

JOHN WESLEY AND THE EMERGING CHURCH

by Hal Knight

We have talked for several decades about “postmodern Christianity.” We have speculated about the forms it would take, the message it would proclaim, and mission it would embrace. Now, at the beginning of a new century we can finally see its outlines. The emerging church movement is not just envisioning a postmodern church, it is bringing it to birth.

I believe Wesleyans should welcome the emerging church. I say this not because the leaders of emerging churches come from Wesleyan backgrounds—most, in fact, do not. Wesleyans should support this new movement because the purposes and values emerging churches seek to embody—their vision of discipleship, church and mission—is highly congruent with those of the Wesleyan Tradition. We have, I think, much to learn from emergent churches, and perhaps something to contribute as well.

What is the “Emerging Church”?

It is hard to characterize the emerging church, which will not surprise its adherents in the least. The emerging church is diverse and decentralized, averse to static structures and fixed ideas. Many participants would resist my calling it a movement, instead describing it as an ongoing conversation about church and mission. It certainly *is* a conversation, which is occurring in local communities, at conferences, but most especially on a multitude of blogs. Yet without at all taking away from their claim to postmodern newness, we should remember that religious awakenings in the past were also highly diverse, decentralized, innovative, and altogether messy affairs. As soon as you try to generalize about the eighteenth or nineteenth century awakenings, you are aware of the difficulty of doing so.

Yet we must describe if we are to discuss, however tentatively. So here is what I see: the emerging church is driven by an increasing dissatisfaction with the assumptions and practices of churches at home in Western culture, which has largely been governed by the Enlightenment. This is why emerging churches are largely found in North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, where Western culture has long been dominant. Its leaders are deeply committed persons who are creatively envisioning a new postmodern Christianity. Brian McLaren stated their agenda succinctly: “If you have a new world, you need a new church. You have a new world.”¹ They are, as the subtitle of the study by Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger puts it, “Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures.”²

This is why emerging churches are often misunderstood as simply a young adult phenomena, a sort of church growth program to reach twenty-something’s. It is true that many of their participants are young adults, but the reason is that they, of all the current adult generations, are the one most at home in postmodernity. Emerging churches are not responding to a passing fad but to deep, permanent, and pervasive cultural change. Subsequent generations will be shaped to an even greater extent by postmodern culture.

It is their happy embrace of postmodernism that makes emerging churches controversial. Many of their leaders grew up in conservative evangelical environments that were very much at home in modernity. They found that the pervasive rationalism of these environments

compromised mission, and their individualism impoverished community. Other evangelicals, shaped by Enlightenment-based modernity, have been highly critical of the emerging churches' postmodern contextualization. From their perspective, emerging churches are abandoning truth and embracing relativism.

There are several things that can be said in response. First, as I have tried to argue elsewhere,³ a commitment to truth does not necessitate a commitment to modernity or a rejection of postmodernism. Second, because awakenings are indeed messy, some elements in the emerging church may indeed develop unorthodox teachings and practices, just as has happened in the past. And, as in the past, such heterodoxy may need to be pointed out for the health of the church. Yet the unorthodox fringe does not deligitimate the many and diverse expressions of orthodoxy at the center, just as the exotic utopian movements of the early nineteenth century awakening did not negate the orthodoxy of the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and others that were at the heart of it. Third, Enlightenment rationalism is itself no guarantee of orthodoxy, as the growth of anti-awakening unitarianism in eighteenth century New England illustrates.

But my main response is this: emerging churches are as traditional as they are postmodern. They seek a fresh, creative, and highly faithful appropriation of Christian tradition for a postmodern culture. To quote two more book subtitles, they seek "Vintage Christianity for New Generations"⁴ and have a "First Century Passion for the 21st Century World."⁵ It is this "ancient/future" dimension that distinguishes emerging churches from church growth approaches that pit "old" against "new", and from seeker churches that remove Christian symbols and terms from their services as barriers to evangelism. Emerging churches exult in traditional spiritual practices and imagery, but seamlessly interweave it with contemporary language, art, and technology.

