

HISTORY SPEAKS

To Hard Questions Baptists Ask

The year 2009 is the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Baptist tradition. To help celebrate this big year, the Baptist History and Heritage Society has created a new 24-article series, HISTORY SPEAKS. Readers of these articles are urged to print copies for themselves and even to duplicate copies for distribution and study. Please include the following permission statement: “Used by permission of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and its website (www.baptisthistory.org), Atlanta, Georgia. Because the articles are produced by free-thinking Baptists, the BH&HS staff and board may or may not agree with the content of each article.”

Baptists and the Emerging Church

Are Baptists Losing Their Identity?

William Loyd Allen

The tsunami of change that struck the modern western world in the twentieth century permanently altered the cultural landscape. The Emerging Church (EC) addresses this postmodern context. Most Baptists will have to jettison some modernist baggage to stay afloat in the new era, but not their core Baptist identity.

The EC relates heavily to postmoderns, those for whom “reality ain’t what it used to be.” The EC may include postmoderns in mixed congregations, may consist primarily of postmoderns, or may be non-postmodern congregations that choose to minister to postmoderns.

Postmoderns are a bridge generation between the receding modern view and its emerging replacement. Moderns accept reality as a set of interconnected truths that if logically arranged reveal a single big picture of reality. For moderns, reality is like a jigsaw puzzle. Each piece has a fixed place in the single image represented on the puzzle’s box top. However, by the end of the twentieth century, many found any single “box top” explanation unconvincing: science threatened life as much as it enhanced it; capitalism and Marxism failed to fulfill human need; and world religions proclaimed peace but stoked violent global divisions.

Postmoderns are those who have abandoned the concept of a big picture reality. Either it does not exist or it cannot be proven by a logical system of propositions, a metanarrative. Postmoderns live out of a reality that is more like a set of Lego building blocks than a jigsaw puzzle. The blocks have meaning—here a wheel, there a wing—according to their context in a particular construct. Truth is established through local relationship more than rational, universal application.

EC leader Brian McLaren said, “If you have a new world, you need a new church.” A loose-knit conversation in the 1990s among some young Protestant evangelicals about the church in a postmodern world developed into a movement and has birthed a few institutions, the most

prominent of which is the Emergent Village (EV). The Emerging, or Emergent, Church Movement (ECM) is so varied that it defies definition. It is everywhere Christians intentionally engage the future church on postmodern terms.

The ECM, like the original Baptist movement, is a marginalized, prophetic attempt to form communities true to the New Testament in an era of radical change. Both movements have resisted generalizations by virtue of their bewildering diversity of theologies, worship styles, regional expressions, and social strategies, but certain shared values point to their compatibility.

The ECM's core concern is ecclesiology. It sees modern pyramidal denominations as structures of an outmoded metanarrative age, much as original Baptists identified the Anglican episcopal hierarchy as part of an obsolete state church. (The ECM questions the Religious Right's attempts to integrate the church into a nation state's hierarchy of powers. Baptists rejected this sort of Christendom in the 1600s.) The EC advocates a local, congregational, self-determining ecclesiology as both biblical and a better fit for pluralistic postmodern culture. Baptists concur.

The ECM holds the Bible as authoritative, but whereas most modern Protestants sift the texts for fixed truths to be arranged in a logical theology, the ECM is suspicious of such doctrinal metanarrative building. It sees more story than system in the scriptures. Its interpreters prefer a narrative approach to reveal truths unavailable to reason alone. Personal engagement is more central than defense of "propositional-based thought patterns," according to the postmodern New Testament translation, *The Voice*. The EV website states, "We don't have a problem with faith, but with statements." Historically, Baptists share this concern that fixed dogma limits personal encounter with God through scripture.

For the ECM, the Christian community's purpose is to incarnate an inclusive way of life, not defend an exclusive doctrinal metanarrative. The EV website says "reconciled friendship trumps traditional orthodoxies" and is a global mission. Baptists insist on individual spiritual freedom and universal religious liberty for all as prerequisites to formation of authentic Christian communities. Christianity is a life of freedom in community.

Some critics see the ECM as a heretical compromise with a pluralistic, truth-denying culture. Baptist history might offer an alternative explanation, namely, that ecclesiology is more defined by the practices of a Spirit-led community than by assent to the statements of a modern theological metanarrative. Conversely, the ECM may provide hope for reformation to Baptists ignorant of the difference between modern truths and Truth incarnate.

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