

Southern Baptists and the Emerging Church: Friends or Foes?

by Mark DeVine

When Rev. Michael Knight first greeted me and then introduced me to the ad hoc theological subcommittee of the Missouri Baptist Convention, he said that they and he really needed my help; he admitted that they were behind the curve on this emerging church movement thing. And this is not surprising. We are dealing with a fairly new, very diverse, and changing phenomenon. I was happy to help.

If we expect to “get it right,” I believe some wisdom I picked up as a graduate student can help us: we cannot critique what we have not first understood, and we cannot usually understand what we have not tried to comprehend sympathetically, at least in the early stages. I think of these guidelines as a kind of Golden Rule, do-unto-others approach to research and communication where apparent differences seem evident. So are Southern Baptists and the Emerging church on the same page or a collision course? Let’s get started.

Nailing Jell-O to a Wall

Celebrated evangelical scholar D.A. Carson’s book *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* delivers a scathing critique of the

movement. But just when we think we are getting a handle on the emerging church, we learn this: when church planters of the ostensibly emerging Acts29 network read Carson, they react thus, “We agree and that’s not us!” In such an atmosphere, an unqualified assertion that “Acts29 is part of the emerging movement,” becomes at least misleading if not positively distortive.

I came by my interest in the emerging movement and discovery of the Acts29 church planting network honestly. As bi-vocational pastor of an historic, declining, inner-city Southern Baptist Church and facing the depressing statistics mapping the prospects for such urban congregations, I cast about for answers. The next thing you know, I was up to my neck in words like emerging, emergent, and missional. What unified these diverse voices? Could a genuine Southern Baptist church be found among them?

To Believe or Not to Believe

The most significant distinction among the many so-called emerging communities of faith became obvious to me after several months of research, namely, the division between those who celebrate historic, biblical and evangelical doctrine and those who do not. The “doctrine or no doctrine” indicator reveals a profound separation among these emerging types.

Doctrine –friendly Acts29 church planters embrace a fully orbed evangelical confession that mirrors historic Southern Baptist sensibilities: unqualified confession of the inspiration and authority of the Bible; unashamed preaching of biblical teaching on sin, repentance, heaven and hell; the necessity of substitutionary atonement, conversion and salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone. Conversely, the “left-wing” or doctrine-averse stream within the emerging church either rejects or mangles beyond recognition all of these fundamental teachings, often according to their notions regarding postmodern culture. Not Acts29.

Acts29 church planters make every effort to base and defend their preaching, worship, evangelism and missionary endeavors according to Holy Scripture. Where matters of disagreement arise, their commitment to a biblical defense of their positions impresses me. For example, some among them do not make abstinence from alcohol a test of fellowship—clearly a controversial stance for Southern Baptists. But they do share Michael Knight’s conviction that “there is a connection between biblical theology and missions methodology.” Acts29’s resistance to the kind of cultural compromise Knight also opposes is evident on several fronts: opposition to abortion on demand, the practice of male-only elder leadership, and recognition of the homosexual lifestyle as sinful. Meanwhile, many “left-

wing” emerging leaders seem bent upon pursuit of politically correct compromises and distortions of historic Christianity on each of these issues. Not Acts29.

Are some within the emerging church or even Acts29 promoting the consumption of alcohol, gambling, or other practices that should offend the sensibilities of Southern Baptists? If so, I will not praise them for that, but rather call them to Christian maturity.

Aversion to Conversion?

Scot McKnight of JesusCreed.com and friendly observer of the center and left wings of the emerging church phenomenon sees trouble ahead for the movement, and he identifies the cause; no zeal for evangelism. Many in the emerging movement speak of “belonging before believing,” and even when they get around to the believing part, the biblical gospel is sometimes hard to find. Not so with Acts29. For them, conversion-culminating evangelism and discipleship are front and center.

Who Wants the Emerging Tattoo?

So why do some of these evangelical, doctrine-friendly Acts29 type believers call themselves emerging? Well, increasingly, they do not. The term “missional” seems to be “emerging” as the designation of choice among them and this word points to a couple of convictions they may in fact

share with the emerging church phenomenon in the broadest sense of the term.

First, the term “missional” contrasts with “attractional.” Rather than expect unbelievers to somehow become attracted to their worship services or Bible studies, missional churches go to the unbelievers—where they live, work, and play to engage them in conversation, keeping poised to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. Second, “missional” indicates the acceptance of insights Southern Baptists took to heart long ago on the international mission field, namely that the gospel must be contextualized in the culture where it grows. In most cases, effective church planters will hail from the cultural contexts they serve; they will be indigenous to that mission field. That was true in Bangkok, Thailand where I served on a church planting team, and it is true in St. Louis, Missouri as well.

Missionaries do well to avoid unnecessary cultural stumbling blocks where they would plant churches. Take note of Lottie Moon’s dress in photographs and paintings; her clothing was not purchased from anywhere in Alabama and not just because of the distance!

Acts29 church planters see themselves as missionaries to the various sub-cultures that increasingly define North America. Cultural factors faced by missionaries always include matters variously pernicious, beneficial or

benign vis-à-vis the gospel message. Optimal sorting of such cultural factors will mean that unnecessary stumbling blocks to the gospel are removed while faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ is maintained (Consider the Apostle Paul's grappling with such issues as circumcision, the eating of idol meat, and Sabbath-keeping). Thai Buddhists yearn to speak English, so missionaries accommodate with lessons employing English Bibles! What a welcome cultural aspiration! But make no mistake, faithful discernment and sorting of cultural factors proves difficult and dangerous, but, also, unavoidable.

One factor clearly separates and even alienates particular Acts29 church planters from the entire emerging movement—they are and wish to remain Southern Baptists! For some, the attraction to the SBC springs from deep roots fed by lifelong nurturing within more traditional Southern Baptist churches, longstanding celebration of the denomination's far flung missionary enterprise and the genius of the Cooperative Program method for funding an amazing international church planting effort. Many feel personal gratitude for the quality theological education they received in Cooperative Program subsidized seminaries. For many, when they encounter the passion for missional evangelism and church planting in Drs. Jerry Rankin (International Mission Board), Geoffrey Hammond (North American

Mission Board), Thom Rainer (Lifeway) and Ed Stetzer (Lifeway and NAMB) they recognize in that passion echoes of their own zeal and aspiration.

Shrinking SBC?

Recent denominational research estimates the proportion of declining Southern Baptist Churches at around 89%— a staggering and sad number for all Southern Baptists who long to see unbelievers reached for Jesus in our nation. Conspicuous and disproportionately represented among that eleven per cent of churches that are growing, we find purpose-driven, seeker, and now Acts29 communities of faith.

Admittedly, Southern Baptists have never reached consensus regarding the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of certain innovative approaches to worship, evangelism and preaching embraced within the purpose-driven and seeker movements. Indeed, within the pews, at the seminaries, the publishing house and our beloved missionary-sending agencies, we have accommodated opposing views and every nuance in between where purpose-driven and seeker methodologies are concerned. I have participated in these conversations and continue to harbor serious concerns regarding both approaches. We have discussed and debated,

treating the issues raised, not as insignificant, not by a long shot, but also, in the last resort, not worth the fracturing of our Southern Baptist fellowship.

I believe this has been a good thing. I believe we have learned from one another and some minds have been changed in one direction or another. Perhaps most importantly, we have seen that the differentiation between primary, secondary, and tertiary matters, while by no means easy, is nonetheless a necessary task where the maintenance of our fellowship and the growth of our denomination remain serious goals.

Just a few years ago, longtime Baptist statesman and stalwart of the conservative resurgence, Dr. Jimmy Draper issued a loving warning to Southern Baptists along these lines: young, theologically evangelical leaders are disconnecting from our convention. Draper urged these young leaders to “keep blogging and be nice. Otherwise you may end up as narrow-minded as you think some of us are.” Draper then pleaded with more traditional Southern Baptists like me to listen carefully and sympathetically to these theologically evangelical young leaders who display a passion for evangelism and church planting. “Keep the lines of communication open and be patient,” Draper advised.

Surely some of these Acts29 Southern Baptists are exactly the kind of young leaders who deserve the hearing, patience, and encouragement of

which Draper spoke. These leaders bring things we need; not least of all, love for our cities and demonstrated effectiveness among the 20-somethings who are exiting our churches in droves. And we bring something these young leaders need, the wisdom of experience and the accumulated benefits of a denomination that has been doing church, missions, and theological education effectively for a long time.

I cannot endorse everything I have heard about and seen among seeker, purpose-driven, Acts29 or for that matter traditional Southern Baptist churches, but I see much among each of them that can help our denomination advance the gospel.

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