This simultaneous respect for tradition and attention to context marked the ministry of John Wesley. He also lived in a time of great cultural and intellectual change. He found it necessary to develop new practices of ministry in order to effectively reach people in his day, invite them into a relationship with Christ, form them as disciples, and enable their participation in mission. Yet at the same time he sought for his movement to be an altogether faithful contemporary expression of the heart of scripture and tradition, especially what he termed "primitive Christianity."

Seven Features of Emerging Churches

Now, drawing upon the fine study of Eddie Gibbs and Ray Bolger, as well as the brief discussion by Eileen Linder,⁶ I will identify seven features that characterize most emerging churches. Where appropriate, I will follow each with a brief discussion of parallels I see in Wesley.

First, emerging churches understand *discipleship* as "following closely and emulating the person and ministry of Jesus."⁷ This is so central it governs the definition given by Gibbs and Bolger: "Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures."⁸ They seek to follow Jesus as Lord as well as trust him as their Savior, to announce good news for this world as well as a promise of a world to come, and understand the gospel to encompass social transformation as well as personal salvation. From scholars like N. T. Wright

they have met Jesus in a new way, as both announcer and embodiment of the kingdom of God on earth.⁹ From writers such as Dallas Willard¹⁰ they have envisioned the Christian life as both a witness to and participation in that kingdom of God.

This understanding of the gospel is of course not new. John Wesley emphasized that salvation is “a present thing”¹¹ and entails not only forgiveness of sins but the living of a new life. This is one area where Wesley can contribute to the emerging church, as I will try to show later. Here, though, it is well to note that while many in the emerging church see themselves as “younger evangelicals”¹² or “post-evangelicals”¹³ they are actually very much in the spirit of an earlier evangelicalism that was rooted in Wesley’s version of holiness of heart and life, was especially vibrant in the early nineteenth century,¹⁴ and never disappeared.¹⁵ This evangelicalism was committed to ministries with the poor, abolition of slavery, and women’s rights as well as fervently evangelistic. The emerging church is not so much “post” this form of evangelicalism with regard to discipleship as it is a contemporary expression of it.

Let me expand on this point a little. Dieter Zander, a leader of an emerging church, says most church people have an understanding of the gospel something like this:

- give a little
- do a little
- pay membership dues
- get a “going to heaven” ticket (through accepting the gospel)¹⁶

Zander says that in contrast the gospel is not about “how we die” but “how we live,” “bringing heaven to earth.”¹⁷ Now listen to this observation on how people understand Christianity by John Wesley in the mid-eighteenth century:

...by a religious man is commonly meant, one that is honest, just and fair in his dealings; that is constantly at church and sacrament; and that gives much alms, or (as it is usually termed) does much good.¹⁸

The only thing missing from Wesley’s account that is in Zander’s is the point about accepting the gospel! What they have in common is a minimalist Christianity designed to do just enough to get to heaven. In neither is there a concern for living a new life, following Christ, or (as Charles Wesley so often put it) “heaven below.”¹⁹

Second, the emerging churches are pre-eminently *missional*. Drawing on insights of Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder, and others,²⁰ they seek to be communities who participate in the mission of God in the world. They understand church structures not as ends in themselves but as means to mission. They are not focused on gaining members but on inviting others to join in this mission.

Again, the parallels with Wesley are striking. Wesley believed God had raised the “people called Methodist” “to reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.”²¹ The institutions and practices of the movement were designed to enable the Methodists to participate in God’s mission in the world. This is in contrast with the prevailing view a century prior, when Protestants in England fragmented over conflicting interpretations of scriptural understandings of what is the prescribed church polity. While Wesley had an admitted bias toward Anglican structures, he insisted that polity exists to serve mission, and made *that* the central test of its faithfulness to scripture.

Third, emerging churches are radically *incarnational*—they see all of life as potentially sacred, all of culture subject to transformation and renewal by the kingdom of God. They reject the dualisms of sacred/secular, public/private, mind/body, faith/reason that are so central to Enlightenment thought. As Gibbs and Bolger put it, “For emerging churches, there are no longer any bad places, bad people, or bad times. All can be made holy. All can be given to God in worship. All modern dualisms can be overcome.”²²

Modernity invented the secular realm in order to study, organize, and ultimately control it.²³ This compartmentalization is what enables people to be “spiritual” while “leaving their secular lives untouched.”²⁴ For emerging churches there is no facet of our lives or our world that is untouched by God. This is why indigenous worship and lifestyle evangelism²⁵ are so central to emerging churches.

In comparing this with Wesley I would note three things. First, living at the onset of the Enlightenment, Wesley resisted the trend toward secularization. Like his Calvinist contemporary Jonathan Edwards, Wesley sought to reframe nature and history within the larger context of God’s redeeming and renewing purpose and activity. He had a deep sense of God’s universal transforming reality. Second, he saw the saving power of God at work in every human being through prevenient grace. There were not two categories of people, the elect and the damned, but only one category, sinners who are loved by God and have worth and dignity by virtue of that love. Third, his classes and bands were occasions where people regularly gathered to ask what it means to live as a Christian in everyday life. They had a spirituality that touched every aspect of their lives and world. Wesley feared that without this they would become “practical atheists,” in which their professed belief in God made no difference as to who they were or how they lived. Practical atheism thrives when Christianity is placed in a “sacred” box, kept clear and distinct from the “secular” box where most of our lives are lived.

A fourth feature of emerging churches is that they are *alternative communities*. They believe the risen Christ is present in their midst through the power of the Holy Spirit, leading and empowering the community into mission. Indeed, it is the mission that creates the church, and the church that is created is essentially missional. The church is also a people: we do not *go* to church, we *are* the church. The lifestyles of members and the practices of the community must be radically transformed in light of the coming kingdom and the mission of God. To facilitate this, emerging churches are often frequently networks of small groups, and for some mutual accountability is a central practice. They also seek to discover what it means to be a genuine community, a people together in relationship, rather than a gathering of individuals.

The parallels with Wesley are obvious: a network of small groups, mutual accountability, transformed lifestyles, relationship in community, and living for mission. This is what in fact distinguished Wesley’s “connection” from both his own Church of England and the other evangelical movements in the awakening. There is also a difference: while both emerging churches and Wesley’s movement are characterized by the mutual accountability of individuals in community, the Wesleyan connection is marked as well by the accountability of societies and pastors to one another in conference. Its polity was not congregational.

Fifth, *proclamation and teaching* in emerging churches finds truth more in biblical narrative than a rational/propositional reading of scripture. While holding strongly to the authority and primacy of scripture, they emulate postmodern evangelicals such as Stanley Grenz and John Franke, as well as postliberal theologians, in moving toward a narrative theology.²⁶ In this way they reject both the claim of rationalism that truth can only be found in clear and distinct ideas, and of romanticism that it is found in subjective experience. Instead, they find truth in biblical narratives and images and express it through story and art as well as in propositions.

John Wesley had a strong sense of the narrative shape of scripture, and Charles Wesley powerfully utilized biblical stories and imagery in his hymns. They were not, however, narrative theologians in the contemporary sense. Here is an area where the experimentation and experience of emerging churches can make a significant contribution to Wesleyan theology and practice. Insofar as they remain faithful to grounding their message in biblical narrative, they can be models of how to proclaim the gospel through narrative in a postmodern culture.

Another area of their enormous contribution to Wesleyanism is in *worship*, the sixth feature of emerging churches. Linder says emerging churches draw “from apostolic as well as contemporary sources to forge a diverse worship through experimentation.”²⁷ They retrieve ancient practices and give them fresh expression. They interweave traditional practices and imagery with contemporary art and technology. They draw upon both liturgical tradition and free church worship. Central to this rich mix of sources and creativity is the eucharist, itself celebrated in very traditional yet often at the same time very new forms.

We have already noted John Wesley’s devotion to tradition and creativity in developing new practices. Wesley saw his class meetings, for example, as a new form of catechumenate. Charles Wesley’s hymns (along with those of Isaac Watts and others) were an innovation that revolutionized congregational singing at a time when the dominant practice was a half-hearted lining of the psalms. The Wesley’s also borrowed innovations from the experimentation of others—Covenant Services from the Puritans, Love Feasts from the Moravians. In all of this ancient practices were seen to be re-emerging in new forms. Emerging churches are one of the primary places such ancient/future experimentation is occurring today.

The last feature of emerging churches I will highlight is their *generous orthodoxy*. Significantly, the term itself was coined by Hans Frei, a postliberal narrative theologian, in a debate with Carl F. H. Henry, perhaps the leading twentieth century propositionalist evangelical.²⁸ It signifies a move away from modernist claims of certainty and more toward what Lesslie Newbigin calls a “proper confidence” in the gospel.²⁹ In Brian McLaren’s words, it “is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving... community of people who are seeking the truth... on the road of mission... and who have been launched on the quest by Jesus, who, with us, guides us still.”³⁰ It is a community humble yet confident, faithfully following the risen Christ in “a wild, inspiring, high-risk pursuit,” yet one that is deeply rewarding and wonderfully fulfilling.³¹ This is not only a definition of a generous orthodoxy, it may also be one of the best description of what emerging churches are all about.

One cannot hear the phrase “generous orthodoxy” without thinking of Wesley’s “catholic spirit.” Wesley distinguished essential doctrines from opinions, and said that it is in the essentials that Christians of all varieties find their unity. His several lists of essentials were short, and usually contained such items as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the authority of scripture, original sin, grace, justification, and sanctification. It was the sort of things you would find in the historic creeds of the ecumenical church. He was sadly aware that persons could profess belief in all these without actually being Christian—that is, without living a Christian life marked by love for God and neighbor. But one could not be a Christian and have that life apart from belief in the essentials.

None of this is intended to say that transformed hearts are absent in emerging churches! To the contrary, wherever persons have a relationship with God, that relationship is transformative. My point is more about what is proclaimed and taught, how God’s promise of new life is understood, and what Christians expect to receive and grow into. What is assumed and not taught in one generation is often neglected and forgotten in the next, as the history of Methodism (among others) is a sad witness.

At the same time, Wesley does not consider opinions unimportant. (By “opinions” he did not mean personal opinions, but those doctrines that distinguished one group of Christians from another). It really does matter, Wesley thought, whether you believe in infant or believers’ baptism, or whether you advocated predestination or prevenient grace. Churches and denominations must be true to what they believe is most faithful to the gospel and the biblical witness, even if other Christians disagree. What Wesley asks is this: while perhaps “we can’t think alike, may we not love alike?”³² For Wesley, a catholic spirit (and a generous orthodoxy) does not mean a lowest common denominator Christianity in which beliefs and practices are unimportant. It means a Christianity in which, though diverse and at times contradictory in our beliefs and practices, we nonetheless love one another in Jesus Christ, our common Lord. And, perhaps, we just might learn from one another as well.

The Importance of the Heart

There is one area in which Wesley may have a major contribution to make to emerging churches. We have seen that they reject the dominant assumption of modernity that right thinking leads to right action. They know all too well how the rational apologetics and cognitive belief they encountered in church all too often did little to change how people actually lived their lives. They longed not just to believe in Jesus as Savior but to actually follow Jesus into a discipleship that made a real difference in the world.

In theological language, they were saying that orthodoxy was not enough; orthopraxy is needed as well.³³ They are, of course, correct. But there is a third term that Wesleyans and Pentecostals have been adding to the other two that is likewise essential: orthopathy. It means having a right heart, or in Wesley’s terms, holy tempers. We need not only right beliefs and practices, we need a right heart; we need not only to think and do what is faithful, we need to be faithful persons. To put it differently, orthopathy does not primarily refer to a warm heart, but to a heart formed, governed and motivated by love.

