

EMERGING ECCLESIOLOGY:  
PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS OF HORIZON CHURCHES  
IN A POSTMODERN WORLD

Dean G. Blevins  
Nazarene Theological Seminary

*Introduction*

This essay provides an opportunity to enter a conversation. I write as an observer at large of a movement within North American Evangelicalism that engenders both fascination and consternation on the part of enthusiasts and detractors alike. These communities provide unique expressions of what might be termed “horizon churches,” congregations surfacing on the horizon, like sailing vessels of a new fleet on the ocean, that seem at first blush to represent a different way of “doing church.” Since these congregations represent the first glimpse over the horizon most prophets and pundits should recognize that we have yet to get a full view of the ecclesial fleet this movement represents.

Unfortunately, in these days of instant access, this caution fails to slow the unceasing prognostication towards these communities. Perhaps said prognostications remain warranted (hopefully, since I am about to offer one as well). These communities, for all their diversity, have already chosen to enjoin a conversation both among and beyond their borders, share resources through websites and publishing concerns, and bear certain family resemblances in their language and practice (Burke 2005, Emergent Village 2005). For the moment the prevailing terms describing these communities includes the words “emerging” or “emergent.” These terms describe communities of passion, energy, and Christian mission. The terms also describe a new intersection between the gospel and postmodern culture that I am fairly certain cannot be dismissed as a fad.

To label this collection of communities as faddish might be problematic for a number of reasons. First, when such a moniker comes from people in denominations often less than a hundred years old, or out of an American movement at best in its own adolescence, seems a little presumptuous in light of the historic church. Secondly this movement appears to subvert other faddish, seeker-sensitive, movements anchored almost solely around mimicking “big box” megachurches (the WalMart syndrome). Instead, emerging churches resemble a range of boutique, storefront, intermediate and larger communities that share certain affinities but resist being reduced to a formula...no matter how much money that formula makes on the open market.

Will these communities survive primarily through associations, clone congregations or mega-conferences? The recent actions of emerging communities seem to belie this approach preferring to share resources through a “web” of connections rather than formula categories. A different perspective suggests that these communities are works in progress where some will survive and others will “morph” as contexts both within and without the congregation dictate change. As noted, what will follow these congregations lies beyond the horizon, but the first glimpse of these sailing vessels invite a reflection on their seaworthiness as they chart postmodern waters.

## *The Postmodern Sea*

More people continue to use the term “postmodern” in multiple contexts. Postmodernity describes a transitory period that marks the end of the Enlightenment’s hold on how persons think, relate and value their lives (Grenz 1996). However the term provides a tentative framework, often describing multiple theological perspectives, intellectual constructs, multicultural engagements, art, economics, education, politics, and value systems (Aronowitz & Giroux 1991; Griffin, Beardslee & Holland 1989; Kearney 1988; Tilley 1995). The phrase continues to grow in daily conversations, becoming ubiquitous for newer cultural expressions, particularly in the Western world. Brian McClaren (1998 2000, pp.159-2002; 2001, pp.28-38), one of the leading figures for the Emerging church movement, provides (2005) several descriptors contrasting the modern and postmodern sea. They provide a helpful reference, particularly in understanding how these churches define their world.

Modern perspective	Vs.	Postmodern perspective
Conquest and Control of Earth		Conservation of Resources
Mechanistic/ Reductionistic Operations		Organic/Systems thinking
whole divided into parts		whole greater than parts
Analytical/linear thought processes		Holistic/global thought processes
Secular/Scientific emphasis		Spiritual/Scientific integration
Objective perspective/detached stance		Inter-subjective/relational perspective
Critical questioning		Listening/Collaborative
Organizational emphasis on structure		Network emphasis on relationships
Individualistic mindset		Community mindset
Protestant/Polemic religious traditions		Spiritual/Transformative Christian heritage
Consumerism		Sustainability
Nationalism		Global & Local: “Glocal”
Print communication		Multilayered/technological communication

