

Church in the Present Tense

**A Candid Look at
What's Emerging**

**Scot McKnight, Peter Rollins,
Kevin Corcoran, Jason Clark**



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Introduction

The Emerging Church

KEVIN CORCORAN

The Christian church has a history. The birth of the church traces its lineage back to Jesus from Nazareth, and more specifically to a community's belief in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. Of course, the Christ event itself is embedded in a history, a peculiarly *Jewish* history. Absent that (Jewish) history, the Christ event is evacuated of theological significance. That a human being should rise from the dead would certainly be a historical curiosity, just another startling oddity in a world that throws up such natural oddities as carnivorous plants and marsupial wolves. But absent a narrative of sin and redemption, a narrative of kingship and exodus, a resurrection from the dead would remain nothing more than an odd curiosity.

What we know as the *emerging church* is no different. It too has a history. Its history begins in the early 1990s in the United Kingdom. It was there, in London, that people like Jonny Baker (who appears on the DVD insert that accompanies this volume), Ian Mobsby, and

others began what can best be described as *experiments in worship*. These communities were self-consciously contextual, both culturally and geographically. The aesthetics of their worship reflected the gifts, skills, and talents of the human resources indigenous to its members, which included artists of various sorts, writers, social visionaries, and the like. These communities also exploited the emerging cultural resources known and daily used by its members, including technological resources such as new media and social networking resources that were just coming into existence via the world wide web.

Many of these experiments were not originally undertaken outside or in opposition to the institutional church, which in the United Kingdom is the Anglican Church. Often these experimental groups began within and with the aid and blessing of the Anglican Church. Today the archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, Rowan Williams, is a staunch defender of the movement. (An interview with the archbishop is included on the DVD accompanying this volume.) “Fresh expressions” is the phrase currently being employed to describe these new ways of doing church within Anglicanism. The term *emerging*, which is also used in the United Kingdom, is actually a fairly recent American export.

What we know as the emerging church in the United States began later, in the late 1990s. And unlike the *alternative worship* movement in the United Kingdom, it seems fair to say that the US emerging church movement began as a reaction against institutional church within evangelical Protestantism. Emergent Village, for example, originally began as a small band of disillusioned friends who gathered for the purpose of forging a way to follow Jesus at the end of the twentieth century and at the dawn of the twenty-first.

In 2000 Tony Jones met with friends in the Minnesota woods to dream about, argue about, and contemplate the future of Christianity. A year later Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, Tim Keel, and others adopted the “emerging” moniker. Since then, and thanks in no small measure to the explosion of Internet blogs and new means of social networking, the emerging church has been spreading like a virus.

It seems fair to say that while the alternative worship movement in the United Kingdom was, at the beginning, primarily concerned with rethinking and reimagining worship practices, the emerging church

in the United States was from its inception concerned with rethinking and reimagining Christian theology as well as Christian practice.

Despite these differences the emerging church in the United States and its British counterpart share the same animating principles and ethos. Below I describe the emerging church as it exists today on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Church and Postmodernism

Each January I teach a three-week course in London and Belfast on the emerging church. To give you a feel for an emerging church, let me describe an experience I had several years ago in London. I was participating in an Anglo-Catholic Mass in a very old church that blended ancient ritual, liturgy, and creeds with the use of the latest image and sound reproduction, including an elegant MacBook Pro, which was perched on the altar table just to the left of the consecrated elements. I found this juxtaposition utterly shocking. There was the priest, dressed in high-church vestments and performing the liturgy, ancient and regal. And also there—a MacBook Pro. On the altar!

What to me seemed initially incongruous was to my students humor. Bread and wine are ordinary things; so too a laptop computer. If the former can become for us the body and blood of Christ, why can't the other, ordinary though it may be, function as a window through which God's love and mercy are communicated via image and sound?

Postmodernism, as I point out in "Who's Afraid of Philosophical Realism?" is both a *cultural* phenomenon and a *philosophical* movement. Cultural postmodernism involves various and sundry sorts of cultural shifts, sensibilities, and notions, while philosophical postmodernism involves, among other things, calling into question "metanarratives," or grand stories of the world and our place in it. The Christian story is one such narrative. Atheistic naturalism is another. Consciously or not, each of us fits our own particular story into a larger story (or stories). What gets called into question by philosophical postmodernism is our ability to float free of the grand narratives we find ourselves in and to view things from a "God's eye view." Those sensitive to the postmodern situation, like

those in the emerging and altworship movements, claim that our grasp of reality is always partial, incomplete, fragmentary. This, I suggest, leads those in the movement to emphatically promote tolerance and enthusiastically participate in dialogue—religious, political, and otherwise.

Second, emerging Christians tend to be theologically pluralistic and suspicious of tidy theological boxes. They believe that God is bigger than any theology and that God is first and foremost a storyteller, not a dispenser of theological doctrine and factoids. Theology for them, therefore, is conceived as an ongoing and provisional conversation. Indeed, many prefer the descriptor “emerging conversation” to “emerging church.”

