

The Starbuckization of the Church

One of the latest innovations in theology is the "emerging (or 'emergent') church movement [ECM], which we can't afford to ignore. It is sparking considerable discussion in evangelical churches, and exerts an astonishingly broad influence. Its leaders publish books, speak at conferences, or teach courses in evangelism. They call for a "new reformation". Their motivations for change are not identical. Some ECM leaders describe themselves as feeling stifled and alienated from existing churches and wanting them more open to creativity and the arts. Others think the culture of the church is so different from popular culture that those they want to reach for Jesus cannot adapt to today's church with her traditions and confessions. Still others feel that there are aspects of modern culture which hinders existing churches from faithfully following Jesus. The common thread that binds them is the claim that if the church is to survive it must acknowledge and adapt to the major changes taking place in North America's postmodern cultural shift.

Some Prominent Emergent Leaders

Brian D. McLaren

Brian McLaren is the one most associated with ECM, and probably its most articulate spokesman. He is the author of *Generous Orthodoxy* with the bizarre subtitle *Why I am a missional+evangelical+post/protestant+liberal/conservative+mystical/poetic+biblical+charismatic/contemplative+fundamentalist/calvinist/+anabaptist/anglican+methodist+catholic+green+incarnational+depressed-yet-hopeful+emergent+unfinished Christian*. He is also the founding pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church, a nondenominational church in the Baltimore-Washington region. McLaren believes that the emerging church has the potential of being to North American Christianity what the Reformation was to European Christianity.

Rob Bell

Rev. Rob Bell is the founding pastor of Mars Hill Bible Church, one of the largest emergent churches in the United States, located in a former Grandville, Mich. shopping mall. He is the author of best-seller, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith*.

Leonard Sweet

Dr. Leonard Sweet, founder and president of Spirit Venture Ministries and professor of evangelism at Drew Theological in Madison, New Jersey, is the author of *The Gospel According to Starbucks with Questions for Coaching and Conversation* by Edward Hammet (2007).

ECM's Theology

The titles of the works by ECM leaders McLaren, Bell, and Sweet reveal their view of the Scripture and the mission of the church. McLaren believes we need to get over our hang-up with absolute truth and become more sensitive to the plurality of truth perspectives. Bell claims that the Bible is a collection of stories that teach us about what it looks like when God is at work *through actual people*. When you read Sweet's *The Gospel According to Starbucks* you learn a great deal about coffee with all its varieties and tastes, but not about historic Christian orthodoxy. Sweet says that modern Christianity is too rational. He claims that the mind took control over the soul and spirit. Christianity became a 'belief system' with a distinct worldview. Sweet argues that the aim of modern faith is knowledge, especially scientific rational knowledge. He states: "Christians in the West became more interested in beliefs about prayer than prayer experiences and practices. This also explains why the nation that most embodied Enlightenment and rational values became the nation of fascism and genocide." And he exhorts that "if Christianity really wanted to get radical, the first thing it could do would be to stop privileging Western rationalism." Judging therefore by the literature of the emergent thinkers, the movement is not shaped by Scripture but by what they judge to be appropriate in the postmodern world. Scripture is not what Jesus taught but what kind of action the postmodern community may want Jesus to say. The emphasis is not on knowing doctrine but on "doing faith". Their teaching focusses on narrative presentations of faith and the Bible rather than on expository preaching. In his book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*, the evangelical theologian Dr. D.A. Carson comments that in ECM's literature, the place of words or Scripture or propositions is *at best* concessively admitted while almost all the emphasis is on Christ as the Word incarnate. We are never told that our understanding of Jesus Christ – the centre and object of our faith – Who He is and what He has taught and done, has been preserved in the Scriptures. In other words, how can you know the Christ, if you neglect God's infallible Word?

