

Perspective Digest

Volume 16
Issue 1 *Winter*

Article 1

2011

Beyond Emergent

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Recommended Citation

Tutsch, Cindy (2011) "Beyond Emergent," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol16/iss1/1>

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A close look at the Emerging Church movement reveals some familiar—and predicted—challenges.

By Cindy Tutsch

Like quantum physics, “Emergent/Emerging Church” is not easily defined, managed, or imaged. The Emerging Church is not a denomination, nor does it speak with one voice. As a fractal in its constant repeating of shapes and cycles, “Emergent” does not exhibit exactly the same structure in all places, yet there are identifiable similarities.

The movement “emerged” or “sprouted out” of the foundations of evangelical Protestant Christianity in the late 20th and early 21st century, as a reaction to both the dead formalism of traditional worship styles and the slick marketing style of the megachurch approach. Adherents sometimes refer to the

movement as a “conversation” that is fluid, non-structured, and focused on the believer’s story, or narrative.

Emergent is usually a reference to a specific organization, initially called “Emergent Village,” whose principal spokesperson is Brian McLaren.¹ *Emerging*, by contrast, often refers to a global wave of decentralized spirituality with roots in postmodern theology and literature as well as the traditions and mysticism of the ancient “desert fathers” (both Catholic and Orthodox), and ancient forms of Judaism. Leaders of Emergent and Emerging groups look for meaning in acts of benevolence and charity, neo-monasticism, and contextualized mission, focusing on inclusiveness, non-judgmental connections, and ecumenism. Scripture becomes secondary to relationships (essentially, the Emergent view of Scripture becomes an adaptation of neo-orthodoxy); absolute Truth yields to pluralism and relativism. Buzz words such as *dialogue* and *reconciliation* replace creeds, dogmatism, and boundaries.

The Emerging family can be divided into at least three groups:²

- **Relevants:** concerned primarily with contextualizing worship styles while maintaining a deep commitment to traditional evangelical authority structures, including male pastoral leadership.

- **Reconstructionists:** promote change of both church form and structure but strongly influenced by less hierarchical Anabaptist, Mennonite, and even pre-Constantinian church models.

- **Revisionists** (most visible and controversial): question key evangelical beliefs such as substitutionary atonement, Jesus as an exclusive path to salvation, deity and incarnation of Christ, the significance of the Cross, separation from God, depravity (humanity’s sinful nature), grace-inspired obedience, judgment, evil, heaven, and hell. Spokespersons, proponents, and

partnering organizations include Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Charles Swindoll, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and Youth Specialties.

The Perceived Spiritual Need

Though Emergent/Emerging groups advocate new forms of worship as a means of experiencing deeper connection with one another and with God, many also advocate a change of Christian theology to better explain theological concepts such as love, forgiveness, suffering, death, and grace. They believe that the truth about these concepts emerges out of progressive dialogue. Thus, although the Bible may be a conversation partner in the community dialogue, it is seen as only one voice among many, with minimal or no authority for establishing and living out truth. The perceived need is for an outcome that will be progressively determined by the participants of the dialogue. The core of the Emergent paradigm is "both/and" rather than "either/or."

Many thought leaders of the movement believe that both traditional churches and seeker churches fail to speak in language or worship formats that are friendly to postmoderns. However, the perceived need is for a core change at the foundational levels of philosophy and theology. Emergents believe that modernism does not provide answers to the deepest longings of the human spirit. In Emergent thought, those needs and longings can be met only through a reality that can be known from the interpretation or experience of the individual or community.

Positive Aspects to Emergent/Emerging

Emerging thought resists the idea that Christ's death was in any way intended to appease the Father. Emergents usually reject the concept of eternal suffering in hell fire, as well as the

dead formality of many mainline denominations. They are welcoming to persons of all persuasions, and seek to establish a sense of community among the “walking wounded.” They allow space for seekers, skeptics, and persons at various points in their faith journey.

Emergents are ardent advocates of missional community involvement and compassionate activism for the marginalized. They are open to exploring new truths found through open dialogue, and are eager to find answers for human suffering. Emergents want spirituality to touch them at their deepest levels, providing an antidote for disappointment and abandonment. They are concerned with the preservation of God’s creation and often care passionately for the environment. At this time, they refuse to align with the traditional political movement of many evangelicals in the United States, who push for an integration of church and state in the culture wars.

Nevertheless, these positives could be strengthened if expressed in a biblical context. These activities and ideas can help satisfy this generation’s deep hunger for meaning and purpose in life, but not if they are disassociated from Scripture. New paths to genuine spirituality must not stray from the Word of God!

The Possibility of Counterfeit Spirituality

Through the ages, humanity has persisted in seeking spirituality through a dependence on human works, including sacraments, the occult, mysticism, pantheism, panentheism, Gnosticism, monasticism, and other works-based endeavors to experience God. Movements or organizations that have promoted and continue to promote these approaches include Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Spiritualists, Mormons, New Age, Neo-Protestants, and Emergent. All of these groups retain elements of

biblical truth but all deny Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation (Acts 4:12) and/or the Bible as the Christian's ultimate authority.

Both Scripture and the writings of Ellen White issue cautions about a counterfeit spirituality that will closely resemble genuine spirituality:

- "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works" (2 Cor. 11:13-15, NKJV).

- "For they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty" (Rev. 16:14, NKJV).

- "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12, NRSV).

- "For who has stood in the council of the Lord so as to see and to hear his word? Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it? Look, the storm of the Lord! Wrath has gone forth, a whirling tempest; it will burst upon the head of the wicked. The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand it clearly. I did not send the prophets, yet they ran; I did not speak to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my council, then they would have proclaimed my words to my people, and they would have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings" (Jer. 23:18-22, NRSV).

- "The track of truth lies close beside the track of error, and both tracks may seem to be one to minds which are not worked by the Holy Spirit, and which, therefore, are not quick to discern the difference between truth and error."³

- “Before the final visitation of God's judgments upon the earth there will be among the people of the Lord such a revival of primitive godliness as has not been witnessed since apostolic times. . . . The enemy of souls desires to hinder this work; and before the time for such a movement shall come, he will endeavor to prevent it by introducing a counterfeit. In those churches which he can bring under his deceptive power he will make it appear that God's special blessing is poured out; there will be manifest what is thought to be great religious interest. Multitudes will exult that God is working marvelously for them, when the work is that of another spirit. Under a religious guise, Satan will seek to extend his influence over the Christian world.”⁴

- “Wherever men neglect the testimony of the Bible, turning away from those plain, soul-testing truths which require self-denial and renunciation of the world, there we may be sure that God's blessing is not bestowed. And by the rule which Christ Himself has given, ‘Ye shall know them by their fruits’ (Matthew 7:16), it is evident that these movements are not the work of the Spirit of God.”⁵

- “I saw that there was great danger of leaving the Word of God and . . . trusting in exercises [subjective experience, i.e., charismatic phenomena].”⁶

- “Let none cherish the idea that special providences or miraculous manifestations are to be the proof of the genuineness of their work or of the ideas they advocate.”⁷

Dangers of Emerging/Emergent Trends to the Seventh-day Adventist Movement and Mission

The heart of the Seventh-day Adventist message is the atonement demonstrated at the cross of Christ, and the urgency of preparation for Christ's return. Emergents minimize or negate the value of Christ's blood sacrifice, and prefer to emphasize the kingdom of grace today over imminence of the kingdom of glory.

There is almost no discussion of the *parousia* in Emergent literature or teaching, since for many Christ's presence in the Eucharist is the *parousia*. There is danger that Adventism becomes influenced by Emergent thought to also diminish emphasis on the literal and imminent coming of Jesus, and the necessity of preparation for that event.

Seventh-day Adventists place a high value on the authority of Scripture over and (sometimes necessarily) against tradition, experience, and reason (knowledge, i.e., science) that conflicts with Scripture. For Emergents, experience and subjective revelation trump Scripture. Absolute truth does not exist; all truth is relative to each person's experience. Thus, no moral judgments can be made about evil. Where there is no evil, there can be no call to repentance and no freedom from guilt through the blood of Jesus because there is no sin.

