

Essential Concerns Regarding the Emerging Church

by Brett Kunkle
of Stand to Reason (www.str.org)

Evangelical Theological Society's Annual Meeting
Washington D.C.
November 15-17, 2006

*** I represent an organization called Stand to Reason. Our mission at STR is to help Christians think clearly about their faith. We have great website that does just that and you can find a pdf version of this paper on our website, at www.str.org.**

1. INTRODUCTION

Thesis

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, I will raise three areas of concern Evangelicals should focus most of their attention as they assess both the Emerging Church movement (hereafter ECM) and Emergent Village. Specifically, I will point to some examples of what three prominent Emergent Village leaders say regarding each. These concerns culminate with my most serious concern and secondly, I will argue there is a potential drift away from orthodox Christian views in the leadership of Emergent Village and thus constitutes a serious concern for the larger ECM. .

Two Preliminary Remarks

Let me begin with two preliminary questions. If you are privy to ECM conversations, you may see the value in starting with these questions upon hearing them. First, am I qualified to offer a critical assessment of the ECM? Second, do I reject all that comes out of the ECM?

Am I Qualified?

There is considerable concern amongst ECM's ranks with criticism coming from outside the movement. Certainly D.A. Carson's book, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, has garnered much criticism from leaders in the ECM. Tony Jones has called it "breathtakingly bad."¹ Or listen to Brian McLaren's comments that are simultaneously an endorsement on the back cover of Bolger and Gibb's book, *Emerging Churches*, and a swipe at Carson's: "If you

¹ Tony Jones, "The State of Emergent 2006," Next-Wave E-Zine (January 2006). This article can be found here: <http://www.the-next-wave-ezine.info/issue85/index.cfm?id=8&ref=COVERSTORY>.

want to be truly conversant with emerging churches, this is the book to read.”² Of course, the implication is Carson’s book is *not* the one to read.

To be sure, there are criticisms levied against the ECM and its leaders that are unfair, even vicious.³ I am just as dismayed by those criticisms which demonstrate careless ignorance or Christian charity. In response, many in the ECM have called for face-to-face meetings, to sit down over a meal, engage in conversation and sort out differences. I have listened and made efforts to do just this. Now, face-to-face meetings are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions a critic must fulfill to assess ideas offered publicly. Indeed, I do not believe those within the ECM have required it of themselves in cases where they have offered public critique. However, a face-to-face conversation can be tremendously helpful and so, I have made my best attempts to arrange them whenever possible.

I have done my best to listen, seek to understand, and to represent ECM views accurately. I submit the following list of qualifications as proof:

- 1. Face-to-Face Conversations:** I have had face-to-face discussions with a number of leaders within the ECM, including Spencer Burke, Dan Kimball, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Mark Oestriecher, and Brian McLaren. Frankly, I have found them to be warm, engaging, enthusiastic, and excellent conversation partners.
- 2. Attendance at the Emergent Convention:** In May of 2005, I attended the Emergent Convention in Nashville, Tennessee, for the express purpose of learning about the ECM and having conversations with those within the movement.
- 3. Reading of Their Books:** I have read their books, many of which can be found in my personal library.
- 4. Reading of Their Articles:** I have read their articles wherever I can find them, be it online or in print.
- 5. Listened to Their Teaching:** I have attended their workshops at the Emergent convention. I have listened to seminar audio recordings from Youth Specialties’ National Youth Worker Conventions.
- 6. Listened to Their Podcasts:** I have downloaded and listened to their podcasts.
- 7. Attend an Emerging Church:** I attend what many consider to be an Emerging Church: Rock Harbor Church in Costa Mesa, California.

Here is my point: I have listened to the ECM’s response to criticism and have attempted to be a well-informed, fair, balanced, and humazing voice within the conversation. In turn, I hope my voice is thoughtfully considered and not quickly dismissed. Conversely, I am open to correction. If I have mischaracterized a position or been unfair to a view, I desire the same correction I humbly attempt to offer.

Do I Reject Everything Coming Out of the ECM?

As to the second question, my answer is a resounding no. Indeed, I share their dissatisfaction with abuses or deficiencies within Evangelicalism. I resonate with their criticisms of consumerism, their emphasis on an authentic lived-out faith, a move toward decentralized

² From the back cover of Eddie Gibbs & Ryan K. Bolger’s book, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

³ However, I would not count Carson’s book as one them.

leadership within the church, and with what many consider the heartbeat of the movement, their passion to be missional.⁴ So, no, I am not a critic who summarily dismisses all that is the ECM.

At the same time, while I acknowledge abuses and deficiencies within Evangelicalism, I want to ensure we apply the same gracious disclaimer to Evangelicalism that we have to the ECM: no segment of Evangelicalism is wholly representative of the movement. Just as we cannot point to an example of a deficiency within the ECM and then dismiss the movement as a whole, we cannot disparage all of Evangelicalism in the same manner.⁵

Clarification: Emerging vs. Emergent

Clarity is essential in this discussion and thus, careful distinctions are necessary. Let us begin with our first: the “Emerging Church” is distinct from “Emergent Village.” Yes, others have pointed this out but either confusion remains or else there is a disregard for its importance. For the purposes of this paper, this distinction is critical.

“Emerging Church” is a very broad phrase that refers to a recent movement (sometimes referred to as a conversation). It is not an organized denomination like the Southern Baptist Convention or the Presbyterian Church of America. The Emerging Church is no monolith. Diversity characterizes the movement. Thus, it is difficult to make generalizations that would paint everyone in the movement with a broad brush. As Scott McKnight points out, “...emerging Christians are as diverse as the universal Church. Some are simply evangelicals with a missional slant, while others are postmodernists with a Christian hangover.”⁶ So let us let a recognized leaders in the movement help us with this distinction.

The Emerging Church broadly conceived seeks to rethink Christian faith and practice. According to Dan Kimball⁷, “the term ‘the emerging church’ simply meant churches who were focusing on the mission of Jesus and thinking about the Kingdom in our emerging culture. It meant churches who were rethinking what it means to be the church in our emerging culture.”⁸ As Kimball highlights, the motivation for this rethinking is a perceived emerging postmodern culture. Gibbs and Bolger implicitly affirm this as they offer the following definition of

⁴ Leaders within the ECM identify its missional emphasis as such. According to Dan Kimball, “That is also why you see diversity among emerging churches that are Baptist or Lutheran etc. as the common link among emerging churches is a missional mindset” (Dan Kimball. “Origin of the terms ‘Emerging’ and ‘Emergent’ church – Part 1.” Vintage Faith Weblog. April 20, 2006. http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html). Scott McKnight distinguishes between the attractional emphasis of many Evangelical churches and the missional emphasis of Emerging Churches by describing the latter this way: “...it does not invite people to church but instead wanders into the world as the church” (in a paper entitled “What is the Emerging Church?” presented at Westminster Theological Seminary on October 26, 2006, on page 21, found here: <http://www.foolishsage.com/wp-content/uploads/McKnight%20-%20What%20is%20the%20Emerging%20Church.pdf>).

⁵ My comments here are probably the result of my frustration with Brian McLaren’s self-admitted bad habit of doing just that in his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*.

⁶ Scott McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?” WTS paper, page 30.

⁷ Author of the book, *The Emerging Church* (Zondervan), and pastor of Vintage Faith Church (<http://www.vintagechurch.org/>) in Santa Cruz, California.

⁸ Dan Kimball, “Origin of the terms...” http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html.

Emerging churches: “Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus *within postmodern cultures*” (emphasis mine).⁹

What then is Emergent Village (hereafter EV)? EV is an official organization. They have a website at www.emergentvillage.org. They have a National Coordinator, Tony Jones, a former youth pastor and current Ph.D. student at Princeton. They have a board of directors. They even raise funds for the organization.

According to Kimball, the term “emergent was first used formally on June 21, 2001 when Tony Jones, Brian McLaren and Doug Pagitt met and had a conference call with some others to come up with a name for a new network they were starting. The reason they were starting ‘Emergent’ was because Leadership Network¹⁰ had originally formed a theological working group as part of their Young Leaders Network” and “the...Young Leaders theology group was disbanding and had ended. So, Doug, Tony, Brian and some others reformed it and named it ‘Emergent’ on June 21, 2001, and got the domain name ‘emergentvillage.org and .com’ on that day.”¹¹

At the same time, the term “emerging church” was being used to describe the broader movement by those involved with Leadership Network and thus, the resulting confusion of terms. Kimball states, “Through time people started even saying ‘Emergent Church’ instead of ‘Emerging Church’ or use both terms as describing the same thing – instead of having Emergents focus more on theology and Emerging Church more on methodology as it started initially.”¹²

To summarize, the ECM is much broader than EV. However, they are not unrelated as EV is a subset of the broader category of the ECM. So, while acknowledging this important distinction, I would additionally argue there is a close connection between EV and the ECM. EV certainly recognizes this. According to their website, “Along with us, the ‘emerging church’ movement has been growing, and we in Emergent Village endeavor to fund the theological imaginations and spiritual lives of all who consider themselves a part of this broader movement.”¹³ Thus, EV explicitly states their desire to influence the theological conversation of the ECM. Indeed, they seem to be at the center of much of that discussion. This highlights why the EV/ECM distinction is an important one. While EV is not the same as the ECM, it certainly impacts the ECM and has played an important role in directing its theological conversation. This is the focus of my concern with the larger ECM and it is why I will direct all of my concern the leadership of EV.

