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Reconstruction of Tradition Part II: An Overview of the Postmodern Church

In *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas tells of the Fox Theater in Greenville, South Carolina that refused to stay closed on Sundays in spite of the state's "blue laws". As a result, he and his friends snuck out of the backdoor of his Methodist church the first Sunday the theater stood in defiance in 1963 and saw a John Wayne movie. He says, "The Fox Theater went head to head with the church over who would provide the world view for the young. That night in 1963, the Fox Theater won the opening skirmish."¹ This was the first time Hauerwas remembers noticing the change the western world was going through, a change that would continue so much that the 1963 America would be completely unrecognizable today. Instead of uncompromisingly changing to stay relevant to the new culture, the church remained the same.

The world had shifted. Mainline American Protestantism, as is often the case, plodded wearily along as if nothing had changed. Like an aging dowager, living in a decaying mansion on the edge of town, bankrupt and penniless, house decaying around her but acting as if her family still controlled the city, our theologians and church leaders continued to think and act as if we were in charge, as if the old arrangements were still valid.²

There have been efforts to fix this. Soon it became impossible to ignore the dwindling numbers in the pews and the complete rejection of all things "Christian" by a society that at one time at least tolerated it. Unfortunately, the traditional churches have never recovered. The recent megachurch movement may appear to be an answer to this

disparaging situation; however, a huge cross-section of society is still left untouched. This movement has been very effective in reaching the boomer culture³, but has not touched the culture to which I find myself immersed in by choice, the postmodern culture.

It took a long time to recognize that we were missing from the pews. Boomers felt right at home in the megachurches; the generation before them felt perfectly comfortable in the traditional protestant churches; my culture feels uncomfortable in both. Attempts were made to make us feel at ease once we made it into the doors of the church, if we even made it to church, by turning a room into a coffeehouse-style setting and referencing *The Matrix* in the sermon. However, we were not fooled. It still smelled like Wednesday night family dinner and we were still looked down upon for coming in smelling like smoke and wearing flip-flops and shorts. It was an act to get us in the doors so we could be shown the Truth, which would make us want to change into a copy of the pastor telling us the Good News. We longed for a place that we could feel at ease, really feel at ease, and explore, without being prodded, the feeling of desire towards something greater than ourselves that was welling up inside of us waiting to be released slowly and on our terms. The place we were looking for came in the form of the postmodern, or emergent, church.

The purpose of this paper is not to criticize the modern church; I have come out of it without being jaded. I grew up in the modern church and I owe my faith in Christ to it. However, I never felt like I completely fit in. It works for most, but it is like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole to others (forgive the cliché). My defense of the postmodern church comes from my own experience. It is still in the learning process, for

it is very young. My faith in the movement stems from the fact that if I had not found the emergent church, I do not think I would be in church at all.

Before I get too far, I must first say that the outline of this paper is based loosely upon a presentation given at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship Symposium on Worship and the Arts by Karen Ward in her session entitled “Emerging Trends in Worship: A Report from ‘Beneath the Radar’” on January 29, 2004. She is the pastor of Apostle’s Church⁴ in Seattle, Washington.

I have been a part of a postmodern, or emergent, church for almost four years now. Most of what I will be discussing comes from my own experiences and observations because of spending a great deal of time immersing myself in the emergent movement. At one time, I wanted to start an emergent church. As a result, I took in as much as possible so that I would be prepared to begin a ministry to the people of my postmodern culture. God had other plans for me, but I have been able to see this new movement progress in leaps and bounds in the short time I have been a part of it. What I’m trying to say is that I love the emergent church. For the first time since I was old enough to know the difference, I felt like I was where I belonged and that gave me a fresh outlook on the faith, which had for me grown stale. It is my hope that you will see that there is a need for churches like these and that you will pray for the people leading and participating in the movement because there is still so much to be done because it is so young. Without further ado...

What are postmoderns looking for? By my answering this, hopefully you will be able to come to some sort of understanding as to what a postmodern is. The term is vague but the joke is, that to put a firm definition on the word would not be postmodern.