McClaren’s comparisons remind readers that postmodernity provides transitional language that disconnects from the modern period, including many modern Christian concepts. McClaren, however, also embraces postmodern concepts that provide a continuation with a deeper heritage in Christianity yet with radically new wrinkles. Other practitioners (McManus 2004) also emphasize urban, multicultural, technological settings that expand the impact of postmodernity. Postmodernism, often maligned by conservatives, nevertheless provides a helpful framework for understanding cultural changes that refuse to discard everything of the past (a modern tendency). However, postmodern practitioners appropriate the past in ways that may be more redemptive for the future. Other theorists concur, describing postmodern concepts alongside modern and pre-modern perspectives as strands in a rope, woven together to provide a stronger cultural (and theological) perspective (Kearney 1988, p. 20). Robert Webber (1999), a dialog partner with many in the emerging church, coins the phrase “ancient-future” to define both an appreciation of the past (including early church traditions) and a re-traditioning of the present. Whether everyone within this postmodern movement maintains such a holistic view remains open to judgment as noted below. In all, the reality of this cultural change proves difficult to ignore.

### *One Caveat: Defining “Them” and “Us”*

In all honesty the observations in this article must be tentative at best. I do believe that this movement, which participants insist remains more conversation than movement, still seeks final definition. “Emergent” describes more than a series of conferences, book titles, and websites. The term also circumscribes a loose affiliation of reinvigorated churches, college and youth ministries, alternative church plants and “tech-lectic” community based associations. The movement generates incredible energy and hope in the way these communities engage culture redemptively. One cannot help but be moved by the sincerity and resiliency in these congregations, as well as an aesthetic that is compassionate all too postmodern in texture. I must also acknowledge a real conundrum with this writing assignment, the danger of describing living, breathing, redemptive communities as “other.” In other words, describing “those” emerging communities presents a real danger when one abstracts people as if they are different from “us.”

At one recent conference the major speaker described emerging congregations like colonies on Mars, to the consternation of the “Martians” present in the room. Yet my job remains to attempt to describe an ecclesiology to primarily modern readers about a community that embodies language familiar in academic settings yet quite different to many people in ministry. I hope readers both within the movement and those just encountering its practitioners will remember that these descriptions revolve around real, passionate, Christians on both sides of this perceptual boundary. To divide people into “modern” and “postmodern” camps probably serves no better purpose than other categorical descriptions (boomer/buster, conservative/liberal, evangelical/mainline, Wesleyan/Calvinist). However, for the sake of the writing, some categories might help if only for the sake of “translation.” The article is not designed to provide “handles” for influencing or evangelizing postmoderns. Hopefully, the article should not serve as an apologetic either for modern or postmodern perspectives either. Instead the writer aspires to provide an interpretation between folk somewhat resident within each perspective.

### *A “Practiced” Ecclesiology*

There are a number of ways to describe “church” theologically. Normally the descriptors are either biblically or theologically informed. In traditionally modern churches a set of propositional statements (articles of faith, confession, or credo) serve as the main bearer of those convictions. Emerging churches seem more interested in Christian practices than Christian belief as the beginning point (Bass 1997). This does not mean that these churches oppose theological or biblical guidance. Their community gatherings resonate with Trinitarian language, biblical accounts of Christ (particularly in the gospels) and narrative theological reflection. However, set doctrines do not define them as much a Christian life. Emerging congregations do not begin by defining a common confession (beyond perhaps the Apostle’s creed) or an elaborate set of Articles of Faith, or a prescribed set of social positions. Emerging churches seem to seek and model a rule of life (like Benedictine or Franciscan rules) or at least a covenant of accountable living as a way to describe the church. The Baby Boomer mantra recited “religion is not what you do...but who you are.” Emerging church practice seems to model the message “religion is not what (you say) you are...but how you live your life.”

