

Southern Baptists, Missouri Baptists, and the Emerging Church

By Mark DeVine

Books by leaders and analyzers of the emerging church movement are coming off the presses at an amazing clip. Christianity Today Magazine recently featured Donald Miller on its cover. Miller's campus sensation, *Blue Like Jazz*, reached the remarkable rank of "4" on Amazon.com. The September issue of CT offers an excellent article on the man Miller dubbed the "cussing preacher," Mark Driscoll, pastor of the 6000 strong and growing non-denominational Mars Hill church in downtown Seattle. Driscoll, founding president of the ACTS29 church-planting network, then known for the occasional utterance of profanity also makes no bones about the compatibility of evangelical and baptistic Christianity with the consumption of alcohol.

Why should Missouri Baptists and, indeed, Southern Baptists care? Not least because significant numbers of churches variously associated with the emerging movement are now Southern Baptist and wish to remain so. The Journey church in St. Louis, whose pastor Darrin Patrick serves as vice president of ACTS29, is one such congregation.

What are Missouri Baptists to make of all this? What hath Mars Hill to do with Nashville? Can an authentic emerging church make its home within the Southern Baptist Convention? The Missouri Baptist Convention?

Complexity and Caution

The emerging church movement seems to include some pretty strange bedfellows. First we have Brian McLaren. Note the subtitle to his bestselling book *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a Missional, Evangelical, Post/Protestant, Liberal/Conservative*,

Mystical/Poetic, Biblical, Charismatic/Contemplative, Fundamentalist/Calvinist, Anabaptist/Anglican, Methodist, Catholic, Green, Incarnational, Depressed-yet-Hopeful, Emergent, Unfinished CHRISTIAN. If the breadth of the group hug aspired to measures ecumenical seriousness, McLaren does seem to be swinging for the fences with that subtitle. Yet Calvin Miller opined thus to McLaren himself: “as an evangelical Baptist I found your book not very generous and not very orthodox.” For my part—ditto.

But then there is Mark Driscoll. His Mars Hill sermons offer blunt but humor-laced conservatism, replete with the depravity of humanity, eternal punishment, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ as the only *Savoir* for sinners. In sync with the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, only men serve as pastors at Mars Hill. In a recent book, *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives*, Driscoll packs over 600 Bible references into 13 pages in contrast to the culture and philosophy fixated contributions of the other emerging authors.

Any movement capable of including the likes of Driscoll and McLaren must be one complex animal to say the least. And so it is. The emerging church movement is a relatively new, growing and still changing phenomenon. Quick and dirty caricatures aimed at either gushy embrace or dismissive condemnation of the emerging church movement cannot help us. During a recent address to the faculty of Midwestern Baptist Seminary, Missouri Baptist Interim Executive Director David Toliver captured something of the considered caution and modesty appropriate to ongoing analysis of emerging: “No one seems to be able to define the emerging church. If you cannot define it, it’s hard to see how you can be for or against it.” Indeed.

Bible and Culture

So are Southern Baptists and the Emerging church on a common path or a collision course? The contrast between Driscoll and McLaren drives home at least one fact we can take to the bank: if the emerging church includes both these men, then what unifies it cannot be theology. Driscoll and ACTS29 are unabashedly theological, embracing a fully-orbed, orthodox, reformed and baptistic confessional statement. (In the case of *The Journey*, the Baptist Faith and Message 2000). The authority of the Bible is not questioned and where politically-incorrect cultural values are perceived to clash with Holy Scripture, culture loses. From the identification of homosexual behavior as sin to the insistence that only Jesus saves, ACTS29 takes its stand within orthodox, reformational evangelicalism.

Scot McKnight argues that emerging should be viewed as a movement, not theological but ecclesiological. I think McKnight is on to something. A discernible “protest” element shapes the posture of many emerging church leaders—protest against communities of faith from which these leaders have emerged. Leaders of both doctrine-friendly and doctrine-wary types have found existing models of church wanting for one reason or another. Both sides attempt to build alternative models of church.

And both groups care much about culture. Culture, they insist, must shape the kinds of churches that are planted and the methods of evangelism employed. But, culture functions very differently on opposite sides of the doctrine divide. Culture matters to the doctrine-friendly folk because we live within culture and communicate according to culturally conditioned means. But culture is not a source of truth, and culture must not trump the revelation of God in Holy Scripture. Male –only elder leadership and bold

recognition that homosexual behavior is sin flies in the face of Seattle values, but has not kept over 6000 of its citizens from the worship at Mars Hill.

If the doctrine-ophobic leaders continue down the path of cultural accommodation, their relevance to the church will surely wane. Indifference to doctrine usually precedes loss of protectiveness even for the adjective “christian,” as this quote from emerging leader of the Sanctus1 community in the UK Ben Edson displays:

We had a guy from the Manchester Buddhist center come to Sanctus1 a couple of weeks ago and talk about Buddhist approaches to prayer. We didn't talk about the differences between our faiths. We didn't try to convert him. He was welcomed and fully included and was really pleased to have been invited.

Gibbs and Bolger account for this mindset thus, “Christians cannot truly evangelize unless they are prepared to be evangelized in the process.” Few developments herald the decline and eventual demise of Christian vitality as certainly as the loss of a good conscience regarding proselytizing. ACTS29 looks very different. Here evangelism and church planting are front and center while core doctrines animate the heart of both preaching and church life.

