SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EMERGING CHURCH

It is not possible to give an airtight definition of "the Emerging Church." But it is possible to point to some typical characteristics ("family resemblances") for various churches that identify themselves as "Emergent Churches." What follows is one attempt at identifying such characteristics, drawn primarily from the following sources (which are listed in the order in which I found them to be informative and helpful)

Gibbs, Eddie and Bolger, Ryan C. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005.

McLaren, Brian D. *Church on the Other Side: Exploring the Radical Future of the Local Congregation.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

McClaren, Brian D. *A Generous Orthodoxy*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.

Carson, D. A. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Sweet, Leonard. Ed. *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

MISSIONAL ON BEHALF OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Emergent Church (hereafter, EC) focuses on the "centrality of Jesus," believing that to be a Christian is to be a "follower of Jesus." But, this is not the Jesus of some forms of Christian pietism (focusing exclusively on "Jesus and me"), or a Jesus concerned only about the personal salvation of individual people. Rather, it is the Jesus whose incarnation inaugurated the Kingdom (reign) of God on earth; a Jesus who desires that all of Creation be reconciled to God, which will be fully realized only at the consummation (end times).

Therefore, one mission of the EC is for the congregation to embody the Kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed ("Christians should *be* the good news").

However, this embodiment of the Kingdom should not take place only within the church community. Much of this Kingdom work must take place outside the walls of the church ("we need a Kingdom focus, not a church focus"). This extension beyond the walls of the church involves "partnering" with God in the full scope of God's redemptive work, seeking to foster a broad spectrum of "Kingdom values" such as justice, peace and reconciliation between persons and groups in conflict, beauty, knowledge, and the flourishing of the natural world.

The EC acknowledges that it is not just Christians who seek to foster "Kingdom values" (even if others do not associate such values with the Kingdom of God). Therefore, the EC

should cooperate with those of other secular or religious faiths who, for their own reasons, are committed to such shared values.

TRANSFORMING SECULAR SPACE

The EC rejects the common sacred/secular dichotomy. Rather, all of life can be sacred, including apparently mundane everyday activities (like nurturing a family) and activities that too many Christians have relegated to a "secular" realm (like political activity or artistic endeavors).

This broad view of what is sacred has been described as "making all of life a sacrament [a sign or symbol of a spiritual reality]."

LIVING AS COMMUNITY

The EC rejects the "Lone Ranger" view of being a Christian; Rather, Christians are meant to live in community, connecting with one another and caring for one another. The Church is not a place or an institution; it is a network of persons in relationships (like a "family" – in any given congregation, "*we* are the Church"). This commitment to fostering "relationships" transcends differences that church members may have relative to some particular beliefs (much more about that later).

In order to foster relationships between members of the church community, we must "get to know one another." Therefore, the congregation needs to create opportunities for its members to share their stories and struggles with one another on their respective journeys of faith.

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

The EC believes that "belonging is prior to believing" (which has been subject to great misunderstanding). This means providing a space for people to belong before they come to believe; a "safe space" for those who may be vulnerable. Therefore, the church needs to welcome the outsider and those who are "different."

This does not mean that differences in "beliefs" are unimportant. Rather, it means that one must create an atmosphere of mutual trust and caring before one can explore differences in beliefs in a loving way.

SERVING WITH GENEROSITY

The EC believes that "orthopraxis is the point of orthodoxy." Therefore, expressing personal concern for the other's well-being, and taking concrete action to meet their

immediate need should be *prior to* "proclaiming a message." But, doing both of these things is important, since you can't separate the Great Commission (to make disciples of all peoples) from the Great Commandment (to love one's neighbor as oneself).

In practice, meeting the immediate needs of another person (e.g., caring for a person who is homeless) may enable you to eventually address deeper long-term needs. But, meeting immediate needs is not to be viewed as just a means to a greater end. In light of the "mission" of the church as an agent for God's redemptive purposes, meeting such immediate needs is an important end in itself.

