

THE EMERGING CHURCH

Mt Hawthorn Community Church, sermon 27/07/14

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Notes to PPT

SLIDE 1: Rom 12:1-21 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

SLIDE 2. On Peter's request I will talk to you today about the Emerging Church.

This was the topic of my essay for a recent unit at Vose Seminary, on *Church, Sacrament and Ministry*.

It was also the theme of the recent ANZATS theology conference here in Perth, to the grim title "**The Eclipse of God: Theology after Christendom**", but I found it tremendously interesting and encouraging.

All the speakers were positive and progressive about the future of the church, and seemed to be ready to move into any gaps and challenges.

I will share a few of those thoughts with you today.

SLIDE 3. As its name suggests, the Emerging Church movement largely consists of Christian communities which have “emerged” from mainstream ideologies and church structures.

Whether disillusioned with or disenfranchised by conventional churches, Emergent groups are generally located outside recognized and accepted traditions.

A growing number of churches see as their primary mission the reaching of today's 'postmodern' culture with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is an informal and multifaceted movement, spanning a multitude of denominations.

Generally a Western phenomenon, North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa, any denomination but Protestant generally.

Operating in various ways, some are local independent churches or house churches, while others worship in traditional Christian denominations, in order to reach people who do not relate to the ideology or practices of the average, or 'modern', church.

SLIDE 4. So what do we mean by “post-modern”, then?

Western scientific modernity that developed between the 15th and 20th centuries focused on the ability to know truth absolutely, in an objective way.

This has led to tremendous technological and medical progress, but has also bred a certain arrogance that humankind would solve all its problems with science and control human behaviour with reason.

Nothing is more indicative of the mentality of modernism than telling someone they are wrong (either intellectually, doctrinally, or morally) ☺

But after a century of extraordinary human-made disasters despite increasing knowledge and even because of it, people started to doubt... everything.

Modernity is now being overtaken by postmodernity, which observes that each person is affected by their culture and conditions so that no-one can be objective about truth.

Postmoderns have what is called an “epistemic humility”, (epistemic means ‘of knowledge’): that is, they realise they can know and control very little.

They have skepticism regarding knowledge, but an openness to spirituality and faith, a congenial tolerance, and relative (situational) ethics.

This current 'reformation' of the church is taking place within, and as a result of, an era of tremendous technological and cultural development.

We now live with constant global awareness owing to instant information and connection; a new cultural era has arrived; people know and learn differently; we now live in a culture of pluralistic worldviews and religions; the church is in a new missional setting.

Christianity is challenged from within and without by multiple worldviews, ethical relativism, and spiritual ambivalence.

Besides these philosophical changes, the world is faced with increasing awareness of ecological unsustainability, equity shifts that widen the gap between rich and poor, and systemic violence, oppression and corruption around the globe.

We live in a world where we have to consider not only how to survive creation (with its disease and disasters), but how to not destroy creation (by pollution and wars). Overall, logic is not worth nearly so much as the last five hundred years would have had us believe.

It is, therefore, not to be trusted as an absolute, nor are its conclusions to be taken as truth just because they depend from logical thinking.

By extension, meta-narrative is likewise to be distrusted, being as it is also a product of humanity's human thinking and explaining.

Narrative, however, speaks the truth of the people: it speaks to the heart in order that the heart may direct and inform the mind.

Emerging Church leaders argue for "hermeneutical humility," which means that we cannot know any propositional truth absolutely, because anyone could theoretically be wrong. This emphasises a reader-response approach to the text, multiple meanings, and ultimately uncertainty about anything theological.

Not just the younger generation are post-modern. I have several older friends who are more ambivalent and flexible in their approach to life and faith than my young adult friends, and challenge everything far more vigorously.

SLIDE 5. Mark Dyer, an Anglican bishop, has observed that one way to understand what is currently happening to Christianity is to realise that about every 500 yrs the Church feels compelled to hold a giant house and garage sale.

