

IS THERE ROOM AT THE TABLE?  
EMERGING CHRISTIANS IN THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE

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*Introduction*

On the third of February, 1931, a powerful earthquake hit the coastal area of Hawkes Bay in New Zealand. This seismic upheaval so substantially altered the surrounding landscape that the inhabitants of the area soon discovered that their local knowledge and maps were now useless. It proved to be impossible to navigate by them. The local population experienced a sense of disorientation as they discovered old familiar landmarks had disappeared and new geographic features had appeared. Previously well-trodden paths and main roads no longer existed. Consequently, new routes had to be forged and new maps had to be drawn so that the locals could once more understand and find their way around their now unfamiliar homeland.

What happened in Hawkes Bay is eerily similar to what is happening in the church today, and especially in the Church of the Nazarene, as we are experiencing the cultural equivalent of the Hawkes Bay earthquake. Major contemporary philosophers,<sup>1</sup> sociologists,<sup>2</sup> educators,<sup>3</sup> biblical scholars,<sup>4</sup> missiologists<sup>5</sup>, and theologians<sup>6</sup> are in universal agreement that we are living in a hinge point of history, when a culture undergoes a complete paradigm shift in its worldview. Peter F. Drucker describes this seismic shift in culture in these terms:

Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation. Within a few short decades, society rearranges itself – its worldview; its basic values; its social and political structures; its arts; its key institutions. In fifty years there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived and into which their own parents were born. We are currently living through just such a transformation.<sup>7</sup>

The emergence of the postmodern culture has caused the same type of confusion and disorientation in the church as the Hawkes Bay earthquake. The familiar landmarks of the previous culture of modernism are now gone completely, altered, or viewed differently than before. As a result, new maps are needed to navigate the changing land, and new practices are necessary to survive.

Truth be told, we *are* living in a new cultural era. The problem is that we continue to operate as if we were still in the previous era. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch describe this well:

Christendom is the name given to the sacral culture that has dominated European society from around the eleventh century until the end of the twentieth. Its sources go back to the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example: Sire, 1997; Middleton and Walsh, 1995; Rorty, 1980; Griffin, 1989; Griffin, et al, 1989; Oord, 2001

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Lyotard, 1984; Barna, 1995; Smith, 2005

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Fowler, 1996; Freire, 1994; Roebben, 1997; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Breuggemann, 1993b; Adam, 1995

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Bjork, 1999; Hertig and Hertig, 1999; Mays, 1999

<sup>6</sup> See for example: Grenz, 1995a, 1995b; Oden, 1992; Peters, 1992; Dean, 2000; Erickson, 2001; Hauerwas et al, 1994; Murphey and McClendon, 1989; Sweet, 2000; Vanhoozer, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Drucker. (1992). The post-capitalist world, *The Public Interest*, Fall.

time when Constantine came to the throne of the Roman Empire and granted Christians complete freedom of worship and even favored Christianity, thereby undermining all other religions in the empire... we still think of the church and its mission in terms of Christendom. While in reality we are in a post-Christendom context, the Western church still operates for the most part in a Christendom mode.<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing the cultural shift in which we live, there have been various groups which have tried to respond, suggesting ways for the church to move forward and engage this new culture. One of the major responses to this cultural shift has been the rise of the Emerging church, a group of Christians who are trying to figure out what it means to follow Jesus as we move into this postmodern culture. As is often the case with new groups and new ideas, there has also been much confusion and misunderstanding of the Emerging church and its beliefs and how these differ from the modern church. Unfortunately, too much of what most people know about this group is based on what some well-meaning, but misguided Christians (even Christian scholars) have written, with the result being that too often the understanding of most is nothing more than a stereotype based on erroneous information.<sup>9</sup> Our hunch is that these misinterpretations have come about because of the interpreter's inability to recognize their own biases which have been shaped by the influence of modernity, as some of their own academic peers have pointed out.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, the focus of this paper is to help the reader better understand the Emerging church, particularly demonstrating that many Emerging churches are in line theologically and in practice with both the Wesleyan and Nazarene traditions. However, it must also be acknowledged that while these commonalities are present, there are also some significant differences in the way they express those beliefs and practices from their modern sister churches. To help the reader better understand this emerging group of Christians within the Nazarene denomination, we will begin with an understanding of the beginning of the Church of the Nazarene, specifically focusing on the mission of the church as its founder, Phineas F. Bresee, saw it. We will then focus on how the Emerging church differs from the modern church. Part of this overview will be defining terms to ensure we're all on the same page. We will then look at some of the characteristics of the Emerging church and how these are in accord with the beliefs and practices of John Wesley and Phineas Bresee, as representatives of Wesleyan and Nazarene theology, respectively.

This paper will not try to *prove* that the beliefs and practices of the Emerging church are better than those of the modern church. First, as a rule, Emerging churches aren't about trying to prove that their ideas are right or another's ideas are wrong. Second, they would never be so bold or naïve as to believe that God has revealed to them alone how to do church, as that would dismiss the value and success of the rest of the church. Instead, the paper will focus simply on

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch (2003). *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Ministry for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*. Hendrickson, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of these writers come from a Reformed theological tradition and hold a deep conviction re. the inerrancy of Scripture, rather than adopting the Nazarene doctrine of plenary inspiration. A representative sample of Reformed writers includes: Erickson, 1998, 2001; Carson, 2005; Dockery, 1995; and Mohler, 2005, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, reviews by Scott McKnight (2005), from the Arminian tradition, and David Mills (2006), from the Reformed tradition, of D.A. Carson's critique of the Emergent church. Both McKnight and Mills accurately point out that one of the major problems with Carson's and other's critiques of the Emergent church is their unwillingness to assess their own modernist position and how that influences their (mis)understanding of the Emergent movement.

showing the similarities between Emerging churches and Wesley/Bresee, and allow the readers to come to their own conclusions concerning the validity of these comparisons.

### *A New Beginning*

On a Wednesday night in October, a group gathered together in downtown Los Angeles. The year was 1895, and they were pursuant to a public announcement made from the pulpit to complete the organization of the Church of the Nazarene. A prepared statement was read from the pulpit that began as follows: *“Feeling clearly called of God to the carrying of His work in the conversion of sinners, the sanctification of believers and the building up in holiness of those who may be committed to our care we associate ourselves together as a church of God under the name The Church of the Nazarene. We seek the simplicity and the power of the primitive New Testament Church. The field of labor to which we feel called is in the neglected quarters of the cities and wherever else may be found waste places and souls seeking pardon and cleansing from sin. This work we aim to do through the agency of city missions, evangelistic services, house-to-house visitation, caring for the poor, comforting the dying. To this end we strive personally to walk with God and to invite others so to do.”*

Some one hundred years later, we contemplate the words so eloquently penned by Dr. Phineas F. Bresee; words that define our heritage and a vital piece of our identity as the Church of the Nazarene. We are found wanting, longing to engage in the heart of the desire of the earliest Nazarenes who responded to the crying out of a culture and society who had been recognizably neglected. Much as Dr. Bresee helped to guide this group of pioneering sojourners, we desire to allow the same mission and vision to persuade us to return to the simplicity of the New Testament Church. We want to reach deep into the caverns of confusion that manage to create neglected societies. We aspire to live inside our heritage and honor our ancestors while responding to the earliest of all apostolic calls as we respond to the mission of God in this world. There can be little argument that as a people we find ourselves at an intersection of thought, understanding, crisis, conversation, and certainty as we emerge from the modern to the postmodern.

We believe that we are living during a time of a great “God movement.” It is time for us to respond to the cries of the neglected as they seek to find fulfillment in the midst of their personal and collective confusion (and struggles). A new set of skills will be required of us in order to move effectively into this God movement. We will need to learn how to listen, how to speak, and how to touch differently. We live in a time where people need, desire, and demand relevant explanations to the issues presented during this time, i.e., global warming, hunger, child labor, HIV, war, slavery, genocide, homelessness, economy, and corruption, to name a few. As a church, we must begin to respond to their questions in harmony. We have, for some time, stood securely and somewhat proudly upon our principles, proclamations, and standards. But now we are beckoned by our Lord to seek out a new “posture” that becomes the new principle, proclamation, and standard—a posture that leads us in the direction of Christ, a posture that takes us back to the heart of the desire of the early Nazarenes . . . to reach the neglected.

Dr. Bresee once stated, *“Let the Church of the Nazarene be true to its commission; not great and elegant buildings; but to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and wipe away the tears of sorrowing, and gather jewels for His diadem.”* There is a growing concern amongst some that we may have veered away from this bold statement and allowed other outside cultural influences to bring forth a differing value system. There are some who desire to resurrect this

vision and to live passionately in union with those living missionally in the early days. When one speaks of the church as presented in the book of Acts, we cannot neglect the communal spirit in which they shared and took care of the needs presented within their society. They responded to the people in order to reach the people and were able to illustrate the love of Christ. This mission is still alive and well in our world; we are only in need of living inside of it to seek and save the lost.

John Wesley once made the following statement, “There is no holiness but social holiness.” Now today, several hundred years later, the church finds itself locked in the middle of a culture conflict stymied by the chasm of language and ideology. Could it be that this subject is not one limited to ideology or even theology? The perplexities of this comment emerge in an age when we have created a shelter, finding a semblance of security in our forms of personal piety, which attempt to define our lives rather than reflect the God-Life. Our journey continues, leading us to evaluate our past and beckons us to discover what lies ahead. Can we, the church, illustrate the wholeness of holiness that God intends for His creation? It is time to explore the depth of Wesley’s statement for the sake of the church and the world.

As we find ourselves emerging from this intersection of time, we can all find comfort and solitude in the words of Dr. Bresee who, when faced with adversity, once said, “... *we stood face to face with the problem of going forth from old relationships to a work into which the Spirit led. It was little our seeking as the call of Abram from the land of UZ was his seeking. The way before us seemed just as indefinite. But it was to be a way in which He would lead us.*” Like Dr. Bresee and Abram, we can find great peace and certainty in knowing that God is leading His church.

*“We are not anxious about final results, but to do the service day by day, which we may be permitted to do under His leadership.” (Phineas Bresee)*

What is it that God has called us to today? How will we engage in His presence and how will we communicate His presence in our postures in the days, months, and years to come as a denomination? Will we hold so tightly to our principles that we may miss the heart, desire, and concern of the founder of our own denomination, and the author and perfecter of our faith, Most Holy God? We know for certain, He will move. The question will remain, with whom?

Some have challenged emerging movements and criticized intentions openly. It is not our desire or directive to defend or communicate on behalf of any of those movements but to learn and bring harmony within our own tribe. We desire to remain connected to our rich heritage and to redeem the places in which time and circumstance enabled us to neglect the neglected. We believe in the Church of the Nazarene and seek to join the story of God and the earliest of His followers as we bring forth this beautiful story of redemption and reconciliation. God is moving and we desire to be on the right side of history when the story is told of those who sought to minister to an emerging culture within the context of their society and time.

Finding ourselves on a quest in God’s Redemptive Story, we desire to live out our missional mystery in such a way that we live in harmony with our heavenly Father. Like Dr. Bresee, we recognize that “*our church is preeminently a missionary church. It knows no difference between home and foreign fields—in these days all fields are near.*” Through the presence of Christ’s love, we earnestly desire to live inside of His wish and prayer for His followers to be a reflection of His redemptive quality in relationship to His community and those who are living in the confusion of cultures that lead them away from His dream. We also desire

to find a spirit of unity in serving the poor and neglected inside the societies of the world. As we seek His redemptive qualities, we desire to explore the wholeness of holiness as we serve as responsible caretakers of the environments in which we live. In so doing, we will advocate that the heart of Christ be brought to fulfillment inside and outside of the church.

As advocates of harmony, we will agree to privately and publicly support and recommend a shared and collective vision. We will do so in such a way that harmonizes with our heritage, and is committed to ministering as a Church to an *emerging culture*. We will embrace all conversations, and we revel in the opportunity to stand with those who need to discover new paradigms, while having the posture of unity within the Church of the Nazarene.

### *Defining Terms*

As would be expected in a postmodern culture, terms mean different things depending on one's interpretation and local context. Therefore, it is important to define terms up front in this paper to ensure that the reader is on the same page as the writers.

#### *Modernism*

Here we define modernism (or the modern era) as “the belief that humanity could find axioms on which one could construct large edifices of truth. Certainty was objectively attainable; truth was ahistorical (not just located in space and time) and universal (all, using the same methods, etc., could come to the same truth).” This stemmed in large part from the Enlightenment, and particularly the thought of Descartes. It is best seen in modernity's acceptance of science and its focus on reason as the sole guarantor and deliverer of truth.

#### *Postmodernism*

Defining postmodernism is much like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall—it's a nearly impossible task because there are so many varieties and forms of it.<sup>11</sup> However, for the purposes of this paper, the writers have defined postmodernism as “the belief that the modern concepts of individualism, foundationalism, and certainty of knowledge need to be called into question.” In other words, postmodernism is not necessarily anti-modernism; rather it is “after” modernism. It recognizes that its heritage is modernism, but it is no longer content to adopt the principles, ideals, and values of modernism, instead adopting new principles, ideals, and values that more accurately reflect living in a new world.

#### *Emerging Church and Emerging Nazarenes*

We have chosen NOT to use the term “Emergent” (perhaps the most well known term for those who are doing church in new ways in a postmodern world) in this paper. This is for several reasons. First, the reality is that there are multiple understandings of what Emergent means. We admit up front that Emergent is not a “fixed” or “reified” object that can be described the way one can describe Machu Picchu or the Lincoln Memorial or Westminster Abbey. Second, there is an official organization called Emergent, which serves as a place to network with like-minded individuals concerning how to minister in a postmodern context. While most of the writers of this paper would agree with many of the principles held by this group, we recognize also some differences and therefore, choose not to adopt this term.

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<sup>11</sup> For an overview of the various types of postmodernism, see Griffin, David Ray et al (1989), *Varieties of Postmodern Thought*, SUNY Press and Murphey, Nancy and McClendon, James W. (1989), “Distinguishing Modern and Postmodern Theologies,” *Modern Theology*, 5:3.

Therefore, the writers of this paper have chosen instead to use the terms “Emerging churches” and “Emerging Nazarenes” to describe who we are. For the purposes of this paper, Emerging churches can be defined as “women and men seeking to fulfill the biblical mandate to follow Christ and build His Kingdom here on earth without being absorbed in the trappings of a modernist mindset.” “Emerging Nazarenes” are people who believe in what Emerging churches believe, but attempt to live it out within a Wesleyan theological context, following both the theology of John Wesley and the missional mindset and practices of the founder of the Church of the Nazarene, Phineas F. Bresee

*Antioch vs. Jerusalem (or Postmodern vs. Modern)*

This paper will not seek to trace the history of postmodernism, nor of how those in the Emerging church movement came to be.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the writers of this paper agree with Ray Anderson, senior professor of theology and ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, who correctly identifies the differences between Emerging churches and modern churches as epistemological and theological. In his book, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*,<sup>13</sup> Anderson makes the case that theology itself is always in the process of emerging from within the unique context of a church’s present ministry. While one could easily confuse this thesis for a reductionistic anthropological argument for how theology works from the place of the human agent, Anderson’s genius rests in his ability to make his case in a deeply theological manner, claiming that the ever changing flow of theology is the doing of God’s action in the world. “My concern is not to trace out the contours of a church emerging in a postmodern context, but to tease out an emergent theology that is truthful only because it is discovered along the journey (revelational), contextual only because it is currently being lived out (incarnational), and contemporary only because it viably takes us into the future (eschatological).”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the case for Anderson’s emergent theology is constructed from and justified by revelation, incarnation, and eschatology.

To give flesh to this argument, Anderson contrasts the first century churches of Jerusalem and Antioch, seeking to detect how theology emerged within these congregations. By using the history of these churches as narrative examples, he asserts that, “... our present generation can find their ecclesial form and their core theology by tracing out the contours of the missionary church under Paul’s leadership based in Antioch.”<sup>15</sup> According to Anderson the missionary church of Antioch was one that sought to encounter God (revelation) within their life in the world (incarnation) as they sought to be led into God’s future (eschatology) in Christ. Anderson interprets the church of Jerusalem to be overly concerned with historical precedent (tradition), which caused them to seek to control new forms of ministry which differed from their own understanding and practice. Their existence was held in place by the long line of continuity with their ethnic and religious tradition. As a result, Anderson claims, their message was tamed and contained by the dominant culture of their past. Contrasting Antioch with Jerusalem then frames the remainder of the text. In short, Anderson writes, the “difference between Antioch and

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<sup>12</sup> For a brief history of postmodernism from a well-respected evangelical author, see Webber, Robert (2002), *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*, Baker. For an overview of how Emergent came to be, see chapter 2 of Jones, Tony (2008), *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier*, Jossey-Bass.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, Ray. (2006). *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches*, Intervarsity Press.

