

Would the Real Emerger Please Stand Up?

by C. Michael Patton

www.reclaimingthemind.org

How does one define the emerging church? This is not an easy question to answer. Are you emerging? Maybe you are and you just don't know it. It is very difficult to define exactly what it means to "emerge." Sometimes its characteristics sound a lot like what "Evangelical" used to mean. Other times it sounds just like "Liberal." Often it is hard to distinguish from neo-orthodox or even Eastern Orthodox. Many would just say that emergers are Christian Democrats!

If you compare yourself to a personality to determine whether you are emerging, it is no better. To whom do you choose to compare yourself? Brian McLaren? Doug Pagitt? Dan Kimball? Mark Driscoll?

1. If you go with Brian McLaren, then you may view "emerging" as somewhat of a political *revolution*.
2. If you go with Doug Pagitt, then you may see "emerging" as the *hope* of God's redemption through a sort of quasi-universalism.
3. If you go with Dan Kimball, then you see "emerging" as a *mission* to win the lost with the essential message of the Gospel through kindness and understanding (sounds a bit like evangelicalism).
4. If you go with Mark Driscoll, then you may find it hard to distinguish "emerging" from a missional minded reformed evangelicalism.

Maybe its not that simple, but my point is that most of these fellows don't seem like bed-fellows. In other words, it is hard to find the least common denominator with regards to their emerging distinction. They all call themselves emergers, but I don't think that Driscoll would be too fond of being identified with Pagitt or McLaren. Kimball and Driscoll maybe, Pagitt and McLaren maybe, but not all of them together. It is hard to find the connection. If all of these guys are emerging, then what does emerging mean? Would the real emerger please stand up?

Part of the reason I write this post is because I just finished John MacArthur's *Truth War*. While I really appreciate much of MacArthur's work, I did not find this book helpful with regards to the emerging issue. In fact, I found it very unbalanced and ill-informed. He simply focused on one thought of one strand of the emerging "movement." He did not distinguish between those who were guilty of his charges from those who

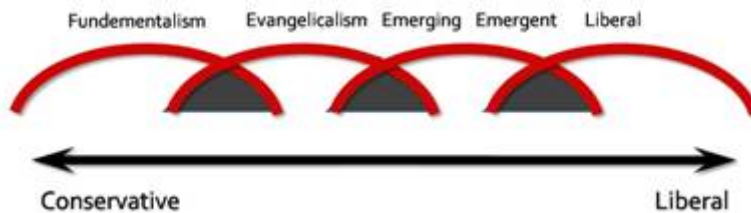
were not. In this he mischaracterized many people and the movement as a whole. He choose one strand of emerging and presumed to attack the entire *un*united movement as if it were united.

I also write this because I was recently identified as an emerger (which was news to me) by some of the more antagonist anti-emergers at a Bible conference. More importantly, I was placed along side of McLaren and Pagitt as a significant influence in the emerging movement. I did not see the connection at all.

I think it is important for us to recognize that there are many types of emergers. Let me attempt to give some perspective.

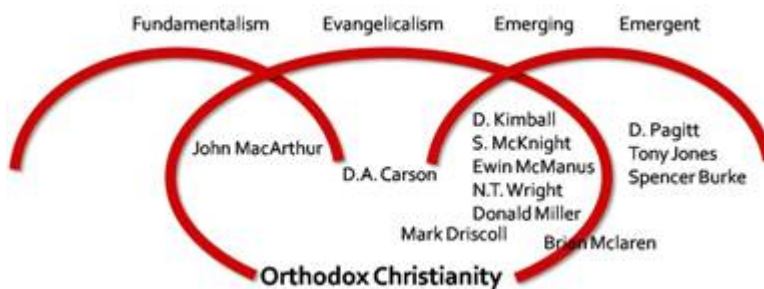
First, I think that it is important to distinguish between two meta-strands of emergers. Some would separate those that are emerging and those that are Emergent. I think this works well and is becoming more and more accepted. Emergent would be the more theologically liberal minded group of emergers. These are those that MacArthur went after with gloves off.

If you were to graph this out, adding a section for fundamentalism and liberalism, it would look something like this.



Notice there is overlap in many of these areas. There is an overlap of traditional evangelicalism and emerging. There is an overlap of Emergent and liberal. There is also an overlap between fundamentalism and Evangelicalism. Traditional orthodoxy might be found in a balance between the extremes.

Here is how I would chart many of the popular emergers.



Notice, I would place many emergers outside the bounds of orthodoxy—at least as it has been seen from a historic Christian standpoint. The reason being is that they deny many aspects of historic Christianity. Among other things, either their doctrine of judgment, the exclusivity of Christ, the atonement, or even theistic worldview is contrary to that of the historic Christian faith. Some would even deny or call into question just about every foundational doctrine to the Christian faith.

Don't misunderstand the chart. D.A. Carson represents the best of traditional Evangelical scholarship. But being in the middle does not necessarily mean that I believe that he is *more* orthodox than Dan Kimball. He is just less emerging! John MacArthur is to the far left, not because he is in danger of stepping outside of traditional Evangelicalism into a heterodox form of fundamentalism, but because he is *more* fundamental and *less* emerging than the others. McLaren is right on the line between emerging and Emergent.

Well, thus far I have simply meant to communicate the defining “emerging” is not a simple task. The one thing that I would immediately caution people on is this: don't lump all those who call themselves “emerging” into the same category reserved for heretics. We have to be more responsible than this. It is unfair and could damage people's reputation. If you were to do this, how is that any less an evil than the evil you may be accusing them of?

Part 2: What is Orthodoxy?

Before my next post on what it means to be emerging, I thought it necessary to reiterate some issues about orthodoxy. I mentioned some in the Emergent strand of emergers that many would place outside "orthodoxy" and this seems to have upset some people because I, in their opinion, too closely associated "orthodoxy" with "evangelical" without qualification.

