

The Emerging Church – Dr. Scott Daniels, Pastor, Pasadena First Church of the Nazarene

Every once in a while I need to empty out my “Frequently Asked Questions” file and try to address some of them here. Far and away the questions I am asked most frequently these days has to do with what has been labeled the “emerging church.” Here are the usual queries. What is the emerging church? Are you pastor, part of the emerging church? Are Nazarenes a part of the emerging church? And is the emerging church a good or a bad thing? These are all good and important questions.

This is highly unusual for me but rather than write one super long blog that addresses all these questions I thought I would take the next few days and address some of the questions about the emerging church one by one. This may mean that your BIG question about the emerging church doesn't get answered for a day or two, but please be patient and I'll try to get to the questions I consider to be the important ones. I also will probably not post comments or questions on the blog until I'm done with all the parts, but I would encourage you if you are interested to read each section.

Here are the questions I plan to cover:

Part 1: What is the emerging church?

Part 2: What are the common themes of the emerging church?

Part 3: What are primary critiques of the emerging church?

Part 4: What do we need to hear from the emerging church?

Part 5: Is the Nazarene Church (and PazNaz in particular) becoming or part of the emerging church?

I hate to give away the ending before the last chapter but let me say from the get go that I do not consider myself part of the emerging church nor am I trying to make PazNaz an emerging congregation. The emerging church is such a new and amorphous movement it is difficult to nail down exactly what it is, but nevertheless I do think there are some themes that we Nazarenes have in common with the movement, some things that we need to hear from them, but also some concerns that we want to raise. Whatever the case, I agree wholeheartedly with those who are doing what they must to reach the coming generations with the gospel. So to that end, let me deal with the some of the questions. Here's part one:

What is the Emerging Church?

The movement which is being called the “emerging church” (from now on I'll abbreviate it as the EC), is very challenging to define because it is a very young movement and it intentionally has no central institution, no primary spokesperson, and no unifying statement of faith. It is important to distinguish between the EC as a movement and the Emergent Village which is a particular organization (primarily organized around a website by the same name) that has attempted to unify some of those who have taken on the label of an “emerging Christian.” Although many people who think of themselves as part of the EC are members of the Emergent Village, most are not.

Although what is today described as the EC began, as a conversation, about two-decades ago outside of the United States, the movement is only about a decade old in the US. The emerging conversation began among young Christian leaders for two primary reasons. The first is that, like the Boomer and Buster generations before them, Generations X and Y had grown disillusioned with and had begun leaving the churches in which they were raised and were not returning. So the conversation began with the question: What kind of church and worship practices resonate with the spiritual passions of the *emerging* or future generations? This is not a new conversation. In many ways this conversation has taken place at the end of every generational shift since the Reformation (and perhaps before).

What is new is the second part of the conversation. Not only is western culture going through continuous generational changes, but uniquely there seems to be a massive philosophical shift

taking place in the culture. Most often this shift is described as a shift from modernity to postmodernity. If one adds to the philosophical shift taking place the fact that Generations X and Y are the first global (meaning they are not only used to cultural diversity but celebrate it) and post-Christian (meaning most of them have grown up outside of Church and with a secular worldview) generations in US history, one can see how the practice of the Christian faith might take on very different forms among them than it did in previous eras.

Thus the question that dominates the conversation among those who call themselves part of the EC is: What will the practice of Christianity look like 25 years from now? Is there a different kind of Christianity emerging that has many similarities to the way the Christian faith has been practiced in recent decades but may also have many differences as well?

Therefore it is critical to recognize that the EC is not a “thing” or a new denomination as much as it is an on-going and building conversation across many, many, denominational and theological lines. It is primarily a dialogue of “kindred spirits” with very little theological, ideological, or pragmatic uniformity. So to talk about emerging theology or EC practices is sort of tricky because there is so much divergence among those who call themselves part of the EC.

I would add one more thought to the definition. In the same way the Reformation would not have happened without the invention of the printing press, I don't believe the EC would be an identifiable entity without the advent of the internet. Imagine if in 1517 the great reformer Martin Luther would have posted his 95 Theses on-line rather than on the door of the Wittenburg Church. Thousands and thousands of other young discontents with Roman Catholicism could have instantaneously joined in on Luther's reforming conversation. Some would have agreed with his theology but not his politics, others would have celebrated his ideas about the abuses of Church authority but not his ideas about the authority of scripture. Also, rather than one Pope excommunicating one monk, there would have been thousands of websites in support of Luther and a thousand more from Catholic priests and laypersons denouncing Luther and those in conversation with him for their heresy and their destruction of long-standing theological principles. I certainly don't think what is happening in the EC is on the level of the great Reformation, but whatever is going on in the EC conversation could not have grown to its current size in less than 10 years without the help of the internet and email.

What are the common themes in the EC?

Because those who name themselves as “emerging” are so diverse, and because there is no shared statement of faith among emergents, it is difficult to point to the primary identifying factors in the EC. But groups of thinkers have tried to find common themes or threads in the emerging conversation. One book that I have found particularly helpful is called *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* by Fuller professors Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger. Gibbs and Bolger point to ten common themes, but let me sight just a handful.

The EC conversation is postmodern. I recognize for some people the word “postmodern” is anathema. For many it is equated with the denial of absolute truth. However, that does not necessarily have to be the case. The cultural and philosophical thought of the last century has been deeply shaped by Einstein's “Theory of Relativity.” Einstein's theory essentially says that as humans we do not see reality as it is, we see reality as it is AND as we are (and both are in motion). Because we are always in motion and what we observe is always in motion then we never see things completely as they are. This doesn't mean truth doesn't exist, but it does mean that we always see the truth from some kind of temporal perspective. Thus although there certainly are some extreme forms of postmodernism, most postmodernism does not reject the idea of absolute truth but it is simply more humble about our ability as humans to know it completely.

