Emerging vs Evangelical [1]

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The truth is that I do not "get out much" regarding keeping up and being in the know with things such as church movements, politics *et cetera*. So, while I have been aware of the term "emerging church" for a while, I really have had no idea what it was. I only glimpsed the scope of the movement a couple of weeks ago, when I decided to read up on it (albeit briefly). I came across this blog post [2] and I encourage the reader to go and read that blog post first before continuing with this one.

What I liked about Elliott's blog post was that it put things simply and clearly. It was not an academic treatise, but got the point across, even if only very informally. As I base my post on his, it is only fair that I add the same warning as he did: "Please read with a bit of salt..."

First off, let me state that I lean more towards the evangelical side, as described in that blog post, than the emerging side. But I must confess that I understand why the emerging church is appealing to some people and that I have a degree of sympathy for them.

I was involved for many years in a church before becoming a student in Stellenbosch. I was actively involved, even as a youth, and loved the people there. Then I witnessed a catastrophic collapse which happened inside that church. This was the result of some ugly things which happened *sub rosa* and led to more ugly things. After that I left that church and became disillusioned with the idea of a centralised church. I became spiritually recluse and, frankly, regarded most Christians I encountered with some degree of suspicion. Years later, thankfully, the Lord rescued me by calling me into a church where I received good Bible teaching: the only standard I was still willing to measure churches and Christians by.

During this "desert" period which I experienced, I was disillusioned by the church as a human institution. I considered whether it would not be better to decentralise the church, empowering individuals so that they can serve God in a way they believe is right (within the bounds of sound biblical doctrine, of course). This, as I understand it, is one facet of the emergent church; the thrust of postmodernism. They are still a church in the sense that they are an affiliation of people who share the same viewpoints. But, as a friend pointed out to me, what about scripture, which teaches a definite church structure? Paul wrote extensively on the issue of church governance (see, for example, his first letter to Timothy). Acts is also clear that structured churches were planted by the apostles. Is it right to forsake such clear instruction (although it is not a matter of salvation) simply to slot in with the prevailing world view?

Regarding the emerging church, Elliott notes his admiration for people who (try to) live "missionally"; embodying the practical teachings of Jesus. While no-one can live a perfect live, we do admire those who "succeed" where we fail in our day-to-day living. Again I myself was part of the WWJD movement and carried reminders around so that I may live a Christ-like life. But despite my good

intentions, my sinful human nature often enough overpowered me. While I look forward to growing in Christ, I recognise that my example is insufficient to lead people to Christ on its own. Other people, however, feel that they can do this. But our attitude towards life and other people is only part of the story of Jesus. What of the forgiveness we have in Him? What about our reliance on Him when we *do* falter? Should that not be spoken, even proclaimed? Was not the whole point of the Law (and a significant portion of the Bible) to show that we ultimately need the forgiveness which the cross enables?

As I said earlier, I side more with evangelicals1. Given my past experiences, however, I do have sympathies for the emerging church. I believe that the evangelical church can learn much from listening to those who are part of the emerging church, as they have real and legitimate concerns. Indeed, it is likely that this is not even possible: the two sides need to engage each other in a constructive and loving manner.

On a final note, I just want to pose an open question: if much of the emergent church is grounded in postmodernism, what is going to become of it as society moves towards transmodernism?

- 1. Although it should be noted that the term "evangelical" is understood slightly differently inside and outside of the USA—a point which I am not going to elaborate on now, but do want the reader to be aware of.

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