

# How to Know When the Emerging Church Shows Signs of Emerging in Your Church

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The world is changing. So is the Christian evangelical church. There was a time— not that long ago—when the Bible was considered to be the Word of God by the majority of evangelical Christians. Now that we are well into the third millennium and the post-modern, post-Christian era, the term *evangelical* can mean almost anything. What has happened? Why is this happening and what is the future for mainstream Christianity?

For the past several years, I have been speaking around the world on current trends that are impacting Christianity. After these presentations, I am approached by Christians who come from many different church backgrounds. Many are expressing their concerns about what is happening in their churches, troubled by the new direction they see their church going. While they may not always be able to discern what is wrong, they know *something* is wrong and that it needs to be addressed.

Further, many have told me they have attempted to express their concerns with their pastors or church elders. In almost every case, they were told they had a choice to make— get with the new program or get out of the church.

This move towards a *reinvented* Christianity (one designed to “reach people”) seems to be here for the long haul. It is not just a passing fad. I am often asked by concerned brothers and sisters in Christ to provide an explanation in order to help them understand what they have encountered. They want to know why these changes are underway and what to expect in the future. As well, they want to know what, if anything can be done, to stem this tide. It is for this reason I am writing this commentary—to provide biblical insight regarding the Emerging Church and where it is heading in the future.

## The Gospel According to the Scriptures

Throughout church history, various trends have come and gone. While culture changes from place to place, biblical Christianity has always been based upon the central message of the Bible which is the gospel of Jesus Christ and the message never changes.

This gospel message is about who Jesus Christ is, and what He has done. A child can understand the gospel message. This message proclaims that life here on planet earth is finite and that life after death is eternal. The good news is that we can be saved from our sins if we will repent and simply ask for forgiveness and follow Him.

How we respond to the gospel message during the time we have on earth determines where we spend eternity—heaven or hell. Jesus, the Creator of the universe, provided a way and the only way we can spend eternity with Him. It is a matter of making a personal decision whether or not we will accept the plan He has provided.

God’s adversary does not want mankind to understand the simple message. His plan is to deceive the world. If he can blind people from the gospel or convince them that they believe

the gospel when indeed they do not, his plan has been successful. Throughout the ages, countless billions have been duped, either rejecting the truth, or believing that they had believed the truth when instead they had been deceived.

## **The Gospel According to Postmodernism**

Times change! However, the gospel must remain the same no matter what else changes. We are now living in the postmodern era. In a sincere attempt to reach the postmodern generation with the gospel, it seems many Christians have become postmodern in their thinking.

Perhaps the term *postmodern* is new to you. Let's examine what it means.

First, the modern era was characterized by a time of rational thinking based on factual observation. Many claim the modern era ended in the mid 1900s.

The postmodern mindset moves beyond the rational and the factual to the experiential and the mystical. In other words, in the past it was possible to know right from wrong and black from white. In the postmodern era all things are relative to the beholder. What may be right for you may be wrong for someone else. There is no such thing as absolute truth. The only thing that is absolute is that there is no absolute.

We now live in a time in history that is characterized as postmodern. Professors at universities teach students there is no right or wrong. All things are relative. The gospel message to the postmodern mindset is far too dogmatic and arrogant. They say it is necessary to find a more moderate gospel that can be accepted by the masses.

Many church leaders are now looking for ways to reach the postmodern generation. They believe they can find the appropriate methods to do so without changing the message. However, in their attempt to reach this postmodern generation, they have become postmodern themselves and have changed the message. As the gospel is fixed upon the Scriptures, the gospel cannot change, unless of course it becomes another gospel. I believe this is what is happening in the Emerging Church.

## **He Didn't Come**

Many have noticed that since the turn of the millennium, their churches have changed positions on Bible prophecy and the Second Coming of Jesus. Many have given up on the return of Jesus. From the '60s on there was an excitement about the imminent return of Jesus. The Jesus People were excited about Bible prophecy and could see signs that Jesus would descend from the heavens for His Bride at any moment.

The year 2000 was of particular importance. When Jesus didn't show up, it seems many were apparently disappointed. "Perhaps Jesus has delayed His coming," some have said. Others are even taking the position that He may not be coming at all, at least not in the manner we have been taught. They are now convinced that we need to be busy about "building His Kingdom" here on earth by "whatever human effort is required."