Personally, I don't see this postmodern humble view of truth as unbiblical. The apostle Paul reminded believers that, “For now we see through a glass, darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). The EC in response to postmodern sensibilities is trying to find ways to embody the truth of the Christian faith with humility and grace rather than argue for the propositions of the faith or carry the Truth

as a kind of baton of certainty with which to hit others. Part of the reason we find the culture at large shifting from modernity to postmodernity is because of the harsh and violent way many who claimed to know “the Truth” carried it through the modern time period. One could argue from a biblical perspective that it was those who were most certain of their absolute knowledge that ended up killing Jesus. Again, this does not mean that absolute truth does not exist, or that Christ does not reveal God’s absolute truth, but it does mean that we must carry our human understanding of that truth with humility and openness rather than with harshness and a closed-mind.

The EC conversation is Christocentric. Most of the writers and pastors who label themselves part of the EC are trying to take the person and ministry of Jesus very seriously. In particular there are many within the EC that see Protestant Christianity as having adopted a strange (and perhaps poorly interpreted) version of Pauline faith bearing little resemblance to the community of discipleship that Jesus proclaimed and embodied. In particular American Protestant Christianity tends to emphasize the substitutionary atonement of Jesus on the cross whose merits for salvation are then accessed by faith on the part of the believer.

There is nothing wrong with understanding Jesus as the sacrifice for our sins upon the cross, but many in the EC argue that this is just one of several aspects of the cross’ significance. For example, Jesus told his disciples that they must take up their cross and follow him. Certainly the cross the disciple is called to carry does not serve as atonement for sin. So what is it? Many in the EC argue that the substitutionary view of atonement (which was not articulated until Anselm in the 11th and 12 century) is one important way of understanding the cross, but the Church also needs to embrace other ways of understanding the cross as well. For example, the cross of Jesus serves as the moral example for the disciple’s responsibility to overcome evil with good. The cross also serves as Christ’s victory over sin, death, and violence. The EC wants believers to live into the moral influence and what is called the “Christus Victor” understandings of the atonement as well as the substitutionary understanding.

To state it more simply, the EC wants the Christians to not only focus on what Jesus saves us from, but also what he saved us to. In short the EC wants to make disciples who live as part of the Kingdom of God and not just believers who have received forgiveness.

The EC conversation is recovering the language of the Kingdom of God while also reacting against the politicization of the Church. Many young people who were raised in the evangelical Church during the 80’s and 90’s experienced what some have called the “conservative co-opting” of the evangelical movement. It is not unusual, for example, in the last few decades for many people inside and outside the Church in America to equate being an evangelical with also being a Republican. For many reasons that have been written about recently in places like *Time* and *Newsweek*, there seems to be a strong reaction taking place among many young believers.

Although it may seem that many young evangelicals are moving to the left politically, the EC is actually part of a conversation that advocates the Church being a third alternative beyond the politics of conservative and liberal. Some quasi-EC groups like a group that calls themselves the “Red-Letter Christians” would argue that they belong to no political party and are just trying to live out the ethics of Kingdom of God as articulated by Jesus. Red-letter Christians argue that there is much that Jesus would like about the Republicans and the Democrats and much he would dislike. But what the Church is called to be is a community that embodies in its life a radical alternative to either the right or left. The EC conversation calls for faithfulness to the unique political vision of the Kingdom rather than effectiveness in political maneuvering within the system.

Because of this reaction the EC tends to want to bring new issues to the political table that they perceive to have been left out of the Church’s conservative agenda: in particular the issues of poverty, violence, and the environment. The EC is certainly still committed to issues of life and family, but those who are a part of the EC – especially the young – have little tolerance for what they perceive to be the harshness of the political rhetoric that dominates much of the political discussion for Christians (in particular that which dominates talk radio).

The EC is post-liberal in theology and post-Christian in structure. Post-liberalism is a movement that says when we approach the Bible we are going to read it as God's inspired Word but we aren't going to use it in an unscholarly manner like the Fundamentalists tend to do. In particular the EC thinkers are willing to wrestle with the work twentieth-century textual and historical critics accomplished while maintaining a high view of the Scripture's authority in the life of the believing community. In this way the EC holds a view of scripture that is identical to the Church of the Nazarene since its founding. The Nazarenes have a very high view of Scripture's inspiration and authority but have always been open to the critical work that recognizes the human instruments through which the Spirit spoke.

The EC takes for granted that the Church is fulfilling its mission in a largely post-Christian culture. In particular in EC forms of worship and ministry it is trying to address the fact that fewer and fewer people have a "churched memory." The world is increasingly post-Christian and because most forms and places of worship were developed during a "Christianized" era, most churches do not know how to reach those who are completely un-churched. EC thinkers tend to assume that the average person is spiritual but not religious and so are trying to find methods, locations, and themes that speak to the hopes, fears, and needs of post-Christian generations.

The EC is ancient as well as modern. Many in the coming generations have had little or no rooting in extended family or stable community systems. Even those who have grown up in the Church have largely grown up in independent mega-churches with little or no history or rooting. There is a hunger on the part of believers to be connected to historical aspects of the Christian faith. A few years ago the late Robert Webber noticed this trend (and its significance) and called it the "ancient-future" movement of the Church. The EC is not the only Christian movement that is trying to move forward while also reaching back but it is certainly common among EC leaders for artistic creativity to be used to fuse together ancient Christian practices with modern technologies and modern sensibilities.

The modern Church in its reaction against Catholicism tended to deny various forms of artistic expression. One way in which the EC moves forward while moving back is by trying to recover artistic expression as an act of worship. Dance, artwork, poetry, music, and theater are often emphasized as part of the EC's forms of worship. The coming generations seem averse to simply being spectators during worship, the EC seems to be tapping into the desire people have to participate and give back part of their abilities to God in worship.

There are several other themes I could point to. Gibbs and Bolger also point to the EC's desire to live in community, the transformation of secular spaces to places of worship, the desire to transform the world through service, etc. but I would argue that the four or five that I have given you here are fairly common and give you a taste for what the primary aspects of the EC conversation are.

What are the critiques of the emerging church?