<sup>14</sup> IBID, p.11.

<sup>15</sup> IBID, p.20.

Jerusalem is essentially a theological issue, not a geographical one.”<sup>16</sup> The Antioch church, according to Anderson, is the one that lived out its Pentecost confession to the fullest, allowing it to shape new theologies and practices; the Jerusalem church, in contrast, seemed willing to rest in its tradition, unwilling to consider or accept new possibilities of God’s continuing revelation.

While Anderson’s use of the Antioch vs. Jerusalem comparison is both rich and conceptually helpful, we recognize the danger of constructing the relevance of Antioch at the degradation of Jerusalem. We do not believe that the Jerusalem church was the “bad guy” in this struggle to promote the Gospel. While the church of Jerusalem certainly wasn’t progressive in its theology, it did serve as the mother of the Antioch church. The Jerusalem church “was the source of an incredible spiritual force that resisted attempts to suppress and even destroy it. When those who were dispersed, due to persecution, fled to other cities, including Antioch, they carried with them the gift and power of the Spirit along with the message of a crucified and risen Messiah.”<sup>17</sup> In the same way, we do not seek to disparage or degrade the modern church and its work. Rather, like the Antioch church, the Emerging church acknowledges our birth from the modern church, and recognizes the birthright and strong tradition it has given us.

However, the Emerging church in the United States, while primarily rooted in evangelicalism, also recognizes its roots in older Christian traditions, seeking to recover what Robert Webber has termed “ancient-future” faith, a faith which seeks to reclaim the apostolic vision and ministry, while earnestly desiring to free itself from the modernistic trappings of religion. In short, we seek to be the hands and feet of Jesus within the cultural context within which we find ourselves. Toward that end, let’s examine some of these Emerging Christian characteristics, **particularly in conversation with our Wesleyan heritage.**

#### *A Wesleyan/Emergent Conversation*

Dr. Henry H. Knight III, professor of Wesleyan Studies at Saint Paul School of Theology, has done brilliant work drawing the parallels between the Emerging church and the work of John Wesley.<sup>18</sup> While the reader can easily access Knight’s original article, here we’ll briefly present each of the seven characteristics that Knight posits and then expand on each one in order to demonstrate that in many ways the Emerging church embodies the purposes and values of the Wesleyan tradition—it’s vision of discipleship, church, and mission.<sup>19</sup> As Knight points out, these churches “are actually very much in the spirit of an earlier evangelicalism that was rooted in Wesley’s version of holiness of heart and life,”<sup>20</sup> something that is often overlooked by those on the outside looking in.

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<sup>16</sup> IBID, p.56.

<sup>17</sup> IBID, p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Knight, Hal (2007), “John Wesley and the Emerging Church,” *Preacher’s Magazine* (Advent/Christmas 2007-2008).

<sup>19</sup> IBID, p.1.

<sup>20</sup> IBID.

### *Discipleship*

First, Emerging churches are communities which understand discipleship as “following closely and emulating the person of Jesus Christ.”<sup>21</sup> Expanding on this idea, Gibbs and Bolger refer to them as “communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.”<sup>22</sup> In short, Emerging Nazarenes are greatly concerned about the minimalist understanding of faith practiced by far too many in the church pew, something Wesley himself noticed:

...by a religious man is commonly meant, one that is honest, just and fair in his dealings; that is constantly at church and sacrament; and that gives much alms, or (as it is usually termed) does much good.<sup>23</sup>

In both cases, there is a view of Christianity present that is solely about doing just enough to get to heaven, not about living life here on earth as we seek to follow Christ. Far too many middle-class Christians have identified Christianity with the standards, values, and attitudes of their own limited and imperfect culture. This is well-stated by Tony Walter:

Christians may not be aware of the extent to which they have conformed to a middle-class lifestyle. So many of the public values of society are middle class that these values, which are far from inevitable or God-given, are taken for granted. Some Christians, because they have one or two taboos—such as not drinking or swearing—that set them apart from other people, are able to convince themselves that they are not conforming to society. By focusing their attention on gambling or drink, they ignore the way in which they have unconsciously absorbed their neighbor’s views on everything else. They strain at a gnat and swallow a whole cultural mule.<sup>24</sup>

Emerging Nazarenes see themselves as missionaries, sent into a culture to live and be the gospel. This oftentimes reveals itself in a commitment to the plight of the poor, especially in urban areas. They are “inspired by nineteenth-century evangelicalism and its strong emphasis on a gospel that results in social action like that of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, and William and Catherine Booth, founders of the Salvation Army.”<sup>25</sup> They are more interested in seeking after God and being the church than they are in pursuing the American Dream.

This was an element that Dr. Phineas F. Bresee lived out. He could not envision a Christianity which did not result in action, seeking to attend to the needs of the poor and destitute. Rather than confining himself to the rich, he sought to minister to the derelict of society, understanding that in so doing, he was emulating the work of the Messiah. In an editorial some years after he started his Peniel mission work, Bresee wrote:

This is the test we desire all men to apply to the Church of the Nazarene. First, it entered an open door. It did not seek the rich ... These Nazarene people heard Jesus say, “The

<sup>21</sup> Eileen W. Lindner, “Postmodern Christianity: Emergent Church and Blogs,” in Lindner, ed., *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches, 2006* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), p. 44.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley, John. *Journal*, Nov. 25, 1739.

<sup>24</sup> Walter, Tony (1979). *A Long Way From Home*, Paternoster, p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Webber, p. 49.



poor have the Gospel preached to them.” They saw that there was a multitude of people trying to maintain homes, who were often in affliction and distress who needed sympathy, and often help, whom it was possible to serve and that their hearts could be opened to the message of infinite love, and they could be gathered to the arms of Jesus. To these people they went.<sup>26</sup>

For Bresee, and really the whole Church of the Nazarene in its beginnings, there was no distinction between what happened on Sundays and the rest of the week. One’s faith carried over into every aspect of life; thus, parishioners were fully expected to be involved in living out their faith as they engaged in ministry to the other. Furthermore, it is impossible to read the history of Bresee and the Church of the Nazarene and not recognize the necessity of removing oneself from the constraints of the modern culture in terms of how it defined what the church should do and look like. Bresee stressed the need to adopt a plainer form of tabernacle, to forego the trappings of the rich, and to concentrate solely on doing the work of Jesus among those who needed Him the most.

Consider the case of one Emerging church in the Nazarene tradition which is doing just that:

“It is a chilly day in Portland. The men are beginning to loosely line up outside the Portland Rescue Mission for that night’s dinner. Some have been around for a good part of the day, others are just now migrating to their place in front of the mission. A small yellow bus pulls up in front of the mission. Immediately four of the men start smiling and waving. Others head for the bus looking to greet whoever may emerge. This is a bus owned by the Community of Adsideo, a Nazarene congregation. The people from Community of Adsideo don’t just show up to help once a month; they are an active part of the ministry of the Rescue Mission. Jim Wicks, the lead pastor, gets off the bus. It’s clear that the people here know and respect Jim. Jim spends the next 20 minutes walking up and down this short section of Burnside greeting and catching up with many of the men. Some of the men have been coming to the weekly Sunday gatherings of Community of Adsideo, getting a ride on the small yellow bus. Others are just meeting Jim and his friends, but clearly there is a relationship there and clearly they respect the Community of Adsideo and know their presence.

“After 20 minutes of greeting, Jim heads into the Rescue Mission. He is greeted there by the staff. One of them, Teddy, is also a part of the leadership group at Adsideo. He spends 30 hours a week at the Rescue Mission in addition to some of the other responsibilities he has with Adsideo and another job at a coffee shop. When asked why he does all this work, Teddy simply responds, ‘Because I like to live out what Jesus has called me to. We do this together and it is a way of life, not a job or something I feel forced to do. I want to be here. These are my friends ... and Jesus is here.’