Using the term “Christian practice” may sound strange to some readers. The terminology describes a new way of describing the intersection between spiritual formation and discipleship in most churches (Blevins 2005). The term, however, actually extends to describing the theologically-laden activities of any congregation that are meaningful for its life (Volf and Bass 2002). In the modern period most practices were interchangeable or dismissed as “traditional.” In the postmodern period practices can carry primary significance. When describing a church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic theorists tend to see these terms as descriptors of Christian practice rather than purely propositional doctrine. Practitioners ask: “how do churches embrace oneness in the practice of egalitarian polity, model holiness in discipleship, express catholicity in koinonia fellowship, and express apostolicity in mission and memory?” This perspective resists reducing doctrine to irrelevance, beliefs do matter. However people “practicing” this approach begin with what the congregation “does,” knowing that actions embody belief. Eventually emergent practitioners much engage certain doctrinal beliefs as authentic partners in the conversation to insure the practices remain holistic and faithful to Christian life. In the meantime these practices reveal a type of spiritually intentional formation (Pagitt 2003, 2005) worth consideration on their own merit.

### *Traditioned Worship*

Christian practices are not that elaborate in a given emergent community. Rather than a “field manual” of a number of prescribed practices, emerging churches seem to identify three or four key practices to mark the rhythm of their congregational lives. Worship provides one such practice. People entering into these communities are struck by the difference in music and ambiance. Music, following more modern styles, tends to be wordier and less simplistic in structure (emerging church praise choruses, if they can be called that, sound more like hymns of the past than commercial jingles of today). Candles intermingle with PowerPoint projections. Often sacramental practices extend not only to Eucharist but to forms of prayer and rhythms of the Christian calendar (Webber 1999). Technology interlaces with “antique” artwork and current artistic expressions of heartfelt piety. Alone the experience proves remarkable... but misleading if visitors think this event is the sole difference between these congregations and other churches.

The experiential disconnect from either “traditional” worship or “adult contemporary” praise proves significant but there remains much more.

Worship for many of these congregations affords an opportunity to embrace ancient traditions via the integration of ancient liturgy and truly contemporary reflection. The practice of “re-traditioning” describes a means by which these communities seek to embrace something foundational within the life of the historic church but reframe it for their current cultural context. When done poorly these practices (candles, dark lights, worship centers) appear pragmatic pastiche, disconnected from the heritage they represent. When done well worship becomes a fusion of history and contemporary culture that creates a alternative “space” where the worship of God is expressed in clear terms.

### *Resilient fellowship*

One practice that marks emerging congregations must be their relentless desire to be in fellowship and in conversation with each other. Some voices appear more strident while others more generous in the conversation (Yaconelli 2003). Apparently they do not all share the same set of beliefs. Indeed it seems this group has given a nod to unearthing and overturning every theological “rock” to see what lies underneath. Their perspectives and positions remain as varied as their wardrobe. For modernists the diversity leads to “crazy making” when trying to pin down just what “those people” believe, particularly on social issues and moral perspectives. In a country where most Christians define and polarize themselves by their positions (more red/blue than Calvinist/Wesleyan) the mere fact that people inside the emergent church can have such different beliefs and still talk to one another must appear just insane. “Emergents” (okay, so I invented a new term) can live with difference without reducing differences to pure relativism. People in these communities do not coerce positions but remain willing to dialog and seek reconciling perspectives that they believe will be more redemptive than assent to either four spiritual laws or one political party.

### *Compassionate Hospitality*

Horizon congregations often blend their ability to practice hospitality (embracing the stranger) both as a means of compassionate outreach and as community building. Table fellowship might describe small group dinners, meals for the homeless, and the Eucharist. For emerging congregations there exists an interchangeable logic to each gathering. Hospitality allows people to accept Christ’s invitation to “come and dine” at the Lord’s table as a model for the Holy Spirit’s binding people together around a dinner table or extending the grace of the Father through a cup of water. Small group dinners frame discipleship explorations into the nature of Christian living. Often a place of nurture, these gatherings include informal table conversations over the nature of faith. Other forms of discipleship might exist through structured classes but the informal educational nature gatherings around meals, movies, and ministry provide a catalyst for growth in grace. Congregations often embrace people on the margins through ESL, street ministries, or homeless shelters. Often located in inner city or mid-town sections, these communities often brush against transitional communities with limited resources. In such settings these congregations develop strong local ties, extending their tables through community development and outreach.

### *“Awkward programming”*

While adult expressions of discipleship appear intentional, other forms of programmed ministry are more exploratory, tentative, and modern. Children’s ministries remain integral to the community but often with mixed results. Children may remain in adult worship (not surprising in such intense community forms) or join children’s classes. Often existing Christian Education curriculum plans provide poorly connected educational strategies. Bible bowling in the fellowship hall seems almost incongruous with intentionally gospel-centered sermons in the sanctuary. Youth ministry may be more holistic since many youth pastors (and youth) remain acclimated to the themes of postmodern emerging ministry. Children’s ministry will undoubtedly “catch up” through creativity and formational ministry. Resources like Jerome Berryman’s

Godly Play (1995) may provide a clue to the future of these ministries. In the meantime, the awkwardness of age-level discipleship may continue.

Collectively this simple (not simplistic) array of congregational practices provides a key insight into the intentionality of these communities. Intentionality and authenticity seem to mark the desire of many in these churches. Maturity ultimately will emerge as well in beliefs as well as practices. In the interim these churches continue to seek further definition and faithful practice, but not without challenges.

### *Storms on the Horizon*

As noted these horizon churches represent a novel approach to ministry that may signal a powerful representation of the gospel in the postmodern world. Young, resilient, brash, inclusive, prayerful, learning, these congregations offer a fresh view of the church, providing they survive their transition. Two particular challenges face these communities from within and without the church at large, premature apologetics and commodification. Taken together these challenges might reduce vibrant, searching, developing congregations into embattled versions of Christian kitsch. Churches interested in new expression of the gospel outreach need to be aware of these storm clouds as much as the horizon churches.

#### *Premature apologetics*

An awkward moment: a young member of an emerging congregation sat before a series of professional Christian educators. His appearance centered on describing practices of community and prayer. Instead he faced a barrage of questions framed around propositional claims. “What is your stance on...?” “What kind of (faith) statement would you church provide on...?” “What do you believe about...?” Gracious yet frustrated the young man finally responded, “I thought you wanted to talk about how we do discipleship.”

Emerging churches are still trying to define “what” they believe. Many people engaged in these congregations come with deeply disappointing encounters with Christian churches. Others merely seek to issues often denied in their own Christian training. Yet, as noted, these churches now represent a movement of sorts with publishing concerns and professional conferences.

The result remains that many of these churches are being pressured to define themselves more quickly and concisely than their own process of reconciling conversations allow. Some of the pressure toward an emergent apologetic stems from criticisms within evangelicalism, often by people who are not that familiar with the movement (Carson 2005). Inquisitors often pressure spokespersons to provide more definition than necessary in a truly postmodern context. In an attempt to translate their ministry for the sake of explanation, many defenders are tempted to “flatten” the rich diversity within these communities, and “rationalize” their practice. If evangelical communities provide space for these communities rather than demanding “answers” the final responses might be more creative, rich and charitable than the embattled present demands.

## *Commodification*

If Emergent leadership faces a threat from within that might quickly reify their borders, they (and the total North American church) face a more insidious threat that might ultimately “package” and trivialize the practices and conversations within the movement through commodification. Commodification describes a cultural phenomena in the western world that reduces culture to commodity. Material goods and practices designed to be resources are quickly shaped into products that promote the appearance of an alternative world that one needs to “consume” for the sake of personal meaning and well-being (Miller 2004). The cultural forces that shape consumer culture often transform life-giving practices into commercial endeavors for personal or corporate consumption. The very local resources created to enrich and inform Emerging churches provide a commercial feast if not distributed in an intentionally measured approach.