Well, this then becomes the question. What is "orthodoxy"? Let me offer you my thoughts so that you know where I am coming from and then tie to together with the emerging series the best I can.

The term orthodox can be defined in a few ways:

1. Historic Christian Orthodoxy: This refers to the *sine qua non* (the "without which not") of Christian belief. This belief is held, to paraphrase Augustine, "by all Christians, of all time, everywhere." In other words, it is not limited to time or geographical region. Therefore, it would be found very early in some sort of articulated fashion, though not necessarily in formal document, in the early church. Historic orthodoxy did take a few centuries to *articulate* in thought and word. It is unthinkable that in the first few centuries Christians would have developed in their understanding beyond a seed form of the basics below. They were too busy trying to stay alive, legitimize themselves to hostile Jews and Romans, and encourage the local congregations. These basics were handed down in tradition (the *regula fide*) and Scripture.

In this case, a historically orthodox Christian would be one that believed in these essential elements:

- Deity of Christ
- Doctrine of the Trinity
- The Sovereignty of God
- The historicity of the physical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ
- Hypostatic union (Christ is fully God and fully man)
- The sinfulness of man
- The necessity of the atonement
- Salvation by grace through faith
- The reality of the body of Christ (the catholic [universal] Church)
- The authority of the visible body of Christ
- The inspiration of Scripture
- The canon of Scripture made up of the Old and New Testaments
- The future second coming

2. Traditional Orthodoxy: This focuses upon the further articulations and nuances of an individual tradition, implied or dogmatized. As the above doctrines developed in understanding, people began to part ways in their interpretation of these doctrines. Traditional orthodoxy takes time to develop since it comes primarily as a result of controversy and challenge. There is a Catholic orthodoxy, Protestant/Evangelical orthodoxy, and Eastern Orthodoxy traditional orthodoxy. I will list all three (although I could have missed something). Notice that the further articulations are inserted in bold.

Historic Protestant/Evangelical Orthodoxy

- Deity of Christ
- Doctrine of the Trinity
- The Sovereignty of God
- The historicity of physical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ
- Hypostatic Union (Christ is fully God and fully man)
- The sinfulness of man **in corrupt nature, imputed guilt, and personal sinfulness**
- The necessity of the **vicarious substitutionary atonement on the cross**
- Salvation through grace **alone** by faith **alone on the basis of Christ alone**
- The reality of the body of Christ (the catholic [universal] Church)
- The authority of the visible **local bod[ies]** of Christ
- The infallible, inerrant inspiration of Scripture **alone with final authority on all matters of faith.**
- The canon of Scripture made up of the Old (**39 books**) and New (**27 books**) Testaments
- The future second coming

Historic Roman Catholic Orthodoxy

- Deity of Christ
- Doctrine of the Trinity
- The Sovereignty of God
- The historicity of physical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ
- Hypostatic Union (Christ is fully God and fully man)
- The sinfulness of man **in corrupt nature, imputed guilt, and personal sinfulness**
- The necessity of the **vicarious substitutionary atonement on the cross**
- Salvation by grace **alone** through faith **as God works these out through our cooperation with Him**
- The reality of the body of Christ (the catholic [universal] Church) **which subsists only, explicitly and implicitly, in the one true Catholic Church**

that resides under the ultimate authority of the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter.

- The **infallible** authority of the visible body of Christ **as expressed by the Magisterial authority of Rome**
- The infallible, inerrant inspiration of Scripture.
- The canon of Scripture made up of the Old (**39 books + Deuterocanonical books/Apocrypha**) and New (**27 books**) Testaments
- The future second coming

Historic Eastern Orthodox Orthodoxy

- Deity of Christ
- Doctrine of the Trinity
- The historicity of physical death, burial, and resurrection of Christ
- Hypostatic Union (Christ is fully God and fully man)
- The sinfulness of man **in corrupt nature and personal sinfulness**
- The necessity of the **recapitulation found in Christ's atonement in his life and on the Cross**
- Salvation by grace through faith **as God works these out through our unification with Him**
- The reality of the body of Christ (the catholic [universal] Church)
- The **infallible** authority of the visible body of Christ **as expressed by the first seven ecumenical creeds**
- The infallible inspiration of Scripture.
- The canon of Scripture made up of the Old (**39 books + the possible inclusion of the Deuterocanonical books/Apocrypha**) and New (**27 books**) Testaments
- The future second coming

3. Denominational Orthodoxy: Finally, there is the further division that can be broken down as Protestants continue to further define each of these areas. Of course Calvinists would further define issues of salvation, election, security, and God's meticulous sovereignty. Arminians would do the same emphasizing God's universal atonement and God's providential sovereignty. Baptists would add issues such as believers baptism and congregational style of leadership within the local church. As well, Catholics have continued to further define areas as well such as the Marian dogmas.

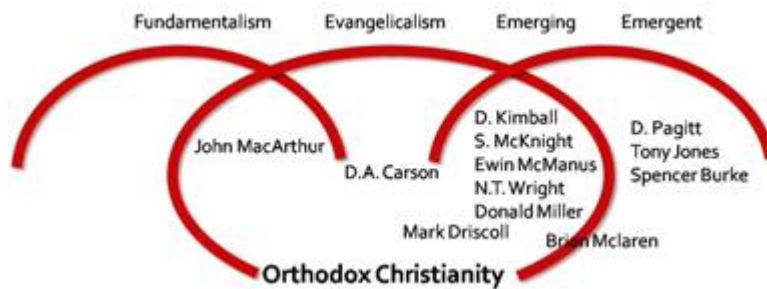
OK, so this is the question: What is Orthodoxy? It depends on what you mean. My thoughts are that we need to define our terms here and be careful with our pronouncement of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. One can be heretical with regards to a

particular traditional or denominational orthodoxy, but this does not necessarily make them a heretic in the proper sense.