The point for Wesleyans is not simply to add a third term to the list. It is to point to the intrinsic and organic interrelation of all three. Each of these has a transformative impact on the other, and together they make a holistic spirituality.

Wesley was aware of the dangers of each of these apart from the others. Orthodoxy alone could be a “dead orthodoxy,” orthopraxy alone could be a “dead formalism,” orthopathy alone could lead to an “enthusiasm” that confuses being a Christian with having specified religious experiences. But taken together, they are more than the sum of the parts. The heart and life is shaped by our beliefs about God; our beliefs and hearts are shaped by our experience of serving God and our neighbor, and our motivation for loving the God in whom we believe and in loving the neighbor we serve comes out of the heart.

There is another way to put this: a generous orthodoxy must not only be generous, it must also be orthodox. For example, it would be a mistake, as my colleague Doug Strong has put it, “to throw the Christocentric theological baby out with the Enlightenment bath water.” Wesley points the way to an ecumenism that avoids narrow sectarianism and embraces the whole while not losing sight of the essentials necessary to being the church.

John Wesley would urge emerging churches not to forget the centrality of the transformed heart. There is a passion for God, our neighbor, and creation itself that can only come from a heart touched by God’s love, from a life given by God’s Spirit. It is out of such hearts that both generous orthodoxy and generous orthopraxy come.

¹ Brian D. McLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), II.

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

³ Henry H. Knight III, *A Future for Truth: Evangelical Theology in a Postmodern World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997).

⁴ Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Churches: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

⁵ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000).

⁶ Eileen W. Lindner, “Postmodern Christianity: Emergent Church and Blogs,” in Lindner, ed., *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches, 2006* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006).

⁷ Ibid, 16.

⁸ Gibbs & Bolger, 44.

⁹ See for example N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999) and *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1996).

¹⁰ See Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1998).

¹¹ John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” par. I.1.

¹² See Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002).

¹³ See Dave Tomlison, *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

¹⁴ See for example Donald W. Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976) and Douglas M. Strong, *Perfectionist Politics* (New York: Syracuse, 1999).

¹⁵ See for example Douglas M. Strong, *They Walked in the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997).

¹⁶ As summarized in Gibbs & Bolger, 55.

¹⁷ Cited in Ibid.

¹⁸ John Wesley, *Journal*, Nov. 25, 1739.

¹⁹ See for example Hymn 1 (p. 81), Hymn 19 (p. 103) and Hymn 198 (p. 329) in Franz Hilderbrandt & Oliver A. Beckerlegge, eds., *A Collection of Hymns for the use of the People called Methodist*, Vol. 7 of *The Works of John Wesley* (Oxford, 1983).

²⁰ See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) and Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

²¹ John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations" Q.3, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), Vol.8, 299.

²² Gibbs & Bolger, 67.

²³ Ibid, 68.

²⁴ Ibid, 77.

²⁵ The idea of lifestyle and relational evangelism, over against more confrontational forms, is not new. See Joseph C. Aldrich, *Life-Style Evangelism* (Multanmah, 1978), Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Salt Shaker and Into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), and Jim Peterson, *Evangelism as a Lifestyle* (Nav Press, 1980). Kevin Graham Ford argues for a narrative evangelism and embodied apologetic in *Jesus for a New Generation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995). Wesleyans may be familiar with H. Eddie Fox and George E. Morris, *Faith-Sharing* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1996) or Lyle Pointer and Jim Dorsett, *Evangelism in Everyday Life* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1998).

²⁶ See Stanley J. Grenz, *Revisioning Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) and Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

²⁷ Lindner, 16.

²⁸ Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (Spring, 1987), 24.

²⁹ Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

³⁰ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 293.

³¹ Ibid, 296.

³² John Wesley, "Catholic Spirit," part 4, in Albert C. Outler, ed., *Sermons II* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), p. 82; vol. 2 of *The Works of John Wesley*.

³³ McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 220.