

The Emergent Church and Worship

Christopher Dorn

In the preceding essays Brian McLaughlin and Michael Wittmer sketched the character and contours of a movement that has come to be known as the Emergent church. My ambition is more modest. I want to focus on worship as the Emergent movement conceives it. To do this, however, it is necessary to consider my object of investigation in the context of a larger set of concerns that animate Christians who identify themselves as Emergent. Central among these concerns is that the established churches (e.g. mainline Protestant, evangelical) are no longer capable of witnessing effectively to the Christian faith because they have failed to address fundamental issues about how to transform their institutions and practices to meet a world that has changed dramatically. According to the Emergents, it is only when Christians become aware of how the world has changed around them that they can begin to develop forms of Christian belief and practice that will survive and even thrive into the future.

The Emergent Church and the Postmodern Critique

How has the world changed? Emergents insist that we are living in a world that has been undergoing a shift from a modern to a postmodern era. What this exactly means has been explored by myriad philosophers, political scientists, and culture theorists during the last few decades. On how to understand the nature of this epochal movement there is no consensus. But it is perhaps possible to separate out a central thread in the discussion. The comprehensive myth or “metanarrative” of the modern age is that advances in science and technology are part of an evolutionary process that will inevitably bring prosperity and progress to the world. In the postmodern age this metanarrative no longer commands universal assent. To be sure, the modern age has brought lasting goods to the world (e.g. democracies, human rights, and medicine). But events in the bloodiest century in recorded history have undermined confidence in the potential of human rationality to achieve a total understanding of the human person and the social order. Subsequently, people have begun to doubt the possibility of rendering accounts of history, human behavior, and the meaning of life that are impartial or even comprehensible to all. Postmodern critique has invited the observer to be attentive to the discontinuities of history. Theorists have announced the end of the “master narratives” (Lyotard) that would serve to integrate the events and experiences of life into a meaningful and coherent whole.¹

In the postmodern world, then, the claim is that there no longer exists an all-encompassing culture in the sense of a system of symbols, images, beliefs, and

values that constitute a set of coordinates to orient people, individually and collectively, in a shared world. Indeed, this realization has coincided in our time with the meeting together of cultures in nations and on continents, so that, unless we choose to withdraw from the world into our own subcultures, we necessarily have to adopt a pluralistic outlook if we want to be at home in an increasingly multicultural world. For some it is easier to adapt to this changing world than it is for others, as we have witnessed in recent years.

Analyses of these conditions have not been lacking among those concerned to communicate the gospel in forms relevant and accessible to those who live in this world. But perhaps the most pertinent question to ask in the attempt to understand the Emergent church is this: What appeal can Christianity have in this postmodern age? Christianity is nothing if not a totalizing metanarrative giving a definitive account of God, the world, and human beings. Whether or not it is just this is a point on which sharp debate has been waged between the Emergents and their critics, as we have seen even in the preceding essays. The stance of the Emergents, however, is that the postmodern age, far from posing a threat to Christianity, actually creates a space in which it can come to authentic expression.

This stance becomes intelligible when one considers the postmodern critique of modern epistemology. The modern age privileges procedural logic, clear and distinct ideas, and discursive reasoning. That is to say, it appreciates the power of human rationality generally as a reliable means by which to apprehend reality and truth. The modern thinker attempts to “establish foundations on which to construct the edifice of knowledge and proceeds with methodological rigor.”² The postmodern critic denies that such incontestable foundations exist, hastening to add that the mind does not even have the power to represent to itself reality as it is in itself. Reality does not present itself to the mind immediately; what in fact is presented to the mind is an always already constructed reality mediated through ways of seeing and speaking that subjects internalize as they participate in a culture.

In response to their critics, Emergents would insist that this postmodern critique of modern epistemology does not inevitably tend toward relativism or skepticism. What it has done, from their perspective, is to enhance awareness that the Christian gospel is always enculturated, always appropriated and articulated by a certain people in a certain time and place.³ For this reason, Emergents stress that Christianity is less a set of abstract propositions to be apprehended by the isolated intellect than a concrete form of life to be lived by the whole person vitally connected with others in a specific community. Peter Rollins, the founder of an Emergent community in Ireland known as Ikon,

reflects this viewpoint when he claims that “one does not learn to be a Christian, but rather, one engages in the process of becoming one.”⁴

It is on this claim that the Emergents base their criticisms of the established church. Here they especially single out evangelical churches, out of which many have come, as we saw in the two preceding essays. To the extent that these churches have embraced the epistemological assumptions of the modern age, they have tended to reduce faith to an intellectual assent to a set of theological propositions. These assumptions underlie a typical worship service of which the center is the thirty-minute sermon. After a praise team, consisting of singers and musicians, leads worshippers in a series of choruses and medleys, the pastor-teacher moves center stage to deliver his message. (The pastor-teacher is usually a man.) In the message, his congregation learns the basics of Christian doctrine in the form of principles derived from a passage of scripture. The pastor-teacher exhorts his hearers to accept and to “apply” these principles “to their lives.” It is assumed that the pastor-teacher has the spiritual authority to preach his interpretation of scripture as God’s truth, even if his style of casual dress betrays an absence of a recognized distinction between clergy and laity.

But to the Emergents the truths of scripture do not express themselves only or even primarily in a set of doctrinal statements. This does not mean the neglect of the study of scripture. Nor does it mean the exclusion of it from corporate worship. But the truths of scripture are not only to be verbalized. They are to be embodied in spiritual disciplines and rituals, and, most importantly, in relationships and in service of the “other” that the former foster and sustain. This embodied and communal faith is what Christianity in the modern era lost; the postmodern critique has opened up a conceptual space in which Emergents can reclaim these lost dimensions of the Christian faith.

Emergent Worship

What are the implications of this recovered embodied and communal faith for Emergent worship? It should not be surprising to discover that Emergents are intent on reclaiming ancient worship practices. These may include the lighting of candles, the burning of incense, stational praying, anointing with oil, and more frequent use of the Lord’s Supper. Such practices express, among other things, the belief that not only the intellect but the whole person should be engaged in worship. Emergents insist that communion with God must be experiential, involving all the senses. When Emergents prepare a space for worship, their aim is to “immerse the worshipper in a sensually rich environment that is designed to draw out an openness to the incoming of God.”⁵

But the Emergents attempt to creatively adapt these ancient practices to forms of communication that are familiar to those living in the twenty-first century. In a service in an Emergent church, according to Sally Morgenthaler, the worshipper may be introduced to the ancient practice of labyrinth prayer set to contemporary electronica. Corporate recitation of the Apostles' Creed may be accompanied by scanned and projected graffiti art offering visual commentary on each affirmation. Morgenthaler explains that this combining of the old and new is in keeping with postmodern sensibilities: the fusing of the past with the present to create something entirely new and unprecedented.⁶

It may be helpful to look more closely at a worship service in an Emergent community. Peter Rollins has provided extensive descriptions of services that Ikon holds. I single out here the Advent service, which is typical of the style of worship in this Emergent community. A detailed overview of this service will serve to flesh out the observations Morgenthaler has made.

What is noteworthy, perhaps above all, about this service is that it is held in a Belfast pub called The Menagerie. When the people enter the worship space, they see Christmas lights and tinsel festooned across the fixtures in the bar. A Christmas tree stands in the corner where a pinball machine once was. In the center of the bar is a large table on which a black cloth has been laid. On this covered table are two objects: a bowl filled with ash, and a large square of sackcloth. On one of the walls of the bar there is a video-loop showing the ultrasound scan of an unborn baby. A DJ plays music into which he has mixed the words from Mark 1:2: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord..." As the music fades, a worshipper moves to the table, begins to cut the sackcloth in strips, and places them in the bowl. Another worshipper then approaches to speak. The subject of the brief address is the Virgin Mary, pregnant with the child Jesus by the Holy Spirit. The lesson is that the hearers are unlike Mary; they have already been impregnated with various things so that there is little room for God. The purpose of Advent is to become empty, "to become pure again so that [they] may house Christ in [their] thoughts and give birth to Christ in [their] actions."

After this address there is time devoted to poetry and more music. Another speaker comes forward to give an address, after which there is silence for reflection. The speaker resumes his homily, and more time is allowed for reflection, in which the people are invited to focus specifically on broken relationships and injustices in their lives that must be set right. Then the speaker invites the people to approach the large table on which rests the bowl of ashes. Each worshipper is to take a strip of sackcloth from the bowl, present it to a leader, who ties it around the worshipper's wrist and offers a prayer. Music plays as the people move solemnly to the "altar" to receive their strips of

sackcloth. The prayer explains that the sackcloth and ashes are symbols of repentance and of the desire to prepare oneself for the advent of God. Each is to wear the strip until Christmas in expectation.

After everyone is seated, someone stands and reads an amplified paraphrase of the parable of the pearl of great price, for which one sells everything he has (Matt. 13:45). The main speaker offers concluding thoughts. As the worshippers leave the service, leaders present CDs to them. On the cover of the CD is a quote from the 14th century German mystic Meister Eckhart: "It is in stillness, in the silence, that the word of God is to be heard." The leaders instruct the people to use the CD to help them become a dwelling place for God's word. The people are unaware that the CD consists in forty-five minutes of silence.⁷

From this service it is possible to distill a number of elements characteristic of Emergent worship. Emergents are concerned to create an open and accepting atmosphere that invites authenticity and self-transparency. Consider the venue for Ikon's worship, a neighborhood pub instead of a church building. The assumption, no doubt, is that it is harder for most to relate spontaneously to one another in the latter than in the former. Parenthetically, it is significant that the pastors of Solomon's Porch, in Minneapolis, removed the pews from the church building they renovated for their services. In the place of the pews now are couches, floor lamps, and coffee tables arranged in semi-circles in order to facilitate face-to-face encounters.⁸ Conversations forge the personal connections necessary for the emergence of genuine community, for which many have a deep longing in the postmodern age.

Emergents are also concerned about retrieving themes from the ancient Christian tradition. Noteworthy is the strong Marian accent on traditional Advent themes celebrated in Ikon's service. The role of Mary in salvation history, however, is not the focus, which it may possibly be in a sermon in a "modern" church. Rather, it is her receptivity to the Word of God, a spiritual virtue that the worshippers are invited to contemplate and imitate. Mary is a vessel fit for her master's use. Emptying herself of all except the desire to be the handmaid of the Lord, she is open to the reception of the divine Word, which is implanted in her by God's Spirit. In this mystery can be discerned a spiritual process to which all Christians should aspire, especially during the Advent season. "And so we seek to empty ourselves this evening, to become pure again so that we may house Christ in our thoughts and give birth to Christ in our actions."⁹

Finally, the service does not so much preach this message as it enacts it. This of course is a distinguishing mark of Emergent worship. The worshippers do not *hear* about the meaning of repentance in a sermon in which a pastor-teacher explains the biblical symbols of sackcloth and ashes; rather, the worshippers

enact the meaning of repentance by having strips of sackcloth tied to their wrists. This ritual act is interpreted by visual media, words, silence, and story from the beginning to the end of the service. Emergents prefer that the people “live into” the truths of the faith as they are presented in a variety of ways than merely assent to a verbalization of them. Nor is their activity to be restricted only to the hour in which the service is held. The people are sent out with a CD to help them continue that into which the service has led them.

Critical Evaluation

There is much to value in the Emergents’ conception of worship. On the basis of what I have presented here, I propose to assess in brief outline the positive contributions of the Emergent movement. I conclude by posing a critical question.

First, the Emergent appropriation of the postmodern critique of modern rationalism makes possible a renewed appreciation of the nature and function of liturgical language. The language of liturgy (and that of much of the Bible) is the language of images and symbols. Spiritual realities, because they are not available to sense perception, can only be expressed indirectly by means of images and symbols. This is not to acknowledge the inferiority of this form of language, which can only serve as a vehicle of spiritual truth when it is translated into the abstract concept, which in turn fixes meaning. On the contrary, the symbol itself opens up dimensions of meaning that are not conveyed by the abstract concept. For example, when I introduce my students to the sacrament of baptism, I invite them to consider the properties of water. What are the uses of water? In what ways is water related to human life and death? Granted, we then go on to connect the answers to these questions to the theological meanings of baptism that we are studying in our textbooks. But in the class I stress the importance of developing the capacity for “listening” as the symbol “speaks” to us. Developing this capacity increases our insight into the spiritual realities as they are mediated to us through the language of the Bible and liturgy. In this sense the “symbol gives rise to thought” (Paul Ricoeur). The ancient adage according to which the “church says more than it knows, and knows more than it says” in the liturgy reflects an understanding of how liturgical language functions. The established churches that are the target of the Emergents’ criticisms have too often failed here. Pastor-teachers too often succumb to the tendency to “making” symbols “understood” by adding to them didactic explanations, which at best limit the symbols’ potential to communicate their manifold meaning to the participants in the worship service.

Second, the stance of the Emergents toward the use of the Bible constitutes a salutary warning against dogmatism. This is a danger to which some evangelical

churches are especially prone. There is no doubt that the Bible contains content—even content that can be organized in a series of propositional statements. But the Emergent movement has asked probing questions about how the relationship between the believing subject and that content should be conceived. The Emergents suspect that the tendency to make the content an end in itself prevails in many of the established churches. This is to violate the well-known hermeneutical rule enunciated by Thomas Aquinas: *actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile sed ad rem* (the act of believing does not relate to the formulation but to the matter). Christians need to be vigilant that the object of their faith and devotion does not become the sacred page but the God to whom that page witnesses. It is possible to see in the way the Bible is used in the forms of worship analyzed above a desire to observe this rule.

Third, the Emergent movement has provided categories of cultural analysis that will help pastors to discern the challenges and opportunities of ministering to people in the twenty-first century. Emergents are attuned to the postmodern predicament in which unsettled people have to assume the responsibility for constructing their own identities apart from the resources of a culture and a tradition that otherwise would provide them stability and direction.¹⁰ Emergents attempt to be open and embracing, providing a worship space that offers the possibility of forming bonds of solidarity with others who feel just as unsettled. This posture of openness can serve as a needed corrective to that of the established churches, whose members can often be exclusionary in their regrettable attempt to secure a safe haven against the external threats posed by the socio-cultural changes that accompany the postmodern turn.

In sum, the value of the Emergent movement is that it draws out issues that are central to the being and activity of the church as it engages with the formidable challenges of the postmodern era. But one can agree substantially with this in the last analysis without necessarily agreeing to what the Emergents propose as the alternative. Is it the case that the established churches have been rendered obsolete by dramatic changes that accompany the postmodern turn? And if so, are Christians in them obliged to make their churches over into Emergent communities in order to witness effectively to the faith in a postmodern world?

The Emergent Christian seems to regard himself as a herald announcing a radical break with a tradition(s) that has already been undergoing dissolution. To be sure, it is a commonplace observation that religious beliefs and practices proper to confessional traditions have been dispersed and distributed beyond the defined boundaries of faith communities sustained and perpetuated by those traditions. Sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has observed the formation of a “mobile and fluid universe” that has been liberated from the hold of established institutions of believing. In this universe, all symbols are “interchangeable,

combinable, and transposable one onto the other."¹¹ But is this a process to be uncritically embraced and celebrated, as it seems to be in the community in which labyrinth prayer is set to contemporary electronica? This state of affairs would seem to give small consolation to people searching for signposts of meaning in a postmodern landscape in which they are forced to negotiate and re-negotiate their sense of place.

Emergent leader Tony Jones exclaimed that the Emergent movement "felt like the beginning of something new and the overthrow of something old." But men and women not only need the spontaneity of innovation but also continuity and coherence of tradition. Christians in established churches ought to revitalize their traditions rather than to break from them. Above all this applies to their liturgical traditions. There is an important difference between the retrieval of ancient worship practices in the Emergent church and that which is witnessed in the confessional Protestant churches in the last century. The latter were guided in their selection by criteria internal to their traditions. In the case of the Reformed churches, liturgical committees asked: to what extent can this element from the liturgies of the early church be integrated into an order of worship that is distinctively Reformed? Combining the old and the new arbitrarily in a postmodern bricolage may be fashionable, but it risks exacerbating the struggle for meaning and sense of place that the Emergents are keen to address. One cannot help wondering whether the cure is worse than the disease.

The postmodern critique that the Emergents have adopted will teach Christians in established churches about the limitations and particularistic character of their traditions. And these Christians will appreciate that in a "mobile and fluid universe" they will inevitably draw not only upon their own traditions but increasingly upon others'. Traditions continually interact and interpenetrate. But at the same time they will come to a renewed appreciation for the importance of their traditions, because it is precisely tradition that mediates and secures those meanings toward which so many in the postmodern milieu seem to be groping.

¹For an analysis of how the postmodern affects worship, see David N. Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 3-13.

²D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 27.

³Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 96

⁴Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006), 73.

⁵Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, xiv.

⁶Sally Morgenthaler, "Emergent Church," *Exploring the Worship Spectrum: 6 Views*, eds. Paul F.M. Zahl and Paul Basden (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 224.

⁷Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 103-108.

⁸Jones, *The New Christians*, 208.

⁹Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 104.

¹⁰John Reader, *Reconstructing Practical Theology: The Impact of Globalization* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 28.

¹¹Danièle Hervieu-Léger, "Religion as Memory: Reference to Tradition and the Constitution of a Heritage of Belief in Modern Societies," in *Religion: Beyond a Concept* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 247-248.