There are many people worried about the EC and there are a number of books and websites that pop-up almost daily to raise concerns about various aspects of the EC. Of particular interest to me are those that are written by Nazarenes (or former Nazarenes) attacking various leaders, pastors, or professors within the denomination that they believe either have emergent leanings or are attempting to make the denomination part of the EC. I keep a close eye on most of the major anti-Emerging websites with Nazarene connections and am very familiar with their concerns. Below I will summarize and address what I believe are the six primary areas of concern that are the focus of many of the critiques. But before I address those concerns let me make two quick clarifying statements:

First, the people I consider to be the most reputable critics of the EC come from outside the Wesleyan tradition and so (often) are critiquing the EC for things that they also critique Wesleyans in general for believing. For example, many of the critics accuse the EC of not treating the Bible as the inerrant Word of God. As I mentioned in a past post, EC writers tend to be post-

liberal which means that although they believe the Bible is the inspired by God, they do not hold to an inerrantist view of the Scriptures. It is important to note that Nazarenes have never held to a strict inerrantist view of Scripture. Nazarenes primarily use words like *plenary* (meaning full) or *infallible* to describe their view of the Bible's inspiration. When Nazarenes use the word "inerrant" they use it in this way: "the Scriptures *inerrantly* reveal the will of God in all things necessary to our salvation." It is important to note that what Nazarenes believe to be inerrant in the scripture is its revelation of God's will and purposes for salvation, but that is very different view than holding to an inerrantist view. I know that sounds like a theological technicality, (because it is), but it is a significant technicality because a non-inerrancy view of the Scriptures tends to allow for a more contextualized reading of the Bible. For example, most inerrancy traditions hold to a literalist view of creation and reject the ordination of women into ministry. The Church of the Nazarene has never in its history required a literalist view of creation and it has always ordained women into ministry.

Some of the most visible and reputable critics of the EC are people like John MacArthur, Mark Driscoll, Roger Oakland, D.A. Carson, and David Wells. I think it is important for Nazarenes who read or hear their critiques of the EC to recognize that each of these critics are writing from a deeply Reformed (Calvinist) viewpoint and that many of their objections of the EC are often rooted in similar objections those same thinkers have to Wesleyan/Arminian groups like the Methodist and Holiness traditions (of which the Church of the Nazarene is part). I certainly have respect for each of their ministries, but there are places of major disagreement between their theological tradition and the tradition in which the Church of the Nazarene is rooted. I think Nazarenes also will have places of disagreement with certain thinkers in the EC, but some of the EC theology that is criticized by the prominent ministers listed above is at some of the places where Nazarenes and the EC are actually in agreement. Again, I have no personal vendetta against any of the five people I mentioned, but for a Nazarene to say that the EC is bad because of what one of those five thinkers says about it is a little like a Republican taking a Democrat's advice on politics. It doesn't mean Nazarenes should ignore their critiques, but it does mean that Nazarenes should be very aware that those five thinkers begin their critique from a very different theological starting point than the Wesleyan/Arminian tradition.

Secondly, in addressing the concerns made about the EC, I'm going to primarily pay attention to folk like those I have already mentioned and I'm going to virtually ignore most of the "concerned" websites out there. I am doing that on purpose because I have to admit that I absolutely cannot stand the tactics I have seen employed by many of the "Concerned Nazarene" anti-emergent bloggers and self-publishers. I have a number of complaints against them, but my primary complaint is the number of time quotes are taken out of context. This is a frequent practice and very frustrating. Let me give you one example of hundreds. In a highly viewed video on YouTube EC critic Eric Barger quotes writer Brian McLaren as stating that, "The challenge today is not whether you are right but whether you are good." Barger quotes this sentence in a video taped presentation as evidence that the EC is abandoning truth. The actual quote in context can be found on page 61 of McLaren's book *A New Kind of Christian*. Here is the actual quote in context:

"...Neo plunged right back into our conversation: 'Dan, when it comes to other religions, the challenge in modernity was to prove that we're right and they're wrong. But I think we have a different challenge in postmodernity. The question isn't so much whether we're right but whether we're good. And it strikes me that goodness, not just rightness, is what Jesus said the real issue was – you know, good trees produce good fruit, that sort of thing. If we Christians would take all the energy we put into proving we're right and others are wrong and invested that energy in pursuing and doing good, somehow I think that more people would believe we are right.... I'm not in any way saying truth isn't important. But I am saying that truth means more than factual accuracy. It means being in sync with God.'"

Not only does Barger not get the quote correct, but in its full context the quote means almost the exact opposite of what he accuses McLaren of saying. In its proper context McLaren's comment is fairly innocuous and probably something most Christians would agree with. Unfortunately I see this kind of unfairness to the actual statements of those they are criticizing happen quite frequently. In fact, I believe they regularly participate in slander.

I also greatly struggle with the win-at-all-costs mentality displayed by many. I do think standing up for orthodoxy is critical in the Church but I also think we need to heed at least two scriptural warnings. The first is the blindness the Pharisees had to Jesus that led to the “unpardonable sin” of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. I take the message of that troublesome text (Luke 12:10) to be that we should always be very careful to call something “not of God” if it indeed may be of God. Second, Ephesus, the first of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3 was praised for having strong filters of orthodoxy but it was chastised for losing its “first love.” I think there is a deep relationship between the way the Church carries its filters of orthodoxy and its demonstration of love. I don’t believe that we have to choose between orthodox doctrine and love, but I think some of the tone and destructive tactics that we are witnessing in the Church over these issues does demonstrate that it is all too easy to lose sight of the centrality of loving one another when contesting over doctrine. And if we lose our love, we have ceased to be Christ’s Church.

All that being said, let me list six areas that seem to be the most frequent areas of concern.

1. The EC denies theological certainty.

I mentioned in a previous post that the EC is profoundly shaped and probably should be seen as an attempted response to postmodernity. How one thinks about this issue will likely be the same as one thinks about the issues of modern and postmodern epistemology.

There were many great things about modernity. The quest for foundational certainty led to the greatest advances in science and technology in human history. But the downside of absolute certainty is seen in the imperialism, violence, and cultural genocides of that same period. There are many great things about postmodernity. A more humble view of certainty usually opens the way for dialogue rather than dispute to take place. But the downside of postmodernity is the very real possibility of total relativism.