My thoughts are these: To be a heretic *in the proper sense* means that you deny a doctrine that has been held by all Christians of all time, everywhere. To be orthodox *in a proper sense* means that you affirm all the essential doctrines of historic Christianity.

My argument in the last post on the emerging church is that the emerging ethos does not *necessarily* give way to heterodoxy as some of my more conservative friends have been led to believe. It is a broader conversation that includes those that fall outside the bounds of historic Christian orthodoxy and those who are well within its borders. Yes, as we shall see, there is a common thread on the *type* of discussion and thought represented by emergers, but there are differences on where emergers land (or if they land at all).

From a historic evangelical perspective the assessment is the same. There is a comfortable overlap between emerging thought and evangelical belief. Yet, there is also a departure from historic evangelical orthodoxy. This, in-and-of-itself, does not make it right or wrong, nor does it make the questions or conversation invalid, it just helps to give us perspective when assessing the issue.



This chart was meant to represent the issue from an evangelical perspective. This is my main audience and, therefore, it is to whom I am primarily speaking. Yes, "evangelical" is very difficult to define these days---like emerging, but I believe that historic evangelicalism, *properly defined*, represents the truth of Christianity most accurately, even if it does so imperfectly. So for those of you who were surprised that I have the evangelical label so closely associated with "Orthodox Christianity" I have to ask you What did you expect? I *am* an evangelical. If I thought there were a better representative of truth then I would not be an Evangelical. Yet this does not mean that I am willing to exclude Catholics or Orthodox from historic orthodoxy. They are just not included in the subject I have been dealing with.

So I ask you to keep these distinctions in the term "Orthodoxy" in mind as we move forward in this series on emerging thought.

As to why the chart has the conservatives on the left and the liberals on the right, I can't answer this. Two possibilities: 1) I am left handed, therefore everything is backward in my world. 2) I was thinking more in terms of a time line (fundamentalism---evangelicalism---emerging---emergent), but that does not explain the placement of "liberal." Oh well . . . as Jack Baur would say, "Deal with it!"

Part 3: An Emerging Definition of Emerging

Often when I begin a series on the emerging church people approach me with two questions: 1) "Am *I* emerging?" 2) "Are *you* emerging?" In both counts this is really a loaded question. I have a hard time answering it because I don't know what they are *really* asking. It takes some further explaining before I am ever comfortable with such questions.

In the last post ("[Will the Real Emerger Please Stand Up?](#)"), I discussed the difficulty in finding a one-size-fits-all category for emergers as evidenced by the variety of leaders who claim the name. There is no one emerger that we can go to that represents the entire so-called "movement." I then attempted to encourage people to see two primary strands of emergers---those that are simply emerging and a sub-set of those who are part of a more definite group of more liberal minded emergers called Emergent (closely associated with [Emergent Village](#)).

For this blog, I would like to narrow our definition of emerging by denying the label certain characteristics and giving a brief description of what I believe it means to be emerging.

What Emerging is Not:

The emerging church is not a church. It is important to realize that to label the emerging church as a church is misleading. Most people want to "go" to an emerging church to see what it is all about. I often tell them that this is not the best way to understand what emerging is all about. While there are "emerging" churches out there, the label emerging expresses something much more than a local assembly. Therefore, even though you may see people, including myself, call it the emerging "church," this is not the best label and can be very misleading.

The emerging movement is not a movement. A movement implies a *unified* and *organized* group intent on bringing about change based in a *set* ideology. The emerging movement is neither unified nor organized. In fact, those who are "emerging" would take the label of a "movement," in this sense and at this point in time, as an insult that represents the antithesis of what is going on. Therefore, even though you may hear many, including myself, refer to the emerging "movement," it is not really such.

The emerging "church" should not be associated with the seeker-sensitive church. This is a very common misconception that I find. The seeker-sensitive church is a label used to describe those churches who seek to tailor all their church services and activities for the unbeliever. They try to create common ground with those outside the church. This common ground is found in the way the service is conducted. It might involve the type

of music, the length of the sermon, type of entertainment, corporate professionalism, the casual dress, or the times of service. All the primary events are done in order for the unbeliever to feel comfortable while the Gospel is proclaimed. Seekers-sensitive churches want the bridge that one crosses from the culture to the church to be as small as possible.

Emergers, on the other hand, don't have this philosophy. While many of the elements may look the same (casual dress, times of service, etc.) the reasons for this are completely different. It has to do with how the emerging community views culture. Emergers do not necessarily see the culture as evil as other traditions might. They don't give people a taste of culture to lure them in and then attempt to change them, but *they are the culture*. This might help:

Relation to culture (forgive the stereotyping):

1. Fundamentalists: Separate from culture.
2. Evangelicals: Change the culture.
3. Emergers: We are the culture.

Remember the song "We are the world"? Well emergers sing "We are the culture." In this case, biblically minded emergers would distinguish between the apostle John's definition of "world" (i.e. "Love not the world nor the things in the world") from "culture." The "world" is the expressions of a *sin infected* culture. Emergers would see God's work in the culture just as much (if not more these days) as in the church. Therefore, they are one more step away from the fundamentalist philosophy of radical separation. They are not seeker-sensitive, but *emerge*-sensitive. Who are they being sensitive to? Themselves. Culture (believers and unbelievers). The *imago dei* in everyone.

What Emerging Is?

Briefly, I believe the best way to get ones arms around what it means to emerge is to define it as a widespread *ethos*, or way of thinking. This way of thinking is held by those who explicitly call themselves emergers and by many who don't. It represents an articulated and unarticulated dissatisfaction with the current way that the body of Christ is perceived by the outside world and, indeed, truly is.