Rather than construct ethics from the foundation of Scripture, Emerging thought sees ethics as constructed within community, which Tony Jones describes as a "relational hermeneutic" for discovering reality. This can become correlationism or radical constructivism. Thus, Emergent thought has no biblical anchor; community, not revelation, forms the Emergents' worldview. In consequence, the power of the exclusive gospel of Jesus Christ is missing, and Emergents try to fill this void by seeking spirituality through ancient mystical practice.

In every culture and in every society, there are diabolical elements which must be challenged. Emergents fail to see that the gospel sometimes mandates a countercultural message. In some cases, an uncritical contextualization of the gospel has introduced syncretism. It has sometimes even become difficult to distinguish Emergent from the theory of universalism. Nobody left out, ever, and nobody judged, ever, is non-biblical and at direct

cross-purposes to the three angels' messages of Revelation 14.

Though claiming to be community oriented, Emergent worship is highly individualistic in that it places greater value on one's personal story and personal interpretations than on worshiping God through the biblical model of repentance, forgiveness, and praise. In biblical worship, the worshiper is drawn to a sense of his or her own unworthiness and need of a Savior (Isa. 6:1-5) and finds release from guilt and burdens through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness provided through the crucified and risen Christ and the burden-bearing Christ (Acts 2:21-36). Singing, then, becomes a paean of praise and adoration from worshipers who have been saved by grace and have found release from their burdens at Calvary.

Adventists who focus worship more on contextualization and the self than on Christ and His Word may in actuality become nothing more than mirrors of the culture, particularly the more corroding aspects of music, art, and film. Because they are not promoting reverent but joyful worship that is in contrast to the world around them, the worship experience can become irrelevant, the very opposite of its purpose.

Adventists who seek spirituality through labyrinths, Stations of the Cross, incense, candles, mantra or repetitive-word meditation, and other mystical or Eastern rituals hope to find a multisensory experience of worship that will deepen their experience with God. Sometimes justification for these externals is found in the idea that we now create our own meaning from these trappings. The context, however, that provided spiritual significance to these perceived aids to deeper spirituality is the mystery of iniquity predicted in 2 Thessalonians 2:1-4. Though Adventists may consider these mere practices that foster theological imagination and spiritual growth, at their core these practices are replacing free access to the Personhood of our Heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, with a human-centered

experience that is based on works and ritual.

The Emergent Eucharist, with its emphasis on the power of the man-priest to control the Christ through a modified transubstantiation, is becoming increasingly central in Emergent practice. Thus again, the beauty of the message of Christ our Righteousness, Christ our High Priest, Christ our accessible Savior, is diluted by the intrusion of human mediation. Though there may be benefits from having a Christian mentor or life coach to help in sorting out some of life's complexities and providing Bible-based focus, there is concern over the possible implications of the designation "life coach" that some Adventists are giving themselves. Isn't the Holy Spirit our life coach? Could "life coach" edge perilously close to human mediation between God and humanity? Do we need a human coach to find authentic spirituality, particularly if that coach is minimizing the authority of the Word of God?

It is possible that the Emergent gravitation toward Catholic and Orthodox ritual and traditions, Eastern practice, and mysticism that edges toward occultism, could be the spearhead of the coalition of apostate Protestantism, spiritualism, and Catholicism that Seventh-day Adventists have historically believed would integrate church and state, with the subsequent loss of religious freedom.⁸ Leading spokespersons for Emergents, or proponents of Emergents, such as Rick Warren, Leonard Sweet, Tony Jones, Brian McLaren, and many others are pushing toward breaking down the walls of denominational barriers and moving toward a new ecumenism. This appears to be a fulfillment of Revelation 13:3.

In words that appear prescient today, Ellen White wrote: "The wide diversity of belief in the Protestant churches is regarded by many as decisive proof that no effort to secure a forced uniformity can ever be made. But there has been for years, in churches of the Protestant faith, a strong and growing

sentiment in favor of a union based upon common points of doctrine. To secure such a union, the discussion of subjects upon which all were not agreed—however important they might be from a Bible standpoint—must necessarily be waived. . . . When the leading churches of the United States, uniting upon such points of doctrine as are held by them in common, shall influence the state to enforce their decrees and to sustain their institutions, then Protestant America will have formed an image of the Roman hierarchy, and the infliction of civil penalties upon dissenters will inevitably result.”⁹

Ellen White may be defining postmodern spiritualism when she states, “Even in its present form, so far from being more worthy of toleration than formerly, [spiritualism] is really a more dangerous, because a more subtle, deception. While it formerly denounced Christ and the Bible, it now *professes* to accept both. But the Bible is interpreted in a manner that is pleasing to the unrenewed heart, while its solemn and vital truths are made of no effect. Love is dwelt upon as the chief attribute of God, but it is degraded to a weak sentimentalism, making little distinction between good and evil. God’s justice, His denunciations of sin, the requirements of His holy law, are all kept out of sight. . . . Pleasing, bewitching fables captivate the senses and lead men to reject the Bible as the foundation of their faith. Christ is as verily denied as before; but Satan has so blinded the eyes of the people that the deception is not discerned.”¹⁰

Increasingly powerful economic, political, religious, and social forces, such as the growth in the number of countries linked to the capitalist system and the spread of information and social networking systems that connect people globally, may soon cause radical shifts in world religions and concepts of religious liberty. In this projected milieu, Emergent thought may play a more significant role than many Adventists imagine.

Retreat centers, seminars, and worship experiences that

focus on mystical rituals and ancient practices are often seeking to find “the God within.” In the ensuing blur of sacred, secular, and mystical, the God who transcends the universe vanishes and is replaced by pantheism or panentheism. Thus, the Creator God cannot be distinguished or worshiped over creation. As a result, each person’s interpretations or ideas are as valuable, or perhaps even more valuable, than the expressed Word of God in Scripture.

The postmodern Emergent mixes the sacred and the profane, the holy and the unholy, God and culture in ways that make it impossible to call individuals out of false worship (Rev. 14:8; 18:1-4) because truth is culturally conditioned and there is therefore no such thing as “false worship.” Further, if God is “in” Babylon, why would there be a necessity of calling individuals out of it? This inclusiveness is in direct opposition to the biblical teaching of differences between sacred and common, good and evil (Lev. 10:8-10; Eze. 22:26; Isa. 5:20).

Adventists, particularly those in youth ministries and seeker-friendly church plants, are looking for ways to “cast the net in new directions” in the laudable effort to win a postmodern culture to Jesus Christ. If we are uncritical in our efforts to be innovative, however, there is danger of losing the heart of the gospel, the authority of Scripture, and our identity as Seventh-day Adventists.

Adventism: A Unique Spirituality

Many persons might argue that Adventism is primarily propositional. The heart of Adventism, however, is Jesus Christ, who invites His creation to come into relationship with Him. Since Jesus said, “I am . . . the truth” (John 14:6, NRSV), we could infer that truth can be equated both with doctrine and with a

relationship with the Person who is the Source of that doctrine. In a sense, both justification and sanctification are highly experiential since both are dependent on a living, working, dynamic relationship with Christ. Because Jesus declares Himself to be God (8:58), the Word (1:1-4, 14), and is declared by Paul to be the Creator God (Col. 1:13-17), He offers a way to God that is superior to any other religion or methodology (John 14:6). Adventists come, then, into special relationship with God every seventh-day Sabbath when we rejoice in His dual creation (Ex. 20:8-11; Eph. 1:7).

The genuine spiritual need of all Christians, including Seventh-day Adventists, is to be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The reception of the Holy Spirit into the heart of the believer brings all of Heaven's blessings in its train.¹¹ The deep, authentic spirituality that the Spirit brings is conditional on obedience (Acts 5:32), which is joyously rendered as a response to God's grace.¹²

God wants to use Adventists as His agents to call people out of Babylon, so that they do not receive of Babylon's plagues, and so that they can be new creatures in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is calling His people to conversion and holiness, to a complete transformation from one way of life to another. This is accomplished through repentance, forgiveness, and cleansing from our sins through the blood of Jesus. Christ's atoning grace, worked out in our lives through the agency of the Spirit, is not legalism or dead formalism. It is victory, liberation, and joy! Jesus calls us to belief, commitment, and certainty in His power to transform our lives and redeem us at last. This is the depth of the call to authentic spirituality that we are to make in these uncertain and chaotic times.

We engage in social reform, obedience, and moral living not to find meaning in life, not merely to make the current world a better place, but as a response to Christ's grace. Our goal is not

to achieve deep spirituality as an end in itself. God's goal for our spirituality is transformation of all that we are (Col. 3:1-17). Christ is the indisputable, anchored center for Seventh-day Adventist Christians. He is Substitute, Savior, and Model. Because He served, we serve. Because He loved, we love. We recognize in Him the exclusive means of salvation.

Adventism models a community with biblical boundaries—boundaries that help prevent chaos within the community, disintegration into disputing factions, and heresy. Adventists have boundaries (1 Cor. 6:9-11), beliefs and doctrines, and ethical parameters (Matt. 7:15-20; 1 John 2:22; 3:14-15). We are not ashamed of the relation-driven statement that there are responsibilities and privileges in belonging to God's family. An ecclesiology that includes elders and deacons is biblical and modeled in the early Christian Church (Acts 14:23).

Rather than tradition informing our theology and serving as an outside marker to help us know when we have moved from biblical fidelity, Seventh-day Adventists have the contemporary prophetic voice of Ellen White. We are not immune to the beckoning of the decadent aspects of our culture (Rom. 12:2), and God in His graciousness has sent a "lesser light" to point to a "greater light" that reminds us of our accountability to Christ and His Way.¹³

In the Adventist sanctuary doctrine, which is unique to our movement, we find a visual merger of relationship (Christ our High Priest), ancient roots (the Judaic sanctuary rituals), and a common history (unfolding dialogue between the people and God). Satan targets this highly symbolic yet relational motif because it is the very heart of God's will and instructions regarding redemption, mission, spirituality, and even worship (2 Chron. 29:25). The artistic symbols and sanctuary services found within the Bible, particularly the books of Hebrews, Daniel, and Revelation, then become a conveyor of truth, providing us with a

model or system correlating theology and liturgy. Based on the sanctuary model, our worship will begin with respect and awe of our Creator God, it will lead to grateful acknowledgement of His power and holiness through prayer and praise and preaching, remind us of our need of His redemptive grace, cause us to accept His loving, atoning sacrifice, and motivate us for service.

Can we grow as a movement? Are there reminders within Emergent/Emerging thought of areas we could strengthen? Absolutely! Adventism as a movement, while modeling a Christocentric approach to education, healing, publishing, and religion, has been less successful at modeling sustained proactive opposition to ills that permeate and destroy society, such as media violence, gambling, human trafficking, and pornography. We could also hope that as a result of people being profoundly transformed by the gospel, an increasing number of Adventist churches would develop that are characterized by both strong biblical preaching and strong community outreach.

Ellen White promotes a healthy enthusiasm in the presence of God, coupled with reverent, expectant joy. Adventist worship services should be "intensely interesting,"¹⁴ participatory,¹⁵ and not rigidly formal.¹⁶ Many Adventists could strengthen their faith by practicing more biblical spiritual disciplines, such as fasting and God-centered prayer. We need to grow toward these ideals.

Today there are strong feelings of dissatisfaction with the superficiality of contemporary life. Members are leaving mainline and megachurches in large numbers because the abandonment of *sola scriptura* underlies a failure to meet the need for authentic deep spirituality. Hence the door is open wide for religious phenomena such as the Emergent church. But the door is also open wide for a church that holds uncompromisingly to the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, and unflinchingly proclaims the message of salvation through Christ alone.¹⁷

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3. *Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 202.

4. *The Great Controversy*, p. 464.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 464, 465.

6. Manuscript Releases, vol. 5, p. 227. The result of these exercises, whether or not the participant is cognizant of this goal, is to achieve altered states of consciousness, making the participant vulnerable to satanic spiritual influences.

7. *Selected Messages*, Book 2, p. 48.

8. *The Great Controversy*, p. 588.

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