Brian McLaren, the emergent godfather, says, “If you succeed in creating a postmodern framework, I think you’ve just sabotaged it.”⁵ It is a melting pot of ideas and people, which is one reason why it is so beautiful and unique. One major characteristic of a postmodern is that he seeks authenticity. He wants to be authentic and in return needs to be in relationships with authentic people. Another thing he longs for is community, especially one that will be a support system. Because of the need for authenticity, the community must be supportive in good times and bad. Authenticity requires being open and supportive during all stages of one’s life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Human love is by its very nature desire—desire for human community.”⁶

Postmoderns are also looking for a place to fit in before they believe. This has been a point of contention between the emergent leaders and people outside of the movement because it almost directly contradicts the established understanding of the way someone becomes involved in the church. Instead of accepting a person only after he or she becomes a believer, emergent churches invite the nonbeliever to participate as much or as little as he or she wants. This is in hopes that he or she will see will recognize God’s presence in his or her life by being around people that knowingly live within that presence and take something away from it that the nonbeliever knows he or she is missing. I will talk more about evangelism shortly. Fitting in is of great importance to the postmodern. Since we are in transition between modernity and postmodernity, those that have already made the transition into the new age are naturally going to be on the outskirts because they are the minority. As a result, they need a place to openly explore their faith in a way that they feel comfortable. Emergent churches are very good at

exploring new avenues of worship, whether it be through art, nature, leisure, conversation, or countless other things. Through one of these avenues, one can find a worship practice that fits best.

Postmoderns also want to take ownership of their community by participating in it. Because the movement is “beneath the radar”, churches need its members’ gifts to function. Most of the time the band members are not paid and the staff does not consist of more than one or two pastors and an administration person, as in the case of the church I attend. This is mostly because these churches cannot afford many paid staff members, but it also allows room for members to use their gifts and to be more connected as a result.

I hope this gives a general idea as to what the postmoderns are searching for and in turn given you an idea as to what a postmodern is. I joked with a friend recently when discussing this paper with him about giving postmodern tours and field trips. Honestly, to really understand the culture, the best thing to do is get out in it. Go to Deep Ellum (and not just to The Door) or Lower Greenville; this is where you will really experience the amazing raw culture.

Now I will turn my attention more specifically to the church. I have discussed what the postmoderns are looking for in a church; now let us discuss what kind of church accommodates these moody, selectively social people. The most important piece to the emergent puzzle is the fact that it is Biblically based (see, we’re not so different after all). We believe the Bible is God’s inspired word from beginning to end and we use the Bible as a guide for daily living and church structure, as well as a window to understanding the mysterious and perfect nature of God. Two quick things that are a little different though,

sorry. First, we believe all the things I just said above, however, when I say Biblically based I do not mean that our churches are built in such a way that the Bible is the foundation. Our foundation is found in the God behind the ink and paper. I cannot count how many times I have heard pastors and students and almost everyone I went to church with growing up say the Bible is their foundation for all things—their lives, faith, church, family, emotional stability, etc. We do not see it as such. Brian McLaren explains this better than any I have heard. He says:

That oft-quoted passage in Second Timothy doesn't say, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is *authoritative*." It says that Scripture is inspired and useful—useful to teach, rebuke, correct, instruct us to live justly, and equip us for our mission as the people of God. That's a very different job description than we moderns want to give it. We want it to be God's encyclopedia, God's rulebook, God's answer book, God's scientific text, God's easy-steps instruction book, God's little book of morals for all occasions. The only people in Jesus' day who would have had anything close to these expectations of the Bible would have been the scribes and Pharisees.⁷

He continues by asking his audience what makes a math book valuable. It is not valuable because it has the answers in the back; it is valuable because "by working through it, by doing the problems, by struggling with it, you become a wiser person, a person capable of solving problems and building bridges and balancing your checkbook and targeting the trajectory of a rocket to mars."⁸ No value is taken away; one great thing modernity did

for the Bible was to give it great value. However, we see the Bible as having a different kind of value.