The Leadership of Emergent Village

And who is the leadership of EV? I will focus on three: Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt. Why these three?

⁹ Gibbs & Bolger, *Emerging Churches*, 44.

¹⁰ The mission of Leadership Network is “to identify, connect and help high-capacity Christian leaders multiply their impact” (http://www.leadnet.org/about_OurMission.asp).

¹¹ Dan Kimball, “Origin of the terms...” http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html.

¹² Dan Kimball, “Origin of the terms...” http://www.dankimball.com/vintage_faith/2006/04/origin_of_the_t.html.

¹³ See <http://emergentvillage.org/about/>, under the section entitled “Organization”

1. First, they are three of the original founders of EV and its most recognizable and influential leaders today.
2. Second, each has or currently does occupy an official post within EV. As mentioned earlier, Jones is the current National Coordinator.¹⁴ McLaren currently sits on the board of directors.¹⁵
3. Third, each of these men signed their name to the “Official Response to Critics of Emergent” document.¹⁶
4. Fourth, others within the ECM consider these men leaders. Scott McKnight specifically identifies McLaren, Jones, and Pagitt as leaders of EV and further claims that McLaren and Jones are not only leaders of EV but also the larger ECM when he states, “There is no such thing as the emerging ‘church.’ It is a movement or a conversation – which is Brian McLaren’s and Tony Jones’s favored term, and *they after all are the leaders*” (emphasis mine).¹⁷ I think what McKnight means is they are *some* of its leaders but the fact he highlights these two men indicates he, like others, identify them as two of the ECM’s most influential leaders.
5. Fifthly, Pagitt and Jones are co-editors and contributors to the forthcoming book, *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*, scheduled to be released in April 2007.

At the very least, we can conclude that these three men hold significant influence in EV and correspondingly, significant influence on the theological discussion of the broader ECM.

A Very Important Disclaimer

Insofar as this paper deals with the ECM, a disclaimer: Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, and Brian McLaren do *not* speak for the entire ECM or even EV itself. Are we clear on this point? I do not even claim the ideas of these three men are in total agreement with one another. My claim is more modest: these three men have significant influence in EV and thus, in the larger ECM.

If during the question and answer period or anytime thereafter, someone approaches me and says, “Jones, Pagitt, and McLaren do not represent everyone in the Emerging Church,” I will have you promptly removed by hotel security.

II. THREE ESSENTIAL CONCERNS REGARDING EMERGENT VILLAGE

At Stand to Reason, four issues have formed the watershed of our concern¹⁸ with the EV and larger ECM. Let me highlight three: 1) the cross, 2) the authority of the Bible, and 3) the nature of truth. Of course, we are not alone in raising these concerns.¹⁹

¹⁴ See <http://emergentvillage.org/about-information/leadership>.

¹⁵ See <http://www.emergentvillage.com/about-information/board-of-directors>.

¹⁶ You can find it here: <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/files/response2critics.pdf>.

¹⁷ Scott McKnight, “What is the Emerging Church?” WTS paper, page 3.

¹⁸ Greg Koukl. “A Tale of Two Emergents.” Stand to Reason Weblog. September 14, 2005. http://str.typepad.com/weblog/2005/09/tale_of_two_eme.html.

I will not spend time here laying out and defending an evangelical position for each issue. This has been done elsewhere. Rather, I will spend my time (very briefly) highlighting examples of the kind of things EV leaders are saying in regards to each.

Concern #1: The Cross

My first area of concern is the cross. Here we ask questions like “What is the meaning of the atonement?” and “Did Jesus actually pay for or purchase anything on the cross?” How are EV leaders answering?

Brian McLaren addresses the cross in his book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. His fictional character Kerry, who happens to be a seeker, asks how Jesus fits in to God’s story. Carol, a Christian, answers with a summary of substitutionary atonement: “Well, I believe that God sent Jesus into the world to absorb all the punishment for our sins. That’s what the cross was all about. It was Jesus absorbing the punishment that all of us deserve. He became the substitute for all of us. As he suffered and died, all our wrongs were paid for, so all of us can be forgiven.”²⁰ Kerry responds: “For starters, if God wants to forgive us, why doesn’t he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That just sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?”²¹ Surprisingly, Kerry’s “divine child abuse” analogy is not the most disturbing aspect of McLaren’s narrative. What is is the absence of a biblically informed response from the other characters. As the narrative continues, the legitimacy of the analogy is never refuted, let alone examined or questioned.

Taken alone, this is worrisome. Coupled with McLaren’s endorsement of Steve Chalke’s book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, this is cause for concern. But add to these the following account from McLaren’s book, *More Ready Than You Realize*, and his views on the cross are a serious concern. So what does McLaren say there?

McLaren describes an encounter with George, a parishioner at his church. George believes in God but, by his own admission, is “still no closer to believing in Jesus Christ” because Jesus doesn’t make sense, particularly his death on the cross. George asks Brian, “Why did Jesus have to die?”²² Upon hearing the question, McLaren is struck by two thoughts. First, George seemed to be asking the question in a way McLaren had never been asked. Second, McLaren does not think his Christian answers fit the way George is asking the question. McLaren asks George for two weeks to think about an answer. After wrestling with the question but finding no answer, McLaren shares the dilemma with his brother Peter saying, “...a couple of weeks ago I realized that I don’t know why Jesus had to die.”²³ His brother quickly responded, “Well, neither did Jesus.” After citing the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as evidence, Peter says,

¹⁹ Justin Taylor. “An Emerging Church Primer.” 9Marks online article. You can find the article here: <http://www.9marks.com/CC/article/0,,PTID314526%7CCHID598014%7CCIID2249226.00.html>.

²⁰ Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 101.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

²² Brian McLaren, *More Ready Than You Realize* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

“sounds to me like Jesus didn’t really understand why it had to be that way either. But the point wasn’t understanding it; the point was doing what needed to be done.”²⁴

When it is time to meet with George again, McLaren recounts his brother’s answer to George’s question, “Why did Jesus have to die?” George, while acknowledging that Brian’s response *does not* answer his question, believes this is actually *better* than an answer and tells Brian, “It kind of makes the question not really matter so much.” And then McLaren concludes the account with this: “Over the next few weeks, George progressed in his faith to the point of becoming a committed follower of Jesus.”²⁵

Let me say three things in response. First, does McLaren actually think Jesus did not know why he had to die? What about Matthew 20:28? “...just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Or what about Jesus’ words to his disciples at the Last Supper? “And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for forgiveness of sins.*” Surely Jesus knew why he had to die. One cannot read the New Testament and conclude otherwise.

Second, does McLaren think one can become a “committed follower of Jesus” without knowing why Jesus had to die? This is certainly implied in his interaction with George. But is there not some minimal understanding needed of sin and the cross before one can place their trust in Christ? Is not an understanding of sin inextricably bound up with repentance? Again, I must side with the New Testament rather than McLaren.

Third, is McLaren being faithful to the gospel when a member of the flock entrusted to him asks him why Jesus has to die and he can give no answer? How can he allow George to walk away thinking this question doesn’t really matter that much anymore? After reading McLaren, we are left with serious concerns regarding his view of the cross.

Concern #2: The Authority of the Bible

My second area of concern is the authority of the Bible. Here we ask questions like “Is the Bible inerrant?” and “In what sense the Bible is God’s communication to us?” How are EV leaders answering?

Well, Doug Pagitt briefly discusses his views of the Bible in his book, *Re-Imagining Spiritual Formation*. Pagitt explains his church’s view of the Bible: “...we refer to the Bible as a member of our community of faith—an essential member that must be listened to on all matters on which it speaks. This approach is meant to strengthen rather than diminish the Bible’s authority.”²⁶ Alright, this is a start but we need more. Pagitt later states: “At bottom, our trust in the Bible does not depend on information that ‘proves’ the Bible to be credible. We believe the Bible because our hopes, ideas, experiences, and community of faith allow and require us to believe.”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 82.

²⁶ Doug Pagitt, *Re-Imagining Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 122.

²⁷ Ibid., 123.

So, according to Pagitt, viewing the Bible as a valuable member of the community strengthens its authority. But why should we think this strengthens its authority? According to Pagitt, the Bible is authoritative simply because the community “allows” and “requires” it to be. But if this is the case, who then has the real authority? It is not the Bible but the community. On Pagitt’s view, the Bible’s authority is grounded in the community, rather than in the fact it is the very word of God. Notice, it is nothing about the Bible *itself* that makes it authoritative on this view.

But, the Bible is what it is despite what one’s community says about it. Our communities do not confer authority upon the Bible. The Bible is authoritative because of the kind of book it is. Sadly, rather than strengthening the authority of the Bible, Pagitt’s view actually removes that authority.

Concern #3: The Nature of Truth

My third concern is the nature of truth. Here we ask questions like “What is truth?” and “Does Christianity give us an accurate picture of the way the world really is, and can we know it?” How are EV leaders answering?

First, let me be fair to them. EV leaders have addressed the issue of truth in their “Official Response to Critics”:

“...we would like to clarify, contrary to statements and inferences made by some, that yes, we truly believe there is such a thing as truth and truth matters – if we did not believe this, we would have no good reason to write or speak; no, we are not moral or epistemological relativists any more than anyone or any community is who takes hermeneutical positions – we believe that radical relativism is absurd and dangerous, as is arrogant absolutism...”²⁸

Certainly, evangelical knee-jerk reactions to EV discussions of truth are unhelpful and maybe even irresponsible. But when I listen to this clarification and then I read some of their other claims about truth, I cannot help but wonder if EV leaders aren’t responsible for much of the confusion on this issue. Let me demonstrate the confusion by looking at what Pagitt says about truth: “When we talk about truth, we’re really considering two concepts: reality (the way things are) and truth (a person’s perspective of that reality.)...No one has access to all reality in such a way that he can conclusively call his experience and understanding *the* truth.”²⁹

Notice first how Pagitt defines truth: a person’s perspective on reality. Truth is my perspective or my take on things. In other words, Pagitt is saying that “truth” is merely what one believes. However, he goes on to say that “no one has access to all reality in such a way that he can conclusively call his experience and understanding *the* truth.” So here he uses the word “truth” again. But does he mean “belief” in this instance as well? Certainly not. To see why, we simply substitute his original definition of truth for the word “truth” in this second statement. Doing so reads like this: “No one has access to reality in such a way that he can conclusively

²⁸ Jones, et al. “Our Response to Critics of Emergent.” Found here: <http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/files/response2critics.pdf>.

²⁹ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 136.

call his experience and understanding *the* belief” or “No one has access to reality in such a way that he can conclusively call his experience and understanding *the* person’s perspective of reality.” Aha. Something is wrong here. Pagitt has equivocated on his use of the word “truth.” In one instance he uses the word truth to mean “belief” and in the next instance he uses the word truth to mean a correspondence to reality.

And this gets at an extremely important point when it comes to discussions of truth in EV. When critics raise concerns about truth, it is not enough for EV leaders to say, “We believe in truth, we believe in truth.” First, in our postmodern context, we must know what they mean when they say truth. This is why I point people back to philosopher Scott Smith’s book, *Truth and the New Kind of Christian*. Frankly, I do not think Smith’s book has gotten enough attention in the ECM discussion. Smith provides careful analysis, with special attention given to both Jones’s and McLaren’s view of truth.

So here is my advice. For those *outside* of EV or the larger ECM, a simple dismissal of either by claiming they don’t believe in absolute truth is inadequate. To them I say read Smith’s book. For those *inside* EV or the larger ECM, a simple dismissal of critics’ concerns about truth or simply claiming to believe in truth is inadequate. To them I say read Smith’s book...and respond to his careful critique.

III. THE MOST SERIOUS CONCERN REGARDING EMERGENT VILLAGE

Opening the Door to Unorthodoxy

Now we come to my most serious concern regarding EV and their influence on the larger ECM: the real potential for a move away from historic Christian orthodoxy. Is there reason to worry about the Christian orthodoxy of EV leaders?

Again, let me be fair to the leaders of EV. They certainly claim Christian orthodoxy for themselves. Indeed, I do not claim that at this point in time, they are not orthodox in their views. From what I have read and heard from EV, I am not sure such a claim can be substantiated. Once again, my claim will be a more modest one. So first, let us look at their references to Christian orthodoxy.

In *Reimagining Spiritual Formation*, Doug Pagitt has a section in chapter five entitled “Avoiding Heresy,” where he deals with the following question: “...how do we handle those times when people say things not in agreement with what the church has held to throughout the ages? In other words, how do we handle heresy?”³⁰ Pagitt then goes on to describe how they answer the question in their local church community at Solomon’s Porch. Committing themselves to “the guidance of the Holy Spirit,” they “gently call on our Christian traditions to help clarify why a certain kind of thinking isn’t really consistent with orthodoxy...if someone presents a position that was held in the past but has been rejected by orthodox Christianity, then someone else who knows the issue will provide the necessary context.”³¹ So certainly, taken by itself, this passage implies that Pagitt holds to some view of Christian orthodoxy.

³⁰ Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 90.

³¹ Ibid.

Tony Jones appeals to orthodoxy as well. On his blog he states, “I would judge historic orthodoxy on the grounds of these beliefs (to name a few): humanity of Jesus, divinity of Jesus, monotheism, trinitarianism, and inspiration of scripture.”³² Furthermore, Jones recounts a recent visit to Southern Baptist Theological Seminary:

“Specifically, I was invited by the faculty of the International Center for Youth Ministry at Boyce College, and its director, Dave Adams...

We talked non-stop from the 11am till 4pm. We found points of agreement and points of difference. For them, it was significant that I personally affirmed the historic, physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ – in fact, when asked point-blank whether I could affirm it, my response was something like, ‘Not only do I affirm it, I consider it the pivot point in the entire history of the cosmos.’”³³

Given Pagitt and Jones’s appeals to Christian orthodoxy, their 2004 seminar entitled “A New Theology for a New World” at the Emergent Convention in San Diego seems to offer a contradictory message. In that seminar, Jones begins this way: “We do not think this [the ECM] is about changing your worship service. We do not think this is about...how you structure your church staff. This is actually about changing theology. This about our belief that theology changes. The message of the gospel changes. It’s not just the method that changes.”³⁴

The main line of argument as far as I could tell was this: as culture changes our understanding of God changes. There is an intersection between culture and theology and as we get new information from culture, be it through anthropology, science, or other disciplines³⁵, our theological understandings must not merely be adjusted but changed. This is how we do postmodern theology. According to Jones, postmodern theology is 1) fluid – it’s moving and we hold it loosely, 2) it is local, meaning there is no universal structure that guides the conversation for all time, and 3) it is temporary, meaning these things are changing faster than we can keep up with them. In contrast, “In the modern quest for universals, we tricked ourselves or deceived ourselves into thinking that theology is universal, absolute, it’s for all time.”³⁶

In 2005, I attended the Emergent Convention in Nashville. This same seminar was offered, only Jones was unable to co-teach so Pagitt taught alone. In that session, Pagitt made the same argument. He talked about the need to “re-imagine” and “reconstruct” our theology because “we

³² Tony Jones. “Keller on Emergent.” Theology Weblog. October 5, 2006. <http://theology.blogspot.com/2006/10/keller-on-emergent.html>.

³³ Tony Jones. “My Day at SBTS.” Theology Weblog. December 15, 2005. <http://theology.blogspot.com/2005/12/my-day-at-sbts.html>

³⁴ Doug Pagitt & Tony Jones. “A New Theology for a New World.” A workshop for the 2004 Emergent Convention in San Diego, CA. The audio recording of this seminar can be purchased through PSI, Inc. at 1-800-808-8273 or via the web at: http://sf1000.registeredsite.com/%7euser1006646/miva/merchant.mv?Screen=BASK&Store_Code=YS-SD&Action=ADPR&Product_Code=NS05-057CD&Attributes=Yes&Quantity=1.

³⁵ Jones and Pagitt cite nanotechnology as a specific example.

³⁶ Pagitt & Jones. “A New Theology for a New World.” This quote begins at 00:37:37.

have a changing story” and “God’s story is changing.” Thus, “theology is inherently temporary” – it is “our current best guess.”

During the Q & A, I asked a clarification question to make sure I understood Pagitt’s view. I asked if his view implied that one day we may need to reconstruct our views about the very nature of God. For instance, the idea that Jesus is God Incarnate may actually be completely wrong (after all, it is only our current best guess) and we would need to reconstruct our view of Jesus and God. Here was Pagitt’s answer: “Yeah, probably. Could be. I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that. It’s dangerous.” He went on to say that we are already adjusting our concepts of God – there is an adjustment about who God is and what he is like. Thus, according to Pagitt, “the Trinity is not wrong but it may not be the only way to understand God.”³⁷

Again, I want to be fair to Pagitt. Elsewhere, he has attempted to clarify his views. In response to charges he denies the Trinity, Pagitt said the following in the comments section of Jones’s blog:

[Pagitt will speak in both the first and third person here] “Also, Doug does not not believe in the Trinity. I have tried to be clear so many times on this; the Trinity is not something to be believed in, it is an explanation of how God interrelates. The language of ‘not believing in something’ is far too limited. It is fair to suggest that the third century version of how God relates is not the most accurate in light of what we currently know...

I simply suggest that the issues that were in place that caused the concept of the Trinity to be formed are no longer an issue. I am not suggesting a lesser understanding of God, or God not dwelling in Christ Jesus. I am suggesting that we not debate the Trinity – that concept did its job, rather we need to have Christian understanding of God that fits our day as well as the Trinity fit the third century.

I am not saying it is wrong, but it is not complete. No view is complete. That is why all belief is progressive.

Also, Doug thinks that there ought be no Dogma. There should be nothing that is not on the table of reconsideration. We will not be able to reconsider everything at the same time, or even think that all things need to be reconsidered, but nothing is exempt from reconsideration.”³⁸

At best, Pagitt is confused and contradicts himself. At worst, Pagitt will eventually displace the Trinity in his own theology in spite of his current affirmation he does “not not believe in the Trinity.”

And what of Jones? He seems to bristle a bit at the suggestion he is moving away from Christian orthodoxy. In a recent blog post in which Jones responds to comments by

³⁷ Doug Pagitt. “A New Theology for a New World.” A workshop for the 2005 Emergent Convention in Nashville, TN. The audio recording of this seminar can be purchased through PSI, Inc. at 1-800-808-8273 or via the web at: http://sf1000.registeredsite.com/~user1006646/miva/merchant.mv?Screen=PROD&Store_Code=YS-SD&Product_Code=NS05-057CD&Category_Code=.

³⁸ Doug Pagitt. “Also, Doug does...” December 29, 2004. “De Trinitate” Tony Jones. Theoblogy Weblog. December 29, 2004. <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2004/12/de-trinitate.html>.

pastor/theologian Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan,³⁹ Jones offers this challenge: "...I'd like to hear how, exactly, I am moving away from orthodoxy. Seriously. This isn't just a question for Keller, but for all who continue to say this. I can't speak for anyone else in emergent (or Emergent Village), but I can speak for myself. I continue to look at my theology, and to write about it, and I have not strayed from traditional Christian orthodoxy."⁴⁰

I think Jones can be answered with his own words. Indeed, he makes a similar claim to the one we just saw from Pagitt. In a blog post on the topic of the Trinity, Jones says the following:

"...my point in all this is that *the doctrine of the Trinity is still on the table*. Some people, it seems to me, would like for us to no longer debate certain 'sacred' doctrines -- the Trinity, the nature of Christ, the nature of scripture, the nature of marriage etc. And these persons tend to get very jumpy when emergent-types discuss these *sacrae doctrinae*, especially in books and at conferences that are being taped. 'This is dangerous,' they say.

I say it's dangerous to *stop* talking about these things, and it leads to a hegemony among those who already control the seminaries, colleges, magazines, radio stations, conferences, publishing houses, and magazines. We will continue to debate such things" (emphasis in the original).⁴¹

Now, if Jones wants to keep every doctrine on the table, why does he defend himself from charges of unorthodoxy? If he wants to remain orthodox, every doctrine *cannot* remain on the table of reconsideration. Orthodoxy is limited by its very nature. To hold to some bare essentials of orthodoxy (no matter how bare they are) just means there is a limit to what you can believe and still call yourself orthodox.

Listen to me closely. I am not saying that Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt are unorthodox *at this moment in time*. I am not saying they will *inevitably* become unorthodox. I hope they do not. What I am saying is this: **the door to unorthodoxy is now open**. And given their argument for the reconstruction of theology, I cannot see any in-principle way Jones and Pagitt can close that door.

Spencer Burke and the Future of Emergent Village

Let us turn our attention to a new name: Spencer Burke. If you are not familiar with Burke you can find a recounting of his story from conservative Evangelicalism into the ECM in the book, *Stories of Emergence*. Burke has been a recognized leader in the ECM. He is co-founder

³⁹ Jones indicates the comments were made during a Q & A session of Desiring God's 2006 national conference entitled, "Above All Earthly Powers: the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World," September 29-October 1, 2006. Audio recordings of the session are available here: <http://www.desiringgod.org/Events/NationalConferences/Archives/2006/>.

⁴⁰ Tony Jones. "Keller on Emergent." Theoblogy Weblog. October 5, 2006. <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2006/10/keller-on-emergent.html>.

⁴¹ Tony Jones. "De Trinitate." Theoblogy Weblog. December 29, 2004. <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2004/12/de-trinitate.html>.

of TheOoze.com, an online community. He is the author of a book entitled *Making Sense of Church*, released under Youth Specialties' Emergent line of books. He is the host of an event called "Soularize: A Learning Party," which his press kit claims "is the original postmodern/emergent annual conference."⁴² In addition, he has been a featured speaker at past Emergent Conventions.

Recently, Spencer Burke's newest book, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*, was released. It is aptly named. Now, before I discuss Burke's main claims, allow me to wonder out loud with you: Does Burke's book give us a glimpse of the possible future of EV? Is Burke an example of what EV's open door to unorthodoxy will ultimately lead to? Who or what in EV can and will stop such a slide? Let us look at Burke's argument.

In the introduction, Burke frames his discussion this way: "At this point in our history, I believe God is to be questioned as much as obeyed, created again and not simply worshipped. Our views must be continually revised, reconsidered, and debated."⁴³ Thus, Burke believes we need heretics to move us forward and proclaim new views. But make no mistake. Burke is not calling us to move farther up and further in. He clearly states, "I am not merely seeking to put a new spin on old beliefs; I am actually declaring that there are new ways of believing when it comes to the Christian story."⁴⁴

Later, Burke argues the Christian view of God has evolved through history, it has progressed, that nothing in religion stays the same.⁴⁵ Why? Because "Our religions are practiced within our cultural horizons, not outside of them."⁴⁶ For Burke, culture is the driving force behind our changing views. This line of argument sounds identical to Jones and Pagitt's in their workshop, "A New Theology for a New World."

Burke then goes on to outline his new views. In short, Burke claims he is a universalist, a panentheist, and denies the personhood of God saying, "I'm not sure I believe in God exclusively as a person anymore either."⁴⁷ There is much more we could say about this book. But rather than offer more of my own critique, I defer to someone within the ECM. Here is Scott McKnight's sobering assessment of Burke:

"...I have to say the following — and I don't do so with anything but sadness. The emerging movement is proud of creating a safe environment for people to think and to express their doubts. Partly because of what I do for a living (teach college students), I am sympathetic to the need for such safe environments. But, having said that, the emerging movement has also been criticized over and over for not having any boundaries. Frankly, some of the criticism is justified. I want to express my dismay today over what I think is crossing the boundaries. I will have to be frank; but I have to be fair. Here's how I see this book's theology as a

⁴² See Spencer Burke's press kit: <http://spencerburke.com/pdf/presskit.pdf>.

⁴³ Spencer Burke with Barry Taylor, *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xxii.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xxiv-xxv.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

Christian theologian. The more I ponder what Spencer does in this book, the more direct I have become...

Is Spencer a “heretic”? He says he is, and I see no reason to think he believes in the Trinity from reading this book. That’s what heresy means to me. Denial of God’s personhood flies in the face of everything orthodox. To say that you believe in the credal view of God as Father, Son, and Spirit and deny “person” is to deny the Trinitarian concept of God.

Is Spencer a “Christian”? He says he is. What is a Christian? Is it not one who finds redemption through faith in Christ, the one who died and who was raised? If so, I see nothing in this book that makes me think that God’s grace comes to us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Grace seems to be what each person is “born into” in Spencer’s theses in this book. That means that I see no reason in this book to think Spencer believes in the gospel as the NT defines gospel (grace as the gift of God through Christ by faith).”

McKnight rightly points out some things are *not* left on the table for reconsideration. He closes with this admonition:

“Spencer, you’re a good guy. But I have to say this to you: Go back to church. Go back to the gospel of Jesus — crucified and raised. Let the whole Bible shape all of your theology. Listen to your critics. Integrate a robust Christology, a robust death-and-resurrection gospel, and a full Trinitarian theology back into your guide to eternity.”⁴⁸

My sincere hope is that McKnight will not have to offer the same correction to the leaders of EV in the near or very far off future.

Now, once again, let me be fair to Jones, et al. The leaders of EV do not hold all of Burke’s views, nor endorse all of them. Jones has issued the following caveat regarding Burke: “Spencer is in the emerging church, in a broader sense, but he is not in the leadership of Emergent Village. I count him as a friend, but that does not mean that I endorse everything that he says or writes. The same goes for others in emergent.”⁴⁹ However, I wish Jones would say more. I wish *someone* within EV would say more but at this point, I have yet to hear any EV leader raise even one concern with Burke’s heretical views. Why, when such a prominent voice in the ECM has put forth such ideas, has no one in EV responded?

Lest I be charged with making some argument from silence, let me offer this: far from raising concerns, Brian McLaren *endorses* Burke’s book. In the foreword, McLaren states, “even in a book with ‘heretic’ in the title, I believe any honest reader can find much truth worth seeking.”⁵⁰ Which truths is McLaren referring to? Burke’s views on the personhood of God? Burke’s views on the nature of the gospel? We don’t know and he doesn’t say. Rather, McLaren leaves “you to figure out what that is when you turn the page and read what’s been

⁴⁸ Scott McKnight’s. “A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity 4.” The Jesus Creed. August 8, 2006. <http://www.jesuscreed.org/?p=1319>.

⁴⁹ Tony Jones. “Spencer is in...” Theoblogy Weblog. Tony Jones. “Keller on Emergent.” Thursday, October 5, 2006. <http://theoblogy.blogspot.com/2006/10/keller-on-emergent.html>.

⁵⁰ Burke, *A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity*, x.

fermenting in Spencer's and Barry's hearts."⁵¹ In the absence of the slightest concerns raised over Burke's book, McLaren's endorsement is worrisome. Indeed, the potential for EV to drift toward Burke's unorthodox views is of serious concern.

IV. CONCLUDING PASTORAL CONCERNS

Two Stories

Let me conclude with two stories that demonstrate my pastoral concerns with all of this. At the 2005 Emergent Convention, the structure of the sessions allowed for a tremendous amount of group interaction. In a session truth, we were given the opportunity to dialogue in what were called "Learning Communities" about the topic at hand. As we began to talk about truth, a young man who was sitting right next to me began making sweeping claims. "All truth is relative." "No one can claim to know absolute truth..."

A second story...after Pagitt's Seminar, a young man approached me and asked, "Are you rethinking the deity of Christ?" He had connected my clarification question to Doug, with the possibility I may be re-thinking this orthodox view. "No, no," I responded. He then went on to explain to me that he was indeed beginning to re-think the deity of Christ. At one point in the conversation he argued, "The Bible doesn't even use the word Trinity..."

Am I open to the ECM conversation? Absolutely. These discussions are helpful and important. But having a conversation is much different than teaching and training future church leaders. And to the degree the leaders of Emergent Village are leading the larger Emerging Church Movement and impacting the Church's futures leaders, I will continue to raise these concerns.

⁵¹ Ibid.