great high priest offering himself as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Yet the idea of God the Son, offering himself as a sacrifice to take away our sins (expiation) and have the wrath of God for our sins poured out upon him (propitiation) is offensive to some and an embarrassment to current sensibilities. The Cross of Christ has many purposes in Scripture. It reconciles all things to God (Ephesians 1:10), it defeated demonic powers (Colossians 2:15), as an example in suffering (1 Peter 1:23), to redeem us (Ephesians 1:7), to ransom us for God paying our debt (Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:5, 6), to make us righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21) and most centrally he died for our sins. Let's look at just a few verses

- 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 (ESV) - Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, 2 and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures...
- Isaiah 53:2-10 (ESV) – 2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. 7 He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. 8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? 9 And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. 10 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand.
- 1 Peter 3:18 (ESV) - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit
- Matthew 26:26 (ESV) – Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." 27 And he took a

²⁵ John Frame, *Certainty* (accessed October 3 2007); available from http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2005Certainty.htm.

cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, 28 for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

- Acts 2:22-23 (ESV) 22 "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— 23 this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

In Summary: Paul teaches us that the gospel is that "Christ died for our sins according to the Old Testament" – that Jesus' death, burial and resurrection were the fulfillment of the Scriptures and that this death was for our sins. Isaiah 53 demonstrates that the prophets indeed had this in mind. Add to that the sacrifices for sins laid out in Leviticus and you can see why Hebrews teaches clearly that Jesus' priestly, sacrificial ministry of himself was "according the Scriptures." Additionally, Jesus taught us that the blood of the new covenant was poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus' brutal execution was done by an oppressive empire but ultimately this was the definite plan of God foreknown and ordained by the Father. The Son willfully gave his life; the Father accepted the sacrifice and then applies this atonement to those you turn to God in repentance and faith. Yet some in the Emergent stream have openly questioned this view of the cross that Jesus died as payment for sins.

Steve Chalke an emerging church voice from the UK has directly called this view of the cross equivalent to "cosmic child abuse"²⁶ and Brian McLaren glowingly endorsed the work. Additionally, in his own work, McLaren has used the very same language²⁷ though it comes through the mouth of a fictional character rather than a plain statement of his beliefs about substitutionary atonement. In the fictional dialogue the atoning work of the Trinity is called "cosmic child abuse" but no clarification is given, in fact the view mentioned as child abuse is explained as "substitutionary atonement" and it is called a "theory" rather than a doctrine of the church.²⁸ What is left of the cross in the view of some revisionists? It is usually presented as a moral example of suffering under oppression, or as McLaren has presented in his latest book "Jesus will use a cross to expose the cruelty and injustice of those in power and instill hope and confidence in the oppressed."²⁹ Salvation from sin, death and hell is missing...where did these biblical teachings go? As we will see in a moment, some revisionists have changed the gospel, denied that judgment might mean hell and that salvation means mainly a new way of life today.

Concern - Rejecting the idea of the need for explicit faith in Jesus Christ

A recent book entitled *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*³⁰ was put out by Baker Books and the Emergent Village. It is a compilation of Emergent voices from mainline denominations, emergent revisionists and a few evangelicals. One of the essays is by Samir Selmanovic entitled *The Sweet Problem of Inclusiveness*. In the essay he quotes extensively from a scene in a 1991 movie called *Black Robe*. The story involves a priest attempting to lead a native American to faith in Christ and the man rejecting the gospel. The account reads as follows:

When I put myself in the moccasins of chief Chomina [who did not want to accept Christ lest he be separated in the afterlife from his family], I feel God's Spirit asking me, "What would you choose, eternal life without your loved ones or eternal death with them?" Chomina knew his answer. He would rather die than live without his beloved. Moved by the Holy Spirit, people like Chomina reject the idea of allegiance to the name of Christ and, instead, want to be like him and thus accept him at a deeper level.³¹

²⁶ Carson, 185.

²⁷ Brian D. McLaren and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), *The Story We Find Ourselves In : Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 102.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 128. A friend has a prerelease copy of this newest work.

³⁰ Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2007).

