

What is the Emerging Church?

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I am particularly honored to be invited to speak at Westminster, not only because someone of my ilk – and I’ll let you exegete “my ilk” as you wish – rarely gets such an invitation, but because I’ve been invited to answer the question “What is the emerging church?”

Perhaps a little Mark Twain tomfoolery will give us a fresh start. Here’s the urban legend: The emerging movement talks like Lutherans – which means they cuss and use naughty words; they evangelize and theologize like the Reformed – which means, in the first case, they don’t do much of it, and in the second, they do it all the time; they confess their faith like the mainliners – which means they say things publicly they don’t really believe in their hearts; they drink like Episcopalians – which means – to steal some words from Mark Twain – they are teetotalers sometimes – when it is judicious to be one; they worship like the charismatics – which means with each part of the body, some parts of which have tattoos; they vote liberal – which means they all move to Massachusetts come election time; they deny truth – which means Derrida is carried in their backpacks.

Each of these points is wrong, but they are frequently repeated stereotypes that sting and bite – but, because they are wrong, as the emergents would say, they “suck.” In order to define this movement, there is a correct method to follow.

Which is where I want to go now: to define a movement we must, as a

courtesy, let it say what it is or describe it until the other side says “Yes, now you’ve got it.” To define a movement, we must let the movement have the first word. We might, in the end, reconceptualize it – which postmodernists say is inevitable – but we will should at least have the courtesy to let a movement say what it is.

How many of you would tolerate an Arminian defining Calvinism by reducing it to “irresistible grace” or even TULIP? or of calling all of Calvinism “hyper-Calvinism”? I think folks like you should get to define what you think, and I think the emerging folks should be given the same privilege.

1.0 D.A. Carson and Emerging

The reason I say this is because I believe the most notable critique of the movement, that of D.A. Carson, in his *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, did not do this. Why say this? For the simple reason that this book (almost) narrows the discussion to one person – Brian McLaren – and narrows the issue – to postmodernist epistemology – and then nearly always defines the latter in “hard” postmodernist categories in spite of the fact that no Christian – at least not Brian McLaren – could ever be a hard postmodernist. Carson’s awareness of the distinction between “hard” and “soft” did not inform his analysis of McLaren. These are, I am aware, harsh words. I say them because of my opening principle: we have to let the movement say what it is and we have to learn to describe it in such a way that the movement says “Yes, that’s it.”

I have probed and prodded emerging church leaders and ordinaries for about two years now, and I have almost never heard anything that resembles what Carson thinks is so typical of the emerging “church.” Let me say it

again: I have sat for hours with Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, along with two theologians who are much-admired in this conversation, LeRon Shults and John Franke, and I've never once heard any of them deny the truthfulness of the gospel or deny that there is truth in a hard postmodernist way. I have heard them push categories that many of us are familiar with about "truth." In each case I've heard what I would call a chastened epistemology, what Lesslie Newbigin calls a "proper confidence." But Carson, who otherwise (rather ironically) has so much good to say about Newbigin, doesn't show that nuance, and it is telling. Because Carson's book has been so influential, we need to say more.

There is no such thing as the emerging "church." It is a movement or a conversation – which is Brian McLaren's and Tony Jones's favored term, and they after all are the leaders. To call it a "church" on the title of his book is to pretend that it is something like a denomination, which it isn't. The leaders are determined, right now, to prevent it becoming anything more than a loose association of those who want to explore conversation about the Christian faith and the Christian mission and the Christian praxis in this world of ours, and they want to explore that conversation with freedom and impunity when it comes to doctrine.

Which is an issue in and of itself: the evangelical movement is defined by its theology (or as David Wells would say, by its lack of theology); the emerging movement is not defined by its theology. It doesn't stand up and say, "Lookee here, this is our doctrinal statement." To force the emerging movement into a theological definition is to do violence to it – it isn't a theological movement and so can't be defined that way.

[Added: By saying that the emerging movement is not a "theological" movement, I have something specific in mind. The EM is not known by its

innovative doctrinal statement or by its confessional stances. Now, to be sure, every movement is “theological” in one way or another, and that means the EM is a theological movement. But, what we need to keep in mind is that it not a “Reformed” movement with a new twist, or an Anabaptist movement with new leaders (though I think it is more Anabaptist than anything else), and it is not a Wesleyan movement centuries later. It is, instead, best to see it as a conversation about theology, with all kinds of theologies represented, with a core adhering to the classical creeds in a new key.]

Also constantly misused in the debate today are the terms “emerging” and “emergent.” But, “emerging” is not the same as “emergent.” Please listen. “Emergent” refers to Emergent Village – an official clearinghouse for this conversation where there are cohorts across the world who officially associate themselves with EV. Emergent Village, or emergent, is directed by Tony Jones, a PhD student at Princeton, former youth minister, and now an energetic traveler on behalf of EV.

“Emerging,” on the other hand, is bigger, broader, and deeper. “Emerging” is connected to EV the way WTS is connected to Reformed Christianity in the world (in all its brands). So, when you say “emergent” you should be thinking of Emergent Village and Tony Jones; when you think of “emerging” you should be thinking of ... well, that is what I have to get to soon.

