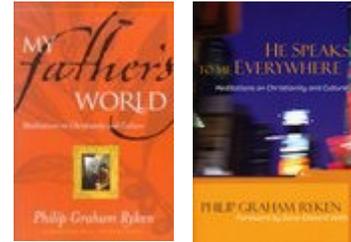


Window on the World

Window on the World is our weekly opportunity to examine our culture from the vantage point of biblical Christianity. Here you will find the text from Dr. Ryken's "Window on the World" talks from Tenth Presbyterian Church's evening service. If you missed one or wanted to send a copy to a friend, you will be able to find them here. Please note: there is no "Window on the World" on third Sundays, selected other Sundays, or in July and August.

Windows on the World before September 2005 are available in an older format. [Click here](#). Many of these are now published in [My Father's World: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2002) and in [He Speaks to Me Everywhere: Meditations on Christianity and Culture](#) (P&R Publishing, 2004) by Philip Graham Ryken.



What's Emerging in the Church?

Dr. Philip Ryken



Series: Window on the World
Date: 03/26/2006

Full Text:

Last year my cousin called to share some serious concerns about her local church. One of her pastors had just attended a cutting-edge ministry conference and was starting to introduce some radical changes to the worship service. Among other things, she was asking what I thought about using a medieval labyrinth to encourage contemplative prayer. My cousin felt uneasy about the changes and wanted to know what was going on. Well, as she soon found out, her congregation was facing the newest wave to hit the American church. This new wave is also one of the hardest to define, but it is usually identified as the "emergent" or "emerging" church. Some people call this radical new way of doing church a movement or a network, but its participants generally prefer to call what they are doing a "conversation"—a conversation about what it means to be the church in a postmodern culture.

By their very definition, emerging churches are decentralized and diverse, yet most of them are united in their grassroots protest against the styles and structures of contemporary Christianity. They are especially critical of mega-churches and other congregations in the old seeker-sensitive movement. Instead, they are seeking a closer-knit spiritual community—a place that has as many questions as answers and values authenticity more than absolutes.

Emerging churches are non-traditional congregations that want to move beyond the old liberal and conservative labels. They typically prefer the communal to the individual, the ancient or the postmodern to the modern, the city to the suburbs, dialogue to declaration, mystery to certainty, images to words, and stories to doctrines. Leadership in emerging churches tends to be collaborative rather than hierarchical. The emergent gospel is not just about individual salvation in the life to come, but about building the kingdom of God right here and right now. The order of worship is often fluid—an eclectic mix of sharing, storytelling, and silence, with a mix of music and multi-sensory worship practices borrowed from the history of the church, including incense, candles, and ancient creeds.

These broad generalizations are not all true of all emerging churches, but they seem to be characteristic of the conversation. I believe that many of the criticisms that emergent leaders make of contemporary evangelicalism are

justified, and that the basic goal of the emerging church is the right one: to reach the lost in our culture with the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ. However, I also believe there is a real danger that some of these churches will overcompensate for what they are trying to correct and end up making equal errors in opposite directions. I have several specific concerns. First, it is always dangerous for the church to marry the spirit of the age, for soon it will become a widow. In its embrace of Gen-X culture, the emerging church is displacing the seeker sensitive church, which was so closely tied to the values of the Baby Boomer generation. Eventually another new kind of Christianity will replace the emerging church too. How much of its ministry will endure? Second, the emerging church tends to be one-generational and therefore somewhat one-dimensional. Yet the church of Jesus Christ was always intended to be a multi-generational family, and it functions best when its local ministry is united across the generations.

Third, some leaders in the emerging church (we can praise God for the exceptions to this rule) seem reticent to draw clear theological boundaries, and this threatens the orthodoxy of their entire enterprise. In speaking about the story of Scripture, they tend to downplay the importance of doctrine—at least any doctrine that is stated in the form of a proposition. Of course it is true that the gospel is a story, and that there is a narrative structure to Scripture as a whole. However, narrative is not the only form of biblical truth. In fact, the apostles found it absolutely necessary to explain the Christian faith by making affirmations and denials that distinguished truth from error in theology.

Unfortunately, some emergent churches seem reluctant to follow the apostolic example in this regard. Perhaps the most influential example is Brian McLaren, who calls himself an evangelical, post-protestant, liberal/conservative, biblical, charismatic, fundamentalist, Calvinist, Anabaptist, Anglican, Methodist, catholic, incarnational, emergent Christian [see Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004]. McLaren's experiential approach to theological truth has a decidedly postmodern feel. Needless to say, some important doctrinal distinctions have been lost along the way!

Today it is not uncommon to hear leading voices in the emerging church make reckless statements that cast doubt on the absolute divine authority and complete historical reliability of Scripture, downplay the doctrine of personal sin as an offense against a holy God, deny that the substitutionary atonement is central to the gospel, or open the door to salvation through non-Christian religions. Emerging churches also tend to be critical of confessional Christianity. Although they use the ecumenical creeds, they are uneasy about the Reformation confessions, with all of the specificity they bring to doctrines like total depravity and justification by faith. It is good to ask honest questions about theology, but a church that fails to give clear and complete answers will inevitably become a divergent church.

All of this raises questions about what kind of church our culture really needs. The answer is a church that strives to find the biblical balance. This means being humble about our own finite understanding of theology, while at the same time boldly declaring everything the Bible says to be true—especially about our need for atonement. It means telling the gospel story in the Bible's own way: through the exposition of Scripture. And it means having a passion for all the things that seem to be missing in so many evangelical churches today, but are vital to biblical Christianity: close community fellowship, genuine confession of sin, compassion for the poor, a heart for the city, and a vision for the kingdom of God that stretches from here to eternity.

[For a critical response to the emergent movement, see D. A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005]