Already the movement (the first vestiges of institutionalism) identifies spokespersons who articulate (hopefully not apologize) what motivates horizon churches. Such spokespersons prove necessary in any human arena where curiosity and misunderstanding arise. A danger rises when society affords said spokespersons “personality” status. Often attempts to reach broader publics tend to “flatten” messages based on larger, more generic, tastes. Categories collapse and the particularity that often fuels local communities dissolves into “fashionable” practice for a market audience.

Some practitioners inside the Emergent movement may fuel this approach. Pragmatists within and outside the church often seek a strategy that “works” regardless of the contexts that give life to such strategies. If a so-called Emergent pastor emphasizes candles, meditative music and event Eucharist because “postmodern people like that stuff,” this person employs a commodification process based on perceived consumer taste.

When ministers rip practices from contexts, these actions (and the actors) become a form of postmodern pastiche (Miller 64), a hodgepodge of insulated imitations of authentic Christian life. “Emergent in a Can” or on CD may become a major obstacle as this popular movement expresses contemporary culture. The rich, textured, conversation among these horizon churches risks compartmentalization and commodification when the same conversation partners rely on commercial efforts to accomplish the task. Music downloads, product development, “market” considerations, the stuff of commercial curriculum producers, challenge the very task of organic community building. Commercial frameworks often reduce life giving practices to the market’s bottom line, trading long-term creativity for short-term notoriety that often trivializes the very movements shaping the practices. The WWJD movement may provide an example of an otherwise organic movement that ultimately became lost in the discount sections of Christian bookstores and catalog distributors. Emerging churches should remain wary of similar efforts in their midst.

Ultimately these horizon churches may need larger structural frameworks like denominations or other judicatory entities whose primary task remains the promotion of Christian mission rather than apologetics or commercial survival. Designing and developing networks that provide missional direction rather than consumer taste. One such community might be denominations within the Wesleyan tradition, particularly in light of our own heritage.

### *Why Should Wesleyans Care?*

To this point the article could have easily been written for a broader evangelical audience. However, there remains one other particular concern. Why should these horizon churches garner interest within Wesleyan circles? Admittedly there are websites already exploring this theme (Emergent Wesleyan 2005), more perhaps from a Wesleyan appropriation of the movement. But there may be other reasons out of a sense of historical correspondence.

John Wesley's day provides a similar backdrop to those of emerging congregations. Wesley lived in a transitory period in England, from the rise of the Enlightenment (and Wig politics) to the end of Albion, an idealization of Elizabethan England (Rule 1992). Wesley was a product of two cultures, the traditions of Anglicanism and the rationality of Oxford education. He was also embedded in one of the more exciting movements of his day, the Evangelical revival of England. Inside the ebbs and eddies of tidal change Wesley also sought to provide a faithful ministry to a new group of people anchored in gospel message and in Christian practice (Rack 1992).

Albert Outler (1964, 1980) described Wesley as a "folk theologian" (119) though perhaps the conversational quality of horizon churches provides a different contextual perspective than Outler's ecumenical hermeneutic. In short, Wesley seemed to stay engaged in a number of spirited theological discussions with others in the Evangelical movement even as collectively they sought to transform the English landscape in the midst of transitory times (Weems 1999, pp.82-91). Randy Maddox (1994) charted three periods of Wesley's theological formulation, privileging John's final period as Wesley's more nuanced, rich, theological reflection. However, horizon churches might wish to also explore the early Wesley to see how theological conversation (for good or ill) flows out of the vibrancy of a new movement. This vibrancy included re-traditioning worship to include expressive song as well as Communion, adapting models of Christian community into groups of accountable discipleship, and blending the financial needs of the poor with the educational compassion of Wesley's discipleship ministry.

Emerging churches seeking a means for describing their networks might also explore the theologically informed "connectional principle" (Weems, p. 102) that informed Wesley's ecclesiological paradigm for emerging Methodism. Under a postmodern lens connectionalism might provide a rubric for networking, mission, and flexibility (Weems, p. 105) that provides horizon churches with a language that bridges innovative networks and denominational concerns.

