

The Emerging Church

Resurgence of Christian Mysticism

Part 1 – The Danger

There is a hunger for some form of spirituality in today's world, and the form that hunger is taking in Christianity, is a renewed interest in mysticism. It has become very fashionable and popular. There are some big names involved in it. But I don't consider it Christian in the reformed tradition, nor do I find warrant for it in Scripture. Yet I realize that evangelicalism has diverse Protestant views. There are Quakers, Charismatics, Plymouth Brethren, and others who subscribe to contemplative prayer, and to the motions of the Spirit. I believe I'm guided and prompted by the Spirit, and I meditate and pray. But some prayer techniques go beyond the traditional Protestant concept of meditation, contemplation, or Spirit-led worship. They fall into the "mystic" category.

In one technique, known as *lectio divina*, the reading of Scripture is divided into four steps: reading, meditating, prayer, and contemplation. So far, so good. But the words that are read are repeated – not for their meaning in the context of the passage – but as a mantra. The meditating imparts meaning to the words, rather than the meaning of the words guiding the meditation; prayer flows from whatever has filled the mind, and that becomes the subject of contemplation. This is a form of transcendental meditation (TM). Uninformed, or untaught Christians, who perhaps aren't mature enough to know the dangers, can fall into the trap of TM – confusing it with biblical understanding, and accepting it as a valid spiritual discipline. I think this type of meditative technique ought to carry a warning with it, as we do for communion. Those who practice it out of curiosity, should be forewarned that it can lead to a twisting of God's word. I've written something about that in a separate article.¹

I'm not Roman Catholic for a reason. And I don't subscribe to Roman Catholic practices or doctrines for a reason. The evangelical desire for ecumenism and inclusiveness these days should not prompt us to cast aside our Protestant distinctives and understanding of Scriptural truth. It especially should not drive us to re-embrace the superstitious practices that we disavowed during the Reformation.

Part 2 – The Promise

I was slow on the uptake as to the implications of the Emergent Church Movement (ECM). I misperceived the issue altogether. A missionary friend said to me that he wasn't familiar with the practices of mysticism, but only with doctrinal aberrations related to justification and faith. It struck me that I'd been troubled by the symptom, but hadn't considered the underlying cause. Doctrinal error was driving this meditative practice; and it was part of a larger trend in evangelicalism. But I couldn't put my finger on what that trend was. As I went to bed, I prayerfully asked God to reveal it to me.

¹ See my article *Christian Mysticism in Meditation*

When I awoke, I re-read a Modern Reformation article on the Emergent Church. I was struck by something Eric Landry had written, concerning the evangelical trend:

Most of us here at Modern Reformation like the Emergent Church folks. Frankly, it's a bit of a relief to have someone within Evangelicalism making the same points we've been trying to make for the past fourteen years. We also like their interest in liturgy, in church history (prior to 1972), and in engaging with Scripture in ways that take it beyond the "handbook for living" genre that so many of our own churches have adopted.

After reading their books and blogs, conversing with them, and attending their conferences most of us just want to grab a beer and talk with these men and women. I think we would find that we have much in common and I would hope that our own like-minded efforts might serve to keep the Emergent folks from swinging the pendulum too far in an unhealthy direction.

In order to be a real force for good within Evangelicalism, the movement will have to go beyond Evangelicalism and appropriate a churchly tradition that gives it real depth, not just an ecclesiological field guide. Otherwise, their efforts at reform will be truncated, for Evangelicalism can't be reformed. By its very nature the movement is shaped not by confession or doctrine but by personality, culture, and circumstance. And thus far, that seems to be what is shaping the efforts of the Emergent Church as well.

We're at a crossroads in history. The denominational churches are ineffective. The Evangelical movement has abandoned tradition, but has offered no substance with which to replace it. The postmodern world is so disaffected from what they perceive to be Christianity, that we need a whole new language through which to speak the truth to it. The Emergent Church is trying to develop that language, and is willing to reexamine every aspect of our faith and of our church practices to succeed. I absolutely agree with all of that. It's the primary reason I began to attend what I thought was a "vanilla" Christian community. I wanted to familiarize myself with the core beliefs of Christianity, apart from the denominational rigidity I'd known – what do we all agree on? What I found was a mixture of incompatible theologies and practices, not a distilled essence of Christianity. There was no effort to define what it means to be a Christian independent of tradition, and apart from those admittedly biased confessions of the faith.

Packer and Oden wrote a book titled, "One Faith," attempting to say, "THIS is what we all agree on." Good try, but the Emergent Church would reject some of the theology and practices that are declared in the book. I would disagree because it's just not true that we all agree on it. Vast numbers of evangelicals, those who at least believe they are evangelicals, would reject entire chapters of this book, and demand additional chapters.

A couple of years ago I started following the R&R movement, the Return to the Reformation movement. I believed, and still do, that the essence of Protestantism, of Christianity itself, was forged during the years 1500-1650. But there were ugly side-effects, deep-seated historical scars that were more reactionary than seminal. It showed up symptomatically in the unholy mixture of church and state throughout Europe. It showed its uglier side in missions as we shackled "victims" of the gospel of freedom by

imposing Western European cultural distinctives on them. We're still reaping the whirlwind from that.

David Wells and Douglas Groothuis have admirably identified the major trends in culture and thinking that characterize the modern and postmodern worlds. They lament the fall from our rational heritage of the Reformation, and are trying to hold the line. Michael Horton has been trying to do the same. He established ACE, the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, in an attempt to shore up the breaches, to give us some kind of doctrinal foundation from which to operate as we re-examine the Church in today's world. This is where it gets tacky, and where the ECM needs some boundaries, like any young child. Cultural and institutional changes like this take generations to reach maturity. We need to be sure they are properly nourished and exercised, and given firm direction along the way.

If you'll keep this idea of an adolescent in mind, you'll recognize that no adolescent attains self-identity without rebellion. There must be a break from the parent in order to establish his own beliefs. Many of those beliefs will turn out to be the beliefs of his parent's generation. Some will not. Conviction requires independence. This isn't a birthing process. This is a maturation process. And in every maturation process there are going to be trials to test the effectiveness of the adaptive and evolving belief system of the adolescent. It will either work, or it won't. Each belief that works, is placed under his belt. Each one that won't, is discarded.

We're witnessing the beginning of this process. I'm hopeful that it will succeed in a big way. It's been 400 years since we've attempted such a venture. In the same way that God blessed many aspects of the Reformation, he will bless many aspects of this Modern Reformation. The dialogue is the thing. The Emergent Church has begun the dialogue. We need to sit at the table if we're going to have any input. We can either attempt to be the dominating parents who try to break the will of their child, and force conformity, or we can be the teacher-coach who allows the child to find its potential. There are certain behaviors that are just flat dangerous, and may have long-term consequences that are irreversible. Every good parent, teacher, and coach is obligated to point out the dangers to the child. But in the end, the child is going to have to make some decisions. Our job is to ensure it has enough information to make its decisions informed ones. That's what I've been trying to do for nearly a decade now. I bring history and doctrinal foundations to bear as evidence presented to the court of public opinion. I don't want to bring doctrine alone to the table; instead, I present the *reasons* for doctrine. If we know the reasons behind the rules, we know when we can set the rules aside.

In all of this, God is sovereign -- even though the child may not accept that as a fact at this point in his development. That's because one of his beliefs is in play. If he's sovereign, how sovereign is he? What has free will or free agency got to do with it? How do they work together? Is rationalism the only path to "enlightenment" or can mysticism contribute to our understanding? To answer those questions, we need to keep the lines of communication open. It's not like we haven't experienced this before in church history. And every time we have these kinds of major upheavals, three distinct groups arise: the

left, the right, and the center -- the revolutionaries, the reactionaries, and the moderates. The moderates prevail every time. That's not because they are willing to compromise, but because they are willing to be reasonable.

Are we being intentional about this dialogue? I would rather the Emergent child be open and honest than to hide his intentions and motives. It avoids misunderstandings and hurt feelings. I'm not a reactionary. But I am cautious. I want change just as much as the revolutionaries in the ECM want it. It's the body-count that concerns me, and the radical experimentation. If we're going to step aside from evangelicalism, let's do it with conviction and deliberateness. Don't just poke at it with a stick, or run it up the flagpole to see who salutes -- that's leadership by polling, and it will fail.