[Added: I refuse to give up on this one. In spite of my protest above, speakers at the conference continued to refer to the “emergent” movement and the “emergent” church.]

But, let me back up to Carson’s book – not because I delight in doing so but because I think it is necessary. By narrowing “emerging” to

postmodernity and narrowing postmodernity to denial of truth, Carson has foisted upon the evangelical world a stereotype that most evangelicals are already prepared to reject. In other words, if you define emerging as Brian McLaren, and then narrow Brian to his sometimes incautious – even if nearly always probing and suggestive – comments about postmodernity and epistemology, and then roll out the implications of what Brian would seem then to believe, and then close with two chapters about what the Bible says about truth, you will give the impression that emerging is about hard postmodernism and, if you got your guts about you, you should avoid these folks like the bubonic plague. Which is what some are doing... which is fine ... unless you want to be accurate.

One more point. The leaders of what is now called Emergent Village are Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, and Tim Keel – along with others like Karen Ward, Ivy Beckwith, Brian McLaren, Mark Oestreicher, and others. Carson's book, however, after sketching the movement by looking mostly at Spencer Burke, Brian McLaren and Dan Kimball, spends most of its time with McLaren and then Steve Chalke. Here's Carson on p. 187: "As far as I can tell, Brian McLaren and Steve Chalke are the most influential leaders of the emerging movement in their respective countries." Chalke famously equated penal substitution with divine child abuse. Now Carson's got the major emerging church leader in England denying penal substitution.

The problem is that Chalke is not a part of the emerging movement in the UK at all, and he is certainly not one of the "most influential leaders." I wrote to Jason Clark, the leader of Emergent UK, and this is what he said: "Steve is a good friend of mine, and he denies ... [he is the leader of the emerging movement in the UK] himself, and has never been part of the emerging church in the UK." This connection by Carson, to use one of his

own words, is sloppy work. That part of the book about Chalke should be ignored or cut out – it has nothing whatsoever to do with emerging.

But, his point now has a life of its own, because some are now saying that the emerging movement sees the atonement in terms of cosmic child abuse ... I'll get to this in my lecture tomorrow.

Yet another point: defining a movement by what folks are reading is hazardous. I think most emerging folks do read McLaren – does that mean they find his questions their questions or does it mean they find his resolutions theirs? The difference is enormous. 70 million copies of the *Left Behind* series have sold – does that mean pre-tribulation rapture is growing in the USA? In fact, one piece of research shows that 90% of the readers *don't believe its eschatology*. I don't need to fill in all the lines and implications here – the point is clear.

Before I go on I must say this: there are many points in Carson's book that hit their target. I suspect that the emerging movement, and Brian McLaren in particular, will be more careful when they speak publicly or write books about what "truth" means. In fact, I suspect the postmodernists among the emerging movement will more likely refer to Peter Rollins' *How (not) To Talk about God* than they will *Generous Orthodoxy*. Carson reminds us that the emerging folk can't continue to eat cookies that are all chocolate chips.

Furthermore, Carson opens up with three elements of the emerging movement: protest against evangelicalism, protest against modernism, and protest against the mega-church. I think he's right: the emerging movement is a protest. I don't think it is the next "Protestantism," as some have claimed, but it is clearly an anti- and protest movement.

But, I must say this: if you want to know what the emerging

movement is all about, don't read DA Carson's book first. Instead, first read Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Baker, 2005). Why? As I said before, the courteous thing to do is to let the movement speak for itself. Which is exactly what Gibbs-Bolger do. They show the center of the movement is about *ecclesiology not epistemology*.

2.0 Gibbs-Bolger and Emerging

We need to move lest I begin to use some words that do not go well with a halo, as Mark Twain put it once. Or, as a Chicago politician once put it, let's not cast "asparagus" at our opponents. Andrew Jones, aka Tall Skinny Kiwi, perhaps the most centrist voice in all of the emerging movement, rates this as his top book on the emerging movement. Here's their definition:

Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. This definition encompasses the nine practices. Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.

This definition and delineation is the result of doctoral student research (Bolger) and professor (Gibbs) collaboration. Bolger is now a colleague of Gibbs at Fuller Theological Seminary.

It is the only study complete enough to hand on to others and say, "Here, this is what emerging really is." Tony Jones is doing his own study for his PhD at Princeton, and no doubt it will become even more definitive –

and others have offered shorter analyses. But, for now, this is the study to which we must refer and I suggest that each of you – if you want to indulge in emerging discussions – buy and read this book. Of, if you can't afford it, buy a cheaper of book of mine and check this book out of your library.

What I am asking is that you be responsible enough to let their definition and their delineations shape the substance of what the emerging movement is. They are “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.” Just how many of them are there?

No one knows, which means I have the platform to guess and exaggerate in order to make it seem a lot bigger than it really is. So, I turn now to George Barna's book *Revolution* and repeat the oft-repeated number that there are 20 million born again Christians in the USA for whom the primary means of spiritual experience and expression is not the local church, and that by 2025 there will be 70 million such persons. Never mind that Barna then revised that 20 million down to 5 million, and that he seems to have what Joseph Epstein calls a “built-in squishiness.” What needs to be observed is that Barna is getting his fingers around some important facts, even if the theory that holds them all together – his grip – is up for serious debate.