Experience

For ECM leaders experience comes before doctrine. They argue that people in our postmodern culture prefer to seek real and authentic experiences rather than scripted or artificial experiences. McLaren claims he has become convinced that "a generous orthodoxy appropriate for our postmodern world will have to grow out of the experience of the post-Christian, post-secular people of the cities of the twenty-first century." Sweet claims that "the stuff of divine revelation is experience – experiences that form themselves into story and story into theology." He says that we should examine the Starbucks experience not simply so we can talk about coffee or the four million coffee drinks that Starbucks sells daily in US America, but so we can learn what Starbucks has come close to perfecting – life that is meant to be lived with passion, and that passion is found and practised through experiences, connection, symbols and images, and the full participation of every part of your being. He says, "When you start living with Epic (Experiential, Participatory, Image-rich, Connective) passion your life takes on the

aroma of God, the taste and the feel of God, and it invites others to experience God for themselves." When I was reading Sweet's book, I began to wonder whether he has shares in Starbucks or whether it is located somewhere near heaven. He even talks about Starbuckization of spirituality. For example, he says that "your local Starbucks, on an admittedly limited scale, is the business world equivalent of the irresistible experience that God invites you to enjoy. You can drink in the life of God and immerse yourself fully in what God is doing on earth. God offers arresting experiences that move you from obligation to passion, spilling over to benefit the lives of those who will see God become visible in your life."

The EMC's view of Jesus Christ

The crucial question in theology is: "What do you think of Jesus Christ?" The ECM leaders send mixed messages. McLaren says, "The more one respects Jesus, the more one must be brokenhearted, embarrassed, furious, or some combination thereof when one considers what we Christians have done with Jesus." He feels surrounded by Christians who very much like the idea of "an American God and a middle-class Republican Jesus, first and foremost concerned about Our National Security and Our Way of Life. 'The Lord is My Shepherd' becomes 'the Lord is Our President.'" McLaren claims, "Jesus came originally not to destroy the law but to fulfill it, not to condemn people but to save them, I believe he comes today not to destroy or condemn anything (anything but evil) but to redeem and save everything that can be redeemed or saved." He also questions the atonement, Christ's death on our behalf. He asks, How can punishing an innocent person make things better? "That sounds like divine child abuse. You know?" He confesses: "For me the 'fundamentals of the faith' boil down to those given by Jesus: *to love God and to love our neighbors*." Carson comments: "I think that this is among the shallowest and most distorted readings of Mark 12: 28-34 now on offer. Jesus presents these commandments as the two that are most important in the law, not as fundamentals of the faith."

The emerging church leaders also question whether Jesus is the Only Way to the Father. McLaren says that the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour and hope of the world does not "demand a restrictive posture concerning salvation for those who have never heard the gospel of those in other faith traditions." He argues Jesus did not come to make some people saved and others condemned.... "He came to save the world. His gospel, and therefore the church's message, is Good News for the whole world...universally good for Christians and non-Christians alike." Bell also denies that Jesus is the Only Way to the Father. He argues that Jesus was not making claims about one religion being better than all other religions..."Rather, he was telling those who were following him that his way is the way to the depth of reality." Jesus expects his followers to be engaged in the endless process of deciding "what it means to actually live the Scriptures."

In their book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger sum up the emergent church leaders'

arguments, which are that through serving and forgiving, Jesus revealed the way of life God has always desired for the people of God. Jesus inspired his followers to live under the rule and the reign of God, thereby becoming a light to the nations and participating in the mission of God.

EMC's View of the Church

ECM has very little good to say about the church. For example, Sweet is extremely critical of the church. "To see how far we have traveled down the rational path, look at your church. Don't focus on what it believes or its original statement of faith; rather, consider how much time your church expends in creating beauty." And he charges: "Most of the church literature I read tastes overripe and stale. Overripe and stale makes God sick."

For ECM's leaders, Scripture has only a relative role in the deconstruction and reconstruction of church practices. Instead of an emphasis on the death of Christ, repentance, forgiveness of sin, and eternal life, they focus instead on inviting people to follow Jesus and be on mission with him in the world. They want to be innovative in their outreach. They look for a new expression of the church, seeking to create communities of followers of Jesus, who "express the kingdom in all they do." They preach a "gospel of relationships", and mission living, which means for them that Christians go out into the world to serve God rather than isolate themselves within communities of like-minded individuals.