## The Gospel of the Kingdom

One of the main indicators that something has changed can be seen in the way the future is perceived. Rather than urgently proclaiming the gospel according to the Scriptures and believing the time to do so is short, the emphasis has now shifted. No longer are “signs of the times” significant. The battle cry is very different. A major emphasis among evangelicals is the idea that the world can be radically improved through social programs.

This concept, while on the surface may sound very good, has some serious biblical implications. According to the Scriptures, there will be no kingdom of God until the King arrives. All the human effort man can muster up will fall short of bringing utopia. In fact, according to the Scriptures, fallen man will lead us further down the road to a society of despair and lawlessness just like it was in the days of Noah.

Thus, this *purpose-driven* view of establishing global utopia may be a plan, but it is “driven” by humanistic reasoning and not led by the Holy Spirit. While it is of course good to do good unto others, all the goodness that we can do will not be good enough. Pastors and church leaders who get involved in such man-driven programs can usually be identified by certain characteristics:

- Sound biblical doctrine is dangerous and divisive, and the experiential (i.e., mystical) is given a greater role than doctrine.
- Bible prophecy is no longer taught and is considered a waste of time
- Israel becomes less and less important and has no biblical significance
- Eventually the promises for Israel are applied to the church and not Israel (Replacement Theology).
- Bible study is replaced by studying someone’s book and his methods
- Church health is evaluated on the *quantity* of people who attend.
- The truth of God’s Word becomes less and less important
- God’s Word, especially concepts like hell, sin and repentance, is eventually downplayed so the unbeliever is not offended.

## Spiritual Formation and Transformation

Much of what I have described provides the formula for a dumbing-down of Christianity that paves the way for an apostasy that will only intensify in the future. This trend away from the authority of God’s Word to the reinvented form of Christianity has overcome all evangelical denominations like an avalanche. Few Bible teachers saw this avalanche coming. Now that it is underway, few realize it has even happened.

However, there is another big piece to the puzzle that must be identified in order to understand what is emerging in the Emerging Church. While biblical Christianity has been dumbed-down and the light of God’s Word diminished, another avalanche of deception is underway that is equally devastating.

This is best described by the Word of God giving way to experiences that God’s Word forbids. The best way to understand this process is to recall what happened during the Dark Ages when the Bible became the “forbidden book.” Until the Reformers translated the Bible into the language of the common person, the people were in darkness. When the light of God’s Word became available, the gospel according to the Scriptures was once again understood.

This trend, which is underway today, shows us that history is in the process of repeating itself. As the Word of God becomes less and less important, the rise of mystical experiences is alarming and these experiences are being presented to convince the unsuspecting that Christianity is about feeling, touching, smelling and seeing God. The postmodern mindset is the perfect environment for the fostering of what is called "spiritual formation." This teaching suggests there are various ways and means to get closer to God. Proponents of spiritual formation erroneously teach that anyone can practice these mystical rituals and find *God within*. Having a relationship with Jesus Christ is not a prerequisite.

These teachings, while actually rooted in *ancient wisdom* (the occult), were presented to Christendom post-New Testament and not found in the Word of God. The spiritual formation movement is based upon experiences promoted by desert monks and Roman Catholic mystics – these mystics encouraged the use of rituals and practices, that if performed would bring the practitioner closer to God (or come into God's presence). The premise was that if one went into the silence or sacred space, then the mind was emptied of distractions and the voice of God could be heard. In truth, these hypnotic, mantric style practices were leading these monks into altered states of consciousness. The methods they used are the same that Buddhists and the Hindus use as a means of encountering the spiritual realm

Such methods are dangerous, and are not sanctioned in the Bible – God gives no instruction for this. On the contrary, he warns severely against divination, which is practicing a ritual or method in order to obtain information from a spiritual source. While proponents of spiritual formation (like Richard Foster) say these methods show that the Holy Spirit is doing something new to refresh Christianity, I would suggest that what is happening is not new and is not the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual formation movement is being widely promoted at colleges and seminaries as the latest and the greatest way to become a spiritual leader in these days. These ideas are then being exported from seminaries to churches by graduates who have been primed to take Christianity to a new level of enlightenment.