Youthful Indiscretion?

The doctrinally sound emerging churches could contribute something significant to the SBC just now. While the vast majority of our Baptist churches are in decline, some of these churches, such as The Journey in St, Louis, are not only growing, but are reaching populations perhaps most resistant to the gospel and least reachable by existing Baptist models, the 20 and 30-somethings. Another strength of the movement also points to a possible vulnerability—its youth. But if some emerging bloggers exhibit an almost delayed-adolescent giddiness celebrating the consumption of alcohol, the ACTS29 website contains very strong, Bible verse-referenced warnings against drunkenness. They

hesitate to embrace an alcohol abstinence policy because (1) they do not find such teaching in the Bible and (2) the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) makes no mention of the matter. I think I spy a likely solution to immaturity just around the corner. Yes! It's called aging and maturing. Mark Driscoll now regrets being tagged "the cussing preacher." And these 30-something leaders do seek out older, more seasoned models and mentors like John Piper and Tim Keller.

The Bigger Picture

We Southern Baptists find ourselves at a crossroads just now, and I think we would do well to consider the emerging church phenomenon in the light of this turning point in the life of our denomination. We live now in the wake of the triumphant conservative resurgence that began in 1979, epitomized by the adoption of the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) and the staffing of all six seminaries with professors committed to the inerrancy of Holy Scripture. Bible-loving Baptists have cause for rejoicing at these extraordinary developments. But something else is happening among us. We seem to be shrinking!! Hardly a month passes without some new alarming statistic tracking the decline not only of Christianity in North America but of Southern Baptists within the lower forty-eight states. And unprecedented loss of denominational loyalty among younger generations accompanies this downturn.

Add to the mix the little booklet, *Building Bridges*, distributed to messengers at the Southern Baptist Convention in San Antonio this past June. Put forth by Charles Colson, Thom Rainer, Morris Chapman, David Dockery and Timothy George, I consider *Building Bridges* 64 narrow little pages of dynamite.

Rainer writes “I was and still am a firm supporter of the conservative resurgence. I knew we could not continue headed down the path we were headed. But it seems as if we just can’t stop fighting even though the battle for the Bible is over and won Though I may disagree with you on secondary and tertiary issues, I will not let those points of disagreement tear down bridges of relationship between brothers and sisters in Christ.” Dockery offers a new x-ray of the current Southern Baptist family that replaces the now obsolete four-dimensional moderate/liberal vs. fundamentalist/conservative divide with an astounding 14 distinguishable segments of Southern Baptist sensibility. Whatever else Dockery’s updated taxonomy portends, the heightened fracturability of our fellowship appears frighteningly obvious.

In Romans 14 and 15 Paul rebuked those who thought the carnivore/herbivore and sabbatarian/non-sabbatarian controversies involved fundamental issues of faith and fellowship. Paul did not consider the matters as tertiary but as secondary. Thus, he instructed the warring factions to act according to conscience in the disputed matters but also to maintain fellowship with those of contrary conviction and practice. This from the same Paul who insisted that if anyone, even an angel from heaven, should teach the Galatians a gospel other than the one he taught, let them mutilate themselves and be anathema. Distinguishing between primary, secondary and tertiary matters in the church might not be easy, but it is biblical and necessary.

Default capitulation to whoever is strictest or boasts the longest list of litmus test issues where Christian fellowship is concerned is not only unloving, but also unbiblical and unspiritual. Not every purity postured willingness to divide the Body of Christ wins the favor of our Lord!

Screening committees whether at the IMB or NAMB or the MBC must be entrusted to disqualify candidates for denominational service on matters unmentioned by the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. If a would-be missionary belongs to a sect requiring the crucifixion of cats over a pyre on Saturday nights, I want him disqualified and I don't want our confession amended. But if the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) comes to serve not as a statement of broad and deep consensus among the people called Baptist, but rather as a running record of who won the latest controversy, it will cease to be the stabilizing, unity-nurturing anchor we need and instead become a stone upon which we shatter into a thousand pieces.

One bright day in Bangkok Thailand, Judge Paul Pressler handed me a signed copy of his book "A Hill on Which to Die." The title highlights Pressler's awareness that not every issue warrants the kind of praying, planning, and politicking that secured victory for SBC conservatives. But the fight for the nature and authority of Holy Scripture did so warrant. Recently, we Baptists have found ourselves at logger heads over private prayer language, the consumption of alcohol, and now an array of issues related to the emerging church. Let us be careful in these days of declining Christianity and the diversification of the Southern Baptist family. Let us pray to God for wisdom to discern those hills worthy to die on and those not so worthy.

I was happy to learn that Southeastern Baptist Seminary is hosting a conference dominated by ACTS29 leaders. Given the deep biblical and missional affinities we share with these young pastors, should we not apply some patience and extend the benefit-of-the-doubt to these young leaders, many of whom want be part of the SBC? Is the Baptist Faith and Message (2000) so weak, so inadequate that even those who affirm its articles

pose some imminent threat? I don't think so. Remember, the same truth-loving but also unity-loving apostle authored both Galatians and Romans 14 and 15.