



A Faith in Dialogue
My Flirtation with The Emergent Church

Josiah Meyer

2008-2009

FOREWORD

For over a decade, I have dreamed of publishing my first book. This is not what I had in mind! However, the decision to publish this book is somewhat forced upon me. I originally wrote these posts during the rocky and decisive period in my spiritual journey, when my first real attempt at ministry ended in a resignation. Once through this season, I no longer felt comfortable having these posts up online, and so they laid hidden on my hard-drive for the past four years.

But I could not escape from them.

However raw and unpolished some of my musings were, there is an honesty here and a relevance that I cannot escape. I am no longer the moody, daring and wounded young man that wrote these words. However, I am still on the quest to find answers to the questions asked here. I find I am barely able to preach, blog or speak about theology without thinking back to one or more post from this season.

It is my hope that you, the reader, will read this book with a generous cup of coffee, and a grain or two of salt. I pray that God will give you discernment of which to use when!

If this beginning of a journey interests you, you will no doubt enjoy my subsequent books (which I hope to compile soon) containing relevant posts from my subsequent blogs. Until these are out, you are welcome to read all of my material since this time on my current blog www.josiahmeyer.com or www.nolongerbechildren.wordpress.com

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated Pastor Keith Graber, for being a dear friend and pastor.

Thank you also to Bruxy Cavey for preaching the Gospel in a way that I could understand and receive even in the midst of my frustration and pain.

And most of all, thanks to St. Augustine for leading me out of the fog.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Some have complained that C.S. Lewis' book *Screwtape Letters* is great to read in pieces, but a hard book to finish. That is likely because it was not written as a book, but as a series of articles in a Christian journal. Because this content was originally written as a blog, I fear this book may also be interesting in pieces, but a hard book to complete.

For this reason, **I have blazed a trail for you**, the reader, in the table of contents. You will notice that I have bolded some of the articles. These are posts that were either written very well, or were very significant in my intellectual journey.

One way to read this book would be to first read through these bolded articles – to catch the sweep of my journey – and then return to read isolated articles of interest.

PLEASE NOTE that although I have some very strong things to say against the church, I never meant to complain against specific people, or specific churches. I am speaking against “the church” and “modern evangelical culture,” and when I speak of specific individuals, I am using them only as illustrations of trends which I see within the North American Church.

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CHAPTER ONE: HURT

FAILURE

The sky was grey, turning black, fading off across dark swirling waters. The sand was wet under me, and the mosquitoes were out. It was a lousy place be sitting, with nothing to look at. But I needed to be alone. Desperately. And I wanted a smoke. Desperately.

FAILURE

The craving was strange. I have never smoked. Never really saw the point. Never had the opportunity, never cared to. But tonight, I desperately, desperately wanted a smoke. I lifted my fingers to my lips and inhaled slowly. Isn't this what people do to calm their nerves? When they feel all alone, crushed, perplexed,

FAILURE

confused and down? Of course I had no reason to have a pity-party. We knew this was coming. Well, not exactly like this. But I had to quit. The fit wasn't right. It was straining our marriage, it was straining my wife. It was straining the church, it was straining me. I had been unwise, taken on too many things. Allowed distance to grow, couldn't ask for help. We should have written a contract, we should have

FAILURE

been more clear at the outset. We had big shoes to fill, and I have tiny feet. So young, already in ministry. "Not a youth, lest they fall into the devil's snare." Is that what I did? Perhaps I am too young. Perhaps I will never be old enough. Or perhaps soon, but just not yet. Not here, not now. It didn't work.

FAILURE

FAILURE,

FAILURE

I took another draw of my imaginary cigarette. It was getting ridiculous and I knew it. But nobody was around. It was cathartic, for some reason. I inhaled again and pretended to exhale the smoke slowly, closing my eyes.

They were wrong. It would have worked, if only they had been willing! No, I was wrong. It's all my fault. Fault? Whose Fault? It failed. Now I must move on. That's all that matters. Nobody is to blame. It just is.

!! F A I L U R E !!

It was a good talk. Was it a good talk? A fitting way to end a ministry? Things were said which should have been said long ago. Ways I could improve, ways they could improve. Laying it all on the table. How can we grow if we don't hear honest feedback? It was good to get it off my chest, and hear what they thought. I knew there were thoughts brewing. It was good to hear them specifically. They were said in love. I said it in love. We got it all out and ended amicably. They are such good people! This is a good ministry. Just a bad fit. Should have known sooner. Shouldn't have come.

FAILURE

But no, wait – this was a good experience! I learned a lot. I grew a lot. I'm a different person for it. I hope they are a better church for it. I hope. It all happens for a purpose I guess. I just need to pull myself together and get up and go home. That's it. Just suck it up and go home. Get up, Failure – time to go home! Gotta keep on keeping on and all that crap...

(failure)

The bugs really were becoming unbearable. And the whole situation was just ludicrous and childish anyways. I got up and dusted off my backside, trying to regain some composure. I eased myself into the driver's seat and gave one more look out into the dark mist. With a slam, the door of my car door shut and a chapter, a ministry, an experience, a lifetime came to an abrupt end. My tail-lights pulled out of the parking lot and disappeared into the night.

The fog and water rolled on. Unmoved. Uncaring. The mosquitos buzzed, a loon called. The dark of the night smirked. A casual wave erased my footprints, and then there was no evidence that I had even touched her shores, or had even existed.

And that was the end of it all.

THE SLED

There was an air of grim, determined comradery about the men as they filed into the room, shaking dust and mud from their hard-worn clothing. Shoulder slapping, compliments and wry humour flickered here and there amidst the group, like lightning flitting about in a distant thunder head.

These people go WAAAY back, I thought. The conclusion was drawn not only from the interactions of the men, but also their age. There couldn't have been one of them below fifty.

But now I had spoken too soon!

The group was mostly seated when the Youth strode silently into the room, and took his seat closest to the door. He was received by several polite nods, which he almost forgot to acknowledge: he seemed very distracted by some small scratches and bruises about his neck and shoulders.

“This meeting will now come to order.” Said the Leader, solemnly picking up a large yoke from the floor, and placing it on his broad shoulders.

For a while, I listened respectfully to the proceedings. I gathered that this was a group of loggers who were collecting wood for the construction of some colossal government building. There was much talk about a large sled, the condition of the forests and roadways, the lack of workers, and the dire importance of their task. I quickly gathered that their enterprise had seen better days.

The meeting was interesting enough while my curiosity was piqued, but my attention quickly began to wander, and my gaze landed on the Youth. He was the only one who did not seem fully engaged in the words of the speaker. Conspicuously missing were the solemn, intent eyes, the nods, and the “amen's which graciously flowed from all other mouths.

The Youth seemed to be the quintessential picture of a man with “something on his chest.” He was leaning forward in his chair, appearing to spring from his seat at every silence, then settling back down into begrudging silence when another took the floor. His right hand was resting on his shoulder, where he gently nursed his lacerations, and glanced at them often.

Again, my eyes wandered and, seeing nothing new, began to glaze over as the Leader droned on about the minutia of the forestry grind.

“...I guess all I'm wondering about is...well, why do we need the sled in the first place?”

I woke from my stupor suddenly, distinctly aware that the atmosphere had shifted. More like disintegrated. A “bombshell” had clearly been dropped, and my mind was reeling, desperately trying to penetrate the fog of the previous fifteen minutes, which lead up to the stunned silence stretching on before me.

The Leader cleared his throat.

“Go on...”

The Youth was clearly uncomfortable. A flush was creeping up his neck, and the slight movements in his upper arms belied the fact that his fingers were twiddling furiously under the table. I saw Jesus walk to him, and place His hand on a restless shoulder. He calmed momentarily, then his gaze went again to the Leader, and he began to fidget again.

“Well, I guess...well...I don’t know...I mean...well, doesn’t it just seem like we aren’t making very much progress here?”

Blank stares greeted him.

“Well, I mean...just think of how the forest used to be! The wood was much bigger, and the roads were cleared and icy...and there was so much more help...”

He struggled to get the last of it out, in the midst of a chorus of grunts, “amen’s” and affirming noises. Immediately, the thick silence was replaced by several voices all speaking at once, excitedly reminiscing about what I took to be “the good old days.” “*Oh, is THAT all that he is worried about!*” everyone seemed to be expressing at once.

The Youth listened respectfully, but I could see that he was not satisfied with the response he had received. When all eyes were on him once more, then took a deep breath and continued.

“All I’m trying to say is that maybe there is a better way. Maybe there is a different way. Maybe the Sled was the perfect vehicle for yesterday, but...I don’t know...maybe there is something better for today?”

Instantly, the silence was back. This time, it was almost palpable. The Leader leaned forward and placed his glasses on the table gently. “What exactly are you suggesting, son?”

“Well, I mean, maybe we could use something like this...”

The transformation over the Youth was instantaneous as he bent down to pick up a pliable, willowy yoke from the floor. The fatigue and timidity seemed to fall from him: he even seemed to loose a couple pounds! In one excited, fluid motion he straightened and placed the yoke on his shoulders, quickly explaining the small cart which he could pull, to seek out and gather the smaller, but highly valuable trees from the crests of the ridges, where the Sled could *never* hope to go.

For several minutes, the Youth had the floor. He seemed to be in his own world as he rattled on and on. I felt like I was sitting in the presence of Michelangelo, describing a masterpiece to a stunned audience.

So enthralled was the Youth in his own dialogue, however, that he could not perceive that the expressions around him were beginning to shift from awe-struck confusion to passivity, to resistance. This was not a crowd that was used to new ideas.

By some fluke of my existence in this place, I was suddenly able to hear their thoughts.

We are so short-handed! How will we ever fill his place on the Sled?

He's just a boy - what makes him think he could pull all of that off, at his age!?

It's an impractical idea. Where would that yoke hook onto the Sled?

Arrogance, pure arrogance!! What makes him think he is so much better than us!?

It's a shame - he seemed like such a good, dedicated boy...

Why, the rebellious little rascal! After all we have given him, he is just going to take it and run...

Suddenly, the Youth seemed to notice the disconnect. His eyes left the far corner of the room, where they had been staring dreamily as though the very walls opened up into the orchards of God. I could see him mentally catching his bearings as he glanced around, blinked uncertainly several times, then mumbled a quick conclusion and sat down.

The Leader saw that it was his turn. He leaned forward and, with an even, moderate tone, began to set the Youth very thoroughly Straight. The Sled had been built with great skill and care, built from the blue-prints which had been handed down for generations. Some of those sitting at the table had sacrificed significant amounts of resources and labour in the construction of the Sled. Many had deceased relatives who had sacrificed even more.

The Youth began to interrupt, saying something about how he agreed that the Sled had value...but the Leader was not finished.

It was a big sled, a functional sled, a good sled. It had worked so well in the past! Times were hard, but it was nothing that a little work and a lot of faith couldn't get them through! The important thing was just to plough on, to carrying one's yoke.

As he said this, the Leader leaned back and shifted, so that his own yoke lifted and his loose-fitting shirt was pulled aside. For a moment, his bare, weathered, and *deeply* scarred shoulder was visible for all to see. The youth quickly hid his own minor cuts and looked away, blushing and silenced at the signs of such great sacrifice.

Sacrifice? But now I needed to look again! Here was something odd, indeed!

It was common knowledge in Heaven that the most beautiful adornments to be had were scars of sacrifice. Even the angels longed for them - the very jewellery of our Lord I turned to look at Jesus now. Every scar - inflicted by nail, whip or splinter - was healed

over with a marvellous sort of glowing, liquid gold. There are no words to describe the beauty! In the darkest of times, it was always the light of His scars by which I found Him again. Even when I could not see Him, I could always *feel* the warmth of His scars, drawing me like a magnet, warming me like the sun.

This same adornment, I soon came to realize, was available for the Saints as well! Amazingly, there was no difference in quality - only the quantity was different, and even in this there was room for confusion. I remembered embarrassing myself once, mistaking Paul for Jesus - having seen him from afar. When I came closer I realized my mistake - but oh! Such adornments he wore! I realized, then, what he meant when he said that he would rather boast in his weakness! Truly, what greater object of boasting, than the adornments of grace, lavished onto the scars of sacrifice?

I looked again at the Leader. His scars looked like old cuts in thick leather. Dry, cracked, black, dead...wasted! But how could this be?

They were not scars of love. The answer came from Jesus. As I glanced at my Lord, I could read the true tragedy of the statement in his eyes.

Back in the meeting, things were coming to a close. The Leader was winding down his diatribe. People were beginning to reshuffle their papers and un-Velcro their packs.

“It’ll be a long day tomorrow, everyone, so make sure you all get lots of sleep!”

Mutters, shuffling feet and a creaking floorboards signalled the end of another long meeting, and the beginning of a night’s rest that was never quite long enough.

For a moment, the flow of traffic halted by the youth, as one odd little man leaned down and whispered confidentially, “*I* appreciated your contributions tonight - I found them very inspirational!!” Quickly, the little man straightened and, glancing furtively about, hurried to catch up with the others.

The Youth continued to sit and stare, apparently unaware of the adjournment, or of anything in the room. He was staring off into that distant corner again, with the face of a parted lover.

After several minutes, the Leader finally finished packing up his papers and began limping his way towards the exit. He paused at the door and, with a deep sigh that could have had a touch of compassion in it, turned to the Youth.

“Look, son - don’t take it so hard. You do good work! I’m very impressed with your contribution! Just keep it up - work hard for another...say...twenty, thirty years. Who knows? Maybe someday you’ll be wearing *this!*”

The Leader lifted the colossal yoke from his shoulders and placed it experimentally on the Youth’s spindly frame. As he moved, I could see the label on the back of the yoke, ‘Pastor.’ The Youth groaned under the weight. The Leader winked at him, and grinned

proudly. “Pretty big, huh?” The big man winked again, picked up the yoke and rested it comfortably on his shoulders. Whistling a merry tune, he walked jauntily from the room.

Either from the exhaustion of the event, or from the exertions of some mental faculty, the Youth sat in a trance-like state for nearly an hour. I was beginning to think that there was some mistake - but Jesus was still there. Watching, waiting.

Suddenly, his fist slammed down on the table. “To Hell with it all!” he said viciously. He got up so quickly that his chair bounced once, then lay still.

The Youth turned purposefully, and walked out of the room.

I AM NOT ONE OF 'THEM'

July 16, 2008

I don't feel nostalgic about the past.
I wasn't there, and it is gone.

I don't feel terrified about the future.
I AM the future, and I feel hope, and determination.

I don't feel unsettled by the secularization of the state.
The church doesn't belong in politics, and I'm glad they're gone.

I don't feel threatened by Darwin, or by science.
'Six-day vs. evolution' is irrelevant to my faith,
And I have more important things to spend my time on.

I don't obsess about end-times conspiracy theories.
Fear mongering is not the way of Jesus,
And He teaches us to be present in the moment.

I don't tie all of my spirituality back to a church building.
My faith revolves around relationships,
And 'church' can happen anywhere.

I do not lay awake worrying about society.
What business do I have judging those outside the church?
It is the state of the church that bothers me.

It bothers me
that we are more concerned with full pews
than with healthy relationships,
More concerned with nice buildings
than with feeding the hungry,
More concerned with a visible cigarette
than with simmering bitterness,
More concerned with walls of protection
than with bridges of connection.

It bothers me
that we are not known for our love,
but for our disunity,
our hypocrisy,
our anger,
our picketing,

It bothers me that we cannot say 'I am sorry,' 'I have sinned,' or 'How can I help you?'

It bothers me that we have exchanged the cross for a sword, or equated the two,

That the 'Gospel of Peace' has become the 'Gospel of Crusades'

Crusades against the gays

Crusades against abortion

Crusades for prayer in schools,

Crusades for ONLY OUR religious material in government buildings,

Crusades for tracts, for Bibles, for 'converts'

What is a crusade but an attempt to force religion on others?

I believe in everything that they do, but I will never force it on you.

I am different than them, I am not one of them.

I don't define my faith negatively, against 'the enemy' of society

I define my faith positively, as obedience to Jesus.

I don't judge spirituality by:

Choice of hair-style,

Choice of beverage,

Choice of chemical stimulants,

Choice of clothing,

Choice of music,

Choice of expletives,

Choice of piercings,

Choice of tattoos,

Choice of transportation.

Jesus teaches me to look at internal, not external markings of faith.

I don't want you to look like me,

I don't want you to act like me,

I don't want you to like my cheesy music,

I don't want you to join our little club.

I want you to follow Jesus.

He has the words of life,

And He has made all the difference for me!

Please - would you give me the chance to tell you about him?

‘HOUSE OF PRAYER’ (A MYTHICAL RADIO AD)

July 22, 2008

So, tell me, pastor, what is that funny-looking sign outside your church’

Yes, well, we are trying out something new at “Community Church. We are calling it the ‘House of Prayer.’

Well, that sounds boring. But since you’re paying for this commercial, why don’t you tell me about it’

Here at “Community Church, we believe that ‘church’ is more than just what happens on Sundays. It is more than singing and preaching and giving money. It is about connecting with God. ‘House of Prayer’ is just one way that this can happen.

Okay, so exactly IS ‘House of Prayer’? If I went there, what would I see?

It depends on the day. It really varies from time to time. Usually, however, you would hear spiritual music playing gently in the background. You might see one or two people praying in various places. Some people come to read or meditate. There will be a table set up with some Bibles and reading material which you can help yourself to, and take home if you would like. Usually, there is at least one person there who can answer questions, or to help out in any way if someone comes in with a need.

So the point is that I am supposed to just come in and pray’ Just between the two of us, I am not exactly a spiritual guy.

Well, the good news is that you don’t have to impress anyone. The point is that it is a silent time of meditation, reading and prayer, or a private time of confession and advice. If you would like to, you can just come in, stay for a while, then leave.

And nobody will bother me?

Nope. Not unless you want them to. As I said, we try to keep at least one person there who is qualified to help people spiritually. If you would like to talk with that person, you are more than welcome to do so. Otherwise, the others will respect your space, and leave you alone.

This is beginning to sound very hard to believe. Most of the time, I cannot even sit down to dinner without someone forcing their religion on me.

Yes, we are sorry about that. There are many things about our approach to sharing our faith which we are trying to re-think.

So you’re not going to shove your ideas down my throat anymore’

We believe that there is a fundamental desire in each one of our hearts simply to connect with the Divine. Each religion tries to offer you a way to do that, and Christianity is no different. 'House of Prayer' gives you the opportunity to 'test-drive the car,' so to speak, and see whether you are interested in the pathway to God which we believe in, without any sort of pressure.

Okay, well, this all sounds very fine and good, but I've got a problem for you. I don't know all ten of those commandment thingies, but I am pretty sure that I break at least three ' heck, maybe even four or five of them ' on a regular basis. Wouldn't people be mad at me if I defiled their holy pews by putting my 'unholy' buttocks on them'

Jesus invites everyone to come to Him, just as they are - no matter where they are on their journey. You don't have to be perfect to come to Him, and no - you don't have to look and act and think like us, or give us money before we will share our resources with you. We simply want to be a part of introducing you to Jesus Christ. If Jesus begins to lead you to live differently, then we are here to help you become the best version of yourself. Until you invite us into that story, however, what you do on your own time is entirely your own business.

Okay, well now I've got another problem for you - I'm not part of your denomination! I was actually baptized Catholic!