³¹ Ibid., 191. Emphasis added

Selmanovic then follows up the story with one of an atheist friend named Mark who also rejects the gospel and Jesus Christ for turning to a grace in his inner life and wanting to spend his life being “a channel of that same goodness to others.”³² He then follows these two stories with a pretty amazing statement

*The Chominas and Marks around us leave us wondering whether Christ can be more than Christianity. Or even other than Christianity. Can it be that the teachings of the gospel are embedded and can be found in reality itself rather than **being exclusively isolated in sacred texts and our interpretations of these texts?***³³

So the gospel may be taught outside of the Bible. Some in the Emergent stream are teaching that we can deny the name of Christ, worship other gods through other religious stories and yet still be walking in the Kingdom of God. What then do we make of Jesus’ own words which teach us the following?

*26 “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known. 27 What I tell you in the dark, say in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops. 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. 31 Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 **So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.***

Matthew 10:26-33 ESV

The Scriptures are clear that Jesus claimed to be God incarnate. They are also clear that there is only one God and creator of all things. The worship of gods which are not God is univocally called idolatry in Scripture. I am deeply concerned that what is being said in the Emergent world is that one can participate in idolatry as the worship of Jesus. This is indeed sad. We do not have to deny that we have something to learn from all peoples and that there are valuable things taught in other religions. What we must not do is declare that a good way to follow Jesus is idolatry, for idolatry is sin and sin separates us from God and incurs his right judgment.

I find it very imperialistic of Christians to think of Muslims (or people of any other faith or belief system) as people who actually follow Jesus the incarnate Son of God, in spirit but not in name. Muslims do not teach or believe this. Additionally, it is not charitable to think that atheists really follow the spirit of Jesus when they do not believe or teach these things. The same could be said for many philosophies and religions. Personally, I have friends who are converted Hindus – you know what they call Hinduism...idolatry. They would never embrace this Emergent view and they seek to lead their Indian friends and family to the cross of Christ and the worship of the triune God. I am thankful that we are all permitted in our culture to believe what we want; yet I am still called by God to present Jesus to others to be followed and obeyed. To say that someone is part of the Kingdom of Jesus by rejecting him makes no sense in light of the New Testament and it does not show respect for the *actual* beliefs of our friends from other religions.

Concern – The rejection of the difficult biblical doctrine of eternal punishment

In several ways leaders in Emergent have continued to reveal that they do not believe that anyone will be under the just judgment of God in hell. When you have no need of a payment for sin on the cross, when you believe that we can follow God in the way of Jesus by participation in idolatry,

³² Ibid., 192.

³³ Ibid. Emphasis added

when you teach that judgment is simply a perfect assessment of your life by God,³⁴ Jesus' teaching on hell simply has no place in your theology.

In every era of the church there have been people who have found the wrath of God and Jesus' teachings on eternal judgment to be unpalatable. The wrath of God is mentioned approximately 172 times in the Old Testament and 36 times in the New Testament. Additionally, we must not forget that it is not Moses or Paul who taught us this doctrine most frequently. It is the teaching of Jesus himself in the gospels.

The most compassionate thing Jesus did about the reality of Hell was to declare its reality and provide a way of escape. He gave himself for us on the cross so that sin, death and hell would be defeated. He did not come to tell us that judgment was a perfect assessment of your life by God, he told us to escape the coming judgment and fly from the wrath to come. He loved us enough to tell us the truth and then accomplish our salvation on a brutal cross of execution. This is good news.

Concern - The Preaching of a New Gospel

For many years there have been people like me wondering where certain streams of the emerging conversation would lead. It was controversial a couple of years ago to question whether some men, most affiliated with the revisionist stream, were preaching a different gospel. In fact, DA Carson wrote these words in 2005.

*I have to say, 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.*³⁵

This was not received well by many in the emerging conversation and Dr. Carson was accused of not really engaging them, misunderstanding them, et al. Today however Emergent is acknowledging that they are offering a "different Christian faith" than evangelical Protestantism. Even as I write this, Tony Jones, national coordinator of Emergent has said just that.³⁶ Additionally, McLaren's books have continued to roll out and now he himself is stating openly he has rejected a conventional view of the gospel in favor of an emerging view.³⁷ Here is a concise description of the new gospel, as I understand it:

The gospel is the good news of the Kingdom of God coming with the person of Jesus. When Jesus came he offered a new way of living, a new way of life here and now that anyone can enter. All who live in this way are already living the Kingdom and in some way are a part of it. We now are able to join in helping God make his dreams for the world come true.

That is the new gospel. There is a big problem here. Part of this is very true. The Kingdom is, in a way, here now. There is a new way of life offered to us in Jesus now. Yet it is tragically incomplete and does not offer what the Scriptures actually call the gospel. The apostle Paul stated clearly in Galatians 1 that if anyone preaches another gospel, than the one he taught let him be cursed. My question is simple. Is this new gospel the gospel as taught by the apostles? It is not. Some today will claim that they are following the gospel according to Jesus, not as taught by Paul in books such as Romans and Galatians. This is nothing but a tacit denial of the inspiration and unity of the New Testament. There is no ultimate fighting cage match between the teachings of Jesus and Paul. Jesus tells us in Mark 1:15 that "the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the gospel." This gospel is reflected in the apostolic witness which is the 27 books of the New Testament. The inspired writers of the both the gospels and the epistles are not in disagreement for their common inspiration is God.

³⁴ McLaren and Leadership Network (Dallas Tex.), *The Story We Find Ourselves In : Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian*, 166.

³⁵ Carson, 186.

³⁶ Tony Jones, *Different Versions of Christianity* (2007, accessed October 4 2007); available from <http://tonyj.net/2007/10/02/different-versions-of-christianity/>.

³⁷ McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* 80-82.

Concern – Nothing is off the Table

The final concern is serious as it deals with the entire theological project of perpetual revisionism. If our doctrine and teaching is constantly changed, we literally open the door to any teaching with no Christian doctrine exempt from re-fashioning or re-imagining. We see this today in all manner of forms. Leaders of Emergent are openly questioning the biblical teaching on human sexuality³⁸, making statements which seem to question the creation/creator distinction which smells of pantheism,³⁹ declaring the doctrine of the Trinity to be still on the table,⁴⁰ and seeming endorsement of the ancient heretic Pelagius⁴¹ who taught that man did not have a sinful nature and could save himself by his free will and own moral actions. Such is the new dance of theology created to match the music of today's culture. It is no surprise that someone like Spencer Burke, founder of the ooze.com and long part of the conversation, has written *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* in which he claims to be a universalist and a pantheist who denies the personhood of God.⁴² A theological methodology that has no fixed point of reference other than a conversation in community has the potential to land in any ideological cul-de-sac one can image. This is heartbreaking to see happen to the children of evangelicalism.

Conclusion

We began by talking about a conversation which was a response to the changing face of western culture and the church's desire to connect and communicate the Christian faith to a coming generation. We have ended with some teachers who are reinventing the faith and leaving what they call the "conventional gospel" behind. We have some questions to answer as evangelicals today:

- Is there a faith once entrusted to the saints? Or is it a dance to be reinvented or repainted in every age?
- Is there a word from God that comes outside in – from God to people in culture(s)? Or are we just talking with ourselves?
- Does Jesus reveal himself in Scripture? Or do we make him who we want him to be?

In the 19th century the mainline Protestant churches led by Schleiermacher and others changed everything in response to the scientific age. They abandoned the old gospel for a more culturally acceptable religion without miracles, spiritual beings and physical resurrections. It was very much a faith that danced well with the assumptions of the spirit of the age. Yet these churches have slowly waned in influence, many unable to call enough pastors to lead. In our day a similar revisioning is happening this time in the image of tolerance, pluralism, subjectivism, anti-authoritarianism and postmodern theories of interpreting texts. My fear is that what will be left will have little resemblance to the faith once entrusted to the saints.

I am in no way a traditionalist in that I think the church must connect, communicate and live in the cultural settings to which God calls us. He has determined the exact times and places for our lives and calls us to be faithful to his mission there. There has been some necessary deconstruction that has taken place, but the church was never meant to live by the exhaust fumes of frustrated deconstructionists. It is meant to live by every word which comes from the mouth of God and move forward under that authority.

As the church follows Jesus on mission in culture, there are two theological tensions which leadership must vigilantly hold. First, we must contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Second, we must contextualize the gospel into culture, becoming all things to

³⁸ See McLaren's comments in Time Magazine David Van Biema, "25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America," *Time Magazine* 2005. His remarks in Q and A about the issue of homosexuality at the 2007 Willow Creek Arts festival Brian McLaren, *Willow Creek Arts Conference 2007 - McLaren and Loveless*(2007, accessed); available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vquwlObeOaA>.and Doug Pagitt's comments on sexuality in Webber and others, 140.

³⁹ Webber and others.

⁴⁰ Kunkle, (accessed).

⁴¹ Webber and others, 128.

⁴² Kunkle, (accessed).

all people that by all means we might save some. We do both for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). We must contend for the faith and not treat our doctrine lightly or flippantly. Both Jesus and the apostles warned us over and over again that false teachers will arise from within, teaching what is contrary to sound doctrine. The cultural winds which buffet the church; be it feminism, a skewed view of tolerance, or a pluralistic mindset relating to religions must not change our core theological convictions. There is content to the gospel that we must hold to with conviction (Galatians 1:6-10). Culture does not define our theology; this must come from God's own self revelation in Scripture. Our second task is equally important. The gospel we preach must be brought to a people who live in a time and place. The gospel must incarnate into the cultural forms of a people in order for effective communication to take place. Getting lost in traditional forms and not going far enough into culture leaves the church isolated in a shrinking Christian ghetto separated from the souls it is called to reach.

This path is not easy to maintain. We need wisdom from older believers and we need to be accountable in the community of the local church. Yet we are called by faith to follow Jesus as the ultimate missionary. The one who came from heaven to earth to demonstrate, preach, and become good news for all by going to the cross and rising from death is our model and means to effective mission in the 21st century. We are ever contending for the truth of the gospel and ever walking in the fluid streams of the world. He is our hope, our vision, our life, our truth and our peace as we follow him to reach out without selling out.⁴³

Here we stand – lead on Lord Jesus...

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reid S. Monaghan', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Reid S. Monaghan

⁴³This phrase is the subtitle of Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation - Reaching out without Selling Out*.

Appendix 1 - The Gospel of the Kingdom

The teaching of the Bible regarding The Kingdom of God is perhaps some of the most complex, mysterious, beautiful and awe inspiring realities. This essay will be but a gnat scratching on the surface of the moon in attempting to describe the teaching of Scripture on this topic. Yet it is also a matter of great importance because it is deeply connected to the gospel as taught by Jesus and the apostles. The sections of this essay will be excessively brief as my goal is to introduce rather than rigorously present all the issues. For those interested there is a short and accessible book by the late George Eldon Ladd entitled *The Gospel of the Kingdom* which I recommend.

The Kingdom Defined-Rule and Reign

When we hear the word Kingdom today we are tempted to define it in terms of a geographical realm with a castle and certain people being ruled by a monarch. At least in my kids' fairy tale books and DVDs this is usually how it rolls out. Or if you are up on world affairs you might think of a Middle Eastern monarchy such as Saudi Arabia or perhaps history buffs will think of historical western kingdoms before the advent of democratic nation states. Either way, both impressions will not help us in thinking of what the ancients meant when they spoke of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom as described in Scripture is the actual rule and reign of a King himself. Rather than geography or a people, the kingdom is the expression of an authority and the nature of that rule. To put it very simply, the Kingdom of God is the rule and reign of God. It is his exercised rule or sovereignty, not the realm in which it is implemented.¹ Additionally, there is great agreement that the Kingdom or Rule of God is one of complete justice, the eradication of sin and death and the peaceful ordering of all things by Christ our King.

So this brings to us an important question. If the Kingdom is the rule of God, is it now here with us? Or is the Kingdom a future reality coming in the time which we call "Heaven." Our answer will be yes...and yes.

Did it already come? Still Coming?

The idea of the coming Kingdom is rife with discussions of temporality (issues of time). Did Jesus bring the Kingdom in AD 33? Is God in charge now, or is that still coming? What does the second coming of Jesus say to the reality of the Kingdom? Does the Kingdom have to do with righteous and just rule or the salvation of sinners by a holy, wrathful, loving, good and forgiving God? Additionally, is it God's job to bring about his rule and reign on the earth, or is it our job as the church? Or both? There are so many questions associated with this. Christians throughout history have fallen on various sides of these questions and the issue is very important in many conversations today. The witness of the Bible on this is precisely the source of the struggle for it clearly teaches that the Kingdom came with Jesus in some way (i.e. Mark 1:14,15) and it is with us in our present reality (Romans 14:17). It teaches that those who believe in Jesus are moved into the Kingdom, yet at the same time there remains a dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13,14). Our greatest mistake is to be reductionist about the Scriptures teaching, silencing some parts in favor of others. This is what Christians have done from time to time with the teaching on the Kingdom of God. A few examples.

Too Much Now

Over time many Christians see the rule of God as perfect justice for all people and creation itself. It is a state where all is made right on the earth. So they see the gospel in these terms. The good news is that there is a different life available now. We can live lives of love and justice and bring the Kingdom to the earth more fully. Liberal Christianity of the late 19th and early 20th century made this push. Today, the idea that the gospel is "the Kingdom is here now" and live that way is becoming popular among Christians flying the flag "Emergent." The call of the gospel is to live the Kingdom way now. That is the good news brought by Jesus. This is in some sense true. Yet the casualty of "Kingdom Now" thinking is that the salvation of sinners from the wrath of God, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus "for our sins" is lost. Many in this camp no longer teach that sin is individual, but only social.

They no longer teach the reality of eternity and the right judgment of God. They no longer teach that Hell even exists but instead that our only focus should be "bringing the Kingdom" now. If you choose to believe that the Kingdom is all Now, we miss some incredibly important truths about the Later. If you like theology-you would call this over realized eschatology.

Too Much Later

On the other extreme is the teaching that the gospel is only about getting a "go to heaven card" and not a call to followership of Jesus, transformation of communities, and reflection of the saving gospel of the Kingdom in our lives today. All the focus is on the second coming of Jesus and the coming judgment and not living the way of Jesus today. If all we are to do today is get folks saved-and I do believe we have a job to call sinners to repentance and faith-we will neglect building a Kingdom culture now that reflects the reign of God. God desires for us to proclaim justice for the oppressed, to feed the hungry and to steward creation as representatives of another Kingdom. You might say that under realized eschatology ignores some very important aspects of the rule of God-NOW for the sake of thinking about the Later.

Of course all this is too simplistic-but these issues are important. The solution to this is not reductionism but to see all the teaching on the Kingdom-that it is a present in breaking reality, that it is not fully here, that it will come definitively at the second coming of Jesus as important. We must like Now and Later, not just Now or Later. Sorry, you knew that was coming...

Now and Not Yet...

The Kingdom is Now

What we want to hold in tension is that the Kingdom very much appeared with the incarnation of Jesus, who is our covenant King. The Kingdom also expresses itself when people enter into it by repentance and faith in Jesus. When someone becomes a Christian, a follower of Jesus, for whom Christ has paid for their sins and reconciled them with God, the person very much enters the Kingdom. After the first coming of Jesus we now can be set free from the power of sin, death, Satan. All of these are thwarted-Jesus is the first fruits, the promise of our own resurrection and eternal life.

The Kingdom is Later

Yet Scripture is clear that this current age is under the dominion or rule of sin, death and Satan. Our great enemy is called the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of this world (or age) and we know very well that sin and death still hold fast on the earth. George Ladd summarizes this very well:

This age is dominated by evil, wickedness and rebellion against the will of God, while the age to come is the age of the Kingdom of God...The point is this: it is the character of this age to choke the working of the Word of God. The spirit of the age is hostile to the gospel.²

Yet, in becoming a Christian now we receive the promise and evidence of the final destruction of these things as sin loses its power over us (sanctification) and death itself is not the end for us any longer (See John 11:17-27). Finally, the second coming of Christ will fully bring the reality of the Kingdom in forever. It will be definitive. The dead will rise to immortality, evil and wickedness will be judged completely and demonic powers removed for all time. As such all things will be made new and the redemption of God in all things will arrive.

The Gospel and the Church-A Resistance Movement

In our day Jesus is still at work in the world saving sinners and adding folks to his community known as the church. In this group of people we have a counter cultural community that lives according to the gospel of the Kingdom. It proclaims good news of the death of Jesus for sin and the resurrection of

Jesus for our hope. It loves others and cares about injustice and empowering the poor. The church is an in breaking of the Kingdom and this reality is proclaimed in the preaching of God's Word and visible in the practice of the ordinances of baptism (entry sign into the Kingdom) and the Lord's Supper (a continuing sign of the Kingdom). This community exists for the world but does not subscribe to the systems and power of the world. It is a revolution, an Inversion by which God is transforming people and extending grace into communities. We are much like a resistance force in occupied territory. Though sin, death and hell still have power, we proclaim hope through the gospel. We are a rag tag group of folks who are desiring the Lord to come and working hard for the sake of others. We hold out the gospel and call people to Jesus for their salvation. Then we walk together as a broken community giving our lives away for the sake of others. When we fail we practice and live in regular repentance and hope in the gospel because we all fall short of the glory of God. This is why we need Jesus. We cannot bring his Kingdom or deal with our sin. He does. This is why the gospel is central to our lives and mission. Once someone becomes a follower of Jesus, he is then part of the Inversion...Dallas Willard said it well:

To become a disciple of Jesus is to accept now that inversion of human distinctions that will sooner or later be forced upon everyone by the irresistible reality of his kingdom. How must we think of him to see the inversion from our present viewpoint? We must, simply, accept that he is the best and smartest man who ever lived in this world, that he is even now "the prince of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5). Then we heartily join his cosmic conspiracy to overcome evil with good.³

What is the Gospel of the Kingdom? It is twofold. It is to see sinners saved and involves individual salvation. Yet it also calls us to see a new society or culture formed-the church. The gospel saves us and will ultimately redeem all things. It is Christ died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15) and a uniting of all things under God (Ephesians 1.10). In our lives today we live as part of a revolution, not a fortress to keep out the world. The gospel saves you and me and makes us part of God's restoration of all things. I'll give the late British journalist GK Chesterton the final word.

In the upper world hell once rebelled against heaven. But in this world heaven is rebelling against hell. For the orthodox there can always be a revolution; for a revolution is a restoration.⁴

Notes

1. George Ladd, The Gospel of the Kingdom; Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God. Grand Rapids, Mich.,: Eerdmans, 1959 20.
2. Ladd, 28, 29
3. Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy : Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God, 1st ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 90.
4. G. K. Chesterton, Orthodoxy, Image Books ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 113.

Appendix 2 - The Reformed Resurgence

The following are some organizations and their resources for those who desire to follow the Jesus of Scripture in his mission amidst the flows of contemporary culture.

The Resurgence

Resurgence is a movement that resources multiple generations to live for Jesus so that they can effectively reach their cities with the gospel by staying culturally accessible and Biblically faithful. This site contains audio, video, articles from many people in the reformed missional conversation.

<http://theresurgence.com>

Desiring God

Celebrating the truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him, we exist to produce and distribute resources that spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. <http://www.desiringgod.org>

The Gospel Coalition

The vision for ministry articulated by this group on gospel centered, contextualized ministry in culture is a fantastic place to stand in today's world with the unchanging gospel.

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/vision.php>

Acts 29 Network

Acts 29 Network exists to start churches that plant churches. God is significantly using our network to influence and shape the church planting culture through both rock-solid theology and contextualizing the gospel. We will not waver on either of these commitments. We won't water down our theology to reach more people and we won't attack the culture in the name of Christianity. We are planting churches that are missionaries in their respective communities sent by Christ with the gospel (John 20:21). <http://www.acts29network.org>

Sovereign Grace Ministries

Sovereign Grace Ministries is a family of churches passionate about the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are devoted to planting and supporting local churches, with a strong doctrinal basis that is evangelical, Reformed, and charismatic. We support our churches personally and relationally, as well as through a variety of training opportunities and resources you will find described through this website, including music, books and periodicals, conferences and events, and audio and video materials.

<http://www.sovereigngraceministries.org/>

Voices in the PCA and SBC

Tim Keller

Dr. Timothy Keller is one of the most listened to missional leaders today. Through Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and the Redeemer Church Planting Center, Dr. Keller's influence in the reformed, missional resurgence and global city church planting has been incalculable. Church Site -

<http://www.redeemer.com/>

Church Planting - <http://www.redeemer2.com/rcpc/rcpc/>

Ed Stetzer

Dr. Ed Stetzer has planted churches in New York, Pennsylvania, and Georgia and transitioned declining churches in Indiana and Georgia. He has trained pastors and church planters on five continents, holds two masters degrees and two doctorates, and has written dozens of articles and books. Ed served for three years as seminary professor at the Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky and has taught at fifteen other seminaries. He is currently the Director of Lifeway Research and Lifeway's Missiologist in Residence.

<http://www.newchurches.com/>

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