

# Is The Village an Emergent Church?

**Summary:** *Because of our understanding of absolute and unshakeable truth, The Village is not an “Emergent Church.”*

Is The Village an Emergent Church? In a word, no.

However, there is a broader movement called “the emerging Church” with which we would certainly share some general agreement. Confusing, I know. Emerging vs. emergent; emerging we are, but emergent we are not. I hope to clarify.

Think of the Emerging Church as a general movement (a tree) and the Emergent “conversation”<sup>1</sup> as a specific or particular subset (a branch) of that broader movement. So, to change the metaphor, the Emergent conversation is a stream in the larger flow of the Emerging Church. That is probably the best way to describe the distinction.

Before we begin to flesh out the difference, it is important to keep in mind that the terminology is quite loosely based and not uniformly applied. When some say “emerging” they mean “emergent” and vice versa. As Justin Taylor has written, “the important thing is to understand that there is a conceptual distinction, even if there isn’t always a linguistic one.” Therefore, anytime someone references “emerging” or “emergent,” there should be a series of questions to try to get at their intended usage. It would be extremely helpful if someone asks you if The Village is emerging or emergent to first inquire what they mean by those terms.

## Emerging

The Emerging church consists of a rather broad perspective which would seek to rethink historic and modern inadequacies and abuses within Evangelicalism especially in response to the rising tide of postmodernism. Within the Emerging church there is a general movement toward community and narrative and a focus on both mission and Kingdom. The aim is not to do away with or dilute theology, but to contextualize certain aspects to be more effective in engaging culture. Given that the culture has changed and is changing, the Emerging church seeks to adapt the means by which unchanging truth is presented. The church is ever and always reforming.

With the above recognition of the need to modify the method behind the ageless message, The Village would certainly agree. We are not chained to historical modes and means of expressing orthodoxy. The intention is to engage culture with freedom where Scripture allows liberty. Without modifying our beliefs, we

understand that our techniques for expressing and embodying those beliefs must be constantly altered.

## Emergent

As for the Emergent Village,<sup>2</sup> there is general agreement with the cultural argument presented above, but also major distinctives which identify and delineate it from the broader emerging movement. In addition, the Emergent Church Movement (ECM) and Emergent Village (EV) represent at least somewhat more concrete organization whereas “emerging” is a more philosophical term.

Due to the reality of varying levels of involvement and association, it is difficult to nail down the prevailing leaders, spokesmen and players within the Emergent conversation. Certain names, however, do come up over and over again: Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Steve Chalke, and Rob Bell are just a few such names.

The issues which typically define the Emergent position revolve around the nature of the atonement, the authority of the Bible and the nature of truth. It is impossible to attribute an exact Emergent perspective on any of these doctrines since their preferred method of theologizing is question rather than answer. Therefore, it is exceedingly difficult and impractical to conceive of a uniform theological position within this camp. In addition, we must caution that it is equally difficult to claim individual agreement even by those whom we will mention below. The conversation is simply too fluid for us to make distinct and decisive statements which adequately represent the feelings and beliefs of each and every member of the movement. However, for the purpose of the paper, we will simply say that these three issues mark the major categorical problems which plague the conversation as a whole.

As stated before, the main problem within the general Emergent understanding is a tendency to shy away from substitutionary atonement, an inerrant and authoritative Bible and any confession of objective reality or absolute truth. It is with these trends that we must take issue.

<sup>1</sup> It tends to call itself a “conversation” rather than a movement since the common expression is more interrogative than explanatory.

<sup>2</sup> The name of the official organization.

## Examples of Compromising Orthodoxy

1. In *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, Brian McLaren uses the character Kerry to ask the question, “For starters, if God wants to forgive us, why doesn’t he just do it? How does punishing an innocent person make things better? That sounds like one more injustice in the cosmic equation. It sounds like divine child abuse. You know?”<sup>3</sup> This question is never answered by the author, leaving one to assume that it represents a legitimate analogy.
2. Steve Chalke in *The Lost Message of Jesus* writes, “The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement ‘God is love’. If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.”<sup>4</sup>
3. In *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell specifically confesses that he believes in the virgin birth of Christ, but then alludes to the fact that such an understanding might not necessarily be essential for Christian doctrine.<sup>5</sup>
4. “We do not think this [the conference and its movement] is about changing your worship service. We do not think this is about...how you structure your church staff. This is actually about changing theology. This is about our belief that theology changes. The message of the gospel changes. It’s not just the method that changes.”<sup>6</sup>
5. “The Trinity is not wrong but it may not be the only way to understand God.”<sup>7</sup>

Once again, we feel the need to stress that not all who would hold to an association with the Emergent Church would endorse the statements made above. Additionally, to our knowledge, the quotes listed are intended to be more unanswered questions than they are propositional assertions. In other words, neither McLaren’s questioning of substitutionary atonement or Bell’s inquiry regarding the virgin birth necessarily indicates that they currently oppose orthodox understandings, just that they are open to the possibility. The issue with which we are primarily concerned is the tendency to make relative or unimportant those issues and doctrines which the Bible has already made absolute.

## Conclusion

“The Village Church exists to bring glory to God through lives changed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>8</sup>

We seek to reflect upon the past weaknesses of our evangelical heritage and attempt to work within the meta-narrative of Scripture,<sup>9</sup> teaching mission, community and Kingdom, but not at the expense of the Bible or the objective and absolute truth which is most fully expressed in the living Word, Jesus Christ. It is His unchanging and definitive gospel which changes lives to the glory of God.

Because of our recognition of an ever-changing cultural movement, The Village embraces the emerging tendency to reflect upon our tradition and use new means to tell the old story. Because of our understanding of absolute and unshakeable truth, The Village is not an “Emergent Church.”

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<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 102.

<sup>4</sup> As quoted on [http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/brett\\_kunkle\\_2006-11\\_essential\\_concerns\\_regarding\\_the\\_emerging\\_church.pdf](http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/brett_kunkle_2006-11_essential_concerns_regarding_the_emerging_church.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 26- 27.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Jones, as quoted on above website

<sup>7</sup> Q&A featuring Doug Pagitt as quoted on above website.

<sup>8</sup> Our Mission Statement

<sup>9</sup> The metanarrative is the overarching story of creation, fall and redemption not only for humans, but for the reconciliation of all things.