ECM argues that Jesus was not a church planter. He created communities that embodied the Torah, that reflected the kingdom of God in their entire way of life. He asked his followers to do the same. ECM defines the church as communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures. McLaren says the church exists for the world. Jesus welcomed the outcast, hosted the stranger, and challenged the political authorities by creating alternative communities. For Sweet, Starbucks is a model for "doing church." It is a coffee franchise that is invested in building community. Coffee is a hospitality drink, a sign of welcome and openness to sharing. Sweet tells us, of course, that we must learn from Starbucks' method of marketing by building relationships over coffee. And he says, "That's one reason some of my friends and I refer to it as St.Arbucks." And he asks, "Can the church take a humble, redemptive lesson from Starbuck's success in turning placard-waving critics into card-carrying customers?" Bell argues that we need a fresh take on Jesus, and what it means to live the kind of life He teaches us how to live, a faith that fights poverty, injustice and suffering – to make this world the kind of place God can come to. "For Jesus," Bells says, "the question wasn't, 'how do I get into heaven?' But 'how do I bring heaven here?'" Dr. John Bolt, comments in his essay, *An Emerging Critique of the Postmodern, Evangelical Church*, "For Bell as well as for McLaren, the emphasis is on a strongly experiential, socially activist, inclusive, pluralistic, pilgrims-on-the way, this world affirming community."

Evaluation of ECM

The ECM is a recipe for failure. By assuming that for churches to survive, they must accommodate to our postmodern culture. But then the seed of destruction for the evangelical faith is sown. By insisting that the focus of ECM leaders should be the restoration of one's relationship with God *rather than* salvation from God's judgment, they are abandoning the Gospel. They seem to neglect personal salvation in favour of social transformation, while the Gospel includes both. The Gospel is more than loving one's neighbours and meeting their needs. The Bible speaks of the wrath of God in terms every bit as personal as it speaks of the love of God. Carson comments: "Rightly understood, God's love is all the more deeply cherished when the nature of Christ's sin-bearing act on the cross is understood in biblical terms."

The ECM leaders base their theology on experience, but the path of experience leads nowhere but to absolute uncertainty. When one reads their literature, you soon notice that for them the Bible that God gave has lost its authority. This means that, ultimately, independent reason and experience now has authority as opposed to Scriptural teaching. But our theology does not come from subjective experiences but from God, who reveals the way of salvation through His Word. Furthermore, if there is no standard of objective truth apart from our simply retelling it by our lives, how can we judge between the Christian Gospel and good and evil?

Instead of adapting to postmodern culture, we should be *counter-cultural*, reminding ourselves that the practices and beliefs of the church should be grounded in Scripture. The phrase *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone," summarizes this principle. And the Christ we confess as our Saviour and Lord is the Christ of the Scriptures. After a careful study of Jesus's views of the Old Testament and his anticipation of the New Testament, John W. Wenham concluded in *Christ and the Bible*: "To Christ the Bible is true, authoritative, inspired. To him the God of the Bible is the living God, and the teaching of the Bible is the teaching of the living God. To him, what Scripture says, God says."

We should not feel threatened by the ECM or any other fad that will arise on the theological scene. We are called to be faithful and not to be successful. But interestingly, statistics show that churches which, grow most rapidly are those that set believers at odds with the surrounding culture. They are conservative churches faithful to the Gospel in word and deed, a haven of stability in an age of rapid change.

Obviously, I have my questions about the ECM, but there is one thing we can learn from it. Over the years the immigrant Reformed churches have become middle class with nice church buildings, etc. I hope, however, we all agree that to be a Christian is not just a matter of assent to doctrinal truths, it is also to become a participant in the ongoing drama of the Gospel. We are called to live the Gospel, confess our Confessions in word and deed, speak and do the truth, reach out to the lost outside of Christ, to the outcasts, the homeless, and the down-and-outers in our society. In order to be a counter cultural church seeking to obey our Lord's Great Commission – with the help of the Holy Spirit –

we should work on strengthening the communion of the saints, the local fellowships of God's covenant people, and thus become beacons of light and hope in our dark world, ready to welcome converts to Christ from every sector of society. In other words, put in practise Lord's Day 21:55 of *The Heidelberg Catechism*, which asks: What do you understand by the "communion of saints"? First, that believers one and all, as members of this community, share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts. Second, that each member should consider it his duty to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the service and welfare of the other members.

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