

Evangelism in a Post-Christian Age: Bridging the Evangelical/Emerging Church Tension.

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Ecclesiology within a postmodern context has the potential to lend itself to a variety of expressions. Denominationalism aside, the creativity which postmodern thought allows for could be transferred into both evangelical and emerging church theo-praxis.ⁱ However, this transitional phase of Western culture highlights the tension that both the evangelical and emerging church approaches to ecclesiology, particularly regarding evangelism, seem to be travelling in very different directions. So is it possible to bridge this tension into a hybrid evangelical/emerging church approach?

Running alongside a potential ecclesiological advance in evangelistic theo-praxis is the tension of the evangelical approach to ecclesiology. Often criticised for remaining within a modernistic mindset, evangelicalism has been well documented for its rigorous, biblically-based and pro-active approach to evangelism. With a heavy reliance on the Scriptural mandates of the Great Commission and the Acts 1:8 global evangelistic mission, evangelical leaders have generally rallied behind the self-appointed title of the Church's heralds of Christian witness in the world.ⁱⁱ

In contrast, the phenomenon of the emerging church movement has taken mission (based on the *missio Dei*ⁱⁱⁱ) into the areas and networks of the un-churched and post-churched.^{iv} The emerging church evangelistic approach seems to highlight relevance over information and context over strategy, and is to be found under various integrative umbrellas, such as art, movies, new media and a myriad of other cultural interfaces – anywhere where dialogue, conversation and engagement are to be found.

The resulting tension concerning evangelicalism has been that potential misunderstandings have taken place regarding each camp's approaches to evangelism. For instance, evangelicalism's viewpoint of emerging church approaches may suggest a relaxed, over-reliance on contextual awareness, a passion to converse rather than to draw conclusions and a fuzzy hermeneutic on what conversion truly means.^v Likewise, emerging church pioneers have tried to distance themselves from an evangelical, preachy, word/Scripture-based focus

which they may feel has been lost and is being lost in a culturally postmodern generation.^{vi} The perceptions on both sides can always find case studies to prove the weaknesses in each camp, but are there tangible possibilities for evangelism to be both evangelical and emerging, modern and postmodern, prophetic yet relevant?

It would be walking in King Canute's footsteps (or sitting in his seat) to suggest that Western culture is not firmly entrenched in postmodern philosophy.^{vii} Truth is a non-issue to most, story is preferred over information, video is accepted more readily than manuscript and religion is relegated to opinion-driven relativity.^{viii}

Postmodernism has swept the Western mindset into a sense of personal deity, apart from any external Deity. It is understandable that in this testing context, evangelicalism seeks to affirm various modern approaches to evangelism, believing the message of the gospel will ultimately prevail over any new philosophical movement. It is also understandable that emerging church approaches to evangelism would seek to embrace the current culture and find viable in-roads to engage with a religiously disengaged Western society.

Sympathisers with the emerging church evangelistic theo-praxis would argue that a typical weakness of the evangelical approach to evangelism is in its stance on being overtly goal-led. In other words, the main aim is to (often as quickly as possible) 'get the message across' at all costs.^{ix} The potential difficulty with this is multi-layered.

Firstly, it can elevate the *process* over the *person*. When the evangelical evangelistic agenda is running high, then a conversation may not necessarily just be a conversation, it may simply be a sounding board for a keen evangelical to find ways within every engagement to somehow 'weave in' the gospel message. The question here must be asked, is this engagement one of integrity or one of agenda-driven conversational manipulation? Is that really how Jesus and the apostles shared the gospel?

Secondly, the burden of having to 'share the gospel' within every conversation can be both terrifying and pride-inducing. If the evangelical mandate is to tell people the gospel so they won't go to Hell^x, then what compassionate Christian would want to refuse? However, the problem with this approach is that it leaves the compassionate evangelical either feeling guilty (out of inherent fear that a soul has been eternally doomed due to conversational paralysis or ineptness) or feeling a measure of

spiritual relief, satisfaction or even pride that the gospel message *has* been craftily woven into a conversation, thereby leaving the evangelist 'off the hook' concerning the recipient's eternal destiny.

Thirdly, this approach can give the watching world an impression of evangelicalism which is solely agenda-driven, process-driven and guilt-driven, which surely takes the glory of Jesus Christ out of the equation.

In contrast to the typical evangelical approach, emerging church approaches carry the potential weakness of a prioritised method over message missiology. The grand goal of emerging church evangelism is to be found in both engagement and contextualisation.^{xi} Sensing that modernistic/evangelical evangelistic methods are possibly outdated and potentially offensive, the emerging church approach has sought, with commendable intention, to re-enter its non-Christian context by a softer, but ultimately (it is hoped) a more integrative method of evangelistic enterprise. The theory is simple – to gain the trust of the un-churched in order to engage with them concerning the gospel. As a theory, this method is not only strategic and compassionate, but contextual and missional. However, as with the typical evangelical approach, the emerging church approach can also carry inherent difficulties.

Firstly, there is (however gospel-centred the theory), the possibility of the *process* of contextual engagement becoming the overriding goal rather than the *practice* of gospel engagement. Huge amounts of time, energy, creativity and money can often be poured into the various expressions of emerging church cultural engagement.^{xii}

Secondly, there might be the argument of a slight measure of deception in an overly-lengthy period of engagement, where friendships and networks *are* created, which may be based on anything other than the clear distinction of the emerging church group, collective – or church – when the agenda is suddenly 'revealed', in that the goal of this network, these cultivated friendships or this formed group has been to garner (possibly manipulate?) the right moment for sharing the claims of Jesus Christ. In this regard, the emerging church and typical evangelicalism have the propensity to be equally manipulative, if given the opportunity.

Thirdly, a potentially more dangerous weakness (in light of the attempt to be truly missional), is that the message itself could actually ironically become the least important point on the missional agenda. With community integration being high on the emerging church 'to do' list, integration becoming an experiential success could (if the group is not singularly motivated) become just a quasi-Christian 'club' which has been strangely welcomed into the local community.

Considering these potential pitfalls on both sides of the evangelistic drive, perhaps a 'third way' may be of significance as we move towards actually reaching the much-feared context of a post-Christian generation.

Drawing on the sense of immediacy and overarching *message-based* model of evangelism adhered to by the typical evangelical approach, yet grounded in the contextual and integrative *method-based* model adhered to by the typical emerging church approach, a potentially hybrid, two-pronged advance could charter the waters of the post-Christian generation with a measure of evangelistic confidence. This approach, which could come under the banner of 'emerging-evangelical evangelism' has the strength and impetus of both approaches (which will, of course mean compromises on both sides) and carries the very real possibility of both engagement *and* evangelism, of penetration *and* proclamation, of infiltration *and* information.

If the evangelical and emerging church approaches to evangelism remain entrenched within their respective message *or* method camps of theo-praxis, then the post-Christian generation will unwittingly reap the stubbornness of our inability to glean wisdom from each other's strengths. However, if we could reasonably see that a message *and* a method approach is what is ultimately needed (for *their* sakes) then we can march into this section of the grand theodrama^{xiii} and rightfully claim that we have surveyed our cultural landscape, sought out wise paths to engage with it and sowed the seed of the gospel as we each played our part.

ⁱ For more on Emerging Church theo-praxis, visit www.emergingchurch.info or www.freshexpressions.org.uk.

ⁱⁱ J. W. Montgomery. *Crisis in Lutheran Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 1967, p. 120.

ⁱⁱⁱ See A. Perriman. "Missio Dei in historical perspectives Part 1" in www.postost.net (01-10-2011).
<http://www.postost.net/2011/01/missio-dei-historical-perspectives-part-1> (03-28-2012).

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- ^{iv} S. Murray. *Church After Christendom*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004, p. 160.
- ^v B. DeWaay. "Undefining God's Mission" in *Critical Issue Commentary*, Issue 116 (Jan./Feb. 2010). <http://www.cicministry.org/commentary/issue116.htm> (05-07-2012).
- ^{vi} J. Webb Kline. "From the heart of a missional evangelist" in www.blindbeggar.org (01-04-2007). <http://blindbeggar.org/?p=395> (05-09-2012).
- ^{vii} D. S. Dockery. "The Challenge of Postmodernism" in Dockery, D. S. (Ed.) *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001, p. 9.
- ^{viii} See J. D. Arthurs. "The Postmodern Mind and Preaching" in Gibson, S. M. (Ed.) *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004, pp. 177-198.
- ^{ix} W. Metzger. *Tell the Truth*. Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002, p. 21.
- ^x R. Comfort. *Hell's Best Kept Secret*. New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2004, pp. 102-103.
- ^{xi} G. Cray. "Common Worship-Common Mission" in www.freshexpressions.org.uk (02-27-2012). <http://www.freshexpressions.org.uk/news/commonworship> (04-02-2012).
- ^{xii} For examples, see the 'Stories' section of www.freshexpressions.org.uk.
- ^{xiii} See N. M. Healy. *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 52-76.