Well, last time I heard, God is non-denominational: 'House of Prayer' is for all of God's children, everywhere.

If you would like to continue attending another church, or attending no church at all, you are still welcome to take advantage of 'House of Prayer' either on a sporadic, one-time or regular basis.

We want to make it very, very clear that this is not a place for recruitment, for preaching, or for fund-raising. 'House of Prayer' is simply a gift - nothing more, nothing less. It is a gift for you, the average member of our community, to know that our doors are open to you, and that you are welcome to come, and to join us in our quest to connect with and enjoy the Divine.

Whether you accept our gift or not, we want you to know that we love you, that we are praying for you, and that we are here for you.

From all of the members of "Community Church...."

"God bless you!!"

I CANNOT WAIT

July 26, 2008

I cannot stop,
I cannot wait.
The need's too strong,
The call's too great.

I can't give up,
I won't give in.
I need a rage
For the fire within.

I know you'll pray, and talk, and shout.
You want it dead, you want it out.

But I cannot stop, and I will not slow.
I cannot, will not, go with the flow.

Please hear my heart,
And rend yours too.
No time to talk,
It's time to **DO!**

THE CASKET

Summer, 2008

Gentle voices,
Kindest hands
Have raised a casket
Made by man

Between these walls
And roof and lid
Ten thousand young
They've safely hid

Until we rise
Anemic few
To seek the light
To blossom through!

We are "Emergent,"
Scared to be
We are not perfect,
But we are free

Men who've been there
Men who fight
Men with scars,
Who know what's 'right'

Hid from troubles
Hid from strife
Hid from poison
Safe from life

Climb through rubble,
Climb through loss
Climb for faith
And Climb for cause

CHAPTER TWO: BECOMING EMERGENT

A FAITH IN DIALOGUE

September 7, 2008

'A faith in dialogue'does this name strike you as odd, for a the blog-site of a good, solid, college & seminary-educated, somewhat "professional" Christian like myself? Maybe something a little less "shaky" would sound a bit more kosher? Maybe I should have called this site something a little more triumphant, like "A Faith Secure", "Standing on the Promises!" or "Yesterday, Today, and Forever!"

On Dialogue

Recently, I have really become enamored by the word "dialogue." After reading this insanely confusing chapter in a textbook, (dealing with the topic of "prolegomenon's" and "scaffolds of conceptual reality" and such things as these) which sent me into mental convulsions for about seventy-two hours, I eventually spat out a very complex paper which even I do not fully understand, to this day. (No, I did not get a good mark on it...that only works in English class!) The upshot of that, however, was somewhat of a revolutionary concept for my future thinking: I realized that in the end *all we have is relationships*.¹ Think of it: unless you somehow (either through your senses or that of others) come in contact with an object, a person, or a thought, you cannot perceive it. And your world is just that much smaller. Or, to put it another way, you are missing out on just that much more of the truth.

On Fragile Faith

I have met people who have what I would call "deck-of-cards-faith." Secretly, they fear that their god is too small, too weak, or too old-fashioned to face up to the questions of society. And so they build walls around themselves, their god, and the life they hold dear. Although acceptable for young children, there are two possible tragedies when this faith stretches on into adulthood. First, there is the tragedy of "spiritual shipwreck" (1 Tim. 1:19) when some whiff of air inevitably blows in and collapses their frail faith. Sadly, when their *protections* around God collapse, these people feel as though their God has collapsed along with it, and their faith is destroyed. More tragically of all, many people go through life never having their faith collapsed, but *perpetually fearing it*. This invisible fear has a petrifying effect on their faith, so that they are never really able to experience the depths of an authentic relationship to Jesus, that we are called to. After all, how can you *really* have a relationship with someone that you have no faith in? Like a house-owner who never dares venture into the basement because they are terrified that they have a crumbly foundation, (and thus every creaking floor-board sets them on edge,

¹ This paragraph summarizes the philosophical undergirding of my postmodernity, and emergent thinking. I renounced this thesis in [What Comes First? Doctrine or Life?](#)

they are always thinking of selling, and never truly ‘at home’), the deck-of-cards faith is a self-fulfilling prophecy: in fearing that one’s faith is unsound, it becomes unsound, and shallow.

Asking the Questions

As much as I can help it, I would like to avoid this sort of cowardice. Don’t get me wrong: I understand that deception is a genuine reality, and I certainly am careful of how much of certain voices I allow into my consciousness at a time. The point is, however, that *I do allow them in*. **Atheists, pagans, cults, various Christian, scientific, political, and social voices all enter into my mind, and are allowed to have some form of a voice in my thinking.** I don’t hide from the tough questions. I allow them to be asked. Some I can answer off-hand, some take months or years of mulling over. Some are only answered partially, and some are not answered at all: but here is the point: *I face all of them.*² There is no religion or ideology in the world which does not have a few ‘problem-areas.’ In the end, however, it is our responsibility to seek these out, to understand them, and to honestly weigh the evidence, to see whether the burden of evidence still rests on ‘our’ side, or whether it’s time to find a new way of thinking. As a Christian, I believe that every piece of falsity left behind, and every piece of truth sighted ahead is a step towards the ultimate source and ground of truth ‘Jesus Christ Himself.

Conclusion

And so here I am - involved in dialogue. Dialogue between left and right, between old and new, between Scriptures and pop-media, between Jesus and religion, and between theologians and each other. Certainly, I do not have the whole truth, although there are a few things that I am absolutely convinced of. Certainly, I do not think my collage of truth is the ultimate definition of truth, to which all others must conform. Most of the time I do not even know whether I am moving forwards or backwards, or simply laterally in my quest for truth. One thing I do know however: it is in dialogue that truth will be found.

This is what I am hoping to do with this site, and I hope it will be a help to others who feel a similar calling.

God bless you as you enjoy this site!!

² Experience taught me, however, that one must learn some caution. See [A Wise Shepherd of a Wandering Mind](#).

SEX, DRUGS & ROCK n ROLL (Do they still belong in the same sentence?)

September 10, 2008

If you asked most Christians - and especially, it would seem, most older Evangelical pastors - the answer is a thunderous, Bible-pounding 'YES!' Aside from killing plants (sorry - inside joke!), the main problem with this rock music is a certain 'image' which it advocates. For this reason, a Christian is to 'abstain' from any music associated with this image, or anything that looks, sounds, feels or smells like it *might* have something to do with this image. We could also say that certain other things - drinking, smoking, tattooing, motorbikes, dancing, piercings, etc. - have also been banned, for the same reasons. No, they are not specifically forbidden in Scriptures...but they are a part of *'that'* image. And good Christians just don't *do* things like that.

To help us understand why the North American church is *so* focused on such minor, external things I would like to give you a short history lesson.

Deism and Cultural Christianity

In the early fifties and before, 'church' was a normal part of Western culture. God was used by politicians to explain policies. It was used by school teachers to explain morality, and it was used by parents to explain authority. In sum, belief in God was a *normal part of everyday life*. We need to stop now, to draw a distinction here between 'deism' and 'Christianity.' Pay attention here, because this is a line that has often been smudged as Christians put their own spin on history.

In brief, deism is the belief that there is a god behind the universe. Usually, this god is understood in basically Christian terms, but *a relationship to Jesus is often edited out*. The god of deism is the distant watch-maker deity, who perfectly created the cosmos and then left, or died. Again, it is really important to realize that *one can believe that there is 'a god' without being a Christian!* This is a hard one for us to wrap our minds around because we tend to think in terms of 'Christianity vs. Atheism.' In the centuries before the 1960's, however, the options were more like 'Deism vs. Authentic Christianity.'

The Sixties and the British Invasion

What happened during the sixties is that Christian deism came under attack, and slowly began to loose its hold over society. There are a lot of things that went into this era, but (since this is not meant to be a thorough paper) I just want you to hold up in your minds one group - the Beatles - as an example. The Beatles were a group of youngsters who held the ear of their generation. They preached and modeled a whole new way of thinking, and of living. This new lifestyle opposed the 'out-dated' ideas of the older, Christian/Deistic generation. Drugs and immorality were openly embraced. Also a part of this 'image' was long hair, drinking, smoking, etc. You know - being a 'hippie.'

The impact which the Beatles (and other bands) had on society was to splinter off a

massive segment of society into a sub-group: the ‘Hippies.’ Suddenly, nearly an entire generation cared more about being a part of a certain ‘image’ and listening to the artists of that image than about church or their parents. Clearly, this movement was a strong erosive force against church attendance, family values, and the gospel message.

Without disrupting the flow of this section, I would like to interject that *at this point in history* the church could be forgiven for standing firm against ‘that image.’ After all, it was clear that at this time ‘sex, drugs & rock ‘n roll’ (and dancing, and drinking, etc...) were clearly linked together. Also, the Hippie generation was leading society down some other paths that the church was unfamiliar with, and thus afraid of. Most importantly, we must realize that at this time, ‘that image’ was part of a splinter group of society. Most of society was opposed to the Hippies (this fact is demonstrated by the fact that even today the maxim ‘no shirt, no shoes, no service’ is assumed in most places of business). For Christians to start dressing like, acting like, or endorsing the Beatles or other ‘rock’ bands at this time would have been an odd, counter-cultural thing to do. After all, ‘that’ crowd was preaching free love and drugs, while the church was preaching chastity and sobriety. How *could* they have anything to do with each other’

Let’s flash forwards to the present.

The Modern Scene

To put it briefly, the Hippies have won. Deism is out, secularism is in. While it is true that most of North America is still deistic, it is quickly becoming politically incorrect to explain anything from a ‘religious’ perspective. Religion is a personal thing now, and we shouldn’t judge the beliefs of others. Also, the ‘sexual revolution’ occurred. This revolution means that there is supposed to be equality between the sexes, and that immorality is the new norm. Finally, the dress, art, music and ‘image’ which the Hippies pioneered has gone throughout society, and created a wave of new culture and art.

So what is the church doing about all of this? To put it simply, I would say that *The Evangelical church has organized itself militarily, in opposition to change*. As I have said before, this stance made sense (within some boundaries) in the sixties, seventies and maybe even the eighties. To *still* be fighting the same fights, however, at this stage of the game, is to equate ‘old-fashioned’ with ‘godly,’ and to totally destroy our witness in our world.

So, if Christians are *not* to be part of the biker/rocker/rebellious image, what image *are* we supposed to have? Go ahead – right now, in your mind, think of what a good Christian family should look like. What picture comes to mind? Are you thinking of a large family, posing happily outside of their white house, with all of the men dressed sharply in dress-shirts and maybe even ties, while the women (always in joyful submission to the men!)³ are dressed in dresses or jumpers? What else goes with this image? Certainly not rock music, tattoos, drinking or dancing! No, if we went into their

³ I was an egalitarian at this time. But see my later post (and posts hyper-linked from it) [Leadership and Submission in the Home](#).

house we would certainly find gentle classical music playing, and no alcohol would be in sight.

I want us all to take a second and realize that *THIS IS THE NORMAL FAMILY OF THE FIFTIES!* Fifty years ago, virtually *every* middle-class family in North America would have fit this description - Christian or non. Now here is the question: if this image did not make people more holy back then, why do we think that holding on to it (when it is fifty years out of date) will make us holier now?

We also need to realize that in the last fifty years, the world has moved on. People are searching for answers to the tough, complex questions of tomorrow, and the uncertainty of our times. In my opinion, there probably been no time in the last fifty or more years when popular society has been *more* receptive to the Gospel of Jesus than now. Unfortunately, however, church is the *last* place on earth they expect the find answers. They see the church as being completely out of date, continually fighting old, irrelevant fights. Also, they see that the main 'rules' of church-attendance (which often gets confused with salvation) as: you must dress from the fifties, no drinking, smoking, chewing, tattooing, motorbikes, rock-music, dancing, long hair, etc., etc., etc.

Conclusion

People are not thirsty for more rules, they are thirsty for Jesus. But by organizing our churches in the way that we have, we have made it clear to the world that external rules are *exactly* what we are concerned with, and unless people are willing to conform, they cannot be a part of us.

So let me ask you this: are we focused on Jesus? Are we following *Him* as He blesses, accepts and teaches even the 'least of these'? Or are we a part of the religious elite - the Pharisees - who are off in our holy fortresses, praying, 'Thank you, God, that you have made me holy! Much holier, for example, than that punk-rocker over there...' (Cf. Luke 18:9-14)

SOMEBODY (John 12:1-8)

September 14, 2008

Church politics is a fascinating study, worthy of a university credit, at least. With all of the intricacies, nuances and subtleties, several years could easily be filled. Most fascinating of all is the eternal question: who *really* holds power?

A novice to the church may be so silly as to think that the pastor holds power. The old folks tend to feel like they are loosing too much power, while the young don't feel that they are given enough. The elders tend to act like all power proceeds from them, while the big donors and longtime participators have a way of holding a strong and steady hand on the reigns, no matter what the front-men may negotiate.

For all their skill and drive, however, each of these parties pales in comparison to another, infinitely more influential figure.

Often mentioned, rarely described, never seen: he is like the Godfather of church politics, skulking silently about in the shadowy halls of power, silently manipulating and controlling the proceedings by his mere presence. Rarely is a decision made without his influence. Rarely does a leader rise without paying his due's.

Although he is known by many names, he is usually simply referred to as 'Somebody.'

Follow me now, as I attempt to follow this powerful player through a day of church politics.

Look! But...where is he skulking off to now?

Three workers, talking and moving easily, are making their way towards one of the many crustations on the bottom of the church. Once mighty propellers, adding life and momentum, these programs have long since died, and - withering into themselves - have become lifeless deadweight, slowing the church down. The workers are almost there - they are preparing to get to work. But wait...they are stopping! In what direction has their conversation turned, to cause this shift?

'...but what if Somebody is still getting a blessing out of it...?'

'...yeah - what if Somebody thinks we don't care about their faithful attendance...?'

'...well...maybe Somebody can breathe new life into this after all...?'

'...what if Somebody is mad at us if we kill this program?'

This last thought is the clincher. They pack up their tools, and go home. With their cowardice, the church moves with just that much more difficulty, and has that much less room for new programs.

But look! I just saw his shadowy form over there, sneaking into the captain's chambers. Let's go and peak in the window!

A minatory trial is in progress - I can see that a person's job is on the line. On the wall is a picture - Lieutenant, first class - and beside it is a long list of substantiated accusations against his performance, and reasons to replace him. There is a space for reasons to the contrary, but it is empty. The decision seems obvious - the man is incompetent and emotionally unstable. His actions consistently hurt the crew and cause material loss to the church. Better men are ready to step up. But something is holding them back. What...what's that? I can barely make out their conversations...

'...but then, I heard that Somebody had been really blessed by him once...'

'...what if Somebody thinks that we don't consider rank to be important?...'

'...I suppose that Somebody may think we are ungrateful, to his faithful years...'

'...what if somebody is mad at us, for replacing him?'

Against all odds, their minds seem to be made up. They wrap up the meeting and tear up all evidences of the trial. By never confronting their brother, they never give him the opportunity to grow, and the leadership of the church is just that much weaker.

But wait! No time to linger here! I just saw Somebody over by the riggings. What ever could he be doing over there?

I can see that the fishermen had all but decided to replace their old, out-dated, torn-and-patched nets with new ones. It's a good thing, too. It is common knowledge that the fish have gotten wise to the old style of nets, so much so that even putting them in the water has been known to permanently turn fish off to a particular churches, or to all churches in general. The new nets were smaller and more involved, but I could see the subtle cleverness in the design.

But what is going on here?! They are not fitting the new nets! They are pushing them aside, and re-installing those dreadful old things. What ever could they be muttering as they work?

'...these nets were good enough for Somebody, years ago, so I guess they're good enough for me too...'

'...I suppose that Somebody could have misinterpreted the new nets, anyways...'

'...if God is really working, Somebody will still be able to join us, even through these old things...'

'...at least Somebody can't be mad at us, for acting without telling him...'

Oh, 'Somebody' - what tragedies follow in your wake!

I could follow Somebody all day, cataloguing his devious exploits. But what is the use?
My heart is already heavy.

I am wise to the scheming rascal. I know how he operates, and who sent him. The
Devious One was always the arch enemy of the church, and of her Master.

From the very beginning, his strategy has been to infiltrate the very ranks of the faithful,
subtly interjecting thoughts of misguided passion, fear of man, and guilt-ridden needs. As
the Sinister One looks on, the church is slowly bound and destroyed from the inside out,
as the shackles of the hypothetical bind his enemies.

Somebody, Somebody, Somebody. Always distant, always needy, always demanding.
When your voice is heeded, there is never enough time in the day, never enough money
in the pot, never enough fire in the bones.

In the long drudge to maintain the status quo, resources become scarce. Suddenly, there is
not enough water to give the thirsty a drink. There is not enough time to visit the lonely.
There is not enough food to feed the hungry. There is not enough perfume to anoint the
Master's feet.

After all, 'Somebody might need that!!'

SOMETHING LIKE (CHURCH) HOMEPAGE

September 14, 2008

In my perfect little fantasy world, there would be a community called "something like," and this is what you would see on the "about us" tab of their homepage.

SOMETHING LIKE

(Church)

Who Are We'

The best answer to this is that we are a community of people who are passionate about following Jesus Christ in all areas of our lives.

For various reasons, this quest has lead us towards a more organic, more relational, and more spontaneous outworking of our faith than is normal among today's churches.

We believe that shaking loose from some of the out-dated structures, programs, budgets and professionals of the typical church frees up a tremendous amount of resources for Kingdom use.

If you want concise way of defining us, think of us as an 'inter-denominational Jesus sub-culture' which is below, among and outside of the walls of the various churches in our area.

What Regular Programs Do We Offer'

None. We have no regular buildings, programs, budgets, paid professionals, or agendas. We get burnt out and annoyed just thinking about such things!

We see *Something Like* more as an operating system than a set of programs, more as a launching pad than a specific rocket, more as a group of friends than the place where the friends to go, or what they do when they get there.

Our hope is that under the broad umbrella of *Something Like*, people will find the freedom to organize and execute whatever programs they feel a burden for, with no real obligation to keep these programs alive if they are no longer useful. We hope that people will use the 'excuse' of *Something Like* to make their normal gatherings into sacred ones, by bringing Jesus into their living rooms, back-yards, camp-sites, etc. We also hope to bring a sense of unity and validation to the many who have left the organized 'church' and are struggling to find Jesus without the structures that they are used to seeking Him through. Finally, we are committed to providing a wide variety of low-commitment 'entry-points' into the family of God, for those who have never heard of Jesus.

To this end, there is a variety of top-notch teaching materials which can all be downloaded free of charge directly from this web-site. Also, there are links to Christian chat-rooms, and several forums exist on our site, for learning about Jesus. Finally, many of our members have made themselves available through personal or on-line communication to those interested in Jesus, or existing Christ-followers who desire increased fellowship.

By far, the most central aspect of our community is *relationships*. Taking time for real, deep, lasting relationships is the primary ‘program’ of *Something Like*, which all of our other programs are based on, lead towards, and are evaluated by. If programs lead away from relationships - to people or to Jesus - they must be dropped.

Are We Anti-Church?

A teacher we respect very much has said, ‘The problem with backing away from something is that you cannot tell where you are going.’ [note: this quote by Merle Nisly] Most of us has been hurt and/or disappointed with the church at some time. We fight the urge, however, to define ourselves negatively against the church, or to harbor bitterness against any one community of faith. Rather, we want to identify ourselves positively as those who are trying to follow Christ and to be His light in our community.

For us, following Christ has tended to lead away from church buildings, although many of us still attend and even participate in leadership of some of the churches in our area.

Are We a New Church?

We believe that there is a serious problem with the way that Christians tend to define the word ‘church.’ The New Testament teaches that ‘there is *one* body and one Spirit...one faith, one Lord, one baptism,’ (Eph. 4:4-5). There is nothing wrong with meeting in various places: however, there is only one Church. The Corinthians were sharply reproved for attempting to divide into something similar to today’s denominations & churches (cf. 1 Cor. 1:11-13).

The New Testament idea of a ‘church’ did not start with a building, then work outwards to identify the leaders and parishioners by their respective ‘holy places.’ Rather, the Greek word *ekklesia* (the only word for ‘church’ in the New Testament) simply means, ‘a gathering with a purpose.’ In consistency with Jesus’ promise that, ‘where two or three are gathered in my name, there will I be,’ (Mat. 18:20), the New Testament church met in homes, synagogues, in the countryside, or wherever else there were adequate facilities.

The church was the meeting of people in the name of Jesus. Wherever this occurred, there was ‘church.’

There is a lot of value in making this ‘meeting’ a regular event, in a designated place, and we actively encourage all of our members to seek out some sort of a regular time of fellowship. We are happy that many of our members have chosen to meet in ‘churches.’ Again, we are not against ‘church.’ What we are against is the notion that three couples getting together in a living room, or two friends gathering over coffee is *not* church, or that it is somehow less than genuine fellowship until tied to an official church building.

Are We An Anarchist Group?

Throughout church history, there have been many times when various churches had almost complete control over the lives of their parishioners. Because of this power, they could legislate morality by exacting heavy discipline towards unrepentant sinners. For many, it has become incontrovertible that this sort of 'church discipline' is the norm, mandated from Scriptures.

For such people, the fact that most churches today are basically powerless over their parishioners is a tragic sign of the times. We understand that to such people, *Something Like* would seem to take even *more* power away from the church, by removing the one disincentive which churches still wield - the denial of church attendance. For them, we may represent the threat of anarchy, since we apparently have no structures for enforcing discipline.

Although we recognize that there has been some value to the 'top-down' style of discipline in the past, we also have seen much abuse of it. Some of us have been hurt very personally by it. Also, we are not convinced that this is the only way to interpret Scriptures, or the best way to apply them to today's culture.

The New Testament model (Mat. 18:15-17) for discipline always starts on an inter-personal level. The person wronged, or the person who first learns of the sin does not take that knowledge to a lofty group of people who are removed from the situation. Rather, they are to go directly to the sinner, and, 'restore such a one in the spirit of meekness,' (Gal. 6:1). We believe that if people's hearts are good, nearly all sin and inter-personal issues may be dealt with in this manner. Also, many people will respond much better to the private reproof of a trusted friend than to the public reproof a distant group of leaders.

If this first attempt does not work, they are to be confronted with an increasingly large group of people, then finally by the entire believing community.

If they still do not repent, their sin is to be made known to all, so that everyone will see that they are 'as a sinner or a tax-collector' and begin to intensely pray for, dialogue with, and especially love on them until they are able to see the error of their ways and come back into fellowship (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1-2, 2 Cor. 2:5-8).

We recognize that we are less equipped to perform the latter stages of this process than most churches are, since we have no organized gatherings for announcements, and no leaders to pronounce verdicts. We do not see this as a weakness, however, but a strength, since the involvement of the entire church community is required only as a last resort, and probably only in special cases. (The example given in Scriptures is of a situation of incest which was disgusting even to the pagans! 1 Cor. 5:1) There is always a temptation to skip the really difficult first step, jump directly to the (easier) second and/or final steps.

We feel that this has been the case far too often in history. Since we focus on relationships and community, we believe that we are much *more* equipped than most traditional churches to perform church discipline in an inter-personal, relational, one-on-one way, which is in keeping with the teachings of the New Testament.

What Do We Do?

Being a part of *Something Like* should feel like a natural fit for the committed Christian. Within our community, there are opportunities for fellowship, ministry and worship.

We empathize with those who have no desire to *ever* darken the doors of a church. Some of us feel the same way! We passionately believe, however, that aversion to this one 'entry-point' into Christianity should *never* be allowed to keep someone from Jesus.

It is our desire and goal to bring Jesus beyond these walls, to provide multiple avenues of connection, so that we might 'by all means save some,' 1 Cor. 9:22.

We pray that our group may be a blessing to you, as we pursue Christ together.

THE QUARRY

October 6, 2008

The Quarry-man was red and fuming. His bald head glistened with sweat as he toiled away. As I came closer, I could see that he was standing in a dip, surrounded by an array of complex and ancient tools. Apparently, his job was to remove the rocks for further processing, but it didn't seem like things were going very well for him. He had a small, square sled which he would fasten the rocks to, then drag them up-hill onto the cart. The rocks were round and smooth, however, and he had a furiously difficult time fastening them to his sled. The few times he got them up onto his cart, they simply rolled out.

"Confounded, darn you, you stupid rocks!" The man yelled, as yet another rock slipped from his sled, bounced once on the cart and rolled back into it's place. "Why won't you just behave!? Why are you so uncooperative!! Don't you realize you are all being bad rocks!?!?" Why, just look at your parents, and theirs. They were all nice and square. They all cooperated nicely! What is wrong with you? Why are you so uncooperative, so un-submissive to authority? Why do you have to make things so hard on yourselves?!" As he said this last bit, he took out a large sledge and began pounding away at the nearest rocks, trying to square off some of the edges, to make them fit his equipment.

Now, don't get me wrong - the little man was quite amusing to watch! I was distracted, however, by more noises and yells off to my right. I left the little man fuming, sweating and smashing to go and see what else might be going on in this strange quarry. "Let's go, boys, let's go. We don't have all day!!" As I came over a ridge, I discovered another operation. This one was coming along much better. I could see that the carts were about the same shape, but larger and with walls on all sides to hold the slippery little rascals in. A half-dozen young men were rolling the rocks up ramps, and into the carts. One foreman was barking orders from his vantage point off to the side. Three carts were already loaded, while two more were almost ready to go. The speed and efficiency of the operation was remarkable!

"Hey, what the...how dare you....get out...what...what are you doing!?!?" I turned to the sound of running feet, and ragged breaths. The little man came scrambling from the direction of his own little cart, an indignant barrage of words preceding him. He came to a panting halt just short of the big foreman, and began... "Hey, what are you doing!? Don't you know that these are our rocks? Church & Co. has worked this quarry for centuries - longer than you have even been alive, mister! You owe us a great deal! How dare you come in here and steal our rocks!..."

The tirade went on and on, while the Foreman continued barking orders and watching his men, decidedly indifferent to the little man's rebuke. "...We have a right to be here. Don't you know that these rocks are so much better off with us?! Why, all that you care about is money. We actually care about our work. We have a good cause! We belong here. This is our turf. OURS!! What do you have?! No right, no right at all! Just greed and ambition, that's all. You're just a usurper, that's all you are! Why, I autta just kick you right on out of here, you ol' rock thief, you..."

The little man was flapping his arms now, kicking up a miniature dirt-storm around him like a strutting rooster, defining his territory. The big man stood, with arms crossed, watching his crew with rigid composure. I wondered if I could see the faintest ghost of a smile flickering behind his mustache. “Why, why, you just wait, you big nothing, you! Why, you’re lucky I just don’t take on the whole lot of you!”

For the first time, the big man looked down at him briefly. He raised one eyebrow, as he sized up the little man, then looked back at his swarthy crew, at his own massive shoulders, then back at him. A definite chuckle was twinkling in his eyes now, as they locked with the little man’s.

A chorus of ‘whoops!’ and ‘Yehaws!’ rose from the men as the final cart was finished. The foreman snapped quickly about, blew a whistle, and began organizing the men around the carts. With grunts and creaking wood, the carts were on the move. In a matter of minutes, they were out of sight.

“Hah! That’ll teach them!” The little man spat in their direction, still red and sputtering. “I bet I really scared them this time. Just wait - next time they come back, then I’ll really give it to ‘em! Ha!” The little man puffed his chest out pompously before taking a deep breath and sobering. “Well, that’s the way to do it. Just stand your ground, speak your mind and they will flee. Gotta keep on keepin’ on! Lots to be done, lots to do. We’re going to take this quarry back, and the mountain too!!”

This last bit of a slogan I heard over his shoulder, as he was marching back to his cart. Probably, he would try to put in a couple more hours before night-fall. I wondered whether he would get two...maybe three stones in today? I looked back at the huge dent made in the rock-pile by this other crew. Thousands of rocks had been taken, apparently with no great effort. Tomorrow, they would be back, and the day after that. I looked back at the size of the pile, then at the dent made, then at the round, red, bobbing head in the distance.

“Your days are numbered, friend.”

But I didn’t have the heart to tell him.

He would find out for himself, soon enough.

“CRUCIFY MACLAREN!!”....?

October 7, 2008

Some of you may know that I just came back from a week of studies out at Briercrest this past week. Out at school, I learned that ‘Emergent’ has become something of a buzz-word. It has become a movement, a ‘them’ which the ‘us’ of the conservative theological community can point to, define themselves against, and thus dismiss. I quickly began to second-guess my previous decision to (overly-hastily?) identify myself as ‘emergent.’

As I thought more, however, I had to just shake my head in frustration. Are we doing this *again*, people? Are we, like Luther and Zwingli, going to dismiss a movement as heretical just because some of the leaders are wacky, and some of the practitioners lapse into extremism? [I am alluding here to the Anabaptist movement - which the Lutherans and Reformed churches tried to squelch by drowning as many members as they could get their hands on, simply because they disagreed on some doctrines. They now functionally adopt many of the practices they were originally persecuting over.] Are we going to simply slap a label on ‘the Emergent church,’ crucify McLaren, then dismiss the movement as immature and heretical? To do so may cause *another* completely unnecessary rift in an already segregated body, and miss an opportune moment for critical dialogue.

From my highly limited perspective (I’m not really sure what Emergent is, totally, and so I have primarily my own experience to go from here) Emergent can be defined most clearly by what it is *not*. For myself, I have been blown away by the distance between the *Jesus* of Scriptures and Spirit, whom I have come to know, and seek to know better, and the religion of the *church*, which I have received and preached most of my life. This conflict has led to a number of deeply troubling questions, which it seems that nobody else is even aware of. For starters, we could ask:

1. Why doesn’t the church care about the environment?
2. Why do Christians feel awkward when a truly needy person walks into church?
3. Why do we care so much about attendance?
4. Why does the church have such a bad reputation among non-Christians?
5. Why is the divorce rate higher among Christians than among non?

Now, let’s say that I break from the norm. Let’s say that, like Lynn White,⁴ I lift my head from the sand and honestly consider the problem of Christians and the environment. Or, like Barna, I consider the question of younger Christians and church attendance. Now, as

⁴ Lynn White wrote a watershed paper entitled “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (*Science* 155, 1967). In it, he argues that Christians abuse the earth more than pagans and other religions do since they do not believe it is divine. I wrote a research paper in answer to white entitled [Stewarding the Environment](#) about this time.

soon as I come up with some answers to these questions, I immediately make myself, it would seem, a *target* for the older conservatives to attack.

Now here's the rub: they may completely overwhelm and shame me, and my argument, *but the discussion is not over!* **Unless the theological community is prepared to grapple with the original question, they have done nothing other than kill the prophet.**

From my perspective, it almost seems that the higher theological community is starting to look like the old, seasoned generals at a war conference who keep saying, 'nope - that's stupid,' 'nope - that won't work,' 'nope - that's ill-conceived' every time one of the younger, emergent members pipes up. They are right of course - each of the propositions has a flaw somewhere. But they are unwilling to see any good in it either. Also, they are unwilling to propose a plan of their own, (except to stick to plan 'A' and stay the course) since they consider their only job to make sure that nobody makes any *mistakes*, rather than come up with some constructive *solutions* to the mounting problems (or 'crises,' MacLaren) which threaten to destroy the faith of many.

Do you disagree with McLaren? Fine. But do you have better answers than him? Are you even *aware* of the questions that he is asking? If not, sit down. You have not earned the right to speak until you lift your head out of the sand.⁵

⁵ At this time I had not read MacLaren, but was responding to those who seemed to attack him unjustly. When I read him for myself – sometime after my Emergent phase – I came to the conclusion that he was a heretic. See [Reflections on MacLaren's "A New Kind of Christian"](#).

MY DEFINITION OF 'EMERGENT'

October 7, 2008

When I say that I am emergent, here is what I mean:

1. I have a history in Evangelicalism.
2. My education and exposure to media has influenced me to view the world through a more 'postmodern,' than 'modern' worldview. This education eventually brought me into conflict with my Evangelical heritage, which has decidedly modern characteristics. [note: look up 'modern' and 'postmodern' online for some good definitions of those terms]
3. I have excelled at 'Church piety,' but eventually found it empty and, ultimately, destructive to faith, and impractical for mission. I have come to long for something more.
4. I am aware of the many global crises that face our planet, and am disturbed that Evangelicalism seems unaware and unconcerned with these issues. I long to make a relevant impact in this world.
5. I have stumbled upon the emergent church movement somewhat by accident, and have found many friends and dialogue partners who seem to be moving in the same direction as me. 'Emergent' seems to be the term that is tossed around among this loosely-organized group, and so I will apply it to myself, in a descriptive sense.

One thing is all important to recognize about my understanding of 'emergent.' I see this movement as temporary, transitional, and descriptive.

1. I see it as **temporary** because it primarily describes what I am *not*: I am no longer 'Evangelical' in the sense which others are (see post 'I am not one of THEM') and yet I do not yet know concretely what I *am*.
2. In this sense also, it is **transitional**. Just like it is common - and even somewhat fitting - for teens to go through a stage where they define themselves negatively against their parents, the hope is that they will one day mature to orient their personality according to another, better standard.
3. Finally, 'emergent' for me is **descriptive, not proscriptive**. What I mean by that is that my failing attempts to follow Jesus have lead me to a place which resembles the journey of others, who call themselves emergent. Thus, the term *describes* me. I do not feel that the term *prescribes* that I act a certain way to gain my sense of identity from the 'in crowd' of the emergent community. I am a Christ-follower who happens, at this time, to be 'emergent,' not the other way around.

I am still exploring the emergent movement, and I hope that my tentative, personal

definition lines up fairly closely with how others are using the term.⁶

⁶ For my final views on Emergent, see post [*THE Book to Read on Emergent, Sermon: "What is the Gospel? A Response to Liberalism and the Emergent Church,"*](#) and [*What is \(Christian\) Liberalism?*](#). For my final views on postmodernity/modernity, read [*The Myth of POST-Modernity*](#), and [*Modernity and the Roots of Classical Liberalism*](#).

CHAPTER THREE: CONVERSING WITH EMERGENT

CAN I BE “EMERGENT” WITHOUT NECESSARILY BEING A PART OF “THE EMERGENT MOVEMENT”?

October 10, 2008

I have been using this blog over the last few months as a means of sorting through my own thoughts on emergent, and on other things. I guess that the result of that is that my posts are probably sounding something like a steam of consciousness more than anything. One thought leads to another, which contradicts a previous one, etc. I'm in a process, and this is all a part of that.

The most recent portion of this journey was my first real frustration with emergent. I have been noticing many weak points in the movement, and have been mentally cataloguing them for a upcoming post which I will entitle “emerging cautiously.” (this isn't a sign of disapproval, but affirmation. I think that critiquing, being critiqued, and thus learning from others is an important part of dialogue, just as iron sharpens iron) I was basically feeling at home in the movement until I listened to a podcast (more properly, the beginning of a podcast) by the emergent podcast (I got this through iTunes. The podcast is “emergent village,” and the episode is “2007 AAR Panel” I listened to about half of the first one).

Something really, really bothered me about the discussion which was taking place, and it has caused me to question whether I can even call myself emergent.

My issue with this podcast was *not* that it was presenting some wrong doctrine, or strange practice. Actually, I got frustrated with it and shut it off before it got to the real meat of the discussion (if there was any). My issue was more with the tone of the discussion, and the assumptions behind it.

I mentioned in a previous post my frustration at the “non-emergent” Christian community for creating an “us vs. them” mentality with emergent, rather than listening to what they have to say. This is a problem, since: **Whenever we find our identity primarily be our segregation into groups and institutions, we loose our ability to pursue truth and impair our ability to pursue God.**

I had thought that this segregation was something which was pushed upon emergent - but I am quickly beginning to realize that it can be a two-way street.

In this podcast, there was a very definite sense of “are you in or not?” to the conversation. This in itself is not all that bothersome. Lines of differentiation are helpful: once we know that you are a Lutheran and I am an Anabaptist, for example, we may very quickly have insight into the thinking of the other, and have a better platform for dialogue. The same may be true of emergent/non-emergent thinking. My issue with these lines, however, was two-fold: first, they felt *imposed*, and second, they seemed *ill-placed*.

On turning off that podcast, and reflecting further, a felt an intense frustration with the fact that “The Emergent Village,” seems to have swept up the copyrights to the emergent

concept, so to speak. Exactly who gives Brian McLaren, etc., the right to decide what is and isn't "emergent"? This is a movement, not a bureaucracy! Is there a central committee deciding what it is to be a "baby-boomer" or what it is to be "Gen-x"? Nobody has a right to decide what is, and what is not "authentically emergent" – least of all some elitist community discussing around a microphone, sending their mandates to the masses.

I feel almost like a Russian revolutionary, who – in a quest for freedom from one dictator – has lent my pen, my sweat and blood to a revolution. What has been the result? Only to have the fruits of that revolution *usurped* by an even more tyrannical dictator!⁷

My understanding of emergent is that thousands of people, all across the Western world are being prompted by their experiences to cry out for a new, revolutionary way of thinking and being. In this, Emergent Village has been really helpful and unifying. But it begs the question: to what extent do they have the right to define, and control?

Perhaps this is, to some degree, unavoidable. Great thinkers and reformers will always gather a following around themselves. McLaren has been there from the beginning, so why *shouldn't* he have a say and be heard? However, this discussion seemed to be going beyond mere opinion. It felt as though concrete deliberations were taking place along the lines of, "is 'X' in or out?" I just don't feel comfortable with this sort of a conversation, and I especially don't agree with the criteria which seems to be employed.

To me, it seemed that the ultimate, unifying standard of Emergent in this discussion was "dialogue." If one was able to truly converse, they were in. If not, they were out.

One example given is that if a lesbian, Episcopalian minister is able to sit across the table from a southern-Baptist, complimentary pastor then they are in. Likewise, there is much discussion about being able to truly dialogue - instead of just monologuing - in such contexts as an internet blog, or in person.

Now don't get me wrong - I love dialogue! I named my site after that, and I really think it is an important, central aspect to theology. Also, it is something that the previous generation has lost, and which needs to be regained. That being said, however, it must be affirmed that it is the dialogue *partners* that make the enterprise successful, not the practice itself. Most importantly, all conversations are ultimately straw when they leave out the Word of God. Dialogue is good. But if it's *not* okay to stand up and say "I really think that you are wrong and that your teaching is not in line with God's truth" then we are not really pursuing God here, but man.

⁷ In another post – which I have lost – I mused how the Emergent movement is similar to a Marxist revolution. It tries to shake off the shackles of the old order of leadership, but in so doing it resorts to a violent sort of "revolution." The ideal is to break through this time to a future utopia of peace and equality. But in reality, Marxism never goes beyond the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat" – the supposedly temporary time when the revolution is under martial law, in a dictatorship lead by one of the "people." In trying to be free from oppressive rule, Marxism delivers the people to a much harsher rule. It was becoming increasingly obvious to me that Emergent also was unable to deliver on its promise. It seemed that the Emergent movement was also a sort of tyranny, where the leaders were followed unquestioningly, and certain ideas and opinions were categorically suppressed and rejected by the unelected dictators. So much for equality and freedom!

...and so here I am. I am frustrated. I really think that "emergent" is a good word to describe my experience, just as "postmodern" is. Does that mean, however, that I *must* be a part of the emergent *movement*? What if I disagree, on several fundamental points with what the leaders of the movement say?

Is there, finally, any way to differentiate between *being* emergent, and being *part* of the emergent movement?

PACIFISM: AN OPEN LETTER TO BRUXY CAVEY

October 12, 2008

Dear Bruxy,

I have been listening very intently to your sermons, especially those concerning pacifism. As a Johnny-come-lately to the Anabaptist movement, I have come to embrace most of the tenets of my Mennonite church, and yet this one issue has remained a sticking point.

You have almost convinced me, Bruxy, and I am especially compelled by your description of pacifism as running *towards* conflict, in an attempt to resolve it, rather than 'passively' standing apart from it.

That being said, however, I have some very significant obstacle in my thinking. Although I am back and forth on this, I think I will play the devil's advocate in this letter, to present to you the arguments for which I simply cannot seem to find an easy answer.

1. The first question which I would like to ask you is: does 'thou shalt not use coercive force' become the one concrete maxim, or law, of your theology? Are there absolutely *no* times or places for a Christian to use coercive force? If so, what is the scriptural grounds for this law (especially since it is never stated as such), and doesn't the existence of such a law run contrary to your belief that Jesus came to do away with the old covenant of laws?

2. My second question is in regards to protecting the innocent. If, for example, you saw a dog viciously attacking a young girl, I think we could all agree that the right thing to do (especially if one has a large stick in one's hand!) is to step in to aid the weak and oppressed. To shift this metaphor, let us say that the girl is being attacked by a young child. Let us say that the child (a strong child, let us say, with a rock) is unresponsive to any verbal reproof. All that is needed, however, is for you to walk over and bodily remove the child from the girl. Is a pacifist able to do such a thing, or would this be in contradiction of the cardinal rule of pacifism ('thou shalt not use coercive force over another human') and thus morally wrong?

3. My third question is in regards to defending those who are under one's protection. This, for me, has always been the toughest one. Don't I have an obligation to protect those who are entrusted to my care? I heard a story about an Anabaptist community whose pacifistic 'secret' got out. A relatively small group of men stormed the settlement, looted the valuables, raped the women, and left. The men stood there and did nothing. Some held their wives hands while they were being raped, to comfort them. The story was told to me by a man who stood in awe of such integrity. To me, however, all I see is a bunch of men who put their religion before providing for their families, and in the end became 'worse than unbelievers,' (1 Tim. 5:8).

4. My fourth question is in regards to maintaining civil order. I dialogue sometimes with a family member who is basically Anarchist in their thinking. According to him, the world would be an infinitely better place if there were none of those pesky police officers and government officials nosing into our business. My response to him is that until he is prepared to enter into the chaos of Africa, or Colombia, he should not be ungrateful for the infinite value of a well-ordered civil system, of which he reaps the benefits. As you are no-doubt aware, however, the gas which runs the engine of society is fear of coercive force (Rom. 13:4). Everyone (myself included) would walk roughshod over many of the laws of our nation without it, and our society would fall apart at the seams. If this is true, however, doesn't pacifism become a potentially dangerous ideology, in standing opposed to coercive power?

5. My fifth question is in regards to international justice. In the same way that civil order only works with fear of coercive force, there is an extent to which this same fear is needed in the international arena. You said yourself once in a sermon that Canada would cease to exist as a nation if it did not have a military. This is true, of course. Once again, pacifism seems to be the enemy of a well-ordered society. More importantly, the threat of invasion is the only thing keeping a large number of nations somewhat in-line with global standards. Imagine, for example, how many nations would develop nuclear capabilities, trash the environment even *more*, or begin openly selling slaves, drugs, arms, etc., if the threat of invasion from the US or other Western nations was not an issue? Also, the actions which *should* have been taken in the Rwanda incident may be illuminative. Isn't there a time and place for the 'big kids' on the international playground to stand up for the little kids, and/or to keep them in line?

6. My sixth question is in regards to the 'getting others to do the dirty work.' I know many pacifists. Some of them do not vote or engage in politics. Most of them ignore Remembrance Day, and do not support any wars, past or present. None of them are soldiers or police officers. And yet, incongruently, *all* of them reap the rich benefits of coercive force in society, both passively and actively. They are passive benefactors by receiving a society which is built upon war and policing, without protest or qualification. (I have not heard of a large Mennonite contingent at anti-war demonstrations, nor have I heard of Mennonites refusing certain war-won-rights on a matter of conscience). Also, they are often *active* benefactors of coercive power by paying taxes into the military, giving non-violent support to war efforts, or making use of the policing/judicial system.

Aren't pacifists contradicting themselves when they will receive the benefits of violence, support its practice, stand by passively by when it is done on their behalf, and then state that they do not approve of it? It seems that the only truly authentic pacifist is the one who removes themselves from society, and goes to a remote location where they may receive no benefits from the government, pay no support to it, and take their own chances with any lawless forces. Otherwise, they are still a part of the system that supports war and policing, except that they get others to do the dirty work.

In conclusion, then, pacifism seems to back me into a corner. By not intervening in acts of injustice and cruelty, I become party to such acts. Also, by refusing to participate in or support the government in roles which include coercive force, I become a corrosive agent within society, subtly unbinding the fabric which holds it together.

The mental picture which I am beginning to construct is that of a tumor. With the addition of pacifism, Christianity becomes an exclusive bubble of people who: Are willing to receive many of the benefits of society, But are unwilling to pay back into society or fully integrate into it, on this important issue. So long as the ‘tumor’ of pacifism stays small, and does not multiply rapidly it may be tolerated. If it really takes hold in force, however, the only result of the takeover of Christianity within the larger body of society is certain death for that society.

I really want to be a pacifist, and I especially want to distance myself from the ugliness of war, which is the greatest single cause of famine and suffering on the planet. Also, I can see how the teachings of Jesus would lead me towards pacifism. Like I said, however, there are these issues which I cannot wrestle my way past. Thus, I do not feel as though I can be anything more than a very conservative ‘just-war-theorist.’

If you could help me out by destroying my ‘devil’s advocate’ argument, above, I would be most appreciative, and would quickly turn to join you in the ranks of pacifism.

Yours truly,

Josiah Meyer

MY FAVOURITE PODCASTS

October 19, 2008

Since I drive for a living, I listen to literally hundreds of hours of audio content a month. Here is a list of my favorite sources, which are also my primary influences right now:

Bruxy Cavey, the Meetinghouse:

(Available off of iTunes)

This guy has some *amazing* insights. For those into reading, we would be willing to lend out our copy of his book “The End of Religion: Sick of Religion? So Was Jesus!”

I would recommend all of his these sermon series especially:

[The Irreligious Life](#)

(this one gets dry towards the end, but the first couple ones really introduce his theology)

[From Christ to Christendom](#)

[Scripture Scandals](#)

Organic

Travel Light

Cruciformity

The series on atheism, on "the Secret" and on sex are also excellent, as well as the series on Philippians and on Revelation...well, actually, maybe I'm just having a hard time choosing. EVERYTHING available from iTunes on Bruxy is excellent! You can also go into the archives of the Meetinghouse. He has some "hot potatoes" series in there, where he hits hard topics like homosexuality, divorce, abortion and God's gender head-on.

There is also a series on world religions which is superb. Unfortunately, his inexperience shows a bit when you go back too far.

The Drew Marshall Show

(Available from his site www.drewmarshall.ca)

This guy is AMAZING! I could listen to him for hours...and I DO! He is a Christian radio host in Toronto who puts all of his shows online. He isn't afraid to ask the hard questions, and comes at Christianity from a very non-traditional perspective. (Interestingly, he is very influenced by Bruxy Cavey's ideas) He also gets a lot of amazing guests. The best part of his shows, however, are the call-in sections (and the "counsel-of-many") where he interacts with live call-ins. His snappy wit is very entertaining to listen to, and he can be very profound, in his own way.

Get to know him first by looking for his interview on 100 Huntley street on his website, or on YouTube.

The Phoenix Journal

(available off of iTunes)

Start with the Eric Elness podcast, to get a handle on what this is about. It is an outspokenly "emergent" podcast. The producer really takes time to make a good product on this one, though. Well worth the listen!

Big Ideas

(available off of iTunes)

This is a secular podcast, but very excellent for expanding your knowledge on certain areas.

Alistair McGrath has an excellent lecture (it should be the first one) in which he refutes Richard Dockins' book "the God delusion"

Naomi Klein's lecture on "shock politics" is *extremely* interesting for those interested in

politics, and especially with Iraq

Margaret MacMillan's lecture on "history as the new religion" is *incredibly* good, for those interested in history

Clifford Will's lecture on Relativity is very helpful for those who have always wondered what the big deal was about Einstein

Lots of other lectures look good too, but I haven't listened to too many of them yet.

One Year Daily Audio Bible

Honestly, I hardly ever do my devotions in the old way anymore. Now, I plug this podcast into my iPod and go out for a walk while I listen to four chapters of the Bible, read and mixed to in a *very* professional manner. An *excellent* podcast for those struggling to do the whole "devotions thing."

The Relevant Podcast

I'm not even sure how to describe this one. It's a Christian podcast, but not in the "churchy" way. They talk a lot about pop culture (recent movies and music releases, interesting news bits, short interviews, etc.) You have to listen to a couple episodes to really get into the inter-personal dynamics. Once you do, however, it can be really hilarious, and enjoyable. Another very professional podcast, which I listen to incessantly.

I 'KNOW' WHEN JESUS WILL RETURN!!!

October 19, 2008

While talking with Keith Graber the other day, our conversation turned to the 'end times.' I told him my position, then said (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) 'I don't *really* care about this issue. Actually, I'm so sick of it that I just don't want to think about it any more, and so I came to this conclusion to end the discussion.'

After that conversation, I realized that there are several other topics which I am sick of, and which I have come up with trite, dismissive answers so that I don't have to think about them.

I thought someone may be interested in these answers to these controversial questions. (I put the other question in a second post, below)

1. Q. When is Jesus coming back?

A. 3020, 9:35 A.M. eastern standard time.

Yup. That's it. I got a call just this morning from Jesus. He told me the day and the hour. Oh wait - I guess that Jesus doesn't know when He's coming back. Well, at any rate, everyone seems to have an opinion as to the general time when He's coming back, and this is my guess. If I'm wrong, I'll do dishes for the Great Supper.

Okay, well, I'll help at least.

I do sort of have a rationale for coming to this date. The gospel has to be preached to all the nations (Mat. 24:14, Mark 13:10), and I don't see that happening any time soon, especially since the population of the earth is expanding more rapidly than we are reaching the lost. Not sure when we're going to turn that tide around. Also, there are issues with the temple being rebuilt, and other things which I just don't see happening any time soon.

Most importantly, I have found that a near-date is sort of a mind-shutter-offer, which is extremely unhelpful. For example, when I try to talk to most Christians about the environment, there is almost the 'escape-hatch' mentality which pops out and says, 'well, Jesus is coming back tomorrow, so who cares what the planet will look like in 2200?' Also, whenever things get really dark in global politics, Christians have a way of mentally escaping and saying, 'Oh well - I don't have to worry, since Jesus is coming back right away...' Not that it's a bad thing to have a coping mechanism like that, but when it keeps us from really caring or thinking about making things *better* in the world, (since we will be ejected out of it so soon anyways) then it really becomes a problem. Think about it - what effect will it have on the world that many of the richest and most powerful people on the planet believe a) that things will get worse and worse, and b) that it's all going to end pretty soon anyways? I think that a 'oh no, the sky is falling' mentality leads towards a self-fulfilling prophecy. Things really *will* get bad, because Christians (globally, us western Christians have a *massive* amount of power!) are not

motivated to work towards making the world a better place, and making sure it will last another thousand years. We're all too busy in our churches, building our spiritual bomb-shelters.

I know that a near-date works extremely well for getting short-term results. Just look at the JW's! A confident prediction of Jesus return in 1906 (or whenever it was...they changed the date about five times) was *extremely* helpful in getting that movement off the ground. After all, what better way to manipulate people into frantic evangelism, and terrified conversions than to tell them that the world is ending, and we have a monopoly on the spiritual life-rafts?

Since we are not a cult, however, and thus we should be considering *non* manipulative methods of evangelism, I just feel that a near-date end-times emphasis is more trouble than it is helpful.

As to the whole 'signs of the end-times' thing...' First of all, Jesus said that earthquakes, wars and famines were *not* signs of the end-times (Mark 13:8). They were just the beginnings of birth pangs. I didn't really understand the meaning of this verse until we had our first child. Trust me on this one - sometimes the 'beginnings of birth pangs' can seem to go on *foreeeevvvvveerrrrrrr!!*

Also - take a look at history.

I know that everybody keeps saying that things look so bad, and all of the stars are aligned and *there has never been a time in history which is more in keeping with Scripture prophecy than now!!*

Riiiiight...

Take a look at the middle ages. In the middle ages you had all of the 'horsemen of the apocalypse' you had massive, devastating wars. You off-the-charts expensive food. You had famines. You had the bubonic plague wiping out literally one third of the population. You had a church that was *really* acting like the whore of Babylon, and a pope which many, many people were calling the antichrist. Things were all there. They all lined up, and many people were convinced that Jesus was returning imminently ...and yet He didn't.

I don't have any problem with someone thinking that Jesus is coming back within the next century, or even the next year. My only question is, 'What if you are wrong?' Live each day on earth as though it may be your last (because it very well *may* be your last, whether He comes or not) but *also* live each day as though it may *not* be your last, and as though the world will live on for centuries. Save for retirement. Buy life insurance. Don't just make converts - make *disciples* who will actually be able to pass on the faith. And yes - *take care of this planet!!* What if it has to support life for another thousand years?!?! At this rate, our great grand children will hate us for our short-sightedness, which will leave them a scorched and withered earth, and a faith which was too short-sighted to survive until them. (Of course, it will survive elsewhere - but that may be over in India or Korea, where our children will not necessarily have access to it...)

CHILDREN, OUR IMMORTALITY

It is the way of the earth:

I should be asleep right now.

In truth, this is the collective reality which draws all of my blogging experiences together: I write when I should be doing something else. When there is actually time to blog, there is nothing to talk about. When there is something to talk about, there are things to do!

At any rate, the thing which sparked off my thoughts this time was the movie “Resistance.” I would describe this as “An excellent movie on a horrendous subject.” The plot is based on the true events of three faming brothers who formed a community of fellow Jews who survived for over two years in the forests of Europe. In the end, 1200 Jews survived through their efforts.

What is truly rending about this movie is the portrayal of the simple reality that thousands upon thousands of women and children were killed in only a few months. That phrase rolls off the lips easily – women and children. The beauty of this movie (if it could be called “beauty”) is that it did not allow one to dismiss easily the terrible reality of the massacre of entire families. In one gripping scene, a man learns that his wife and child have died. It is impossible to describe in words the emotion of that moment. It was like the insides of his soul were violently ripped out – cut off from his roots, withering, imploding and dying, the man seemed to just crumple at the news.

What a horrible reality that would be – to be deprived of both wife and child in a single day!

In Genesis 3, God passes sentence on the human race due to sin. This curse culminates in the pronouncement of death on us all. Immediately, Adam turns to his wife and says, “You will now be called ‘Eve,’ for you are the bearer of life.” In that instant, as the first man and woman saw their own lives cut short, they realized immediately that immortality would lie in something other – although, not completely separate from – themselves.

Bearing children is something which God created humanity to do before the fall: when death enters the picture, however, children not only become our joy, but now also our immortality.

Although I wouldn’t recommend it due to its violence, the movie “Children of Men” dramatically illustrates this point by asking, “what would happen if children were taken away from humanity?” In this movie, women the world over are suddenly stricken with barrenness. Nobody knows why. Now, the youngest child in the world is well over 18, and no new pregnancies are occurring.

Tell me, what do you think would happen to our heads if this were to occur?

In the movie, the world falls into apocalypse. Suddenly, people just don't care. Life has no meaning. Society falls apart. Masses revolt and riot, governments fall. All is chaos, death, and grinding meaninglessness.

The irony of it all is, of course, nothing has changed in a sense. People are just as healthy as they once were. There is just as much food, just as many resources, just as many toys, gadgets and trinkets to occupy one's time. So why is it that meaninglessness pervades and destroys the human existence?

In Ecclesiastes, the author writes that God has "Written eternity within our hearts." This is a profound truth, which ties all of humanity together – we are all grasping for immortality. From primitive times, people sought to leave handprints, statues, and monuments to outlive them. More recently, people sought for a name in history – to give a great gift, or leave a great scar on the world, in order to be remembered. From the greatest to the smallest of us, we all quietly rebel against the idea that our death will be the end of us. Our memory will go on. We will be honoured by the living, we will be remembered. We will endure. We will survive. Our name will never die.

Of course this is an illusion – but it is an illusion which we cling to desperately. Without it, we would go absolutely insane. Even if we were told we would live 100 years, we would feel this time was a short, shallow life if that were truly to be the end.

And here is the connection: we need children – our children, or the children of others – to fill in this void. Without the next generation, there can be no enduring human race. This feeling is amplified to an extreme degree when you have children of your own: now it is not just your memory, but (in a sense) a part of you which will live on in your children.

The story is told of a missionary in china who was working hard to convert an old farming woman. Using strategies that had worked in the West, he asked her, "But woman – don't you fear death?" Her response was stunning: "Young man, I hold on to the ancestors with one hand, and I hold on to my children with the other. It is so that in a way, I shall never die."

Before I had a child, I would not have grasped any of this. Now, I feel as though I have become a part of a living thing – an organism, which is "humanity." The branches and roots which have given me life have spread through me and given life to another, who will carry on after me.⁸ In Korban and his children, I will live on, I will touch the world, I will endure, I will be remembered.

In the bodies, memories and lives of my children, I will never die.

And, not surprisingly, the true and ultimate source of eternal life comes from a child, born of a woman: in salvation, as in life, "A child shall lead them."

⁸ This is an allusion to a passage in C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, where he explains original sin.

Children, Our Immortality

In death decaying, race is doomed
In children, laughing, our face renew'd

In age, decaying, flicker dim
In youth, renewing, flame within

A cherished spark, fragile dream
The one from two, enduring stream

In you is life, thou favored one
Life giving woman, redeeming Son.

THE WAY OF THE EARTH (Poem)

November 5, 2008

It is the way of the earth:
That the wisdom of gray,
Bow to vigor of green,
And every hope and dream
Be on our children laid.

WHY I WAS “PRAY-VOTING” FOR OBAMA, EVEN THOUGH HE IS “PRO-CHOICE”

November 5, 2008

(Um - just a warning: this post is a little political! Sorry if you get mad at me')

Well, there are a number of reasons I was praying for Obama to win, but just because most of the people that clicked on this post were interested in the 'pro-choice' comment, I will start there.

I wouldn't prefer McCain over Obama for his stand on abortion, any more than I would have preferred Dion over Harper (that's Canadian politics, for the Americans out there) on their stands on homosexuality. It's not that I don't believe that homosexuality and abortion are big, important issues. It's just that I don't think Canada will *ever* outlaw same-sex unions, or that the US will *ever* outlaw abortions - at least not by political force. (If revival sweeps the continent, and God convicted the nations, that would be a different story)

Abortion and homosexuality are non-issues. They are smoke-screens for the Christian community. They are convenient chains, which a politician can pull, to get the Christian voting block to give them unquestioning support.

Let's take a case-study: look at George Bush. Has there *ever* been a more evangelical, pro-life president in the White-house? Probably not. His stand on abortion was a major factor in his being elected. He was practically adopted by the Christian community as 'God's guy' in the Whitehouse.

He's also proved himself to be headstrong and independent - ready and capable of single-handedly taking 'his' country in directions that *he* wanted to go, whether anybody agreed with him or not.

And he has had eight years to do it. If anyone could have 'dealt' with the abortion issue, it would have been Bush.

But he didn't.

Abortion is still legal in the states.

Take another case-study: Stephen Harper. He's been Prime-Minister for how long now? We all know his stand on same-sex marriage. Some of us voted for him specifically because of that.

So - when's the announcement? When will he revoke the same-sex laws?

Here's a wild guess - never!

Politicians are smart, and they know how to out-smart us Christians. They know that if

they look 'more conservative' than the other guy, the Christian community will rubber-stamp them with a halo and declare that they are 'God's messiah' come to turn the continent back to the blissful golden era of the 1950's.

They know that once they receive that quasi-sainthood status, they have a carte-blanche from the Christian community. As long as they avoid scandal, they can do anything they want, and the Christian community will support them, 100%.

So why did I 'pray-vote' for Obama?

Well, to be honest, Obama just struck me as an honest, decent man. Someone with intelligence, who can handle pressure and make wise, discerning, and compassionate decisions on the pressing issues of the times.

McCain? Not so much.

Aside from being a shade more white, conservative and pro-life, exactly what *did* McCain have going for him, anyways?

PACIFISM #2 (Pro-Pacifism)

November 10, 2008

A few posts ago, I wrote an post on pacifism. I am really "up in the air" on this one, so I am flipping back and forth. In the last post, I wrote a strongly "just-war" post, to vent all of my reasoning's for that side. This time, I have written something that supports all of my pacifistic leanings.

I have decided to pretend that I hear two magical voices in my head, one named "Alter" (he is "just-war" all the way!) and one named "Ego" (he's a pacifist).

Please post lots of smart stuff, to help me figure out where I should land!!

Dear 'Alter,'

Thank you for your thoughts. I especially appreciated the compactness, clarity and bluntness of your thoughts: in many ways which will become clear, it is very helpful that you did not try to soft-pedal you opinions for my benefit.

I hope you will not be offended if I write with equal bluntness?

If you will allow me to be frank, I believe that the problem with your thinking, Alter is that you are far too short-sighted and earthly-minded. You care far too much about the survival of your nation, doing your own part, and - it must be said - working to maintain a good reputation (for yourself, for God, and for His church) than you should be. Please consider for a moment what kind of a bind this thinking would have placed you in were you alive in the pre-war Germany. Many countless Christians found themselves, when all was said and done, with a massive amount of guilt on their heads, because of espousing just such theology.

You describe the Christians on earth as a 'tumor,' as defined by, 'an exclusive bubble of people who: Are willing to receive many of the benefits of society, But are unwilling to pay back into society or fully integrate into it, on this important issue.'

Your metaphor is extremely helpful first by clearly indicating the bias in your thinking, and second in pointing out a fundamental aspect of the Christian community. First, let us talk about your bias.

I would like to bring a Scriptural metaphor into the mix, to aid our discussion: it is the one recorded in Daniel 2. In this metaphor, all of the nations are represented by a massive, impressive statue. While grand in its own way, a rock (God, probably also including His church) rolls towards the statue, shatters it to bits and grows into a mountain that takes over the whole earth.

I want you to notice a fundamental similarity between both of these metaphors: in both cases, the state and the church find themselves fundamentally opposed to each other. In both, the state is destroyed and the church is triumphant. There is a significant difference, however: in your metaphor, you have made the church the 'bad-guys,' and also implied

that its success would kill the very body that gave them life.

Doesn't this thinking betray your short-sighted bias? True, a pacifistic nation would die, short of miraculous intervention - but since when was the Church dependent on the state for life?

More than short-sighted, you are earthly-minded. From God's perspective, all of the nations are in the wrong, since they are standing in the way of His rule. Only once they have been removed may He set up His kingdom. Yes, this includes the US, Canada, the West, and every other government on earth.

This leads to discussion of a fundamental aspect of Christian community: segregation. As Christians, we must be 'in the world, but not of it.' We must live in the tension of associating with and influencing our sinful neighbors (1 Cor. 5:9-10), while also remaining aloof from their influence on us (1 Cor. 15:33). We must be like spicy bits of salt, or brilliant points of light (Mat. 5:13-16) among a crooked and sinful generation (Phil. 2:14-16), with the *explicit* purpose of grating on people's nerves, surprising them, and causing them (either now or at the judgment) to glorify God on our behalf. If we compromise our purity, we are worthless. (Mat 5:13, Jam. 1:27).

This purity will at times make us good citizens, and good neighbors: after all, who would *not* want someone living next to them who has purposed to live a quiet and industrious life (1 Thess. 4:11), pouring their heart-and-soul into every task they begin (Ecc. 9:10), and doing their best to exemplify the best ideals of society (Rom. 12:17)? On certain other issues, however, there will be a distinct break with social conventions.

Christians are *not* first members of their nations, but first followers of Jesus. Since all the nations are in a sense in opposition to Christ, this position puts us in the position of being traitors or infiltrators on foreign soil. If we make ourselves friends of this world, we make ourselves enemies of God (Jam. 4:4): if we try to serve both the God of love and the world-systems which are based on money, we will find the task impossible (Luke 16:13). Any agreement between us and our neighbors is purely incidental: conflict is inevitable. It just so happens that the issue of war and coercive force is a flash-point between the kingdom of peace and the kingdom of greed.

I know this is a hard pill for you to swallow, Alter, and I recognize that many of your objections come from valid concerns. You genuinely do not want to put stumbling blocks in the way of people who desire to come to faith. There is a fundamental offense to the gospel, though, Alter, which you cannot mess with: that message is simply 'Jesus is Lord.'

In my thinking, following Jesus in a whole-hearted manner will lead necessarily towards pacifism. I am enjoying the dialogue!

God bless, Ego.⁹

⁹ For my final position on Pacifism/Just war, see the sermon [Why I am a Pacifist](#)

REMEMBRANCE DAY POST

November 11, 2008

"Remember us!" they tell us,
And we too quick agree.
We honor them November
In brief solemnity.

Then haste to fight our own wars
For politics and fame.
Remembering them truly,
We soldier in their name!

But tell me if you know now
What words their hands did pen:
"In our name fight forever!"
or
"Sons, 'NEVER AGAIN!!!"

THE END OF THE WORLD!!

November 16, 2008

I am emotionally unbalanced, exhausted, and I cannot get my right eyelid to stop twitching.

I dropped my wife off at the train four days ago. I woke up two days ago with a vivid dream of an atomic bomb blowing up in my city, and left home one day ago and have been on the road almost the entire time since. Oh, and by the way - I have been listening to the 'doom-and-gloom' books of the Bible on mp3 almost the entire day.

So yeah - I am going nuts!!

What better time to write an 'end-times' post!?!

Okay, pay attention, people, because if this post works correctly, the insane feeling of paranoia which I feel right now will be transferred to you by the end of this post!!!

First of all, you need to recognize that the end is *just around the corner*, because so many signs of the times are dawning on us. Some have already occurred:

1. Travel has increased exponentially
2. Information is shared easily, so that knowledge has dramatically increased

But you, O Daniel, shut up the words and seal the book, even to the time of the end. Many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall be increased. (Dan 12:4)

3. National power has become fragmented, like toes on a foot.
4. Despite being segregated into many portions, they are also divided generally into 'clay' (Islamic/post-Islamic') and 'iron' (Christian/post-Christian')
5. The strength will be in the 'iron' (note: Iron was also the material representing Rome 'the Christian/west is 'post-roman,' and still very roman in some respects)

And as to that which you saw: the feet and toes, part of potters' clay and part of iron; the kingdom shall be divided. But there shall be in it the strength of the iron, because you saw the iron mixed with miry clay. And as the toes of the feet were part of iron and part of clay, so the kingdom shall be partly strong and partly brittle. And as you saw iron mixed with miry clay, they shall mix themselves with the seed of men. But they shall not cling to one another, even as iron is not mixed with clay. (Dan 2:41-43)

Now, for the things which seem to be coming:

1. The ozone layer will be depleted, to the point that the sun's UV radiation will become a lethal force, scorching humanity

Then the fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to burn people with its fiery heat. They were burned by the fierce heat, and they cursed the name of God, who has authority over these plagues. But they would not turn from their sins and praise his greatness. (Rev 16:8-9)

2. Global warming will progress to the point that the ice-caps will melt, causing the oceans to rise, with devastating consequences to many of the world's most important cities (and, yes, since this happens in every apocalyptic movie ever made...the statue of liberty will be at least partially submerged!)

"There will be strange things happening to the sun, the moon, and the stars. On earth whole countries will be in despair, afraid of the roar of the sea and the raging tides. (Luke 21:25)

3. A 'brown cloud' of pollution such as the one which now covers Asia (you can research this online) will cover the earth, causing:

3.1. All or most of the stars to disappear, the sun will become shrouded, and the moon to appear 'blood-red'

"I will give warnings of that day in the sky and on the earth; there will be bloodshed, fire, and clouds of smoke. The sun will be darkened, and the moon will turn red as blood before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes. (Joel 2:30-31)

And I saw the Lamb break open the sixth seal. There was a violent earthquake, and the sun became black like coarse black cloth, and the moon turned completely red like blood. The stars fell down to the earth.

3.2. Agriculture will be dramatically impaired, causing food prices to spike

5When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, "Come!" I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. 6Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, "A quart[a] of wheat for a day's wages,[b] and three quarts of barley for a day's wages,[c] and do not damage the oil and the wine!" (Rev. 6:5)

3.3. Poison rain will poison one third of the earth's fresh water supply

A third of the waters turned bitter, and many people died from the waters that had become bitter. (Revelations 8:11)

3.4. Despite this, the UV radiation and oppressive heat of the sun will still penetrate through the clouds (just like on a smoggy, cloudy day, when you can still get sunstroke/sunburn), so that the prophecy above comes true.

4. One really interesting point here is that *global trade and luxury* will still continue for a select few, despite all of this suffering. This only makes sense in our context: after all, just ask yourself what would happen if all these things happened in the next 150 years'

The Western countries would build better shelters, specialized sunscreen, and expensive (although still efficient) methods of farming. It is only the third world and the poor which will suffer. Of course, this wealth and luxury of the west will come to a crashing end at the "fall of Babylon."

11 "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes any more' 12 cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; 13 cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and bodies and souls of men.

"The merchants of the earth will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your riches and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.' 15 The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn 16 and cry out: " 'Woe! Woe, O great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls! In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!' (Rev. 18:11-17)

In summary, then, I would say, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!" run for the hills!! The sky is falling, the sky is falling!!!

Also, send me all your money, since you won't need it anymore.

Also, buy my book, soon to be released.

Mwa-ha-ha...come to me, all you who are gullible, and I will steal your money!!

....

....

....I need sleep so badly!!...

CRUSADE OR WITNESS?

November 23, 2008

There is a great scene in 'the Mask of Zorro' where Zorro (now old and wise) is trying to teach an apprentice the fine art of 'Zorro'ing,' before going out to fight evil. On one particularly tough day of training, the young kid snaps and yells 'enough of this, I want to go fight the enemy NOW!!!' The old Zorro quietly says, 'okay - choose your weapon.' Eagerly, the kid runs to his scabbard, whips out his sword and runs to challenge Zorro. In response, Zorro pulls out a spoon.

Zorro knew that the sword would be no match for the complex battle they needed to face: the youth needed to learn tact, shrewdness, patience and - yes, manners - to bring about a final, complete victory.

This is a good mental picture of the difference in my mind between 'witness' and 'crusade.' No matter what our cause is, our natural tendency is to run for a sword - to ask, 'How can I quickly and decisively leverage the largest amount of power to overwhelm the enemy?' Sometimes, however, the more subtle means of 'winning' are the most effective.

Consider the testimony of the early church. Even though they lived in a time of great social injustice, they were so compelled with the message of Jesus that they were willing to literally give everything up for the poor and needy among them (Acts 4:35) and in their communities (Acts 9:36-39). In the face of persecution, they prayed not for relief but greater *boldness* to spread their faith more effectively (Acts 4:29). They suffered disenfranchisement, imprisonment, torture, exile, and death willingly for the gospel (Acts 8:1). Despite and *because* of all of these things, the early church fulfilled Jesus command to be 'light of the world' (Mat. 5:14). The response of the non-believers was awe & respect (Acts 2:43, 47), fear (Acts 5:5), and (on the part of some) intense curiosity leading to faith (Acts 16:29-30).

This was the 'spoon' which Jesus was advocating. It was going out in the midst of wolves not with a prerogative to destroy them forcibly, but to win them over by wise/innocent testimony (Mat. 10:16), even at great personal cost (Mat. 16:24).

When you look at the testimony of the church over its history, however, it is clear that we have often defaulted to the 'sword' - literally and figuratively.

The crusades are, of course, the example which stands out in everybody's minds. But also, think of the Inquisition, and the witch-burnings. Think of the wars between the religions and denominations and - here is where it really starts to hurt - think of the wars in our own present context.

How many Christian books are being written on 'The war for Marriage/the Family/America/The Faith/Christianity/prayer-in-schools/creationism, etc., etc'? They are all over the place. Apparently, the church is besieged all around by 'enemies.' In the face of such opposition, our mandate is to 'FIGHT!!'

What is our current sword? Well, unfortunately some people actually use guns - the modern sword - to kill abortion doctors. Others do not kill, but murder in their hearts and with their words (Mat. 5:21-22) as they preach 'holy' hatred for 'the enemy.' For the rest of us, political might, picketing, billboarding, book-writing, etc. becomes our method of attack. We have made it clear: '(North) America is *OUR* turf (that is, God gave it to us Christians) and we will defend it against those secular, liberal, gay, cold, tree-hugging, Darwinian, feminist, evil, communist, abortionist, (etc., etc., etc.) peoples at all costs!!!'

Now tell me - what is the perception which such a stance presents to the world?

Anger, territorialism, exclusivism- or love?

The testimony of 'crusade' (if it could even be called a testimony) is nothing which the world has not seen elsewhere. It seems pretty unlikely to attract people to follow Christ: instead, it is easy to see why people such as Christopher Hitchens, (Author of *Why God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*) think of religion in general and Christianity in particular as a global curse rather than blessing.

I recognize that many people have really good hearts in this. Lots of unfortunate things have happened in the West in the last fifty years, with the decline in morality. It is easy and intuitive to reach for 'swords,' and to call for 'crusades' against those who are leading our nations down the wrong path.

We need to ask, however: is this Jesus' way, or the way of the flesh? Are we choosing the 'sword' or the 'spoon' - or, to leave the metaphor behind 'are we going to have a witness for Jesus, or a crusade?'

ONLY JESUS CAN BRING PEACE TO THE MIDDLE EAST

January 14, 2009

*Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.' "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR and hate your enemy.' "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
(Matthew 5:38-45)*

There was a time in history when overt military force worked pretty well to overcome national enemies. If a large nation was being attacked by a little nation, they could sweep in and conquer them, set up military stations throughout the nation and demand crippling taxes. Yes, some amount of guerilla warfare could be expected in these situations, but so long as people traveled with large military escorts, the danger was minimal and the nation would be mortally crippled. After all - when you are talking about swords, arrows and horses, numbers and training *always* win overwhelming, devastating victories.

This is simply not the case anymore, and Jesus' way of dealing with conflict has never been more badly needed!

Nowadays, guns are cheap and rockets and bombs are not that much more expensive. The result is that a nation may win a devastating victory over another *nation*, but unless they are prepared to wipe out every man woman and child of the *people* of that nation, there will always be people left who are more than able to engage in very successful guerrilla warfare or "terrorism," as it is called today.

I am sure that Israel feels very justified in invading Gaza. After all, Gaza has been sending crude rockets over the border for years - and 'eye-for-eye - is just the way that things are done. But consider this: in under a week, the Israelis have killed *200 children*, and 400 adults - and the death toll is still rising!

Just stop and consider that. Imagine if your own children or nieces were killed by a neighboring nation, whom you have always disliked. Tell me, is this the kind of thing which will make you want to just say, 'Oh well, I guess we'll leave you alone now.' or is this precisely the thing which will make you want to build a rocket to send over the border or (if you have nothing else to live for now) to strap on a bomb and go kill as many of the enemies as possible!?

The 'eye-for-eye' method makes sense. It wins loud applause for nations who feel victimized. But in the end, however, it is only through forgiveness, self-sacrifice and

enemy-love that lasting peace will be won on this earth.
Only Jesus has the answer for lasting peace in the middle east, and for the world!!

CREATION SCIENCE: ARE WE SHOOTING OURSELVES IN THE FOOT?

February 4, 2009

‘I believe the Bible, not any new-fangled scientific theory.’

‘Once you start compromising the ‘literal’ reading of Scriptures on one issue, it will be a slippery slope away from all things good and essential about the faith.’

‘When conflicting, you must believe the Bible rather than science, since the former is written by God, and the latter by mere men.’

Regardless of what you may be thinking, these quotes were *not* written in relation related to the ‘creation/evolution’ debate. Actually, quite similar words (the words above are mine) were written by Luther, Calvin and the Pope concerning the flat earth.¹⁰ Yup, that’s right. Back in the day, when scientists finally figures out the earth was round, it was *the Christian leadership* which held the world back literally in the dark ages for centuries.

The fascinating thing about the whole flat earth issue is that despite all of the stink made about it, (and believe me, there *was* a stink!) the issue really makes no difference. If you read the Bible as a ‘flat-earth-er,’ it makes sense: if you read it as a ‘round-earth-er,’ it also makes sense. Only when these two world-views clash does a problem arise - but this problem only becomes a ‘religious’ problem if one perspective or the other makes the horrible mistake of *tying theology to science*.

...which is precisely what happened. And yes - it is happening again with ‘creation-science.’

With the ‘flat-earth-debate,’ the argument was decisively settled when Captain Cook circumvented the globe: tragically, there is no such resolution for this debate. The only way to prove that God *did* create the earth in six literal days is to get Him to do it again under laboratory conditions: there is absolutely no way to prove that He did not.

...and so the conversation goes on and on, with so much time and resources poured into a debate which only hurts the church!

For starters, most ‘Creation-Scientists’ are not at all qualified to enter a scientific debate: many are pastors, parents and lay Christians. Some of the ‘experts’ have impressive titles, but few are known outside of the Christian community. The material is designed for chuckles and ‘amen’s at a Sunday-evening service, but sounds silly and trite to the unchurched ear.

More than losing face, however, the real loser of this debate are the children of the

¹⁰ Actually, almost all academics at the time agreed that the earth was a sphere. The disagreement was on whether the planets/sun revolved around the earth (Ptolemaic cosmology) or whether the Earth rotated around the Sun (Copernican cosmology).

Church. After being thoroughly indoctrinated in the 'young-earth-only' perspective all through childhood, what is a Christian teen to do when they enter college? Some ghettoize and find a way to hold onto their anti-intellectual faith: others (statistically, probably 'most') find it impossible to hold onto the simplistic explanations of their parents.

And here is the gunshot to the foot: here is where the church is destroying itself from the inside out, and fulfilling its own prophecy:

Because the young-earth theory is preached so strongly, MANY FEEL THAT TO BECOME AN EVOLUTIONIST IS TO GIVE UP ON GOD!!

Tell me, where did they get this silly idea? Think about it - so long as God created the world, what difference does it make whether it is flat, or round, whether it was created in six days or three billion years? What does *any* of this have to do with Jesus, with faith, with living a transformed life?

Creation science is a prime example of Christianity shooting itself in the foot: By tying additional doctrines to the Gospel, they have made the faith unnecessarily fragile, disconnected, and distasteful to a generation which desperately needs a relevant path to God!!!

WHAT'S A GIRL TO DO?!

February 18, 2009

There is a touching scene in “God’s Smuggler” where “Brother Andrew” receives two letters simultaneously, and sits down on a park-bench to read them. The first fills him with joy - he has been accepted for a long-awaited ministry position! Immediately he feels a sense of joy and conviction - yes, this is God’s “next step” for him. In the next letter, however, his spirit is crushed. It is from his father: Andrew is to stop this “churchy” nonsense, and return home immediately - the family needs him. Holding the letters in either hand, Andrew enters into an intense hour of trial - after weeping, praying, and “wrestling with God” for most of the afternoon, he finally lowers the letter from his father, and raises the letter from the mission. Yes, he will obey God, not man on this one.

I think most of us would agree that Andrew made the right call: following God rather than your parents is clearly in line with the teachings of scripture. For example, when Jesus called James and John, they dropped everything - leaving their father alone with the family business - and followed Jesus (Mat. 4:18-22).

On the other hand, when two unnamed disciples asked for permission first to care for aging parents (the cultural meaning of “bury my father”), and the second to say “goodbye” to parents and family, Jesus rejected them both as disciples, since hesitation or a divided heart are not acceptable (Mat. 8:21-22, Luke 9:59-60). Jesus made it clear that following Him involved taking up a cross (Mat. 10:38, Luke 9:23, etc.) and that those who were unwilling to count the cost were not worthy: this cost will involve leaving money, possessions and relationships (Luke 14:25-35). Rather than hiding from the relational cost, Jesus bluntly stated that the true disciple must not only leave, but also hate their parents, in comparison to the great love they must have for Him (Luke 14:26). Jesus made no apologies for the fact that true discipleship will at times destroy families (Mat. 10:35, Luke 12:53).

Considering the clear teachings of Scripture - and also considering that Andrew was, by this point, a mature Christian who was very able to discern God’s will - there seems to be no room for argument. This was Andrew’s moment of decision - his call. Would he follow God or man? If he had chosen his parents, he would have been no follower of Christ. I think most would agree with what I have written so far - but let’s throw in a twist: what if “Andrew” was, in a hypothetical situation, “Andrea”? We are assuming, then, that this woman is in exactly the same predicament - she is a mature Christian, living away from home as a grown single, who is faced with the decision of following God’s clear leading, or her parents’ clear instructions: what should she do?

I know that some of you out there are scratching your heads, wondering what I am getting at with this, so let me explain. According to some patriarchal teachers, there is really no such thing as an “independent” person. As the pagan soldier alluded to in Mat. 8:9 and Luke 7:8, we are all “men under authority” - with people under us, and people over us. This theme is picked up in Romans 13 - which clearly states that there is no authority which has not been instituted by God (v. 1), and thus those who resist

authorities are really resisting God (v. 2-7).

Although this passage is talking specifically about obedience to government, the patriarchalist would apply it also to the home, since the husband/father is to be the head of the home, with his wife and children submitting to, and obeying him (Eph. 6, Col. 3:18-25, 1 Pet. 3). Appeal is also made to the patriarchs of old, whose wives submitted completely to them - especially Sarah, who even lied, deceived and endangered her own purity in obedience to her husband (Gen. 12, 20, 1 Pet. 3). All of these passages are sometimes tied together with a metaphor called “the umbrella principal.” Spiritually, all organizations work on the pyramid structure, with God at the top, who appoints leaders under Him to govern families, churches, businesses, governments, etc. This pyramid is like a series of umbrellas: to step out from under the authority of a leader is to step out from the shelter of God-appointed leadership - a move which is sure to bring God’s wrath down upon you. Also, this “umbrella” functions as a means of finding God’s will for your life: even mature, married couples should seek the advice of their parents on major decisions, since they are still under authority to them. This “umbrella principle” applies especially to women: after all, there are really two “umbrellas” which a woman may function under - her fathers, or her husband’s. Until she is married, she must remain firmly within the protective authority of her father, regardless of age, stage-in-life, location, etc.

Now that I have caught the rest of you up to speed, I think we can all stare into the case-study of “Andrea,” and see the same issue reflected back at us. Clearly, Andrea is in a real “rock-and-hard-place” situation: she truly feels that God is calling her to the mission field - if she refuses to take up her cross and follow, she will be in disobedience to God. On the other hand, obeying God would mean disobeying her father - an action which (she has been taught) will remove God’s protection and blessing from her life, and place her in a state of rebellion against God-given authority.

Tell me now – what’s a girl to do in this situation?

CHAPTER FOUR: QUESTIONS, AND GROWTH

IS LOVE GOD?

February 20, 2009

I recently had an interesting talk with an old friend, Wanda-Marie. During the course of our conversation, she mentioned her reservations about a statement made by Shane Clairbourne in *An Everyday Radical*.

In the interest of full-self-disclosure, let the record show that I have not read this book: however, a quote which Wanda-Marie repeated to me has really piqued my interest, and has made me wonder whether to take Clairbourne out of my 'good-books'? The quote is as follows:

'God is love and love is God'

Although apparently innocuous, this addition has the potential to - at best - syncretize eastern religion into Christianity and - at worst - to actually replace Christianity with a full-blown easternism, with Christian trappings. Please allow me to explain:

Although there is a tremendous amount of diversity in the eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, New Age), I think I am correct in saying that all of them see the self as the centre of the universe. In other words, God is not 'up there,' so to speak, but 'in here.' Literally, each person must dig deep inside of themselves to reach God (or 'ultimate reality,' or whatever spiritual force is behind the universe). Usually, this theology leads (especially in the Americanized versions) towards radical introspection, in search of religious feelings.

In other words, we could expect that the reason for all eastern religious practice and teaching is to dig deep within - through meditation, yoga, incense, etc. - to drum up religious 'warm-fuzzies.' These feelings become almost the sole measure of one's spirituality, by which one may measure how connected they are to the divine.¹¹

This leads us to the question: is Clairbourne actually leading us to the same place, with a statement like the above?

First of all, if 'love is God,' then we must begin our quest with an anthropocentric (aka 'human-centered') starting-point - after all, love is something we humans feel. Already, we are starting on the wrong foot. If we take the two additional steps of saying: a) that love is a warm-fuzzy emotion, and b) that love is an entirely internal experience, then there is nothing differentiating eastern religion from Christianity except for nouns ('God/Jesus' instead of 'the divine/avatars') and practice (a church instead of a temple, worship songs instead of meditation, sermons instead of Oprah and Deepak Chopra, etc.)

After all, what difference is there between the mystic described above and the 'Christian' who comes to church only to evoke a 'spiritual experience' to brighten their day? In both cases: 1) the focus is inwards, not upwards, 2) the intended result is internal "warm-

¹¹ This is not how I would describe Eastern Religions today.

fuzzies" rather than upwards-facing worship, 3) no allegiance is given to the divine, only benefits received from it/him, 4) in the end, the self is deified, by becoming the center of one's religious experience and (let's just say it like it is) the "idol" before which one is worshipping.

I need to be fair to Clairbourne: I have not read his book. Maybe he carefully guarded against these possibilities in the context...? I certainly hope that he has - because these words as they stand certainly open a can of worms that I don't think Clairbourne is ready to deal with.

A NOTE ON JOHN REGIER/CARING FOR THE HEART MINISTRIES

It was about this time that I had some very excellent counseling with a Christian counselor affiliated with John Regier's ministry, *Caring for the Heart*. I speak of the new understanding of security in Christ, and the freedom to not compete in the sermon *Peace on Earth?*

This counseling also helped to heal many of the remaining hurts from ministry experiences. In hindsight, this short counseling session was a real turning point for me in my intellectual journey, and my life.

IS IT JUST ME AND JESUS?

February 26, 2009

Some, under the pretence of being taught of the Spirit of God, refuse to be instructed by books or by living men. This is no honoring of the Spirit of God. It is disrespect to Him, for if He gives to some of His servants more light than to others - and it is clear He does - then they are bound to give that light to others, and to use it for the good of the church. But if the other part of the church refuse to receive that light, to what end did the Spirit of God give it? This would imply that there is a mistake somewhere in the economy of God's gifts and graces, which is managed by the Holy Spirit. - Charles Spurgeon Words of Counsel for Christian Workers

This is an interesting and very good quote, although I think I would state it just a little differently: I'm not so sure that there are two groups of people "the "enlightened" who speak, and the "unenlightened" who listen. While God may gift some people to primarily speak of insights, I think the primary reason for listening to others is that the Spirit continually gives insight into different things to various people, so that no matter how "enlightened" one is, they can always learn from other Christians.

Either way, though, I think this quote really hits on the point that God intended the Christian life to be lived in community, and that especially includes learning. We need to share our thoughts from others, receive from them, and especially to listen to and learn from the great minds of old, who have written down their thoughts for us.

RULE THYSELF WISELY, AND ANOTHER'S ROD YOU NEED NEVER FEAR

April 8, 2009

I really don't like getting on people's cases about stuff. In my day-job, I drive a garbage truck which means - among other things - that I have lots of interactions with...shall we say...teens who aren't going to be in seminary any time soon.

Most of the time, we get along great. I drive, the guys throw garbage, and between stops we talk about music and vehicles with big engines. It's all very "laissez-faire" and congenial: but with this latest hire...not so much.

For all of his other winning qualities (he has two of them, at least...oh, let me think...) he has one glaring fault which - due to my quasi-authoritative role - places us continually at odds. The boy is lazy, through and through!

Like I said, I don't like getting on people's cases: but what am I to do when he literally just stands there and watch a fellow-employee do the work for both of them, while he lights a cigarette, plays with his iPod, etc., etc., etc.

It all leads me to my poignant insight of the day (also doubling as a handy-dandy "quote of the day"): "Rule thyself wisely, and another's rod you need never fear." Think about it - in almost EVERY area of life, if you will just self-govern yourself, work hard, and apply yourself, you will eventually work yourself to a place where either your boss leaves you alone, you are your boss' best buddy, or you ARE your own boss.

If you are lazy, even people who barely know you, or who have no business telling you what to do will start bossing you around. Ever heard someone say "everyone is on my case"? Could it be that they aren't on their own case enough?

The moral of the story is: if you don't like people bossing you around, don't complain about it, don't quit, and don't lash back. Be quiet and take it. If they have genuinely pointed out a fault, take that under consideration and change it. If not, just diligently work - going the extra mile, and always asking "what more can I do" rather than "what can I get away with NOT doing." Very quickly, you will find that people are not on your back anymore. In fact, you will soon find that the world is smiling on you, everyone at work is your friend, and promotions and raises come quickly and easily.

I'M A NEW CREATION...AND YOU'RE NOT...

April 15, 2009

A couple weeks ago, Chris and I were having a conversation about Christianity and sin. The question is, "if we have died to the flesh, why do we keep on sinning?" As Paul says in Romans 7, it is not "us" that sins, but sin in us. The sin is just kind of "habit" which we don't HAVE to follow and, most importantly, it feels very strange to us, because it is not in our nature anymore. Sinning for a Christian is not like an athlete who doesn't try hard enough, but more like a fish that jumps out of the ocean and tries to walk. It is something that we were just not designed to do.

I actually hadn't thought about this whole "what dies when we get saved, and why do Christians still sin" question before, and am still chewing on it. One thing that came out of our conversation, however, is that I can't help but look at non-Christians differently. Suddenly I realized "If I became a radically different creature at salvation, then unsaved are different 'creatures' than myself." Of course, there are some non-Christians in whom God is working very hard, and some Christians in whom Satan is working very hard, which throws things off a bit - but across the board, I think Christians and non-Christians are just plain DIFFERENT. Thinking in this way, I am able to relate to, and even feel some compassion for people I bump into that would otherwise just drive me up the wall.

Today, for example, I met someone who - I don't think I'm exaggerating here - runs all of life through the lens of personal (usually sexual) gratification. People, vehicles, etc., etc., etc. - it seems that everything finds its ultimate worth in relation to its ability to please Mr. "X". Those things which are unappealing or unavailable are kicked aside and degraded - the others are pursued and without hesitation. I feel compelled to add the phrase "and such were we all" in here. It is such a sad, twisted reality - the human heart ensnared in sin!

As I said, however, I am finding it oddly easier to love people like this when I realize that they are, so to speak, from a different planet than myself. Due to a lot of circumstances beyond my control (and a few which were kind of under my control, maybe) I ended up "born again." That is, my old nature died, and I got a new heart, a renewed conscience, and the Holy Spirit took up residence within me. Of course, I can still enter into that old "me at the center of the universe" train of thought (and, sadly, I do go there so much more often than I would like) but I also know that this is a huge insult to the God who saved me, a destruction of a part of the good life He has put within me, and a contradiction of the new nature He has put within me. It is "just not right" for me to go there: but then, it would not be a contradiction to Mr. X's nature. He has not been redeemed. Like a pig who is happy in his muck, so Mr. X is just acting out of his nature. My role, here, is to recognize that "but for the grace of God, there go I!" and to pray my heart out for this poor gentleman. It is only when God's spirit starts to go to work within his heart that he will awaken to his own filth and neediness. Until then, there is no point in judging him according to a set of criteria which simply do not apply to his spiritual nature. I'm a new creation and he is not " but Oh God, may He be saved as well!!

AM I IN THE FLESH OR IN THE SPIRIT?

April 16, 2009

Well, it is happening again. I have grown and matured enough to know that it is happening and what to do about it, but that does not change the fact that I am in the same place, facing off with the same old enemy.

Let me put it this way: I have something important to do, but I don't feel like doing it. In fact, I don't feel like doing anything constructive. I want to eat junk food. I want to play computer games. I want I want I want...anything that gives me instant gratification. All things instant-pleasure fill my mind. My sermon? What a headache! Scriptures? Bor-ing! I just want to crawl into a hole and self-indulge myself to death.

Does any of this sound familiar? I hope I am not the only one who has "past-life flashbacks" like that! (Read the post two posts back to understand what I mean by that).

What is happening is that my mind has become "set on the flesh" (Romans 8:5-8). Technically, this is a state which only the unsaved are in, but us saved folks sometimes get stuck in it too if we're not careful. For me, it is usually computer games, listening to my iPod and eating junk-food (all good things, more or less) which triggers this for me. Once I am in it, everything gets flipped upside down. As Romans 8:5-14 says, when I'm "in the flesh" or "carnal," I don't care about the life and peace of God, I don't care about pleasing Him and I probably couldn't please Him if I tried. If I follow what I "want" to do when in this state, the result is always death in one form or another.

So that is half the battle - seeing where I am, and how I got there. Now for the tough half: how do I get out?

Paul writes, "I do all things for the sake of the Gospel, so that I may become a fellow-partaker in it. Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." (1 Cor. 9:23-27)

I think Paul would say that the problem here is that my "body" is leading me, instead of my spirit, or my head. If I want to snap out of it (and I had better snap out of it, he would say, because I am in grave danger at the moment) then I had better show this old bag of bones who is boss - to "discipline my body and make it my slave."¹²

Others find that certain things work for them. For myself, there is nothing like physical exercise to drive the Devil from my body. It seems that right about the time when jogging it is not "fun" anymore, that old man starts to die. After that, it is like every aching step

¹² Actually, Paul would say that the "flesh" wars against the "spirit." But he would not say that the body is bad. Here I am lapsing into Evangelical Platonism! Oops!

on the pavement is an iron-soled boot stomping that old man back into his coffin, where he belongs.

Well, there is my predicament, this is my plan, and that is where I am going - wish me luck!

AM I “GETTING WITH THE PROGRAM”?

April 26, 2009

The sun cut diagonal slashes through the sawdust-laden air. The occasional hammering and the sharp ring of power-saws cut through the stillness, and feisty squirrel chattered indignantly at all the commotion. Dreamily, a teenager was leaning against a post, staring off into space - all defenses lowered before the seductions of a sleepy summer afternoon.

The year was 1995, that teenager was me, and I was about to have a rude awakening.

“Cut me another three-foot 2/4.” The phrase was terse and stern, bursting from the cauldron of discontent simmering within my boss.

“Oh, oh sorry - three foot you said...or was that three and a half?” In my haste to comply, I overcompensated and began blundering around - tripping myself up in the lumber and falling flat.

It had been the last straw.

“Son, this is just about all I can take. Now, we are here to work! You can see what I am doing. It is not rocket science. Five minutes ago I asked you to cut a piece three feet - you could have figured out that I would need another one. You aren't doing your job just listening to instructions - you need to become a part of what is going on here. Get with the program, boy!”

The words stung, but they stuck. By the end of the summer, that old salt would go out of his way to select me as his helper. By then, I had learned the fine art of “getting with the program.”

Certain situations have made me think about this conversation again recently. I have been thinking about how there are two options in any workplace - either we mindlessly follow the rules (legalism), or we take time to actually become a part of what is going on (freedom). I believe that the same basic principle applies also in spiritual matters.

When we first come to Christ, we do not have an intuitive sense of what is right and wrong, of important and unimportant issues, or of our place in the overall plan of God. Therefore, we become dependent on others (parents, pastors, speakers/authors) to develop elaborate sets of “do's” and “don'ts” for us. Everything becomes important for us, and our “place” is to “do as we are told.”

While this is a good starting place, these sorts of things are supposed to act as a sort of “tutor” to lead us to real maturity (see Gal. 4). By cultivating a close relationship to Jesus, one will be able to discern not just “what the rules are,” but “why are these rules here?” As a Christian begins to grasp the broader principles of love, worship, service and humility, they begin to see their own place within the sweeping plan of God within time, a whole new mentality takes over. The rules are still followed, but they are no longer the focus. Leaders are still respected, but obedience is not the end-goal. Perfection is never

attained, but one begins to get more of the important things right more often. Most importantly, a deep relationship is built beyond the trappings of religion - and even past Scriptures themselves - to get in step with, to get on the same page as, and to “get with the program” of God, through Jesus Christ His son (John 5:39-40).

This is the core of true spirituality: this is really “getting with the program,” for “he who has the son has life: he who does not have the son does not have life,” (1 John 5:12).

SPIRITUAL PUBERTY

June 18, 2009

I feel that I am in the throes of spiritual puberty.

Pimpily, gawkish and unsure of myself, I feel that I am still seeking to find out who I will become. Mentally, I am sliding back and forth between denominations and theological systems. What will I believe? The core is a given - but as to the details...I do not know.

Like a teen whose arms grow first, or first his legs, or first one appendage and then the other, I feel that the nature of my education has left me distorted and awkward. I am confident when speaking of the reformation, but have no idea what happened in the last 300 years of Christianity. I am fluent when speaking of the doctrines of the Trinity, but draw a blank on eschatology (end times). The things I have taken classes on I know well - but other things I know hardly at all.

Having only recently (and partially) made the transition from one who must constantly receive to one who is able to give, I am unsure of myself and hesitant. Who am I to contribute? Where should I step in? When am I overstepping? When am I acting out in pride? When am I hiding away behind fear, cloaked in false-humility? I do not know.

Most of all, I feel that my head has grown faster than my heart. Love is, of course, the most important thing for any Christian - especially for Christian leadership. But the heart is the slowest muscle to grow, and the one least attended in modern colleges and seminaries. I am terrified of becoming a clanging gong, a clashing cymbal - an intellectual out of touch, a theologian who cares not for souls, a teacher obsessed with his own career, a brilliant mind devoid of compassion - cold, dead, and useless to God.

Into the chaos and insecurity of this season, God has given me two gifts which - although I have at times been slow to recognize it - have been like fixed points on the horizon: beacons of truth to guide me through the storm.

The first is the love of a practical and Godly woman, and of a demanding yet (somehow) very precious child. Family brings chaos into my tightly ordered world, and also purpose. I will admit that there are times that I resent the loss of time, the addition of responsibilities, the encroachment on "sacred time," the near impossibility of establishing a routine. But I am realizing, more and more that the only really important task of any Christian is to love. My family has made me more useful to God than any amount of Christian education ever could.

The second gift of God has been my church family. Again, this is a gift which I (like a spoiled teen!) took for granted at times rejected. I had to learn the hard way that solid friendships, wise counsel, genuine hearts of love, and a community of forgiving, welcoming and spiritually alive Christians is very, very hard to come by. Red Lake Mennonite Church has been the family which reared me - and I feel that it is also the place where the first steps of maturity should be taken. I will never again take my home church for granted!

At the core of it, I feel that God's lesson in this season is the lesson of "small."

Growing up, there were always people telling me I had so much potential - I was destined for "big things." In my early Christian education, this message seemed to be amplified: unless I did something larger than life, I felt like I would be a failure.

What God is teaching me now is that God does not measure talent in the same way that the world does, nor does He measure tasks in the same way that the world does. I am realizing that to be a good father, to be devoted husband, to pour out my life into a small congregation - this would be a good and fitting use of my life. Maybe it would be "big" in God's sight, maybe it would not. But I am not to look for a name for myself. Christianity is all about love, and love is all about relationships, about people. How do you measure the worth of loving a soul? Is it a small thing to love even a few people deeply, truly, and permanently, and to pour one's life out for them?

In secular life, the quest is always to move from "small" to "big." In spiritual life, I think that the pattern is opposite. A real saint is one who is small in their own eyes. I long to become small, to shrink, to diminish, so that He may increase.

And Lord, may thou be my all in all, and please teach me what I need to know from this awkward and uncomfortable season in my life!

Amen.

WHAT IF THERE 'IS' A HELL?

July 7, 2009

I have been reading Augustine's 'City of God,' and just came across this rather horrifying (although thoroughly Biblical) description of hell:

[the ungodly]...shall inherit eternal misery, which is also called the second death, because the soul shall then be separated from God its life, and therefore cannot be said to live, and the body shall be subjected to eternal pains. And consequently this second death shall be the more severe, because no death shall terminate it.

...For in this life, when this conflict has arisen, either pain conquers and death expels the feeling of it, or nature conquers and health expels the pain. But in the world to come the pain continues that it may torment, and the nature endures that it may be sensible of it; and neither ceases to exist, lest punishment also should cease...

It is not that I didn't know this, really. The clearest reading of Scriptures is that nonChristians will consciously suffer eternally, in a fate which is euphemistically described as "the lake of fire." Yes, I knew that - but I guess I have been avoiding it.

I feel myself being stared down by an awful, terrifying question: what if there really is a Hell? There are a great many things in my life that will need to change, and quickly, if people I know are even now passing from this life into eternal flames on the other side...

A NOTE ON AUGUSTINE

Summer, 2009

Note to reader: During this summer, I worked uber-dilligently on a 15-page research paper on Augustine's just-war theory.¹³ In preparation, I read *The City of God*, *Confessions*, *The Enchiridion* and selections from *Letters*. About 1600 pages in all. I would later speak of the transformation that Augustine's works made in me. He did not so much convince me of anything new, but he transformed the way that I thought.¹⁴ Much later, I discovered analytical thought and the rules of logic, and realized that it was this which had, in large part, influenced me.

After climbing the breathtaking peaks of *The City of God*, basking in the pure honesty and worship of *Confessions*, and throughout all, breathing in the cool crisp air of Augustine's mind, I was never again at home in the murky relativism of postmodernity and Emergent.

In hindsight, the events of the fall were determined by the summer's readings.

¹³ See [The Politics of St. Augustine from an Anabaptist Perspective](#)

¹⁴ I reflected at length on this in [A Wise Shepherd of a Wandering Mind](#)

APPEARANCES ON “A CHRISTIAN AND AN ATHEIST PODCAST”

August 19, 2009

As I mentioned in church a couple weeks ago, I am working on appearing on the podcast, “A Christian and an Atheist.”

So far, we have done one interview, but we had technical difficulties and I wasn’t really happy about how well I did. We mutually decided to do the same material over again - that interview is set for this Thursday.

If you want to hear the old interview (which won’t be open to the general public) click [here](#). Thanks for praying!

Listen to the next two interviews below:

[Back to the Garden Pt 1](#)

[Back to the Garden Pt 2](#)

SHAKESPERE QUOTE

October 10, 2009

Here's a notable quote from Shakespeare's 'King Lear':

*How far your eyes may pierce I can not tell:
Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.*

It is so true that we often ruin the good things which we have by trying to make them better. This seems to especially be the case in Christian circles. Straying from the simple path of love, gentleness, self-control, etc., all balance is lost in an all-out pursuit of one exaggerated virtue or unique teaching which apparently has the key to "super-holiness."

Although commendable (from a human perspective) such attempts are usually a reflection of a heart which has not really learned to rest in God's love and acceptance, to cling to grace, to rejoice with others, and to live in kindness, gentleness, and respect with others.

Oh God give me grace to follow steadfast, even down paths of mediocrity!

Taking My Education Into My Own Hands...

November 2, 2009

As I am nearing the end of my studies at Briercrest, there are three things which I am realizing:

- 1) **there is no end to new books** being written about theology,
- 2) **most of these books** (justifiably!) disappear quickly into the sands of time,
- 3) **there is a select core of books** which have stood the test of time, and remain the standard for Christian thought. It is simply expected that any Christian intellectual has a working knowledge of these works. All major papers and books in theology are linked to these works and build off of their content.

I have decided upon a simple plan: I will compile a list of these books (odd that such a list wasn't part of my MA in theology...) and read them in their entirety. As time allows, I will also write introductions and book-reviews to make them more accessible to people who read this blog.

Aside from intellectual credibility, I have really found myself blossoming under the tutelage of the ancient masters - there is a reason why the classics have always been so dear to the Church! Also, I feel that the first books which I seriously study will lay a foundation against which to measure other works.

I have put my interest in the Emerging Church and Atheist Apologetics almost entirely on the back-burner to pursue this greater goal: **I want to know about “real” Christianity before weighing the pro’s and con’s of modern, extreme variations of Christianity.**

I have created a new tab (“Reading List”)¹⁵ which will document my progress in compiling my list and reading through it.

¹⁵ Regrettably, I lost this list when I deleted my site. However, you can see the books I hope to read in my [goodreads profile](#) (also accessible from my Facebook page).

A Mystery Solved About Mars Hill Church

November 10, 2009

Last week Keith sent me a link to some EXCELLENT sermons by Mark Driscoll, teaching pastor at the Mars Hill church. (Link in iTunes here...<http://rss.marshillchurch.org/mhcsermonaudio>) I especially enjoyed the sermons “the struggle of false teachers.” Wow - Driscoll really knows how to say it like it is! And his words carry the genuine weight of Scriptures behind them. Yes, false teachers are “wolves” that kill and destroy the sheep. Yes, there are “close-handed” (aka really important) doctrines that you just CANNOT mess with. Yes, a true pastor needs to spend time guarding and defending his sheep against false teachers. So true!

All through his sermon, however, I just kept asking myself “How can Mark Driscoll and Rob Bell be pastors of the same church?” After all, Rob Bell - the man who recently wrote a book “Velvet Elvis,” in which he stated that religion is like a faded painting of Elvis which needs to be re-painted every generation or so, and that the virgin birth and other essential doctrines are fair-game along with everything else - is also the pastor of Marsh Hill church. It seemed that the two were at complete logger-heads: according to Driscoll’s very correct interpretation of Scriptures, Rob Bell is a heretic.

I typed in “Driscoll vs. Rob Bell” into Google and did indeed find that Driscoll has recently come out and said Rob Bell is a heretic, and he is (predictably) getting flames for it. I was all bothered by it, thinking, “After all his wonderful precision with Scriptures, has Driscoll allowed a heretic to emerge as co-pastor in his own church? This will absolutely devastate his ministry!”

Okay, long story short - there are two (at least) churches which are called “Mars Hill” church. Actually, Rob Bell’s is “Mars Hill Bible Church” (ironically enough, since they seem more concerned with popular spirituality and NT. Wright’s theology than the Bible per-se) and Driscoll’s church is just “Mars Hill Church.”

Well that makes sense...kind of. I suppose there’s a limit of good names in the bible. Too bad it worked out like this - so confusing!!

Pacifism: A TENTATIVE POSITION

November 12, 2009

I have been debating whether this is a bad time for a pacifism post. War is on everybody's mind, and so pacifism is on mine ...and yet I don't want to be offensive. I know this is a sacred time of year for many.

Since this is the place for me to post my own thoughts on things, I will go ahead and do that - but to those who disagree: please know that I mean no offence.

In the last year, I have struggled with pacifism vs. just-war and have now basically landed on the pacifist side. My reasoning is as follows:

1. Jesus' commandments to "turn the other cheek," "return good for evil" and "pray for your enemies" is completely incompatible with the "you attack us, we attack you," "you threaten us, we attack you," or "you have resources we need, we attack you," mentality of war.
2. Christian attempts to reconcile war and Jesus have been flimsy and have always lead (in hind- sight) to places which we are ashamed of (Crusades, the religious wars of the 1600's, Bush's crusade, etc.)
3. The early church seems to have been completely pacifistic until around the time of Constantine: this is also when the Church's purity went down the drain, as far as I can see
4. Movements in history (most notably the Anabaptist movement) which have marginalized received theology to place a heavy emphasis on Scriptures itself have almost all come away from the Bible with a pacifistic stance.

This is about where I was last year, but two things were still stopping me: first, if war is vital to a nation's survival - are pacifists good citizens? Second, if violence is at times necessary to a family's safety, are pacifists good father/husbands?

I wrote out a detailed exposition of my citizenship concern to an Anabaptist pastor Bruxy Cavey, which you can read [see above] Bruxy was gracious and directed me to some resources but didn't really have time to respond. After a while, however, a response began forming in my mind, and I wrote down what he (or someone like him) might say, from scriptures, to my letter. [See above]

If you have time to listen to an hour long discussion on this, this link covers about all of the issues on pacifism, from a pacifist side of things. (<http://www.themeetinghouse.ca/roundtable/feed.rss> ; podcast "prince of peace, God of war").

In sum, my answer is that no, Christians are not to be good citizens. In fact, there is nothing which a nation should fear more than Christianity. It's members return good for evil - thus, they cannot participating in that one, great act of patriotism, which is war.

This refusal will have a destabilizing effect on any nation - and any ruler with a brain will persecute true Christianity. History speaks, however – no matter how much you persecute Christianity, it will continue to spread. So what will the result be? Perhaps the nation will “fall” - that is, be invaded by another nation. This will be devastating to the nation...and yet Christianity will simply be open to a new mission field, and the cycle will begin again.

We all know that war is evil - everybody hates it. But who will lay down their arms first? When will it all stop? Maybe Christianity was God’s answer to a hurting world, which desperately needs to grasp the idea of pacifism.

As to pacifism in the home...well, that is a tough one. There is one quote which really forms my thinking, though. Bruxy recounts discussing a hypothetical scenario with a number of Christians: “What if a bad person broke into your house and threatened to kill your family - then in a moment of confusion left his gun right in front of you. Would you take the gun and shoot him?” There were various responses to this question. Finally one older gentleman replied, “no, I would not pick up the gun. I would fall to my knees and pray - because I believe that I would be tapping into a greater power on my knees than with the gun.”

I am still not completely sure where I stand on all aspects of pacifism - but there are two things I clearly understand: 1) Pacifism is a doctrine of faith in a God who really is in control, 2) Pacifism is a doctrine which lives life before the throne of God: wrongs in this life will be righted in the next, and thus there is no need to fight for our rights here and now.

I am still in the process of working out this theology - I would be interested in thoughts and discussions on this topic!

CHAPTER FIVE: A BOMBSHELL AND A BREAK

FROM “COOL YOUNG EMERGENT INTELLECTUAL” TO “OLD-FASHIONED, BORING CONSERVATIVE”

November 22, 2009

Those of you who read this blog probably know what “emergent” means - basically, it is a form of Christianity which is custom-made to the generation now aged 20-30. There is a knee-jerk reaction against the protectionism of the 70’s, the perfectionism of the 80’s and the big-shiny-shallow churches of the 90’s. Hallmarks of Emergentism are obsession with big questions (not answering them, just chewing on them), downplaying or outright rejecting hell, the importance of the Bible, the exclusivity of Christianity, the horror of abortion and the perversion of homosexuality. Ambivalence on these topics allows the Emergent movement to be very “laid back” about their faith, and spend more time being “culturally relevant” than offending their society with the cold hard offense of the Gospel. Emergent folks also are sick of “the institutional church” and either want to start a new church in their own image or just leave and fly solo. Emergent people are very interested in compassion (some actually do something about it...some only pat themselves on the back for THINKING about doing something about it), but generally Emergent folks aren’t all that interested in evangelism, except to fellow disgusted Christians.

For a while I was calling myself emergent: then I stopped, but others still labeled me as such. Right at this moment, I feel like just absolutely rejecting all things emergent and pushing just as hard as I can into the old, “1950’s,” Bible-thumping, perfect-family, conservative, institutional-church oriented, close-minded “stereo-typical-Christian” mould which I have been reacting against.

Before explaining my reaction, maybe I should explain my journey (there’s a very Emergent thing to do! Ha!...)

My main reasons for becoming Emergent were reactionary. My wife had experienced a lot of pain growing up (and especially leaving) a home which was very close-knit and probably a little on the legalistic side. Because of her tendency towards extremes and her desire to please authorities, she took the legalism of her family much more seriously than the others - thus, when she began to question and ultimately to reject some of the rules she grew up with it made the “leaving-the-nest” tensions much more acute than normal.

Since I grew up with the Bible and church as my emotional happy-place, there was a conflict in our early marriage. When my wife saw me reading a Bible, or doing some other overtly “religious” activity, the fresh wounds from her past were opened, and she reacted negatively. I didn’t want to fit the mould of a super-religious, domineering, perfectionist family-head, and so I backed off of that stuff. Also, I began to see that some of my religious expression was motivated by an insecure desire to protect myself - I started becoming suspicious of all things overtly spiritual. Finally, we had some negative experiences with the church, which made us want to retreat into more secular occupations.

After all that, out popped a very stereo-typically emergent couple. We dropped Sunday-school and other church involvements and only showed up for Sunday-mornings. For a while we even thought about dropping that. We read a lot of books and resources by Emergent authors, watched a lot of movies, and hung out with more Emergent friends - although we still kept contact with our “institutional-church” friends. We began questioning the typical Emergent questions (mentioned above,) and wondering how to make our faith more “relevant” for evangelism to our generation - as well as reaching people like us who had been “burnt” by the institutional church.

Okay, all that is background: this post is me saying - and saying emphatically - “I AM DONE!!” I am not emergent anymore!! I quit. I resign. I am burning (metaphorically speaking) all of my Emergent books, I am diving back into “the institutional church,” I am (slowly) developing convictions about the tough questions of life, and most of all, I am taking the reigns of our family, to lead us into being a solidly Christian home.

There are a lot of things which have been feeding into this. God has been leading me to a lot of Reformed resources which - as it turns out - is the stronghold of all things anti-Emergent. These scholars¹⁶ and talkers have been picking away at the arrogance, woundedness, reactionism and independent spirit behind my Emergentism. Also, I have gone back into my church, and (much to my surprise!) have found that the leadership is NOT threatened by change. They are able to keep step with me in my Emergent literature. They aren’t insecure about their faith or “the church,” and (here’s the real shocker!) they are just as frustrated with outdated formalisms where they are present, and are actively seeking new ways of expressing their faith through the church. I felt like leaving the church because I wanted it to change: now I am realizing that it is just people like me whom the Church leadership is seeking IN ORDER to change the church!

I guess these things have all been pushing me back from my Emergentism, but what really got me was a visit with some really “on the edge” Christians. I suppose that a year ago we would have left that visit saying, “Wow, isn’t it cool that a Christian is free enough to do that...and there were no awkward ‘God moments’ in what we talked about...” or some such thing. Now...? There is something different now. Aside from a difference in our spirit, we also have a child. A very, very impressionable child. As I sat watching a video containing swears, innuendo’s and Godlessness, then sang songs about breakup, immorality and blasphemy while alcohol flowed freely, and prayers and God-talk were conspicuously absent...I couldn’t help but ask, “Do I REALLY want my child to be a part of this sort of atmosphere?” It was more than the things done, however: I recognize that there is nothing wrong with drinking in moderation, or enjoying secular entertainment. However, in this case these externals seemed to be a symptom of something deeper. There was a spirit about that house - something in the air. I didn’t feel comfortable. There was a decisive moment while my family and I were lying in bed. We were talking about how the evening made us spiritually uncomfortable and dark. Although it was several hours past his bed-time, my son was restless between us. I prayed something to the effect of: “Lord, this is not a house of peace. This is not a place where

¹⁶ St. Augustine, Mark Driscoll, The Reformed Forum, John Piper were influential intellectually. John Regier’s material and ministry, *Caring for the Heart* was significant emotionally.

you are Lord. But in this room we declare that you are Lord. We pray that you would pitch a tent of peace over us as we sleep, and that your presence would be here.” Before I was half-way done that short prayer, our restless son cuddled up and was instantly asleep. Both my wife and I also felt a burden lifting and slept deeply and dreamlessly all night.

I mentioned above that my wife had some things to work through from her family. We have tended in the past to be very ungracious in our perception of her family because of this: however, recently I have been thinking, “What is worse? A family which raises strong, solid, Godly children but has a hard time letting go, or a family which raises questioning, authority-despising, godless kids who are tempted by all sorts of vices, freely available in their home?” Let’s be honest - what sorts of child will result from this kind of parenting? Kids imitate what they see, and kids take it to the next level. My wife has had things to work through, and yet she is SOLID! Her parents did an AWESOME job raising her. I am very, very glad that my in-laws were the farthest thing from Emergent.

Another event sticks out in my mind: we had my longtime mentor/pastor over to pray for/dedicate our new house. He was talking to us about a Christian home with a Bible in his hands when my son walked up to him in his typically intrusive, curious 19-month-old manner. There was just something about the way that Ivan turned to him and opened the Bible for him and said, “This is a Bible! Isn’t the Bible wonderful? You love the Bible, don’t you? Yes, of course you do!” that at first struck me as strange, bordering on offensive (isn’t that mind-control?) but almost instantly I realized was extremely good (yes, we control minds...that is what education is all about!). I don’t want to be a father who implicitly says, “Korban, God is not important. After all, we don’t open the Bible, go to church, or talk about God - except to complain about how badly His people are making a mess of things.” Rather, I want God to be the centre of our lives - explicitly and unapologetically. I want to be one of those families that has regular times of meaningful prayer, family devotions, and who are often in church. I want my children to grow up in a bubble of Christian friends. I want my children to grow up with a deep, unquestioning belief in a God who is the source of all good things, the one in whom alone happiness is to be found, and in whose service their lives will find meaning.

This is what I want for my kids, this is what I want for me - I want to be a conservative, unapologetically religious, family-oriented man.

I can’t be this and also be Emergent. But that’s okay. Emergent is a phase, a transition period. For some, it is the time-out box where they sit on the bleachers, lick their wounds, catch their breath and go through a season where they spend more time critiquing those actually playing than playing themselves. For these people, they will eventually grow out of Emergentism, to slide out onto the ice themselves and get involved once again. For others, Emergent is the locker-room, where the gear and clothing of Christianity are steadily and systematically peeled away and exchanged for the “street-clothes” of relevance and agnosticism before silently slipping off into the night.

Nobody stays Emergent forever.

I have no regrets. For us, Emergent was a good stop - THE stop, the place where God wanted us - along the path of life. There are things I hope to always take with me from there: I hope always to be concerned with global compassion initiatives, with environmentalism and with sanctified technology. However, we are done now. We are not Emergent anymore.

Now, a major question on my mind is, "How do I lead my family in spiritual matters?"
Any ideas anyone?

A Sermon on Sin

November 25, 2009

Well, I finally bit the bullet and coughed up the dough to be able to post media on this site. [1]Psalm 51 is the sermon I preached two Sundays ago on finding real joy by dealing with sin. (Just occurred to me - never got around to naming this sermon - oh well!) I think people who found my last post interesting would be interested in this sermon.

The main gist of what I was saying is that a Christian who does not deal with their sin will find their spirituality fading and leaking away until all that is left is boredom and frustration. Those who deal with their sin will find their spirituality blossoming and growing like the escalating, climbing rays of a sunrise, which get brighter and brighter 'till noon-day.

The quote which I will tuck away in my back-pocked from my sermon notes is as follows:

"Sin and hell are the pitch-black canvass on which God in His providence strokes on His blazing orange, crimson-red, snow-white, and royal-blue - a masterpiece of grace! But if we try to blanch out sin and hell, we will find our faith fading from pastels to watercolors, then blanching out to grey, to white and almost to "nothingness."

Follow-Up Post to “From....Emergent to....Conservative”

November 28, 2009

Well, I must say that I have been a little taken aback by the huge response to my last (major) post. I'm not used to that much activity on my blog! I have learned some things from the feedback I received, and my thoughts have developed on points. Here are some of the things that I would like to say, to follow up my previous post:

TO THOSE OFFENDED: I APOLOGIZE

From some private posts and e-mails, I realize that my post was very hurtful, at least to a few people. This was not my intention, and I am sorry. My post was primarily about my journey, and a reaction against my immaturity in a past stage of life. It is always okay to critique yourself and learn from the past - however, I recognize that my language was at times too loose, and others found themselves insulted in what was to be an introspective critique. I also said some strong things against Emergentism which are true in a limited sense, but should have been said more clearly. More on that in a bit.

I guess this has all been a learning experience for me. I am used to sitting down on my computer and just dumping whatever pet-peeve, poem or insight is within me. I am prone to hyperbole and I have been wandering around, changing my perspective every six months or so, trying to find my theological moorings. I have directed all sorts of attacks at the [1]institutional church, church-leaders, church plutocracy, and the [2]Evangelical sub-culture. I have not lost any friends doing this, nor even had negative feedback - one of my pastors actually tracked me down and told me how much he enjoyed “[3]The Sled” (a post which made pastors look ridiculous!). This recent post has made me realize, however, that I should be more careful in how I word things in such a public space - especially when critiquing the Emergent camp.

I cannot help but remember that I became Emergent because of pain. I felt ripped off and stifled by the organized church, and felt that without Emergentism as a safety-net, I would have simply free-fallen into who-knows-where. I remember being very angry at times with people who attacked the Emergent movement without presenting a viable alternative.

All this to say that I am sorry: I misjudged my audience, and I regret causing pain where I have done so.

CLARIFICATION OF THE WORD “EMERGENT”

I mentioned above that my usage of the word “Emergent” could be better defined. Well, this is the problem with the word “Emergent” - nobody knows what in the world it means! Broadly speaking, it is probably accurate that “Emergent” is a reaction against the Evangelicalism of the 80's and 90's. Like a teen which wants to break away and find their own identity, my generation (and the generation just older than me) wants to break away from the “Baby-boomer-dominated” churches they grew up in, to create a new Christianity for the future.

Instead of intolerance they want tolerance. Instead of hierarchy they want equality. Instead of dogmatic theology, they want open-ended discussion, mystery, and journey. Instead of perfect leaders and shiny buildings, they want leaders who “let it all hang out” and buildings that make them feel comfortable. Instead of paranoia of those who “drink, smoke, chew, or go with girls who do,” there is an openness to the “vices” not directly forbidden by Scriptures. Instead of a protectionistic “us-vs-them” attitude towards culture, they want to be welcoming to non-Christians. Instead of a difference in dress and music, they want to integrate into society on non-moral issues. Instead of rules, they want personal opinions. Instead of a sheltered perspective, they want a global perspective. Instead of local initiatives, they want global initiatives. Instead of suspicion of Science, they want an openness to new science (evolution, global warming, etc.).

As you can see, the emergent movement is very broad. It is likely that it is even broader than these points, but this is a start.

If you are like me, you are likely looking at that list saying, “So, is he saying that Emergent is bad or good?” From this list, however, you can see that there is room for all sorts of people within Emergentism - there is room for “bad” and “good” stuff.

This was a major flaw of my last post: I spoke out against all of the Emergent movement without distinction. Please allow me to refine my critique.

Everyone who becomes Emergent has a story: usually, there is pain involved. There is usually also an attraction to promises made by the Emergent movement. Thus, there is a push away from the institutional church, and a pull towards the emergent church. In and of itself, this motivation is not sin (people who stay in the institutional churches also have motivations - but I have spoken amply of that elsewhere). What will one do with one’s motivations? This is the question. More importantly - what will one do when their motivations conflict with Jesus? This is the real heart of the issue.

Perhaps a case-study would be helpful here.

I once heard a leader in the Emergent Village discussing what it takes to become “Emergent.” The gist of his comment was: “Unless you are willing to accept the ministry of a lesbian pastor, you cannot really be emergent. Being emergent is about toleration.” (You can read my visceral reaction to this comment [\[4\]here](#)) What should be glaringly obvious here is that the one thing which is not tolerated is a person who takes a stand. What if a person has a crisis of conscience? What if a person honestly feels that scriptures declare homosexuality to be a sin (Rom. 1) and forbid them from “tolerating” any such person involved in immorality - especially if they are involved in Christian teaching (cf. Rev. 2:20, NASB)? Apparently, at least some “Emergent” people believe that one must at times deny Christ and conscience in order to be a card-carrying, true-blue member of the Emergent Movement.

Thus, I think it is accurate to depict three camps within the Emergent movement: those who put culture first, and Jesus infinitely second (the “culture-emergent” camp), those who put Jesus first, and culture infinitely second (the “Jesus-emergent” camp), and those

who are as-yet undecided. This middle camp is comfortable and appropriate for a time, but it can never become permanent because even the decision to remain undecided is itself rejection of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

WHERE WE ARE AT

The gist of my last post is that my family and I have been wandering back and forth in this place of indecision for nearly a year now. It was what we needed, it was the journey God had for us. It was a place of healing and maturing. I cannot condemn others in this place, because I do not feel God's judgment over me for being here. At some point, however, we had to make a choice: we had to decide whether culture or Jesus would have the final say in our lives.

Some may still say that we are Emergent. Perhaps this is true - but that all depends what is meant by that frustrating, floppy word. What is really important to know is that we are followers of Christ, who are explicit about making Jesus Lord of our lives, and seeking to build our family on the foundation of the Bible. Can we still be Emergent and do these things? Certainly - but maybe "conservative" is a better tag for us now. I'll leave that to others to decide.

The season we are in now seems to be a transition-stage, filled with many life-forming decisions. Here are a few I have been thinking about recently:

1. Being relevant is not enough: I must share Christ, and Him Crucified

There is nothing wrong with learning more about the music, culture and interests of people I am trying to reach for Christ. However, I have to be honest and say that my attempts at "culturally-relevant evangelism" looked more like "trying to be cool" and "making new friends" than real evangelism. If I am terrified to speak the name of Jesus, or share the message of what He has done, it should be obvious that whatever I am doing, it is not evangelism. I have much to learn in this area, and I really need prayer, and to grow in boldness in this area.

2. Equality is a cop-out: God has called me to lead my home

There is something very easy - too easy! - about saying, "I don't know - what do you think, honey?" It's not right for me, as the head of our home, to drift along - mind filled with theology and work, hands busy with projects and toys - not really engaging in the important issues of family life until they are raised by my wife. It is also not right for me to test out my wife, to feel out the decision she is leaning towards, then "choose" to go along with her in whatever she thinks is best. This is not acting within my role as head, and it places a burden on her she was not intended to carry. I have a lot to learn in this area, but the teaching ministry of Mark Driscoll has a lot of good resources for this area.

3. Cowardice is not an option: I am called to be the spiritual leader of our family

I don't like doing family devotions. I don't like praying in public, or reading the Bible aloud. I feel exposed, vulnerable, ridiculous, and silly. I have been trying to tell myself

that I am being considerate to my wife: she doesn't enjoy these things anymore than I do, and there are wounds from the past to be considered. Scriptures are clear on this point, however: as followers of Christ, we are to "teach God's Word diligently to our children and to talk of them when we sit in our house and when we walk by the way and when we lie down and when we rise up. We are to bind them (metaphorically, or by tattoo? lol...) as a sign on our hands and foreheads, and to write them on the doorposts of our house and on our gates" (Deut. 6:7-9). I do not want to be the leader of a home where mentioning the name of "Jesus" is a socially-awkward event, where Bibles are never opened, where prayers are never said. Christ should be to my children as constant as gravity, as visible as the sun, as vital as air, as comfortable as Mommy's embrace. I will do what I can to provide it.

4. Indefinite indecision is unacceptable and unethical on important topics

In this life, I will probably never know which end-times theory is correct, whether the human is "body- and-soul" or "body-soul-spirit," or how exactly predestination and free-will fit together. So what? These doctrines don't change how I wake up in the morning. *But what about Hell?* Is it real? Is it as bad as people used to say it is? Is it true that *everybody* who does not accept the Gospel is going there?

There are questions on which perpetual ambiguity and indecision is unethical and unacceptable.

If Hell is a myth, we can take a collective sigh of relief. If it is real - if it is true that people all around me, and around the world are falling every day, every minute into an eternal, conscious torment apart from God and apart from hope - then there is no excuse. Basic human compassion demands that I live every waking moment in the light of this terrifying fact, and make evangelism the #1 priority of my life. There are many such life-or-death issues in the Christian faith: I will take the time I need to research out answers, but I cannot get too comfortable with a perpetual indecision.

I could go on, but I hope these points give you an idea of the direction I want to take our family.

The decision has been made: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, we are finding ourselves in a season of purging, standing awkwardly around a pit dug under the Oaks of Shechem (cf. Gen. 35). What are the family idols? Let us root them out, let us be rid of them. Let us place them here, under this tree, cover them with earth and never think of them again. Let us move on from this place with renewed focus and passion for our One Lord, Jesus Christ.

Under His Lordship and direction, and on the firm foundation of His word, may we move forward as a family!

EMERGENT: MONOLOGUE OR DIALOGUE?

November 29, 2009

[Note: Because of the caustic tone of this post, I originally posted it only as a private post.]

Okay, I just have to say this.

I wrote the core of this post a couple days ago, then decided that I shouldn't say it, since it may offend people. Well, since certain people have promised to cut off contact from me, maybe I don't have to worry about them now, and can just write openly...?

For those who have not talked with us in person or read between the lines of my last post, let me fill you in: we have had some very emotional lash-back on these two posts. Several of our friends (not people we know locally - stop trying to guess!) have told us that if this is how we think/feel, they can no longer be our friends. They have cut off all contact.

I revised my original post where I thought I was going a little over the top, and started my second post with the apology you see. This was not a ploy! I could see where my words were overly harsh and vague: I really wanted to clear up that confusion, and affirm those who are still inside of the emergent phase. I thought I was pretty clear that God can really bless "Emergentism" as a stage, or (depending how you use the word) God may bless an "emergent Christian" who is really just living the ancient faith in a modern way. I tried - I really, really tried to be clear, and to speak the truth in love. Writing this second post has consumed my week: I put as much effort into it as I put into most sermons and some research papers. At least twice, I deleted all of my work (4 pages the first time, 7 pages the second time - that's single-spaced!) since I thought my words were too strong, or came out with a self-righteous spirit.

Apparently, that was not enough. Comments received still indicate that if I am going to plant a flag, to make a decision about my family, to declare an opinion on right and wrong then I am arrogant and selfish.

I just don't get it.

I thought that to be emergent was to be all about relativism (I have my truth, you have your truth, etc.) - so what is so wrong in saying, "this is what I think"? I thought being emergent was all about journey and conversation: why can't I say, "This is where we have been, I think this is where we are going..." I thought being emergent was all about following Jesus boldly, in free and relevant expressions of the faith: why can I not say, "I feel freedom and blessing in this direction: this is where I will be taking our family!"

This lack of toleration and openness, this inability to dialogue, this quick-to-judge attitude (isn't there great irony in "judging" somebody by calling them judgmental?) is especially striking when compared with the amazing toleration, grace and love which I received from my "institutional church" friends who seemed not at all offended by my

attacks, rants, loony ideas, questioning, criticizing, and full frontal-attacks on all that they held sacred, during my emergent phase.

Apparently, the old emergent stereotype is inverted: it is the institutional church folks who are open to dialogue, who “can take it,” who are willing to be friends with those who are struggling/hurting/questioning, who do not look like them, who openly criticize/question their beliefs. Maybe I am just spoiled in my church experience: however, this is how it has turned out for me.

By contrast, my emergent friends seemed to have dropped me at the first sign of unloyalty to “the tribe.”

Strange, very strange.

COMMENTS:

Keith (2009-12-08 11:58:43) Josiah: you tend to paint with a rather broad brush. Not all the emergent movement will react to your journey the same way, and not all “institutional church” folks are open to discussion. Regarding the aversion to a fixed position: if the emerging church truly does hold dialogue in that high a position, fixed positions have to offend it. Fixed positions end conversation, and that’s unacceptable. (Now I’m the one painting with a broad brush.)

A DECISION TO REMAIN UNDECIDED

December 3, 2009

I have long loved the story related in Matt. 21. The Pharisees come to Jesus, to try to trap Him by asking where His authority came from. Rather than responding, he asks them a “filter-question.” The question had nothing at all to do with the topic at hand: however, Jesus knew how to cut through to the real heart of the issue. His method was to ask them to state their position on a current, relevant issue: “Was John from God or from men?”

This question put them between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they had their reputations and institutions to defend – on the other, they had the fear of public outcry. One notices that the question of “truth” did not factor into their discussions at all. Unwilling to cause scandal or offense, and apparently unconcerned with truth, they choose perpetual indecision: “we do not know, teacher.” In response, Jesus denied to answer their question. It is those who worship God in “spirit and in *truth*” whom the Father seeks (John 4:24): the double-minded man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord (James 1:6-8).

This question applies to the emergent doctrine of “perpetual indecision.” According to some, to state that one knows anything with absolute certainty is pure arrogance. As I heard one person say, “Once you come to a conclusion, the emergent conversation is over.” Instead, the good “Emerger” is to remain in a perpetual stasis of indecision on touchy issues.

A famous case of this is Brian MacLaren, who still (as far as I know) has not declared his position on homosexuality.

There are many valid reasons for a Christian to be undecided. A topic may be beyond their expertise (I am decidedly undecided about the science of creation, since I am not a scientist), or Scriptures may be silent or intentionally vague about a topic (e.g. the “end times”), or a topic may be simply irrelevant (seriously – who CARES whether the human is body/soul or body/soul/spirit?!).

I think it goes without saying that none of these caveats apply to the topics of homosexuality, hell, or abortion, to name a few.

These topics are pressingly relevant, spoken of clearly in Scriptures, and within the scope of every Christian to make an informed decision.

This is yet another water-shed moment for the emergent community. Yes, mystery, toleration and questioning have their place. But what will one do when one finally *emerges* out of the mists of confusion, to be presented with the cold, hard words of Scriptures? Will they bow in humble submission to the lordship of Christ, or will they

intentionally turn their backs on certainty, to stumble backwards into a perpetual wandering in the wastelands of indecision?

If they chose this latter road, they will find a difference.

Indecision as a pathway to decision is a road blessed by God: indecision as a rejection of the lordship of Jesus is a sin. Until this rebellion is repented of, I believe they will feel God's disapproval in place of his approval, God's judgment in place of His blessing, and God's silence in place of His voice, as their intentional indecision leads them further and further into the shadows of relativity, and away from the light of His revealed presence.

POSTLOGUE

After the fall of 2009, two factors together made my blog a significantly different thing than it was previously. First, as you can see, my thinking had shifted considerably and has stayed on basically the same track since. Secondly, people actually began reading my blog! My readership went from around 7-8 “hits” a day to over fifty, spiking to over a hundred on some days. People also began commenting and I threw myself into writing and discussing passionately for a time. These posts are still up on my blog, but because I wrote *so much* during this time, attempts to write a sequel to this book have been futile up ‘till now.

The following are some projects I would like to publish soon, as time permits:

Groping After Him Who Sought And Rescued Me: *A Conversation With the Young-Reformed Movement* (Excerpts from my blog 2009-2010)

Emerging Cautiously: *Seven Letters to An Emergent Friend* (some things I would say now to my previous, emergent self)

Reformed And Mennonite (A brief history of the influence of the Mennonite heritage, and the Reformed heritage on me, as well as my finished beliefs on a variety of interweaving topics)

In the mean time, if you would like to follow the main stream of my thought, you can click on the category “intellectual journey” on my blog. You may also notice that I have linked individual posts forward to posts in my current blog, so that you can see how my thoughts have matured over the years.