If that description didn’t make sense to you, think of it this way. Do you think Columbus was a hero or a villain? (This is a gross simplification, but) If you see Columbus as “discovering” the New World and bringing with him the great advances of Western reason, technological superiority, and the Christian faith, then you lean a little toward valuing the certainty of modernity. If on the other hand, you think of Columbus as invading a territory that was already occupied and destroying a valuable (if primitive) culture in its own right and unnecessarily and imperialistically imposing his power and religion on others, then you lean toward a more postmodern view.

There’s no question that the EC is trying to embody the faith in ways that meet folk who think more like postmoderns than like moderns. The question is: can they do that without slipping into complete relativism? The EC response is that they believe they can be humble about truth without being relativists by embodying and witnessing to the truth rather than dictating or coercing others with the truth. The critics of the EC believe they are on a slippery slope to relativism.

One important aspect to this question is the issue of postmodernity itself. Is postmodernity an inevitable reality or is it something we should reject altogether? I think most of the critics think that postmodernity is part of the problem and it should be rejected. Some of the kinder critics agree that the EC should meet postmoderns where they are at, but they should move them towards modern views of Truth and certainty. Most EC thinkers would likely argue that we are in postmodernity whether we like it or not (and most like it) and that we should embrace doing ministry as postmoderns among postmoderns.

2. The EC rejects the substitutionary atonement of Jesus.

I would argue that there has been robust conversation about the substitutionary view of the atonement for centuries. It has not been unusual for theologians historically to struggle with the view that the sole meaning of the cross is appeasing God’s wrath and judgment through the sacrificial death of Jesus. The debate over how to understand the atonement and how to understand the substitutionary atonement in particular has been raging for centuries and has little

to do with the rise of the EC even though it is currently getting all the press about it. For example, I have a chapter on the cross and non-violence in a book entitled *Violence and Atonement* (edited by John Sanders and published by Abingdon) in which all of us who contributed to the book are arguing with various aspects of the substitutionary view of the atonement but not one of us had even heard of the EC at the time. The debate over atonement goes back centuries and is only now getting broad attention because of the way the debate is taking place in the EC and because some of the EC writers have probably done a better job of making the issues surrounding this debate accessible to the average believer.

I think like many non-Reformed or non-Calvinist traditions, the EC does not so much deny the substitutionary theory of the atonement as react against it being the ONLY view of the atonement held by the Church. One would be hard pressed to find any Christian, EC or otherwise, who would not at least confess that when we look at the cross we are reminded that God does not hold our sins against us but extends forgiveness through his Son. What I believe the EC is reacting against is an American evangelical theology that has at times limited the meaning or significance of the cross to its work as sacrifice for sin. To state it crassly, American evangelicalism at times has seemed to say, "Believe that Jesus died for your sins, and if you get around to living as a disciple of Jesus that would be good. But the important thing is that you cognitively believe that Jesus died for your sins." I believe at the core, this is the view that the EC is reacting against. The idea that to "believe" means that we become committed disciples of Jesus and citizens of his kingdom is central to the reaction of the EC.

To expand the understanding of the cross is not a new idea. In fact, one could argue that there are many ways of understanding the significance of the cross found in the bible. Historically, at least two or three other theories of atonement have been very important. The early Church Fathers (from the second through fourth centuries) often held to what scholars refer to as a "Christus Victor" view of the cross. This view says that in the cross Jesus defeated death, evil, and violence. This view actually emphasizes the resurrection as well as the crucifixion. One of the weaknesses of holding only to a substitutionary view of the atonement is that logically the resurrection isn't necessary because what was important for atonement was Christ's death. The resurrection, however, celebrates God's victory over death by conquering it with life, evil by conquering it with love, and violence by conquering it with peace.

Another important historical figure, Peter Abelard, argued for the "Moral Influence" of the cross. In the cross, argues Abelard, we see the pattern of self-giving love that is a requirement for all disciples. Jesus called his followers to "take up their cross and follow him." It makes no sense for the disciple's cross to be thought of as also a cross of substitutionary sacrifice. The disciple's cross must therefore be the commitment on the part of the believer to participate in Christ's redeeming of the world through love rather than coercion.

Because these other aspects of the cross have often been overlooked by American evangelicals I do think that some in the EC have tried to make corrections through over-statements. If there are any who deny that when we look at the cross we see merciful and justifying grace of God in the sacrificial death of Christ, then I will agree that they have gone out-of-bounds. I have yet to read any who say that. I have read many who want to expand what is meant when we speak of atonement, but I have not read any personally who deny the cross as God's consummate act of forgiveness.

A good example of how this point is often misconstrued by critics is the frequent quoting of Brian McLaren as saying, "The cross isn't the center, it is almost a distraction and false advertising for God." What the critics inevitably fail to either quote or understand is that this statement is made in the midst of a conversation about how God will establish his kingdom. Brian – like many Christians including Anabaptists and Mennonites – believes that the cross means that God will establish his kingdom in peace rather than in violence. God did not, Brian argues, overcome evil with good at the cross as a temporary plan. Rather, (it may be beyond our imagination to conceive) but God is going to establish his kingdom in peace in the end also. So Brian's statement regarding the cross is made in the context of: "If God is NOT going to establish his kingdom in peace, but like every other king in history, can only bring about his kingdom through

inflicting violence and torture upon his enemies... THEN the cross isn't the center, it is almost a distraction and false advertising for God."

That "THEN" makes all the difference, but it is almost universally left out by those who critique the EC for denying the atonement. The irony is that – at least in Brian's case – he believes MORE about the cross than his critics do. He believes that the cross of Jesus is God's instrument of forgiveness but he also believes it is God's victory over evil and the disciple's pattern for life. Far from denying the atonement he actually expands the meaning of Christ's atoning cross.

If you want to read a good example of the way some in the EC expand the conception of atonement, I would recommend *A Community Called Atonement*, by Scot McKnight.

3. The EC emphasis on conversation, community, and peace abandons the proposition that Jesus is the unique way to heaven.

This is also a by-product of the postmodernity of the culture to which the EC responds. Members of the EC often work for conversation and collaboration between other faith traditions. This tends to be out of the assumption that not everything about other faith traditions are completely wrong but that there are some common areas of agreement that allow people of various faiths to work together.

There are two things that are typical of the EC that create tension on this issue. The first is that the EC doesn't focus a whole lot on the question of heaven. I believe this again is a reaction to American evangelicalism that has often focused exclusively on the question of heaven and hell without working to transform the world. It is a stereotype, but it has often been the case that evangelicalism has been "heavenly minded, but no earthly good." I do believe the EC wants to push the church to be "earthly good." Because of that, the EC has tended to leave questions of eternal judgment to God while working for the transformation of the world. I think there are some cases of over-statement here among EC thinkers. I believe it is very important for us to continue to raise questions regarding the assurance of eternal life through Jesus, but as a child of American evangelicalism, I am sympathetic to the desire for people to "know we are Christians by our love."

The second thing that is typical of the EC on this point that creates tension is that they tend to be reacting against dispensational premillennialism. If you are unfamiliar with that theology, dispensationalism is the view of Christ's return made most popular in the *Left Behind* book series. There has been debate for at least a century between dispensationalism, post-millennialism, and amillennial views of eschatology, but I believe most EC leaders lean toward the more optimistic views represented in "post" or "a" millennial positions. In short, this means that they tend to be more hopeful about what God may do through his people to create places of love and justice than most dispensationalists. Often dispensationalists hear conversations promoting peace and justice across boundaries of religions as potentially leading to one world religion and the advent of the Anti-Christ. While folk on the other side interpret these conversations as signs of God's Spirit moving among all people uniting those that have for so long been divided.

I do think that there are concerns to be raised on the EC side that any time social aspects of the gospel are emphasized that a kind of hope rooted in humanism can be a danger. But on the other hand I think dispensationalism often suffers from "conspiracy-itis." When one is convinced that history will get better then one can fall for false schemes rooted in humanism rather than in Christ. But when one is convinced that history will only get worse then one is taking the risk of missing out on genuine movements of God because every popular moment that comes along is potentially a moment of evil and deception.

4. The EC denies the existence of hell and is universalistic.

I do believe that many EC thinkers want to move the Church away from Dante's vision of hell that has captured the imaginations of people both inside and outside the Church for centuries. I get a little frustrated with critics who will say things like, "The EC denies the biblical view of hell." My frustration is that (a) the critics assume that their view of hell is the THE biblical view; and (b) that the EC thinkers writing about hell and judgment are saying, "I don't care what the bible says about it... There is no hell." It has been my experience that many Christian's view of hell and divine judgment is shaped more by Dante than by the Scripture. And it has also been my experience in reading EC folk that they are trying to make a biblical argument for why their view of judgment is THE biblical view.

I am also surprised at the way some critics act like this is a totally new question that has never been raised before. For example, most of what I read from EC folk regarding their view of hell is almost identical (in fact most admit that they are borrowing their view from) C.S. Lewis' view of hell as articulated in his well-known book *The Great Divorce*. Most are trying to balance divine love and divine justice without saying (like a Dispensationalist would say), this is currently a period or dispensation of God's grace, but next is coming the period or dispensation of God's justice. This is not simply an EC issue. Theologians of every bent are trying to interpret the bible and hold in tension what it means for the Lion of Judah to eternally be the Lamb of God. I think it is unfair to the EC to say that they reject the "biblical view of hell." One can disagree with their interpretation of the bible, but the critic has to recognize that they too carry one interpretation of the bible.

I have noticed that even some critics have begun to realize that their claim that the EC is "universalistic" (meaning that everyone will end up in heaven) is wrong. Again, much like Lewis' *Great Divorce*, there are many theologians throughout Church history who have argued that "God will be all in all" and that he will not stop working until everything that can be redeemed will be redeemed. I have seen many names given to this view, but the essential view is not that everyone will be saved but that God will continue working until all that wills to be saved will be redeemed. There are biblical arguments theologians (the foremost example being Jurgen Moltmann) make for this view. So again, critics can criticize the interpretation of the Scripture of those who hold some kind of "universal redemption" view, but it is wrong to say it is "unbiblical."

Personally, I don't see the need to create division in the Church over this issue. I think people on both sides see the danger of a general universalism. But none of us knows if God is going to draw a line in the sand historically and say, that is it, you are done, or if he will continue working until "every knee bows and every tongue confesses..." I remember hearing a student ask Jurgen Moltmann one time if he was a universalist. He responded, "Oh no! I am not a universalist! There are many people I hope go to hell. I'm just not sure Jesus feels the same way about them." I can make the biblical argument for why they will end up in hell and I can make a biblical argument for why God will work until all is redeemed. I really don't know which will be the case. I know that I want people to live now with the assurance of eternal life. And although I don't know if Moltmann is correct in his biblical argument, I kind of hope that folk like him are right about God's redemptive work. But even if he is wrong, I simply can't see why this needs to be a place of division between believers.

5. The EC is opening the door to contemplative spirituality and the New Age.

This is another area where I think both sides need to be cautious. I think the EC needs to be cautious about certain spiritual practices that get co-opted into the faith that have their origins in other religious traditions. But I think the critics need to be really careful about not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. It seems that any use of the term Spiritual Formation is being thrown under the bus by the anti-emerging critics. I also think the critics are practicing a great deal of unfair and unnecessary anti-Catholicism in some of their objections.

There is a tendency among critics to say (again) that the spiritual practices among the EC are unbiblical. I think we need to be careful here, especially Wesleyan folk. Wesleyans have held that "tradition" is part of the quadrilateral of sources for truth. That means that we don't reject

everything that comes to us through Christian tradition just because it is not specifically mentioned in the bible. Most of the critics are genuinely naïve to the number of non-biblical traditions that all Christians practice and with just cause because they are practices handed to us through the development of Christian tradition.

I am willing to share in some of the criticism of some contemplative practices that a few folk in the EC church (and other parts of the Christian Church) practice. But I refuse to participate in what feels like Catholic bashing on the part of some critics.