“Jim continues on this theme, ‘We cannot imagine a Jesus who is not active like this. We also cannot imagine our community without living out our faith in this way. It is one of the ways that we see God help us grow. There’s something about living and serving together, helping people with their real life, raw, messy issues that helps us

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<sup>26</sup> *The Nazarene Messenger*, vol. 7, no. 38 (March 26, 1903), pp. 2-3.

realize that following Jesus is about more than words.’ It is precisely this ‘living out our faith’ that has drawn many to be involved in Community of Adsideo.”

### *Missional*

Second, Emerging churches are preeminently missional. “Drawing on insights of Lesslie Newbigin, Darrell Guder, and others,<sup>27</sup> they seek to be communities who participate in the mission of God in the world. They understand church structures not as ends in themselves but as means to mission. They are not focused on gaining members but on inviting others to join in this mission.”<sup>28</sup>

The parallels with both Wesley and Bresee are striking. “Wesley believed God had raised the ‘people called Methodist’ ‘to reform the nation, particularly the church, and to spread scriptural holiness over the land.’<sup>29</sup> The institutions and practices of the movement were designed to enable the Methodists to participate in God’s mission in the world.”<sup>30</sup> Bresee would have approved of this missional mindset, for he wrote, “Let the Church of the Nazarene be true to its commission; not great and elegant buildings; but to feed the hungry and clothe the naked, and wipe away the tears of sorrowing, and gather jewels for His diadem.”<sup>31</sup>

When we pray the Lord’s prayer, we collectively say, “your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).<sup>32</sup> An important distinction is seeing that the Kingdom of God is part of the here and now, not just some future event. Emerging Nazarenes understand that the Kingdom of God is currently present and at work all over this world in which we live.

Sometimes the Kingdom of God is found in the culture in which we live. More often we would hope, the Kingdom of God is found in the church. The life for those following God in the way of Jesus is to find where God is at work and make our “mission” to ask God where and how He can use us. This is what it means to be a missional church.

If God is present and at work everywhere, then we must realize that God is at work in all people all around us all the time. Being missional is about realizing that God wants to bring wholeness to ALL of creation. This means that Emerging Nazarenes aren’t just concerned about spiritual transformation, but about the transformation of the whole person. In addition, they believe strongly that they are responsible to join in with what God is already doing to transform the world. Therefore, most Emerging Nazarenes will seek to redeem the world through being good stewards of its resources, engaging in creation care, and generally choosing options that redeem the world now, rather than viewing it as something to be used and tossed away.

Being missional means recognizing the *Imago Dei* (Image of God) in everyone. It means realizing that those of us “in” the church aren’t the only ones who are cooperating with Christ in

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<sup>27</sup> See Newbigin, Leslie, (1989). *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Eerdmans; and Guder, Darrell L. ed. (1998). *Missional Church*, Eerdmans.

<sup>28</sup> Knight, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Wesley, John. (1978). “Minutes of Several Conversations” Q.3, in *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, Baker, Vol.8, p. 299.

<sup>30</sup> Knight, IBID.

<sup>31</sup> *The Nazarene Messenger*, vol. 6, no. 29 (Jan. 15, 1902), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> All scripture quotations are NIV unless otherwise noted.

what he's doing. Lots of people who would never consider themselves "Christians" are busy at work, sacrificing time, energy, and other resources to bring restoration and healing in our world.

Here is another example of a person who chooses to live his life missionally:

A pastor went to volunteer at a food distribution center where they were gathering and sorting food to send overseas to an impoverished people. As he faithfully came every Saturday to donate his time and manpower, he developed a friendship with the man who ran the center, Steve. It finally came up in conversation that he was a pastor. Steve stopped dead in his tracks at this revelation. He looked the pastor in the eye and said, "What do Christians care about those in need?" (This statement was a direct reflection of his previous engagement with Christians, and their lack of care for others.) The pastor went on to tell him that caring for those in need was a fundamental part of what it means to follow God in the way of Jesus. He invited Steve to continue doing his "kingdom work" and said, "Perhaps there is more to this way of Jesus that you might find helpful too. There is much you are teaching me about the way of Jesus and I want to continue to learn from your passion for those in need."

The emphasis here wasn't on Steve as a project, but on Steve as someone through whom God was already working. This pastor didn't invite Steve back to square one; rather he continued to fill in the painting that God had begun through and in Steve's life. And Steve's life helped continue the painting that God was working on in the pastor's life. Being missional in this time has a lot to do with how we see the world and God in it.

One aspect of living missionally and seeing the Kingdom of God at work is the way those in the emerging culture choose to enter local communities. The modern paradigm was to invite people to a saving relationship with Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and then the person would begin to engage in the activities and ministries of the church. They would be asked to assume roles in the church and to engage their newfound faith. However, postmodern folk are not content to sit on the sidelines watching until they make a faith commitment. Because of their idealism which pushes them to make a difference where they are, and their unwillingness to trust anything until they've tried it out, postmoderns want to enter a church and immediately engage it in all of its activities and ministries. The old paradigm for modernists was "behave, believe, belong" while the paradigm adopted by many in the Emergent church is "belong, believe, behave."<sup>33</sup>

This means that the Church has to re-think its ecclesiology.<sup>34</sup> We have to carefully consider how much of our understanding of what the church is and how it operates has been unduly influenced by modern business models, and seek instead to more fully adopt an ecclesiology which takes seriously the necessity of being different from the world and focuses on *being* the Gospel to every person we encounter, practicing the very heart of incarnational ministry. The problem with allowing business models to drive the church is that the focus becomes less on people and more on success, less on disciple-making (which is at the heart of

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<sup>33</sup> Webber, p. 48.

<sup>34</sup> Or better yet, it means that the Church, and especially the Church of the Nazarene, needs to more fully develop its ecclesiology in such a way that it provides room for a wider range of members. As strong as the theology of the Nazarene denomination is, the doctrine of ecclesiology is woefully underdeveloped, as former General Superintendent William Greathouse remarked at the 2007 Revisioning Holiness Conference, held Feb. 8-10, 2007 at Northwest Nazarene University.

the Gospel) and more on maintenance of programs and ministries, often for the sake of those in the church. As a general rule, Emerging Christians, and we Emerging Nazarenes, would agree with Black and Sarrott that we have “apathy toward big programs, big ministries, big ideologies and big solutions.” The only way “you can make a difference or make an investment is in individual lives—not in things or institutions, but in people.”<sup>35</sup> We aren’t interested in developing huge Wal-Mart churches which operate by business standards, and as a result, can sometimes forget about the very people they are called to serve. Instead, we seek to grow the kingdom through the multiplication of smaller groups that are, in and of themselves, fully functioning faith communities who seek to be the church in their locale.

Emerging Nazarenes seek to move beyond the Constantian church’s view of a *professional* clergy who has primary (often sole) responsibility for ensuring that the church is reaching out to the world around them. Instead, we adopt a pre-Constantian (and biblical) view of the priesthood of all believers, recognizing that every man and woman is a minister of the gospel. Each one has the gifts God has blessed them with, and each one needs to exercise that gift, both for the good of the body, but also the good of the world. Professional clergy still exist in Emerging Nazarene churches, but their focus is less on being the penultimate spiritual leader who has all the answers and seeks to meet everyone’s needs. Instead, the focus of the professional clergyperson is to resource the laity so that they can better be ministers in their own right.

This is also seen in the way we view mission. In the modern church, the focus was on the training and sending of missionaries for the church. They were our “representatives,” doing the work of missions around the world. However, for Emerging Nazarenes, we don’t “send” missionaries, nor do we have a “missionary” program. Instead, we recognize that we *are* a mission where we are . . . whether that be downtown London, suburban Olathe, Kansas, or a rural part of India. Robert Webber puts it best when he writes, “The postmodern church invites people in its neighborhood into the new alternative community of people who embody the kingdom, and it promises them an experience of the kingdom that is to come.”<sup>36</sup>

### *Incarnational Ministry*

Third, those in the Emerging church practice radical incarnational ministry to the world around them.<sup>37</sup> They truly see themselves as “Jesus with skin on” as they seek to serve the needs of those they meet. They understand their calling to BE mission not just DO mission; therefore, they prioritize practicing their faith over hearing more about it. Emerging Christians would wholeheartedly agree with Dietrich Bonhoeffer when he wrote, “One act of obedience is better than one hundred sermons.”<sup>38</sup>

Because of this, they are unwilling to adopt the dualisms of sacred/secular and faith/reason which have been so pervasive in the church since the Enlightenment. Instead, they “see all of life as potentially sacred, all of culture subject to transformation and renewal by the kingdom of God.”<sup>39</sup> As Gibbs and Bolger put it, “For emerging churches, there are no longer any

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<sup>35</sup> Black, Andrew and Sara Sarrott.(1995). “Don’t Call Us Slackers!,” *Faithworks*, November/December, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Webber, p. 121.

<sup>37</sup> Knight, p.?.

<sup>38</sup> As quoted in *Draper’s Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, Edith Draper (ed.), 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Knight, p. 4.

bad places, bad people, or bad times. All can be made holy. All can be given to God in worship.”<sup>40</sup>

This also impacts the way they view other arenas of life. For instance, Emerging Nazarenes reject the politics and theologies of left versus right. Seeing both sides as a remnant of modernity, they look forward to a more complex reality. They’re not willing to back a candidate or group simply because the candidate belongs to a certain group or endorses a single issue (e.g., abortion, gun control, the economy, the environment). Rather, they understand that their choice may have as many negative qualities as positive, but they’re looking at the big picture of how she or he will make a difference.<sup>41</sup>

Wesley himself, even though he lived at the onset of the Enlightenment, rejected the trend toward this dualism or bifurcation between the sacred and secular, faith and reason. Instead, he saw the benefits that the so-called “secular” enterprises could bring to the Christian tradition. In fact, Wesley’s belief in prevenient grace was so strong that it was impossible for him to think of people as being hopeless; rather, they were “sinners who are loved by God and have worth and dignity by virtue of that love.”<sup>42</sup> Wesley’s spirituality was such that it had to inform every aspect of life; to live otherwise, he believed, was to become nothing more than a “practical atheist” “in which their professed belief in God made no difference as to who they were or how they lived. Practical atheism thrives when Christianity is placed in a ‘sacred’ box, kept clear and distinct from the ‘secular’ box where most of our lives are lived.”<sup>43</sup>

Here is a story of one group of people who live out what it means to be incarnational to the world around them:

“In the neighborhood near the church there is a different neighborhood that emerges at night, one of drug abuse and prostitution. As our church began studying Scripture and hearing the call for ‘freedom for the captives,’ our eyes began to be opened to the women who were enslaved to this life of prostitution. Several of us would spend time talking to these women, ministering to their needs as we could. Over a period of time, we were able as a group to connect to a group of these prostitutes and we began to realize that a large part of their issue was an economic issue. In the following months, we did a lot of work connecting these women to resources, information and education. Praise God, many of them were able to step out of that lifestyle forever! Several began attending our church on a regular basis.

“At our church we serve communion every Sunday and we do it by intinction. The pastor breaks the loaves and serves a small group first, then they take those loaves and cups and serve everyone else as they come down to the front. I will never forget the day that a group of those women, formerly prostitutes, were the group who served communion! Tears flowed that day as the grace of God through his son, Jesus Christ, was preached as much through those women serving us as through any sermon.”

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<sup>40</sup> Gibbs and Bolger, p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> This may in many ways account for their overwhelming support of Senator Barack Obama for president. Obama offers a compelling vision of what the future could hold. He speaks to the idealism of Emerging Christians, and tries (mostly) to steer clear of the common left/right issues of the political spectrum.

<sup>42</sup> Knight, p.4.

<sup>43</sup> IBID.

*Alternative Communities*

Fourth, Emerging churches are alternative communities. They believe they are called by Christ and empowered by the Spirit to be the church in the world around them. “The lifestyles of members and the practices of the community must be radically transformed in light of the coming kingdom and the mission of God.”<sup>44</sup> Toward this end, they seek out others to hold them accountable, and small groups are a constitutive part of their lives.

The similarities with Wesley are numerous: “a network of small groups, mutual accountability, transformed lifestyles, relationship in community, and living for mission.”<sup>45</sup> Wesley believed strongly in the necessity of this type of relational living: “Such a society is no other than a company of men [and women] having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the word of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other to work out their own salvation.”<sup>46</sup> The establishment of the societies, classes, and bands became a safe place where participants could pursue the spiritual life, to voice the questions that needed answers, and to be held accountable by those within the group for the purpose of helping each person grow spiritually. Nurture occurred in the encouraging context of an affirming group, all of whom were in various stages of the same quest toward personal holiness (what Wesley called “perfect love” or the character of Christ).

This means that emerging leaders, pastors and theologians have begun to place a higher value on orthopraxy than on orthodoxy, emphasizing living as Christ over the ability to just articulate dogma. Even in the early days of the Church of the Nazarene, its leaders understood the necessity of living out one’s faith in practical ways rather than simply being able to parrot a theological doctrine. During the organization of the first Church of the Nazarene, Dr. J.P. Widney preached a phenomenal sermon which articulated this very point.

Notice that Christ does not say: Accept the creed that I frame. Observe the church forms or rituals I devise, or join the church which I found. He only said, “Follow Me.” It was as though He had said, “Come, live My life with Me.” What does it mean? It means that Christianity is not a creed; not an ecclesiasticism; not a ritual; but a life. Christ had no church edifice for His service; gave no forms save a simple prayer that a child may repeat; framed no formal creed.<sup>47</sup>

Similarly, Emerging Christians understand that the primary concern of the church is to communicate not dogma, though it has its place, but faith. Not surprisingly then, the emerging conversation is placing more emphasis on a holistic, contextual, communal faith which seeks to engage the world, and less emphasis on an interior, privatized faith which is solely concerned with one’s personal salvation.

Here is one way one of the writers of this paper experienced this alternative community in powerful ways. We’ve left the story in first person to better convey the emotional strength of this experience.

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<sup>44</sup> IBID.

<sup>45</sup> IBID.

<sup>46</sup> Wesley, John. (Works, VIII: 269)

<sup>47</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 7, 1895, p.6 (as quoted in Donald Brickley, *Man of the Morning: The Life and Work of Phineas F. Bresee*. Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1960, p. 135)

“My family and I had just moved to a new town because of my new job. We moved into a neighborhood where we knew almost no one. We were just starting to attend a church. I was out of town on business when my wife and four children were driving on the highway to attend their first small group at our new church. On the way there, they were involved in a terrible accident. My wife called me from the scene of the accident as our children were being loaded into ambulances. I jumped on the first flight I could and rushed into the hospital to find that miraculously our family survived and were mostly unharmed. My wife was so wired from all that had happened that when we finally got home in the very dark and early hours of the morning, she sent an e-mail to the small group leaders explaining why they hadn’t made it. (Did I mention my wife is much nicer than me?) I told her she was crazy and should get some rest.

“The next day our small group, whom we had never met in person, began to love us in unbelievable ways. They brought food, helped with the kids, helped with the house, and were generally just great friends! This was a church being the hands and feet of Christ, bringing the kingdom of God!”

This is only one story of uncountable stories of the church loving people and bringing healing and wholeness in immeasurable ways. It is what Emerging churches seek to be about on a daily basis—loving those in their midst (both in the church and out), being the hands and feet of Christ, as they seek to meet needs (spiritual, physical, emotional, financial, etc.) and create an alternative world whereby the Kingdom of God is truly here and now, not just in the future.

### *Proclamation and Teaching*

Fifth, “*proclamation and teaching* in emerging churches finds truth more in biblical narrative than a rational/propositional reading of scripture ... In this way they reject both the claim of rationalism that truth can only be found in clear and distinct ideas, and of romanticism that it is found in subjective experience. Instead, they find truth in biblical narratives and images and express it through story and art as well as in propositions.”<sup>48</sup>

This is one of the areas where Emerging Nazarenes not only draw from Wesleyan theology, but perhaps build on and expand it. While both John and Charles Wesley frequently used biblical stories and imagery in their sermons and songs, neither were narrative theologians as we understand it today. However, that is not to say that they would be opposed to it, as John Wesley was always advocating models that sought to meet the needs of the people of his day, as long as those models remained faithful to grounding its message in the Biblical narrative.

The underlying struggle to contextualize the Christian faith in new cultural situations—to make sure that it is proclaimed and lived in both a culturally relevant and biblically coherent manner—is of crucial importance. “The gospel of Jesus has always found its ways in new cultural settings, and not only by changing its methods, but also making adjustments to the message ... the gospel is living and active in our world today, and is as fitting to our cultural setting as at any point in history.”<sup>49</sup> As Jacques Ellul says, “The yearning for holiness is not at odds with the desire for relevance. For while holiness sets us apart unto God, it is God who calls us into the world.”

