

# **Voices: Whatever happened to the Emerging Church?**

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At the turn of this century, Western Christianity experienced a dramatic shift.

Some felt these tremors were simply stylistic alterations, the age-old quest of the church to present itself in a way that attracts a new generation of believers into its fold, (or that keeps them there.) Others felt what was happening represented a once-every-500-year-or-so transformation of Christianity, similar to the “East-West” split of the Church in the 11<sup>th</sup> century or the Protestant Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

On a more local, congregational level, the conversation around what became known as the “Emerging Church” movement sounded much like the conversations in the ’70s and ’80s about contemporary worship or, in the present day, about what to do with those pesky “millennials.”

Everyone had an opinion. Depending on who you asked, the Emerging Church signaled either the future of Christianity or the death of it.

## **Submerged into postmodernism?**

My own church, University Baptist in Waco, was at the forefront of this movement. We read (and wrote) books, held conferences, invited speakers and preachers at the forefront of the conversation and were intentional about leaning into this exciting new way of living out our faith.

This time was characterized by several points of emphasis: deconstructing traditional ideas of authority and the interpretation of Scripture, and the

rejection of the idea that there is a clear line of division between what is sacred and what is secular, which led to a journey of finding God's fingerprints in music, art and literature as a part of our discipleship.

And, most notably, a flirtation with the philosophical ideas of postmodernism.

## **Drowned in relativism?**

Many critics of the Emerging Church, and even some of its proponents, falsely conflated postmodernism with relativism, which meant they believed we were abandoning the truth of Jesus Christ for a belief that there is no Truth. (Philosophers take note: I am, at best, a novice in the language of philosophy and fully understand that you are probably rolling your eyes right now at my lack of nuance.)

But this was an incomplete understanding of our engagement with postmodernism. We never questioned the existence of "Absolute Truth," but we did wonder out loud whether the tools any of us had (individually or collectively) at our disposal to ascertain what is and isn't "True" were sufficient to determine what actually is.

For many of us, the result of this wondering was abandoning long-established doctrines and institutions that claimed ownership of "Truth" and, instead, embracing a multiplicity of voices, stories, sources and witnesses to better understand the Truth, which was found in a person, Jesus Christ. (Which, by the way, I found quintessentially *Baptist*.)

There's an irony about what became of this postmodern controversy.

# Or ‘still hovering, going where the Spirit leads’?

One of the things our jeering section often accused us of was creating a dangerous reality in which observable facts could be questioned and even dismissed in favor of personal narratives. Things that “felt true,” they reasoned, would hold precedent to us over things that were observably true.

Not all, but many, of these critics would, in 2016 and beyond, go on to support a man for president (reasoning he was “God’s choice”) who exploited this by presenting “alternative facts” and relying on actual fake news, all while dismissing real facts which were unfavorable to him as “fake.” Our jaws dropped at what we saw, and I imagine more than a few of us wondered if we had helped create this.

So, whatever happened to the Emerging Church?

From my limited vantage point, I have seen the movement bleed back into the larger institutional church, where it is affecting it in ways that are yet to be seen.

We often described ourselves (borrowing a metaphor from Brian McLaren’s “A New Kind of Christianity”) as people who believed truth hovered above the proverbial “liberal-conservative” spectrum line, refusing to be categorized by old labels. But if we are honest with ourselves, we’d have to admit that the gravity of the last decade has brought many of us down to particular places on that spectrum.

Some of us landed where we jumped off from—conservative evangelicalism—while, I believe, the vast majority, if we landed back on the line of orthodoxy at all, just became good old-fashioned liberals.

But there are others who are still hovering, going where the Spirit leads them. From time to time, we hear dispatches from the frontier. Someone has joined a monastery. Another group is meeting in a home or a bar, while still others are sitting silently in the pews of a thousand churches but gathering with each other to report their findings.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases ... and so it is with anyone born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

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