There is a seven part EC series coming out from Thomas Nelson on spiritual disciplines. The topics of the seven books are: prayer, Sabbath keeping, fasting, the sacred meal (Eucharist or communion), the pilgrimage (discipleship), the liturgical year, and tithing. I fail to see the danger in Christians practicing any of those seven disciplines.

I believe there is a deep need on the part of young people who are being raised without familial or community roots and have been raised in “what’s happening now” Christianity to connect with the historical church. The spiritual disciplines of the Christian tradition are one important way that we reconnect. As the Church goes through the process of reconnecting with its past we are going to have to have conversations about what practices are beneficial and which are not, but I find the criticism of the whole idea of Spiritual Formation by many of the critics I read as overblown. I especially find the labeling of people like Richard Foster and Dallas Willard (two deeply devoted Christians who have done great work in connecting Christians to the history of Christianity) as part of the EC ridiculous. I also think the term “New Age” is thrown around as a label by many critics as just a dirty label to put on somebody, but it rarely if ever has any connection to the actual New Age movement. It reminds me of one of my favorite quotes from Bishop Camara of Brazil. He writes, “When I gave food to the poor, they called me a saint; when I asked why there were so many poor, they called me a communist.” When you don’t like someone’s politics, just call them a communist or a socialist. When you don’t like their spirituality, just call them New Age.

I do think there are legitimate disciplines of concern here. But again, I don’t understand the need for division over this point. I have just as many differences of opinion over spiritual practices with the Charismatic movement as I do with the EC, but I certainly still think of them as brothers and sisters in Christ and I’m certainly not going to label them New Age or heretical.

The EC is not new, it’s just cooler, hipper, and disconnected

My EC friends won’t like me here, but I sort of agree with this critique at some levels. I think there are many folk who have jumped on the EC bandwagon who are simply trying to pick worship styles and themes that look cool or feel spiritual without considering the theological implications of those practices. I do think there are some EC groups who are trying to do very creative and intentional things in worship with theological forethought, but some of the gatherings I know of under the EC banner are simply gatherings of bored and discontent Christian young people.

One of the presuppositions for some in the EC is that everyone is spiritual but not religious. That is an idea that may need to be explored more. I think I understand why that dichotomy is often talked about, but I am a little wary of meeting spiritual people with the gospel if that gospel doesn’t then get embodied in very ethical (and material) ways. As my friend Michael wrote and reminded me, we often work hard at making the Church accessible to spiritual but un-churched people without first asking, “Do we want to be accessible or be the Church?” Michael reminded me that part of being the true Church will mean that some people won’t want to join. Michael’s question also overstates the case a bit, but there is some truth to that overstatement. Like all movements trying to reach those outside the Body of Christ, the EC has to find that balance between what we might call “relevance” and “faithfulness” (even though the two are not always mutually exclusive).

I’m also a little weary of criticizing “the religious.” Which leads me to my other critique; the desire to be spiritual but not religious is often an attempt to move away from institutional forms of

Christianity. If I have one major concern about the EC it is its lack of connection. I don't think the EC intended (and probably still doesn't intend) to become a "church." It was meant to be a conversation among likeminded Christians across churches. But somehow, whether intentionally and unintentionally, the EC has become a "thing." And it is largely a "thing" that is unconnected from some other "thing," which means it currently has little accountability. I am concerned that many EC leaders have either no specific Church connection or are leaders of independent congregations. I understand why that is the case (the same thing happened to Luther) but I confess that I prefer those forms and folks in the EC who are staying in their particular denominations and battling it out. The only accountability some in the EC have is whatever their publisher will let them get away with. I think that is problematic.

That is not all their fault. We live in a strange time historically when Christianity is divided into denominations but Christians are increasingly becoming anti-denominational. That raises serious issues of ecclesiology and accountability for both the EC and its critics. For example, who can hold EC leaders accountable not only for what they are teaching but also for the direction they lead congregations? Likewise, who holds the critics of the EC accountable for the often despicable and dishonest methods that they are using against other believers? In other words, nearly all American evangelicals have inherited a lousy ecclesiology, (that's not necessary any of our faults). But it remains to be seen if the EC will be part of the solution and not just a continuation and furtherance of the problem.

I apologize for the long post. But these are important critiques to address. In the next section I will write about some of the things the EC is saying that I think the Church needs to hear. But for now, if you are interested in reading more about some of the critiques and defenses of the EC let me recommend the following resources.

If you want to read a critique of the EC, the one that I found interesting and the most fair is: *Why We're Not Emergent by Two Guys Who Should Be*, by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck.

If you want to read something short from Brian McLaren defending and describing the EC in his own words, I recommend the interview at the following link: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week846/interview.html>

What do we need to hear from the EC?

There are some who won't like this question because the word "emerging" itself has become such a negative term that the idea that anything of value might come out of the EC is anathema. But I believe that even the most ardent opponents of the EC need to have more of a hermeneutic of charity (rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion) with the EC because like many renewal movements there is most likely much at work here that the Church at large needs to hear. Certainly the fact that many people resonate so deeply with the emerging conversation ought to cause all believers to pause and reflect on the reasons why the EC has sparked such interest (beyond simplistically sighting "deception" as the cause).

I'll suggest five things the Church needs to hear from the EC:

First, the Church is reformed and always reforming.

The Body of Christ is never a fixed entity it is always alive and developing. Certainly the Scriptures form the "rule of faith" for how and in what ways the Church should be formed, but it is nevertheless the reality that in every culture and successive generation the gospel of Jesus Christ finds ways to be re-formed. The great Reformation of Luther's era was not the end of the Church's development theologically, ecclesiastically, liturgically, etc. It certainly marked a unique moment of massive transformation, but the Church that is reformed is continuously reforming.

The EC is one group that is keenly aware of the current re-forming taking place in the Church. I am not convinced that the Church will look as dramatically different in 25 years as some EC thinkers argue. I tend to see the EC as one important renewal movement among a whole series of renewal movements and not as the "next Great Reformation" as some EC thinkers seem to

think. But nevertheless, I do believe that sweeping and significant changes are taking place as we move increasingly away from the state-church model that dominated modernity into whatever ultimate form the Church will embody in postmodernity.