But, such serving of others should not be limited to those within the congregation. Again, in light of the "mission" of the church, such service should extend beyond the walls of the church, to the community in which the church is embedded and beyond.

LIVING EVANGELISM

The EC emphases on community, welcoming the stranger, and serving with generosity lead to a view on evangelism as flowing naturally from how the community lives ("our community is our apologetic"). The mode of engagement is conversational, not confrontational, which involves listening, providing opportunity to talk about the deep experiences of life with those outside the Christian faith, and demonstrating our love by the way we live rather than focusing on our "doctrines." As Brian McLaren asserts: "postmoderns don't want truth without equal doses of love" (*Other Side,* 171).

As relationships of trust are established, members of the EC are indeed prepared to give reasons for the hope that is within them, with humility, "speaking words of faith softly," often using stories relative to shared experiences rather than religious jargon.

As a result of this dialogic approach to evangelism, members of the EC are friendly with and committed to dialogues with those from other faith/religious traditions.

PARTICIPATING AS PRODUCERS

The EC rejects the common 20/80 paradigm for the involvement of church members (20% of the members do 80% of the work), which makes church a "spectator sport" for many members. Rather, the EC emphasizes active participation of all members, with each member contributing according to his/her particular abilities (theologically, this is a focus on the doctrine of the "priesthood of all believers").

This emphasis on participation rather than passive observation has numerous implications for the worship services typically held by ECs, such as the following. Worship needs to provide opportunity for a wide spectrum of activities that reflect the giftedness of the members, not just preaching and a "narrow musicianship" (whether traditional or contemporary) It should provide opportunity for art, dance, writing, film, graphics,

meditations (ECs value changes in pace, pauses, and periods of silence) and other expressions of gifts that "make use of all of the senses."

Worship services should not aim for "professionalism," but should emphasize natural expressions that flow from the gifting of members (which can include both prepared and spontaneous contributions). In addition, all members should be invited to help plan worship services, and all ages should be included in worship gatherings. Since ECs value stories, they should create spaces that enable everyone to share his/her story. Above all else, human performers should not be placed between worshippers and God.

CREATING AS CREATED BEINGS

ECs typically embrace the theological premise that since all human beings have been created in the image of God, every member of the congregation is creative in some way. Therefore, church programming and other church activities (not just worship, as noted above) should provide opportunities for a wide spectrum of creative activities on the part of all its members, for the "good of the congregation," and the "good of the world."

LEADING AS A BODY

The EC is wary of the "cult of personality," and "hierarchy," in which a charismatic leader exerts unchecked power. In contrast, the EC values a "decentralization that empowers others" rather than "centralization that disempowers others." Therefore, a church leader should facilitate the work of others (creating a space for others to work), not setting a church agenda, but facilitating a process by which the congregation sets the agenda. This includes "giving everyone a voice" in a consensual process in which all have a say in influencing outcomes.

The EC values multiple leadership, with leadership assignments reflecting giftedness. This allows for one member to lead in one area, with another member leading in another area. Those who demonstrate passion for a given initiative will (should) emerge as leaders for that initiative.

MERGING ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITIES

The EC seeks to foster eclectic spiritual practices, including monastic elements, ancient prayers, and the practice of daily spiritual disciplines (e.g., Bible reading and prayer). This includes reconnecting with ancient liturgies that inspired past Christian generations and sustained the Church across the centuries.

The EC typically emphasizes the Eucharist rather than the pulpit, practicing hospitality and inclusion.

The EC tries to avoid hyperactivity, allowing time for reflection and silence, where art is central.

ON CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS AND TRADITION

It is challenging to sort through the views on ECs on the traditions(s) of the Christian Church. A good starting point is the following quote from Brian McLaren, arguably the most thoughtful and articulate apologist for the EC movement. McLaren asserts that Christians should "Trade up Traditions for Tradition" (*Other Side,* 57). What McLaren appears to mean by this is that doctrines that are unique to particular Christian denominations should be secondary ("have a marginal place") in comparison to the "essential core beliefs" of the Christian faith. And it is these "essential core beliefs" that constitute "Christian Tradition" (in contrast to the "Christian traditions" of the various Christian denominations). He elaborates further by asserting that it is this separating of "essentials" from "nonessentials" that distinguishes between "genuine Christianity" and our (individual and various culture-encoded) versions of it" (*Other Side,* 178).

But, of course, this begs the question as to which Christian beliefs are indeed "essential," which can be debated endlessly. Some ECs appear to reduce the essentials to one belief: to be a Christian is to be a follower of Jesus, allowing much room for disagreement as to what it means to "follow Jesus."

Some ECs want to say more, believing that the essentials of the Christian faith are expressed in or the Apostles' and Nicene creeds (which appears to be the position taken by McLaren).

Others in the EC movement want to say still more; confessing the beliefs inherent in the broad contours of the "Christian Story" (Creation, Fall, Redemption, the witness of the Church, Consummation). Belief in these broad contours allows considerable room for disagreement concerning doctrinal elaborations. For example, the Creation motif asserts "that" God created the cosmos, leaving room for disagreement as to "how" God created. And, the Consummation motif asserts that God's purposes will one day be fully realized, and God will then render final judgment as to good and evil, leaving room for disagreement as to the exact nature of these "end times."

Of course, many critics of the EC movement believe that all of these minimalist options say too little. For example, they would assert that a proper view of the "how" of Creation is an essential Christian belief; or a proper view of exactly what will take place at the "end times" is an essential Christian belief; or a proper view of the nature of baptism, as related to the meaning of "Redemption," is an essential Christian belief.

What, then, should be our stance toward Christian traditions of the various denominations or "The Christian Tradition" (as understood by a particular EC)? McLaren argues that there is "tension between loyalty to tradition and willingness to break with tradition" (McLaren in Sweet, 148), and "somewhere in the midst of this tension…is the way of

wisdom, neither underestimating the rich inheritance we have in our traditions (and in our shared Christian traditions) nor overestimating their present perfection." In other words, neither our denominational Christian traditions, nor our understanding of the 'essentials of "The Christian Tradition" are static; they are ever developing, and we need to "look back into our traditions [or our understanding of "The Christian Tradition"] and find resources to help us move ahead in innovation" (McLaren in Sweet, 148).

ON CHRISTIAN UNITY

In light of Jesus' prayer for the unity of all those who would follow him (John 17: 22-23), the EC aspires to attain such unity (see also Ephesians 4: 3 – Keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace). But, for the EC, Christian unity does not mean agreement on all the "nonessentials" of Christian belief. Rather, it means that there is a common fund of essential (core) beliefs that can hold us together, while tolerating diversity of beliefs about nonessentials.

Once again, this raises the thorny issue of deciding on the "essentials" of the Christian faith. For those many in the EC movement who define the essentials in terms of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the "message" of the church "never changes" (even if the means for getting the message out may change); "it is always the unfolding story of Jesus" (McLaren in Sweet, 205). It is always the "Christ-centered gospel story" (McLaren in Sweet, 206). Christians who can agree on the centrality of Jesus ought to be able to worship together around this focus, even if they disagree on many other issues, doctrinal or social. As John Franke says in commenting on the viewpoint of Brian McLaren, he "identifies both the diversity that characterizes the Christian tradition and *its unity through the living presence of Christ*) (GO, 16, italics mine).

The EC also believes that working together to meet each other's needs can contribute to Christian unity.

ON TRUTH OR NOT

The most prevalent criticism of the EC is that it is "soft on the Truth," possibly even "denying the existence of Truth." Critics assert that in its desire to witness to "postmodern culture," the EC has capitulated to aspects of that culture that are antithetical to the Christian faith, most notably buying into a postmodern suspicion of (or disdain for) the concept of "truth" as being more than "the truth for me." In the context of the characteristics of the EC that are summarized above, I will argue that this criticism is, for the most part, misplaced, reflecting a non-nuanced view of postmodernity.

Just as one cannot give an airtight definition of the EC, it is impossible to give an easy explanation of what is meant when one talks of "postmodernism." However, at least a portion of what is meant by "postmodernism" deals with epistemology (issues related to

what we can know and how we can support that which we claim to know). And, to attempt to get to the bottom of this, it is important to make a distinction that Merold Westphal, a Christian philosopher at Fordham University, made in an interview in *Books & Culture.* Westphal distinguishes between "Truth" (with a capital T), which is the nature of things as known fully only to God, and "truth" (with a lower case t), which is that portion of "Truth" that we as finite, fallible human beings are able to grasp.

With that distinction in mind, a "radical postmodernist" holds that there is no such thing as "Truth." This position is antithetical to my understanding of the Christian faith, and I fail to see how any EC can embrace such a radical postmodern position.

However, a "soft postmodernist" (which I take myself to be) holds that there is "Truth," but I cannot fully grasp that "Truth" because of my finitude and fallibility; meaning that I must settle for "truth," my particular perspective on "Truth" (reflecting elements of my social location, such as my biography, gender, race, and the Christian tradition in which I am embedded), which may differ from the "truth" as grasped by other Christians having different social locations.[1]

So, then, what can be done to adjudicate these differing "truths?" As I elaborate elsewhere (in my book *Learning to Listen, Ready to Talk: A Pilgrimage Toward Peacemaking*), I should commit myself to having "respectful conversations" with those who do not share my particular perspectives, in the hope that we can learn from one another.

In that context, here is my understanding of the dominant position of the EC relative to the issues of "Truth" and "truth," quoting directly from the words of Brian McLaren.

McLaren unequivocally rejects "relativism" (the view that any one claim to truth on the matter at hand is as good as any other claim to truth), stating that "relativism offers no standard for stopping the crazies" (*Other Side,* 124). In contrast to "radical postmodernists," who dismiss "absolute truth," McLaren asserts that a postmodernist can believe there is absolute truth, but doubts his ability to comprehend all of is. In his own words: "I believe Christianity is true, but I do not believe that my version (or yours, for that matter) of the Faith is completely true (*Other Side,* 178). I believe this is equivalent to my asserting above that there is "Truth" that only God knows completely (which, in McLaren's words can be called "absolute truth"), but, as a finite fallible human being, I am only able to grasp a partial glimpse of that Truth.

But, it is extremely important to note that for McLaren and for the EC in general, this grasping of a partial glimpse of "God's Truth" is not a once-and-for-all thing. Rather it is a dynamic, ongoing process. We should continually be seeking the Truth, not believing we have all of it. Based on John 7:17, McLaren asserts that "It is in the midst of following the way, of living the life, that one finds the truth" (*Other Side,* 184). He views

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[1] In philosophical terms, the epistemological position I am embracing is called "critical realism," which holds that there is a reality "out there" independent of me the knower, but my understanding of the nature of that reality is affected by the interpretive framework that I, the knower, bring to the process of knowing.

church history in terms of *"semper reformanda,* continually being led and taught and guided by the Spirit into new truth" (*Generous Orthodoxy,* 215). On this journey of always seeking for greater glimpses of "Truth," we must exemplify that rare combination of deep commitment to one's present understanding and openness to refining that understanding ("we are genuinely open to being wrong about parts or all of our beliefs, while at the same time being fully committed to them").

This view of seeking the Truth as a dynamic process fits well with the general EC emphasis on the whole of Christian living being as dynamic process: "the way to know is by embarking on an adventure of faith, hope, and love, even if you don't know where your path may lead (think of Abraham, Hebrews 11:8)" (*Generous Orthodoxy,* 207).

A CRITIQUE

I resonate strongly with the typical characteristics of the EC, as I understand them and have summarized them above. What I have said in my book *Learning to Listen, Ready to Talk: A Pilgrimage Toward Peacemaking* comports well with my understanding of the general contours of the EC movement.

Having said that, however, there are some particular tendencies (or, at least, temptations) within some expressions of the EC movement with which I disagree. These are tendencies toward "bifurcation" (false dichotomy) in which one is asked to choose "either/or," when I would rather choose "both/and." The source of many of these false dichotomies is a *truncated view of personhood.* That assertion will obviously take some explanation.

Some in the EC movement give the impression that we must make "either/or" choices between the poles of the following dichotomies: mystical Christianity/intellectual Christianity; the experienced Word/the spoken Word; a cognitive approach to truth/a "spiritual" and communal way of living. These are all false choices, reflecting a truncated view of what it means to be a whole person. In each case, it should be "both/and," not "either/or." Why is that?

To be a whole person includes interaction between thinking, feeling and doing (a synergy of the cognitive, affective, and volitional, to use more high-falutin words). Therefore, the world of deeply felt religious experience, including "mystical experience," cannot be divorced from the life of the mind (in fact, one learns nothing from "raw experience;" one learns only from reflection on one's experiences). So, the "experienced Word" cannot be divorced from the "spoken [not to mention "written"] Word," and "mystical Christianity" cannot be divorced from "intellectual Christianity."

Furthermore, there is ongoing interaction (a two-way street) between how one lives one's life and one's cognitive beliefs about the nature of reality. Each pole deeply informs the other pole. So, it is wrong-headed to set up a dichotomy between a "cognitive approach to truth" and a "spiritual and communal way of living."

There are two other related dichotomies that a holistic view of personhood call into question: changed lives/changed beliefs, and practice/belief. How one lives (one's practices) cannot be divorced from what one believes. They are two sides of the same coin.

Lest you think that my calling into question the dichotomies noted above is a case of "academic nit-picking," allow me to conclude with reflections on the implications of what I have just said for the hot debate about the "forms (means) of worship" that are viewed as most appropriate for our postmodern age. Once again, as you will soon see, this debate also buys into a dichotomy or two that I reject.

Some in the EC movement are quick to point out the fact that many in our postmodern generation of young people are more attuned to "visual images" than to "words." That is no doubt empirically true. But, so what? Surely, that is not an adequate argument for replacing the spoken or written word" with "images" in our worship services. That is a false "either/or" choice. Rather, I believe that our worship services should incorporate both images and the spoken/written word. In this way, the young persons in our congregations can be teased into a greater appreciation for the spoken/written word, and old folks, like me, can be teased, sometimes kicking and screaming, into a greater appreciation for the use of images other than spoken/written words in out worship of God.[2]

Similar things can be said, I believe, about the hotly contested issue of the type of music should be included in our worship services (contemporary versus traditional). There is another false dichotomy. As you may guess, from my self-identification above, I find the singing of traditional hymns to be most worshipful. In contrast, most of the young people in my church find the singing of contemporary Christian songs that lend themselves to a little bouncing around and clapping of hands to be most worshipful. So be it, as long as the songs selected in either category point to the God who is to be worshipped rather than to the performer(s). This suggests to me the desirability of what has come to be called a "blended worship service," including some of both types of music, which will help me to appreciate more the musical preferences of the younger set, and, yes, help the young folks to gain a greater appreciation of the old hymns that I favor. I gather that some ECs may need to consider more seriously the possibility of implementing this "both/and" option.

Harold Heie, August 2009

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[2] My choice of "both/and" in this case (and in the next paragraph) is informed by my understanding of a deep expression of diversity. A shallow view of diversity amounts to nothing more than coexistence (Caucasians sitting at one table in a school cafeteria, with Latinos at another table, or a traditional service for us old folks, and a separate contemporary service for young people). The fatal flaw in this shallow version of diversity is that neither group benefits from the treasures that can be offered by the other group. The robust form of diversity that I embrace calls for groups having their differences engaging one another, so that each group can be enriched by interaction with the other groups.