

P R E F A C E

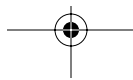
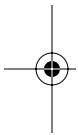
“Emerging Churches”

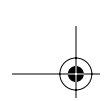
If the current evangelical renewal in the Church of England is to have a lasting impact, then there must be more explicit attention given to the doctrine of the church.”

Thus spoke Robert Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, during his visit to the third National Evangelical Anglican Congress (NEAC), named a Celebration, at Caister-on-Sea in Norfolk in 1987.

Robert Runcie’s words divided us. Some nodded their assent, fearful that his stricture was correct. But others protested vigorously, having “turned away from the stubborn individualism for which we used to be notorious.”¹

What is clear is that during recent years there has been an extraordinary proliferation of books about the church. I am thinking, for example, of *The Church on the Other Side* (1998), *The McDonaldization of the Church* (2000), *Changing World, Changing Church* (2001), *Church Next* (2001), *The Provocative Church* (2002), *Liquid Church* (2002), *The Prevailing Church* (2002),





Mission-Shaped Church (2004), *The Emerging Church* (2004), *The Church Invisible* (2004), *God's New Community* (2005), *The Responsive Church* (2005) and *Emerging Churches* (2006). And this is only a sample from today's exploding library of popular ecclesiology. One could continue the list with reference to seeker churches, purpose-driven churches and others.

What has precipitated this avalanche of books is the sense that the church is increasingly out of tune with contemporary culture, and that unless it comes to terms with change, it faces extinction. Of course it will not die, for Jesus promised that even the powers of death will not overcome it. Yet alarming statistics warn us of the current crisis, and the language of "seismic" change enforces the situation.

It is not that the church's calling is to ape the world, for it is called rather to develop a Christian counterculture. At the same time, we must listen to the voices of the world in order to be able

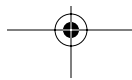
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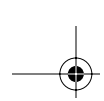
to respond to them sensitively, though without compromise. For example, in the Church of England, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have sponsored the development of "fresh expressions of the church,"² in part to proclaim the

gospel relevantly in an increasingly postmodern population that views the church as a relic.

THE POSTMODERN WORLD

Keen-eyed social analysts are still trying to summarize what is



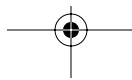


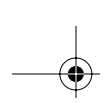
involved in the cultural shift from the modernism of the Enlightenment to the arrival of postmodernism. The prefix “post” in the word does not simply mean “after.” It rather hints at a protest against the Enlightenment years and the collapse of the intellectual and social edifices of modernism. Indeed, postmodernism is essentially parasitic on modernism, as a remora clings to a shark.

One has only to list a set of antitheses to recognize that both modernism and postmodernism are extremely varied phenomena. In general, modernism proclaims the autonomy of the human reason, especially in the cold objectivity of science, whereas postmodernism prefers the warmth of subjective experience. Modernism is committed to the quest for truth, believing that certainty is attainable; postmodernism is committed to pluralism, affirming the equal validity of all ideologies, and tolerance as the supreme virtue. Modernism declares the inevitability of social progress; postmodernism pricks the bubble of utopian dreams. Modernism exalts self-centered individualism; but postmodernism seeks the togetherness of community. Modernism is supremely self-confident, often guilty of that arrogant ambition which the ancient Greeks called *hubris*, whereas postmodernism is humble enough to question everything, for it lacks confidence in anything.

Some characteristics of postmodernism, in its critique of modernism, are to be applauded, and offer new opportunities for the gospel, whereas others are to be rejected. One needs discernment to determine which is which.

What then are the marks of a church in a postmodern culture,





that is, of an “emerging church”? Most agree that what is evolving is as yet more a conversation than a movement, and are modest enough not to claim too much, since the situation is continuing to develop.

At the time of my writing, the most thorough analysis of such churches is *Emerging Churches* by Professors Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger of Fuller Theological Seminary, subtitled *Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (SPCK, 2006). It is the fruit of five years’ research, during which the authors listened to more than fifty leaders of innovative churches, and allowed them to tell their own stories.

From this comprehensive survey Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger identified nine “patterns” or “practices” which kept appearing, three of which were “core” practices common to the other six. Each is then given a chapter in the rest of the book.

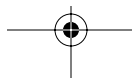
The first is “identifying with the life (or way) of Jesus,” namely both his example and his teaching as verbalized in the Sermon on the Mount.

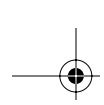
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The second is “transforming secular space” that is, rejecting the sacred-secular divide promoted by modernism.

The third is “living as community,” indeed as a kingdom or family community.³

To be sure, these three “core” practices do not appear very new, since following Jesus, rejecting dualism and developing





community should characterize every church. Nevertheless, what should be the case often differs from what actually is. And so, because many church structures actually inhibit these core practices, emerging churches are rediscovering them and giving them a fresh emphasis.

It seems to me that traditional and “emerging” churches need to listen attentively to one another, with a view to learning from one another. The former must recognize that much of what we recognize as traditional today was itself once revolutionary and even “emerging,” and therefore be open to today’s creative thinking. The latter should be wary of loving newness for newness’ sake. We both could afford to be less suspicious, less dismissive of one another, and more respectful and open. For, as Archbishop Rowan Williams has written, “there are many ways in which the reality of ‘church’ can exist.”⁴ Nevertheless, it has certain essential marks which will always characterize an authentic and living church.

I have often said that we need more “R.C.” churches, standing now not for Roman Catholic but for Radical Conservative churches—“conservative” in the sense that they conserve what Scripture plainly requires, but “radical” in relation to that combination of tradition and convention which we call “culture.” Scripture is unchangeable; culture is not. The purpose of this book is to bring together a number of characteristics of what I will call an authentic or living church, whether it calls itself “emerging” or not. I hope to show that these characteristics, being clearly biblical, must in some way be preserved.⁵