As it happens, we are living in and through one of those five-hundred-year sales right now. What a ride!

It is the business of any garage sale to first remove all the old treasures that belonged to one's parents, and update or replace them, so as to get on with the business of keeping house the new way. Some of this is necessary, some of it purely reactionary. Cleaning out the whole place is the first step toward refurbishing it.

Phyllis Tickle, a popular commentator on the sociology of Christianity, lists and labels the upheavals that come every 500 or so years. Some of these labels are coined just for the slide ☺

The half-millennium before Christ saw some of the greatest empires and thinkers in antiquity. This **transformed** tribal, feudal society into the beginnings of what we broadly call 'civilisation'.

Then came the birth of Christianity in the 1st century, which turned the world upside down. Jesus gave us the Great **Commission**, to preach the Gospel into all the world.

After 4 centuries of developing creeds and traditions, the church survived the momentous Fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century, and was saved and **consolidated** under Pope Gregory in the 6th century.

Another major crisis was the Great **Schism** of the 11th century, which split the Church in three... Roman Catholic, Greek/Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox... a schism which is only just now tentatively resolving as each party learns to respect and value the traditions of the other.

The next upheaval was the **Reformation** of the 16th century, with Luther's *sola scriptura*.

Locating ultimate authority in Scripture required universal literacy if it were going to work. The Protestant requirement that everyone read the Bible for themselves accelerated the drive toward rationalism, and from there to Enlightenment, and from there straight into the science, technology and literature that shape our lives today. One disadvantage of literacy is this: if 5 people read the same text, there will be at least 3 interpretations. ☺

Combine this with a developing 'modern' expectation of absolute truth, that is "There is only one right interpretation", and you have grounds for conflict!

Divisiveness and denominationalism was Protestantism's gift to Christianity, and it has run an exhausting and bloody course.

Now, some 500 years later, many Protestants have grown suspicious of "only Scripture and Scripture only."

We question what the words of the texts mean— Literal? Figurative? Mythical? Poetic? Prophetic?

We even question which words do and do not belong in Scripture, and speculate on the editorial influences.

It seems as though Luther's principle of "sola scriptura, scriptura sola" created a paper pope in place of a human one.

From this historical trend, now in the 21st Century, Christianity is due for, and is indeed undergoing, another seismic deconstruction and reformation.

This has already been dubbed the Great **Emergence**.

Each of these Great Garage Sales came after a century or two of general disaster... plagues, wars, and droughts.

The 20th Century was no exception. How many millions of people died last century, despite, or even because of, technology and knowledge?

The pain and chaos makes people think... and reject whatever assumptions may have contributed to the problems.

It is reassuring to realise that no standing form of Christianity has ever been destroyed in these great crises.

Rather, in losing power to the emerging form, has itself been refined and regenerated.

First, a new, more vital form of Christianity does indeed emerge.

Second, the dominant expression of Christianity until then is purged and reformed into a better version.

And as a result, the Church ends up with two or more new creatures where once there had been only one.

The Church did not cease to be after the Fall of Rome.

Orthodoxy did not cease to be after the Great Schism.

Roman Catholicism did not cease to be after the Great Reformation.

And Protestantism will not cease to be as a result of the Great Emergence.

It will, however, have to reconfigure and adapt, and is already well along in that process.

To paraphrase Mark Twain: "Rumours of the church's death have been greatly exaggerated". I think this might be what makes the New Atheists so angry and bitter... despite their best efforts and the most devastating blows from history, the church not only survives, but ultimately thrives, albeit in an altered form and style.

In each of these great eruptions, the fundamental or foundational question is "Where now is our authority?"

We may not like the word 'authority' these days, if we are true postmoderns ☺ but without an answer to this question, both the individual and society will fall into chaos. Would anyone like to guess what was the recognised 'authority' was in each of these eras?

Axial Age: Emperor? Power? Philosophy?

Early Christianity: Christ? The Holy Spirit? The Apostles?

Post Roman Empire: Tradition? Knowledge (monasticism)?

Post Great Schism: The Church, Doctrine?

Post Reformation: Sola Scriptura?

Post Emergence: The Individual? The Holy Spirit? (Many Emergents are Pentecostal)

SLIDE 6. READ:

Whoever would have thought that there would be any retreat or reversal from the modern values of truth-seeking, science, reason and certainty?

But we underestimate the ability and even the compulsion of each generation to react against their parents' values and assumptions.

So the postmodern culture features a reluctance to believe anything, or commit to anything, and takes a critical stance against the effects of scientific progress, the domination of the environment etc.

SLIDE 7. The Emerging Church is driven by the realisation that Christianity is no longer either socially or inherently attractive to the culture at large.

The vast majority of churches engage their contexts in an 'attributional', and therefore 'extractional', way, seeking to extract people out of the world and into the church.

[Attractional: An approach to ecclesiology in which the church develops programs, meetings, services, or other 'products' in order to serve the social and spiritual needs of those who already attend, and to attract other Christians and non-Christians into the church.]

This has been observed by emerging Christians to be ineffective and self-defeating in current society.

If a postmodern were to join a religious community and seek to find meaning and social fulfilment within it, he or she would be operating as a modern.

The true postmodern is uncommitted, flexible, ambivalent and cynical.

They know what it means to be constantly targeted by compelling sales messages aimed at every human desire, concern and insecurity.

Postmodernism is suspicious of power and vested interests, realising that the business of institution generally requires hierarchy, whereas hierarchy protects itself at the expense of best practice for the business of institution.

Deinstitutionalisation, therefore, is a rising ideal in our times as well as a defining hallmark of Emergence Theory itself.

Emerging churches are works in progress, improvisational in their approach to everything from worship to leadership to preaching to prayer.

Some settings are geared towards a multi-sensory experience, resembling (or even utilising!) cafes, pubs or nightclubs;

others will create a contemplative or liturgical feel, trying to restore what was lost in the Great Reformation;

yet others are simple house or park gatherings with a shared meal and discussion. Whatever the setting, the characteristic informality extends to virtually every aspect of the church experience.

Creativity and an appreciation for the arts are celebrated in these circles.

They are also technologically savvy and use the internet with great skill.

Among the emergent churches, expositional preaching is generally rejected and replaced with narrative preaching (using stories as opposed to propositions) and dialogue (where everyone brings their understanding to the text).

Each person can thus join the conversation to share his or her personal story or narrative.

Relationships take priority.

Emerging church mission involves a holistic emphasis of redeeming society and creation too.

This is the legacy of the social gospel which moves the emphasis from personal redemption to social reformation and environmentalism.

SLIDE 8. Pic

SLIDE 9. So, as the culture changes, Emerging churches rethink, reshape, and revalue how to go about everything.

In communicating the gospel, Christianity has generally relied on a single tool, the monologue: the 'address', 'sermon', 'homily', 'lesson', or 'exhortation'.

But the hyper-stimulated 'multimedia-raised' generation is no longer able to access speech or text in the same way previous generations did.

Many emerging churches, lacking the resources to preach and teach by sophisticated technologies, expand into other methods: discussions, games, activities, stories, outings, guided meditation, and all forms of social engagement. As for pastoring and church structure, participants avoid power disparity, assuming that all have gifts to offer in service to God and others.

Authority in the Emergent Church seems to resemble 'network theory'.

The Church, like the World Wide Web, is starting to look like a network -- a self-organising system – where no one component possesses the whole truth of anything, and currents of truth in the whole can be discerned rather than known.

Truth is crowd-sourced, egalitarian, flexible

Meaning is personal mystical, experiential.

Now you don't have to "believe" before you belong, you can just belong, and belief is optional.

The effective theological currency is now 'narrative' rather than logic or meta-narrative (doctrine).

"Narrative is the song of the vibrating network".

SLIDE 10. Phyllis Tickle's lists a number of modern influences in an attempt to explain and summarise how Christianity got to this most recent crisis:

We will make a whirlwind tour through these developments of the last two centuries:

Evolutionary theory provided an alternative origins story to Creation by an all-powerful God...

Cognitive theory provided an alternative explanation for human behaviour, proposing needs and neuroses instead of the ideas of "fall" and "sin"

Quantum mechanics demystified the nature of matter and energy, but also shook up some constants such as time and space... if even these are relative, how can anything be constant and true?

Literary Criticism hit very hard at the notion of the inspiration and integrity of the scriptures, raising the question again: "Where now is our authority?"

Mass communication gave commercial and political interests direct access to the population without the mediation of the clergy or government

Pentecostalism offered an answer in the idea that authority can be derived and received directly by the Spirit... and the language of personal "calling" and "revelation" entered the Christian culture. About one quarter of emergent Christians and the emergent Church are Pentecostal, and they have brought with them into the new aggregate this central belief in the Holy Spirit as authority.

The car freed wealthy Westerners to roam at will, whereas before they had been tied to one place, one town, one school, and one church. Within a few decades, Sunday would become the day for shopping, movies, and sports. Saturday evening services were invented in order to allow the faithful to get their worship over and done with so they could have Sunday for recreation.

What was behind the "**I'm spiritual but not religious**" mantra? Some sociologists of religion will cite the founding of **Alcoholics Anonymous** as the first in the list of prime movers. The 12 Steps repeatedly make the point that the addict can be helped only by "God as we understand Him." Choose your own concept of God. AA also assumed from the start that the addicted were themselves better and more effective helpers of the addicted than the experts and authorities, including most particularly pastors and clerics.

Then came **Buddhism** with the language and tools to enter the spiritual and subjective experience unencumbered by theism. The journey of the spirit did not require the baggage of religion to be worthwhile and rewarding.

The World Wars shocked and disappointed trust in patriotism and statesman-like authority figures. Moreover, women moved into the workforce and kept industry running perfectly well while the menfolk were on the battle front. They gave a tremendous post-war boost to feminism and emancipation.

Drugs altered reality, issues of **civil rights, divorce, gender, and sex** just about cracked society open at every seam.

Medical progress gives a longer life expectancy and therefore a reduced sense of mortality and vulnerability.

Sexual patterns have changed dramatically since the arrival of reliable **contraception** and disease prevention, so that many Christian young people are not living the moral lifestyles they believe is expected of them and take themselves out of church to pre-empt censure.

So people were being forced to acknowledge that what the Bible says was not quite so black-and-white as the Church's teachings would have them believe.

The emancipation of women was followed, of course, by their ordination. The Great Emergence is characterised by the movement of women into the hierarchy of the church where they may influence its future formation.

Clearly the battle of "sola scriptura" was being lost. There was only one more pawn left on the board, 'the gay issue', which by now is pretty much all over... even the shouting.

But it would be impossible to exaggerate the central importance of the **Internet** and the **World Wide Web** to the Great Emergence

In the same way as it would be impossible to overstate the importance of the invention of the printing press in 1440 to the Great Reformation.

The internet arrived around 1995... right on cue for the semi-millennial upheaval of the Church at the turn of the century.

We older ones have all been on a steep learning curve... my goodness, I am exhausted!... but kids now are born with a tablet in one hand and a smartphone in the other... my grandson has just turned 3... on his Mum's smartphone he can open the camera app and take photos, open YouTube or iView, choose the channel and pick which show to watch, pause, play, and navigate back to previous screens. On the Tablet, he can lock and unlock the screen, adjust the volume, choose any apps or games and play without any help. I have had two lots of teenagers... one in the late 90s and one in the late 00s... I can't even begin to detail the different educations and freedoms they have had compared to each other and to my childhood. All these changes have to make drastic changes to life and faith... and ultimately to church.

Much religious experience, instruction, and formal worship has passed into electronic space... Many people now receive their entire pastoral care and religious instruction and engagement on the Internet.

The computer, opening up as it does, the whole of humankind's bank of collective information, enables the priesthood of all believers in ways the Reformation could never have envisioned.

SLIDE 11: As you might imagine, conservative Christians have been hostile to the Emerging Church...

SLIDE 12: but it is necessary to be pragmatic and welcome the changes... painful though they may be.

SLIDE 13: As with all the previous upheavals, the transformation of the Church is inevitable...

It is exciting to be in the very generation living right at the fulcrum of this turning...

SLIDE 14. I am often hit by the realisation that large sections of society, probably the majority, will never or seldom see what goes on in Christian community.
We live in a society where people consider environmental, economic, social, and political concerns to take priority over spiritual investigation. There are urgent concerns that crowd out doctrinal ones.

Religious affiliation is not seen as an obstacle to business and relationship, but nor is it seen as relevant.

In a multi-ethnic society it has become improper and socially insensitive to talk about religion.

What is more, we can no longer assume that everyone longs for a stable, intentional community...

or that people without faith feel lost and hopeless,

or even that converts will be willing to adopt a lifestyle of high demands on their time and energy.

So rather than trying to bring the world 'into' the Kingdom, we must take the Kingdom out into the world.

The radical notion that "Christians are not the end users of the gospel" can rebalance a narrow focus on individual salvation and spiritual fulfilment.

A time when Christ would move out of the Church and into the world was foreseen by Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his last year of life in a Nazi jail. In his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he seems to prophesy a world that we are now experiencing.

Realising that a focus on doctrine and personal salvation creates 'other-worldliness', thus pulling Christians out of the world, he saw a need for 'this-worldliness', or a kind of faith that moves Christians deeper into the world.

He wrote that "In the gospels we always find Christ in the midst of life and death, and his disciples are to follow him wherever he leads.

He imagined a "religionless Christianity" that would be limited to two things: *prayer* and *righteous action* among humanity, that is, identifying with those who suffer

(through intercessory prayer), and acting in solidarity with them or on their behalf, to achieve justice.

We may note that when it comes to Christian ethics the horse has long bolted from the church and there really is no point in trying to close the gate.

We cannot claim or keep Christian ideals in the church and nor do we want to.

This after all is what Christ came to do... to heal the world... by any means and any agency.

If you recall my talk about the yeast... well the dough is visibly rising now... the yeast of the kingdom has completely infected the world...

People may no longer know where it came from or who put the yeast in the dough but everyone and every culture is being affected and changed through mass media and instant communication.

We see this in the regular waves of international outrage over human rights abuses and terrorism, as in the current Israel-Gaza flare-up

and large-scale public empathy and support in tragedy, as in the recent loss of the Malaysian passenger jets with all on board. When it comes to what is right and wrong with the world, most people are singing from the same hymn-sheet, no matter what their religious persuasion

Love of neighbour is now a 'worldly' value... and who are we to protest?

In Numbers 11, when some 'unauthorised' prophets were prophesying in the camp, Joshua urged Moses to "forbid them".

But Moses wisely said "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!"

SLIDE 15. Rather than merely restyling the traditional church approach for a broader appeal, the Emergent Church sees itself as 'incarnational'.

Just as God entered into our world and human experience in the person of Jesus Christ, incarnation is to live sacramentally within and amongst the secular world as Jesus did. Every activity and relationship, therefore, is sacramental.

An incarnational church is 'outward focused' -- oriented toward the needs of the world rather than its own preservation.

The shift from the 'attractional' to 'incarnational' model is enormous.

The Church used to expect people to leave their social groups, and integrate into Christian social circles.

But in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith, multi-cultural society, this is no longer possible, and hasn't been for a long time.

People need authentic encounters with Jesus from *within* their own social networks. It is critical that people experience Christianity in a way that does not dislocate them from their natural family and social groups.

The Emerging Church ethos releases individual Christians to follow their own hearts and ideas for missional projects,

or to just live gently, ethically, and redemptively amongst their own people, whoever they are and whatever they believe.

Mission ought not to deliberately infiltrate any subculture by going ‘undercover’ as it were, in order to disarm them and preach the gospel.

This is non-organic and would be perceived as quite sinister by the targets of this mission.

Likewise, missional work need not be aimed at Christian conversion to be Kingdom work.

Nor do charitable projects need to be organised and conducted with other Christians as a form of outreach.

All sorts of people from many backgrounds have a heart for meeting various societal needs.

It is OK to be the sole Christian in any social group or charitable organisation, and it is more effective in dispersing the love of Christ and Kingdom values.

NOT USED (summarised): There have been some counter-productive features of church communities:

Attending church events helps fill our social and spiritual needs, but depletes social energy.

This means being less available to others who are more in need of relationship with Christians than are our church friends.

Depending on the level of commitment to church, one can almost totally avoid local relationships, removing a Christian presence and influence from neighbourhood, workplace, and even extended family.

Even within church, members tend to settle into cliques according to personal similarities and socio-economic standing.

The ability to travel long distances to attend a more compatible church within one’s preferred denomination selects for homogenous communities which are inward focused rather than outward focused.

Another effect of travelling to church is the dislocated effect of meeting in remote ‘neutral’ venues — the communal life of the congregations does not reflect the rich complexity of the members’ everyday experiences, struggles and triumphs.

There are marked differences in relationship patterns within church community and those in everyday life.

Whereas individual social ‘footprints’ are unique, within church their diversity is significantly limited.

Rather than just a few of one’s contacts knowing each other, in a church context most of one’s contacts will know each other, thus reducing the potential for missional contact with others.

Family members, work colleagues, neighbours, and other contacts may include nominal Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, atheists, and agnostics.

For best results, befriending non-Christians should not be a ‘discipline’ but something that happens ‘organically’, as an outcome of natural interactions, circumstances, and attractions.

Within such varied contexts, Christian love is constantly modelled and tested while topics of faith and hope come up in casual ordinary ways.

These may be a conversation about a movie, a news event, a reflection on a common experience, or comfort offered at a time of grief, suffering or joy. “Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:5-6).

Such opportunities arise, however, only when relationships are authentic, mutual, and equal; now more than ever, people do not want to be patronised or evangelised. It takes a high level of maturity to be open to relationship with those in different cultural and spiritual contexts, to embrace unity in diversity, and to abandon an ‘us-and-them’ mentality.

Pragmatically therefore, if churches as corporations are still to exist, they need to address the spiritual formation and communal worship needs of Christians and visitors without taking over and fulfilling their social needs.

By recognising that people’s ‘real’ lives are in the world, relevant churches can aim to be a ‘pit-stop’ for spiritual service and recharge.

The cathedral church (or mega-church) model may have been overly ambitious but it does allow the uncommitted to attend as a tourist...

and it provides the facility for committed Christians to experience the euphoria and satisfaction of group worship without depleting their social energy.

Ironically, a ‘professional’ church that provides programs to a casual itinerant population is the essence of the consumerism that the Emerging Church rejects, and yet may be the most efficient way forward.

In summary, it seems that the trajectory for the Emerging Church movement is the deconstruction of anything we might recognise as ‘church’.

However, the pattern of previous semi-millennial reformations shows that churches will still exist in previous forms, but they will be reformed and refined by rediscovering aspects of the gospel that have been neglected.

Nonetheless, by current trends, many more people than ever before will not affiliate with any church and Christianity will be increasingly forced to “find God in the world”.

DISCUSSION: