

BIBLICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE

THE EMERGING CHURCH AND ADVENTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

Kwabena Donkor



RELEASE

08

THE EMERGING CHURCH AND ADVENTIST ECCLESIOLOGY

Kwabena Donkor
Associate Director Biblical
Research Institute
October 2011

The Emerging Church and Adventist Ecclesiology

Introduction

Mark Driscoll traces the beginnings of the Emerging Church to a conference hosted by the Leadership Network in the mid-1990s¹. The conference's initial focus on ministry to Generation X shifted to issues "related to being the Church in an emerging postmodern culture."² Continuing the discussion on postmodernism, a small team was formed to study what missions would look like in the USA and the implications for theology and the Church. The team eventually came to include Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Tony Jones, Dan Kimball and Andrews Jones, with McLaren rising to become team leader.³ In America, Brian McLaren is generally recognized as the most influential representative of the Emerging church.⁴ It was this team that became what is now known as the Emergent.⁵

¹Leadership Network was born in 1984 out of the cooperative efforts of Bob Buford and Peter Drucker to be a "resource broker" to churches. For further details, including the initial founders' interest in mysticism and the involvement of Zondervan Publishing and personalities such as Rick Warren and Leonard Sweet, see *Faith Undone* by Roger Oakland (Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2009), 23-38.

²Mark Driscoll, "A Pastoral Perspective on the Emerging Church," *Criswell Theological Review*, 3.2, 2006, 87-93.

³Mark Driscoll left the group in part because of theological differences.

⁴McLaren's books include *A Generous Orthodoxy*, *The Secret Message of Jesus*, *The Last Word And The Word After That*, as well as *Adventures in Missing the Point* that he coauthored with Tony Campolo. My reading of these works as well as analyses of them by other authors has informed my own reflections and critique of the Emerging church movement.

⁵We are told that the concept of "emerging" or "emergent" has its roots in rainforest ecology where "*Emergents* are small saplings that grow up in the shadow of the mature forest canopy, waiting to soar up and fill the gap vacated by a dying tree." See Richard L. Mayhue, "The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation?" *Master's Seminary Journal*, 2006, 193.

A wide variety of churches and Christians comprise the broad category of the Emerging Church. Because of this diversity, defining the Emerging Church becomes quite difficult.⁶ Ed Stetzer has provided a helpful way to classify the emerging phenomenon into specific types.⁷ He explains succinctly and consecutively what he has classified as “relevants,” “reconstructionists,” and “revisionists.” He notes, “I believe that some are taking the same Gospel in the historic form of church but seeking to make it understandable to emerging culture [relevants]; some are taking the same Gospel but questioning and reconstructing much of the form of church [reconstructionists]; some are questioning and revising the Gospel and the church [revisionists].”⁸

Relevants and reconstructionists have not been the focus of much of the critical discussion surrounding emerging churches. This observation raises the question: When does the emerging phenomenon become harmful? The issue with “relevants” is fundamentally an issue of contextualization, which in principle, is not unbiblical (1 Cor. 9:19-23). However, the possibility of contextualization becoming syncretism necessitates great care to be taken to find *biblical* principles in support of or against any practices. This is especially important for issues pertaining to particular points of worship styles (music types, dancing, praying loudly, shouting, etc.). Reconstructionists seem to take the issue of contextualization more theologically, extending it to the very form and structure of the church. Unlike issues of worship, where we may only garner principles from the Bible to guide a potentially wide

⁶John S. Hammett, “An Ecclesiological Assessment of the Emerging Church,” *Criswell Theological Review* 3.2, 2006, 31.

⁷Ed Stetzer, “First Person: Understanding the Emerging Church,” accessed, April 14, 2011, <http://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-orleadership/first-person-understanding-the-emerging-church-1372534.html>.

⁸Ibid. Relevants are described as being doctrinally sound but trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture. Reconstructionists are concerned about the current *form* of the church that they consider irrelevant and unhelpful. Thus, they may reject certain traditional organizational models and prefer what may be called an “incarnational” or “house” model. Revisionists are described as theologically liberal and question key evangelical doctrines.

variety of practices, the Church is so critically connected to God's plan for the world (Eph 3:10), we must be cognizant of biblical directives concerning the church. Incarnational or house church models, for example, speak not only to the issue of theological "relevance," but also to one of theological "adequacy."⁹ Stetzer is correct, in principle, when he opines, "Don't want a building, a budget and a program? OK. Don't want the Bible, scriptural leadership, a covenant community, Not OK."¹⁰

It is the revisionists within the emerging church that cause the greatest concern due to the questioning or modifying of fundamental gospel issues. Much of our discussion here will focus on revisionists. The issues of spiritual formation (contemplative/centering prayer etc.) are the primary concern of Seventh-day Adventists--not contextualization. For our purposes, we will focus on the ecclesiological aspects of the phenomenon.¹¹ However, closely related theological themes such as soteriology, eschatology, and the doctrine of Scripture will be referenced to in order to bring clarity to the nature of the ecclesiological problem in emerging thought.

Theoretical Foundations of the Emerging Church

Despite the difficulty of defining the Emerging Church, John Hammett correctly notes that its central premise is "that churches must change to respond to postmodern culture."¹² He elaborates, "The virtually unanimous consensus in the emerging church is that those to whom they desire to speak must be spoken to in language that is at least cognizant of

⁹For a discussion on house churches, see my "New Testament House Churches: A Model for Today's Complex World?" *Ministry Magazine*, April 2008.

¹⁰Stetzer "First Person: Understanding the Emerging Church," accessed, April 14, 2011, <http://www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/first-person-understanding-the-emerging-church-1372534.html>.

¹¹For a brief focus on the reconstructionist type of emerging church see James Coffin, "The Emerging Church: A Practical Assessment," *Adventist Review*, June 10, 2010.

¹²Hammett, 34.

postmodern sensibilities and sensitivities.”¹³ Others concur. “Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.”¹⁴ Since postmodernism is foundationally a philosophical construct, the emerging church’s goal to change the church to respond to postmodernism must be based on postmodern principles.

Philosophical Principles of the Emerging Church

Jon Bolt identifies two major disaffections of the emerging church--*traditional fundamentalism* and *modernity*--and points out their commonality: epistemological certainty. He asserts, “Fundamentalism is absolutely certain of what it knows and believes because the truth has been given in inerrant propositions in scriptural revelation. Modernity’s epistemological certainty comes by way of a religious devotion to a single scientific method as the key to all knowledge.”¹⁵ Emergents are convinced that the church’s key weakness is its capitulation to modernity as evidenced in the church-growth and megachurch phenomenon. The philosophical principle at stake here is *foundationalism*, the idea that for knowledge to be certain, it must have an unassailable basis on which all other knowledge ought to be built. Since the emerging church is self-consciously postmodern, it is *anti-foundational*. Emergents argue that foundationalism has not been able to deliver its promised certainty and therefore should be rejected.¹⁶ Consequently, they replace foundationalism with a post-foundational epistemology that is interested primarily in an inclusive, open-ended *conversation*, aimed at fostering community and theological insight.¹⁷

Closely related to the principle of foundationalism is the

¹³Ibid., 33.

¹⁴Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 44.

¹⁵John Bolt, “An Emerging Critique of the Postmodern, Evangelical Church: A Review Essay,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 41, 2006, 207.

¹⁶Travis I. Barbour and Nicholas E. Toews, “The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique” *Direction*, 39.1, 2010, 35.

¹⁷Ibid.

concept of truth. It has been suggested that most evangelicals who see postmodernism as something to be opposed, do so because of its truth claims.¹⁸ This conclusion supports the view that evangelicals consider epistemology in postmodernism a fundamental issue.¹⁹ They particularly oppose the emerging church's rejection of universal, objective truth.²⁰ Emergents encourage the acknowledgment of the "legitimacy of narrative truth, metaphoric truth, relational truth, mystical truth, and the like."²¹ At its roots, the emergent movement represents a methodological shift from a realist epistemology by embracing a constructionist view of the world. The constructionist view states that "rather than viewing the world objectively from an Archimedean vantage point [i.e. a point outside from which a true picture of something can be obtained], humans structure the world through the concepts they bring to it... No simple, one-to-one relationship exists between language and the world. Nor can any single description provide an accurate 'map' of the world."²²

The rejection of both foundationalism and the possibility of universal, objective truth leads to intellectual *pluralism*. Intellectual pluralism is the notion that it is not possible to have a single system, or view of reality with which we may explain the totality of life. Intellectual pluralism is to be

¹⁸Hammett, 41.

¹⁹Stanley Grenz, a key thinker for many in the emerging church has observed that "one especially far-reaching impact of the emerging postmodern situation is upon the realm of epistemology." See *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* by Stanley Grenz (Baker Academic, 2000), 185.

²⁰Charles Colson, in his "Back Page" in *Christianity Today* has observed, "Emerging church leaders are trying to translate the gospel for a postmodern generation. That's a commendable goal...Though in their effort to reach postmoderns—who question the existence and knowability of truth—I expressed fear that they are coming dangerously close to the teaching that objective truth does not exist," *Christianity Today*, June 2006.

²¹Bolt, 207.

²²Stanley Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," in John G. Stockhouse (ed.) *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 108.

distinguished from the commonplace fact that ours is a world comprised of various elements. Leslie Newbigin clarifies. "It has become a commonplace to say that we live in a pluralist society—not merely a society which is in fact plural in the variety of cultures, religions and lifestyles which it embraces, but pluralist in the sense that this plurality is celebrated as things to be approved and cherished."²³ The distinction being made here is between pluralism as a fact of life and pluralism as an ideology. The latter is a contemporary response to the former, especially in the realm of religion, where plurality of beliefs is no longer seen merely as an observable fact but a phenomenon to be theoretically justified. As such, any normative claim to truth may at best be censured as imperialist and divisive or at worst judged as "the intellectual equivalent of fascism."²⁴

Anti-foundationalism, rejection of universal, objective truth-claims, and intellectual pluralism are a few of the basic philosophical principles of postmodernism that influence an emerging church committed to its postmodern sensibilities. These principles, in turn, have immediate effects on theological themes.

Key Theological Themes of the Emerging Church

Mark Driscoll, a member of the original discussion group that evolved into the Emerging Church, lists eight important theological issues that emerging Christianity "is essentially making up its mind again."²⁵ They are Scripture, Jesus Christ, gender, sin, salvation, the Cross, hell, and authority. We will only focus on the themes of Scripture, soteriology, and eschatology, which have received considerable attention in emergent thinking.

²³Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1, quoted in Alister E. McGrath, "The Challenge of Pluralism for the Contemporary Christian Church," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, 35.3, 1992, 361.

²⁴McGrath, 362.

²⁵Driscoll, 91.

Scripture

The issue of Scripture is tied to emerging epistemology, and Brian McLaren's views are representative. John MacArthur characterizes McLaren's approach to Scripture as a challenge to its clarity.²⁶ McLaren believes the Bible is to be understood as narrative.²⁷ In David H. Kelsey's taxonomy of *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, he discusses the narrative method to the authority of Scripture, mentioning "recital" and "presence" as two main approaches.²⁸ Though differences may be detected among its proponents, narrative theology subscribes to the notion that the authority of the Bible resides in its narrative power and not its didactic aspects.²⁹ Adopting the narrative approach, McLaren observes that it "does not lessen the agony one feels reading the conquest of Canaan with the eyes of one taught by Jesus to love all, including enemies. But it helps turn the Bible into what it is, not a look-it-up encyclopedia of timeless moral truths, but the unfolding narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham, into a new way of life."³⁰ Quite clearly McLaren, like other proponents of narrative theology, places the authority of the Bible in the power of its confessional narratives. He continues to say, "To be truly biblical does not mean being preoccupied with some golden age in the ancient world and God's word to people back then. It means learning from the past to let God's story, God's will, and God's dream continue to come true in us and our children."³¹ D. A Carson criticizes McLaren's appeal to the Bible's narrative as doubly distortive for the reason that "despite all his emphasis on the

²⁶John MacArthur, "Perspicuity of Scripture: The Emergent Approach," *Master's Seminary Journal* 17.2, 2006, 141-158.

²⁷Larry D. Pettegrew, "Evangelicalism, Paradigms, and the Emerging Church," *Master's Seminary Journal*, 17.2, 2006, 171.

²⁸David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 32-55.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 171

³¹*Ibid.*

Bible's story line, McLaren remains deeply suspicious of any appeal to 'metanarrative,' even the Bible's metanarrative."³²

McLaren's overall attitude towards Scripture stems from this narrative approach to its authority and the refusal to see it as embodying a metanarrative. For this reason, he expresses ambivalence towards the exegetical enterprise. He observes that "when we theological conservatives seek to understand the Bible, we generally analyze it. We break it down into chapters, paragraphs, verses, sentences, clauses, phrases, words, prefixes, roots, suffixes, jots, and tittles. Now we understand it, we tell ourselves. Now we have conquered the text, captured the meaning, removed all mystery, stuffed it and preserved it for posterity, like a taxidermist, with a deer head. But what have we missed? What have we lost by reduction?"³³ On the other hand, McLaren hints at what he may think is more important when he poses the question, "How about a congregation who may not have 'captured the meaning' of the text, but a text that captured the imagination and curiosity of the congregation?"³⁴ Yes, McLaren espouses doctrinal uncertainty and interpretive complexity.³⁵ But it is all a result of embracing a narrative approach to biblical authority, which eschews propositional truths, the same thing postmodernism disallows.

Soteriology

The doctrine of salvation is at the center of both the Old and New Testaments. And, throughout the Bible, the concept of atonement is intrinsically connected to the doctrine of salvation. But when the Bible is read primarily for its narrative value, one must expect significant changes to nearly all of its

³²D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 165. Carson notes that as soon as one speaks of the Bible's metanarrative, McLaren is wont to ask: Whose gospel?

³³Brian McLaren, in Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo, *Adventures in Missing the Point* (El Cajon, CA: Youth Specialties, 2003), 73, quoted in Pettegrew, 171.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵MacArthur, 144-146.

conceptual formulations including the doctrine of salvation. To help define emergent thought on soteriology, we wish to place it on the broader evangelical theological landscape. After making the surprising observation that in spite of the centrality of the question of salvation in all Christian theological discourse, the Christian church has never produced a dogma of salvation as it has done on the Trinity or Christology, Lutheran theologian Carl E. Braaten makes the following significant comment:

The more deeply we probe the Christian sources for an answer to the soteri-ological questions ... the more we find our focus of attention narrowing down to the traditional dogmatic topic of soteriology centering on the “work of Christ,” and even more specifically on the doctrine of the atonement and the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Soteriology—the doctrine of salvation—becomes inseparably linked to Soter-ology—the doctrine of the Savior.³⁶

Braaten also warns of two opposite errors to be avoided while trying to understand the Christian doctrine of salvation: First, the subjectivist error of constructing the picture of the Christ solely from the side of human interests and desires for salvation. Second, the objectivist error that makes Christology a system of facts and doctrines true in themselves, without reference to the structure of human experience.³⁷

From a different perspective, Donald Bloesch crystallizes some tendencies in contemporary soteriological thinking:³⁸

- The death of Jesus Christ on the cross is treated more as an incomparable revelation of God’s grace and mercy than as a vicarious substitutionary atonement for the sins of mankind.

³⁶Carl E. Braaten, “The Christian Doctrine of Salvation,” *Interpretation*, 35.2, 1981, 118.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Donald Bloesch, “Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought,” *Interpretation*, 35.2, 1981, 143-144.

- The cross of Christ is also regarded as a dramatic testimony to the power of suffering love and as the key to the abundant life of freedom. Among salvation models, liberation from oppression, humanization and inward healing are much more prominent than penal redemption or victory over the devil.
- Personal integration and self-realization are also given serious attention as viable models of salvation (reflecting a cultural milieu that promotes narcissism).
- The purpose of the incarnation is to demonstrate God's deep love for us or to reveal the presence of God latent within all people. It is not to save people from divine judgment and hell (as in the older theology).
- In most current theology, justification is absorbed into sanctification, which is often interpreted as a process of self-purification that continues beyond death.
- Christ is generally seen as an exemplar of perfected human nature or as the historical personification of liberating love rather than as a mediator and sin-bearer. He signifies the maturation of the human spirit, the flower of humanity rather than the Word made flesh.
- The pre-existence of Jesus Christ is, for the most part, considered a relic of an outmoded mythology.

On both the issues of atonement and the unique role of Jesus Christ in salvation, the Emerging Church exhibits the tendencies noted above by Bloesch. The *Lost Message of Jesus*,³⁹ a book written by influential English emergents and warmly praised by McLaren, deals with the question of atonement. The rather unflattering depiction of the Old Testament temple and its sacrificial system as the "sin-busting, forgiveness-bestowing machine"⁴⁰ seems to be just the beginning of a decided disdain for the biblical concept of sacrificial atonement. Although the New Testament (especially Hebrews) casts Christ's death in sacrificial and expiatory terms, the authors are not

³⁹Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

⁴⁰Ibid., 104.

shamefaced in their negative evaluation since they find such categorizations “both offensive and a massive contradiction”⁴¹ of their understanding of God’s love.

The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love.” If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.⁴²

Emergents prefer to accentuate the moral perspective of atonement or the *Christus Victor* theory, ostensibly because of postmodern sensitivities. Robert Webber observes “that God in Christ is the cosmic-redeemer is a message pleasing to postmodern ears.”⁴³

The shift in emphasis from sacrificial atonement to the contemporary tendencies in soteriological thinking noted above has implications for the unique role of Christ in salvation. McLaren revises the Reformed doctrine of “limited atonement” in favor of “limitless reconciliation.” He employs the concept of *missio dei* in a relational sense to mean that God’s reconciliation never isolates divine from human relational healing.⁴⁴ This position taken by McLaren explains Pettegrew’s remarks that he [McLaren] refuses “to make a judgment about non-Christians’ eternal destiny. He thinks the incarnation suggests an affirmation by God of human

⁴¹Carson, 185.

⁴²Chalke and Mann, 182-183,

⁴³Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 66-67.

⁴⁴McLaren, *Generous Orthodoxy*, 196.

culture generally—including other religions, to a degree.”⁴⁵ In this way, the uniqueness of Christ towards the salvation of all humanity is blunted. These considerations are consistent with McLaren’s view that while in modernity the gospel was made to center on atonement, in Emergent thinking, the gospel is about the kingdom of God. Explaining the kingdom, Tony Campolo writes, “God’s kingdom is a new society that Jesus wants to create in this world—within human history, not after the Second Coming or a future apocalypse or anything else. But right now.”⁴⁶ The difference between centering the gospel either on atonement or on the kingdom should be clear: An atonement-focused gospel, for emergents, leads to a “pie-in-the-sky” religion; whereas a kingdom-oriented gospel addresses the needs of society here and now.

Eschatology

It is here that emerging soteriology appears to merge into its eschatology. In the book that Tony Campolo co-writes with McLaren, he sets his understanding of eschatology against the backdrop of dispensational eschatology. Campolo correctly criticizes dispensationalism as a deviation from classical Christian understanding of the end.⁴⁷ Yet, his portrayal of the end seems to fall short of God’s supernatural irruption of history. Instead, he makes the end appear as an extension of the course of history. Opposing the dispensational view of a world that is spiraling down morally, he writes: “To the contrary, the history of the world is infused with the presence of God, who is guiding the world toward becoming the kind of world God willed it to be when it was created. Human history is going somewhere wonderful.”⁴⁸ It is clear that Campolo approaches eschatology from an idealistic understanding of prophecy. He employs this principle to interpret Babylon in Revelation 17. “Babylon refers to the *dominant culture in which Christians find themselves living*,” writes Campolo, and “each

⁴⁵Pettegrew, 171.

⁴⁶McLaren and Campolo, 43.

⁴⁷Ibid., 57-59.

⁴⁸Ibid., 59.

age and each nation has its own Babylon.”⁴⁹ For 21st century Americans, the materialistic, success-oriented, consumeristic society of American culture is Babylon. Opposing Babylon is Jerusalem, “the social system that the whole of history points toward.”⁵⁰ In Campolo’s view, this is what the Second Coming is all about, “ultimate hope...the fulfillment of all our dreams... the realization of every utopian expectation.”⁵¹ One gets a sense of the humanistic tone of emergent eschatology from Campolo’s conclusions about the Second Coming. “To those who work for peace, the Second Coming is the assurance that their labors are not in vain, and that one day peace will reign. To those who strive to eliminate poverty, the Second Coming means the day is coming when the hungry will be fed, the naked clothed, and the homeless housed.”⁵²

McLaren has similar ideas on eschatology. Scot McKnight has concluded that McLaren’s vision “is simply to return to Jesus and to rework and revitalize Jesus’ kingdom vision.”⁵³ What McLaren has discovered is Jesus’ thoroughly social vision which, he believes, most conservative evangelicals have buried. It is a vision that has everything to do with public matters in general and politics in particular.⁵⁴ McKnight’s conclusion is that “in this aggressive emphasis of the here and now, we see a devaluation of the traditional view of heaven, and the need for a radical reworking of familiar terms—*eternal life, heaven, kingdom, repent, believe, and sin*. These terms now take their meaning from the story of God’s current redemption of the entire created order through the followers

⁴⁹Ibid., 60.

⁵⁰Ibid., 59-60.

⁵¹Ibid., 64.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Scot McKnight, “McLaren Emerging,” *Christianity Today*, Sept., 2009, 60.

⁵⁴An affinity to the ideas of liberation theology can be detected here. According to Daniel Plenc, “Las Iglesias emergentes: Manifestaciones y desafíos,” *DavarLogos* X.2 (2011), 145-150, the Emergent Church movement is already having an impact in Latin America. In his article he discusses the theological and philosophical background of the movement and its main characteristics, and points to the fact that the liberation theology movement may have prepared the way for its acceptance.

of Jesus who embody and expand his message.”⁵⁵

Emerging Ecclesiology

The philosophical and theological themes reviewed above provide the background for the emerging church’s approach to the Christian understanding of the church in the 21st century. How church is *conceived* and *practiced* are influenced by these principles.

Emerging Views on the Nature of the Church

Traditionally, Protestants have tried to understand the nature of the church by examining words such as *ecclesia*, as well as exploring the biblical images of the church (e.g. body of Christ [Rom 12:5], people of God [1 Pet 2:9] etc.). The church includes all who are saved by Christ, expressed as one community throughout the world, yet at the same time present in each assembly. Protestants have also felt the need to identify the marks of the true church as the place where the Word is rightly preached and the sacraments properly administered. Although, presently, the body of Christ is manifestly divided, one implication of the biblical image of the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit is that the Holy Spirit, being one, endeavors to produce unity within the body (Acts 4:31-32).

Emergent ecclesiology, however, seems to see the nature of the church differently. McLaren, for example, is not too concerned about maintaining an orthodox understanding of the nature of the church. His principle of generous orthodoxy, following Stanley Grenz and Hans Frei’s use of the phrase, means that ecclesologically, the nature of the church could, in principle, be eclectic. McLaren, the emergent, unfinished Christian, who claims also to be “missional, evangelical, post/protestant, liberal, conservative, mystical/poetic, biblical, charismatic/contemplative, fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, catholic, green, incarnational,

⁵⁵Ibid., 61. See also *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke and Alan Mann (Zondervan, 2003), who devote the work to “demonstrate that the core of Jesus’ life-transforming, though often deeply misunderstood, message is this: *The Kingdom, the in-breaking shalom of God, is available now to everyone through me,*” 16.

depressed-yet-hopeful,”⁵⁶ speaks about the “Seven Jesuses I have known,”⁵⁷ and asks, “*Why not celebrate them all?*”⁵⁸

To take such an eclectic view of the church places it one short step away from ecumenism; and Emergent thinkers embrace it. First, they affirm their commitment “to honor and serve the church in all its forms—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Pentecostal. We practice ‘deep ecclesiology’—rather than favoring some forms of the church and critiquing or rejecting others, we see that every form of the church has both weaknesses and strengths, both liabilities and potential.”⁵⁹ Second, emergent ecumenism goes beyond Christian denominations to embrace other religious traditions. For McLaren, generous orthodoxy sees members of other religions and non-religions as neighbors, collaborators and dialogue partners.⁶⁰ Indeed, he argues that the Christian faith he is proposing should become a welcome friend to other religions and not a threat; Christians should be protecting the heritages of these religions and not be one of their enemies.⁶¹

But, is it possible to hold together such a “deep ecclesiology” and ecumenical outlook without a galvanizing center? The emerging church appears to have found an answer in response to Grenz’ call on evangelicals to take the lead in “renewing a theological center” that will meet the challenges of the postmodern situation. Emergent *spirituality* and its *missional* idea seem to provide the needed center.

Emerging Views on the *Role* of the Church

Traditional Protestant understanding of the role of the church generally revolves around four elements: evangelism (Matt 28:19), edification (Eph 4:12), worship (Heb 10:25), and social concern (James 1:27; 2:1-11; 1 John 3:17-18). Each of

⁵⁶Generous Orthodoxy, 25.

⁵⁷Ibid., 43.

⁵⁸Ibid., 66.

⁵⁹Emergent Village Home Page, Values and Practices accessed, May 17, 2011, http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/values_and_practices.

⁶⁰Generous Orthodoxy, 35.

⁶¹Ibid., 254.

these elements is being re-envisioned in the emerging church.

Evangelism

In the emerging church, the concept of evangelism seems to have been replaced with the missional idea. Scot McKnight, who considers himself to be part of the Emerging movement, comes right out to claim that the emerging church is not known for evangelism.⁶² And this is the irony; a movement that prides itself on being missional does not have much room for evangelism (missional means meeting peoples' needs here and now). McKnight traces the cause to the movement's skepticism about what they consider to be an "in versus out" mentality of much of evangelicalism. This skepticism may be traced, philosophically, to the movement's commitment to postmodern pluralism, and more theologically, to their failure to admit to the uniqueness of Christ in the salvation of humanity. Christian evangelism or mission has to do with the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ. McKnight is right when he says, "Unless you proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, there is no good news at all—and if there is no Good News, then there is no Christianity, emerging or evangelical."⁶³

Another reason evangelism is a problem for the emerging church is its stance on the authority of Scripture. Jesus' final instructions to the disciples and to the Church included the commission to go into all the world and make disciples (Matt 28:19-20). Disciple-making required the apostles, and the Church today, to proclaim the *truth* and the *will of God* to the nations. The Church is not called to proclaim just *any* gospel. It is the word of the Lord that the Church is mandated to proclaim. We are charged to teach the world to observe all things the Lord of the Church commanded (Matt 28:19). The proclamation of the gospel, therefore, ties the Church to the authority of God's revelation in Scripture. Teaching the world to observe all the things the Lord commands requires more

⁶²Scot McKnight, "Five Streams of the Emerging Church," *Christianity Today*, February 2007, 38.

⁶³Ibid.

than the narrative authority the emerging church is willing to grant the Bible.

Edification and Worship

Biblically, edification focuses on the believer, and worship, on God. But the two are closely related. As Christopher Knight has correctly noted, “While worship is indeed the prime purpose of liturgy, however, expression of the *worth* of God presupposes a particular type of consciousness and state of being on the part of the worshipper.”⁶⁴ Forming the believer’s proper state of being for worship is one of the goals of edification. It involves building up the individual believer and the community of faith through teaching, preaching, fellowship, prayer, etc. Knight hints that there seems to be a gap between what is actually done in liturgy and what is found to be genuinely edifying--building up individual believers and communities. He notes, “There is a widespread sense that what was formerly appropriate in worship in this respect has ceased to be so, with the result that many find themselves with no Christian community in which they feel truly at home in worship.”⁶⁵ In general, the response to this so-called sense of “homelessness” has been either to seek a deeper sense of the *numinous* in worship (as in the Taize community model) or to seek a closer sense of relevance of worship to the world of work, politics, and community life (as in the *incarnational* worship model of the Iona community).⁶⁶

Proponents of the emerging church address a similar sense of disillusionment of worship experience in evangelical

⁶⁴Christopher Knight, “Send Us Out Into the World,” *Modern Churchman*, ns 33.2, 1991, 20.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶The Taize community is an ecumenical monastic order of Roman Catholic and Protestant monks in France devoted to peace and justice through prayer and meditation. Experience at the community has prayer and silence at its core, as well as a music tradition that has much-repeated prayer chants during candlelit prayer services. The Iona community in Glasgow, Scotland, is also an ecumenical Christian community seeking to live the Gospel in the world today through social and political action. It calls for a renewal of the church through new forms of worship and an integrated approach to spirituality.

churches. Dave Tomlinson speaks of “a longing for the spirituality squeezed out by modernity’s emphasis on materialism and rationality.”⁶⁷ He observes, however, that in the postmodernist world, “the search for spirituality doesn’t lead to conventional religion because religious metanarratives are no more appealing to them than modernist metanarratives.”⁶⁸ Speaking for post-evangelicals, one stream of the emerging church,⁶⁹ Tomlinson says that “the post-evangelical impetus, however, is to search for this fresh sense of spirituality, which they don’t find in most evangelical circles, in the symbolic and contemplative traditions of the church rather than in the New Age movement.”⁷⁰ In pursuit of this search

The emerging church is not shy about raiding the storehouses of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and the Anglicans for richer liturgies as well as prayer beads, icons, spiritual direction, *lectio divina* and a deeper sacramentality. The return to ancient faith and practice is increasingly seen as a way forward in churches polarized by worship wars and theological intransigence.⁷¹

Emerging spirituality is a natural consequence of the Emerging Church’s embrace of postmodernism, and it is one area that gives many serious concerns. One observer notes that “the embrace of postmodernism by evangelicals is not simply a corrective to perceived faults and not just a methodological move but one filled with destructive content, particularly in its distinctive spirituality.”⁷² The view is commonly shared that a new generation of Christians are redefining the church’s

⁶⁷Dave Tomlinson, *The Post Evangelical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 29.

⁶⁸Ibid., 83.

⁶⁹See McKnight, 38.

⁷⁰Ibid., 29.

⁷¹Scott Bader-Saye, “The Emergent Matrix: A New Kind of Church?” *Christian Century*, 121 no 24 N 30, 2004, 21.

⁷²Observation of David Wells as reflected in John Bolt, 213.

traditional modes of worship, liturgy and ecclesiology.⁷³ It is argued that this Christian counter-culture, which is noted to find expression in the Emerging Church movement, “is a modern form of mysticism, a characteristic of which is individualistic encounters with God.”⁷⁴ Beth Sheppard reveals parallels between medieval mysticism and the spirituality of the emerging church.⁷⁵

In his book *Future Church*, Jim Wilson shows that the emerging, post-seeker Age churches are not as concerned with marketing services for unbelievers or entertaining believers “as they are in ushering people, believers and unbelievers alike, *into the presence of God*” [emphasis added].⁷⁶ This goal of ushering people into the presence of God explains the emerging church’s devotion to creating sacred spaces and experiential, multi-sensory worship gatherings.⁷⁷ Thus, Julie B. Sevig writes about 33-year-old Kay Craddick who dances down the aisle of her church with a clay bowl of incense as part of a procession that includes several other young adults: the crucifer, torchbearers and bookbearer.⁷⁸ Sevig remarks, “Post-moderns prefer to encounter Christ by using all their senses. That’s part of the appeal of classical liturgical or contemplative worship: the incense and candles, making the sign of the cross, the taste and smell of the bread and wine,

⁷³Fernando Canale, “The Emerging Church,” *Adventist Review*, June 10, 2010.

⁷⁴Beth M. Sheppard, “Supporting the Modern Mystic: Collecting for the ‘New’ Spirituality,” *American Theological Library Association Summary of Proceedings*, 63, 2009, 208.

⁷⁵Sheppard refers to two works: 1) Phyllis Tickle’s *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why?* 2) Michael Lauwers and Marie-Helene Congourdeau’s article on medieval mysticism in *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*. She draws out the following chief characteristics shared by mysticism and the emerging church: primacy of personal experience; no need of ecclesiastical authority; heightened role for women; and being disparaged or marginalized by existing institutional leaders.

⁷⁶Jim L. Wilson, *Future Church* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), 38-39.

⁷⁷Roger Oakland, *Faith Undone* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing, 2007), 57.