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<sup>48</sup> Knight, p.5.

<sup>49</sup> Pagit, Doug as quoted in Tomlinson, Dave. (2003). *The Post-Evangelical*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, p. 45.

Emerging church members absolutely do stand for the Christian faith, but in new ways. Rather than seeking knowledge that is logical, non-contradictory, and clear, many postmoderns understand that things are complex and multi-dimensional. But this doesn't mean they are relativists; they are not turned off by claims to absolute truth. However, neither do they want to arrive at absolute truth through evidence or logic (e.g., rational thought alone). Instead, they see the gospel as Story; the gospel isn't always a rationally defended, logically consistent fact that one can understand by cognitive acceptance. Therefore, postmoderns are more comfortable with the mysteries, ambiguities, and paradoxes of faith. They understand that life is not easy and that answers aren't always found in three points or in a few isolated propositions. Christianity becomes a language, a way of seeing life. It is more than saying, "Here are three steps to how you can make it into the world." It is saying, "Let's live this together as we seek to make it in the world."

Those in Emerging churches believe that beliefs, in and of themselves, can never hope to completely contain God. They are our best descriptions of what we believe to be true, but we must maintain the capacity to admit that our words are insufficient, incomplete and unable to capture the essence of God. When we "idolize" and "absolutize" our words about God, we use them as leverage, as tools to shape and perhaps weapons to carve, manipulate, or control persons.

Understanding this is actually freeing for postmoderns, as they recognize that they no longer have to have all of the answers to all of the questions. When pure logic is unable to answer life's questions, the Story can help postmoderns by showing them possibilities inherent in the Story, rather than forcing them into beliefs that are at best inconsistent, and at worst, stifling and incoherent when faced with real life.

It is through stories that postmoderns most often communicate. "Stories make words visual and memorable. The propositionalism of modernity reduced everything to factual words, but now we are recovering the power of stories to shape and form our lives. There is no better or more meaningful story than that of God's involvement in history and in the stories of Israel and Jesus. This is the *good* story postmoderns are waiting to hear."<sup>50</sup>

It is through entering the narrative world that postmoderns are ultimately transformed, as they find their world in the real world of God. It is, as the author of Hebrews points out, an alternative world, one that shapes our identity as the people of God. In entering this world, we develop an entirely new worldview, a whole new way of thinking. A Story-shaped identity invites one to enter into a story, to stay there, to ask questions from there, to roam in it. The longer you stay in that story, day in and day out, your identity is shaped. Of course, this is a peculiar narrative, one which asks people to conceive of themselves in new ways within the Story of God. This is more than simply a change in moralistic behavior, but rather allowing the Christian narrative to so totally transform our identity that our ethic emerges naturally out of our identity.

One community of faith began to realize that they indeed did not have "all the answers." As new people began to come, it became clear to the leadership of the church that most of these people had some great questions about faith, church, truth, spirituality, and God. Church leadership also realized that it wasn't necessarily answers that many of the new Christians were

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<sup>50</sup> Webber, p.50.



after, but rather someone to join them in their questions and participate in their journey to find answers. To help people with their questions, the church set up a “doubt night.”

There was a box placed in the lobby area labeled “the doubt box” and paper and pencils were made available for three weeks leading up to the “doubt night.” The instructions were simple, write down any question you have about faith, church, spirituality or God and put it in the box. No need to put your name. No need to put anything else, just your question.

When the “doubt night” arrived, there were clearly more in attendance than usual. The pastor opened the service by explaining that we all have questions in our faith and that no one has it all figured out. He went on to explain that true Christian community, like this one, was less like a professor with all the answers and more like one beggar showing another beggar where to find food. He had a small panel of people sit in the front which was made up of a teenager, two laypersons, and himself. He opened the “doubt box” and pulled out the first question and read it aloud. He then asked if anyone there had any thoughts about that question. People moved to the open mics and shared some thoughts. The pastor then opened it up to the panel to make comments on. While many thoughts were given and Scriptures shared, no final definite answer was given. The pastor moved on to the next question. The service lasted for an hour and a half covering such questions as, “What is true?”; “How do we respond to other faiths?” and “Where is God in disaster?” The pastor wrapped it up by asking how many people had heard questions they themselves had asked before or were asking now ... the response was overwhelming and the message was clear: You may have questions, but you are not alone.

The response was so great, they did it again the next week, going for two hours in front of an overflowing room. Friends brought other friends who had asked them hard questions in the past. The church now does a “doubt night” worship service once a quarter. It has become one of the greatest tools for sharing faith that they have.

The reality is that we all have questions, perhaps even doubts, regarding our faith. This is both normal and expected. As such, we need to not be afraid of the questions, seeing them as opportunities to help those who are searching for the risen Christ. And just as importantly, we need to recognize that doubts and questions are not sinful. None of us has all the answers, not even our most well-trained pastors and theologians. But we can all have faith in the God who gave us the ability to think and reason, and trust that God will give us the strength to pursue truth and the humility to recognize that we don't have a stranglehold on it.

### *Worship*

Sixth, Emerging Christians have brought creativity and praxis to the worship event. Linder says Emerging churches draw “from apostolic as well as contemporary sources to forge a diverse worship through experimentation.”<sup>51</sup> The late Robert Webber referred to this as “Ancient-Future Worship.”<sup>52</sup> In the postmodern church, Emerging Christians are not limiting themselves to just the current Evangelical marketplace when it comes to their expressions of worship. Instead, they seek to reclaim many of the historic practices of the church, often drawing from a wide stream of influences and traditions.

Knight explains it well: “They retrieve ancient practices and give them fresh expression. They interweave traditional practices and imagery with contemporary art and technology. They draw

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<sup>51</sup> Lindner, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Webber. *Ancient-Future Worship*. Baker Books, 2008.

upon both liturgical tradition and free church worship. Central to this rich mix of sources and creativity is the Eucharist, itself celebrated in very traditional yet often at the same time very new forms.”<sup>53</sup>

Both the Wesleys and Bresee would have appreciated the return to the classics, as they themselves sought to bring the old forms into the church, but with often surprising innovations and methods which sought to re-invigorate the practice for the current culture. “Charles Wesley’s hymns (along with those of Isaac Watts and others) were an innovation that revolutionized congregational singing at a time when the dominant practice was a half-hearted lining of the psalms. The Wesley’s also borrowed innovations from the experimentation of others—Covenant Services from the Puritans, Love Feasts from the Moravians.”<sup>54</sup>

Emerging churches are seeking to find ways to help postmoderns connect to Christ and to one another in the worship setting. Part of this means they are seeking to reclaim the intent and purpose of the early church in worship, while seeking to contemporize for our context the early church’s practices.

This is seen perhaps most vividly in the way worship unfolds in Emerging churches. Liturgy (which simply means “the work of the people”) is present in every church (modern or postmodern) to some degree. In short, liturgy is simply a communal response to the sacred through purposeful, often standardized, activity. The varieties and forms of liturgy are as numerous as there are churches, as each church tends to allow its liturgy to be contextualized by its tradition or denominational polity, the gifts of its people, and the context in which it finds itself (e.g., people who prefer Southern Gospel, contemporary Christian, more formalized liturgies, etc.).

In Emerging churches, liturgy is also present. What can make it seem different from the liturgies most Nazarenes are familiar with is the desire to create space for creativity to occur in the worship service. While the service itself may have many of the traditional elements of worship (congregational singing, preaching, communion), those in leadership see themselves as curators, people who seek to create space in the service for the natural gifting of its members to be used. This can take many different forms: artists who paint during the service, sculptors who use clay to build; videographers who have created a video which speaks to the theme of the service. In each of these examples, those involved are seeking to capture a portion of the theme of that worship service in a way in which only they can.

In many ways, this is really no different than what our Nazarene forebears did. Many of us recall being part of services where the Spirit visited in mighty ways, and people readily gave of their talents through singing, testimony, spontaneous preaching, etc. Because Emerging churches take seriously the priesthood of all believers (as previously discussed), they understand that doctrine applying to worship gatherings as well. No longer is it just the pastor or worship leader who plans the worship gathering; rather many voices contribute, each seeking to give what they can. As a result, Emerging church worship gatherings often seek to utilize all the senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch), recognizing that each person learns differently, and that the more senses involved, the greater the participation and retention by the congregants.

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<sup>53</sup> Knight, p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> IBID.