This ethos finds expression not in church planting, revitalizations of local church assemblies, or the creation of new denominations, but through conversation--- conversations with other like-minded thinkers. People emerge on internet blogs, in chat

rooms, and in coffee shops. They emerge through a shared ethos that expresses dissatisfaction and seeks change. These emerging avenues provide people with safety to ask questions---theological questions---that stimulate a conversation. These theological questions come with no assumed answer. In fact, most of the time they are not meant to be answered. Try to answer these questions too quickly with a definite and/or cliché answer and you will have immediately proved yourself disqualified from the emerging conversation. Why? Because you have illegitimized the question. You have insulted the intelligence of the emerging community by acting as if the questions that are bringing about conversation can be answered so thoughtlessly.

It is important to understand that many who are and have been dissatisfied with the church are apathetic to their own disdain. Their questions have never found a place---as safe place---to be asked. Most of these people are no longer active in Church nor are they seeking to be. They may not be able to articulate this dissatisfaction, but there is an ever present nagging within them that says, "This is not the way it is supposed to be." These may qualify as dormant emergers. They share in the emerging ethos, but have yet to emerge as emergers. It would seem that these dormant emergers, who at present probably out number the active emergers, are being awakened by a like minded call for change---sometimes radical change. They are finding affinity in their naggings and are beginning to rise to the occasion.

Another group is actively seeking to do something about it. They call for and enact change at various levels---change in practice *and* thinking. Among these are those who are self-identified as emergers. They have come "out of the closet," expressing their dissatisfaction with others.

So What Does Emerging Mean?

In short, the emerging *ethos* represents a growing *mindset* which is, consciously or sub-consciously, willing to legitimize and take seriously *anew* the type of questions being asked, doubts being expressed, and the distrust and dissatisfaction that the a postmodern (emerging) culture has with the traditional church (and Christianity) *because they identify with them.*

Those that seem to identify with the postmodern mindset too closely, believing that traditional Christianity may not have *the* answers, are more on the Emergent side. Emergents call for radical change in doctrine and practice. Those that identify with the postmodern mindset yet feel traditional Christianity, while imperfect, does offer *the* answers *to the most important issues* may be part of the more orthodox emerging movement. These call for a more mild change.

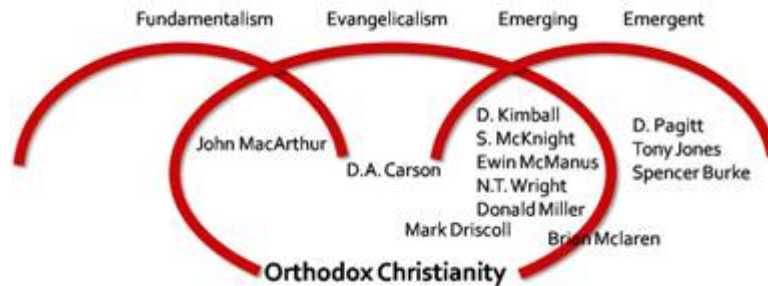
But it is not really that simple. There are many ways to call for change and many areas in which this change can occur. Next I will talk about how people can call for change---how people can emerge---in five different ways. (I know I already said that, but this needed to be said first!)

If this has served to obscure the issue for you, this is not such a bad thing. One of my main purposes with this series on the emerging "church" has been to show that confident categorizations of what it means to emerge can do more harm than good and really misses the point.

Part 4: Comparing Fundamentalists, Evangelicals, and Emergers

OK, I lied. Here is another parenthetical post in my emerging series. The five ways in which one can emerge will be coming soon. However, in my defense, I did not know I was lying at the time I made my original commitment---does that count?

Take heart, this post has a LOT more charts and all emergers love charts, right? ;)



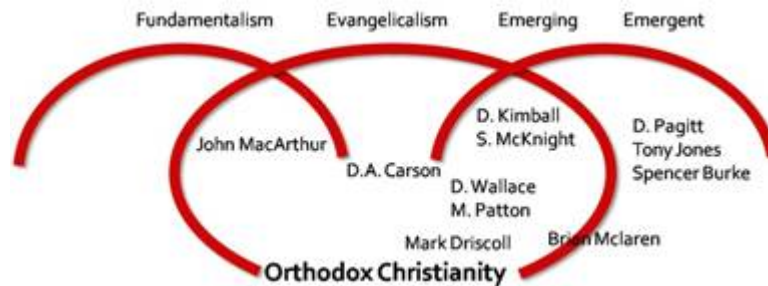
Here is the chart once again. Let me explain further what my thoughts are as to evangelicalism *vis a vis* emerging.

To be emerging does not *necessarily* have to do with *where* you land on certain issues. It has to do with your willingness to fly, seriously entertaining *anew* important and fundamental issues. Not only do you entertain questions (e.g. Why does God allow bad things? Is inerrancy the center of evangelical faith? Do the various traditions---Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant---all have valid contributions to make?) but you have the same questions yourself. In some sense it captures the Protestant reformation principle of *reformata et semper reformanda* ("reformed and always reforming") better than other traditions who have reformed and then hardened in their categories of thought and practice.

In the end, as an emerger, you may land your plane in the field of traditional Protestantism on a particular issue, but it is your willingness to take off that is key. Are you willing to discuss issues from a fresh perspective? This is a key emerging question.

For example, I am Calvinist, complementarian, and affirm inerrancy. This does not necessarily disqualify me from being "emerging" simply because I have landed on these issues. It has more to do with the attitude I have with regard to such and how important these issues are in my doctrinal taxonomy. Am I willing to question my assumptions regarding my stance? I hope. Does this mean that I will change with regards to these issues. Not necessarily. I might even become strengthened in them. But the willingness to listen and change, understanding the questions and difficulties involved is the key, not so much where we land. We go where truth takes us, we do not bring truth to our home.

Here is where I would place myself and Dan Wallace on the chart. Again, Dan and I are both complementarian Calvinists who affirm inerrancy. (NOTE: I did not consult Dan on this one!)



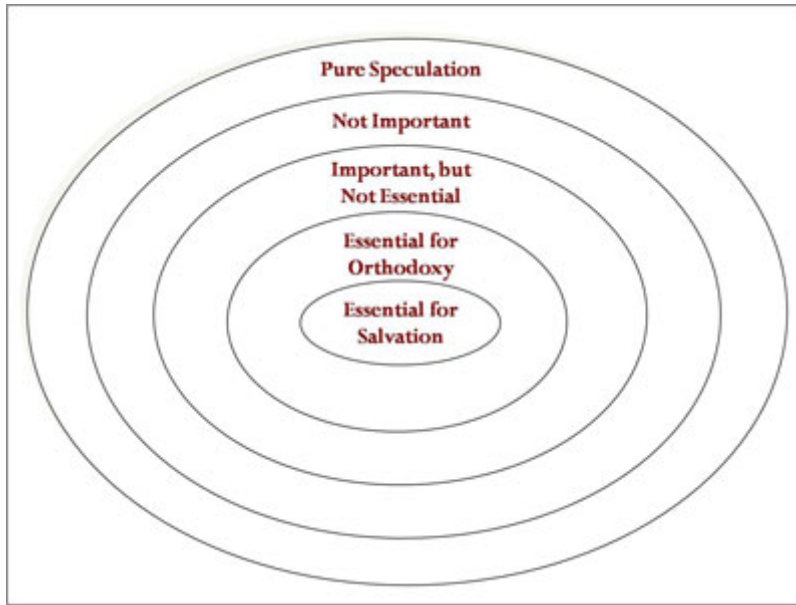
Notice that I see myself as well as Dan as more emerging than Mark Driscoll. Why? It does not have to do with where we land theologically, for we line up very much with Driscoll on key issues. It has more to do with how much focus we place on certain issues. How willing are we to entertain alternative ideas and perspectives? The more willing, the more emerging.

Yet at the same time, I am not comfortable with the label as its associations, at least in my circles, are too closely tied with those who are more Emergent. Plus, I, like Roger Olson, believe that the name Evangelical can be saved. Call me idealistic, traditionalistic, or a bleeding heart, but Evangelicalism is not dead yet. (Maybe emergers can save it? :))

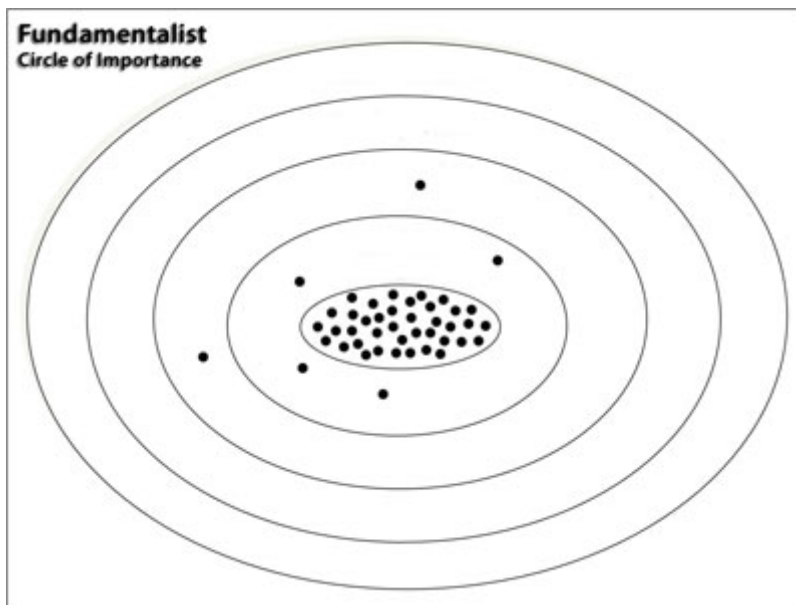
It is important to know that there are many who are not even willing to entertain any questions. They are not willing to take off, being settled and having their fortress built with walls of traditional confidence and conviction. Right or wrong is not the issue, but a willingness to legitimize the flight. This is the essence of fundamentalism (in the contemporary sense). When fundamentalism begins to emphasize non-essentials as essential, this is where they depart from traditional orthodox Christianity thereby creating their own form of Christianity. That is why there is a unorthodox form of fundamentalism---legalistic fundamentalists.

In a sense, I think that there are aspects of emerging that represent and revive the best of evangelicalism. Sadly, much of this pioneer confidence that marked 20th century evangelicalism as it rose out of the clutches of deteriorating fundamentalism has been lost. Evangelicalism is in danger of becoming the new fundamentalism and in many ways emergers look more evangelical than evangelicals! Does that make sense?

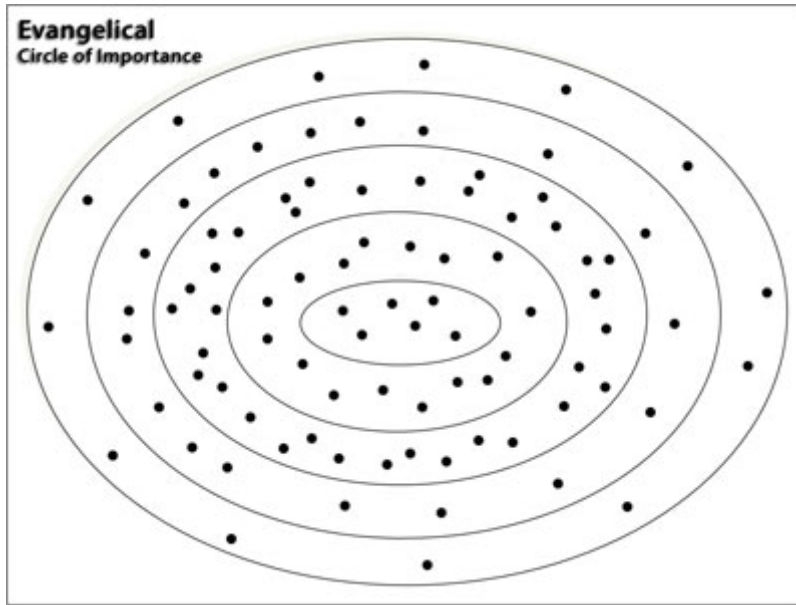
Here, sense everyone likes charts so much, let me give you the concentric circle of importance that I teach in my Introduction to Theology course of [The Theology Program](#). I will modify these so that they represent each group: fundamentalists, evangelicals, emergers, and emergents.