Emerging Christians are also allergic to thinking that fixates on who is going to heaven and who is going to hell, or on who’s on the inside and who’s on the outside. They stress the importance of right living (*orthopraxy*) over right believing (*orthodoxy*). What’s important, some often say, is whether you engage in God-love and neighbor-love. They believe the gospel is a radically *this-worldly* bit of good news.

Third, emerging Christians believe the church must change if it is to speak meaningfully to a postmodern culture. So, like the prophet Amos, the rhetoric of emerging Christians can be shocking, alarming, and hyperbolic. They are frequently given to dramatic overstatement. But it should be kept in mind that, at its best and most sincere, the aim of the rhetoric is to rouse us (the church) from dogmatic slumber, to get us to see old things with new eyes, or sometimes to see completely new things. The aim, one might say, is to unsettle us such that a space is open for God to break in and to speak afresh, and then for us to get on with God’s agenda in the world. At its worst, however, the rhetoric of emerging Christians can be sloppy, unnecessarily misleading, obnoxiously jargon laden, and incoherent.

Fourth, participants in the emerging and altworship movements are passionate about the present. The gospel, they want us to realize, is about the here and now and not a ticket to secure a place in the there and then of heaven. This passion for the present manifests itself in four overlapping foci: community, transformation, worship, and social engagement.

Community

Emerging Christians place a premium on community, on living life together in all its messiness. However, community can take many shapes, and emerging or altworship communities often do not resemble traditional church community with a paid staff and centralized leadership. It's a dispersed community, a patchwork of enclaves dotting the landscape of contemporary culture. Members live together, love together, and dream together in the rough-and-tumble of everyday life.

Transformation

Emerging types are passionate about transformation, both personal and structural. They tend not to view themselves as finished products, as “saved” or even as “Christian.” Instead, they speak of themselves as “*being saved*” and “*becoming Christian*.” They tend to be political activists and socially “liberal” in the sense that they care deeply about the proverbial “widow, orphan, and alien”—those who are marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised—and about changing the personal and structural realities that perpetuate the disenfranchisement and marginalization. They believe that engaging in such tasks is not supplemental to following Jesus but is an essential part of what it *means* to follow Jesus. And they don't much care who you are or what you believe: if you're laboring for the poor, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised, then you're doing God's work, and that's what matters here and now.

Worship

Emerging Christians are innovative and imaginative in the aesthetics of worship, and they are technologically savvy. They're sacramental and incarnational, sometimes employing large-scale transformative theater, such as the ikon community does in Northern Ireland. I say sacramental and incarnational because of the heavy emphasis on the tactility of emerging worship and emerging living. God, Christians believe, became incarnate, wrapped himself in ordinary human skin and bone. Emerging Christians believe God is still revealing himself in the ordinary and earthy. And their worship embodies this incarnational and tactile character.

Revelation, one of the communities we visited in London, for example, offers a sophisticated blend of ancient ritual and liturgy and cutting-edge image technology and participation. Worship that engages us as whole and embodied beings, providing a feast for most if not all of our sensory modalities—sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch—is typical in these communities. (You’ll get a small taste of this in the footage from the accompanying DVD.)

Social Engagement

Emerging Christians enthusiastically endorse Jesus’s claim that “by their fruits you will know them.” Thus, they seek to be active agents of God’s reconciling, redemptive, and restorative agenda in and for the world. They are thus politically and socially engaged.

It should be pointed out that the emerging church movement resonates not so much with a particular demographic (e.g., well-to-do twenty- and thirtysomethings) so much as with what a friend of mine has described as a particular *psycho-graphic* (i.e., with people in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, and even seventies who share a certain cultural aesthetic and cultural sensibility). So it’s a mistake, I think, to suggest that the movement is a youth movement or appeals only to a younger generation.

It is also decidedly not a movement peculiar to evangelical Protestants. It is popping up among people all across the denominational landscape: Protestant, evangelical nondenominational, Episcopal, and Roman Catholics alike. And while some talk about how long a run emerging Christianity will have, I suggest that its “demise” is actually written in its DNA. The emerging church is much like a flash mob that comes together in a certain place at a certain time and for a limited duration. However long emerging Christianity lasts, you can bet its DNA will turn up in future incarnations of church and theology.

Book Overview

This volume is divided into four parts, consisting of two chapters each. The first part, “Philosophy,” opens with my “Who’s Afraid

of Philosophical Realism? Taking Emerging Christianity to Task.” In it I explore emerging authors’ and practitioners’ allergy to philosophical realism and to creedal formulations of Christian belief. I suggest that this situation derives largely from either a confusion of *epistemic humility* with philosophical *antirealism* (terms clearly defined in the chapter) or the mistaken belief that the epistemic humility that emerging Christians prize depends on postmodern, philosophical antirealism. I argue that commitment to ecumenical creedal formulations and to concrete Christian beliefs is in no way incompatible with or inimical to epistemic humility or other distinctive features of postmodernity prized by emerging Christians, such as the deep conviction that our grasp of reality is always partial, incomplete, and provisional. Since what seems to lie at the heart of emerging sensibility is epistemic humility, and not relativistic, creative antirealism, I call for an embrace of what might be termed *chastened realism*. I also call for a respectful division of philosophical labor within emerging circles between so-called analytic and continental styles of philosophy by suggesting that deconstructive philosophy and analytic philosophy, or what I want to call *clarificatory philosophy*, are complementary, noncompeting modes of discourse.

The second chapter, “The Worldly Theology of Emerging Christianity,” by Peter Rollins, argues for the claim that emerging thought is first and foremost a critique of Christianity as *hermeneutical*, that is, a privileged way of interpreting the world. Rollins challenges us to replace this view with an approach that seeks to symbolically enact the divine kenosis (*self-emptying*), in other words performatively emptying ourselves of our various religious and political interpretations of reality and thus taking on the identity of Christ, who in the incarnation became nothing. Rollins argues that it is in this desertlike space of negation that we are transformed and Christianity rightly seen not as a privileged way of *interpreting* or *knowing* the world but rather as a way of *changing* the world.

Chapter 3 opens the second part of the volume, “Theology,” with “Consumer Liturgies and Their Corrosive Effects on Christian Identity,” by Jason Clark, who argues that consumer society is rife with identity-forming liturgical practices and that Christians are not im-

immune to its identity-forming effects. From the consumer calendar, which provides the rhythm, and the shopping malls, which provide the secular space for engaging in the practices of consumption, to the lengths to which we go to discipline our bodies, our characters are being shaped by the narrative of consumption. Emerging communities must be places, therefore, that offer alternative liturgies, ones that cultivate peculiarly Christian characters and fortify Christians to live in the world without being of the world.

In chapter 4, “Thy Kingdom Come (on Earth): An Emerging Eschatology,” I explore the biblical notion of the kingdom of God—an unexpected, unanticipated, and often iconoclastic in-breaking event that brings about a new reality. Through an examination of the concept of “kingdom of God,” I draw out the richly textured contours of a new Jerusalem and show how emerging Christianity can be understood first and foremost as an eschatological movement, a vibrant anticipatory enactment of a new reality, namely, God’s kingdom come, and still coming.

The fifth chapter opens part 3, “Worship.” Here Jason Clark kicks things off with his essay “The Renewal of Liturgy in the Emerging Church.” Clark argues that it is not enough to provide worship aesthetics and experiences to help make sense of life; instead, all Christian worship—emerging or not—is about the right ordering of life and the formation and embodiment of our identity as Christ followers. Emerging collectives therefore must provide liturgies that invite us to participate in, repeat, and enact together as a community practices that remind us of who we are and who God is. The story these rituals and practices enact, moreover, is not of our own choosing (i.e., another consumer choice we make). Rather, Clark argues that Christian liturgies open those who practice them to the possibility of reconnecting with the Christian story—and with the people who have held and practiced it through the ages—so that we ourselves might also know and incarnate the story in our own peculiarly postmodern communities and spheres of influence.

In chapter 6, “Transformance Art: Reconfiguring the Social Self,” Peter Rollins draws on the thought of Nietzsche and Heidegger to describe emerging collectives as groups engaging in innovative ways to help close the gap between belief and practice through *transfor-*

mance art. The essay explores the nature of the ironic stance, which is a way of intellectually distancing ourselves from social activities that we might willingly engage in but that actually undermine the very commitments we profess to hold most dear. Rollins shows how the practices of transference art of emerging collectives are designed to combat the ironic stance.

In chapters 7 and 8, Scot McKnight addresses issues in both the Bible and doctrine. In “Scripture in the Emerging Movement,” McKnight sketches ways Christians read the Bible—as a law book, as a collection of blessings and promises, as a Rorschach inkblot, as a massive puzzle, and through the lens of one author, who is treated as a maestro. An emerging understanding of Scripture recognizes that language is being asked to carry an enormous load in speaking for God and of God. McKnight brings into this context the recent and brilliant work of the Jewish scholar Michael Fishbane, who draws us into the potency of language while recognizing that all language eventually drains itself dry before the “unsayable God.” Scripture, McKnight argues, needs to be approached as a collection of wiki-stories of *the Story*. We know the plot, but the Story itself is known only through the particular wiki-stories (the individual authors of the Bible who tell the Story in their books).

“Atonement and Gospel” brings the volume to a close. Here McKnight notes that there is a marked focus today among some to speak of both double imputation and propitiation as either the center of the atonement or the most important idea contained in the concept of atonement. The remarkable problem is that double imputation is never unambiguously taught in the New Testament, and propitiation is rarely taught. Moreover, when double imputation and propitiation are made the gospel message, preaching involves the framing of our problem as guilt and being under the wrath of God. And this, McKnight argues, leads to the presentation of Christ’s death and the gospel as the event whereby God’s wrath is appeased (propitiation) and our guilt removed. But that’s not the gospel, McKnight suggests. In this chapter, McKnight attempts to recapture just what the gospel message of the Bible actually is.

All of these issues and topics are interesting in their own right. Insofar as they form several of the substantive issues in emerging

conversations and reflection, they are crucial both for understanding what the emerging church is and where it is going. One of the aims of this volume is to give the reader a front-row seat as four scholars in philosophy, theology, and biblical studies frame and discuss these important topics.