This is where “definition” really matters. Carson's book narrows emerging to emergent and emergent churches to churches that question Christian orthodoxy and doubt we can know truth. In so besmirching the emerging movement with such a definition, many are prevented from seeing what Barna is pointing out: the emerging movement of churches and Christians involves the house church movement, simple church movements, and churches that may well not even have a “worship service.” Barna contends that 1 out of 5 Christian adults attend a house church at least once a

month, and he calculates that 20 million adults attends a house church once a week. This movement is distinguished from “small groups,” and therefore forms a sizable population.

Here’s my point: if you narrow the emerging movement to Emergent Village, and especially to the postmodernist impulse therein, you can probably dismiss this movement as a small fissure in the evangelical movement. But, *if you are serious enough to contemplate major trends in the Church today, at an international level, and if you define emerging as many of us do – in missional, or ecclesiological terms, rather than epistemological ones – then you will learn quickly enough that there is a giant elephant in the middle of the Church’s living room. It is the emerging church movement and it is a definite threat to traditional evangelical ecclesiology.*

I would like to spend our time rehearsing Gibbs-Bolger’s nine characteristics, but you did not ask me to come here to summarize someone else’s book. Instead of doing that, I want to spend the rest of our time examining the emerging movement – again, as a missional ecclesiology – as characterized by four rivers flowing into Lake Emerging.

3.0 McKnight and Emerging

[Added: Let me develop my metaphor first. There are four rivers flowing into Lake Emerging, a lake that is no more real to some than Lake Wobegon. I happen to be a believer in both, and so let me explain what I mean. Each of these rivers – postmodern, praxis, postevangelical, and politics – flows with its own integrity into Lake Emerging. Some hang out on that river and near where it flows into Lake Emerging. Others flow right into the Lake but hang out near the opening. Yet others flow into the river

and boat themselves into the whole of Lake Emerging. Now if you see the complexity of location here, you will see the difficulty of pinning Lake Emerging down. This is the way most movements of this size are created. Hang on because it will eventually become clearer to all of us.]

I begin with the obvious one. The emerging movement is to one degree or another connected to *postmodernity*. So, our first river to look at is the postmodern one.

3.1 Postmodern River

“The mistake,” Mark Twain says God made, was “in not forbidding” Adam to eat “the serpent.” Had God forbid the serpent, Adam “would have eaten the serpent.” Imagine where we’d be had Adam eaten the serpent. Moral character, God reveals, is shaped by solid prohibitions. When the evangelical world prohibited postmodernity, as if it were the apple on the tree, from its students, the fallen among us – like Jamie Smith and Kevin Vanhoozer and John Franke and Stan Grenz and Ray Anderson – chose to eat it to see what it might taste like. We found that it tasted very good even if at times you found yourself spitting out hard chunks of nonsense. As some of us have learned, once again to quote Twain, “a week or two” with the postmoderns will “limber up” our “piety.”

It is not always the piety that gets limber when one begins to read and absorb postmodernity. Sometimes it is the theology that can begin to be limber. I quote from Peter Rollins’ new book, *How (Not) to Speak of God*: “This understanding [of the emerging theological movement] includes a rediscovery of ideas such as: concealment as an aspect of revelation; God as hyper-present; the affirmation of doubt; the place of silence; religious desire as part of faith; Christian discourse as a/theological; God-talk as iconic; a

recognition of journey and becoming; truth as soteriological event; and orthodoxy as a way of believing in the right way” (73). That’s pretty limber, I say. It’s also quite suggestive. Many in the emerging movement like this sort of talk.

Let us define postmodernity, not as the denial of metanarratives or the denial of truth as it so often done at the level of urban legend, but as the collapse of metanarratives because of the impossibility of getting outside such assumptions to prove them on a rational, foundationalist, and objective method that enables us to construct from the bottom up universal knowledge. While there are always good as well as naughty entailments when opting for a philosophical stance, evangelical Christians ought to embrace elements of this understanding of postmodernity. In fact, Jamie Smith, in his *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernity?*, argues just this: that postmodernity is compatible, at times, with classical Augustinian epistemology. Faith seeking understanding, trust preceding the apprehension or comprehension of truth, and the recognition that even the mind – *voilà!* the noetic impact of the Fall – is in need of illumination in order to comprehend the gospel. All of which is to say that postmodernity as a philosophy forces upon the postmodern person the admission that our “stories” are embedded in space and time, and the confession that our community and our faith determines where our minds journey.

Let’s, however, observe that “within postmodern cultures” means different things to different people. Some in the emerging movement will – to borrow categories I first heard from Doug Pagitt, pastor at Solomon’s Porch (which is another characteristic: cool names for churches) – minister *to* postmoderns. Along with David Wells in his three-volume engagement with evangelicalism and culture, those who minister *to* postmoderns see

them as trapped in moral relativism and epistemological bankruptcy – they have no moral compass and they are afraid to render judgment on the truth. In other words, postmodernity is a condition out of which humans need to be rescued and in which the Christian wallows for a time in the effort to rescue them. A good example here would be John Burke in Houston.

Others minister *with* postmoderns. That is, they live with, work with, and converse with postmoderns and they accept their postmodernity as a fact of life in our world. Because the Christian's calling is to be "paracletic" instead of "parasitic," the Christian will accept postmodernity as the present condition of the world in which we are now called to proclaim and live out the gospel. Good examples here would be the seeker-sensitive models of ministry in which the Christian, like the apostle Paul on the Areopagus or the writer of Hebrews, adapts to the world in order to reach the world – and in the process gospel is both brought into reality and a new vocabulary discovered.

Now, before I get to my third form of ministry and postmodernity, let it be said that *plenty of emerging Christians and churches fit into these first two categories – in fact, the vast majority so far as I can tell*. Many float on this river and many are bobbing around in Lake Emerging. What I'm saying is that "within postmodern cultures," as stated by Gibbs-Bolger, most often means that Christians are rescuing folks *from* postmodernity or *walking alongside* such folk in order to lead them to paradise. These sorts of emerging Christians don't deny truth, and they don't deny that Jesus Christ is the truth, and they don't deny the Bible is truth – but they might be gentle when it comes to their use of the word "truth." Well, for some in the emerging movement, some theologians and preachers could benefit from an occasional "flash of silence" in their truth-talk.

A third kind emerging postmodernity is the sexy kind that, once it walks into the room, draws all lookers and lurkers: these folks minister *as* postmoderns. That is, they embrace the human condition of not knowing absolute truth or at least not knowing truth absolutely – and they speak of a proper confidence and a chastened epistemology and the end of metanarratives and the fundamental importance of social location as shaping what we know and find to be true.

What gets all the attention when the emerging folks walk in the room is that they are wary of *propositions* and they believe in faith, or trusting in God who is Truth, but not in our constructed *statements* about God and the faith. They stiff arm criticism when they announce, rather boldly at times, that only God is Absolute Truth and that nothing – emphasize that: *nothing* – we know can be grasped absolutely. They speak of orthodoxy as a way of believing in the right way, or of the preeminence – or at least egalitarianism – of *orthopraxy* vs. orthodoxy. They think the gospel is lived and seen and embodied, that the gospel can't simply be known noetically but must be experienced, and they sometimes say truth is relational rather than rational. They love either-or claims, especially when one side wins and the other side loses – as in “relational rather than rational.” While I think such language is much more often a ranking of truths by the *via negativa* rather than some superficial false dichotomy, no one can dispute that the emerging folks have at times embraced such language in order to create a clear divide and to pound in some stakes. False dichotomies might be the opiate of the emerging style; as for opiates, it has to be one of the more charming ones.

More to the point, emerging thinkers embrace a proper confidence and a chastened epistemology: LeRon Shults claims “from a theological perspective, this fixation with propositions can easily lead to the attempt to

use the finite tool of language on an absolute Presence that transcends and embraces all finite reality. Languages are culturally constructed symbol systems that enable humans to communicate by designating one finite reality in distinction from another. The truly infinite God of Christian faith is beyond all our linguistic grasping, as all the great theologians from Irenaeus to Calvin have insisted, and so the struggle to capture God in our finite propositional structures is nothing short of linguistic idolatry.” (From *Emergent-US* (May 6, 2006).) Flaubert once remarked, when trying to express his love for his mistress, that the “language to do so was inept.” That, my friends, is where some emerging postmodern Christians are trying to say. Language is inept to talk absolutely about God.

I must confess that I am smitten with the potential adoration and awe that derives from such apophatic approaches to Christian theologizing, and I’m inclined to say Shults is right.

What I’m suggesting in this first point is that postmodernity, at various levels, is a recognizable river flowing into Lake Emerging: it is conscious, it is intentional, and it is desirable. Someone who eschews or bad-mouths – or who curses, as the Lutherans sometimes do – postmodernity cannot be emerging. As you don’t invite Arminians to be professors at WTS, so we don’t invite pomo-bashers to our events.

3.2 A second river flowing into Lake Emerging today is *praxis*. I want to describe this river with four terms. In fact, I want to say that with this term *praxis* we are getting to the heart of the worldwide emerging movement. If you want to define the emerging movement, begin where Gibbs-Bolger did: “Emerging churches are communities that *practice the way of Jesus* within postmodern cultures.”

Worship

First, the praxis involves *worship*. I've heard – mostly uninformed – folks describe the emerging movement as “smells and bells” all over again, or as “funky worship,” or “candles and incense,” or that it is about “style vs substance.” I don't know how big an element this is. Doug Pagitt, for instance, in his *Body Prayer* is big on letting our bodies express our heart's prayers; Dan Kimball is as creative as anyone when it comes to the physical expression of worship; we could go on. Some fluff incense around the room, some light candles, and some have a service where there is multi-tasking.

We can forget sometimes that God really cares about physical things – and he created a tabernacle with detailed directions and Solomon built a majestic Temple with all kinds of rituals and physicality. Jesus didn't seem to be about this, but his ministry was focused elsewhere. Paul didn't seem to say a lot about aesthetics, but the author of Hebrews sure did – and it gave rise to potent thinkers like Hans Urs von Balthasar – the finest name ever for a theologian. Like the name Cesar Geronimo for a baseball player or Dick Butkus for a football player.

And we should not forget that the Reformers stripped churches clean of all that artwork – some of it positively provocative and others of it worth thinking about again. Which is what many in the emerging movement are doing. They see churches with pulpits in the center and a hall-like room with 90 degree angles for wooden, hard pews. They wonder if there is another way to express – theologically, aesthetically, anthropologically – what we do when we gather. The Plymouth Brethren gathered in circles with the communion table in the middle, and some emerging folks sit in couches while others sit at tables while others sit in the round. These things matter,

and the emerging movement believes that *praxis shapes theology* **and** *theology shapes praxis*.

They ask this question: is the sermon the most important thing on Sunday morning because that's all you can do when you are in room shaped as most churches are? They ask, if we sat in circles or in the round would we engender a different theology? If we lit some hippie-like incense would we see our prayers differently? If we took down the pulpit and put the preacher on the level with us would we create a clearer sense of the priesthood of all believers? If we acted out what we believe would we come to terms more emphatically with incarnation?

I've not heard emerging folks quote Mark Twain on this, but they'd quote this: "Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs one step at a time." Come to think of it, for some in the emerging movement, because habits are habits, they need to be flung out the window!

Orthopraxy

Second, the praxis river involves an emphasis on *orthopraxy*. There is a premise here – and you can find it either in Mark Twain or in Jesus. I begin with Twain: "Few things," he said, "are harder to put up with than the annoyance of a good example." Of course, Twain was being cynical. To be straight up about it, the emerging movement thinks *how a person lives* is more important than *what they believe*, that *orthopraxy* is the most important thing. And that the power of a life forms the best apologetic for the way of Jesus.

That is, we love to quote Jesus: "by their fruits [not theology] you will know them." Often overemphasized, dramatized, and sensationalized, the

point is regularly touted as central to the emerging movement. We are, of course, right: Jesus calls us to believe in him and to follow him and to obey his teachings; and his brother, James, said “faith without works is dead.” And we could go on. Apart from wonderful exaggerations – the sort of “cut out your eye if you have to” exaggeration, I know no one in the emerging movement who thinks one’s relationship to God is *established by how one lives*, nor do I know anyone who really thinks it doesn’t matter what one believes about Jesus Christ – except perhaps Spencer Burke (who is, in my estimation, post-emerging and something I can’t quite figure out).

Jesus, emerging folk are quite proud to remind us that we will be judged according to the parable of the sheep and goats on how we treat the least of these (25:31-46), and that the wise man is one who practices the words of Jesus (7:24-27). On top of this, some are quite fond of reminding us that Jesus didn’t offer a doctrinal statement but a way of life, and that he called people to follow him and not just to get their theology right. And they are not beyond saying that every judgment scene in the Bible is a judgment based on works, and no judgment scene seems like a theological articulation test. And they may be willing to say that no one has ever believed everything just right – not Origen and not Athanasius and not Augustine and not Aquinas and – to end the little “a” roll here – not Calvin and not Luther and not Menno Simons or John Wesley. Now it does seem that John Piper thinks Jonathan Edwards got it all right ... but I don’t think either of them believes in Hebrews 6 [that’s supposed to be taken as humor]. Which leads us precisely to the emerging issue with theology: we are left alone in what we think is right theologically and being alone isn’t enough when it comes to theology.

So, they don’t try to compose theological statements; they rely on the

great creeds and confess them as part of their heritage. And instead of worrying about getting everything just right – and they point to the fact that no two scholars agree – not even Michael Horton and Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield agree – leads them to concentrate on *living the way of Jesus*. We may not get it right when it comes to theology, so what we are called to do is *live right* – which most of them have either enough theological integrity to admit they don't get it right in practice or they have enough postmodernist irony to say the same. Either way, they get humbled both by theology and by praxis.

But praxis in the sense of orthopraxy is a major river in the emerging movement.

Social Justice

And a third element of the praxis river is *social justice*. Now I've gone a record a number of times, none of them all that profound, to say that I don't like this expression "social justice" because I think it is nearly always defined by the US Constitution, with its preoccupation with freedom and rights and the right to happiness. Instead, I prefer "justice" and to define it biblically as the condition and behavior that conforms to the will of God – that the issue is not rights but responsibilities, and that we have often capitulated to the social agendas in order to fight for social justice.

Whether we do this or not, the emerging movement believes – nearly uniformly – that Christians are summoned by God to work for justice in this world. I will develop another angle on this topic later in our paper, but let it be said that this emerging emphasis on justice is not the same as the Religious Right's focus on the family (that's a clever little combination) nor is it the Religious Right's advocacy for either anti-abortion or military

support. Justice, for this group, is exactly what Walther Rauschenbusch and Jane Addams said it was.

But what has to be seen is that anyone who thinks the Christian can withdraw from culture and society, cloistering themselves into huddled Bible study groups, longing for heaven and hoping it will happen soon are unfaithful to Jesus' message of the kingdom. That's the heart of the emerging movement's concern with social justice. Many have spoken to this concern, but none as has Brian McLaren in his *The Secret Message of Jesus*, which defines kingdom as the "interactive relationship of humans with God and others." And such a kingdom theory – and I'll say more about this tomorrow – was manifested by Jesus, not by way of power but by way of love and suffering in order to create an alternative society where kingdom values subvert the ideologies and powers of this world.

Missional

The fourth element gets to the heart of hearts on the river named emerging. This praxis river is first and foremost about being *missional*. We need to get this straight: the emerging movement would probably run and hide if you got too direct them and asked them if they believe in "evangelism." Their response might be along this line: "Well, in fact, we do, but we don't call it that. We call it missional and we see missional as bigger than evangelism." So, let me define what I see going on in the emerging movement when it comes to this term "missional."

First, it comes from the great missiological thinkers who use the expression *missio Dei*. The emerging movement is missional in the sense that they are asking *what God is doing in this world*. They become missional by *participating, with God, in the redemptive work God is doing in this*

world. In essence, they join the apostle Paul who said that it was to us that God gave “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:18). Missional, then, is theocentric.

Second, to become missional means to participate in the community where God’s redemptive work occurs. Thus, missional is first of all *theological* and then it is *ecclesiological*. Church matters, and it matters deeply, to the emerging movement. The church is not sacramental but the alternative community through which God is working and in which God manifests the utter credibility of the gospel.

Third, to become missional is to participate in the *holistic redemptive work of God in this world*. The Spirit groans, the creation groans, and we groan for the redemption of God – so Romans 8:18-27. And the nature of that eschatological redemption – witnessed in Revelation or Isaiah (unless you disagree with my eschatology) – in which case I’m back to Romans 8:23 where we see that the whole creation groans for a physical redemption – the redemption of our bodies. Romans 8, and as I read Revelation and the prophetic lines, anticipates what CS Lewis describes in *The Last Battle* -- namely, the utter release of creation to praise its Creator for its redemption through the cross of the Lamb.

This holistic element in the missional impulse of the emerging movement finds its perfect expression in the ministry of Jesus – who went about doing good – to bodies and to spirits and to souls and to families and to societies. He swept up the marginalized from the floor and put them back on their seats at the table, and he attracted harlots and tax collectors, and wiped the lame clean and opened the ears of the deaf. He cared, in other words, about bodies and whole persons. He attacked the vicious injustices of the Herods and the Caesars and the religious elite of Israel, and he declared

in tones even more strident than Jim Wallis that what they were doing was flat-out wrong and it had to change.

The central element of this missional praxis is that the emerging movement is not attractational in its model of the church but is instead missional: that is, it does not invite people to church but instead wanders into the world as the church. It asks its community “How can we help you?” instead of knocking on doors to increase membership. In other words, it becomes a community with open windows and open doors and sees Sunday morning as the opportunity to prepare for a week of service to the community, asking not how many are attending the services but what redemptive traits are we seeing in our community. It wants to embody a life that is other-oriented rather than self-oriented, that is community-directed rather than church-oriented.

To finish this praxis river off, I wish now to return to my opening principle of defining a movement by listening to what the movement is saying. Let me go to the narrower element, but in which may well speak for a broad range of emerging Christians – to Emergent Village’s website on its “Values and Practices.” These statements embody what is meant by the praxis impulse of the emerging movement:

- First, a commitment to God in the way of Jesus.
- Second, a commitment to the Church in all its forms (universal church).
- Third, a commitment to God’s world.
- Fourth, a commitment to one another.

To each of these are attached, in educrat-like fashion, *practices*. Like:

- Spiritual disciplines
- Dialogue and fellowship with other Christians.
- To be involved in at least one issue of peace and justice.

To participate in emerging events.

3.3 A third river flowing into Lake Emerging is *post-evangelical*. DA Carson got this right: the emerging movement is a protest against evangelicalism, and to make the lines clear the emerging movement often defines evangelicalism in simple, un-nuanced terms. This riles evangelicals while it also makes quite clear the points that we want to get across.

So, let me begin with a simplification: the gospel is more than Jesus coming to die for my sins so I can get to heaven. This gospel is not only protested by the emerging movement; it is rejected. Emerging Christians are trying to get *beyond* this gospel and that movement. Please observe: as an Apple computer is *post* a PC or a Dell, so the emerging movement is *post evangelical*. Not in the sense of abandonment, not in the sense of rendering obsolete, but in the sense of taking up and moving beyond as a fresh work of the Spirit.

Whether or not the emerging movement can define “evangelical” along the lines of John Stott or Alister McGrath, or John Woodbridge, or Donald Dayton – in fact, it probably favors the descriptions of Randy Ballmer, it knows whereof it speaks because it speaks viscerally with this sort of language: “been there, done that.” The study of Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelicals*, describes the experience of many – especially those in Emergent Village.

Having said this, however, let me make an observation I hope sticks with you: I would say that the vast majority of emerging Christians are evangelical theologically or evangelical conversionally, but they are post-evangelical when it comes to describing the Christian life and theology.

How so? To be an emerging postevangelical is to be post-Bible study piety, to be post systematic theology, and to be post “in/out” in perception.

Post-Bible-study-piety

The emerging movement is perhaps annoyed more by Bible thumpers and Christians who are obsessed with being biblical than anything else – not because they disparage the Bible but because they know too many Christians whose theology is all that matters to them, who render judgment on everything and everyone – with Bible verses to back it up – but who don’t live compassionately (and sometimes we mention names) and who don’t live out Micah 6:8 – “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Never mind that we ourselves don’t (always) get the “humbly” part, we at least want to make sure that our responsibility is to act justly and love mercy. When I wrote *Jesus Creed* to show how central loving God and loving others was to his ethics, I didn’t know my idea was emerging.

Whether it is or not, it is biblical: Jesus said the whole Law hangs from these two commandments. The apostle Paul – in Romans 13 and Galatians 5 – and James, brother of Jesus, both state that the whole law is summed up in loving others as yourself. John’s first letter is zippered up and tied down with the commandment to love others. The emerging movement thinks love defines Christian existence. Which means reading about love and exegeting *agapao* and the like are not enough.

This post-Bible study piety deserves more comment. The goal, so we in the emerging movement often say, of the Christian life is not to master the Bible but to be mastered by the Bible (*via negativa*, not false dichotomy). The goal is not *information*, but *formation*. In other words, it believes the *telos* of the Word of God is just as 2 Tim 3:16-17 says it is: “All scripture is

inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.” Bible study piety emphasizes “inspired by God” while the emerging movement emphasizes “equipped for every good work.” Any Bible study that does not lead to concrete behavioral changes aborts what God designs the Bible to give birth to.

Post systematic theology

Along this line of post-evangelical, the emerging movement is suspicious of *systematic theology*. Why? Not because we don't read such folks, but because (1) the diversity of theologies alarms us, (2) no genuine consensus has been achieved, and most importantly, because (3) God didn't reveal a systematic theology but a storied narrative and (4) no language is capable of capturing the Absolute Truth who alone is God. Frankly, the emerging movement loves ideas and theology; sometime sit down with its leaders and its participants and you'll find that they love theology – they just don't “have” a theology and they don't “subscribe to” a theology or “confess” a theology. They believe the Great Traditions offer us ways of telling the truth about God's redemption in Christ, but they don't believe any one theology gets it absolutely right.

This means, catch this, *all theology is always a conversation about the Truth who is God in Christ through the Spirit*. It is never final; it is never fixed. It is always in flux. This flux-like nature of theology can be anchored in postmodernity's skepticism about metanarratives, but more likely it is anchored in a proper confidence and a chastened epistemology. We ought, to rub it in a bit, to admit that the noetic impact of the Fall has an impact as well on our theology. In this sense, and I hope you see the wisdom here, the

emerging movement is radically reformed. It turns its theology against itself.

In vs. Out

Now a third, very controversial element. Many in the emerging movement are post-evangelical because they are inherently skeptical about the “*in vs. out*” *mentality* of the evangelical movement. Let’s get the foil for the emergents on the table: evangelicals render judgment on who is and who isn’t a Christian. Catholics know who is Catholic, and Orthodox know who is Orthodox – that’s easy. Check the list. Evangelicals don’t have official lists, but rely on personal conversion. And anyone who hasn’t had this conversion is not a Christian – whether they go to Church or not.

The emerging movement is skeptical of our ability to know such things.

Some will point to the words of Jesus: “he who is not against us, is for us.” Others, using the words of Clark Pinnock’s book, point to a “wideness in God’s mercy.” And yet others will point to postmodernity’s crushing of metanarratives and will extend that as well to master theological narratives – like Christianity. And some will then say what really matters is *orthopraxy* and that it doesn’t matter one bit which religion one belongs to as long as one loves God and loves one’s neighbor as one’s self. And some will tag along with Spencer Burke’s thoroughly unbiblical, overcharged Arminian concept of prevenient grace and contend that all are born “in” and only “opt out.” I hear many more speak of a spectrum of faith, degrees of faith, and permeable walls that permit “belonging” before believing.

However one orders these thoughts, the issue is that many in the emerging movement don’t think it is possible to know if others are genuinely in the family of God – they don’t very often use “saved” – and so

they assume or trust that others are in the family of God or are moving into the family of God.

Which creates a serious issue on evangelism. The emerging movement is not known for it – and I wish it were known more for it. I believe it is right here that we are staring at a very serious issue for the emerging movement itself: any kind of Christianity and any kind of Christian – and I don't want to say the Reformed are excused from this problem – that is not evangelistic is woefully inadequate. Unless you proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, there is no good news at all; and if there is no good news, there is no Christianity – emerging or Reformed.

I speak personally. I'm an evangelist – not so much the tract-toting and door-knocking kind, but I am the Jesus-talking and Jesus-teaching kind. 50% of my students in my Jesus of Nazareth class are non-Christians, and I spend time praying in my office before class, and time praying in the car driving to school, and lots of time pondering ... time thinking about how to say what in order to bring home the message of the gospel in my classrooms. And I can tell you that I'm more than grateful for the numbers of kids who come to Christ or who give their lives back to Christ that come my way each year.

And I offer here a warning to you and to the emerging movement: any movement that is not evangelistic is failing the Lord. We may be humble about what we believe and we may be careful to make the gospel and its commitment clear, but we better have a goal in mind – the goal of summoning everyone to follow Jesus Christ and to discover the redemptive work of God in Christ through the Spirit of God.

I've had lots of first and seconds, so let me put this together. The

emerging movement is postmodern, focused on praxis and it is postevangelical. My final point:

3.4 Lake Emerging also receives a river called *political*, and here I'm talking now only about the USA. Tony Jones is regularly told that the emerging movement is a latte-drinking, backpack-lugging, Birkenstock-wearing, group of 21st Century left-wing hippie wannabes. Put directly, they are Democrats. And that spells "doomed" for conservative evangelicals.

I have publicly aligned myself with the emerging movement, and as I have said, what gets me into this movement is its soft postmodernism (or a critical realism) and its missional focus. I lean left in politics. I have told my friends, and now I'll say it publicly – which I've never done, but I have voted Democrat for years for all the wrong reasons. I don't think the Democrat party is worth a hoot, but its historic commitment to the poor and to centralizing the government for social justice is what I think the government should do. I don't support abortion – in fact, I think it is disgusting; I believe in civil rights, but I don't believe homosexuality is Christian. But, I'm a pacifist. And, with the emerging movement, I think the Religious Right doesn't see what it is doing – and that means, yes, I do think Randy Ballmer's new book, *Thy Kingdom Come*, is a good book – not always right, but right (or should I say "left" or "Christian"?) in its direction.

And though emerging leaders often speak of the bi-partisan or non-partisan nature of emergent, I don't see it. I think they are mostly political left. Brian McLaren called for a "purple" politics. I'll believe the emerging movement is "purple" in politics when I see a politics that is genuinely moderate, genuinely independent, and genuinely willing to criticize both the Republicans for their godless emphasis on money and the Democrats for

their godless emphasis on amorality.

Now that I've assumed the high ground of being sanctimoniously independent and altogether righteous, let me say what I see in the emerging movement when it comes to politics. I've gone too long without quoting Mark Twain, so let me bring him back into our conversation this morning. "Training is everything," he said. "The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education." The purple politics spoken of in the emerging movement is nothing but Democratic partisan cabbages dressed up enough in rhetoric to look like an independent cauliflower. It isn't.

What I see (sometimes) in emergent in the USA is Walther Rauschenbusch, the architect of the social gospel. Brian McLaren has become good friends with Jim Wallis – and I have read almost everything Jim Wallis has written in book form. Wallis' hero, so far as I can see, is Rauschenbusch. He loves Mother Theresa and the like, but what I see in Wallis is Rauschenbusch one hundred years later. Now, unlike perhaps some of you, I don't think everything Rauschenbusch said was cock-eyed or bull-roar. Most evangelical critics of Rauschenbusch have read as much of him as they have of Pelagius. but it hasn't stopped them from thinking they know them – and it is more likely that they know more about Pelagius than Rauschenbusch.

Rauschenbusch, as you know, faced the challenge of a spiritual vs. a social gospel, and without trying to deny the former, led his followers into the latter. The results were devastating for mainline Christianity when it comes to the summons to personal conversion. The results were also devastating for evangelical Christianity for, apart from very few, it has struggled to maintain a balance itself. Jim Wallis, beginning with his

justifiably well-known *Call to Conversion*, and now in his scrapbook of ruminations, *God's Politics*, has had one thing to say to the evangelical church since the rise of his own social conscience: justice in the world matters to God.

He's right, but – to use the title of McIntyre's book – “whose justice?” And what is justice? How will we define justice? In my estimation, justice is being right with God, with the self, with others, and with the world – but what is “right” is what God says is right, not what the US Constitution says. So, when I read many in the emerging movement talk about justice, I've got the suspicion of the skeptical Viennese fella named Freud – who thought there was more going on at the table than met the fork – I think I'm hearing the Democratic platform. I could be wrong. But that is what I see.

The emerging movement, at least the impulse in the emergent movement in the USA, will have to decide – and it will be done at the individual level – what the word “right” means before it can work for “justice.” Deciding what is right, in fact, shapes everything about the emerging movement and, for that matter, the Reformed movement.

4.0 Conclusion

To define this movement is to begin with its own categories and its own emphases. The movement can be analyzed theologically, and theological analysis will uncover some of its genius. But, I maintain that the emerging movement, especially when you grasp its world-wide dimensions, is not a theological confession nor an epistemological movement but an ecclesiological movement. It is about “how to do Church” in our age. Or, in the words of Gibbs-Bolger: how to practice the way of Jesus in postmodernity.

There are at least four rivers flowing into Lake Emerging – postmodernity, praxis, postevangelicalism, and politics – and because some gravitate toward one or the other, emerging Christians are as diverse as the universal Church. Some are simply evangelicals with a missional slant, while others are postmodernists with a Christian hangover. To narrow them to an epistemological issue is as inaccurate as narrowing Calvinism to Calvin’s church reforms in Geneva.

Fairness, which is the politically correct term for the hermeneutics of love, is required of Christians – and I’m asking that you learn to be fair to the emerging movement. If you are fair, you’ll learn that they can be friends and that some of them are even Reformed, which is yours to define.