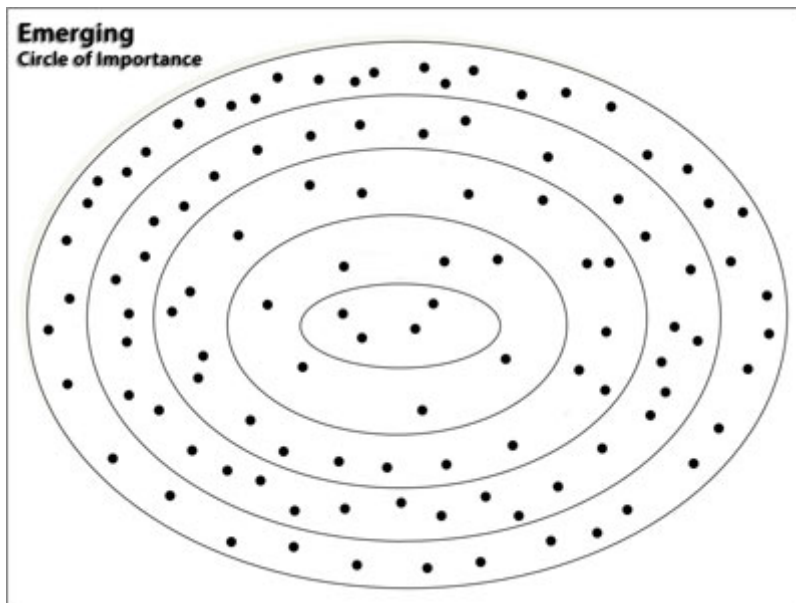
The above is the key for the charts below. Notice, the further to the center, the more important the issue or doctrine. Those that are in the center circle are those which the representative tradition believes are essential for one to believe to be saved. Next is the circle of orthodoxy. This represents those issues or doctrines that the representative tradition believes is essential for one to be orthodox, not necessarily salvation. The outer circles represent a depleting belief in importance and emphasis.



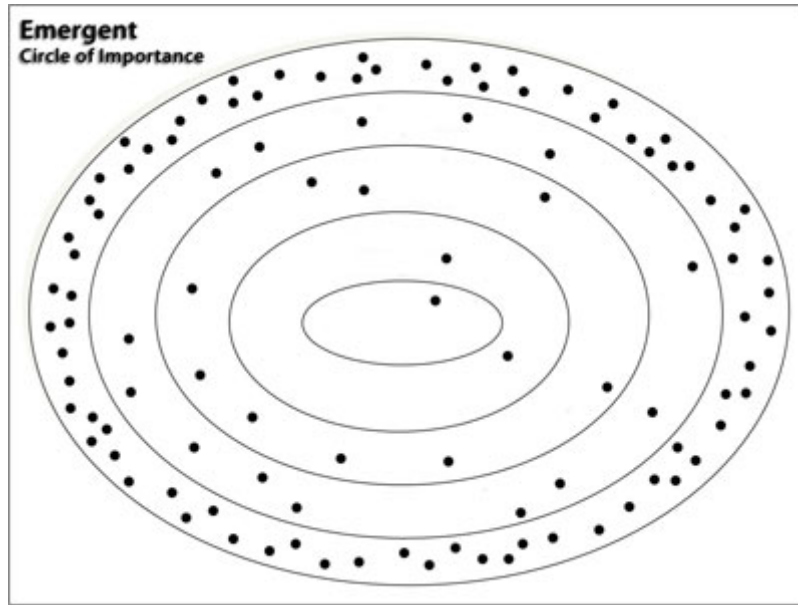
Notice the concentration toward the center. Fundamentalists (at least in the contemporary sense of the word) would place just about everything in the center. "If it is in the Bible, it is absolutely essential, and we are certain that we are right!"



Notice that the Evangelical concentric circle is much more balanced, having a definite place for all issues. The center circle would have less representation.



Notice the change. The center circle has little change, evidencing that non-Emergent emergers do have a definite center. As well, there would be fewer items in the "circle of orthodoxy." Most issues would be pushed to the outside with the result that those toward the center have more emphasis.



Now you can probably see the resulting difference. Those in the Emergent camp seem unwilling to land their plane anywhere near the center. In fact, the most emphasized and essential point may be that one cannot land near the center!

In the end, I want people to notice the difference between emerging and Emergent. I also want to draw attention to the similarities between evangelicalism and emerging.

Of course, not everyone will agree with or like these charts---they are not Gospel---but understand their intent in giving perspective.

Next, I will give the five ways which people can be emerging.

Part 5: Are You Emerging?

Are you an emerger? Is the emerging church heretical? What should my attitude be toward this “movement”? These are the questions that started this series of blog posts and I hope by the end of this post you will be better equipped to answer these questions in an informed and responsible way.

I will now (finally!) attempt to give you five ways in which I believe one can emerge or identify with, at least to some degree, the emerging movement.

Here they are:

1. Emerging Ecclesiologically
2. Emerging Sociologically
3. Emerging Theologically
4. Emerging Epistemologically
5. Emerging Politically

It is important to keep in mind that being “emerging” in any of these categories does not *necessarily* mean that one is an emerger, it simply means that one identifies, sympathizes, or finds themselves within this particular characteristic of emerging thought.

The examples provided in each group are not meant to be exhaustive *or* taken as a unified whole. In other words, some emergers may identify with some of the examples and not others.

Emerging Ecclesiologically

This characterizes an attempt or desire to return to some traditional elements of the Christian faith that draw upon a more experience based worship. Many times this will be evidenced by a less formal structure of gatherings or formal church time, allowing freedom of expression without the traditional restraints of more program oriented gatherings.

Examples:

- Less tendency to have a traditional (post-reformation) church program structure
- Movement toward house churches
- Disdain for “mega” churches
- Lord’s supper/Eucharist practiced every week
- Artwork as expressions of faith

- Candles and incense
- Traditional prayers and creeds
- Prayer walks

More radical Emergent type examples:

- Eastern meditation
- Yoga services

Emerging Epistemologically

A desire for an epistemic humility that recognizes the shortcomings modernistic enlightenment philosophy bent on striving for absolute knowledge and certainty in all things. This humility ranges from radical agnosticism (e.g. a denial of our ability to know anything for certain) to essentials-only mentality (e.g. we only focus on the essentials that are clear and have been held by the historic Christian faith).

Examples:

- Suspicious of all truth claims
- Willingness to question personal traditions at the deepest level
- Doubt and uncertainty concerning an individualistic approach to truth and knowledge—we learn in community
- More desirous to broaden perspectives outside subjective cultural norms
- Recognition that our knowledge is not objective, we all learn in a biased context
- Denial of man's ability to have *absolute* certainty (this is reserved only for God)
- More skeptical of traditional sources of information and authority (science, denominational authorities, pastors, theologians, media, etc)
- More apophatic, emphasizing mystery and our inability as finite beings to *definitely* and *conclusively* define an infinite God

More radical Emergent type characteristics:

- Denial of the existence of "Truth" with a capital "T" (absolute truth)
- Denial of *any* claims to certainty
- Denial of the analogy of language (e.g. language is not a sufficient conduit of truth)

Emerging Theologically

Calling into question many traditional Christian doctrines. This questioning can result in agnosticism toward the particular doctrine, marginalization of the issue, or a settled

humble conviction concerning the issue. This is closely tied to being emerging epistemologically.

Examples:

- Missional focus concerning the spread of the Gospel (Christians do not go to church, they *are* the church)
- Less tendency to recognize or give strong credence to traditional theological divisions (e.g. Catholic-Protestant; Reformed-Arminian)
- Not too keen to systematic theology since to “systematize” ones theology usually implies a seemingly forced system of harmonization that is seen to be inconsistent with both human ability and divine revelation
- Hesitancy about taking traditional labels such as Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Liberal, or even Emerger since the labels associate them with a *systematized* system of beliefs and thought
- 1) Agnostic with regards to the destiny of the unevangelized (e.g. we don’t know the eternal condition of the unevangelized)
- 2) Inclusivistic with regards to destiny of the unevangelized (e.g. Christ’s blood can save those who don’t have the chance to hear the Gospel)
- More agnostic toward the nature of hell
- Willing to see value in multiple theories of the atonement, not just the vicarious substitutionary view
- Traditional Protestant theology of imputation questioned

More radical Emergent type characteristics:

- Universalism (all people will make it to heaven as God will redeem all things)
- Pluralism (all religions are basically the same)
- Denial of hell as a place of eternal judgment
- Complete denial of the vicarious substitutionary view of the atonement

Emerging Sociologically

Engaging in and integration with culture and society in traditionally “unorthodox” ways. The integration has to do with a belief that culture is not *necessarily* evil, but can be part of God’s common grace. The engagement is purposed on sharing the Gospel in places and ways that are seen as taboo for many in the evangelical or fundamentalist communities. As well, this characteristic is bent upon the belief that loving one’s neighbor and sharing the Gospel is not limited to our words, but is more powerfully expressed through out actions—actions of kindness, mercy, and justice.

Examples:

- Having church service in a brewery
- Looking like the culture (e.g. dress, nose rings, colored hair)
- Talking like the culture (e.g. getting rid of all Christianese language, less sensitive toward vulgarity, etc.)
- Focus on bringing about justice (liberation of the oppressed, sympathy toward aids victims, women's rights in society and the church, etc).
- Willing to traverse the Christian sub-culture taboos (drinking, smoking, rated "R" movies, etc.)

More radical Emergent type characteristics:

- Denial that homosexuality is sinful
- Social Gospel becomes primary (e.g. Gospel of mercy without preaching of sin, the cross, and forgiveness)

Emerging Politically

Sympathizes with many of the more traditionally liberal political concerns. This is closely connected to being socially emerging.

Examples:

- Do not identify with a political party (e.g. they should not be seen as "the republican party at prayer!")
- Anti-war or more pacifistic
- Support those with environmental concerns (green peace, global warming, recycling)

More radical Emergent type characteristics:

- Approval of homosexual marriages and unions
- Support of the women's right to choose
- Definitely identify with more liberal politics

I think that it is important to note that one can be emerging in one category and not so much in another. One might be emerging epistemologically and, to some degree, theologically, but not so politically or ecclesiastically. As well, one might be emerging socially, like Mark Driscoll, but not really too emerging in the other areas. Does this mean that they are still emerging? Yes, but only in those areas. Should they take on the name? I guess if they so choose, but one is always going to have to qualify what they mean.

As I said in previous posts, many of the non-*Emergent* type characteristics are shared by both traditional Evangelicals and emergers. Therefore, if you are an Evangelical and see yourself in some of these emerging characteristics, this should not surprise you. As I said before, much of the ethos of the emerging movement is simply what I believe to be a revitalization and a “next step” of Evangelicalism as it arose out of Fundamentalism in the 40s and 50s.

As well, there are those leaders in the emerging movement who I would call *evangelical-emergers* such as Scot McKnight, Robert Webber (deceased), Stanley Grenz (deceased), Dan Kimball, N.T. Wright, Eugene Peterson, Donald Miller, Mark Driscoll, and Dallas Willard (not *all* of whom would necessarily take the name emerging, but do identify closely with the emerging ethos). In this case, “evangelical” might be used as an adjective rather than a noun. They may be evangelical, not necessarily Evangelical.