One of the things that many people who visit Emerging communities' worship services notice is that it is not incredibly different in form than many worship services they've been a part of. There is music, announcements, preaching, sacraments; all things they have seen and experienced in their own worship services. They may even note the values behind the practices are not that different either. There is a commitment to building community; a space to join in praising God; an emphasis on prayer and intercession; a strong value in preaching and Scripture; and an invitation to join the community in serving God and others throughout the rest of the week. However, one of the main differences here is the way in which Emerging Nazarenes order their values. In modernity, excellence is highly valued. While postmoderns definitely want to do things to the best of their ability, they value authenticity even higher. For example, in a modern worship service you'll often find songs written and recorded by popular Christian artists (young or old) that are recreated in this worship setting. People are comfortable with these songs because they know the words, they know the tunes, and these are proven to be good songs. In a postmodern worship service, you'll also find worship songs, but oftentimes, you'll find songs that are written by members of that local community embodying that community's experiences and encounters with God through Scripture. These songs may not be as professionally written, recorded, or distributed widely, but they are authentic, in that they articulate the reality of this community and its responses to God.

Understanding that worship is far more than just the weekly gathering of the community of faith, Emerging Nazarenes desire to live lives of worship on a daily basis. To assist them, they seek to reacquaint themselves with ancient Christian spiritual practices. Through learning about and practicing such Christian practices as *lectio divina*, labyrinths, stations of the cross, the daily office and the development of a rule of life, Emerging Nazarenes not only develop deep roots by being connected back to the historical church, they also are being renewed in the present as they open themselves to God's Spirit.

### *Generous Orthodoxy*

The seventh characteristic Knight posits is that Emerging Christians bring to the table a *generous orthodoxy*. Here, we find it best to simply quote Knight regarding the source of and expression of this term.

Significantly, the term itself was coined by Hans Frei, a postliberal narrative theologian, in a debate with Carl F. H. Henry, perhaps the leading twentieth century propositionalist evangelical.<sup>55</sup> It signifies a move away from modernist claims of certainty and more toward what Lesslie Newbigin calls a "proper confidence" in the gospel.<sup>56</sup> In Brian McLaren's words, it "is not to claim to have the truth captured, stuffed, and mounted on the wall. It is rather to be in a loving... community of people who are seeking the truth... on the road of mission... and who have been launched on the quest by Jesus, who, with us, guides us still."<sup>57</sup> It is a community humble yet confident, faithfully following the risen Christ in "a wild, inspiring, high-risk pursuit," yet one that is deeply rewarding and

<sup>55</sup> Hans Frei, "Response to 'Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,'" *Trinity Journal* 8:1 (Spring, 1987), 24.

<sup>56</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Proper Confidence: Faith, Doubt, and Certainty in Christian Discipleship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>57</sup> Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 293.

wonderfully fulfilling.<sup>58</sup> This is not only a definition of a generous orthodoxy, it may also be one of the best description of what emerging churches are all about.

One cannot hear the phrase “generous orthodoxy” without thinking of Wesley’s “catholic spirit.” Wesley distinguished essential doctrines from opinions, and said that it is in the essentials that Christians of all varieties find their unity. His several lists of essentials were short, and usually contained such items as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the authority of scripture, original sin, grace, justification, and sanctification. It was the sort of things you would find in

the historic creeds of the ecumenical church. He was sadly aware that persons could profess belief in all these without actually being Christian—that is, without living a Christian life marked by love for God and neighbor. But one could not be a Christian and have that life apart from belief in the essentials.<sup>59</sup>

Drawing from Wesley, Bresee proffered similar thoughts. He believed strongly that if one was to use the term “Christian,” there were certain beliefs which were essential to hold. However, he was quite generous on his treatment of those who held different views on items he considered nonessential. Consider the following editorial which he wrote on the subject of unity:

Everything which is absolutely essential to holiness is to be tenaciously held by all. There are a few great truths any one of which dropped out, and there remains no sufficient ground for holiness. Such as the triune Godhead in unity, embracing the deity of Jesus Christ and the personality of the Holy Spirit. The provision in the atonement for both the new birth and entire sanctification by the Holy Spirit, to which He also witnesses; and growth in grace, etc. . . . Of such truth as different theories can be held, and do not interfere with being hold, there is to be individual liberty: not to press a personal opinion on as obligatory, but to hold it as unto themselves and recognize the privilege of others to hold a different theory; each knowing that *holy love is large enough for all to dwell in.*<sup>60</sup>

In another editorial, Bresee summed up this idea with the simple phrase, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.”<sup>61</sup>

Stated simply, Emerging Christians find little importance in the discrete differences between the various flavors of Christianity. Instead, they practice a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all Christian movements. This is not to denigrate denominational ties, but rather the appreciation that a specific denomination is one of many who are seeking to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. Coupled with this, Emerging Christians tend to have a negative reaction to the church as institution, but not to the church itself. “Mostly, it was a repudiation of institutional rigidity, corporate bureaucracy, and the church’s embrace of dominant cultural values: patriotism, consumerism, materialism, and the franchising of Christianity.”<sup>62</sup> This anti-institutional bias leads them to not be as committed to a denomination as they are to a local church, for it is in that local body that they experience Christ and do ministry. Denominational

<sup>58</sup> IBID, p. 296.

<sup>59</sup> Knight, p. 6

<sup>60</sup> *The Nazarene Messenger*, vol. 4, no. 5 (Feb. 1, 1900), p. 2. (Emphasis added.)

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., vol. 5, no. 23 (Dec. 6, 1900), p. 4.

<sup>62</sup> Mike Yaconelli, as quoted in Tomlinson, p. 37.

bodies are often viewed suspiciously, as Emerging Christians believe that church should function more like an open-source network and less like a hierarchy or a bureaucracy.

In the case of the Church of the Nazarene, this may mean that while emerging congregations are doing incredible work in their own communities, when it comes to denominational functions (ranging from district assembly to general church sponsored activities and programs), they may be less willing to be involved than their modern counterparts. They can see things like district budgets as overkill, believing that the monies need to either stay local, or should be used by the local congregation to support an individual or family in their mission work around the world. Of course, the local community has to have a relationship first with this individual and see her as an extension of the work in which the local community of faith is involved.

In general, Emerging Christians are committed to being intergenerational, intercultural, and postdenominational. Emerging Nazarenes, while fully agreeing with the first two, do not seek to remove ourselves from the denomination we love and respect. We believe the Nazarene denomination has a long and glorious history of being incarnational, missional, and holy, as it has sought to minister to the poor, neglected, and marginalized of the world. We seek to carry on that tradition, but to do so in ways that are culturally relevant and representative of what we believe the gospel to represent.

In fact, there is longing to belong and to be a part of something bigger than their individual impact or their own local ministry. Their suspicion of institution here can be overcome with intentional relationships between district and general leadership and local communities of faith. It is imperative here that district and general leadership see their role as relationship builders. So too do local Emerging Nazarenes and their communities need to better weave their own local story into the larger Nazarene story. This works to create space for relationships with district and general leadership and also to help connect their own local story to the larger story of how God is working through these people called “Nazarenes” around the world.

### *Conclusion*

It is our hope that this paper has provided the reader with a clearer picture of just who the Emerging Nazarenes are, and just as importantly, who they are not. Toward that end, as we conclude, we simply encourage the reader to consider our claims in the humility with which they are offered, and to be open to the leading of the Spirit in ascertaining their validity. We consider ourselves a part of the Church of the Nazarene and want to continue to live out our faith and theology together with those who have gone before us. We openly welcome conversation and community around these issues. It is with open arms that we offer this as a way of *beginning* that conversation.

Our fervent prayer is that the Church of the Nazarene can make room at the table for those of us who consider ourselves Emerging Nazarenes. As Bresee himself reminds us, “Holiness looks out through the eyes of faith and love, and is necessarily broad.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *The Holiness Messenger*, vol. 5, no. 23 (Dec. 6, 1900), p. 4.

*Postscript: A Challenge to Emerging Nazarenes*

*A Push ... and a Push Back*

The problem with understanding and accepting the Emerging church as a genuine expression of Christ's work in the world, as most would acknowledge, is two-fold. First, there have been too many in the Emerging church who, in their attempt to deconstruct the modern church and show another way, have been extremely critical of that expression of the church, often to the point of being downright rude and condescending.