⁷⁸Julie B. Sevig, “Ancient New,” *The Lutheran*, September, 2001.

touching icons and being anointed with oil.”⁷⁹ Scott Bader-Saye describes her experience at an Emergent Convention at the Nashville Convention Center in 2004:

The convention tipped its hat to the ancient by constructing a portal to the past in the form of a prayer labyrinth. Convention goers passed from the fluorescent daytime of the convention hallway into the darkness of the sacred place, dimly lit by candles. The labyrinth filled the room. One by one participants filed in to walk the path of prayer. But unlike the ancients, these postmodern pilgrims carried portable CD players which guided them through the journey and provided ambient music. Along the way, walkers paused at stations to engage in spiritual exercises. A stone and a bucket of water, a map and a compass, bread and wine all became instruments of prayer and meditation.⁸⁰

Part of “raiding the storehouses of the Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and the Anglicans for richer liturgies” is the appeal by *worship renewal* authorities such as Robert Webber for evangelicals to get immersed in the writings of Roman Catholic mystics such as Thomas a Kempis, Meister Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Merton. It is Webber’s view that these books are “indispensable to spirituality. Those who neglect these works do so to their harm, and those who read them do so for their inspiration and spiritual growth.”⁸¹

Spiritual Formation and Contemplative/Centering Prayer

One of the defining characteristics of edification and worship in the emerging church is the practice of contemplative or

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Scott Bader-Saye, 22. Note: In emerging culture, darkness represents spirituality.

⁸¹Oakland, 65.

centering prayer. Contemplative prayer has become a *sine qua non* of spiritual formation. It is generally acknowledged that the contemporary contemplative prayer movement draws its influences from Roman Catholic spiritual practices: “During Fr. Keating’s term as abbot at St. Joseph’s [Massachusetts] and in response to the reforms of Vatican II, he invited teachers from the East to the monastery. As a result of this exposure to Eastern spiritual traditions, Fr. Keating and several of the monks at St. Joseph’s were led to develop the modern form of Christian contemplative prayer called Centering Prayer.”⁸² Fr. Keating was one of the “few significant monastic others” who followed in the wake of Thomas Merton.⁸³ “During the final decade of his life [Merton] was deeply drawn not only to Buddhism, but equally to Sufism.”⁸⁴ He had come to embrace ninth century Sufi saint, Louis Massignon’s “vision of the ‘point vierge,’ that mysterious liminal ground equally shared between creator and created.”⁸⁵ Of *le point vierge* Merton observes:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of

⁸²Contemplative Outreach, Home Page, accessed June 6, 2011, http://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/site/PageServer?pagename=about_people_keating. According to James C. Wilhoit, the organization founded by Thomas Keating to support and disseminate the practice of contemplative prayer, Contemplative Outreach, has over 120 active contemplative chapters in 39 countries, supporting over 800 prayer groups. The organization also conducts seminars and teaches the practice to about 15,000 people each year. See “Centering Prayer,” by James C. Wilhoit in *Life in the Spirit: Spiritual Formation in Theological Perspective* by Jeffrey Greenman and George Kalantzis (eds.) (IVP Academic, 2010), 180-181.

⁸³Cynthia Bourgeault, “Centering Prayer and Attention of the Heart,” *Cross Currents*, 59.1, 2009, 20.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 18.

⁸⁵*Ibid.*

absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.⁸⁶

The significance of this Sufi concept for Merton is not lost on Cynthia Bourgeault who notes that “he [Merton] also understands intuitively that the way to remain in contact with ‘that little grain of gold, this spark of the soul’ is simply to be able to let go of *whatever it is that jams its signal*”⁸⁷ [emphasis added]. In Merton’s own words:

The real freedom is to be able to come and go from that center, and to be able to do without anything that is not connected to that center. Because when you die, that is all that is left. When we die, everything is destroyed except this one thing, which is our reality that God preserves forever. He will not permit its final destruction.

And the thing is, that we know this. This is built into that particular little grain of gold, this spark of the soul, or whatever it is. It *knows* this. And the freedom that matters is the capacity to be in contact with that center. For it is from that center that everything else comes.⁸⁸

For Merton contemplative prayer was nothing than simply getting in touch with the “center.” He is reported to have said in response to a question at a conference on contemplative prayer: “contemplative prayer is nothing other than ‘coming

⁸⁶Thomas Merton, “A Member of the Human Race,” *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York:Doubleday, 1966), quoted in Bourgeault, 18.

⁸⁷Ibid., 20.

⁸⁸Ibid.

into consciousness' of what is already there."⁸⁹ Clearly, there are pantheistic/panentheistic and mystical overtones in this philosophy that cannot be explored in detail here. It has been presented to draw attention to the mystical element in contemplative prayer as it is practiced in some places today.

Emerging Views on Church Governance

Theologically, the issue of church governance is one of authority. Ultimately, the church's authority rests with God. But at a practical level, the expression of church authority requires governance. Governance has to do with getting things done—who has the authority to authorize things? What is the proper way to act? Who can be authorized to act? The different answers to these questions have given rise to different forms of church government—Episcopal, Presbyterian, Congregational, Representative, non-governmental, etc.

The special meaning of Emergence for biologists relates to a unique phenomenon. When an established form is unable to absorb new information, an emergent system adapts to the situation by using parts of the established form to self-reorganize. Generally, emergence connotes incompleteness and development. But Travis Barbour and Nicholas Toews point out three pertinent aspects of the term based on its derivation from the field of biology.⁹⁰ They observe that "three aspects of the biological phenomenon are pertinent to understanding the Emergent Church: first, emergence is triggered by changes in the environment; second, there is a pre-existing form from which the new system emerges; and third, emergent systems are self-organizing."⁹¹ Consciously self-organizing

⁸⁹Quoted in *A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World Religions* by Ray Yungen (Lighthouse Trails Publishing Company, 2006), 83.

⁹⁰Richard L. Mayhue, "The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation? *Master's Seminary Journal*, 17.2, 2006, 193. The idea of emergence has its roots in rainforest ecology where "emergents are small saplings that grow up in the shadow of the mature forest canopy, waiting to soar up and fill the gap vacated by a dying tree."

⁹¹Travis I. Barbour and Nicholas E Toews, "The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique, *Direction*, 39.1, 2010, 33.

and organic in nature, emerging churches “do not see the need for centralized, pastoral leadership,” believing that “church should function more like an open-source network and less like a hierarchy or a bureaucracy.”⁹² The Emergent aversion to structure is evident in McLaren’s generous orthodoxy. While church structure and organization is not without its problems, a generous orthodoxy embracing all church forms arouses serious ecclesiological questions. Paul Doerksen raises the foundational concern that “refusing to be pinned down to any one ‘solid’ ecclesiology may be expressive of a laudable and theologically sound openness, but it may also be a grasping, a possession, of the radical individual choice that marked the modern era.”⁹³ Mark Driscoll forecasts the consequences of the Emerging Church’s omnivorous ecclesiology.

In the end, I believe the conversation will result in multiple communities arriving at different conclusions and breaking off to have their own conversations, with their own Bible translations, leaders, books, magazines, websites, blogs, conferences, and model churches. That is already happening as new networks are forming and new church planting networks are establishing new churches with varying answers to the missiological questions. Over time, this may result in new denominations because inevitably systems must be put in place to serve a movement and somehow an umpire must be put in place to make decisions about what is and what is not acceptable doctrine and practice.⁹⁴

Evaluating the Emerging Church from the Perspective of Adventist Ecclesiology

In a general evaluation of the emerging church, some positive things can be said about the movement—its effort to speak to contemporary culture and its call for authenticity in

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Paul Doerksen, “The Air is Not Quite Fresh: Emerging Church Ecclesiology,” *Direction*, 39.1, 2010, 6.

⁹⁴Driscoll, 93.

the church.⁹⁵

On the nature of the Christian church, its role, rituals, and governance Adventists share quite a bit with the wider Protestant, evangelical churches. Consequently, Adventists generally agree with the critique of the emerging church coming from mainline evangelical sources. One of the more sustained critiques of the emerging church is D. A. Carson's *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Carson takes the emerging church to task on the uncritical embrace of postmodernism, especially with regards to the latter's stance on the truth question.⁹⁶ Carson also focuses his critique of the movement by looking closely at the theological positions taken in two representative books of the movement; Brian McLaren's *Generous Orthodoxy*, and Steve Chalke's *The Lost Message of Jesus*.⁹⁷ Carson focuses on some of the key theological themes presented earlier and shows how the emerging church departs from them. Adventists may sympathize with Carson's evaluation. Similarly, Richard L. Mayhue's five-point evaluation of the emerging church as an eclectic, ecumenical, earthbound, Scripture-doubting, and a resisting-biblical-authority church is mostly consistent with Adventists' views on those issues.⁹⁸

But from the perspective of Adventists' unique ecclesiological self-understanding, the emerging church deserves a closer look. Ángel M. Rodríguez has correctly suggested that Adventist ecclesiology is fundamentally a remnant ecclesiology,⁹⁹ one that has always been deeply missiological.¹⁰⁰ As Gerard Damsteegt notes, for early

⁹⁵For details, see D. A. Carson, 45-56.

⁹⁶See especially chapter 5.

⁹⁷See chapter 6.

⁹⁸"The Emerging Church: Generous Orthodoxy or General Obfuscation?" *Master's Seminary Journal*, 17.2, 2006.

⁹⁹Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (ed.) *Toward a Theology of the Remnant* (Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2009), 21.

¹⁰⁰Distinguish "mission/missiology" which is about the church's proclamation of the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ from "missional" which focuses on meeting people's needs here and now, and in which the agency of the church is not determinative.

Adventists, the remnant motif provided “a positive argument for their uniqueness in the history of salvation as God’s faithful remnant participating indispensably in His final rescue mission.”¹⁰¹ In addition to the remnant and missiological outlooks of Adventist ecclesiology, Rodríguez mentions Adventists’ unique eschatological, soteriological, and gospel outlooks on ecclesiology.¹⁰² It is from these distinctive perspectives that we will briefly appraise the emerging church movement.

Remnant Ecclesiology, Its Missionary Outlook, and the Emerging Church

The Adventist identity as the remnant mentioned in Rev 12:17 and its mission are two inseparable concepts. Adventism is bound up with its self perception as the remnant described in Revelation. The remnant is a special ecclesiological entity¹⁰³ with a specific mission--the proclamation of three closely-related messages symbolized by three angels (Rev 14: 6-14). Furthermore, the remnant’s end game is to rally all of God’s scattered people under the truth-banner of the distinct messages of the three angels.

No question, the concept of the remnant raises the spectacle of a ‘scandal of particularity’ which is said to foster “an arrogant, exclusivist, and judgmental attitude toward the spirituality of others.”¹⁰⁴ It is easy to see that if in the wider evangelical world the Adventist concept of remnant was scandalous,¹⁰⁵ for the

¹⁰¹P. Gerard Damsteegt, *Foundations of the Seventh-day Adventist message and Mission* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1988), 244.

¹⁰²Rodríguez, 20.

¹⁰³For Adventists’ appropriation of the remnant’s identifying marks see, Gerhard Pfandl, “Identifying Marks of the End-Time Remnant In the Book of Revelation,” in Rodríguez, 139-158.

¹⁰⁴Frank Hasel, “The Remnant in Contemporary Adventist Theology,” in Rodríguez, 163.

¹⁰⁵Walter R. Martin, *The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1960), 212; “Although it is possible to have fellowship with Seventh-day Adventists, we cannot accept the ‘remnant church’ concept which is exclusivism, in the light of the Biblical teaching concerning the unity of the Body of Christ.”

emerging church it would be a scandal upon a scandal. For example, the central role traditionally accorded the Christian church with regards to mission has come under criticism from the emerging church's "missional" concept:

The word ***mission*** in 'missional' refers first of all to the ***mission of God in the world (all of creation)***. The most fundamental reality for the missional church is not the mission of the Church, but the fact that God sent Jesus to save the world and sent the Spirit of Christ to sustain and recreate the world. The primary acting subject in "missional" is God through the Spirit, not the Church; the aim is the world, not the Church.¹⁰⁶

Given McLaren's "generous orthodoxy," the notion of a *Christian church* entity claiming a *unique*, divinely-given missionary role, with *universal* spiritual significance, flies in the face of everything for which the emerging church stands. Moreover, the Adventist concept of the remnant is based on an apocalyptic, prophetic understanding of the book of Revelation. We have already mentioned Campolo's idealistic exposition on eschatology in the book of Revelation. If Campolo denies Babylon is symbolic of a real, apocalyptic interpretation in the book of Revelation, it is difficult to see how the remnant, whose message is intricately connected with an apocalyptically interpreted Babylon (Rev. 14:8), can have any eschatological legitimacy.

The goal of the remnant's mission, as understood by Adventists, is at odds with the emerging church's overall missional objectives. This point brings into view the gospel outlook of Adventist ecclesiology. Whereas the emerging church focuses on a kingdom-oriented gospel that addresses the needs of society here and now, the gospel preached by the remnant, at the close of the cosmic conflict, incorporates distinctive truths ignored by many other Christian communities. Hence, it is said of Adventists that indeed "our

¹⁰⁶Church Innovations, Home Page accessed June 7, 2011, http://www.churchinnovations.org/05_news/pii_v7_i2/pii_v7_i2_swart.html.

mission is fueled by the seriousness with which we have taken biblical truth and its relevance for the last days.”¹⁰⁷ From this perspective, Adventist ecclesiology faces a significant challenge from the emerging church.