As well, these contemplative practices are being promoted by emergent leaders such as Brian McLaren, Robert Webber, Dallas Willard and others. Publishers like NavPress, InterVarsity and Zondervan are flooding the market with books promoting contemplative practices based on Eastern mysticism. Pastors and church leaders read these books and then promote the ideas as if they were the scriptural answer to drawing close to God.

### **Signs the Emerging Church is Emerging**

There are specific warning signs that are symptomatic that a church may be headed down the emergent/contemplative road. In some cases a pastor may not be aware that he is on this road nor understand where the road ends up.

Here are some of the warning signs:

- Scripture is no longer the ultimate authority as the basis for the Christian faith.
- The centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ is being replaced by humanistic methods promoting church growth and a social gospel.
- More and more emphasis is being placed on building the kingdom of God now and less and less on the warnings of Scripture about the imminent return of Jesus Christ and a coming judgment in the future.

- The teaching that Jesus Christ will rule and reign in a literal millennial period is considered unbiblical and heretical.
- The teaching that the church has taken the place of Israel and Israel has no prophetic significance is often embraced.
- The teaching that the Book of Revelation does not refer to the future, but instead has been already fulfilled in the past
- An experiential mystical form of Christianity begins to be promoted as a method to reach the postmodern generation.
- Ideas are promoted teaching that Christianity needs to be reinvented in order to provide meaning for this generation.
- The pastor may implement an idea called “ancient-future” or “vintage Christianity” claiming that in order to take the church forward, we need to go back in church history and find out what experiences were effective to get people to embrace Christianity.
- While the authority of the Word of God is undermined, images and sensual experiences are promoted as the key to experiencing and knowing God.
- These experiences include icons, candles, incense, liturgy, labyrinths, prayer stations, contemplative prayer, experiencing the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of the Eucharist.
- There seems to be a strong emphasis on ecumenism indicating that a bridge is being established that leads in the direction of unity with the Roman Catholic Church.
- Some evangelical Protestant leaders are saying that the Reformation went too far. They are reexamining the claims of the “church fathers” saying that communion is more than a symbol and that Jesus actually becomes present in the wafer at communion.
- There will be a growing trend towards an ecumenical unity for the cause of world peace claiming the validity of other religions and that there are many ways to God.
- Members of churches who question or resist the new changes that the pastor is implementing are reprimanded and usually asked to leave.

### **What does the Future Hold?**

If the Emerging Church continues unfolding at the present pace, mainstream evangelical Christianity will be reinvented and the gospel of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures will be considered too narrow and too restrictive. In other words, the narrow way to heaven that Jesus proclaimed will eventually be abandoned for a wider way that embraces pagan experiential practices. I call this reinvented, re-imagined form of Christianity that is unfolding—“Christian Babylonianism”.

This new form of Christianity will replace biblical faith with a faith that says man can establish the kingdom of God here on earth. The Word will continue to become secondary to a system of works driven by experiences.

An ecumenical pattern towards unity with Rome will become more apparent. Those who refuse to embrace this direction will be considered spiritual oddballs that need to be reprimanded. Those who stand up for biblical faith will be considered the obstructions to the one world spirituality that is promoted as the answer for peace.

The best way to be prepared for what is coming is to gain an understanding of what is happening now. While there are not many who seem to discern the trend underway, there are some. Without the Bible and the Holy Spirit as our guide, the darkness that is coming

would be overwhelming. However, the light of God's Word penetrates the darkness and there are those who are being delivered from deception and see what is taking place.

I am convinced we are seeing apostasy underway, exactly as the Scriptures have forewarned. This means that this current trend is not likely to disappear. We must continue to proclaim the truth in the midst of deception with love. As Paul instructed Timothy:

*<sup>24</sup>And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. <sup>25</sup>Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, <sup>26</sup>and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. 2 Timothy 2:24-26 (NIV)*

There are still pastors and churches who are dedicated to proclaiming the truth. Find out where they are and support them. If you are in a location where this does not seem to be possible, seek out materials that are available from solid Bible-based Christian ministries and hold Bible studies in your own home.

And keep looking up! Jesus is coming soon.

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