What is more, Wesley's emphasis on Christian practices, on the means of grace (Blevins 2005), provides a serious theological (and sacramental) link to Emergent intentionality. Perhaps the new and yet old emphasis on "practiced" ecclesiology might reopen Wesley's passion for the means of grace and his vision of holiness of heart and life. Wesleyan churches, in modern times, have shied from emphasizing Christian practices out of the older charges of legalism. Perhaps horizon churches will model for Wesleyans authentic Christian practice once again, and Wesleyans will discover new definitions for holiness that engage a postmodern search for authentic Christianity.



## *Conclusion*

As noted horizon churches are just that, communities on the horizon that signify a change in the way we think and perhaps “do” church. Their ecclesiology remains fluid, anchored more in the basic gospel message and the practice of Christian life that fuses daily creation with kingdom living. To chart their travel requires patience on the part of other churches to not expect a polished apologetic, nor to seek a commodified version for personal gain. Wesleyans will do well to pay attention to these new “Methodists” for the methods they employ reveal insights into ministry in a postmodern world. It requires the courage to sail out to deep water to embrace these vessels of change and exchange. But as the Spirit of God lends wind to their (and our) sails, so may the voyage reveal a large part of the future of the church.

## *Works Cited*

Aronowitz, S. and H. Giroux, Editors (1991). *Postmodern education: Politics, culture and social criticism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bass, D. C. Editor (1997) *Practicing our faith: A way of life for a searching people*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

Berryman, J. W. (1995) *Teaching Godly play: The Sunday morning handbook*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Blevins, D. (Spring 2005). “Renovating Christian education in the 21st century: A Wesleyan contribution” *Christian education journal*, Series 3, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 6-29

Burke, S. *The Ooze: Conversations for the journey*. Available Online [Cited 28 December 2005] <http://www.theooze.com/main.cfm>

Carson, D.A. (2005) *Becoming conversant with the emerging church: Understanding a movement and its implications*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing.

Emergent Village. Available Online [Cited 28 December 2005] <http://www.emergentvillage.com>

Emergent Wesleyan Available Online [Cited 28 December 2005] <http://www.emergentwesleyan.com/>

Grenz, S. J. (1996). *A primer on postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.

Griffin, D. R., W. A. Beardslee, and J. Holland, Editors (1989) *Varieties of postmodern theology*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Kearney, R. (1988). *The wake of imagination: Toward a postmodern culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Maddox, R. (1994) *Responsible grace: John Wesley's practical theology*. Nashville: Kingswood Books.

McLaren, B. D. (1998, 2000) *The church on the other side: Doing ministry in a postmodern matrix*; revised and expanded version of *Reinventing your church*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

McLaren, B. D. (2001). *A new kind of Christian: A tale of two friends on a spiritual journey*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass Publishers.

McLaren, B. D. (03 November 2005) Notes taken at theology and culture presentation. Olathe, KS: Mid America Nazarene University.

McManus, E. R. (2001) *An unstoppable force: Daring to become the church God had in mind*. Colorado Springs: Group Publishing.

Miller, V. J. (2004) *Consuming religion: Christian faith and practice in consuming culture*. New York: Continuum Publishing.

Outler, A. C. Editor (1964, 1980). *John Wesley*. London: Oxford University Press.

Pagitt, D. (2003, 2005). *Church re-imagined: The spiritual formation of people in communities of faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing.

Rack, H. (1992). *Reasonable enthusiast: John Wesley and the rise of Methodism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Rule, J. (1992). *Albions' people: English society 1714-1815*. London: Longman Publishers.

Tilley, T. W. (1995). *Postmodern theologies: The challenge of religious diversity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Volf, M. and D. C. Bass, Editors (2002) *Practicing theology: Beliefs and practices in Christian life*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing

Webber, R. E. (1999). *Ancient-future faith: Rethinking evangelicalism for a postmodern world*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

Weems, L. H. (1999) *Leadership in the Wesleyan spirit*. Nashville: Abingdon Press

Yaconelli, M. Editor (2003). *Stories of emergence: Moving from absolute to authentic*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing.