

EMERGING FROM THE EMERGENT: A PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL  
EVALUATION OF THE RISE AND FALL OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH

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## ABSTRACT

### EMERGING FROM THE EMERGENT: A PASTORAL AND THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF THE RISE AND FALL OF THE EMERGENT CHURCH

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Since the dawn of the twenty-first century the contemporary ecclesiological expression known as the “Emergent Church” has been widely publicized. Publishing houses have rapidly promulgated the works of various authors that deal with concepts pertaining to the Emergent movement. Seminars orchestrated to further *or* counter the influence of the movement have drawn thousands of participants. Scholarly skirmishes, books, periodicals, and classes have all brought considerable attention to this movement. Yet none of these has paralleled the far-reaching impact of Internet blogs, sites, and forums. The explicit approval of thousands and the tacit interest of countless others has overwhelmed pastors and Christian leaders.

Yet shockingly so, the majority of leaders within the movement have declared that the so-labeled phenomenon shows signs of collapse or has even ceased completely. Evidence demonstrates that these prophetic sentiments have quickly become reality. Therefore church leaders now have a challenging opportunity to theologically evaluate the rise and fall of this highly influential ecclesial expression. Because the inception and the general cessation of the Emergent movement have arrived with clear historical markers, a new perspective has been gained concerning its theological veracity and doctrinal conclusions.

Many factors led to the overall collapse of the Emergent movement, yet most pivotal to its demise were (1) a reactionary deconstructionist sentiment and (2) a postmodern pragmatic philosophy. Both factors contributed to the rise of the movement through connections with current North American culture and popular societal philosophy. However, these moorings proved to be doctrinally and theologically flawed, and conversely, led to the movement’s demise. Thus what gave energy to the movement at the outset also precipitated its collapse. This thesis contends such evidence elucidates a means by which God’s truth is being undermined in the postmodern world and the ill results that follow flawed theology. Yet these findings are also instructive for how God’s people can effectively reach the present generation with the gospel of Christ without assimilating to claims contrary to Christian orthodoxy.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: EMERGING FROM THE EMERGENT

#### **Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this thesis is to thoughtfully delineate some of the key elements involved in both the inception and cessation of the Emergent Church, in order to develop a proper pastoral and theological response to this movement and other similar forthcoming postmodern challenges in the twenty-first century. This thesis contends that the Emergent Church Movement rose to popularity and influence, in part, because of its reactionary deconstructionist sentiment *and* postmodern pragmatic philosophy,<sup>1</sup> and conversely, that these same elements also precipitated its fall.

#### **Procedure for This Study**

In order to accomplish the stated objective, this chapter follows by providing three key introductory explanations: (1) the irenic and gracious approach sought for this

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<sup>1</sup> These philosophical terms will be more thoroughly defined in the following material. But to clarify here: this thesis posits that the ECM held a philosophy of pragmatism (theories and beliefs are evaluated on the basis of practice and results). Yet their pragmatism was also rooted in a postmodernism that asserted truth and morality are relative to the individual and his or her experience and context. The argument could be placed in this order: (1) early leaders of the ECM sought to reach those in a culture of postmodernism with the gospel message; (2) these leaders were dissatisfied with the results of fundamentalism, theological foundationalism, presuppositionalism, and evangelicalism; (3) therefore they approached postmodernism with a pragmatic philosophy (looking for ways to achieve results through practices and beliefs that “work”); (4) because postmodernism allowed these leaders the latitude to dismantle former beliefs and practices, they quickly sought to deconstruct anything thought to impede their outreach to the said populace; (5) however, because they so thoroughly attempted to accommodate to postmodernists, they sadly assimilated to the underpinnings of philosophical postmodernism that would, in turn, injure the very foundation of their Christian faith and would lead to the later demise of the movement. For a very helpful summary of the perils of philosophical postmodernism see Jonathan Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, ed. Paul Pettit (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 34-35; Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: the Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 13-31.

work, (2) a survey of the evidence for the initial growth and later demise of the movement, and (3) a series of definitions for several subcategories within the broader *Emerging* movement and a working definition for the *Emergent* Church as it relates to this study. Chapter 2 details how a philosophical *reactionary deconstructionism* influenced and impacted the Emergent Church. First, the evidence provided shows the movement arose as a sociological phenomenon, in part because of its reactionary deconstructionism through connections with the current generation and common societal sentiment. Second, it will be argued that this same reactionary deconstruction also contributed to the movement's demise through a lack of constructive efforts and a pervasive disillusionment among the followers. Chapter 3 will delineate a similar juxtaposition; yet it will focus on the *postmodern pragmatic philosophy* adopted by the Emergent Church Movement. First, various proofs demonstrate that the postmodern pragmatism of the Emergent Church provided significant cause for the movement's rise. Second, it will be argued that these same elements also contributed to the movement's ultimate collapse. Chapter 4 employs this study with three brief points of evaluation and application for contemporary pastors. These are as follows: (1) a short explanation of the continuing influence of this collapsed movement, (2) a list of suggested areas for further study, and (3) a proposal for developing good answers to postmodern trends. Finally, chapter 5 serves as a recapitulation of the thesis and a concluding summary of this study's purpose.

### **Approach of This Study**

The approach of this study is to elucidate for the people of God a means by which His truth is being undermined in the postmodern world, so that they can remain steadfast and strong in the gospel of Christ. In contrast to the plethora of texts attempting to broach this subject, this work is not intended to be a heated polemic in opposition to the movement, nor an anecdotal epilogue lauding its praises. The various personalities (as

noted above) who spearheaded the Emergent Church Movement will also *not* be the primary subject of this study. Yet the questions, interpretations, and concepts raised by leaders such as Brian McLaren and Tony Jones will be thoroughly discussed. However, this work will not focus on the persons themselves but on the most crucial issues that were contributing factors to the Emergent Church.

Instead of becoming preoccupied with polemics leveled at mere people, believers will do well to remain firm in the “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). As will be demonstrated, many leaders involved in the Emergent Church Movement have diverted from the counsel of Scripture and historic Christian orthodoxy. Yet the focus should be not on browbeating, but on building up the body of Christ in this the most holy faith. Therefore this study will seek to exemplify an irenic spirit that delights in the unity of God’s people in truth and love for the glory of God.

### **The Demise of a Movement**

With the dawn of the new millennium arose a movement that hoped to forever change the face of Christendom. A new century had begun and a new culture was emerging from the moors of modernism. More than eleven years have now passed since the inception of this church-altering movement.<sup>2</sup> This recent contemporary ecclesiological expression known as the “Emergent Church” or the “Emergent Conversation” has been widely publicized and commonly debated.

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<sup>2</sup> Some may contend the Emergent movement formally began as early as 1989. For instance, Andrew Jones, an emergent author and leader, and journalist Anthony Bradley, estimated the movement’s beginning around this date (see Andrew Jones, “Emerging Church Movement (1989-2009)?” in *Tall Skinny Kiwi* (2009), <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/12/emerging-church-movement-1989--2009.html> [accessed May 27, 2011]; Anthony Bradley, “Farewell Emerging Church, 1989-2010,” in *Community* (World Magazine, 2010), <http://online.worldmag.com/2010/04/14/farewell-emerging-church-1989-2010/> [accessed May 25, 2011]). However, the movement arguably did not see widespread influence and popularity until the turn of the twenty-first century (1999-2000). Dan Kimball (among others) has most lucidly identified the popular rise of the Emergent movement with this time frame (see Dan Kimball, “Origins of the Terms “Emerging” and “Emergent” Church - Part 2,” in *Dan Kimball: Vintage Faith* (2006), [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origins\\_of\\_the\\_.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origins_of_the_.html) (accessed October 26, 2011).



Evangelical publishing houses have rapidly promulgated the works of various authors that deal with issues and concepts pertaining to the Emergent movement.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous Bible colleges and theological seminaries have offered special courses designed to discuss and research the methods and beliefs of those ascribing to this popular movement.<sup>4</sup>

Conferences orchestrated to further the influence of the Emergent movement have drawn thousands of followers and curious onlookers.<sup>5</sup> Profound scholarly interest

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<sup>3</sup> For example see Dan Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). Or peruse the more revelatory works by McLaren and others: Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); idem, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> In October 26-28, 2006, Westminster Theological Seminary held a conference on the Emerging Church entitled, *An Eternal Word in an Emerging World*. Scott McKnight, a spokesman and theologian in the wider Emerging movement, was a keynote speaker at this event. In 2004, D. A. Carson (a theologian critical of the movement) delivered a three-part *Staley Lecture* series on the Emergent Church at Cedarville University (see this unpublished review of Carson's lectures: David M. Mills, "The Emergent Church - Another Perspective: A Critical Response to D. A. Carson's Staley Lectures," (Cedarville, OH: Cedarville University, 2004). On May 30, 2006, Dallas Theological Seminary presented a learning dialogue entitled "The Emerging Church." This series offered a discussion between the school's president (Mark Bailey) and three other faculty members regarding "an introductory exploration into a movement hopeful of meeting the complexities of ministering to an emergent culture" (<http://www.dts.edu/media/play/the-emerging-church-movement-1-of-3-mark-l-bailey-mark-h-heinemann-glenn-r-kreider-and-andrew-seidel/?audio=true> [accessed May 29, 2011]). Wheaton College offers a course on the Emerging Church (EVAN 694 – The Emerging Church) as part of their M.A. program in Evangelism and Leadership (see: [http://www.wheaton.edu/evangelism/courses/course\\_descriptions.html](http://www.wheaton.edu/evangelism/courses/course_descriptions.html) [accessed May 29, 2011]). Fuller Theological Seminary currently offers a number of specific courses related to the Emerging Church, for instance: "MC536 Leading an Emerging Church," and "MC535 The Emerging Church in the Twenty-First Century" (see: <http://www.fuller.edu/page.aspx?id=7880&terms=Emerging%20church> [accessed May 29, 2011]).

<sup>5</sup> For instance the leaders of the Emergent Village typically hold an annual conference called the "Emergent Convention" (although other similar terms and descriptors have been used). In an archived online dialogue, Brian McLaren noted that about "1100 [attended the Emergent convention] in 2003, and then about 1500 total in two 2004 conventions" (see <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000226.html> [accessed May 31, 2011]). In March 2009 these leaders also held a "Catholic-Emergent Conference" formally entitled: "The Emerging Church: Conversations, Convergence and Action." Richard Rohr (Roman Catholic Priest), Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Shane Claiborne (among others) were keynote speakers at this "the first large gathering of Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical, and other Christians seeking to explore emergence and convergence together" (see: <http://archive.cacraddicalgrace.org/conferences/emerg/> [accessed May 31, 2011]). Jonathan Brink, a blogger for the Emergent Village

has also been expressed by those in the Evangelical Theological Society, resulting in a regional meeting being focused solely on this ecclesial trend.<sup>6</sup> Although books, conferences, classes, and scholarly skirmishes have brought considerable attention to the Emergent movement, none of these has paralleled the far-reaching influence of Internet blogs, sites, and forums.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly the wide influence of this sociological phenomenon *alone* would provide grounds for a thorough evaluation to be performed and made accessible to both pastors and laypersons alike. And to answer this need several good works deal with the many varying issues concerning all things “emergent.”<sup>8</sup>

However, the majority of leaders within the movement have now declared that the so-labeled phenomenon has ceased, or they have called for a disbanding of the “Emergent” label and brand.<sup>9</sup> In an article describing signs of fragmentation in the movement, author Brandon O’Brien reported these words:

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estimated that approximately 900 attended this conference (see Jonathan Brink, “The Emerging Church Conference - Day 1,” in *Emergent Village* (2009), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog%20/the-emerging-church-conference-day-1> (accessed May 31, 2011).

<sup>6</sup> John Bohannon presented a paper at this event entitled, “Preaching and the Emerging Church.” He wrote, “The 2007 Eastern Region Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society composed their entire meeting around the emerging church – ‘Postmodernism, the Emerging Church, and Evangelicalism’” (John S. Bohannon, *Preaching and the Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt* [Raleigh: Lulu, 2010], 15).

<sup>7</sup> For this reason much of the research cited in this thesis is from a variety of websites, weblogs, and online chat forums.

<sup>8</sup> For example Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*; Mark Driscoll et al., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, ed. Robert Webber (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Pagitt and Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*; William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent: a Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009); Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Numerous authors, leaders, and bloggers such as Andrew Jones (an emergent leader from the United Kingdom), Tony Jones (one-time national coordinator for emergentvillage.com), and Adam Smith (writer for *Relevant* magazine) began noticing a collapse in mid-year 2009 (Jones, “Emerging Church Movement (1989-2009)?” <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/12/emerging-church-movement-1989---2009.html> [accessed May 27, 2011]; Tony Jones, “Lonnie Frisbee and the Non-

As one-time leaders of the emergent movement have recently distanced themselves from the term, the network itself dropped its organizational leader [Tony Jones]. The decision of Emergent Village's board of directors to eliminate its national coordinator position marked the latest sign that the movement is either decentralizing or disintegrating. . . . [Brian] McLaren says there have been ongoing questions about the label itself. "For many people, the name *emergent* has allowed them to remain in the evangelical world," he said. For others outside the conversation, he admitted, the name has become an epithet for theological heresy or cultural trendiness. Even some within the network are beginning to avoid emergent vocabulary. Prominent blogger Andrew Jones (known online as "Tall Skinny Kiwi") has dropped the emergent label from his conversations. "The word no longer communicates what I want it to," he said, "so even though I will still be in support of emerging church ventures. . . . I will no longer be using the word for myself and the ministries that we support."<sup>10</sup>

Since approximately February 2008 various proponents *and* opponents of the ECM<sup>11</sup> began reporting that the movement was headed for demise.<sup>12</sup> In a telling piece of narrative, Scaramanga wrote:

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Demise of the Emerging Church," in *Theoblogy* (2009), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/tonyjones/2009/12/30/lonnie-frisbee-and-the-non-demise-of-the-emerging-church/> (accessed May 27, 2011); and Adam Smith, "The End of the Emergent Movement?," in *Relevant Magazine* (2010); <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/features/21181-the-end-of-emergent> (accessed May 25, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Brandon O'Brien, "Emergent's Divergence: Leaders hope decentralizing power will revitalize the movement," *Christianity Today* January (2009): 13-14. Of note, for Andrew Jones the terms "emerging" and "emergent" seem interchangeable.

<sup>11</sup> Henceforth the full title the "Emergent Church Movement" will often be abbreviated as "ECM" for the sake of space and verbal conciseness. For further elaboration on the nomenclature surrounding this study see the forthcoming section in chapter 1, entitled "Definitions and Limitations."

<sup>12</sup> The blogosphere reveals the most explicit telltale signs. Url Scaramanga (pseudonym), a provocative writer for *Christianity Today's* blogging community called "Out of Ur," wrote a very intriguing and well-documented article entitled, "R.I.P. Emerging Church: An overused and corrupted term now sleeps with the fishes." He notes that as early as 2006 certain publishing groups had plans to drop the ECM label. Furthermore, he chronicles how various leaders publicly distanced themselves from "Emergent" – especially in North America. Blogger Trevin Wax wrote an article on February 5, 2008, entitled, "5 Reasons Why the Emerging Church Is Now Receding." Within this perceptive essay he noted the following factors for the recession: (1) The Emerging Church does little evangelism. (2) Some Emerging leaders have embraced a disturbing lack of clarity on key doctrinal and social issues. (3) Many who [were] initially intrigued by the Emerging conversation are now distancing themselves from Emerging theology. (4) Some aspects of the Emerging Church look faddish and fleeting. (5) Evangelicalism is beginning to address the good questions raised by the Emerging movement (Trevin Wax, "5 Reasons Why the Emerging Church Is Now Receding," in *Kingdom People* (2008), <http://trevinwax.com/2008/02/05/5-reasons-why-the-emerging-church-is-now-receding/> [accessed May 25, 2011]; Url Scaramanga, "R.I.P. Emerging Church," in "Out of Ur" (Christianity Today, 2008), [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip\\_emerging\\_ch.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html) [accessed May 27, 2011]).

“The emerging church will disappear.” That is what my informant told me as we shared drinks at our clandestine watering hole. I felt like Luca Brasi being handed a dead fish wrapped in newspaper. The hit had been ordered? The emerging church’s fate had been sealed. In my informant’s mind, the death of the emerging church was a settled matter. I double-checked my surroundings for listening ears before whispering, “How can you be so sure?” The informant (who worked for a publisher) leaned forward and said their marketing plans included dropping the “Emerging Church” brand within two years. That was two years ago. Now comes word from recognized leaders and voices within the emerging church movement that the term has become so polluted that it is being dropped.<sup>13</sup>

Confirming the prediction of Scaramanga’s “informant,” emergent leader Andrew Jones wrote, “In my opinion, 2009 marks the year when the emerging church suddenly and decisively ceased to be a radical and controversial movement in global Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> As one critical of the ECM, MacArthur remarked, “The Emerging juggernaut has nearly ground to a halt. The wheels seem to be coming off. . . . Several influential authors and pastors (including several members of the original network) have now foresworn the word ‘Emerging’ altogether.”<sup>15</sup>

Such prophetic sentiments soon became reality. A search for recent or upcoming conventions on the website for Emergent Village yielded just one result: the “Wild Goose Festival,” described as “a music, art and conversation festival at the intersection of justice and spirituality . . . rooted in the Christian tradition seeking to welcome all regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, background or belief.”<sup>16</sup> This is a far cry from the numerous conventions, conferences, and seminars that popularized the

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<sup>13</sup> Scaramanga, “R.I.P. Emerging Church,” [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip\\_emerging\\_ch.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html) (accessed May 27, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Jones, “Emerging Church Movement (1989-2009)?,” <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/12/emerging-church-movement-1989---2009.html> (accessed May 27, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 228.

<sup>16</sup> This event was held June 23-26, 2011 (see <http://www.emergentvillage.com/events/wild-goose-festival> [accessed May 31, 2011]).

movement at its beginning. Undoubtedly the ECM as a socio-movement has lost a great deal of momentum in recent months.

One former self-identified “sympathizer” with the movement quipped, “The Emerging Church was not around long enough to be declared alive, so the announcement of its death comes with an apathetic “ho-hum” for many of you. But it is true. Stop the “What is the Emerging Church?” seminars. Edit the “Beware of Brian McLaren Sermons.” And don’t even entertain starting an Emerging blog. As far as I can see, the Emerging Church is dead at 15.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus in a little over a decade<sup>18</sup> what was known, discussed, and studied as a groundbreaking movement that would forever shape and change the church came to an end.<sup>19</sup> Some beg to differ and contend the ECM is simply emerging or morphing into a

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<sup>17</sup> C. Michael Patton, “Obituary: The Emerging Church (1994-2009),” in *Parchment and Pen* (Credo House Ministries, 2009), <http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/2009/05/obituary-the-emerging-church-1994-2009/> (accessed May 25, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> To reiterate, determining a precise date for the beginning of the ECM is nearly impossible. Myriad opinions exist about when the movement actually began. Therefore it seems most advantageous to mark when the movement became widely public and influential. Most leaders see this occurring between 1999-2000. Tony Jones offered a piece of historical insight when he wrote, “Those who started emergent were at the National ReEvaluation Forum in 1998.” The context of this statement assumes that Jones believes the ECM formally began sometime shortly after this conference. From another statement by Jones, it appears “emergent” truly actualized after a number officially left the Leadership Network: “In 2001, we [Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Brian McClaren, et al.] left the auspices of Leadership Network, Andrew Jones had moved to the UK and Mark Driscoll jumped ship (or was pushed overboard, depending on whom you ask). . . . It wasn’t until the Emergent Convention in 2003 that we gained any real steam, and that was only because of the energy of Mark Oestreicher and Youth Specialties. To be honest, I pretty much thought [t]he thing was over until that convention,” (Tony Jones, “So, You’re Disappointed with Emergent,” in *The New Christians: Tony Jones on Culture, Politics, and the Emergent Church* (Belief Net, 2009), <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/06/so-youre-disappointed-with-eme.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> This fact was noted in class lectures with Dr. Glenn Kreider during the course *ST105 Sanctification and Ecclesiology*, Dallas Theological Seminary, spring 2010. See also Josh Brown, “The Emerging Church Is Dead Because Church is Dead,” in *I Am Josh Brown* (2009), <http://www.iamjoshbrown.com/blog/2009/06/04/the-emerging-church-is-dead-because-church-is-dead/> (accessed May 27, 2011); Brian LePort, “The End of the Emergent Church? ,” in *Near Emmaus* (2009), <http://nearemmaus.com/2009/12/29/the-end-of-the-emergent-church/> (accessed November 5, 2011); DJ Word, “An Obituary for the Emerging Church,” in *Cheaper than Therapy* (2010), <http://djword.blogspot.com/2010/01/obituary-for-emerging-church.html> (accessed May 27, 2011); Bradley, “Farewell Emerging Church, 1989-2010,” <http://online.worldmag.com/2010/04/14/farewell-emerging-church-1989-2010/> (accessed May 25, 2011); Gary E. Gilley, “The Emergents Are Emerging,” *Israel My*

different “skin” or label.<sup>20</sup> Certainly the sentiments and ideologies that drove the ECM to great heights of popularity and influence have not ceased to exist. In fact, they may be spreading more rapidly today than they were ten or twenty years ago. These concerns will be addressed in the application of the forthcoming material. However, *most* within and without the ECM, in particular, have admitted a collapse of influence, organization, and popularity.

Therefore church leaders now have a great and challenging opportunity to reflect on and theologically evaluate the rise and fall of this highly influential and widely publicized ecclesial expression. What was the cause of its rise and fall? What will be the continuing influence of this transitioning movement? These questions need to be thoroughly answered in order to provide pastors and other Christian leaders with groundwork by which to evaluate similar forthcoming postmodern issues. Because the inception and the general cessation of the ECM have arrived with clear historical markers, a new perspective has been gained concerning the theological veracity and doctrinal outlook of the expression. In this way a thorough study of what precipitated its rise and fall will provide insight and evaluative tools for understanding postmodern expressions of faith and particularly the Emergent church.

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*Glory*, July/August, (2010): 17; T. Scott Daniels, “The Death of the Emerging Church,” in *Pastor Scott's Thoughts* (2010), [http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor\\_scotts\\_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html](http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html) (accessed May 25, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Pro-emergent: Jonathan Brink, “A State of Emergence 2010,” in *Emergent Village* (2010), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/brink-state-of-emergence-2010> (accessed May 31, 2011); Jones, “Lonnie Frisbee and the Non-Demise of the Emerging Church,” <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/12/lonnie-frisbee-and-the-non-demise-of-the-emerging-church/> (accessed May 27, 2011); Danielle Shroyer, “What do you do when a revolution isn't sexy anymore?,” in *Danielleshroyer.com* (2009), <http://danielleshroyer.com/2009/12/30/what-do-you-do-when-a-revolution-isnt-sexy-anymore/> (accessed May 27, 2011). Contra-emergent: Author, *They Say the Emerging Church Is Dead - The Truth Behind the Story* (Lighthouse Trails Research Project, 2008 (accessed May 27, 2011); available from <http://www.lighthouse trailsresearch.com/newsletter092208.htm#LETTER.BLOCK33>.

### Definitions and Limitations for This Study

Pastors, scholars, and authors have vociferously debated how to define the Emergent/Emerging movement. Some identify four or five interrelated yet distinct schools of thought within the ECM, while others prefer to view it as one organic entity.<sup>21</sup> Broadly speaking, the label “Emerging Church” was originally used to simply define various individuals and churches who were seeking to bring the message of the gospel to people emerging from a culture of modernism into postmodernism. Dan Kimball echoes this definition, “If you were to have asked me [in 2003] about what the core of the emerging church is, I would have responded with ‘evangelism and mission in our emerging culture to emerging generations.’”<sup>22</sup> Yet Kimball goes on to delineate how starkly the definition(s) has changed over the last ten years:

I don’t even think the word “evangelism” comes up when I start hearing about “the emerging church” for the most part anymore. . . . The emerging church world has also become so theologically diverse that it has become understandably confusing. I can’t defend or even explain theologically what is now known broadly as “the emerging church” anymore, because it has developed into so many significantly different theological strands. Some I strongly would disagree with.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Mark Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (2006): 87-93. See also Driscoll et al., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*; Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today,” *Christianity Today* January (2007), <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html> (accessed December 19, 2011). In 2005, Aaron Flores defined the movement as rather indefinably, “There is currently no clear, distinct definition or descriptive label for the emerging church.” However, he later borrows a definition from Wikipedia (an online encyclopedia), “‘The Emerging Church’ is a label that has been used to refer to a particular subset of Christians who are rethinking Christianity against the backdrop of Postmodernism” (Aaron Flores, “An Exploration of the Emerging Church in the United States: The Missiological Intent and Potential Implications of the Future” [M.A. thesis, Vanguard University, 2005], 7, 11).

<sup>22</sup> Dan Kimball, “The Emerging Church: 5 Years Later - the Definition has Changed,” in *Dan Kimball: Vintage Faith* (2008), [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2008/09/the-emerging-ch.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2008/09/the-emerging-ch.html) (accessed November 5, 2011). He then expounds on the definition this way: “And from that, other things were of course included, alternative worship, discussions on ecclesiology etc., as a means for fruitful growth of disciples of Jesus. But evangelism for me was underneath it all.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

Ironically this statement comes from the same man who wrote the seminal work entitled, *“The Emerging Church.”*<sup>24</sup> Because of the many variant “strands” or “lanes” associated with the labels “emerging” and “emergent,” Mark Driscoll attempted to carefully define the movement through four distinct groups (particularly assessed by their theological suppositions).<sup>25</sup> Driscoll distinguishes the four “lanes” as: (1) *Emerging Evangelicals*, (2) *House Church Evangelicals*, (3) *Emerging Reformers*, and (4) *Emergent Liberals*.<sup>26</sup> As one closely involved in the beginnings of the ECM and as pastor of debatably the largest “emerging” church in North America (even though he has distanced himself from the label),<sup>27</sup> his sketch is quite insightful. The following is a summary of these four categories.

#### *Emerging Evangelicals*

Emerging Evangelicals are those seeking to make church gatherings and the gospel appear as user-friendly and relevant as possible to those in a postmodern culture. They are firmly within the realm of Christian orthodoxy and are willing to hold doctrinal positions on issues like the nature of the atonement, the inspiration of Scripture, and mankind’s eternal destiny. However, they tend to differ on “the role of women in

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<sup>24</sup> Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*.

<sup>25</sup> Others, such as Ed Stetzer, have seen the Emerging movement as comprised of three groups: *Relevants*, *Reconstructionists*, and *Revisionists*. However, it is important to note that Stetzer’s “Three R’s” were developed approximately two years prior to Driscoll’s formulation of the “Four Lanes.” Thus Driscoll’s evaluation seems more thorough and up-to-date. See Ed Stetzer, “First-Person: Understanding the Emerging Church,” (Nashville: Baptist Press, 2006), <http://www.sbc Baptist Press.org/bpnews.asp?ID=22406> (accessed November 14, 2011); and Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 89-92.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” *Christian Research Journal* 31 (2008): <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>27</sup> Lillian Kwon, “Mars Hill Pastor Ditches 'Emerging' Label for Jesus,” in *The Christian Post* (2008), <http://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hill-pastor-ditches-emerging-label-for-jesus-31344/> (accessed November 14, 2011).



ministry, the proper mode of baptism, and charismatic gifts.”<sup>28</sup> Emerging Evangelicals are also quite progressive in updating the modes of media and communication for worship gatherings. Organizational structures and preaching designs are also specifically tooled to connect with the postmodern mindset. But in contrast to the other “lanes,” this group does “not place as much emphasis . . . on actively engaging in their local culture and loving and serving people as the church.”<sup>29</sup> Emerging Evangelicals are also sometimes criticized for “doing little more than cool church for hip young Christians.”<sup>30</sup> This “lane” is represented by leaders and pastors like Dan Kimball, Chris Seay, and Donald Miller.<sup>31</sup>

### *House Church Evangelicals*

House Church Evangelicals could be defined as the dissatisfied.<sup>32</sup> Many within this “lane” are greatly disillusioned by current church models (such as traditional, institutional, seeker-sensitive, and especially megachurch trends in evangelicalism). They point to overseas revivals that spawned from house churches and small cell groups as proof that wholesale ecclesial change is necessary for believers in North America, if they hope to reach the postmodern generation with the gospel. They decry the status of North American evangelicalism and, in their estimation, its resulting “worldliness” and

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<sup>28</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> See Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*; Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); Chris Seay, *The Gospel According to Jesus: A Faith That Restores All Things* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010); Chris Seay, *Faith of My Fathers: Conversations with Three Generations of Pastors about Church, Ministry, and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> The author was personally involved in the House Church Movement for a short period of time because of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with current church trends. Most within this movement have a great passion for God’s Word and a desire to see the spiritually lost come to faith in Christ. Many of their concerns are well founded. However, a denial of leadership structure, a dismissal of sound Bible education and preaching, and a pervasive spirit of disgruntledness have riddled the movement for years.

preoccupation with materialism. Driscoll remarks, “They subsequently propose more informal, incarnational, and organic church forms such as that of house churches.”<sup>33</sup> Most proponents maintain the essential tenets of the Christian faith and keep the gospel central in their methodologies.

This subgroup has drawn criticism for denying formal leadership structures, deemphasizing formal Bible education and preaching, and countenancing a general disgruntled sentiment. Some contend they are “overreacting to the mega church trend and advocating a house church trend that works well in some cultures but has not proven effective in Western nations.”<sup>34</sup> Authors, pastors, and leaders such as George Barna, Frank Viola, Shane Claiborne, Alan Hirsch, and Michael Frost are key proponents of this “lane.”<sup>35</sup>

### *Emerging Reformers*

Emerging Reformers may be classified as those who “see the postmodern world as an opportunity for the church to practice the *semper reformanda* or ‘always reforming’ cry of the Protestant Reformation.”<sup>36</sup> This ecclesiological principle drives Emerging Reformers to change the modes, styles, and methods of church ministry and worship (that are not clearly defined in Scripture), in order to communicate the gospel

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<sup>33</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> See George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005); George Barna and Frank Viola, *Pagan Christianity? Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008); Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Michael Frost, *The Road to Missional: Journey to the Center of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Leap of Faith: Embracing a Theology of Risk, Adventure, and Courage* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2006).

<sup>36</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

with relevance to the postmodern populace.<sup>37</sup> Strong theological ties are found between traditional Reformed and Calvinistic theology and the Emerging Reformers.

Interestingly Driscoll points out that they “are charismatic in terms of spiritual gifts and worship and aggressive in church planting, particularly in major cities.”<sup>38</sup>

Though it should be said that not *all* subsumed under this classification are theologically “charismatic,” as defined by neo-charismatic and Pentecostal circles. In contrast with the other subgroups Emerging Reformers have maintained a conservative position on gender roles in church ministry: “only qualified men may serve as pastors and preachers.”<sup>39</sup> This highly popular “lane” is sometimes criticized by liberal opponents for “merely repackaging tired Reformed fundamentalism” and for continuing in an “outdated... understanding of gender roles.”<sup>40</sup> Theological guidance is most often taken from writers and ministers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and recent contemporaries such as J. I. Packer, Francis Schaeffer, John Stott, John Piper, C. J. Mahaney, D. A. Carson, and Wayne Grudem.<sup>41</sup> Key pastors and

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<sup>37</sup> This principle has also been used by the “emergent liberal” (fourth “lane”) camp as well, but with a different interpretation altogether. Kevin DeYoung clarifies the proper, historical use of this principle: “Emerging church leaders, unlike the Reformers, are calling for change because the culture has moved [this sounds even like the “emerging reformers” view above]. The Reformers, by contrast, were calling for change because the church had moved away from the Bible. “Reformed and always reforming” was not a motto giving license for continual doctrinal innovation, which is how I’ve heard *semper reformanda* used a hundred times. It was a rallying cry to keep going back to the Scriptures so that by them the church may be reformed and always reforming” (DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 86).

<sup>38</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. See also John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: a Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); John Piper, *What's the Difference? Manhood and Womanhood Defined According to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ibid.

leaders in this “lane” are Matt Chandler, Mark Driscoll, Mark Dever, Tim Keller, Darrin Patrick, Ed Stetzer, and Tullian Tchividjian.<sup>42</sup>

### *Emergent Liberals*

Emergent Liberals represent those who have moved from mere gospel contextualization to the far reaches of cultural and theological accommodation. Driscoll defines this “lane” as those who “have drifted away from a discussion about how to contextualize timeless Christian truth in timely cultural ways and [have] instead come to focus on creating a new Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> Most of the key leaders within the Emergent Liberal subgroup have evolved from a prior position of theological orthodoxy to an ambiguous conversation that seeks to deconstruct or even dismantle the essential truths of the Christian faith (i.e., the Bible as God’s inspired and authoritative Word, God as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the full humanity and deity of Jesus Christ, mankind’s inherent sinfulness and separation from God, Christ’s death as the substitutionary atoning sacrifice for sin, salvation by the grace of God alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, the reality of a literal heaven and hell, and the second coming of Christ, etc.).

In seeking to reach a postmodern culture with the gospel, most Emergent Liberals ended up rapidly assimilating to the culture they intended to reach. Because Western postmodernism is largely characterized by relativism and religious pluralism

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. See Mark Driscoll, *The Radical Reformation: Reaching Out Without Selling Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); idem, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008); idem, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Group, 2008); Ed Stetzer and David Putnam, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006); Ed Stetzer, *Planting Missional Churches: Planting a Church That's Biblically Sound and Reaching People in Culture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2006); Tullian Tchividjian, *Surprised by Grace: God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

<sup>43</sup> Driscoll, “Navigating the Emerging Church Highway,” <http://journal.equip.org/articles/navigating-the-emerging-church-highway> (accessed November 14, 2011).

(though not in every form), this “lane” soon adopted similar interpretations of Christianity – thus “A New Kind of Christianity” was in order.<sup>44</sup> Al Mohler remarks on their vague and troubling theology this way: “When it comes to issues such as the exclusivity of the gospel, the identity of Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the authoritative character of Scripture as written revelation, and the clear teachings of Scripture concerning issues such as homosexuality, this movement simply refuses to answer the questions.”<sup>45</sup>

To define the Emergent Liberal subgroup concisely is rather difficult because of its inherently ambiguous nature.<sup>46</sup> However, a workable definition may be as follows: Emergent Liberals are those who originally sought to contextualize the message of the Christian faith to people emerging from a culture of modernism into postmodernism, but who now have accommodated so thoroughly to a liberal postmodernism that theological relativism, pluralism, and ambiguity characterize their teaching and praxis.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*.

<sup>45</sup> Albert Mohler, “‘A Generous Orthodoxy’ - Is It Orthodox?,” in *AlbertMohler.com* (2005), <http://www.albertmohler.com/2005/06/20/a-generous-orthodoxy-is-it-orthodox/> (accessed November 18, 2011).

<sup>46</sup> DeYoung and Kluck (and others) remarked that an attempt at “defining the emerging church is like nailing Jell-O to the wall” (to borrow the common colloquial phrase). They also contend “the Jell-O nature of the emerging church is also intentional. It is, after all, a ‘conversation.’ Emergent authors, bloggers, and pastors do not see themselves as leaders or authoritative theologians, but as talkers. This is one of the most admirable and frustrating parts about the emerging church. It’s admirable because emerging Christians admit that their ideas are only exploration and experimentation and not definitive in any way. That’s refreshingly honest and self-effacing. It’s frustrating because the ‘we’re just in a conversation’ mantra can become a shtick whereby emergent leaders are easy to listen to and impossible to pin down” (DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 16-7).

<sup>47</sup> See contra-emergent: *ibid.*, 16-19; Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 41-44. And pro-emergent: the authors of the Emergent Village describe their group this way: “Emergent Village is a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (see <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about/>). See also Tripp Fuller, “Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village',” in *Homebrewed Christianity* (2009), <http://homebrewedchristianity.com/2009/06/17/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village/> (accessed November 18, 2011); Tripp Fuller, “Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village.’” in *Emergent Village* (2009), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village> (accessed November 18, 2011). At the outset, the intentions and questions of those now accepted as leaders in the

To bring further definition for this study, the “Emergent Church Movement” (ECM) denotes that sector of postmodern ecclesiology popularly known simply as “Emergent Liberal” or the “Emergent Church” and what may be subsumed under the auspices of the “Emergent Village” web collective and other closely linked “conversation” groups.<sup>48</sup> This especially vocal portion of the postmodern movement is currently led by people who have clearly veered from sound, orthodox doctrine.<sup>49</sup> Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Karen Ward, and Rob Bell are central to this school of thought and are generally accepted as leaders in the ECM.<sup>50</sup> To delineate the many layers associated with defining the ECM, Jeff Keuss attempted to provide a multivalent perspective:

[The ECM is generally characterized by] a minimalist and decentralized organizational structure; a flexible and at times mongrel approach to theology whereby individual differences in belief and morality are celebrated and accepted with difference as normative; a holistic view of the role of the church in society (this can mean anything from greater emphasis on fellowship in the structure of the group to a higher degree of emphasis on social action,

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Emergent movement were both admirable and profound. In an interview with R. Alan Street, Brian McLaren defined the ECM in these elongated terms, “It appears that the church is growing rapidly where pre-modern people enter modernity, but where modern people move into a postmodern cultural milieu, the Christian faith has not yet understood or engaged the questions they’re raising. So, many of us are seeking to faithfully incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ – the gospel of the kingdom of God available to all through Jesus – to people in our mission context. Really we’re just acknowledging and seeking to enter a new mission field – not on a new continent, but one that is emerging on all continents. So, in this sense, what people call ‘the emerging church’ (a term I don’t particularly like because it can sound divisive) is really ‘the church that is engaging with the emerging culture.’ ” This definition sounds a lot like Kimball’s original definition for the broader Emerging Church. However, McLaren explains more concisely how he sees Emergent as a new kind of Christianity, “Emergent and other conversations like it are seeking to rediscover the Jesus of the Scriptures and fairly represent him and his message to our world” (R. Alan Street, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3 [2006]: 5-14).

<sup>48</sup> Since much of the ECM was (and still currently is – in diminishing form) operated through the medium of the Internet, most discussion groups (or “cohorts” as emergentvillage.com likes to call them) were formed through what might be called a “web collective.” This simply denotes a “conversation” (a discussion group) based in and perhaps entirely cooperating within web-based applications. Websites like theooze.com and emergentvillage.com are particularly representative of the online ECM dialogue.

<sup>49</sup> Full validation of this claim will be given in the following argumentation.

<sup>50</sup> One might also include emergent-liberal thinkers such as Spencer Burke, Phyllis Tickle, Leonard Sweet, David Tomlinson, and Peter Rollins.

community building or Christian outreach); a desire to reanalyze the Bible against the context with the goal of revealing a multiplicity of valid perspectives rather than a single valid interpretation; a high value placed on creating communities built out of the creativity of those who are a part of each local body.<sup>51</sup>

This study concentrates on what has been referred to above as the “fourth lane” or “stream” of the broader Emerging Church.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore the following will argue that this highly influential sector of the movement was prone to reevaluate and reinterpret core doctrines of the Christian faith, in order to “save” Christianity by reformulating it for success in a postmodern world.<sup>53</sup> While the other three “lanes” of the broader Emerging Church exhibited certain similarities with the ECM (as demonstrated above) and also gained significant influence in North America, the ECM differed by adopting radically liberal ideologies. As a result of these aberrant tendencies the ECM headed down a path of fragmentation and theological demise. Inasmuch as the other

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<sup>51</sup> Jeff Keuss, “The Emergent Church and Neo-Correlational Theology after Tillich, Schleiermacher and Browning,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 450-51. His study focused almost entirely on Emergent Liberal leaders such as Brian McLaren. Keuss provides a rather objective understanding of the ECM as one who postures himself as a religious liberal.

<sup>52</sup> Within the following material various sources use the terms “emerging” and “emergent” interchangeably, which may be justifiable. Yet this study will focus on the beliefs and issues relating to the subcategory or “fourth lane” most commonly labeled “emergent” (the ECM). The deciphering of which “lane” is being addressed by the various authors and leaders will be proposed.

<sup>53</sup> This is undeniably reminiscent of Fredrich Schleiermacher’s goal in religious liberalism in the nineteenth century and of his protégés in the early twentieth century. The most lucid work outlining this connection has been written by Jeff Keuss (Seattle Pacific University), in which he contends, “The ‘emerging church’ movement, through writers such as Brian McLaren, is merely a new form of correlational theology – or what I will term ‘neo-correlational theology.’ This ‘emergent’ movement aligns itself with Paul Tillich’s systematic presentation of what he termed a ‘theology of culture’ addressed in his 1919 lecture *Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur* and is deeply rooted in theological essentialisms aligned with Fredrich Schleiermacher and Don Browning. . . . First, the heritage of Schleiermacher’s notion of ‘feeling’ as an authentic categorical form of knowledge forged through radical reflexivity which is the proper domain for authenticity in the Emergent movement. Second, as underscored in Tillich’s *Theology of Culture*, the church as ‘emergent’ is profoundly imminent and therefore necessarily social, positivistic, and historical. Third, theological anthropology is understood primarily through our freedom over and (at times) against the necessity of redemption” (Keuss, “The Emergent Church and Neo-Correlational Theology after Tillich, Schleiermacher and Browning,” 450). Ultimately Keuss (who is theologically liberal) successfully argues for a clear connection between various ECM voices and the bygone era of religious liberalism and its accompanying proponents. While Keuss is hopeful and gladdened by this connection, conservative evangelicals should accept it as indicative of the flawed theological bearings found within the ECM.

Emerging Church subgroups remained rooted in the essentials of Christianity they also witnessed genuine and continued success in the mission of the gospel.<sup>54</sup> However, to the extent that the ECM discarded the basis of Christian faith and doctrine they also began to show persistent signs of decline, ineffectiveness, and confusion. Therefore a direct correlation may be observed between the ideologies of the ECM and the end of the movement. Some may contend that the other Emerging Church subgroups are worthy of study and evaluation, and such a proposal is correct. However, a survey of the entire movement is beyond the scope of this thesis for two reasons. First, the size limitation of this study disallows such a broad and varied subject. Second, in contrast with the other Emerging subcategories, the ECM (with its transition away from orthodoxy) is more closely associated with the reasons behind the movement's rise *and especially* its fall. The following material will militate for this proposal.

Many factors led to the overall collapse of the ECM. These include but are not limited to (1) the reactionary deconstructionist nature of the proponents, (2) the personality-based structure of leadership, (3) the movement's immersion in postmodern pragmatism, and (4) the prevalence of a low view of scriptural authority. Thus what gave exuberant energy to the movement at the outset also precipitated its collapse. Unfortunately the leaders' positive desire to reach the emerging postmodern generation in North America also included inherent problems, which can likely be linked back to these four faulty antecedents. The leaders were presenting many excellent questions, questions that still need to be answered. However, their answers were too often influenced by the issues listed above; consequently the movement collapsed.

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<sup>54</sup> Not surprisingly, leaders in other three "lanes" of the Emerging Church are quickly distancing themselves from the terms "emergent" and "emerging," (see Kwon, "Mars Hill Pastor Ditches 'Emerging' Label for Jesus," <http://www.christianpost.com/news/mars-hill-pastor-ditches-emerging-label-for-jesus-31344/> [accessed November 14, 2011]). Pastors such as Matt Chandler, Mark Driscoll, and Dan Kimball (among many others) are continuing to enjoy great success for the gospel's sake.



This work focuses on the two most central factors that contributed to the rise and fall of the ECM movement within the context of North American evangelicalism.<sup>55</sup> This thesis contends that the ECM rose to popularity, in part, because of its reactionary deconstructionist sentiment *and* postmodern pragmatic philosophy,<sup>56</sup> and conversely that these same elements also precipitated its fall.

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<sup>55</sup> Because of the many ecclesial differences between North American, European, Australian, and Asian contexts, the space limitations of this thesis will limit the study to North America and most particularly the United States.

<sup>56</sup> To repeat the argument set forth at the outset of this study: this thesis posits that the ECM held a philosophy of pragmatism (theories and beliefs are evaluated on the basis of practice and results). Yet their pragmatism was also rooted in a postmodernism that asserted truth and morality are relative to the individual and his or her experience and context. The argument could be placed in this order: (1) early leaders of the ECM sought to reach those in a culture of postmodernism with the gospel message; (2) these leaders were dissatisfied with the results of fundamentalism, theological foundationalism, presuppositionalism, and evangelicalism; (3) therefore they approached postmodernism with a pragmatic philosophy (looking for ways to achieve results through practices and beliefs that “work”); (4) because postmodernism allowed these leaders the latitude to dismantle former beliefs and practices, they quickly sought to deconstruct anything thought to impede their outreach to the said populace; (5) however, because they so thoroughly attempted to accommodate to postmodernists, they sadly assimilated to the underpinnings of philosophical postmodernism that would, in turn, injure the very foundation of their Christian faith and would lead to the later demise of the movement. For a very helpful summary of the perils of philosophical postmodernism see Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” 34-35; Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: the Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*, 13-31.

CHAPTER 2  
THE REACTIONARY DECONSTRUCTIONISM  
OF THE EMERGENT MOVEMENT

**Introduction**

This chapter details how a philosophical *reactionary deconstructionism* influenced and impacted the ECM. First, the evidence provided shows the movement arose as a sociological phenomenon, in part because of its reactionary deconstructionism through connections with the current generation and common societal sentiment. Second, it will be argued that this same reactionary deconstruction also contributed to the movement's demise through a lack of constructive efforts and a pervasive disillusionment among the followers.

**Cause of the Movement's Rise**

As noted above, at least four factors contributed to the rise of the ECM. Yet one of the most central elements that gave impetus to the increase in popularity for this school of thought was its reactionary deconstructionism. This is evidenced in two ways: (1) connections with the current generation, and (2) popularity through common sentiment.

*Connections with the Current Generation*

At the dawn of the ECM the reverberations of postmodernism<sup>1</sup> were beginning to echo all across the corridors of North America. This radically new way of determining

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<sup>1</sup> Socio-cultural movements such as *postmodernism* are notoriously difficult to define. Carson admits, "Neither modernism nor postmodernism is easy to define. Even experts in intellectual history

“how we know things, or think we know things”<sup>2</sup> tenaciously confronted modernistic sensibilities. Rationalism, reductionism, and the scientific method were replaced with spiritualism, aesthetics, emotions, and “authentic” community.<sup>3</sup> There were and still are many who hold to a modernistic view of life and knowledge, however, the message of postmodernism now permeates (in varying degrees) the fields of art, literature, media communication, economics, and religion.<sup>4</sup> One cannot run or hide from this retooled epistemology.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly the effects of this new way of viewing life had already been identified and discussed by the academy at large.<sup>6</sup> Yet shortly before the turn of the

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disagree on their definitions” (Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 25). However, this study primarily focuses on the way postmodernism determines knowledge and truth (epistemology) and will not necessarily delve into the developments and history of postmodernism itself or the broader consequences of the movement outside ecclesiology. Further explanation of postmodernism will be given in chapter 3, “The Postmodern Pragmatism of the Emergent Movement.” But as a moderately workable definition, *postmodernism* (as associated with the ECM) connotes a socio-movement predominantly in Western Europe, North America, and parts of Asia and Australia that denies “the classical (and commonsense) notion of the correspondence theory of truth and reject[s] the idea that language [including special revelation, the Scriptures] has meaning outside of a socially constructed context...[thus leading to] a belief that there is no truth with a capital *T*, only truths with a lowercase *t*, which are relative to individuals and cultures” (Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” 34). One might summarize by adding to a common colloquial phrase, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder – and so is truth.” This philosophical postmodernism also decries modernism’s drive for certainty, linear thinking, and absolutism and replaces these with intellectual “tension” (embracing paradox), authenticity, aesthetics, and relationship (not entirely bad goals). See also R. Scott Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 175-90.

<sup>2</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 27. This is simply a concise definition of *epistemology*. The most basic concern and issue at stake with postmodernism is an epistemological one.

<sup>3</sup> Yet some traits are common in both liberal modernism *and* postmodernism, e.g., relativism, religious pluralism, and certain anthropocentric philosophies. Modernism and postmodernism both have serious faults.

<sup>4</sup> See Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: the Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*, 27-31.

<sup>5</sup> Certainly postmodernism encompasses more than just epistemology. One might also add under its auspices: architectural trends, artistic style, literary interpretation, increased ethical and moral relativism, and pedagogical/developmental studies and approaches. However, our concern with postmodernism is almost entirely related to a philosophical epistemology.

<sup>6</sup> Renowned pastor and leader, Charles Swindoll, observed this reality and exposes it in detail. (Charles R. Swindoll, *The Church Awakening: a Pastor's Urgent Call for Renewal* [New York: Faith

twenty-first century the general feelings of the populace finally began to crystallize. In 1999 Charles Smith recorded similar observations in his doctoral dissertation:

The western world is in a time of transition. Modernity is giving way to post-modern understandings of reality. Western dominance is being challenged as third world countries develop. The baby-boom generation has matured and American culture is increasingly driven by Generation X. An industrial society is giving way to an information-based society, and traditional understandings of morality, truth and value are being challenged.<sup>7</sup>

This reflection sums up the tremendous *cultural revolution* taking place at the very same time the ECM rose to influence. Many people were – and still are – dissatisfied with the effects of modernity and the status quo of religiosity. Modernity’s penchant for empirical knowledge and scientific theory failed to meet the deepest needs of the Western world. In many ways, the church accommodated to modernity through basing faith on empirical evidence and Christian living on social betterment.<sup>8</sup>

Statistics show that at this same time millions of young people raised in “Christian America” were disillusioned by the faith of their evangelical parents. George Barna reported in 2006, “A majority of twenty-somethings – 61% of today’s young adults – had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually

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Words, 2010], xvi-xvii). To peruse seminal works on the developments and definitions of philosophical postmodernism see Jaques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1973); Millard J. Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); idem, *Truth or Consequences: the Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*; Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*, Theory and History Literature Series, ed. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> Charles Frederick Smith, “An Evangelical Evaluation of Key Elements in Lesslie Newbigin’s Apologetics” (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999), 1.

<sup>8</sup> For a thorough and insightful study of modernity and postmodernity’s effect on the church through a historical lens see John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: the History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2001). See also David S. Dockery, *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); Thomas C. Oden, *After Modernity...What? Agenda for Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church*; David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Pow’rs: Christ in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying.”<sup>9</sup> As the new generation matured into adulthood the frustrations of their early years resulted in either spiritual ambivalence or radical reaction (the ECM).

The time had come for Generation X<sup>10</sup> to make its mark, and this came in the form of *reaction* and the *deconstruction* of nearly everything related to what has been coined “the establishment” (i.e., the institutional church, government bureaucracy, capitalistic “big business,” traditional educational infrastructures, etc.).<sup>11</sup> This sentiment insisted that established social, ethical, and moral norms were no longer to be accepted for tradition’s sake and should be vociferously questioned. Governmental, educational, business, and religious establishments deserve the same treatment, so the reactionary postmodernist asserted. Within the religious realm, many claimed the church, with all its many factions, was steeped in sterile traditionalism or rigid isolationism. Certain leaders claimed that fundamental Christianity was clueless of the postmodern world surrounding it, and therefore must be questioned, deconstructed, and rebuilt to conform to a new

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<sup>9</sup> George Barna, *Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years* (Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 2006), <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years> (accessed: Nov 28, 2011). This trend continues with devastating results; see David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church, and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 4-30; Ken Ham and Britt Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 20-36, 141-80.

<sup>10</sup> For a helpful summary of Generations X (and Y) see George Barna, *Generation Next: What You Need to Know About Today's Youth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1995), 11-21, 108-15.

<sup>11</sup> To witness the validity of this attitude and its accompanying vernacular, one need only engage in conversation with current students at any major college or university in North America. The “stick-it-to-the-man” mentality with a proclivity for deconstruction is abundantly in vogue among those in Generations “X” and “Y.” The current “Occupy” movement (mass protest gatherings around Europe and North America with demands for financial justice, freedom from societal oppression, revival of true governmental democracy, social equality, etc.) also serves as proof of this claim (see <http://www.occupytogether.org>; <http://occupywallst.org>; <http://www.occupyeurope.com>). Occupy groups have set up encampments in cities such as New York, Washington D.C., London, Madrid, Athens, Toronto, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Oakland, Miami, and Detroit. Protest and deconstruction of the establishment epitomizes all that is couth for the current generation.

*modus operandi*.<sup>12</sup> This was the rallying cry of a new “conversation” that would help guide the church as it emerged into a whole new world.

With the rise of this deconstructive sentiment, several people came forward to express their disillusionment with the church. Some had broken away from a rigid brand of fundamentalism, while others entered through mainline denominational channels. Together they rallied with the current generation and formed various schools of “conversation” through the Internet.<sup>13</sup> Now thoroughly connected with the postmodern generation via online chat forums, blogs, and web newsreels, the ECM quickly gained traction and rose to tremendous popularity within a matter of months. One well-informed blogger gave a brief historiography on the rapid beginnings of the ECM:

I feel it was around 2001 when the word [“Emerging” and “Emergent”] exploded onto the radar screens of the church. Young Leaders in [the] USA had changed their name to Emergent [the break from the Leadership Network], a number of European networks from the UK, Spain and Germany gathered in Frankfurt for an event called “Emerge,” Karen Ward started a website called [emergingchurch.org](http://emergingchurch.org) (2002?) and in Austin [Texas] the Boaz Project hosted the Epicenter roundtable for leaders of emerging church networks.<sup>14</sup>

The ECM grew with amazing speed, perhaps faster than any other religious movement in recent history. The movement’s inherent connection with the ideals and frustrations of the current generation was very appealing – even fad-like for a populace

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<sup>12</sup> The observation that Christianity is largely clueless of postmodernism is quite accurate. However, the ECM leaders answered this need with a quest for radical deconstruction, which later led to their demise. For example see John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*, The Church and Postmodern Culture, ed. James K.A. Smith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> In 2001 Barna pointed out the significant rise in Internet usage for faith-based communities and church-related conversations in his report entitled, “More Americans Are Seeking Net-based Faith Experiences.” See George Barna, *More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences* (Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 2001 ), <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/48-more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences?q=teenagers+teens> (accessed November 29, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> A blogger identified simply as “David” placed this comment on Kimball’s post: Dan Kimball, “Origins of the Terms “Emerging” and “Emergent” Church - Part 1,” in *Dan Kimball: Vintage Faith* (2006), [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origin\\_of\\_the\\_t.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html) (accessed: January 11, 2011).

that had grown up around new marketing fads developing every year or two.<sup>15</sup> Above all, the desire to react and deconstruct<sup>16</sup> drove many to follow a new brand of leaders who became a collective voice amidst the confusing cultural milieu.

### *Popularity through Common Sentiment*

All across North America young people, particularly between the ages of twenty and thirty-five, stood ripe for a group of energetic leaders to back up their disillusionment with the gripping questions of the age. In January of 2000, Barna observed this cultural pivot in the church and found that more than 60 percent of all teens entering adulthood (who had been actively involved in evangelical congregations) had left the established church, perhaps never to return.<sup>17</sup> This links to the later assessment by Barna in 2006 that was previously mentioned, “A majority of twenty-somethings – 61 percent of today’s young adults – had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying).”<sup>18</sup> The teenagers of 2000 had become the “twenty-somethings” of 2006.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For example, those who grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s were constantly inundated with catchy fads like logo-driven designer clothes (Nike’s swoosh, etc.), games like “pogs” (round cardboard cards), Pokémon, Nintendo, Sega, miniature trolls, various Disney fads, and other mass-marketed items.

<sup>16</sup> The terms *deconstruct* and *deconstructionism* have developed in both a technical and a broad sense among philosophical circles. Here the term is used in a broader sense that connotes the strong critique and perhaps dismantling of modernity. In a more technical aspect deconstructionism conveys the idea of *bursting through* an old system or structure and the development of a dramatically new ideology or system. For further study see Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*; Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*.

<sup>17</sup> George Barna, *Teenagers Embrace Religion But Are Not Excited About Christianity* (Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 2000), [www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org) (accessed: Nov 29, 2011). See also the wider and more in-depth report entitled, “Third Millennium Teens,” developed by the Barna Research Group.

<sup>18</sup> Barna, *Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years*, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/16-teensnext-gen/147-most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years> (accessed: Nov 28, 2011). This trend continues with devastating results, see Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving*

On this scene came Emergent leaders Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Karen Ward, and Rob Bell (among others). The sentiment that the church had become irrelevant, ineffective, and hopelessly hypocritical was deeply embedded in the hearts of these key leaders. One prominent writer for the ECM summarized his profound disillusionment this way:

I realized the modern-institutional-denominational church was permeated by values that are contradictory to the Church of Scripture. The very secular humanism the institutional church criticized pervaded the church structure, language, methodology, process, priorities, values, and vision. The “legitimate” church, the one that had convinced me of my illegitimacy, was becoming the illegitimate church, fully embracing the values of modernity.<sup>20</sup>

Likewise, young men and women who had grown up in the church were not going to sit idly by and walk in what was often the hypocritical faith of their parents. In 2009 Ham and Beemer conducted a survey of one thousand people between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine, all of whom regularly attended church before adulthood but had since ceased to attend.<sup>21</sup> Of these one thousand the top five reasons for leaving the established church were: “boring service” (freq. 119), “legalism” (freq. 117), “hypocrisy – leaders” (freq. 111), “too political” (freq. 98), and “self-righteous people” (freq. 92).<sup>22</sup> Remarkably these five categorical responses amount to 53.7 percent of all one thousand

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*Church, and Rethinking Faith*, 4-30; Ham and Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It*, 20-36, 141-80.

<sup>19</sup> The argument may be raised: if the “twenty-something” generation had left the church, how did they get engaged in the ECM? To answer this it is important to note that many followers (as the ensuing discussion will demonstrate) of the ECM had already departed from the established church before becoming involved in the movement. Therefore the ECM was not necessarily a movement primarily consisting of people within the church. The leaders and the followers were disgruntled and disillusioned with the church and many had already made their exit.

<sup>20</sup> Mike Yaconelli, “The Illegitimate Church,” in *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic*, ed. Mike Yaconelli (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Ham and Beemer, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It*, 167-80.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 167-68. Other notable categories were: “Not relevant personally” (freq. 63), “God would not condemn to hell” (freq. 57), “Hypocrisy – parents” (freq. 20).



respondents. Emergent leaders attuned to these sentiments also pointed to concerns like the divorce rate and the lack of social justice in the church as proof that it was time to react and drastically change the church – even to its very core if necessary.<sup>23</sup> Had American evangelicalism perhaps gotten it all wrong? This was the burgeoning question of the times.

On March 26, 2007, Tony Jones (then National Coordinator of Emergent Village) demonstrated his belief in the necessity for radical ecclesial and theological deconstruction in rather obscene fashion.

I am quite convinced that the Bible is a subversive text, that it constantly undermines our assumptions, transgresses our boundaries, and subverts our comforts. This may sound like academic mumbo-jumbo, but I really mean it. I think the Bible is a f\*\*\*ing scary book (pardon my French, but that's the only way I know how to convey how strongly I feel about this). And I think that deconstruction is the only hermeneutical avenue that comes close to expressing the transgressive nature of our sacred text. Deconstruction is bent on showing the limits of all hermeneutic frameworks, including its own. It doesn't so much tear them down as burst through them, pushing them beyond their limits, showing their inevitable weaknesses...when other hermeneutics stagnate, deconstruction shouts, "There's more here, there's a perfect justice to be had, and we can't rest until we get there." . . . I'm looking for a hermeneutic that roughly parallels the syntax of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and, IMHO ["in my humble opinion"], deconstruction does that.<sup>24</sup>

Protests against the many hypocrisies and extra-biblical idiosyncrasies in mainstream evangelicalism became the hobbyhorse of a disillusioned generation (with good reason). Generation X simply would not (and will not) accept the "pat" answers of a bygone era. Solutions for today's complex problems cannot be borrowed from a 1950s

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<sup>23</sup> For example see Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 134-36, 197; McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*, 187-89.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Jones, "Subversive Syntax: Why is the Emerging Church Drawn to Deconstructive Theology?," in *ChurchandPomo* (2007), [http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2007/03/why\\_is\\_the\\_emer.html](http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2007/03/why_is_the_emer.html) (accessed November 30, 2011). For another example of the ECM's love for deconstruction see also Tony Jones, "O Lord, Deconstruct Me!," in *ChurchandPomo* (2008), <http://churchandpomo.typepad.com/conversation/2008/02/o-lord-deconstr.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

plaster cast and applied to twenty-first-century postmodernism, many argued. With this sentiment grew a wide proclivity toward protest that connected thousands of “20 and 30-somethings” with the ECM. In his thorough evaluation of the ECM Carson observed the same correlation: “In short: the whiff of protest in the emerging church movement is everywhere. It can be usefully analyzed along three axes: against what is perceived to be a personally stifling cultural conservatism, against modernism and its incarnation in modern churchmanship, and against modernism’s incarnation in seeker-sensitive churches.”<sup>25</sup>

Often the protests of ECM proponents simply came in the form of questions – questions about the interpretations of certain doctrines, ethics, and morals. Some might have caricatured this questioning as similar to “the nagging teenager who will not stop asking, ‘why?’” But this would be a misunderstanding of the situation. Jonathan Brink (a blogger for Emergent Village) chronicled how he was raised in conservative Baptist surroundings, trusted in Christ (out of fear of hell) when nine years old, and yet eventually began to see “holes” in his understanding of God and salvation.<sup>26</sup> Sadly, when he started asking serious questions he was abruptly silenced and told he should not even raise such inquires. He likened his journey down the road of deconstruction to an age-old fable, “The Emperor’s New Clothes”:

What does it feel like when some of what you’ve been taught to believe to be true doesn’t quite feel true anymore? Fear. Wonder. Betrayal. These are the emotions of deconstruction. . . . You see, the more I walk down the path of deconstruction, the more I’m beginning to see the holes in the fabric [gaps of theological understanding or concreteness]. And this moment often feels like the little boy in the Emperor’s New Clothes. Is it just me, or does anyone else see that the emperor has no clothes on?

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<sup>25</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 41.

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Brink, “The Emotions of Deconstruction,” in *Emergent Village* (2008), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/the-emotions-of-deconstruction> (accessed May 31, 2011).

And who am I to question what those before me have offered? Who am I to ask questions? But these questions nag at me. . . . Good people are asking great questions. And we're not doing it because we want to be jerks. We sense a deep dissonance within our own hearts about the story that we have been told. And the more we ponder the dissonance, the more we begin to listen to those who are asking the same questions and coming to decidedly different conclusions. And these conclusions begin to resonate.<sup>27</sup>

The queries raised by the ECM leaders (and numerous followers) were and still are valid. Certainly some of the questions were perhaps misguided or jaded by unusual or exceptional experiences.<sup>28</sup> Yet this should not preclude an honest evaluation of the questions put forth. Furthermore, as already demonstrated, the current generation echoed the same sentiments (and continues to do so). They want to know why and how the church lost her ability to be effectual for the gospel's sake. They want to know why hate and self-righteousness often prevail over true faith and love within the church. The ECM leaders announced that these and many other questions deserved an answer.<sup>29</sup> And through their innate connection to the common sentiment, the ECM rapidly grew in popularity.

Validation of this rapid growth in the ECM has already been demonstrated in the preceding material. But to provide further evidence, between late 1999 and early 2010 the movement saw amazing expansion through cyberspace and traditional publishing

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> This seems to be the case with some of McLaren's objections. He wrote, "My own upbringing was way out on the end of one of the most conservative twigs of one of the most conservative branches of one of the most conservative limbs of Christianity, and I am far harder on conservative Protestant Christians who share that heritage than I am on anyone else. I'm sorry. I am consistently over sympathetic to Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, even dreaded liberals, while I keep elbowing my conservative brethren in the ribs in a most annoying – some would say *ungenerous* – way. I cannot even pretend to be objective or fair" (McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 35. See McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*, 35. For a helpful review of this work see James B. Manuel, "Review: *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming the Faith*," *Denver Journal* 13 (2010), <http://www.denverseminary.edu/news/a-new-kind-of-christianity-ten-questions-that-are-transforming-the-faith/> (accessed November 30, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> This point is thoroughly demonstrated in the article by Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church," 87-93. See also McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*.

methods.<sup>30</sup> Bohannon notes that a Google-powered search using the operators emerging church “conducted on October 20, 2005 reported just a fraction over half a million [results].”<sup>31</sup> Yet when the same search was performed on September 12, 2007 he found in “excess of 2.5 million references.”<sup>32</sup> For the sake of this study, a recent Google search was conducted on December 2, 2011 yielding 5.44 million references for the operators “emerging church” and 1.96 million references for the operators “emergent church.” That is an approximate increase of more than 900 percent for web-related references in just six years.<sup>33</sup>

As the message of reaction and deconstruction resonated with the current generation, key leaders of the ECM also began church-planting efforts. Doug Pagitt planted Solomon’s Porch of Minneapolis in 2000.<sup>34</sup> Journey Church of Dallas was planted

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<sup>30</sup> The following books are examples of popular works written by both those for and against (to varying degrees) the ECM: Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution*; Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*; Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*; McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*; Brian D. McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007); idem, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*; Pagitt and Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*; Leonard I. Sweet, *Postmodern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000); Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008); Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*; DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*; David A. Mappes, “A New Kind of Christian: A Review,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004).

<sup>31</sup> Bohannon, *Preaching and the Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt*, 14. Though not rigorously scientific, these web-related statistics *do* indicate an undeniable period of growth in the ECM. Because the ECM predominately gained influence through the Internet it is apropos to provide at least some evidence for the movement’s web presence.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Important for this study is the fact that the cyberspace growth rate slowed between 2007 and 2011. Between 2005 and 2007 (two years) the growth rate was around 500 percent. Yet between 2007 and 2011 (4 years) it was just over 200 percent. The quick decline in the ECM is quite evident.

<sup>34</sup> Pagitt planted Solomon’s Porch of Minneapolis, Minnesota in 2000 (see <http://www.solomonsporch.com/who-we-are/intro/>).

in 2001 and is now pastored by emergent leader Danielle Shroyer.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps most notably, Rob Bell held the first “Mar’s Hill Gatherings” on February 7, 1999, near Grand Rapids.<sup>36</sup> All of these markedly coincided with the beginnings of the ECM and its uncanny expansion. Undoubtedly the movement as a whole struck an attractive chord with the common sentiment of the current generation.

### **Cause of the Movement’s Fall**

Ironically what gave impetus to the increase in popularity for the ECM also precipitated its collapse. The reactionary deconstructionism of postmodernity resulted (within the context of the church) in two primary problems that eventually contributed to the ECM’s ultimate demise: (1) the lack of constructive efforts and (2) the disillusionment of the followers.

#### *Lack of Constructive Efforts*

Certainly the questions being raised by the ECM leaders were valid and worthy of thoughtful response. However, the way in which they responded to the questions drove them to concentrate largely on reaction and deconstruction. Many of the leaders, as well as their proponents became assailants of the institutional church *only* and never offered any plans for constructively accomplishing the mission of the gospel *through* the church. T. Scott Daniels remarks in this regard:

Particularly in the areas of atonement, justification, homosexuality, divine judgment, and the exclusivity of Christ, some of the most prominent EC leaders went further than those of us tied to historical communities of faith would or could go. I think that forms of deconstruction are healthy but only if they lead to new and better construction. I’m not sure some of the EC leaders ever got around

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<sup>35</sup> Journey Church of Dallas, Texas was planted in 2001 (see <http://www.journeydallas.com/history.html>).

<sup>36</sup> Bell held the first formal service for Mars Hill Bible Church on February 7, 1999, near Grand Rapids, Michigan (see <http://marshill.org/history/>).

to helping construct a faith – at least a faith that was still tied to the historical faith.<sup>37</sup>

In many ways, the ECM became defined by protest and demonstrated its discontent through deconstructing not only “the establishment,” but also the most essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Crystal Lewis, a prolific writer for *Emergent Village*, evidences this claim in her cursory remarks on hell, entitled “Seven Reasons Why I Don’t Believe In Hell.”<sup>38</sup> For this conversationalist, who describes herself as “no theologian” (yet certainly an influencer of emergent theology), hell is nonexistent. To conceive of hell as a literal, eternal place of condemnation and separation from God for those outside of Christ is incomprehensible – even unconscionable, in light of her perception of God. In conclusion, Lewis exhorts her readers to engage in the same radical deconstruction she purports, “I think we should re-examine the religious construct we’re offering to people and question whether it’s healthy... whether it’s something we truly want the next generation to believe... and whether we believe it because we want to – or because we’re afraid not to.”<sup>39</sup> While this sounds rather innocuous outside of context, this sentiment drives Lewis to proclaim, “I’m a proud, card-carrying, hell-free heretic and

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<sup>37</sup> Daniels, “The Death of the Emerging Church,” [http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor\\_scotts\\_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html](http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html) (accessed May 25, 2011). This professor and long-time pastor went on to provide further insightful elaboration, “It is not unusual, by the way, for reforming movements to go too far. When the Reformation began to take hold, Luther had to denounce his colleague Andreas Karlstadt for using the Reformation to incite the peasants to revolt. Luther believed that the people needed to react against the oppressive authority of the Church, but what Karlstadt was doing by inciting violence was too far for Luther. I think there are many who have either supported or defended the EC movement who feel deeply disappointed in some of the leaders for pushing the boundaries further than they or their local church could go.”

<sup>38</sup> Crystal Lewis, “Seven Reasons Why I Don't Believe In Hell,” in *Emergent Village* (2011), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/seven-reasons-why-i-dont-believe-in-hell/> (accessed May 27, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

proud of it.”<sup>40</sup> Thus, in the minds of at least some ECM writers, deconstruction certainly meant dismantling traditional Christian beliefs about the afterlife – especially hell.<sup>41</sup>

However, a Christian definition of hell was not the only dogma deconstructed by ECM thinkers. When questioned about his personal view of the atonement, McLaren intentionally spoke with ambiguity:

I don't reject reconciliation – with God, self, neighbor, stranger, enemy, and all creation! However, with growing numbers of biblical scholars, leaders, and others, I do reject the claim that the gospel should be equated with or reduced to any single theory of atonement.

As I understand it, the gospel that Jesus proclaimed was this: “the kingdom (or reign, or commonwealth, or network, or sacred ecosystem, or ???) of God is at hand (available now, waiting for us to reach out and touch, or enter, or receive, or experience, or participate in).” It includes a call to repentance (radical rethinking of everything) and faith (confidence in Jesus), which naturally and inevitably leads to a life of following Jesus (learning his ways, imitating him, becoming transformed so as to reflect his character and embody his mission).<sup>42</sup>

So, for leaders such as McLaren, there may be six or seven acceptable theories of the atonement (the penal substitutionary view merely being one in a plethora of possible choices).<sup>43</sup> Every doctrine and belief of the Christian faith was placed on the table for evaluation and possible deconstruction. If a belief or practice was suspected to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. On her personal blog Lewis also informs her readers that she is now a Unitarian Universalist (see <http://crystalstmarielewis.wordpress.com/about/>).

<sup>41</sup> Rob Bell is another ECM leader (by default yet not necessarily by personal association) who comes very close to denying the existence of hell as a literal place of eternal punishment and separation from God. See Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011), 63-93. For a thoughtful and thorough critique of Bell's work see Glenn R. Kreider, “Review: *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 353-56.

<sup>42</sup> Brian D. McLaren, “Q & R: Atonement,” in *Brian D. McLaren: Author, Speaker, Activist* (2003), <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/blog/just-curious-based-on-your.html> (accessed December 5, 2011). See also Brian D. McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In: Further Adventures of a New Kind of Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 143-67.

<sup>43</sup> For a helpful defense of the penal substitutionary atonement view see Garry J. Williams, “Penal Substitution: A Response To Recent Criticisms,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007): 71-86.

have the earmarks of modernity, fundamentalism, or evangelicalism, ECM enthusiasts quickly (almost gleefully) tossed it on the table for sardonically oriented discussion.

In colloquial terms modernism became “the whipping boy” for everything distasteful, dated, or idiosyncratic in the church – often without any qualification. Leonard Sweet painted a deconstructive and rather unqualified stroke when he wrote, “Postmoderns are truth-seekers first, truth-makers second. Whereas modern seekers sought the knowledge of the truth, postmodern seekers want to *know* the truth in the biblical sense of that word “know” – that is, *experience* the truth.”<sup>44</sup> Modernism appeared entirely shortsighted and useless to the leaders of the ECM. Yet unfortunately, such unqualified deconstructionism *without actual construction* ultimately led to the movement’s collapse. A movement cannot remain only a mode of critique without offering tangible, positive solutions or constructs.

Following in a similar vein of radically juxtaposing modernism and postmodernism, McLaren presents a rhetorical question, “What was the goal of theology in the modern era, other than this: to describe God as a scientist describes an object – objective, detached, sanitized of subjectivity, removed from the variable of personal relationship?”<sup>45</sup> Not surprisingly, he likens the exegetical labors of pastors to what he labels the “Bible Analyst” – “The modern Christian leader dissects the Bible like a scientist dissects a fetal pig: to gain knowledge through analysis. And in modernity, knowledge is power.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, the implicit insinuation here is that the “Bible Analyst”

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<sup>44</sup> Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 380.

<sup>45</sup> Brian D. McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 262.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 158. McLaren continues in satirical fashion by deconstructing items like biblical hermeneutics, apologetics, Christian radio broadcasting, proclamational evangelism, and leadership methodologies.



is really trying to obtain personal power – not sincerely and faithfully handle the Word of God.

For the key leaders of the ECM, deconstruction was much more important and attractive than construction. When every key ecclesial and theological mooring had been dissected (however modernistic that may seem) through myriad dialogues, many were left wondering if God and the church were worth knowing or experiencing at all. For so long, each piece of the “establishment” had been a source of humor or sarcasm. But was there anything left of the puzzle worth piecing back together? What was the ECM becoming? Just a radical fringe of disenchanting ex-fundamentalists turned liberal? Ironically (and perhaps sadly), when these questions began to grow in the minds of numerous followers they were largely met with silence.

One voice *did* recognize the criticism from without and the silence from within. On July 18, 2010 Jonathan Brink (of Emergent Village) wrote:

Over the last decade, many of us who have participated in what some call “the conversation” have been engaging a deconstruction process of our faith. In many ways this leaving was liberation from an old story. The traditional way of seeing the story in the Gospel just didn’t work anymore. . . .

One of the real, valid criticisms of this process is that much of the conversation was a deconstruction process. In other words, we were tearing down an old story but nothing new was offered to take its place. I get that concern. It’s easy to criticize what’s wrong with something and never offer something different. But I would also offer that removing the old story was necessary for us to see something new.<sup>47</sup>

Of the more than ninety comments responding to Brink’s blog post, many writers agreed with the sense of disappointment over a pervasive deconstruction void of positive construction in the ECM. Yet devastatingly, Brink’s new constructive offer for the conversation was not a biblically based tool for evangelism, church planting, or anything of the kind. Instead, Brink chose to explain his own “new” theory of the

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<sup>47</sup> Jonathan Brink, “A Time To Reconstruct,” in *Emergent Village* (2010), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/brink-reconstruct> (accessed December 6, 2011).

atonement, which radically departs from a substitutionary understanding of Christ's death.<sup>48</sup>

On June 5, 2009 (on the threshold of the ECM's collapse) Tony Jones attempted to quell the flames of disappointment by listing seven reasons why people should still be satisfied with the movement.<sup>49</sup> However, his efforts were met with seemingly little success. The regression of the ECM appeared inevitable. One blogger who commented on Jones's article summed up the sentiment of many, "I am not let down by the follow through (or lack thereof) by emergent; rather I am a bit surprised [by] how little impact it [has] had for all its hype a few years ago. Few converts, recycled ideas and theology from liberalism, and no major mark in the church planting landscape."<sup>50</sup>

Just a few months after Jones's post to those "disappointed with emergent," the negative effect of Emergent Village's decision to "decentralize" and remove any form of leadership structure<sup>51</sup> became widespread on the group's site. When various board members of Emergent Village (such as Steve Knight and Danielle Shroyer) posted a video explaining the future plans of the group, their rather vague message was received

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid. One of the "new" constructs Brink speaks of is explained in detail throughout the remainder of this same article: a "new" theory of the atonement. He goes on to describe how he arrived at a theory of the atonement that differs from both the ransom-to-Satan and the penal-substitutionary view of the atonement. In sum he writes, "The cross was not God sending his Son to satisfy the demands of Satan, or to appease his own sense of justice. The cross was God lifting his arms to the world and saying, 'This is how far I will go to show you that my original judgment of you was true.' For the first time the Gospel could be framed as a ferocious love. God's justice was found in the act of mercy. It made sense in a way that seemed to redeem the Gospel. And it was so simple." This may be labeled a sister to the moral-example theory of the atonement, made popular during the period of the Renaissance. Yet this position does not satisfactorily answer the question, "So, why was it necessary for Christ to die?" Nor does it answer the biblical evidence for a penal-substitutionary atonement (Brink's article is entirely void of biblical support. There are no references or quotations of Scripture, aside from an ambiguous reference to the Fall in the book of Genesis). See also Jonathan Brink, *Discovering The God Imagination: Reconstructing A Whole New Christianity* (Seattle: CreateSpace, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Jones, "So, You're Disappointed with Emergent," <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2009/06/so-youre-disappointed-with-eme.html> (accessed May 31, 2011).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. This quote is from a blogger identified as "Tom. F."

<sup>51</sup> See O'Brien, "Emergent's Divergence: Leaders hope decentralizing power will revitalize the movement," 13-14.

with more confusion.<sup>52</sup> Blogger “Chris” responded, “OK so what are you doing? What is the purpose of EV [Emergent Village]? Didn’t Tony [Jones] suggest that maybe it is time to ‘move on’? While Emergent theology is important I think we all agree it is not about just hanging out but if [you all] don’t have a vision for us then is there really a point to doing all this?”<sup>53</sup> Barbour and Toews clearly summarized this point of contention:

The Emergent Church. . . . seems to have merely knocked out its top leader without adequately empowering emergents to become leaders themselves. It also failed to provide any clear rationale for the church beyond the vague goal of conversing about theology. In doing so it neglected to recognize a key attribute of successful emergent [technical use of the term] systems: form. Ironically, the commitment of emergent to one aspect of emergence (the self-organizing principle) keeps them from more fully appreciating what true emergence means. It should come as no surprise, then, that even former leaders are beginning to argue that the movement is coming to an end.

Its rejection of form is perhaps a symptom of another problem with which the Emergent Church struggles: its failure to produce constructive theological insights. As a consequence, there is a serious risk that the movement will be reduced to a mere cultural phenomenon rather than a powerful spiritual force.<sup>54</sup>

The implication of philosophical deconstruction is that the new model of belief or form would burst through its predecessor (the old belief or form). When leaders of the ECM applied this practice to Christianity, the end result lacked substantive and valuable form. Church structures and methods were dismantled and never rebuilt. Modes of worship, liturgy, and preaching were criticized but not successfully retooled. Means of sharing the gospel were largely discarded. Evangelism became skewed in its message or nonexistent.

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<sup>52</sup> Steve Night, “Moving Forward: Hopes for the Future of Emergent Village,” in *Emergent Village* (2009), <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/moving-forward-hopes-for-the-future-of-emergent-village> (accessed December 7, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Numerous similar comments may be found on Emergent Village’s many blog posts.

<sup>54</sup> Travis I. Barbour and Nicholas E. Toews, “The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique,” *Direction* 39 (2010): 37.

Eventually many of the followers began to see the lack of constructive progress and pulled back from their affiliation with the ECM and returned to more established forms of Christian community,<sup>55</sup> this proved the principle: a movement based largely on reaction must also offer sound biblical solutions.<sup>56</sup> The need to react against certain trends and culturally oriented beliefs in Western evangelicalism is real. Postmoderns continue to wonder why the church is largely void of genuine faith and love. Yet in contrast with the leaders of the Reformation who reacted against the aberrant establishment of their day, ECM leaders often busied themselves with deconstructing the Christian faith while ignoring the need for orthodox theological formation and practice. Unfortunately the ECM pulled away from biblically rooted answers and left their followers to pick up the pieces they had so fervently deconstructed, therefore resulting in the movement's demise.

#### *Disillusionment of the Followers*

Woven tightly together with the lack of constructive efforts was the disillusionment of the followers within the ECM. Without the presentation of solid solutions for the myriad problems within the established church, zeal began to wane and disillusionment quickly overtook many proponents. One blogger identified as "Matt Self" commented:

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<sup>55</sup> See Jones, "Emerging Church Movement (1989-2009)?," <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2009/12/emerging-church-movement-1989---2009.html> (accessed May 27, 2011); O'Brien, "Emergent's Divergence: Leaders hope decentralizing power will revitalize the movement."

<sup>56</sup> To reiterate, Daniels provides an excellent summary of this situation: "It is not unusual, by the way, for reforming movements to go too far. When the Reformation began to take hold, Luther had to denounce his colleague Andreas Karlstadt for using the Reformation to incite the peasants to revolt. Luther believed that the people needed to react against the oppressive authority of the Church, but what Karlstadt was doing by inciting violence was too far for Luther. I think there are many who have either supported or defended the EC movement who feel deeply disappointed in some of the leaders for pushing the boundaries further than they or their local church could go" (Daniels, "The Death of the Emerging Church," [http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor\\_scotts\\_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html](http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html) (accessed May 25, 2011).

I appreciated the LN [Leadership Network] to the extent that someone understood a clean-cut seminary grad in a pair of Dockers holding an acoustic guitar wasn't going to address the growing unchurched counter-culture. I'm very hip to the missional aspect of Emerging, it just seems like no progress has been made since it first started. That saddens me, because the whole initial missional push seems downgraded in favor of a red-letter-only milquetoast theology.<sup>57</sup>

As this comment demonstrates, the missional zeal of the broader "Emerging" movement could not seem to be maintained in the liberal theological conversations of the ECM. Instead of presenting the gospel in a way that was culturally relevant *and* biblically sound, the ECM leaders opted for a message that undermined their initial purpose. Jesus and the gospel narratives were deconstructed to focus on what seemed to be a present, earthly kingdom mentality.<sup>58</sup> Social equality, justice, world peace, and humanitarian efforts (albeit worthy goals) were emphasized as the mission of the church, often over-and-above the simple message of Christ, the cross, and the resurrection.<sup>59</sup>

A striking parallel may be found between the ECM and the religious liberalism that made inroads into mainline denominations a century ago. Similar to the liberal movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that emphasized a "social gospel" and capitulated to modernism's demands to reconcile church teachings with scientific findings,<sup>60</sup> the ECM highlighted social action, cultural harmony, and

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<sup>57</sup> This response was given in response to the blog post: Kimball, "Origins of the Terms "Emerging" and "Emergent" Church - Part 1," [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origin\\_of\\_the\\_t.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html) (accessed January 11, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> For examples of the Emergent Village's emphasis on the present social aspect of the kingdom see Dwight J. Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009); Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*.

<sup>59</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering The Truth That Could Change Everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 30-6, 138-42.

<sup>60</sup> The seminal work for this movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917). For a helpful critique of Rauschenbusch's theology see Hannah, *Our Legacy: the History of Christian Doctrine*, 137-38, 329-30.

egalitarianism *as the gospel now*.<sup>61</sup> Their deconstruction of key Christian doctrines and presuppositions also strikingly mirrors the critical methodologies of Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich (among others). Hannah provides an excellent, concise summary of this bygone era, which brings the said parallel to the foreground:

Liberal Movement: An attempt by church leaders from the nineteenth century and afterward to adjust Christianity in light of the findings of science. Scholars of this tradition sought to preserve the faith by reducing the essence of Christianity to its moral teachings while rejecting the complete truthfulness and sufficiency of the Bible, the absolute deity of Christ, the necessity of blood atonement, and salvation by divine declaration through grace alone based on the work of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Just as historic religious liberalism sought to accommodate a modern epistemology (science and rationalism), so the ECM sought to accommodate a postmodern epistemology. Likewise the ECM also operated under the pretense that the church must change or die, which bears similarity to liberalism’s goal of “saving” Christianity. Yet most importantly, as liberalism critically denied the claims of historic Christian faith, in like manner, leaders of the ECM deconstructed the essential claims of orthodoxy. In place of an evangelical gospel rooted in the Scriptures was a moral-ethical-social gospel rooted in the felt needs of postmodern culture.

While expressing the “hands and feet” of the good news through meeting the physical and felt needs of humanity is a noble and Christ-like goal to pursue, believing such actions are the complete embodiment of the gospel myopically misses the point of Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. Yet for many ECM leaders social justice and moral equality *now* (accomplished politically or otherwise) truncated the message of the

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<sup>61</sup> Spencer Burke and Colleen Pepper, *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emerging Conversations about God, Community, and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 57-61, 146-48.

<sup>62</sup> Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine*, 370.

cross and salvation and its implications for *eternity*.<sup>63</sup> The results of such doctrinal deviation and deconstruction mark the final parallel: just as the corridors of mainline churches are now largely empty and lack purpose,<sup>64</sup> so also the ECM quickly declined and lost direction. The missional zeal and exponential growth of the broader “Emerging” movement simply could not be maintained in the ECM with its accompanying reactionary deconstructionism. In retrospect it appears that deconstructing the essence of Christianity and the gospel actually accomplished the opposite of the movement’s original goal. Sadly, some proponents of the ECM even left all established religion and attempted to find community via online venues and splintered groups around North America.<sup>65</sup> The disillusioned simply abandoned the church, the ECM, and in some cases, even their faith.

On June 4, 2009, a former writer for the movement wrote a despondent report of his journey and its rather sad conclusion:

If I was still a proponent of “church” and believed in it, it would only be because of these expressions of it [personal examples of Andrew Jones and other ECM friends]. . . . The emerging church is dead because church is dead. The emerging church is irrelevant because church as we are still talking about it in the conversation is irrelevant. . . . I’ll go one step further, the god of the emerging church is dead. In its place is neither agnosticism nor atheism nor theism.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 120-25.

<sup>64</sup> This observation comes from personal experience with and travels to numerous mainline-liberal congregations and church buildings. Members of the author’s immediate family serve as Episcopalian priests (ECUSA), United Methodists ministers, while others hold association or positions within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the Roman Catholic Church. Also, the condition of mainline churches in Europe is much worse than that in North America.

<sup>65</sup> Friesen chronicles the ecclesial departure of several in his work Friesen, *Thy Kingdom Connected: What the Church can Learn from Facebook, the Internet, and Other Networks*, 15-30.

<sup>66</sup> Brown, “The Emerging Church is Dead Because Church Is Dead,” <http://www.iamjoshbrown.com/blog/2009/06/04/the-emerging-church-is-dead-because-church-is-dead/> (accessed May 27, 2011).

While some in the ECM seem to have completely exited the church and maybe even the faith, others have broken away from the label or “conversation” because of the increasing number of negative connotations associated with it. More moderate leaders of the broader Emerging movement (and occasional sympathizers with the ECM) have suggested the formation of a new collective that would adhere to a broad yet concrete statement of Christian faith. Scaramanga (pseudonym) reported:

As the emerging church rides off into the sunset, where does that leave things? Well, news has been leaking about a new network being formed by Dan Kimball, Erwin McManus, and Scot McKnight among others. I understand further meetings will be happening this week to help solidify the group. The still unnamed network has agreed to start with the inclusive but orthodox theological foundation of the Lausanne Covenant, and they intend to emphasize mission and evangelism.<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps this transition by well-known leaders will provide a clear purpose and foundation for the younger generation of Christ-followers who have become disillusioned with the false hopes of wholesale deconstruction in the ECM. However, for some well-reasoned proponents such a break from the label discards the essence of the ECM altogether. One ECM blogger wrote:

I, and many of like mind, are convinced that the principles of “Emerging Church” (in its original, unadulterated form; and all further references to EC will imply that form) are contrary to its reduction to a “statement of faith,” no matter how inclusive-yet-orthodox that statement is. It was my understanding that the “statement of faith” of the EC was contained in Genesis 1 to Rev. 22. I was under the impression that one of the central stimuli for the EC was the injury caused by the attempted reduction of God’s narrative into bite-sized nuggets, no matter how “true” those nuggets.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Scaramanga, “R.I.P. Emerging Church,” [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip\\_emerging\\_ch.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html) (accessed May 27, 2011). Similar information was also reported in Stephen Shields, “Ten Years Out: A Retrospective on the Emerging Church in North America,” *Next-Wave: Church and Culture* (2010): <http://www.the-next-wave.info/2010/09/ten-years-emerging-church-north-america/> (accessed December 12, 2011).

<sup>68</sup> Raffi Shahinian, “An Open Letter to Dan Kimball, Erwin McManus and Scot McKnight,” in *Parables of a prodigal world.com* (2008), <http://www.parablesofaprodigalworld.com/2008/09/open-letter-to-dan-kimball-erwin.html> (accessed December 12, 2011). This link is no longer available online. For a



So it seems the ECM, by definition, resists any concrete statement of belief or doctrine. Yet for many, the meaning of Christ and the purpose of the cross were lost in a sea of cynicism and eventual disillusionment. Reactionary deconstruction led to a truncation of doctrine and biblical truth, which also led to redefining the essence of the gospel. The “mess” of the Emergent church (as Tony Jones labeled it)<sup>69</sup> was to be preferred over anything to do with organized religion or the “establishment.”<sup>70</sup> However, the “mess” only grew messier when the encroaching elements of relativism and philosophical deconstruction gained sway in the ranks of ECM leadership. DeYoung wisely remarked on the consequences of dropping all theological moorings, “Radical uncertainty sounds nice as a sort of protest against the perceived dogmatism of evangelical Christianity, but it gets in the way when you want to prove your point. At some point, no matter how often you rag on certainty and boast in the great mysterious unknowability of God, you will want people to be clear about your beliefs.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite prolific writing and web-oriented communication by ECM leaders, the constant lack of clarity and certainty on the essential truths of Christianity *and* the purpose of the movement, resulted in widespread disillusionment and confusion. For this reason, the many followers felt less and less convinced of the claims being made by the ECM and left the movement. Thus the reactionary deconstructionism within the ECM precipitated two primary problems that eventually contributed to the movement’s demise: (1) the lack of constructive efforts and (2) the disillusionment of the followers.

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citation from this same article see MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 229-30.

<sup>69</sup> Tony Jones, “Introduction: Friendship, Faith, and Going Somewhere Together,” in *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, ed. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 15.

<sup>70</sup> See the following texts to witness this sentiment: Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*; McLaren, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*; Pagitt and Jones, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*.

<sup>71</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 41-2.

CHAPTER 3  
THE POSTMODERN PRAGMATISM  
OF THE EMERGENT MOVEMENT

**Introduction**

This chapter delineates a juxtaposition similar to that found in chapter 2; yet it focuses on the *postmodern pragmatic philosophy* adopted by the ECM. First, various proofs demonstrate that the postmodern pragmatism of the ECM provided significant cause for the movement's rise through two avenues: (1) popular agreement through relativistic consensus, and (2) practicality over biblical orthodoxy. Second, it will be argued that these same elements also contributed to the movement's ultimate collapse, specifically through: (1) lack of consensus, and (2) accommodation leading to assimilation.

**Cause of the Movement's Rise**

The second of two primary elements that gave impetus to the increase in popularity for this school of thought was its immersion in postmodern pragmatism. This is evidenced in two parts: (1) popular agreement through relativistic consensus, and (2) practicality over biblical orthodoxy.

*Popular Agreement through Relativistic Consensus*

Not only was reactionary deconstructionism a unique cause for the rise and fall of the ECM, but also its immersion in postmodern pragmatism contributed as well. This study primarily focuses on the way postmodernism determines knowledge and truth

(epistemology) and will not necessarily delve into the developments of postmodernism itself or the broader consequences of the movement outside of Emergent ecclesiology.<sup>1</sup>

For many people philosophical postmodernism is integrally joined with general relativism;<sup>2</sup> truth is based *not* on a set of absolutes but on the relative circumstances of an individual or situation. Therefore what is true for one person may or may not be true *or of any value* to another person. As a tentatively workable definition, postmodernism (as associated with the ECM) connotes as socio-movement predominantly in North America, Western Europe, and parts of Asia and Australia that denies “the classical (and commonsense) notion of the correspondence theory of truth and reject[s] the idea that language [including special revelation: the Scriptures] has meaning outside of a socially constructed context...[thus leading to] a belief that there is no truth with a capital *T*, only truths with a lowercase *t*, which are relative to individuals and cultures.”<sup>3</sup> One might summarize by adding to a common proverbial phrase, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, *and so is truth.*” This philosophical postmodernism also decries modernism’s drive for certainty, linear thinking, and absolutism and replaces these with

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<sup>1</sup> As described previously, the most basic concern and issue at stake with postmodernism is an epistemological one, though postmodernism encompasses more than just epistemology. One might also add under its auspices: architectural trends, artistic style, literary interpretation, increased ethical and moral relativism, and pedagogical/developmental studies and approaches. However, our concern with postmodernism is almost entirely related to a philosophical epistemology.

<sup>2</sup> Not every “postmodern” necessarily adopts relativism. There *are* some characteristics of postmodernism that have value for evangelical Christians, such as a renewed interest in authentic relationships, community-based spiritual formation rather than only individualistic piety, and an emphasis on spiritual experience instead of only propositional application. However, the majority of people who holistically adopt postmodernism also adhere to relativism (perhaps in varying degrees). This was the case in the ECM. To study the development of philosophical postmodernism see Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*; Erickson, *Postmodernizing the Faith: Evangelical Responses to the Challenge of Postmodernism*; idem, *Truth or Consequences: the Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*; Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

<sup>3</sup> Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” 34. See also Smith, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian: The Emerging Effects of Postmodernism in the Church*, 175-90.

intellectual “tension” (embracing paradox), authenticity, aesthetics, and community relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Conjoining this postmodernism with holistic pragmatism implies that what is “true” is what works for any individual or situation.<sup>5</sup> A strong pragmatism argues, “The end justifies the means.” Therefore with a relativistic postmodern pragmatism the methods and strategies employed to reach a proposed outcome may have no tangible boundaries (in theory). Certainly not all postmodern pragmatists purport complete relativism. As demonstrated in the ECM, the boundary was often stated to be “Genesis 1 to Revelation 22”<sup>6</sup> – even though central interpretations of the Bible widely varied and sometimes headed off into heretical territory. So although there may be relative boundaries in postmodern pragmatism, they are often very elastic or even transitory. To bring further definition to the technical terms at hand, D. A. Carson offers one of the most lucid juxtapositions of modernism and postmodernism:

Modernism is often pictured as pursuing truth, absolutism, linear thinking, rationalism, certainty, the cerebral as opposed to the affective – which in turn breeds arrogance, inflexibility, a lust to be right, the desire to control. Postmodernism, by contrast, recognizes how much of what we “know” is shaped by the culture in which we live, is controlled by emotions and aesthetics and heritage, and in fact can only be intelligently held as part of a common tradition, without overbearing claims to being true or right. Modernism tries to find unquestioned foundations on which to build the edifice of knowledge and then proceeds with methodological rigor; postmodernism denies that such foundations exist (it is “antifoundational”) and insists that we come to “know” things in many

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<sup>4</sup> As previously noted, not all aspects of postmodernism are to be rejected. Similar to modernism, postmodernism has many faults, yet it also holds several elements worthy of study for conservative evangelicals. An emphasis on authenticity and relationship are two examples of positive aspects in postmodernism. See Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 87-124.

<sup>5</sup> On evangelical presuppositionalism contrasted with a “strong postmodernism” see *ibid.*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Shahinian, “An Open Letter to Dan Kimball, Erwin McManus and Scot McKnight,” <http://www.parablesofaprodigalworld.com/2008/09/open-letter-to-dan-kimball-erwin.html> (accessed December 12, 2011). This link is no longer available online. For a citation of this same article see MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 229-30.

ways, not a few of them lacking in rigor. Modernism is hard-edged and, in the domain of religion, focuses on truth, versus error, right belief, confessionality; postmodernism is gentle and, in the domain of religion, focuses on relationships, love, shared tradition, integrity in discussion.<sup>7</sup>

So if the ECM operated under the ideologies of postmodern pragmatism, what was the end goal of the leaders and what were the means or methods used? First, the ECM leaders originally sought to contextualize the message of the Christian faith to people emerging from a culture of modernism into postmodernism.<sup>8</sup> The ECM wanted to shed modernistic “baggage” that hindered the church’s effectiveness and fostered irrelevance with the changing society. Initially the simple goal was to bring the message of the gospel of Christ in a relevant and effectual way to people who were largely unreached by the established church in North America. Second, the methods adopted by the ECM in order to reach their goal were characterized by accommodation to the multivalent languages of postmodern culture. In other words, *contextualization* of the gospel was central. Yet sadly the ECM eventually accommodated so thoroughly to a liberal postmodernism that theological relativism, pluralism, and ambiguity typified their teaching and praxis.<sup>9</sup> As they assimilated to postmodernism the central message

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<sup>7</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, “The Emerging Church: 5 Years Later - the Definition has Changed,” [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2008/09/the-emerging-ch.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2008/09/the-emerging-ch.html) (accessed November 5, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> See DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 16-19; Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 41-44; Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church*, 20-30. The authors of the Emergent Village describe their group this way: “Emergent Village is a growing, generative friendship among missional Christians seeking to love our world in the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (see <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about/>). See also Fuller, “Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village',” <http://homebrewedchristianity.com/2009/06/17/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village/> (accessed November 18, 2011); Fuller, “Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village',” <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village> (accessed November 18, 2011). At the outset, the intentions and questions of those now accepted as leaders in the Emergent movement were both admirable and profound. In an interview with R. Alan Street, Brian McLaren defined the ECM in these elongated terms, “It appears that the church is growing rapidly where pre-modern people enter modernity, but where modern people move into a postmodern cultural milieu, the Christian faith has not yet understood or engaged the questions they’re raising. So, many of us are seeking to faithfully incarnate the gospel of Jesus Christ – the gospel of the kingdom of God available

dissipated and the initial goal became skewed and lost. In fact, many ECM leaders began purporting a whole new goal: “a new kind of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup>

So began a process of “rediscovering” the true meaning of Christianity and the message of the gospel. Although the original intentions of some ECM leaders may not be determined, it appears the goal of the movement dramatically shifted. The drive to find relevance and effectiveness in the postmodern culture evolved into a force that ultimately changed the entire goal of the movement.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the ECM became intrinsically associated with a liberal postmodern pragmatism.

Returning to the quick rise of the ECM: spiritual community and “conversation” developed through the broad strokes of aesthetics, common tradition, and a longing for authentic relationship served to propel the movement forward in the postmodernism of North America. In this way the Emergent Village web collective and

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to all through Jesus – to people in our mission context. Really we’re just acknowledging and seeking to enter a new mission field – not on a new continent, but one that is emerging on all continents. So, in this sense, what people call ‘the emerging church’ (a term I don’t particularly like because it can sound divisive) is really “ ‘the church that is engaging with the emerging culture.’ ” This definition sounds a lot like Kimball’s originally definition for the broader Emerging Church. However, McLaren explains more concisely how he sees Emergent as a new kind of Christianity, “...Emergent and other conversations like it are seeking to rediscover the Jesus of the Scriptures and fairly represent him and his message to our world” (Street, “An Interview with Brian McLaren,” 5-14).

<sup>10</sup> See Brian D. McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001); idem, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*; idem, *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions That Are Transforming Faith*; Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*; Yaconelli, “The Illegitimate Church.”

<sup>11</sup> To repeat the argument set forth at the outset of this study: this thesis posits that the ECM held a philosophy of pragmatism (theories and beliefs are evaluated on the basis of practice and results). Yet their pragmatism was also rooted in a postmodernism that asserted truth and morality are relative to the individual and his or her experience and context. The argument could be placed in this order: (1) early leaders of the ECM sought to reach those in a culture of postmodernism with the gospel message; (2) these leaders were dissatisfied with the results of fundamentalism, theological foundationalism, presuppositionalism, and evangelicalism; (3) therefore, they approached postmodernism with a pragmatic philosophy (looking for ways to achieve results through practices and beliefs that “work”); (4) because postmodernism allowed these leaders the latitude to dismantle former beliefs and practices, they quickly sought to deconstruct anything thought to impede their outreach to the said populace; (5) however, because they so thoroughly attempted to accommodate to postmodernists, they sadly assimilated to the underpinnings of philosophical postmodernism that would, in turn, injure the very foundation of their Christian faith and would lead to the later demise of the movement. For a very helpful summary of the perils of philosophical postmodernism see Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” 34-35; Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism*, 13-31.

other online venues for the ECM amassed thousands of followers from all across the globe and from various definitions of faith.<sup>12</sup> The keen ability of the leaders to “read” the culture and communicate with the felt needs of the populace was uncanny. The ECM was not merely camouflaged in postmodern garb; the movement had become one with the jungle of relativistic postmodernism. Through assimilation to the postmodern culture the movement inherently connected with its target audience.<sup>13</sup> The results were both startling and staggering. Newly published books by authors like Brian McLaren and Rob Bell quickly became bestsellers. Conference calendars and speaking schedules exploded with action. Websites and the wider blogosphere were replete with the “conversation.”<sup>14</sup> The connection was made and a movement had begun.

One particular way the ECM connected (or perhaps assimilated) to the postmodern culture was through an epistemological relativism. Many other factors contributed to the rise of the movement and its intrinsic connection with postmodernism. Yet for any movement to exist there must be some type of overall purpose and basis for unity. For the ECM, the evidence seems to indicate this need was met through relativism. Because the *modus operandi* of the ECM was a postmodern pragmatism (what is “true” is what works for any individual or situation), theological relativism could serve as a basis

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<sup>12</sup> The statistics from a Google search previously mentioned should serve this point: between late 1999 and early 2010 the movement saw amazing expansion through cyberspace and traditional publishing methods. Bohannon notes that a Google-powered search using the operators “emerging church” processed “on October 20, 2005, reported just a fraction over half a million [results].” Yet when the same search was performed on September 12, 2007, he found in “excess of 2.5 million references” (Bohannon, *Preaching and the Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt*, 14). For the sake of this study, a recent Google search was conducted on December 2, 2011, yielding 5.44 million references for the operators “emerging church” and 1.96 million references for the operators “emergent church.” That is an approximate increase of more than 900 percent for web-related references in just six years.

<sup>13</sup> This point was thoroughly demonstrated in chapter 2, under the sections entitled “Connections with the Current Generation” and “Popularity through Common Sentiment.”

<sup>14</sup> Validation of these claims has been shown in the preceding material, especially in chapter 1 under the section entitled “The Demise of a Movement.”

for unity or as a rallying point for followers. Clear indications of a relativistic consensus are found in Tripp Fuller's proposed formal description of Emergent Village:

By the end of the twentieth century there was ample evidence that American society had entered a "post-Christian" period, meaning that traditional Christian institutions were losing relevance outside their own structures. Instead of reacting negatively to this development, emergent (or emerging) churches embrace a future that is open-ended. Drawing on "post-modern" philosophy and literary theory, Brian McLaren and others in the late twentieth century started calling for the dismantling of imperialistic Christianity. . . .

Emergent churches reject modern bureaucracies and prefer to build cohorts and virtual communities. . . . It relies heavily on internet networking (podcasts, blogs, etc.) and conversation to build relationships across theological and social divides. . . . The participants generally avoid the type of doctrinal polemics that have caused so many schisms in the history of Christianity. Emergent churches avoid drafting doctrinal statements or creeds, often noting that "Jesus did not have a statement of faith."<sup>15</sup>

Fuller intimates that stating the basis for the Christian faith in certain terms with lucid definition was somewhat antithetical to the ECM. Their purpose was to be theological broad, generous, and relative. This concept held remarkable appeal to Generations X and Y.<sup>16</sup> For the many who had witnessed hypocrisy and lackluster faith in the church, such an "open-ended" proposal appeared quite inviting. In essence, the thousands who jumped aboard the ECM bandwagon were given permission (by leaders like McLaren, Jones, Sweet, and Bell) to react *and* the opportunity to ask whatever they wanted to ask and believe whatever suited their context.<sup>17</sup> Therefore the forum of the

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<sup>15</sup> Fuller, "Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village'," <http://homebrewedchristianity.com/2009/06/17/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village/> (accessed Nov 18, 2011); Fuller, "Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village'," <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village> (accessed November 18, 2011). The original post of this encyclopedic description was on the former reference above and then later posted Emergent Village's website.

<sup>16</sup> Socio-categories such as Generation X and Generation Y simply refer to those (approximately) born between the years 1975 and 1988. These groups have also been referred to as "Mosaics" and "Millennials."

<sup>17</sup> This may appear to be an overstatement. Yet in the thousands of pages researched for this study, never once was found a clear admonition to adhere to a certain set of core Christian beliefs (within Emergent-liberal literature). The only piece that comes even close to organizing a statement of faith is Tony



ECM rallied around a relativism that allowed a multiplicity of opinions and beliefs to coexist and converse, regardless of whether or not they were within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, all the while still calling itself *a movement of the church*.

Similarly, the leaders, in particular, came to popular agreement with many people on the basis of relativistic truth, not on the grounds of Christian doctrine or established orthodoxy.<sup>18</sup> McLaren expressed this philosophy as it relates to theological dialogue:

I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion, but I do hope that all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus. . . .

To help Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and everyone else experience life to the full in the way of Jesus (while learning it better myself), I would gladly become one of them (whoever they are) to whatever degree I can, to embrace them, to join them, to enter into their world without judgment but with saving love, as mine as been entered by the Lord. I do this *because of my deep identity as a fervent Christian*, not in spite of it.<sup>19</sup>

McLaren seems to imply that “the way of Jesus” may be *added* to the personal religion of someone who is Hindu, Buddhist, etc. Therefore a person holding to

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Jones et al., “Response to Recent Criticisms,” in *Brianmclaren.net* (2005), <http://www.brianmclaren.net/archives/000429.html> (accessed May 27, 2011). The “Response to Recent Criticisms” was also later published in Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, 227-32. However, this work still falls short of defining an evangelical faith rooted in the historic creeds of the church and the later soteriological explanations of the Reformation. The seven authors say they all “affirm the historic Trinitarian Christian faith and the ancient creeds. . . . that Jesus is the crucified and risen Savior of the cosmos and no one comes to the Father except through Jesus.” Yet much wonder remains as to why Unitarian Universalists (like Crystal Lewis, see chapter 2) and liberal-pluralistic Roman Catholics (like Father Richard Rohr) are key writers and speakers for the ECM (not to mention the rather confusing “orthodoxy” of Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, and Rob Bell). As further evidence, ECM writer LeRon Shultz wrote an “anti-statement of faith” (denounces statements of faith as necessary in postmodernism) that appeared in the appendix of *ibid.*, 233-36. So, ironically, a mild and perhaps incomplete assent to historic Christianity by seven ECM leaders is directly followed in the same book by a denouncement of statements of faith.

<sup>18</sup> As previously noted, ECM writer LeRon Shultz wrote an “anti-statement of faith” (denouncing statements of faith as necessary in postmodernism) that appeared in the appendix of Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, 233-6. Tony Jones and other ECM leaders applauded this work. Also note Fuller, “Input Needed: Help Describe the 'Emergent Village',” <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/input-needed-help-describe-the-emergent-village> (accessed November 18, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 264.

Islam, Hinduism, or any other faith could also be following Jesus while not reneging on their commitment to another religion. This syncretistic approach (born out of relativism) to theological discussion and formulation in the ECM rapidly broadened the scope of influence for the leaders. In speaking of the ECM's consensus under postmodern relativism, one critic wrote:

[Relativism in the ECM] is in keeping with its postmodern premise. The one essential, non-negotiable demand that postmodernism [epistemologically speaking] makes of everyone is this: No one is supposed to think he or she knows any objective truth. Because postmodernists often suggest that every opinion should be shown equal respect, it seems (on the surface) to be driven by a broad-minded concern for harmony and tolerance, which sounds very charitable and altruistic.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically their consensus was to have no corporate consensus, *in the traditional sense of the term*. Consensus in the ECM was gathered under a common discontentment with the establishment and a reaction against the current ecclesiastical methods of Western evangelicalism. The movement largely decried formal doctrinal statements or even simple statements of belief. Simply put, the ECM's goal was to open the table for discussion on every established point of the Christian faith – everything had to change.<sup>21</sup> This was the purpose and consensus of the ECM. The walls of authority were elastic – even in regard to the clear implications of Scripture. As a result, other faiths became increasingly accepted as viable forms of following “the way of Jesus.”<sup>22</sup>

Pivoting on issues related to deconstructing previous notions of the Christian faith, the ECM clung to a faction of postmodernism that enabled them to redefine

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<sup>20</sup> John MacArthur, “Perspicuity of Scripture: The Emergent Approach,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 17 (2006): 149. See also a similar critique Trevor P. Craigen, “Emergent Soteriology: The Dark Side,” *The Master's Seminary Journal* 17 (2006):177-90.

<sup>21</sup> See McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*, 77-130.

<sup>22</sup> Note the acceptance of Unitarian Universalists such as Crystal Lewis (who accept all faiths as equally true and beneficial) within the circle of the ECM. On her personal blog Lewis informs her readers that she is now a Unitarian Universalist (see <http://crystalstmarielewis.wordpress.com/about/>).

everything – even the nouns, verbs, and adjectives they used to compose their re-definitions. Carson summarized this point well in his evaluation of McLaren’s postmodernism:

When McLaren speaks through the lips of Neo, the postmodern Christian protagonist of his two best-known books, he can use “post-” as a universal category to highlight what he does *not* like: “In a postmodern world, we become postconquest, postmechanistic, postanalytical, postsecular, postobjective, postcritical, postorganizational, postindividualistic, post-Protestant, and postconsumerist.”<sup>23</sup> A rapid reading of those books shows how much what McLaren thinks “a new kind of Christian” *should* be like today is determined by all the *new things* he believes are bound up with postmodernism: hence: “a new kind of Christian.”<sup>24</sup>

As mentioned previously, the ECM was centrally grounded in the venues of the Internet – through various blogs, websites, and forums.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps the ECM would not have even come into existence apart from the various web collectives in which it was housed. Where no doctrinal consensus was sought, a new brand of ecumenicity quickly became the rule. This *relativistic consensus* in turn led to a very broad door of ecclesial

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<sup>23</sup> McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Kimball reports the quick and rather sudden rise of “emergent” or “emerging” online, noting the beginning date and author of several key websites: “Emergingchurch.org – May 21, 2001 – Karen Ward from Apostles Church in Seattle got this domain name and began discussing emerging church issues on it. Emergingchurch.net – June 12, 2001 – Since the book, *The Emerging Church*, I was writing was in the works, I got the domain name back in 2001. Emergentvillage.org and .com – June 21, 2001 – “Emergent” the organization was formed at this time and bought these domain names. Emergingchurch.com – June 22, 2001 – Youth Specialties bought the domain name on this date from someone who originally bought it in the year 2000 but didn’t use it. But Youth Specialties at this time was looking at being involved in emerging church issues so they bought it from someone else in 2001” (Kimball, “Origins of the Terms “Emerging” and “Emergent” Church - Part 2,” [http://www.dankimball.com/vintage\\_faith/2006/04/origins\\_of\\_the\\_.html](http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origins_of_the_.html) (accessed October 26, 2011). Note the very close timeframe in which all of these websites were launched. Also as stated earlier, in 2001 Barna pointed out the significant rise in Internet usage for faith-based communities and church-related conversations in his report entitled, “More Americans Are Seeking Net-based Faith Experiences.” See Barna, *More Americans Are Seeking Net-Based Faith Experiences*, <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/48-more-americans-are-seeking-net-based-faith-experiences?q=teenagers+teens> (accessed November 29, 2011).

conversation advanced through technological means, which in turn drove the movement to new heights of influence and popularity.<sup>26</sup>

Conversations of faith with Roman Catholics, Hindus, and Buddhists (among others) quickly became the norm, thus further broadening the ECM's scope as a sociological phenomenon. The invitation to join the dialogue of the movement was enormously inclusive. Jeffrey Straub reported a rather startling relationship between some ECM leaders and clerics of other non-Christian religions:

Recently [in 2008] Pagitt and Rob Bell joined in a broadly ecumenical conference in Seattle, *Seeds of Compassion*, which featured Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, and Sikhs. Participants included the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Dr. Ingrid Mattson, president of the Islamic Society of North America. The conference was co-founded by a Buddhist monk, Ven. Lama Tenzin Dhonden, who is a close associate of the Dalai Lama.<sup>27</sup>

Such broad association with other world religions initially contributed to the rise of the movement. Nearly everyone was welcome to participate in this discussion about Jesus, the church, Christianity, and the meaning of the gospel. Thus it should come as no surprise that the theme of Emergent Village's reoccurring "Wild Goose Festival" is deliberately inclusive: "We are followers of Jesus creating a festival of justice, spirituality, music and the arts. The festival is rooted in the Christian tradition and therefore open to all regardless of belief, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, denomination or religious affiliation."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The Internet itself did not bring about the rapid growth of influence and popularity, since it was only the avenue of the ECM's message. However, this method for conveying their message undoubtedly served the movement quite well. To ground community in the Internet does not necessarily breed ecumenicity. A root cause for the rise of the movement was a radically inclusive community based in the Internet. The Internet itself was not the cause but merely an effective tool for the cause.

<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey P. Straub, "The Emerging Church: A Fundamentalist Assessment," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 78. See also <http://www.seedsofcompassion.org/> (accessed December 17, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.wildgoosefestival.org/intro> (accessed December 17, 2011).

The broad and open posture of the ECM was intentionally welcoming to a multi-faith mosaic of the postmodern society. Through this heightened ecumenicity the movement naturally connected to a wide spectrum of the postmodern culture. Anyone was welcome to join in the conversation of a retooled “church.” Thus the popular agreement found through a relativistic consensus served as a source of purpose for the beginnings of the ECM and also increased the initial growth of the movement.

### *Practicality over Biblical Orthodoxy*

The ECM reached new levels of influence by also fostering forums where practicality<sup>29</sup> ruled over traditional biblical orthodoxy. Those who held to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith were often labeled dogmatists and those who conversed about everything but held to nothing were considered good pragmatists.<sup>30</sup> Thus the door was open to any and all who wanted to describe their new interpretation of the atonement or any other tenet of faith.<sup>31</sup> If the orthodoxies of the past no longer seemed workable in postmodernism, they were redefined, tabled for discussion, or even rejected in order to accomplish the end goal of connecting to the current culture. These pragmatic

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<sup>29</sup> The term “practicality” is used here in connection with the pragmatic drive of the ECM.

<sup>30</sup> See McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 151-98.

<sup>31</sup> For example, as noted previously in chapter 2, Jonathan Brink from Emergent village constructed a “new” theory of the atonement. He goes on to describe how he arrived at a theory of the atonement that differs from both the ransom-to-Satan and the penal-substitutionary view of the atonement. In sum he writes, “The cross was not God sending his Son to satisfy the demands of Satan, or to appease his own sense of justice. The cross was God lifting his arms to the world and saying, ‘This is how far I will go to show you that my original judgment of you was true.’ For the first time the Gospel could be framed as a ferocious love. God’s justice was found in the act of mercy. It made sense in a way that seemed to redeem the Gospel. And it was so simple” (Brink, “A Time To Reconstruct,” <http://www.emergentvillage.com/weblog/brink-reconstruct> (accessed December 6, 2011)). This may be labeled a sister to the moral-example theory of the atonement, made popular during the period of the Renaissance. Yet this position does not satisfactorily answer the question, “So, why was it necessary for Christ to die?” Nor does it answer the biblical evidence for a penal-substitutionary atonement (Brink’s article is entirely void of biblical support. There are no references or quotations of Scripture, aside from an ambiguous reference to the Fall in the book of Genesis). See also Brink, *Discovering The God Imagination: Reconstructing A Whole New Christianity*.

assumptions and their resulting effects significantly contributed to the beginnings of the ECM and the guiding purpose that drove the movement to new heights of popularity as a socio-phenomenon.

Leaders of the ECM targeted (and assimilated to) the epistemology of a relativistic postmodernism in contrast with the accepted epistemology of conservative Christianity.<sup>32</sup> In regard to a postmodern conception of truth, Gibbs and Bolger remark, “It is not that postmodern people do not want truth per se, but whose truth? Often the one proposing, or more often imposing ‘truth’ is a person in power. Why trust that person? Instead, a better way to truth, in their view, is to hear the many stories and to discern accordingly, within the context of community.”<sup>33</sup> Adopting this understanding of truth in order to relevantly communicate the message of Jesus led to a very distinct change:

Evangelism or mission for me is no longer about persuading people to believe what I believe, no matter how edgy or creative I get. It is more about shared experiences and encounters. It is about walking the journey of life and faith together, each distinct to his or her own tradition and culture but with the possibility of encountering God and truth from one another.<sup>34</sup>

Making the gospel known to people outside of Christianity could no longer be done in any form of proclamation, confrontation, or overt interaction concerning the truths of Christ. Instead pragmatically accommodating to postmodernism required something entirely different – something much more inclusive and non-offensive. This concept is carried by McLaren in a form of *incarnational* outreach that pushes the limits of traditional evangelical mission work:

At heart I think my main gift and calling is to evangelism. I want to help every person I can to become a follower of Jesus, beginning with myself. . . . [Yet] we

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<sup>32</sup> As previously noted in this chapter, most evangelicals hold to the correspondence theory of truth.

<sup>33</sup> This quote is from Pip Piper in Gibbs and Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*, 68.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

must be open to the perpetual possibility that our received understandings of the gospel may be faulty, imbalanced, poorly nuanced, or downright warped and twisted. . . . In this sense Christians in missional dialogue [interfaith association] must continually expect to rediscover the gospel. . . .

In this light, although I don't hope all Buddhists will become (cultural) Christians, I do hope all who feel so called will become Buddhist followers of Jesus; I believe they should be given that opportunity and invitation. I don't hope all Jews or Hindus will become members of the Christian religion. But I do hope all who feel so called will become Jewish or Hindu followers of Jesus.<sup>35</sup>

McLaren implies here that all religious groups (such as Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity) are merely cultural labels rather than systems or communities of belief. This generous (yet ironically myopic) understanding of the various schemas of world religions allowed the ECM to broaden its scope well beyond the boundaries of evangelicalism and engage in theological discussion with people from a wide range of backgrounds, thus sparking increased interest and popularity.

Yet the guardrails of Christian orthodoxy were pushed far beyond missional philosophies or new definitions of the atonement. Everything had to change in order to reach the postmodern culture, so argued the ECM leaders. In Doug Pagitt's work entitled, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, he flatly rejects the inerrancy and plenary inspiration of Scripture,<sup>36</sup> God as omnipotent and sovereign,<sup>37</sup> and the innate sinfulness of mankind.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly the inherent parallel of the ECM with the faulty religious liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries has been lucidly set forth and tacitly applauded by contemporary liberal scholarship:

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<sup>35</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 261-64.

<sup>36</sup> He wrote, "The inerrancy debate is based on the belief that the Bible is the word of God, that the Bible is true because God made it and gave it to us as a guide to truth. But that's not what the Bible says. . . . For Paul and Timothy, Scripture found its power in the community of faith, in the activity of God as seen through people, in the continuing story of God's partnership with humanity" (Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 65-66).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 100-109.

<sup>38</sup> He wrote, "We can say we believe that humanity is evil and depraved and that we enter the world this way. But I don't think this fits the Christian story, nor do many of us hold to it" (ibid., 124).

The neo-correlational theology of the emergent movement aligns itself with Schleiermacher through an essentialist theological anthropology which grounds and empowers a finite human freedom under the sovereignty of an infinitely free and loving God. In emergent communities, radical human freedom is not only acknowledged but celebrated. As Schleiermacher rigorously construes human freedom as limited, finite and relative freedom, in contrast to Kant's moral philosophy, so does the emergent movement uphold a robust liberty core to humanity which challenges both Reformed and Wesleyan notions of atonement.<sup>39</sup>

Similar to Schleiermacher's goal of "saving Christianity" from extinction in the face of rationalism and modernism,<sup>40</sup> Pagitt and other leaders argued that Christianity must drastically change in order to stay alive in the face of postmodernism.<sup>41</sup> In this way the movement was driven by a postmodern pragmatism. What would be relevant to the postmodern culture? How could Christianity answer the myriad needs of the populace? Why was the church ineffectual in communicating the message of Jesus? What could the church do that would work *with* postmodernism instead of *against* it? What had to change? These were the practical questions that leaders like Pagitt, Bell, and McLaren continually brought to bear in the ECM dialogue. The apropos nature of these questions was proven when "the younger evangelicals" of North America resoundingly affirmed the same sentiments.<sup>42</sup> As a result the Emergent movement grew by leaps and bounds through a holistic postmodern pragmatism.

### **Cause of the Movement's Fall**

Just as the ECM's reactionary deconstructionism conversely precipitated its collapse, the same was also true in regard to its immersion in postmodern pragmatism.

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<sup>39</sup> Keuss, "The Emergent Church and Neo-Correlational Theology after Tillich, Schleiermacher and Browning," 456.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah, *Our Legacy: the History of Christian Doctrine*, 60-61, 97-100, 130-32.

<sup>41</sup> See McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope*, 119-256.

<sup>42</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 13-43.



This relativistic pragmatism resulted in three primary problems that eventually contributed to the movement's ultimate demise. These are: (1) the lack of consensus, (2) accommodation leading to assimilation, and (3) the absence of the anchor of orthodoxy.

### *Lack of Consensus*

The “mess” of the Emergent movement was specifically designed to provide a forum in which corporate doctrinal consensus or even basic agreement was shed for the sake of the broadest of conversations. As previously noted, the leaders' only general agreement was to have no consensus, *in the traditional sense of the term*. To hold to the core dogma of the Christian faith was deemed risky for the “conversation” and sometimes interpreted to be a breach of the relativistic agreement.<sup>43</sup>

The moral, ethical, and scriptural implications of the Nicene Creed were downplayed or deemed incompatible with the plan for a postmodern reformulation of the church. So moral issues such as homosexuality and bioethical issues like abortion<sup>44</sup> were open to reinterpretation according to the postmodern pragmatic grid.<sup>45</sup> McLaren commented on the issue of homosexuality this way:

Frankly, many of us don't know what we should think about homosexuality. We've heard all sides but no position has yet won our confidence so that we can say “it seems good to the Holy Spirit and us.” That alienates us from both the

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<sup>43</sup> See the quote from Raffi Shahinian in chapter 2 under the subsection “*Disillusionment of the Followers*” from Shahinian, “An Open Letter to Dan Kimball, Erwin McManus and Scot McKnight,” <http://www.parablesofaprodigalworld.com/2008/09/open-letter-to-dan-kimball-erwin.html> (accessed December 12, 2011). This link is no longer available online. For a citation from this same article see MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World*, 229-30.

<sup>44</sup> See Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*, 63-127; McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 185.

<sup>45</sup> Attesting to an undeniable moral relativism, former evangelical pop singer Jennifer Knapp (a self-proclaimed, practicing homosexual) performed at the Wild Goose Festival, June 23-26, 2011. Although the leaders of the Emergent Village and the Wild Goose Festival claim to desire a conversation between people of many different faiths and persuasions, the dialogue is often starkly biased. One online blogger wrote with sarcastic frustration, “Glad to see that pointing out the truth about Knapp's unbiblical sexual lifestyle only results in comments being deleted. Keep up the good work” (see <http://www.patheos.com/community/wildgoosefestival/2011/06/02/announcing-jennifer-knapp/> (accessed June 6, 2011).

liberals and conservatives who seem to know exactly what we should think. Even if we are convinced that all homosexual behavior is always sinful, we still want to treat gay and lesbian people with more dignity, gentleness, and respect than our colleagues do. If we think that there may actually be a legitimate context for some homosexual relationships, we know that the biblical arguments are nuanced and multilayered, and the pastoral ramifications are staggeringly complex. We aren't sure if or where lines are to be drawn, nor do we know how to enforce with fairness whatever lines are drawn.

Perhaps we need a five-year moratorium on making pronouncements. In the meantime, we'll practice prayerful Christian dialogue, listening respectfully, disagreeing agreeably. When decisions need to be made, they'll be admittedly provisional. We'll keep our ears attuned to scholars in biblical studies, theology, ethics, psychology, genetics, sociology, and related fields. Then in five years, if we have clarity, we'll speak; if not, we'll set another five years for ongoing reflection. After all, many important issues in church history took centuries to figure out. Maybe this moratorium would help us resist the "winds of doctrine" blowing furiously from the left and right, so we can patiently wait for the wind of the Spirit to set our course.<sup>46</sup>

While the ambiguous nature of McLaren's very elongated response to the issue of homosexuality may appear confusing, his indecision provides a clear picture of his actual stance on the matter. DeYoung and Kluck remarked concerning this irony, "It seems as if he [McLaren] hasn't chosen sides in the debate, but for all practical purposes he has. He doesn't preach against it. He doesn't tell parishioners it's wrong. He doesn't draw any lines of right and wrong. We can all plead the humility of uncertainty, but on some issues our silence speaks volumes."<sup>47</sup>

Just two years after McLaren's call for a five-year moratorium, Tony Jones announced, "In any case, I now believe that GLBTQ [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer] can live lives in accord with biblical Christianity (at least as much as any of us can!) and that their monogamy can and should be sanctioned and blessed by

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<sup>46</sup> Brian McLaren, "Brian McLaren on the Homosexuality Question: Finding a Pastoral Response," in *Out of Ur* (2006), [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2006/01/brian\\_mclaren\\_o.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2006/01/brian_mclaren_o.html) (accessed December 19, 2011).

<sup>47</sup> DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 46-47. They also point out that the same is true of Rob Bell, in light of a thorough evaluation by Ben Witherington.

church and state.”<sup>48</sup> So was a general, corporate decision made? No one seems to be quite certain.

Thoroughly grounded biblical norms were set aside in moratorium while the postmodern “conversation” flew around in circles, yet never found a landing place. Once enthusiastic followers now became frustrated and bewildered by the constant upheaval. What was to be changed, and what was unchangeable?

Signs of disunity caused by a lack of consensus in the movement were cited as early as 2004. Andy Crouch reports a very key piece of evidence:

At the Emergent Convention in Nashville in April [2004], it becomes clear that McLaren’s insistence that “Emergent is not a movement” is not false modesty.

At the opening session, Youth Specialties president Mark Oestreicher (hair: two-tone wavy locks) urges attendees to come and go at will, cheerfully undermining the credibility of the proceedings: “A lot of what conference speakers say is not really true – they take 20 years of reality and turn it into 90 minutes of unreality.” . . .

At the Emergent Convention, emerging theology and emerging culture don’t so much coexist as collide, thanks to the somewhat uneasy partnership between Emergent and Youth Specialties. . . . “I hate it,” [McLaren] says ruefully of the worship music. Another Emergent leader tells a seminar, “The general sessions are a betrayal of everything Emergent stands for.”

The truth is that the convention makes it difficult to tell what Emergent does stand for. Even the invited guests seem bewildered. Plenary speaker Robert Webber, whose book *The Younger Evangelicals* celebrates the emerging church, is clearly taken aback by what he sees: “They claim to be rejecting the last 30 years of evangelicalism – and they’re repeating the last 30 years of evangelicalism.”

Twentysomething writer Lauren Winner, dismayed by the video loops playing incessantly behind her during her address, tells me, “I feel so alienated from my generation.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Tony Jones, “How I Went from There to Here: Same Sex Marriage Blogalogue,” in *Belief Net* (2008), <http://blog.beliefnet.com/tonyjones/2008/11/same-sex-marriage-blogalogue-h.html> (accessed December 19, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Andy Crouch, “The Emergent Mystique,” *Christianity Today*, November, (2004): <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/november/12.36.html?start=6> (accessed May 25, 2011).

Crouch went on to deduce, “Any movement – or conversation – that can inspire such ambivalence, even among its friends, has an uncertain future.”<sup>50</sup> As the circle of ECM leaders began to fragment according to individual interpretations and methodologies, so did the many followers. One blogger remarked on his own confusion about the ECM, “Just what IS ‘emergent?’ After hanging out [with] people who describe themselves this way for a number of years, I still have no idea what it means. . . . the only common denominator seems to be the pursuit of something different than what they have experienced in the past.”<sup>51</sup>

In 2008 a well-spoken blogger mentioned that one of the key reasons the ECM was beginning to show signs of collapse was that “Some Emerging leaders have embraced a disturbing lack of clarity on key doctrinal and social issues.” He went on to explain:

Most of the non-Christians that I meet with (and most of the Christians I minister to as well) want to do business with serious theological issues. . . . They don’t want to hear pontifications on how “these are complex questions. . . . maybe we can search together and eventually find some answers.” In a world of gray, black-and-white answers are not a turn-off to unbelievers. They are appealing if explained with grace and love.

Some Emerging leaders consistently refrain from speaking out on important moral and theological questions of our day. Asking for a moratorium on making pronouncements the Bible has already made may sound humble and gentle, but in reality, it leaves people struggling with sin and guilt without a clear word from God.<sup>52</sup>

Since the movement as a whole lacked any tangible consensus tied to the historic Christian faith, it also eventually lost its ability to be effectual *or* believable in the

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> This blogger identified himself as “Larry” and commented in response to Scaramanga, “R.I.P. Emerging Church,” [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip\\_emerging\\_ch.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html) (accessed May 27, 2011).

<sup>52</sup> Wax, “5 Reasons Why the Emerging Church Is Now Receding,” <http://trevinwax.com/2008/02/05/5-reasons-why-the-emerging-church-is-now-receding/> (accessed May 25, 2011).

eyes of the populace.<sup>53</sup> O'Brien reported: "McLaren says there have been ongoing questions about the label itself [Emergent]. 'For many people, the name *emergent* has allowed them to remain in the evangelical world,' he said. For others outside of the conversation, he admitted, the name has become an epithet for theological heresy or cultural trendiness."<sup>54</sup>

Certainly there remains ongoing influence by various leaders of the collapsed ECM, such as Rob Bell, Doug Pagitt, and Brian McLaren. Yet interestingly, both Bell and McLaren have now removed themselves from formal church leadership in the congregations they planted.<sup>55</sup> Books are still published and conferences are attended. So although the leaders themselves have not ceased to be influential (even popular in significantly smaller circles) the overall influence of the ECM has dramatically decreased because of a lack of theological and basic doctrinal consensus.<sup>56</sup>

#### *Accommodation Leading to Assimilation*

One of the central premises of the Emergent movement was that by thoughtfully accommodating to postmodernism the kernel of the Christian faith would be saved from extinction. Thus the movement was prone to *re*-evaluate and *re*-interpret core

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<sup>53</sup> One blogger identified as "Haugeberg" wrote an insightful comment, "Brian McLaren came to NCU to speak once, and both introduced the concept to me for the first time, and also seemed to try and disassociate himself from the movement (of which he is usually tied). I'd say this is a pretty common pattern [among] most Emergent Church personas: they get on and off the Emergent bus pretty quick. I'd say that it has a lot to do with the fact that all of the books written about the subject, fall short of defining what it really is in the first place" (Joseph Sunde, "Is the Emerging Church Dead (or Dying)?," in *Remnant Culture* (2010), <http://remnantculture.com/?p=706> (accessed May 27, 2011)).

<sup>54</sup> O'Brien, "Emergent's Divergence: Leaders hope decentralizing power will revitalize the movement," 14.

<sup>55</sup> This information is readily available from the websites of Mars Hill Bible Church and Cedar Ridge Community Church (see <http://marshall.org/rob-bell/news/> [accessed December 19, 2011]; and <http://www.crc.org/content/page/brian-mclaren> [accessed December 19, 2011]).

<sup>56</sup> It should be noted, however, that the ideologies and sentiments of the ECM leaders still remain and perhaps even continue to grow in Western evangelicalism. The scope of this will be briefly addressed in chapter 4.

doctrines of the Christian faith, in order to “save” Christianity by reformulating it for success in a postmodern world.<sup>57</sup> However, as a result of these aberrant tendencies the ECM headed down a path of fragmentation and theological demise.<sup>58</sup>

Simply stated, accommodation eventually leads to assimilation. If a person thoroughly accommodates to the modes and means of the surrounding worldview(s), then he or she will ultimately capitulate to the same. Driscoll draws the same parallel, “the emergent church is part of the Emerging Church Movement but does not embrace the dominant ideology of the movement. Rather, the emergent church is the latest version of liberalism. The only difference is that the old liberalism accommodated modernity and the new liberalism accommodates postmodernity.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> This key point was fully delineated in chapter 2, in the subsection “*Disillusionment of the Followers.*”

<sup>58</sup> Driscoll outlined eight specific elements of Christian doctrine (all the basic essentials of the faith) that the ECM attempted to rework or radically change (some continuing to do so). These were: “(1) Scripture. This includes the divine inspiration, perfection, and authority of Scripture. (2) Jesus Christ. This includes his deity and sovereignty over human history as Lord. (3) Gender. This includes whether or not people are created with inherent gender differences, whether or not those gender roles have any implications for governments of home and church, and whether or not homosexual practice is sinful. This also includes whether or not it is appropriate to use gender specific names for God, such as Father, like Jesus did. (4) Sin. The primary issue here is whether or not human beings are conceived as sinners or are essentially morally neutral and are internally corrupted solely by external forces. (5) Salvation. The issue is whether or not Jesus Christ is necessary for salvation and whether or not salvation exists for people in other religions who do not worship Jesus Christ. (6) The Cross. The issue here is the doctrine of penal substitution and whether or not Jesus died in our place for our sins or if He went to the cross solely as an example for us to follow when we suffer. (7) Hell. The issue whether or not anyone will experience conscious eternal torment, or if unbelievers will simply cease to exist (annihilationism) or eventually be saved and taken to heaven (universalism). (8) *This issue is perhaps the most difficult of all. Much of this conversation is happening online with blogs and chat rooms. However, as the conversation becomes a conflict, the inherent flaw of postmodernism is becoming a practical obstacle to unity because there is no source of authority to determine what constitutes orthodox or heretical doctrine* [italics added]. With the authority of Scripture open for debate and even long-established Church councils open for discussion (e.g. the Council of Carthage that denounced Pelagius as a heretic for denying human sinfulness), the conversation continues while the original purpose of getting on mission may be overlooked because there is little agreement on the message or the mission of the Church” (Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 91-92). For a thorough evaluation of Brian McLaren’s theological journey toward liberalism see Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 30-35.

<sup>59</sup> Driscoll, *Confessions of a Reformission Rev.: Hard Lessons from an Emerging Missional Church*, 21.

Similar to the liberalism that seeped into mainline denominations around the turn of the twentieth century, the ECM eventually became no different from the postmodern culture it originally sought to reach with the gospel. As noted in chapter 2, just as historic religious liberalism sought to accommodate a modern epistemology (science and rationalism), so the ECM sought to accommodate a postmodern epistemology. Yet most importantly, as liberalism critically denied the claims of the historic Christian faith, in like manner, leaders of the ECM deconstructed the essential claims of orthodoxy.

The assimilation process of the ECM into relativistic postmodernism became so thoroughgoing that recent praise was offered to the movement by a number of Unitarian Universalist ministers. Bret Lortie, a Unitarian Universalist leader in San Antonio, Texas wrote, “The emergent church is challenging Christianity to move away from creedalism, dogma, and judgment and toward reconciliation, toleration, and pluralism. . . . While the emergent church is still deeply rooted in the idea of the confession of sin (especially relational ones) and the primacy of Jesus’ teachings, it questions any practice that would damn some souls to hell, and others to heaven. These universalist brothers and sisters of faith are worth taking seriously.”<sup>60</sup> Positive attention from Unitarian Universalists was merely symptomatic of a deeper assimilation to an epistemology that would cause the movement to rapidly deteriorate. The downward cycle of theological liberalism quickly (and sadly) became evident in the ECM. In place of an

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<sup>60</sup> Bret Lortie, “UU and the Emergent Church,” in *Messages from First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio* (2008), <http://www.lortie.net/?p=262> (accessed December 19, 2011). The denomination (Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations) wrote a formal report on entitled, “The Emergent Church” in April 2011. Brian McLaren’s original church plant (Cedar Ridge Community Church) was the primary case study of this report and received a rather glowing commendation (see <http://www.uua.org/worship/theory/worshipworks/129232.shtml> [accessed May 25, 2011]).

evangelical gospel rooted in the Scriptures was a moral-ethical-social gospel rooted in the felt needs of postmodern culture.<sup>61</sup>

While expressing the “hands and feet” of the good news through meeting the physical and felt needs of humanity is a noble and Christ-like goal to pursue, believing such actions are the complete embodiment of the gospel myopically misses the point of Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection. Yet for many ECM leaders social justice and moral equality *now* (accomplished politically or otherwise) truncated the message of the cross and salvation and its implications for *eternity*.<sup>62</sup>

The results of such doctrinal deviation and deconstruction mark the final parallel: just as the corridors of mainline churches are now largely empty and lack purpose,<sup>63</sup> so also the ECM quickly declined and lost direction. This assimilation resulted in the further disillusionment of many followers and the quick departure of some prominent leaders such as Mark Driscoll.<sup>64</sup> Therefore the assimilation process eventually contributed to fragmentation on a grand scale.<sup>65</sup> In December 2009, blogger Brian LePort echoed the thoughts of many former ECM followers when he wrote:

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<sup>61</sup> For a scholarly evaluation of the ECM’s soteriology and how this effects their evangelistic efforts see Craigen, “Emergent Soteriology: The Dark Side,” 180-90.

<sup>62</sup> See McLaren and Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point*, 120-25.

<sup>63</sup> This observation comes from personal experience with and travels to numerous mainline-liberal congregations and church buildings. Members of the author’s immediate family serve as Episcopalian priests (ECUSA), United Methodists ministers, while others hold association or positions within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) or the Roman Catholic Church. Also the condition of mainline churches in Europe is much worse than that in North America.

<sup>64</sup> Driscoll, “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” 88-91.

<sup>65</sup> As an interesting validation of this trend, the cyberspace growth rate slowed between 2007 and 2011. Between 2005 and 2007 (2 years) the growth rate was around 500 percent. Yet between 2007 and 2011 (4 years) it was just over 200 percent. The quick decline in the ECM is quite evident. Bohannon notes that a Google-powered search using the operators “emerging church” processed “on October 20, 2005, reported just a fraction over half a million [results]” (Bohannon, *Preaching and the Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt*, 14). Yet when the same search was performed on September 12, 2007, he found in “excess of 2.5 million references.” For the sake of this study, a recent Google search was conducted on December 2,



After I graduated from college in 2005 I became very interested in the emerging church movement. I had become a bit disgruntled with Christianity. I began to read everything by Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Tony Jones, and Scot McKnight that I could find. I gave money to the Emergent Village. I subscribed to “Relevant Magazine.” I signed up for newsletters from Sojourners. I joined the One Campaign. Eventually I went to Santa Cruz, CA, to visit the Vintage Faith Church as well as to meet with Dan Kimball before leading a short-lived “emergent worship gathering” in San Francisco.

Then I became a bit discouraged by the whole thing. . . . It felt disconnected from the rest of the church. It felt like we spent more time critiquing the people of God than the worldly system that surrounded us. There is much that I learned from the emerging church movement for which I am grateful but overall I could no longer subscribe to their vision. . . .

I think my own experience has been mirrored by many others. There is not much attention being given to the emerging church these days. I hear less and less about it.<sup>66</sup>

In August 2010, T. Scott Daniels offered a similar evaluation of the demise of the movement:

A year ago, the EC conversation was THE buzz. People loved it or hated it. They considered it the hope of the church or the seed of its destruction. When I wrote my five-part series on the EC a year ago my blog received hundreds of hits each day with people wanting to read all they could about this important movement.

A year later, I can’t find a whole lot of people who care. In particular I can’t find any scholarly folk who want to talk about it. One of my theological colleagues here at APU [Azusa Pacific University] summed it up well in a conversation last week. “For all practical purposes the EC movement is dead. It is over and done. Does anybody care about it anymore?”<sup>67</sup>

C. Michael Patton, self-identified as former “sympathizer” of the ECM, wrote an obituary for the movement and included several key reasons for its demise:

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2011 yielding 5.44 million references for the operators “emerging church” and 1.96 million references for the operators “emergent church.”

<sup>66</sup> Brian LePort, “The End of the Emergent Church?,” in *Near Emmaus* (2009), <http://nearemmaus.com/2009/12/29/the-end-of-the-emergent-church/> (accessed November 5, 2011)

<sup>67</sup> Daniels, “The Death of the Emerging Church,” [http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor\\_scotts\\_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html](http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html) (accessed May 25, 2011). Daniels describes five reasons for the end of the ECM: (1) capitalism, (2) liberalism, (3) the resiliency of the institutional church, (4) the critics jumped the shark, and (5) the global church.

The Emerging church refused to stand for anything. As the old song goes, “You have to stand for something or you will fall for anything.” The Emerging Church fell. It ran out of fuel. It called on everyone to leave their base and fly with them. Many of us came along for the ride. The problem is they never did land anywhere. . . . They wanted to wait five or ten years to decide who they were. In the meantime, the fuel ran out. They did land and it was (mostly) not on friendly ground. From there they cried out against Evangelical orthodoxy kicking us in the most sensitive areas: Abortion, Atonement, Justification, Assurance – and then there was the attempted burial of our belief that homosexuality was a sin. Oh, did I mention the attacks on Hell and the Exclusivity of Christ? . . . When its most prolific insiders jumped (along with a few pilots), it was over. We landed and acted as if it never happened. “Emerger who? Never heard of him.” And we pull our hat down over our eyes and move on.<sup>68</sup>

As the leaders of the ECM continued to shed or drastically reinterpret the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, the movement soon began to resemble a ship floating at sea with no anchor. The winds of the times seemed to give more direction for the leaders than that found in the counsel of Scripture. Brian McLaren became increasingly ambiguous in his theological constructs, eventually denying evangelical tenets like the inerrancy of Scripture,<sup>69</sup> foundationalism (epistemological),<sup>70</sup> and the *solas* of the Reformation.<sup>71</sup> Doug Pagitt ultimately rejected the inerrancy and plenary inspiration of Scripture,<sup>72</sup> God as omnipotent and sovereign,<sup>73</sup> and the innate sinfulness of

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<sup>68</sup> Patton, “Obituary: The Emerging Church (1994-2009),” [http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip\\_emerging\\_ch.html](http://www.outofur.com/archives/2008/09/rip_emerging_ch.html) (accessed May 25, 2011).

<sup>69</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 163-64, 197.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 11, 117. For a further critique of the ECM’s postmodern epistemology see DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, 49-51.

<sup>71</sup> McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 198.

<sup>72</sup> He wrote, “The inerrancy debate is based on the belief that the Bible is the word of God, that the Bible is true because God made it and gave it to us as a guide to truth. But that’s not what the Bible says. . . . For Paul and Timothy, Scripture found its power in the community of faith, in the activity of God as seen through people, in the continuing story of God’s partnership with humanity” (Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing*, 65-66).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100-9.

mankind.<sup>74</sup> Most recently Rob Bell implied that hell is not an eternal place of conscious torment, but the reality of life without God *in the present* and only, perhaps, a temporary (not eternal) place of separation from God in the afterlife.<sup>75</sup>

With this generous compromise came the loss of any point of reference. The ECM appeared to float about with no direction or clear vision. Followers began to wonder if there was any purpose behind the next great “emergent” book or attending the next edgy conference.<sup>76</sup> As a result, the accommodation to a relativistic postmodernism that resulted in assimilation to that same epistemology reaped devastating consequences for the ECM and the many followers, some of whom may never return to a corporate gathering of God’s people.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> He wrote, “We can say we believe that humanity is evil and depraved and that we enter the world this way. But I don’t think this fits the Christian story, nor do many of us hold to it” (ibid., 124).

<sup>75</sup> Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, 71-86. For scholarly critique of Bell’s work see Kreider, “Review: *Love Wins: A Book about Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*,” 353-56.

<sup>76</sup> The typical disillusionment of the followers is illustrated by this blog commenter (Nile Gomez) on Tony Jones site, “Personally, while I like a lot of what the emergent church stands for, I have shied away from the movement as a whole because of its openness to unorthodox theological positions such as universalism and hyperpreterism and its stance on homosexuality. I realize not all emergents adhere to these beliefs, but Brian McLaren alone has said enough ‘out there’ things to make me step back a bit. Unfortunately, I haven’t had enough time to keep up with the reading, as I work full-time and am a divinity student as well. The problem with emergent thought is that there is no clear statement of belief, but rather, is a mushy mish-mash of disparate voices claiming the “label” of emergent. And perhaps that is deliberate. After all, emergent, as I understand it, is not a belief system that claims to have ‘arrived,’ but rather, one that is on a journey in uncharted territory from the traditional into the unknown. Still, I would prefer to not see the baby thrown out with the bathwater in the quest for change. Just my two cents’ worth” (Jones, “Lonnie Frisbee and the Non-Demise of the Emerging Church,” <http://blog.tonyj.net/2009/12/lonnie-frisbee-and-the-non-demise-of-the-emerging-church/> (accessed May 27, 2011).

<sup>77</sup> The author recently engaged in an online dialogue with three young adults (simultaneously) who grew up in conservative evangelicalism but have since become so disillusioned with the faith that they all have chosen to completely reject Christianity and become atheists. Interestingly, there appeared to initially be a certain degree of influence from the ECM in their radical shift of paradigms.

CHAPTER 4  
EVALUATIONS AND APPLICATIONS  
FOR CONTEMPORARY PASTORS

**Introduction**

This chapter employs the preceding study with three brief points of evaluation and application for contemporary pastors. These are as follows: (1) a short explanation of the continuing influence of this collapsed movement, (2) a list of suggested areas for further study, and (3) a proposal for developing good answers to postmodern trends.

**The Continuing Influence of a Collapsed Movement**

As this study demonstrates, the Emergent movement has collapsed from its early levels of popularity and influence. The reactionary deconstructionism and postmodern pragmatism embedded in the fabric of the movement eventually surfaced in the form of fragmentation and theological demise. Sadly the concept of reaching the postmodern generation with the gospel of Christ was never thoroughly answered in a biblical and historically Christian way.

However, the ideals of postmodernism are not necessarily disappearing; in fact they are probably on the rise in today's culture. The relativism and pragmatism that so permeated the fourth "lane" of the broader Emerging movement has not collapsed or even weakened in influence. Instead the various ideologies and theological concepts that morphed within the emergent organism have now spread like dandelion seeds on a warm spring day. A reactionary and relativistic postmodernism continues to influence the church and Western culture at large. Therefore pastors and other Christian leaders should be wise and cautious in how they approach the needs of the culture.

### **Areas for Further Study**

This study of two philosophical elements that contributed to the inception and cessation of the ECM was by no means exhaustive. Numerous other concepts relating to this ecclesial movement might have been researched and evaluated. Undoubtedly much room remains for further reflection and contribution on both a pastoral and academic level. In light of the continuing influence of relativistic postmodernism in Western culture and ecclesiology, it would seem advantageous to continue studying and evaluating other trends and ideologies related to the ECM. Following is a brief list of suggested areas for further study:

1. An evaluation of a proposed personality-based structure in the ECM and the broader Emerging Church Movement.
2. A detailed analysis of various ECM leaders' concept of the kingdom of God in their theology and presentation of the gospel.
3. A study of a proposed asymmetry or lack of balance between social aspects of the gospel and the theocentric, objective, and *eternal* effects of the gospel in the ECM and Western evangelicalism.
4. A more thorough study of the parallels between the historic, modern religious liberalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the theological evolution of the ECM.
5. A study of the significant contribution of N.T. Wright's "New Perspective" soteriological formulations in ECM theology.

### **Developing Good Answers to Postmodern Trends**

God's people must understand that doctrinal and theological vigilance is not optional. However, the questions raised by the Emergent conversation were *good*

questions that needed to be asked of the church at large.<sup>1</sup> The queries raised by the ECM (and numerous followers) were and still are valid.

Certainly some of the questions were perhaps misguided or jaded by unusual or exceptional experiences. Yet this should not preclude an honest evaluation of the questions put forth. The current generation wants to know why and how the church has seemingly lost her ability to be effectual for the gospel's sake. They want to know why hate and self-righteousness often prevail over true faith and love within the church. The ECM leaders announced that these and many other questions deserved an answer.<sup>2</sup>

What would be relevant to the postmodern culture? How could Christianity answer the myriad needs of the populace? Why was the church ineffectual in communicating the message of Jesus? What could the church do that would work *with* postmodernism instead of *against* it? What had to change? These were the practical questions that leaders like Pagitt, Bell, and McLaren continually and persuasively brought to bear in the ECM dialogue.

These questions should not be rejected simply because they were, perhaps, initially raised by the ECM. The problem was not so much the questions themselves, but

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<sup>1</sup> In a sense Brian McLaren illustrated this point wonderfully when he said, "I think we are wise to adjust our methods, just as any good fisherman would during changing weather conditions" (Street, "An Interview with Brian McLaren," 9). This no doubt was derived from Brian's love for the sport of fly-fishing *and* his passion to see the message of the gospel spread in a postmodern context. Sadly, as the previous material has shown, McLaren's theological moorings have evolved into a liberal conception of God and His Word that has skewed the gospel he once sought to make known.

<sup>2</sup> In his interview with R. Alan Street, McLaren put forth several more questions which he deemed vital for young Christian leaders in our time: "(1) What is a better alternative to either a) a private, personal spirituality unconnected to public life, and b) a public civil religion that compromises with partisan politics (of either the right or the left)? How do we live out the kingdom in the public sphere, learning from the mistakes of recent decades and from Christian history over centuries? (2) How do we make real disciples? Why are so many of our church members so mean-spirited? (3) What does the gospel have to say about the global economy, about the growing gap between rich and poor, about stewardship of the environment, about the growing threat of violence from both terrorists and anti-terrorists? (4) What new forms of church will be necessary to faithfully contain the ever-new wine of the Holy Spirit in our fast-changing world? (5) How can pastors sustain their own spiritual health in times of stress, change, and tension? (6) How can pastors develop friendships that sustain them in their spiritual disciplines?" (ibid., 11-12).

the eventual answers offered by the movement's leaders. The way in which the ECM leaders went about proposing solutions was aberrant and theologically erroneous. Eventually many of the followers began to see the lack of constructive progress and pulled back from their affiliation with the ECM, this proving the principle that a movement based largely on reaction must also offer sound biblical solutions.

Yet the need to react against certain trends and culturally oriented beliefs in Western evangelicalism is real. The church of North America is devastatingly self-oriented rather than Christ-centered. A cultural Christianity that emphasizes the American dream and political nationalism has too often denigrated the true message of the gospel. Ethical and moral hypocrisy is rampant in circles of Christian leadership, especially in the pastorate. Fringe groups touting the label "fundamentalism" treat the gospel as a means for man-made rules, regulations, and fear, instead of a free offering of grace, hope, and divine love.

Therefore pastors and lay leaders in the church must thoughtfully and graciously approach postmodernism with the gospel of Christ while remaining steadfast in the essentials of the faith.<sup>3</sup> A voice from the past rings with accuracy for today's pastors and leaders:

If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the Word of God except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Him. Where the battle rages there the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on all the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a helpful study on how to minister within a postmodern culture while remaining historically "fundamental" see Straub, "The Emerging Church: A Fundamentalist Assessment," 81-85.

<sup>4</sup> Many attribute this inspiring quotation to the great reformer, Martin Luther, as did Francis Shaeffer in his book, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1984), 50-51. However, its exact, historical origins are uncertain. Many cite the following as containing the phrase: Martin Luther, *Briefwechsel*, Weimar ed., vol. 3, D. Martin Luthers Werke, 81ff. But the exact wording above is not found therein (though similar thoughts are expressed). However researchers have found the very same wording in a novel that references Luther and the Reformation; see Elizabeth Rundle Charles, *The Chronicles of the*

God's Word, as His divinely inspired special revelation to mankind (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:2), must be upheld as the authority for God's people and the only good news for those in spiritual darkness. The reality of the resurrection and the eternity of the life to come must be preached ever more passionately. For those outside of Christ there awaits eternal punishment in a place of literal torment: hell. Yet for those in Christ there awaits a place where the blessed hope is fulfilled forever in the presence of God: heaven and the eternal kingdom (John 3:16-19; 5:24; Rom. 3:23; 5:8; 6:23; Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-5).<sup>5</sup>

Yet servants of the gospel must *not* remain ignorant of the real need for good answers to postmodern trends.<sup>6</sup> Postmodernism is not immediately retreating and its influence within the current generation of youth is immense. Therefore gospel-centered leaders must develop sound, biblical answers that will equip the church to proclaim the truth of the gospel unashamedly and relevantly. This will be done through appropriately upholding the uncompromised message of the gospel and the historic Christian faith in the amoral language elements of the culture. In other words, certain cultural presuppositions integral to postmodernism should not be accommodated because of their inherent incompatibility with scriptural truth. However, other amoral cultural elements *can* be used to contextualize the gospel to the postmodern world that would not in any

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*Schoenberg Cotta Family* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1864), 315. For a thorough evaluation of this apropos quote see Carl Wieland, "Where the Battle Rages - A Case of Misattribution," in *Creation Ministries International* (2010), <http://creation.com/battle-quote-not-luther> (accessed Nov 29, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> This stands in contrast to the ECM's view of the social gospel "kingdom." Christ's description of discipleship and the theme of suffering before glory in Mark 8:22-38 is particularly instructive. The missional zeal of the broader "Emerging" movement could not seem to be maintained in the liberal theological conversations of the ECM. Instead of presenting the gospel in a way that was culturally relevant *and* biblically sound, the ECM leaders opted for a message that undermined their initial purpose. Jesus and the gospel narratives were deconstructed to focus on what seemed to be a present, earthly kingdom mentality

<sup>6</sup> The missional collective *Soma Communities* is an excellent example of gospel-contextualization while being thoroughly wedded to the core doctrines of the Christian faith, even distinctively premillennial and dispensational. See <http://tacoma.somacommunities.org/missionaries/doctrinal-statement/>.



way distort the counsel of Scripture and Christian doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Understanding and evaluating the means and modes of postmodernism through this proposed lens will be the key to reaching the present generation with the gospel through the power of God’s Spirit. Even though culture might dramatically change, the ultimate need of mankind remains the same. Kimball wisely wrote:

Ancient, medieval, modern, or postmodern – emerged or emerging – when it comes down to it, we still have the same basic human needs. We all want to be accepted. We all want to know that we are loved. We all long for purpose. We also long for spiritual fulfillment and meaning. We long to know our Creator and are born with a hole in our hearts that only he can fill. These things will never change this side of heaven. This means Jesus will be the only answer to fill this eternal longing created in us, whether we’re ravers, gothics, or Wiccans, twenty-year-olds or ninety-year-olds, Madonna or Marilyn Manson, Elton John or Eminem... We are not facing anything new. We are not facing anything that the Holy Spirit of God moving in the emerging church cannot overcome.<sup>8</sup>

The gospel message of Jesus Christ communicated in the power of the Holy Spirit is the only true hope for the church *and* for those separated from God. Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth is particularly instructive:

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.<sup>9</sup>

Jeffrey Bingham, an esteemed teacher of many, once said, “When the most holy faith seems most unappealing, such is the time not to ‘dress it up’ by false alteration

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<sup>7</sup> Carson is particularly good at showing how the strengths of the ECM can be used for good while discarding its weaknesses. This is seen in the ministry of Tim Keller with Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. See Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications*, 55-56.

<sup>8</sup> Kimball, *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*, 90.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 (ESV).

but to show and proclaim it forth in its rags, its raw truth. When the faith is least welcome, it is most needed.”<sup>10</sup> Instead of becoming preoccupied with polemics leveled at mere people, leaders must remain firm in the “faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). With the power of God it *is* possible to reach this postmodern generation with the gospel of Christ *without* compromising the essence of biblical Christianity. Mark Driscoll exhorts believers this way: “The only hope is a return to the true gospel of Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture. The gospel must be unleashed in the world through the Church for the transforming salvation of sinners and their cultures.” To this end Christian leaders must study, love, and serve, so that God the Father might be revealed and the work of Christ be made known.

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Jeffery Bingham gave this exhortation during a chapel service message entitled “Once For All,” at Dallas Theological Seminary on September 8, 2009.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### EMERGING FROM THE EMERGENT

The purpose of this thesis was to graciously delineate some of the key elements involved in both the inception and cessation of the Emergent church, in order to develop a proper pastoral and theological response to this movement and other similar forthcoming postmodern challenges in the twenty-first century. In other words the approach of this study was to elucidate for the people of God a means by which His truth is being undermined in the postmodern world, so that they can remain steadfast and strong in the gospel of Christ.

To accomplish this end the argument was twofold. First, the ECM was seen as arising as a sociological phenomenon, in part because of its reactionary deconstructionism and postmodern pragmatic philosophy. Second and conversely, these same elements also contributed to the movement's ultimate demise. Third, this work closed with several points of evaluation and application for contemporary pastors: (1) a short explanation of the continuing influence of this collapsed movement, (2) a list of suggested areas for further study, and (3) a proposal for developing good answers to postmodern trends. May God be pleased to bless this effort to exalt His Son and uphold the gospel with unwavering faith.

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