So, are you an emerger? As you can see from this series of blogs, that is quite a question.

Will the real emerger please stand up? No, I take that back. Will the non-emergers just sit back down—that seems easier.

I hope this has been a helpful series.

Thoughts? Are you standing or sitting?

Part 6: Random Thoughts of Emergence

Having finished my series about the Emerging Church, I feel that it is important that I say a few things so that people have a better understanding about my thoughts in general concerning the “conversation” that is going on—the “emerging” conversation.

I have a deep sympathy toward the confusion that postmodernism has brought about. The global culture that has been created in the last 50 years has caused us to change our perspectives on many things. The internet, world news, and globalization of culture has made it less likely that people can stay sheltered in a naive understanding of truth, religion, and morality—even if they are right. The ever changing currents in science, exposure to world religions, fractures in the family unit, divisions in Christianity, and subjective change in personal beliefs and certainty have caused Christians to question the reliability of any source of truth. People are suspicious, disillusion, bewildered, and uncertain.

We have seen that things are not summed up in one single confession of faith, one denomination’s take on truth, or one person’s interpretation of the Scripture. The “we-have-got-everything-right-while-everyone-else-is-wrong” mentality is fading. While a previous generations fundamentalistic hardening of the categories has brought about the postmodern ethos, the ensuing betrayal felt is producing a hardening of the same sort. Obfuscation (darkening through manipulation) of truth by well-meaning fundamentalists of all varieties has begun to create a different type of obfuscation. This darkening is no less well-meaning, but can be just as destructive.

I sympathize with postmodern and emerging thought. No, I *empathize* with it. But this empathy cannot produce a static position of ever changing dynamics. We need to be wise, forward thinking, and responsible.

This generation is postmodern. Really it is *soft*-postmodern. Soft-postmoderns do not deny the existence of truth, they simply are less naive about the possibility that their particular take on truth sums up the whole. Hard-postmoderns deny truth all together. As Christians we need to realize that hard-postmodernism, by definition, is antithetical to Christianity. Christianity does not exist without truth.

We are asking questions that were not asked in a previous generation, but assumed. These questions are good questions. They need to be asked anew by *every* generation. This is the essence of *semper reformanda* (always reforming). We are *always* reforming, never satisfied with a hardened traditions that characterize those who have made camp on the journey. Their direction may have been right, but they should never have stopped.

But asking of questions is merely the first step. We have to follow where the evidence leads, otherwise what good are the questions? Why ask questions if, in the end, we are not expecting *any* answers?

Were we going in the right direction?

Are we following the map correctly?

Should we have made that last turn?

Where do we go now?

These are all the questions that need to be asked. Don't we expect *some* answers?

Loving Christ—this is good. Following Christ—this is Christian. Introducing people to Christ—this is our mission. But the question Who is Christ? *must* be asked *and* answered. What did he do? Why do we need him? How do we know? What is our problem? What is the future? Who is God? Answers to these questions will produce propositions. While God, Christianity, and faith cannot be boiled down to a set of propositions, it must begin with such.

We are finite, and God is infinite. This is a true proposition that most are willing to admit. If God is infinite, is it possible that finite words, language, culture, concepts, and expressions of faith can really do justice to an infinite God? This is a tricky question that one should not conclude on too quickly. While our propositions are insufficient to explain God *fully*, can't they introduce him *truly*? If they can't then we have created a self-defeating philosophy of religion. How? Because we have said that the infinite, all-powerful God who can do all things *cannot* communicate in an intelligible way. Are you sure you want to go there?

The Bible does contain a lot of information. Some information is in stories, narrative, and drama. Other information is in theological themes, propositions, and contextualized principles. Some of this information is hard to understand. Some of it is very easy to understand. Some information good Christians disagree about. Other information good Christians agree upon. Do the disagreements mean that the information should be ignored? Should we tear out the portions of Scripture that cause this disagreement? Should we no longer discuss such, relegating this information to the anathema of a postmodern bias against disagreements?

Believe me, I sympathize with people who are sick of divisions. But isn't it the *unnecessary* divisions about which we speak?

Unite around the essentials, right? As Rupertus Meldenius said, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” I love this statement. Yes, we unite around essentials. But simply because something is a non-essential does not make it non-*important*, does it?

I am a Calvinist. I won't divide with an Arminian because of our view of election. I will say that I believe that he is wrong, I will give arguments for my positions, and I will say that I think my position more accurately represents God's revelation than the opposing positions. Is my argument a power play? It could be, but it does not have to be. Could I be wrong about my position? Yes. Are there good people who disagree with me? Most certainly—good people who love the Lord more than I. Does this mean that we then anathematize such conversation. Not at all. Why would we?

Vigorous conversation is what we need. Don't anathematize people because they believe they are right.

But too many people have divided and killed in the name of religion. What about the Crusades? What about the Salem witch trials? What about the inquisition? Yes, these are all ridiculously sore black-eyes in Christianity's past. What is the solution? How do we keep from repeating the past? I think it starts with each individual. *Don't do such things*. As Bob Newhart would say, “Stop it!” Change your perspective. Change your outlook. Change your response. But don't change your position if it is correct. Don't kill or disrespect other people who disagree. Make your arguments and leave it to the Lord. He is the judge.

Who decides what is essential?

What is the essence of Christianity?

What is the ultimate source of truth?

Can we know anything at all?

What is the Gospel?

Let's have a conversation. Let's engage in the emerging conversation. It is exciting. God is not scared of questions.

Non-emergers, don't anathematize emergers for asking these questions. You don't really have every figured out like you think you do. These questions *must* to be asked. There are reasons for the doubt, suspicion, and skepticism that may not be sinful. Think about it.

Emergers, don't anathematize yourself or others when you begin to find your answers. As well, don't regulate non-essentials to non-important.

This conversation is necessary—it always has been. Call yourself emerging, evangelical, Christian, missional or whatever, but realize this, we must push forward.