I especially think we need to glean some insights from those EC folk who believe that the church in 25 to 50 years will look more like the Early Church than the churches of the last 500 years. Certainly the culture around the Church philosophically may be more like AD 30 than 1930.

Second, discipleship and living as citizens of the kingdom of God matters.

Certainly the EC are not the first nor the only group to emphasize radical discipleship, but I do believe that many people (especially young people) are attracted to the EC because of the creative ways the EC is trying to embody the holistic life of the disciple in the world. In particular, the EC is trying to find ways to embody the present but not-yet reality of the kingdom of God through practices of love, compassion, and justice.

This is a gross overstatement, but to some degree the American evangelical church has tended to emphasize a Pauline formula for salvation that emphasizes making converts whereas the “Jesus model” (if I can call it that) emphasizes becoming a disciple and living as a citizen of God’s reign. As I said in an earlier post, the EC emphasizes holistic discipleship over cognitive conversion. I don’t think that Jesus and Paul are really in conflict with each other. I think what I’m calling the “convert model” that has been largely taken from Paul’s letter to the Romans is in actuality a very poor reading of Paul. But nevertheless, what the Church needs to hear from the EC and other renewal groups is their emphasis on radical discipleship and kingdom living.

Whatever else the gospel proclaims it is centrally a message of Christlikeness. The Church must be first and foremost Christocentric. If the EC and other renewal groups do nothing else but help the Church recover its Christ-centeredness then they have performed a great service for the kingdom.

Third, the Church needs to learn to do ministry in the midst of many “posts.”

Maybe more so than any other Christian renewal group around, the EC takes seriously what it means to do ministry in the midst of the many “posts” of our culture. I think the Body of Christ needs to hear what the EC is saying about how to be a postmodern, post-Christian, post-denominational, post-liberal, and a post-national Church.

[Postmodern] I have mentioned this several times in previous posts, but the Church needs to pay attention to some of the ways the EC is learning to “see through a glass darkly.” We have to reject any movement that abandons ultimate truth, but I don’t believe we will ever have anything like the modern culture of certainty again. From now on truth and meaning will have to be connected and the evidence of existential truth will come from communities of people who are living the truth in non-coercive ways.

[Post-Christian] Some churches seem convinced that if they just hang in there long enough that a Constantinian or “churched” culture will come back around. It may, but I certainly don’t think it will happen in any of our lifetimes. In an increasingly secular, globalized, and multi-religious world the Church has to wake up to the increasingly post-Christian culture around us. Again, the EC is far from the only group recognizing this reality, but certainly one of the core tenets of the EC is reaching the post-Christian world with the gospel. The Church needs to hear what the EC has to say about embodying the gospel in a post-Christian world and also finding places to work together for the common good with those outside the Christian faith.

[Post-denominational] EC writer Phyllis Tickle argues that American Christianity has been lived out in four primary quadrants or camps. She names the four groups the *liturgicals* (high church traditions), the *social-gospel* (predominantly mainline churches), the *renewalists* (mainly

Charismatics and Pentecostals), and *conservatives* (particularly fundamentalists and some evangelicals). Tickle argues that what is happening today is a merging toward the middle as conservatives discover the importance of social justice, renewalists discover the significance of spiritual disciplines, liturgicals discover spiritual gifts, the social gospel folk find need for theological boundaries, etc... etc... Christians seem less and less concerned about staking out a particular territory or building a particular denomination or institution, but are finding the need for what each quadrant brings to their spiritual walk.

At the same time that many Christians are merging toward the middle, others are running to the corners of each quadrant terrified that all is being lost. So while some merge into others areas, others are working diligently to defend their territory. Some liturgicals are convinced that their people are abandoning the history of the church. Some in the social gospel movement are concerned that their folk are becoming too conservative. Some in the renewalist tradition are concerned that an emphasis on community and good works is taking the place of a direct and personal relationship with God. And some in the conservative camp are quite sure that everyone is abandoning Truth (with a capital "t").

By the way, I believe that this is largely what is taking place within the Church of the Nazarene currently. When one looks at the four quadrants that Tickle articulates it is difficult to know where one should place the Nazarenes within those four boxes. It is hard to argue that we have ever been "liturgical" (although John Wesley was deeply devoted to the sacraments). But in many ways we are "renewalists" because of our history in the Pentecostal movement and our emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Our roots among the poor through Phineas F. Bresee certainly have ties into the "social gospel." And certainly in life-style issues and over the last several decades in politics we have been part of the conservative quadrant. I believe that most of the current criticism of the EC within the Church of the Nazarene comes from people staking out the corner in the conservative quadrant. Nazarenes increasingly drawn to the EC and other movements that emphasize liturgy, social action, and even the work of the Spirit are criticized by conservatives for being "monastic, liberal, and dismissing the inerrancy of the Bible" among other conservative complaints.

I don't know how this on-going battle between the middle and the corners will turn out. Part of the dialogue within the EC conversation is that the two camps will not be able to sustain relationship with one another and the middle will break off and emerge. I think there is certainly a battle going on within parts of the Church of the Nazarene regarding who really has control of the church - the middle or the conservatives. I hope we will stay together, but I believe the jury is still out.

I will say, however, as a child of a particular denomination who has been at times more concerned with sustaining the institutions of the denomination than building the broader kingdom of God, there is much that the EC is saying about the post-denominational Church that I have needed to hear.

[Post-liberal (and Post-fundamentalist)] I believe the Church has to find a *via media* (a middle way) between liberalism and fundamentalism. In my opinion the fundamentalist reading of the Scripture is too naïve in its approach and liberalism dismisses the particularity of the unique community of Christ that is formed by the Scriptures. The EC is at least one example of Christian thinkers trying to hold to the inspiration of the Bible while taking seriously the scholarly work done by biblical, form, textual, and historical critics.

I think it is important to mention to Nazarenes that we have always (from our very inception) been trying to be a *via media* tradition between the extremes of liberalism and fundamentalism. Middle ways are always tricky, but I think this is a critical *via media* that we cannot abandon, so if the EC can help us navigate this path we need to glean what we can from them.

[Post-national] American evangelicalism has at times been guilty of the idolatry of nationalism. People, like me who were raised largely in a Christian tradition merged with Americanism need to hear some of the global, non-violent, ecological, and strongly anti-imperialistic theology from the EC and other movements trying to give voice to those at the margins. Someone recently said to

me that they considered the EC “anti-American.” They considered it such because the EC writer that this person was reading was questioning the cultural arrogance, consumerism, militarism, and misuse of resources that many in the world associate with America. I don’t see those questions as anti-America, I see them as anti-idolatry. If being a good American means that I have to subscribe to national arrogance, consumerism, militarism, and inequity in resource distribution, then we have made the “American way of life” an idol. I deeply love our country but I also am aware of how easily throughout history national identity for Christians from many different nations became idolatrous. Certainly, the EC is not the first or only voice speaking prophetically about nationalism, but nevertheless, this is a message we need to hear.

Fourth, the EC is trying to help the Church move away from institutionalism.

Church historian Jaroslav Pelikan stated that “Tradition is the living faith of dead people. Traditionalism is the dead faith of living people.” The Church has to be constantly re-narrating the tradition of the faith for living people. There is a part of me that loves the EC emphasis on not waiting for people to return to the Church but taking the gospel to where people are. In particular I find the sanctifying of secular spaces interesting and invigorating.

As I have said before, I do think this is a double-edged sword. I am concerned that those leading the EC conversation not lose accountability to those traditions that have embodied the Church in the world, but at the same time I think for several decades the Church has been living out patterns of traditionalism and expecting people to come to us. The gospel implores us to go into the world.

Eric Barger has criticized Brian McLaren for saying that if John Wesley were alive today that he would be an emerging church leader. Brian made that comment in the light of Wesley’s tendency to take his preaching into the fields and to use methods around him (including bar tunes) to extend the gospel. We need renewal movements like the EC reminding us to take the good news to where broken people are.

Fifth, the EC is optimistic about grace.

Those of us from Wesleyan traditions need to hear this. I believe that the primary distinctive of Wesleyan traditions is our belief in a grace that is both prevenient and transformational. This is an optimistic and hope-full view of God’s gracious activity. Prevenient grace means that God desires for every person to enter into a redeeming relationship with him. And transforming (or sanctifying) grace means that God does not just want to pardon people but transform them into image.

The evangelical theology of the twentieth century tended to not be very hopeful. In fact, I think the popular dispensational theologies of the twentieth century have lead to some of the “conspiracy” language that shapes a good deal of the dialogue on Christian radio and television (and largely shapes the debate over the EC). The saints are continually being stirred up to be against something.

I think we need to hear balancing voices of hope that stir the saints to be for something. As I have said earlier, the EC can potentially fault by becoming humanistic and placing its hope in human schemes and agendas of peace. But personally I would prefer that risk than to miss out on the redeeming movement of God because I lived in continual suspicion. We are not optimistic about humanity’s ability to build the future but we need to hear the voice of people who are hope-full about what God may do through his obedient people. To quote Cornell West, “I am not optimistic or pessimistic – that is an attitude. I am a prisoner of hope.”

As I have said before, there are certainly things that we would want to be wary of or discuss as differences with some EC thinkers. But as general themes I think these are at least five areas where we (Nazarenes) ought to at least listen to what those in the EC are saying.

Part 5: Is the Nazarene Church becoming part of the emerging church?

One of the unique things about the Church of the Nazarene is that even in its inception it was not one fully cohesive organization. The church was formed by people with diverse theological ideas and liturgical practices who agreed about the need for believers to live the holy life God called his children to live and were unified around the shared experience of having given themselves entirely to the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. My guess is that we started with a great deal of diversity and we will continue to be very diverse.

For example, the Church of the Nazarene has always and will continue to contain theistic evolutionists and young earth literalists who agree that God created but disagree deeply over the process of that creation. The church has and will continue to contain pre-, post-, and a-millennialists who agree that Christ will return but share little in common regarding the way Christ will return. The church has always had members who are pacifists and others who hold and live out just-war theorists. The denomination will continue to call both sides to tolerate one another. And now, likewise, my guess is that the church will find a way to hold together (in tension) Nazarenes who think of themselves as “emerging” and those who view all things labeled “emerging” with great suspicion.

The one problem, however, with the “big tent” the Nazarenes have always tried to maintain is that eventually one side tries to push the other out. There may be some exceptions to this, but it is my impression that in the examples I mentioned above it is usually the side that would name itself “conservative” (although I hate liberal and conservative as descriptors because they are usually quite inaccurate) that does most of the pushing. Usually young earth creationists want to push out the theistic evolutionists. The pre-millennialists want to get rid of the post and a-millennialists. The just-war theorists shove out the messianic pacifists. And currently the anti-emergents want to label the EC heresy and rid the church of its “emergent” Christians.

I think its probably clear to those who have patiently read every section of these posts on the EC that although I believe there is much to be discussed and argued about regarding the EC, I believe it would be a tragedy for the denomination if the church forced out or even lost, due to frustration and hurt, the emergent believers among us. My hope is that the kind of leadership that Bresee gave during the early years of the denomination that allowed diversity instead of requiring sameness will be renewed in our current leaders. I am not optimistic that this will happen. I am not even optimistic that folk like me trying to promote open dialogue, while maintaining peace on both sides, will survive politically in the church. But to borrow a line from Zechariah, ultimately I am not optimistic or pessimistic. I am a “prisoner of hope.”

If you are interested in reading more about the EC from some Nazarene leaders who do consider themselves both EC and Nazarene, here is a link to a very recent and wonderful paper written by a handful of gifted young leaders (and good friends) who make a beautiful and articulate plea for the church to keep a place for them at the table:

<http://northst.org/Various/Is%20There%20Room%20At%20The%20Table.pdf>

Thanks for the many positive comments about this set of FAQ blogs on the EC. I hope they have been helpful for those of you who have labored through them. Pray that God would continue to give the church discernment, wisdom, and courage to pursue his will in all things.