

Extreme Makeover: Church Edition

The Emerging Church is a “thing” very dear to me. I spent several years feeling like the outsider in traditional and contemporary churches, and was gob smacked when I discovered this new model we’re now calling *emergent*. There are a lot of elements in the composition of an emerging community that really appeal to me. Among these, the emphasis on individual sensory experience within a community setting, openness to dialogue between people committed to a faith journey, and models of leadership and discipleship that emphasize servitude and social justice. Those are some of the principles of an “emerging church,” yet I’m critical of the lengths that most churches are going to in an effort to conform to these ideals.

As I scour the net for communities who are fleshing out the emergent way, I often find myself disappointed with the feeble efforts most churches are going to to embody the principles of the emergent church and post-modernity. For most churches, “becoming emergent” means forming a band, dropping a few liturgical prayers into the Friday night service and juicing up their website. Yet, these steps, in themselves, are the very efforts that stand in the way of sojourners looking for an authentic experience of God’s vastness. It seems that the principal that most defines the postmodern religious experience happens to be the one the Church is most threatened by: pluralism. In an effort to keep things cut and dry, black and white, the Church has laid out it’s own “12-step” program for Christian faith and experience of God. When I compare the beliefs of an emergent church with those of a traditional congregation, there’s virtually no difference. It’s only in the style, the facade of the faith, that we find a difference. Yet, this sort of shallowness is the very repellent of most postmodern souls.

When I talk about God with my friends of varying faiths, words like “trinity, inerrant, salvation and blood” rarely come up. And yet, these are the words that litter the pages of the websites and services of most emergent churches. These words are merely symptoms of the fact that emergent churches and church leadership are still operating in the mindset of the modern church (not postmodern). The fact is, somewhere along the way, someone figured out that God is bigger than words like “He, sin and saved.” Someone figured out that God cares about the poor as much as the rich. Someone figured out that if God loves everyone, then Muslims are loved by God. Someone figured out that any word that any feeble language can muster can’t come close to wrapping itself around the small toe of God, much less the essence of God.

Sometimes, I sit through church and expect Ty Pennington to pop out and say “Move that Bible!” or something equally ridiculous. The church is giving itself a facelift, while its heart goes untouched and unchanged, halting our hope for a fully emerged Church. The stall in the emergence is grounded in the Church’s commitment to modernity. Namely, the Church is still more committed to our attempt to “prove” than we are to welcoming our neighbor. The Church is more committed to being the only group in Heaven, than we are to being the group known for bringing Heaven to Earth. In the coming decade, as the universe shrinks due to commercial space travel and the world becomes a virtual neighborhood, the Church will be forced to choose between its efforts to cling to inerrancy and atonement, or to “open the

doors, let the music play and let the streets resound with singing.”¹ Not all will choose to enter, but the Church has to make space in its heart enough for all people to come, as they are, into our Body- into our lives.

For the emergent church to truly *emerge*, the people inside the Church, like you and me, are going to have to figure some things out too. We can add flash to our websites, we can cover every song Chris Tomlin can write. We can light every candle in the world and dig up every ancient prayer ever written, but if we don’t change our hearts and our minds, if we don’t change our faith and our theology, then the people waiting for the emergent church to emerge will continue to look right through us.

¹ Martin Smith, "Did You Feel the Mountains Tremble"