The second difference in Biblical understanding is our open view of Scripture interpretation. I say “open” because we believe the Bible is open to different interpretations depending on one’s culture, history, etc. There are things that are not open for interpretation, such as Christ’s work on earth, but many ideas and principles presented in the Bible are. We believe in absolute truth *and* subjective interpretations. I could give many examples, but I do not think it is necessary. The fact that we have countless denominations within the Church is proof of this. Even St. Augustine says:

What difficulty is it for me, I say, if I understand the text in a way different from someone else, who understands the scriptural author in another sense? In Bible study all of us are trying to find and grasp the meaning of the author we are reading, and when we believe him to be revealing truth, we do not dare to think he said anything which we either know or think to be incorrect.⁹

The emergent church is missional, both locally and globally. Most emergent churches are located in the neighborhoods where the people they are attempting to reach are concentrated. My church, Journey Community¹⁰, is located on Greenville Avenue, a few miles north of Mockingbird Station and Lower Greenville. These are the places we hang out and where our friends hang out and what better way to reach them than to be located right down the street from their house or apartment. When I say missional, I do not mean going to these places I just mentioned and passing out tracts. That evangelical approach, while very effective in many cases, would be very ineffective to those we are

attempting to reach. We teach in our churches, and just naturally practice, relational evangelism. Just like yours, our faith is a part of our deepest being, therefore it cannot help but be a part of all that we do and say. It is like the Great Spirit Sarah in C.S. Lewis' *The Great Divorce*, whom the author could not remember whether or not she was clothed or naked. "If she were clothed, then the illusion of nakedness is doubtless due to the clarity with which her inmost spirit shone through her clothes. For clothes in that country are not a disguise: the spiritual body live along each thread and turns them into living organisms."¹¹ We desire for our spirituality and faith to "live along each thread" of who we are and therefore be seen by everyone we come into contact with. Because we want to be a presence in the community, we are actively involved in the community. Members of the church are involved in neighborhood associations and, in the case of my church, we hold art exhibits and invite people from the community to join art projects we hold at the local Starbucks. George Hunter III writes in *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, "If [non-believers] know and feel we understand them, by the tens of millions they will risk opening their hearts to the God who understands them."¹² This is our evangelistic plan. Once in the church, we allow everyone to fully participate in hopes that through this they will see Christ in the members and take the steps towards coming into a relationship with Him, as I previously mentioned. We are also involved globally, participating mostly through giving money to humanitarian aid and mission groups. We choose these carefully and most of the time become involved in groups that give aid that will benefit a country or neighborhood long term. Philip Pfatteicher says, "Spirituality is therefore an act of loving adoration of God and simultaneously an act of loving service of those in

need.”¹³ My church recently gave to Heifer International that through donations buys wheat and livestock for towns in third world countries and trains the people to raise and maintain the animals and crops, while also meeting their immediate needs. This is one example of the type of global missions we take part in.

The emergent church is communal. Community is a very important part of these churches. We share meals together weekly, take care of members financially and physically (food and clothing) when they fall on hard times, and just generally share life together. The members are a very close-knit group and most free time outside of church is spent hanging out with people from the church in the community. Communion is taken together, breaking bread and pouring wine for the person next to you. Author Anne Lamott recognizes the need for a strong church community. She says, “And that is why I have stayed so close to them—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home.”¹⁴

Emergent churches are mostly small and becoming many in number. It is rare to find a church that has over one hundred members. There are exceptions of course, like Mars Hill in Seattle that has over one thousand members. However, this is usually not the case. Once a church reaches a certain number, it has difficulty maintaining the sense of intimacy that is so important to the emergent church. When a church is faced with this issue, most of the time it breaks into smaller churches, somewhat like the mission church setup that many more traditional churches support. Because of this and the sheer need for emergent churches, the network is rapidly growing. They can be found in all major

cities, more often than not more than one per city. There is an automatic connection between the churches across the country and in England, where the movement happens to be even bigger than it is in the States, and this helps to provide support and accountability. Because they are all so like-minded, the network is very tight and connected so that wherever a person moves, he or she can find a church like the one attended in his or her home city and quickly become connected. There are emergent church conferences every year that most of the people involved in the movement attend, so everyone stays very close.

Another characteristic is that the churches are mostly non-hierarchical and almost fully self-sufficient. I say mostly non-hierarchical because the pastor naturally has more authority as he or she guides the community. Because the churches are so communally based, each member plays a very important role in its survival and this mostly eliminates the need for a large staff of pastors.

The emergent church is ancient and future, an idea named by author Robert Webber.¹⁵ A major component to these churches is the desire to connect with the historical church practices. As a result, we use historical liturgy that has been practiced since the earliest days of the church and is still being practiced by churches around the world today.¹⁶ Liturgy has become a very important part of my daily faith practices, testimony to the affect it has had in my own life. For example, in my church we begin each service with the collect from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* and read each week from the lectionary, knowing that churches around the world are reading the same thing we are reading. This not only connects us to the Church's historical roots, but it

also connects us to churches around the world. Many protestant denominations forget about the time period between the earliest churches mentioned in the Bible and the Protestant Reformation. So much was created during this time, such as the contributions from the Saints, and they have been overlooked. Once I discovered this, it was as if a hole had been filled in my faith because I realized I had been missing out on a huge chunk of history. The future aspect can be found in our use of a large amount of media that is used not only for practical purposes, such as song lyrics and some sermon supplements on Power Point, but also for aesthetic purposes. Before the service and during the sermon, we have art on the screens, which adds to the atmosphere and emphasizes our appreciation of art. Most of the art depicts religious themes, such as Renaissance depictions of Biblical scenes or photographs of nature or religious statues, most of which are taken by church members (there are many artists in the emergent churches). We are also future in the sense that we are progressive in our thought and practice, as you can probably see based on what I have been explaining.

Another characteristic is that we are post-denominational. Basically, the only tie we have to any one denomination is through whatever group is supporting us financially. Other than this, we do not affiliate ourselves completely with any single church denomination. At the Calvin conference, Karen Ward said people ask her all the time if her church is Catholic and she says yes, someone else will ask if they are Episcopal and she says yes, and so on. This is the general understanding in the churches—we pull from almost all denominations because the members that make up the church each come from different religious backgrounds. In my church, we first started implementing liturgy in the first few months of the church because a man who grew up Catholic suggested some

readings from a Catholic prayer book. This immediately became an integral part of our services because people understood the beauty and history of the writings. Almost everything we do, unless it is an original idea by one of the members, is pulled from things we grew up doing in whatever church we were a part of. Instead of trying to reject everything that is not “postmodern”, we try to focus more on being a place that people of all Christian faith backgrounds can feel comfortable participating, while also expanding our worship understanding by doing things that might not be as familiar to some.

Finally, though there is still so much I have to leave out due to time restraints, the emergent church rejects dualism. Thanks to Dr. Naugle, this idea is probably not foreign to most of you. We want to get rid of the very deep line between what has been labeled the sacred and the secular. God created all things and therefore is working and moving in and amongst them all; therefore all of God’s creation is sacred. There has obviously been a great perversion of God’s creation, which we of course believe we should avoid, but there are still redemptive elements in most things. Saint Augustine says, “In filling all things, you fill them all with the whole of yourself.”¹⁷ I will never forget the first time I heard my pastor speak when he said he went to a Dave Matthews Band concert and was able to worship God. Dave Matthews is not a “Christian” artist, but my pastor was able to worship God through the music because each member of the band possessed an amazing gift that could only come from God. One of the major worship avenues that I have discovered through the church is art. I have learned to look at a piece of art, whether it be a painting, sculpture, music, or film, and ask myself, “Where is the redemption in this?” Just by asking this, I have been able to experience new aspects of God that I have never experienced before. I have learned that God is a God of beauty,

mystery, and complexity to name a few. I would never have discovered this if I had remained stuck labeling things sacred and secular and only participating in what I had deemed to be sacred.

The worship aspect of the emergent church is an important part of our unique identity. Unfortunately I cannot go into detail about these, but I will list a few characteristics that Karen Ward presented. If you have questions or want these explained in detail, I would be happy to discuss them. Maybe there will be a part three next year. Here are the characteristics she gave:

- Biblical and apostolic
- Sacramental and symbolic
- Contemplative and emotive
- Interactive and decentered
- Artistic and devotional

If something does not change, those people that the modern church will never be able to reach will be forgotten. Many have said that postmodernity is only a phase or a fad that will eventually die or is already dead. The British *Prospect Magazine* said, “Postmodernism is dead, finally killed off after years of sickness as a result of mortal injuries sustained on September 11th, 2001.”¹⁸ This is not the case however, for if it were, the postmodern church would be nonexistent and I would have wasted three and a half years. While this is not a fad, it is also not the next “cool” thing to do like it was “cool” years ago in the modern church to start using drums in church or replace hymnals with Power Point in the contemporary service. There would be no depth if a church were

built on “cool”. The emergent church is necessary; without it, those of us that find it to be natural would be unchurched. Not in any sense am I taking anything away from the modern churches, I merely want to point out that it does not work for all people. I also want it to be clearly understood that emergent leaders do not want to completely reject all things modern. There is no way that is possible seeing as how we are still steeped in it. This is a common misconception from those outside of the emergent church, as well as those new to the movement. As I said earlier, we owe our faith to the modern church and to reject what they have worked so hard to create would be to reject our history (plus they give us money). We just want to do church differently so that everyone, and not just the moderns, will have a place to explore his or her faith, as it was for so long. The emergent church is for, as Brennan Manning so perfectly stated when listing to whom he wrote *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, “the solely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other...the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don’t have it altogether and are too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace...the bent and bruised who feel their lives are a grave disappointment to God,” and finally, “the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out.”¹⁹ These are the people that need the emergent church. It is an exciting and new and nerve-wracking time in the postmodern church and there are too many people that have placed their bets against us and are working as hard as possible to pour water on our small, barely flickering but quickly growing flame. I am asking you to stand with us as we move forward to reach the next generation for Christ. Hold us accountable while being supportive and become educated about what is going on. God promises us in Isaiah that he will be right next to us as well. “When you pass

through the waters, I will be with you.”²⁰ Leonard Sweet writes, “[Postmodernity] has created a sea change such as the world has never experienced before, including a shift in religious sensibility. While the world is rethinking its entire cultural formation, it is time to find new ways of being the church that are true to our postmodern context. It is time for a postmodern reformation.”²¹ Will you join me on this journey?

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Journey Community Church Core Beliefs and Values

Christian

We seek to follow God in Christ, study the grand narrative of the Bible, and learn from Christian tradition (church history, art, liturgy)

- We desire to listen and be obedient to God in Christ
- We desire to be deeply connected to God in mind, body, soul, and spirit
- We believe intentional communication with God through sacred acts such as prayer, communion, worship, art, music, silence, and meditation is imperative to life with God
- God's spirit takes precedence over systems and structures
- God walks with us as the narrative of our life unfolds
- We recognize our human condition of brokenness because of sin and choose to accept Christ's forgiveness, redemption, and wholeness
- We desire to respond to God's love for us with a life of dependence and obedience – holistically (heart, mind, emotionally, physically, intellectually, financially, family, the way we live)

*(Also see Mark 8:34-38, 2 Timothy 3:16-17, Proverbs 1, 1 Corinthians 3:18-23, Ecclesiastes 1-3, Genesis 1:26-27, 1 Thessalonians 5:21-24, Matthew 22:37-40, Romans 4-8, Psalm 62:1, John 14:15, Romans 12:1-2, John 8:1-11)*Christian

Missional

As missionaries, we seek to be the incarnate Christ in our present culture.

- Accepting the challenge of Christ to live immersed in the world and not to become a product of it (Hans Kuhn)
- We embrace a paradigm (worldview) that does not see culture as sacred or secular, but redeemed or in need of redemption.
- We desire to assist those who are not Christ followers' to become Christians and pursue a life of faith
- We desire to assist those who are Christ followers' to mature in their faith in Christ
- We seek to raise up leaders who are mature – spiritually, emotionally, relationally; as well as be a training center for up and coming church planters and worship leaders

(Also see Acts 8:25-40, story of Phillip and the Ethiopian, Acts 17:16-28 - Paul at Mars Hill, 1 Timothy 3)

Community

We believe the Christian faith is a call to community and not to individualism. Therefore, we seek to establish a family of pilgrims, together, on this journey of faith.

- We desire to be a church community that embodies these attributes:
 - Caring for one another, deeply
 - Bound to one another
 - Being a family of followers of Christ
 - Following Christ's example of being others-centered

- Art, beauty, creativity, and diversity are valued, utilized, and understood as coming from our Creator
- Authenticity is valued and understood as being real before God, others, and self
- We believe it is the pastor and the people who are participants together contributing to the Kingdom of God of being God's hands and feet to others
- Christian community as the attraction to unbelievers and the answer to their questions of faith

(Also see John 13:24-25, Philippians 2:1-18, Ephesians 4:25, Romans 12, I Corinthians 11-12)