What I see happening is that in our attempt to reach out to the postmodern world, we are becoming postmodern -- we aren't just speaking in the postmodern language. To become what we are trying to save would be a mistake of catastrophic proportions. What characterizes postmodernism is pluralism. We cannot let ourselves fall into pantheism just to keep the conversation going. We cannot espouse another gospel than the one true gospel. It is the images in our story that must change, not the content. If we're going to develop a new Christian meta-narrative for the postmodern world, we cannot compromise the truth of Christ.

These are exciting and hopeful times that are coming! It gets the adrenalin pumping for me. I hope you see it that way as well. Imagine being present on the eve of the Reformation, seeing Martin Luther on his way to the Wittenberg Chapel, and knowing full well what is about to take place! Imagine being present at the Constitutional Convention in America, knowing its potential and its promise, and contributing to the creation of something wonderful, something never before seen in the history of the world. These are such times! May God bless our efforts. And may we consider our ways, so that we assume our responsibilities soberly, being at all times faithful to the Word of God.

Part 3 – New Vehicle, not a New Path

The primary book on the ECM from their point of view is probably Dan Kimball's book, *The Emerging Church - Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. There are two forewords, one by Rick Warren and the other by Brian McLaren. So yes, there's a link between Rick Warren and the ECM. Keep in mind that the ECM is not monolithic. It is many things, but mostly it's a dialogue. McLaren is only one voice, even if it is the voice most associated with the movement, and the most ambivalent, radical, and confused voice among them. He says if anyone wants to be part of his "Generous Orthodoxy," they should jettison the notion of "solas." At that point, I stopped listening to him. But many evangelicals, appallingly, are buying into that proposition.

The ECM itself is not a doctrine, style, theology, or methodology. It is an open and frank discussion of where we've been, and where we need to go as the Body of Christ. Back in the late 80's and early 90's I made it a habit to ask my youth group, "If the church is not a building, and we are the church, then what should we look like?" That's the question

we're all asking, and the ECM is the vehicle through which the discussion is occurring. If we let those like Brian McLaren and the late Stanley Grenz control the conversation, and set the agenda, we'll only delay the resolution of this issue. We need more opinions, more points of view, to sit at the table. And we need consensus. We mustn't ignore the ECM, or simply denounce it in favor of traditionalism.

Doug Pagitt, an ECM devotee and pastor of Solomon's Porch, says that ECM is not "a stagnant belief." Tony Jones, ECM's national coordinator, says "Is it more sloppy than what a systematic theology professor does, sitting in his tenured chair typing up a book on the doctrine of the atonement? Yeah, it's messier than that! I think [it's] theology as it works itself out in the lives of human beings who are kind of scratching and clawing their way to try to follow Jesus on a daily basis. It's a messy endeavor, and I embrace that messiness." This disdain for "stagnant" or fixed theology is characteristic of the ECM. Tony also says "conversation alone leads to paralysis by analysis, which is why we have always made sure that conversations are led primarily by practitioners rather than theoreticians and consultants." What he means by "practitioners," from what I've read of him, is those who are successful in attracting the targeted audience and keeping them engaged. Popularity in practice determines our orthopraxis, just as popularity in book sales determines our orthodoxy.

The use of the phrase "Vintage Christianity" in Kimball's book highlights the return to liturgy and Roman Catholic mysticism, exactly what you're seeing in the new popularity of Greek Orthodoxy. What drives it is not Scripture, but focus groups. The ECM denounces the consumerism of seeker churches, which is the current rendition of evangelicalism, yet they have their own marketing teams out there taking surveys of what the 19-34 year olds want in the way of church and worship. And what that targeted group wants is mysticism, symbolism, and shared community. So that's what we're going to give them - much like asking a child what he wants for dinner. I don't think it will work. Based on what we know of their values, these kids will see right through it -- they'll come for awhile to see if we're serious and convicted, but then they'll recognize the insincerity in our "packaging" of the gospel, and leave again -- especially as they see it "evolving." Here's one possible decision table to consider:

- preserving message, preserving methods – traditional/denominational.
- preserving message, evolving methods – evangelical/seeker.
- evolving message, preserving methods – emerging/post-seeker (i.e. ancient methods of mysticism).
- evolving message, evolving methods – New Age/cult?

DA Carson's book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* is probably the most balanced assessment of the ECM. Another good one is *Reclaiming the Center* by Erickson, Helseth, and Taylor. It's not so much that it addresses the ECM, but that it addresses "evangelical accommodation" which is the "give 'em what they want to hear" attitude I just described. It's the marketing of Christianity to a targeted audience that drives me crazy. The ECM says that it's justified by the fact that Jesus spoke differently to different audiences. Well, not really. His attitude was different, but not his message.

His explanations were different, but not his truth. His challenges were different, but not his goal. And all of his explanations (parables, stories, lessons), as a body of truth, are completely consistent. They evoke the same response from all audiences across all generations and across all national and cultural boundaries, as we've discovered over the past 2000 years. *They are archetypal.*

The problem is that the images he used meant more to those in the Middle East and other areas who understood sacrifice and appeasement, than they do to the modern or postmodern mind. We're tired of having to explain them. And so there is a desire to tell the same truth in a postmodern context. After all, Paul became all things to all men that he might save some. But in rebuttal, I'd say that although Paul understood and spoke to them in their language and imagery, he didn't become one of them. As I said earlier, it's one thing to speak to the postmodern world in postmodern language. It's quite another to become postmodern ourselves.

I would assume this is one motivation to update the parables and biblical text into modern-day text, stories, and examples. But in the end I think we'll rely more on these updated versions than the original text of Scripture. Obviously there is a danger in that - but it's only dangerous if you subscribe to biblical inerrancy. I think that's why we quote *The Message* more than the NIV, etc. It's the most commonly quoted text at many churches today. I suspect that during the next 20-30 years we'll see dozens of these restatements of Scripture being published, each one departing further from the original text. There's a push for such updates, and there's big money in it - so the publishers are more than willing to participate and promote it. The CBA loves book sales too, so they're more than willing to offer "supporting" books. Like the ECM, publishers focus on the demand for spirituality without considering doctrinal purity or theological accuracy. After all, it's not as if there was a consensus about such things in the church...

I think this idea of updating the text has influenced the rejection of systematic theology, rational interpretation, and Scriptural consistency (the abuse of biblical theology that we're seeing in our seminaries). If we can rid ourselves of these "leftovers of the modern Enlightenment mind," it will establish a foundation for such restatements, and pave the way for the ECM's postmodern presentations of a new gospel meta-narrative. If indeed we cater to the Gen-Xers' alleged belief that truth is relative, and this is the primary criticism of the ECM, then all we're doing is putting the Christian message out there as one more truth among a myriad of truths. We want to become an inclusive and accepting voice instead of exclusive and judgmental. The ECM says, in their defense, that indeed we are one voice among many right now. Therefore, if Christianity is already perceived that way, we might as well catch their attention with something much closer to their hearts: let's change the bait we use.

I won't go into the underlying theology of all this, but as I've said before, once you accept the Arminian view of missiology and evangelism, once you buy into Revivalist outreach, all of this is a natural outworking of that persuasive approach. The reformed view precludes all of this. It says that there are two families in Scripture, that there are the sons of men and the sons of God, that the sons of God are pre-elected, that Christ died for

them alone, that his sheep hear his voice and the goats cannot, and that God regenerates his own, drawing them inexorably to himself through the Gospel by the power of the Spirit. But once you cast these doctrines aside, this trend toward accommodation makes perfect sense. You won't find that assessment in *Reclaiming the Center*. It's not PC. The question to be resolved is which of these two views is the true gospel: predestination (eternal security w/o works) or free will (works w/o eternal security). It was evangelicalism's notion during the past fifty years that these two views can co-exist in the community of believers, and even be commingled, which has led to the marketing of the gospel as we see it today. The evangelical movement is predominantly an Arminian movement. That's why it is moving back towards Catholicism, because their theologies are very much the same. It's why we're seeing the second pillar of justification falling. It's why... well, maybe another day.

Some of this was affirmed by Philip Jenkins' books, such as *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, and *The Next Christianity*. Jenkins is a Roman Catholic who says that in the next 50 years, the world will be dominated by Christianity (meaning Roman Catholicism). Its locus will be south of the equator, and its practitioners will focus on mysticism and rites, speaking languages other than English, dressed in garb other than Western European, reflecting cultural values other than traditional Christianity. If that's the trend, says the ECM, then let's go with the flow; we'll offer similar fare at our own table so they'll be as willing to sit with us as with the RC's. This is sometimes described as buffet-table ecclesiology, or now it's called iPod or TiVo Christianity - take what you like with you, play it back when you want. No accountability, no oversight, no direction, no right or wrong, no confrontation, and no discernment -- it's all just a different way of looking at the truth, they say. Designer religion. Private theology. It seems that few of us are willing to call it "itching-ears" Christianity.

I believe we do need to change the way we do church, and the way we do evangelism. I agree whole-heartedly that we're in trouble, and we have failed to contextualize the gospel in the same way that Paul contextualized it for the Greek philosophers on the Areopagus. I believe we have failed to target society's leaders, as the Apostles did, and have chosen instead to target only the masses using the lowest common denominator for our messages. I believe we have failed our congregations by choosing not to equip them for the works of the ministry, but instead we have pursued personality-based presentations in ever-larger auditoriums, and packaged our message through mass-media. I believe we have failed our seminarians in not giving them the tools they need to live an exemplary Christian life, choosing instead to equip them for a professional career.

Part 4 – Considerations for the Journey

We need to change. The question before us is, Why? and then, How? If we can correctly answer why we need to change, then we'll know how. I believe that Christianity is a one-on-one ministry of the gospel: face-to-face, sincere, personal, practical, exemplary, and Christ-incarnated. Until we return to THAT, we'll just be spinning our wheels. I believe THAT is what the Gen-Xers want to see and experience, and what every other generation has wanted since Pentecost. THAT is where we find community, belonging, meaning,

purpose, and God's love-at-work. Am I alone in believing this? I could swear it used to be the predominant view of Christians everywhere.

We're asking, "Do you want to change the world?" Listen to Ozzie Osbourne's answer, because it resonates with this generation:

Standing on the crossroads, world spinning round and round
Know which way I'm going, you can't bring me down
Don't you try and teach me no original sin
I don't need your pity for the shape I'm in

Chorus

I don't wanna change the world
I don't want the world to change me
I don't want to change the world
I don't want the world to change me

Tell me I'm a sinner I got news for you
I spoke to God this morning and he don't like you
You telling all the people the original sin
He says he knows you better than you'll ever know him

Chorus

You know it ain't easy
You know it ain't fair
So don't try to please me
Because I really don't care

Don't tell me stories 'cause yesterday's glories
Have gone away, so far away
I've heard it said there's a light up ahead
Lord I hope and pray I'm here to stay

Tell me I'm a sinner I got news for you
I spoke to God this morning and he don't like you
Don't you try and teach me no original sin
I don't need your pity for the shape I'm in

Do you hear the disillusionment and despair? The isolation and anger? We don't need to ram a counter-lyric down their throats and crank up the volume. Nor do we need to invent our own music or lyric. We're inviting the world to sing along with us by sounding out our song in sweet harmonies. Those who belong to Christ will recognize the melody and the lyric of God, and they will inevitably join us. What we're changing is the orchestration and the cadence of our music. We want to intrigue and attract the modern ear to listen, just as Christ did. His message wasn't really new. You can hear it throughout Genesis. His commands weren't new. You can hear them in the Pentateuch. His promises weren't new. You can hear them in the Prophets. Only his covenant was new. God's promised grace and redemption had become a historical reality. *That's* the gospel: we are

the beneficiaries of the Last Will and Testament of Jesus Christ, and there are present as well as future benefits. We need to enumerate them.

I believe what intrigues and entices the world to our doorstep isn't our style and our packaging, but our *Union with Christ*. And you know what? It's a *mystical* union! *What exactly is it, and what does it look like? What makes it any different than what the world is offering?* That's what we need to answer. That's what we need to obtain consensus about. If we cannot answer such questions decisively and convincingly, as a worldwide Body, then we have nothing to offer a dying world. *Nothing*. We will remain a splintered group of throwbacks and experimenters, an irrelevant voice in a sea of voices. We will have lost our saltiness, and our yeast will no longer cause the flour to rise. I'm sure none of us wants that. It would be impossible to explain to Christ when he returns. "When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" I pray so.