Second, Emerging Christians have tended to react negatively when modern Christians lash out at them, calling them heretics, unorthodox, and destroyers of the church. But rather than showing the grace and love of God which they proclaim guides them in their new endeavors, they castigate the modern church for its refusal to accept them and they make fun of moderns, relegating them to the same place they cast their parachute pants and Milli Vanilli albums.

This becomes a two-edged sword. Because moderns are terrified of what they hear and see Emerging Christians saying and doing, and because it doesn't fit their cultural understanding of Christianity, they do the only thing they know to do—push Emerging Christians to the margins, if not outside, the walls of the church. As Mike Yaconelli has said, "There are thousands of believers who desperately want to know God more, who long for a deep intimacy with Jesus, whose passion is to give everything to Christ, including their doubts, and because their journey with Jesus has brought them outside the parameters of "normal" faith, they are ostracized from the faith community, when, instead, they should be welcomed."<sup>64</sup> These "outsiders" need to be embraced by the modern church as a fresh, viable expression of what God is doing.

However, Emerging Christians need to make room at the table for moderns as well. Although the writers of this paper tend to think largely in postmodern categories, we recognize that most people in the church today still think primarily in modern categories.<sup>65</sup> The writers of this paper belong to the collective "we" of the Nazarene church. The individuals who make up those churches are our brothers and sisters, whom we cherish and value. Madeline L'Engle in her book, *A Wind in the Door*, reminds us the value in knowing each other as people:

"Progo!" Meg asked. "You memorized the names of all the stars—how many are there?"

"How many? Great heavens, earthling, I haven't the faintest idea."

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<sup>64</sup> Mike Yaconelli as quoted in Tomlinson, p. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Although, the reality is that the number of Emerging Christians is growing daily. In a survey conducted in Britain in 1996, 24% of Christians labeled themselves as post-evangelical (a synonym for the term Emerging Christian). In the 12 years since, that percentage has increased significantly. In the United States, Tony Jones and other Emergent leaders have conducted a demographic "guesstimate" based on demographic trends within the church. They suggest that there are three distinct groups of people: modernists, postmodernists, and amphibians (those who have learned to navigate both worlds). The number of people who would be considered as postmodernists rises with each succeeding generation: with the baby boomer generation, only about 30% would be considered postmodern; in the busters generation, that number jumps to approximately 50%; and in the millennial generation, the number rises to 65%. It must be noted, however, that this is much more than just a generational shift; it is a cultural shift, and as such, affects people of all age.

“But you said your last assignment was to memorize the names of all of them.”

“I did. All the stars in all the galaxies. And that’s a great many.”

“But how many?”

“What difference does it make? I know their *names*. I don’t know how many there are. It’s their names that matter.”<sup>66</sup>

### *Walk a Mile in My Shoes*

As Emerging Nazarenes, we have to be sensitive to the fact that moderns haven’t traveled the same road and we need to appreciate the fact that moderns are very comfortable with their philosophy of life and their understanding of God and the church. As such, it might be helpful for we Emerging Nazarenes to imagine this scenario:

You’re ready to build your dream house. You work with a realtor to secure a piece of land that will serve as a solid foundation for your new home. The realtor identifies a parcel that she says has bedrock just a few feet under the surface, an ideal piece of land. You build your home, secure in the belief that nothing can ever sway it. However, after living in the home for 20 years, you begin noticing some cracks in the walls. Soon the foundation itself has cracks, and they appear to be growing larger. Concerned, you have an inspector come and check things out. His report is not good—the “bedrock” upon which you built your house was really just a limestone deposit that has shifted, and your home is soon going to wind up being sucked down into a sink hole. How would you feel? Confused? Angry? Of course! You’d immediately want to take legal action against the inspector for not doing his job properly. You would check out what options you had for shoring up the house, work to repair the foundation, and anything else in order to keep intact the beautiful house you worked so long to create.

Now, imagine if someone told you that everything that you believed, everything upon which you had built your life, was changing. How would you feel? Confused? Angry? Well, that’s how most moderns feel when they are told by we Emerging Nazarenes that the principles which have served as the foundation of their lives are now considered either antiquated or irrelevant.

### *A Force-Fed Philosophical Diet*

We have to remember that some of the ideas of the Emerging church are largely terrifying to moderns. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to make these ideas palatable to the moderns with whom we discourse. Unfortunately, rather than gently helping our modern friends understand the implications of both modern and Emerging church ideas, because we are convinced that our Emerging church beliefs and practices are more correct, we have attempted to force-feed them to our modern friends.

One of the ways we have done this is by dichotomizing the two philosophies, pitting them as opposites radically opposed to one another, and therefore, forcing people to choose one way or the other. Because there are ideas associated with postmodernism that Emerging

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<sup>66</sup> Madeline L’Engle. *A Wind in the Door*. 1973, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 181.

Christians believe to be the truest expressions of Christianity as revealed in Scripture and theology, we often find ourselves dichotomizing the two positions, subjecting modernism to intense critical analysis while basically giving the ideas of Emerging Christianity a free pass, making it difficult for anyone to reject these ideas. As a friend of one of the writers recently stated, “Those who advocate postmodernism by and large present it in such a way that any mature Christian would have difficulty *not* embracing it.” And yet this friend, who holds a Ph.D. in history, reminds us that dichotomizing modern and postmodern values inevitably leads to oversimplification and distortion of the actual ideas and feelings being investigated. It is important for us to remember that in real life people do not divide on modern and postmodern issues as clearly as we would like to think.

A second way we Emerging Nazarenes make postmodern ideas unpalatable to the modern church is by making statements regarding modernism or the Emerging church that are simply indefensible. For instance, one of the cool things to do is to contrast the individualism of moderns with the community of Emerging Christians. In our efforts to draw a distinction between the two, we make it black and white—moderns are autonomous individuals who never give a thought to community and seek only to serve their own selfish needs, while Emerging Christians are reaffirming the bonds of family, the wider community, and even tradition, as they seek the best for others.

However, truth be told, the notion that modernism was devoid of any belief in the importance of community is patently false. The modern concept of what Biblical community looks like may differ significantly from what Emerging Christians believe the Bible describes, but it is the modern Christians’ attempt to practice community as they understand it. Conversely, the “community” that *some* Emerging Christians participate in may not look anything at all like the biblical concept of community. In his insightful book, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Tony Jones states that community for postmoderns may be expressed in untraditional ways such as cohabitation, or in TV shows like MTV’s *Road Rules*, *Big Brother* or *Survivor*.<sup>67</sup> This type of community has a strong hint of narcissistic hedonism in its expression, where community is about what I get out of it, rather than what I can contribute to others.

We don’t know if it is an issue of some wanting to prove their point by making a straw man out of modernism, or if they simply aren’t doing their homework. However, when certain Emerging Christians make statements like these, they only contribute to the stereotype moderns have of us—as those who reject reason and logic entirely and base every decision on emotions. When we fail to engage moderns in discourse on why a postmodern value may be preferable to a modern one, preferring instead to dismiss those who disagree with us, we only prove the modern person’s assumption that postmodernism is nothing more than some hocus-pocus that we’ve dreamed up in order to play fast and loose with the rules.

Like any philosophy, postmodernism has some ideas that are wonderful expressions of Christianity, as well as some ideas that are simply incompatible with Christian beliefs. If we are really interested in hastening along this transition from modernism to postmodernism, we need to take seriously the objections that our modern friends raise about postmodernism, and dialogue intelligently with them about the issues. For instance, many of our modern friends greatly appreciate how deconstruction has led us to consider marginal voices that need to be heard in the

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<sup>67</sup> Tony Jones (2001). *Postmodern Youth Ministry*. Zondervan, p. 35.



church. However, they find it quite difficult to accept the idea that many postmoderns don't believe in absolute truth (as a modern would define it).

### *A Charitable Discourse*

When faced with such circumstances, we have two choices. We can label our friends as "modern" and simply dismiss their criticism, thus ensuring that we will continue to speak past one another. Or, preferably, we can recognize that their critique of our postmodern beliefs may be just what is needed to help us critically analyze those beliefs, weed out the junk, and come away with a stronger, more cogent postmodern belief system, one that can carry us through this century.

It is the hope of the writers that this paper will be an example of charitable discourse, as we seek to help moderns better understand what Emerging Christians in the Church of the Nazarene are like, and how our beliefs and practices are not only congruent with Wesleyan theology and Nazarene doctrine and practice, but also a fitting and proper way to practice church in a postmodern age.

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