Remnant Ecclesiology, Its Soteriological Outlook, and the Emerging Church

To recognize the soteriological outlook of remnant ecclesiology is to express conviction, in its identity, message, and mission, that the church is the result of the incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and mediation of Christ.¹⁰⁸ We have seen the emerging church hesitate at the centrality of the atonement and the uniqueness of Christ towards the salvation of all humanity. Indeed, some in the missional church movement, such as Christopher Duraisingh, oppose any ecclesiology that is “centered around the ‘creation-fall-redemption’ matrix.”¹⁰⁹ He explains what is objectionable about such ecclesiologies--The “emphasis is upon a christocentric exclusivism which envisages that the church is the only locus of salvation. The purpose of its mission, therefore, is the conversion of those who are outside of it and to that end it plants churches everywhere so that the benefits of Christ’s passion may be dispensed.” Duraisingh prefers what he calls a “*concursum Dei*-centric” ecclesiology which presumes that the story of Jesus represents the classic instance of a “cocreative activity of God; a dramatic concretization in history and manifestation of the power of the *concursum* of God with creation.”¹¹⁰ In this view, the incarnation is a concretion of the divine *concursum*, and the Spirit of the risen Christ furnishes a *Christic Gestalt* that is now available for all.¹¹¹ “The church is one manifestation of such a movement within God-movement, reflecting the sovereign

¹⁰⁷Rodríguez, 21.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁰⁹Christopher Duraisingh, “From Church-Shaped Mission to Mission-Shaped Church,” *Anglican Theological Review* 92.1, 2010, 22.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹¹*Ibid.*

accompaniment of God with creation.”¹¹²

Adventist ecclesiology and Emerging ecclesiology could not be further apart on this point. The soteriological outlook of Adventist remnant ecclesiology actually extends the “creation-fall-redemption” matrix beyond the cross to include Christ’s High-priestly ministry in the heavenly temple.

Remnant Ecclesiology, Its Eschatological Outlook, and the Emerging church

The Adventist church is apocalyptic. From its beginning, the church has identified its nature and activity with the end-time remnant described in the book of Revelation. Particularly, the church understands much of its existence through a historicist interpretation of Revelation 12-14. It is an existence which involves it in a conflict summarily presented in chapter 12 and developed in chapters 13-14. Ultimately, under the influence of the dragon, the sea beast and the land beast form a coalition to wage a spiritual war described as the war of Armageddon. Effectively, this is a war against the remnant (cf. Rev. 12:17; 16:12-14). In the closing scenes of this war, the agencies of three frogs coming out of the mouths of the dragon; the beast; and the false prophet are enlisted. These frogs are said to be spirits of demons, interpreted as a movement “leading the pagans into worshipping the wrong gods.”¹¹³ Jon Paulien suggests that, in the context of the end-time, this development points to “a strong role for spiritualism unifying the world for a common cause.”¹¹⁴

The eschatological outlook of Adventist remnant ecclesiology, therefore, causes Adventist scholars to pay attention to developments regarding worship and spiritualism,

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 591-592.

¹¹⁴Jon Paulien, *Armageddon at the Door* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2008), 173. For a full discussion on spiritualism in the book of Revelation see Ekkehardt Mueller, “Evil Powers and Occult Practices in the Apocalypse” in *The Church, Culture, and Spirits: Adventism in Africa* by Kwabena Donkor (ed.) (Biblical Research Institute, 2011).

both in the secular and religious worlds. In this regard, the spirituality of the emerging church comes into focus. Some Adventist writers have commented on this issue and have made connections between spirituality in the emerging church movement and the prophecy of Revelation.¹¹⁵ A number of Adventists are concerned about the seeming inroads being made by emerging spirituality into Adventist ranks.¹¹⁶ There is much discussion of contemplative prayer in the history of Roman Catholic spirituality.¹¹⁷ However, the mystical element in emerging spirituality and in its association with Eastern religious traditions, is a matter of real concern. Cork is correct in his observation that “the language of ‘mysticism’ and ‘contemplation’ has been co-opted by individuals who weave together Christian language and the language and practices of eastern religions. They often have a view of human anthropology in which the ‘spirit’ is the ‘divine’ within; or even a Gnostic perspective in which the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ is light and immortal and must be elevated from a body that is in darkness and corrupt.”¹¹⁸ For this reason, it is not advisable for Adventists to try to appear to be “relevant” by using “emergent” language and at the same time argue that those words mean something else when *they*, Adventists, use them. It is not helpful to discuss contemplative prayer practices of the emerging church outside the context of its philosophical

¹¹⁵Ray Yungen, *A Time of Departing: How Ancient Mystical Practices are Uniting Christians with the World Religions* (Silverton, OR: Lighthouse Trails Publishing Company, 2006); Also seeOakland; Also *The Omega Rebellion* by Rick Howard (Remant Publications, 2010) provides similar information from the perspective of the author’s personal involvement with mysticism. These authors also attempt to show the connection of such influential leaders and authors such as Rick Warren, Richard Foster, and Chuck Swindoll to the contemplative/spiritual formation movement.

¹¹⁶Kevin Straub, “Emerging Evil in High Places: Spiritualist Practices Recommended to Pastors, from the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists,” accessed June 8, 2011, <http://www.adventistonline.com/forum/topics/spiritual-formation>.

¹¹⁷For a brief overview see Bill Cork, “On Contemplative Prayer,” *Spectrum Magazine*, accessed June 8, 2011, <http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2010/10/31/contemplative-prayer/>

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*

and theological foundations. While one may not be able to categorically proclaim this the beginning of the fulfillment of Revelation 16:12-14, the Adventist remnant eschatological outlook calls for vigilance on these developments.

Conclusion

It is hard to tell whether the Emerging Church is a passing fad or the second reformation. Yet, it is undeniably a movement whose influence is spreading fast across Christian denominational lines. It is a movement of the times, seeking to adjust the Christian church, its message, and practices to fit the postmodern culture. It is a movement that is attempting to change what it means to *be* and *do* church. Its implications are immense for all ecclesial traditions. But for the Adventist church, emerging ecclesiology strikes at the very reason for its existence. There must be open and candid discussion about the movement, as a whole.

These discussions should be placed in its philosophical and theological context in order to facilitate a full, coherent, and balanced understanding of the emerging church phenomenon.



Biblical Research Institute
General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600

Website: adventistbiblicalresearch.org
E-mail: biblicalresearch@gc.adventist.org
Phone: 301-680-6790
Fax: 301-680-6788