

## Introduction to this Issue

Those who have been following developments unfolding largely out of evangelical communities in North America and the United Kingdom will be familiar with the theme that we are featuring in *Reformed Review*. We have devoted this issue to the “Emergent” church. It is perhaps important to clarify at the outset that the Emergent church is neither a new denomination nor a formally constituted organization of churches. Rather, it is a set of convictions and sensibilities shared by a number of Christian leaders our authors will introduce to our readers in the pages to follow. We may say here that these leaders are convinced that the question what it means to live out the Christian faith authentically today must be revisited because we are in a world that is undergoing a dramatic change. This change, according to these leaders, can be characterized as a shift from the modern to the postmodern era. What the terms “modern” and “postmodern” mean in this claim our authors will explain; here we simply point out that to the Emergent Christians this shift is of such momentous significance that it requires Christians to fundamentally reevaluate the forms of beliefs and practices that have shaped and sustained the Christian churches until now. Emergent leaders look critically at church architecture, worship spaces, liturgies, interpretation of scripture, as well as the denominational and seminary institutions that authorize and maintain these things, and ask: how do all these serve to communicate God in a world that has become postmodern?

As one may already imagine by now, so radical a program is bound to provoke controversy. And our readers will see in the first two essays that we are making available here that their authors, Brian McLaughlin and Michael Wittmer, have entered into the controversy and developed positions in which they unambiguously reveal their opposition to the Emergent church movement.

But by no means should this prejudice a close reading of their contributions. Both authors have read widely in the literature that the movement has spawned, showing themselves to be more than familiar enough with it to say something critical about the movement. McLaughlin has presented a broad survey, in which he discusses the movement’s understanding of the postmodern, the meaning of the gospel, mission, and worship. Only after this informative survey does he volunteer theological observations critical of the distinctives of the movement.

Wittmer is concerned in his essay with testing the movement’s theological claims – both implicit and explicit – against a reading of scripture in a theological tradition which he himself represents. Wittmer is engaging in an examination of the Emergent church from the perspective of Reformed confessionalism. This tradition sees it as necessary to assert that scripture and a theology that reflects

on what scripture teaches presents Christians with definitive truth claims about God, Christ, and the human condition that can and must be believed and confessed. To the Emergent church, according to Wittmer, Christianity is more about how one lives than what one believes. Wittmer's plea is that Christians focus on the latter without neglecting the former. Throughout his essay he argues that the positions that Emergent Christians favor on fundamental theological issues, such as original sin, the necessity and scope of the atonement, and the relation between Christianity and non-Christian religions, are problematic from the perspective of the Reformed confessionalism that he represents. In a concluding section, he suggests provocatively that the theology of the Emergent church resembles that of the liberal Christians of the 1920s, a group that is the target of criticism in J. Gresham Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*.

We conclude this issue with a short essay that I myself contributed. One will not find evidenced in this essay the same command of the Emergent Christian literature possessed by McLaughlin and Wittmer. The author's defense, however, would be that his task is more limited in scope. In my essay I am concerned with developing the implications of the postmodern turn for Christian worship. I attempt to explore both why and how postmodern sensibilities prefer particular forms and expressions of worship. What further distinguishes my essay from those of McLaughlin and Wittmer is that I show myself to be more sympathetic with the movement. At the same time, I would hope that our readers not mistake my generally positive assessment of the Emergent church for an endorsement of what I perceive to be its call to the Christian churches. I do not accept that the established "modern" churches have become, to adopt the language of the world of business, "mature enterprises" and therefore cannot survive into the postmodern era. No one denies that the church must always be engaged in continual reformation. Indeed, this is at the heart of the tradition that *Reformed Review* plays its own small part in perpetuating: *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei* (the church reformed and always to be reformed according to the word of God). But this certainly cannot mean a break with tradition, not even a break with more recent tradition in an attempt to go beyond it to one in the more remote past. Accordingly, my concluding remarks invite churches to reflect again on their traditions. What might it mean for modern churches to reevaluate and reform their traditions, especially their liturgical traditions, in light of the postmodern turn? Hopefully, more and more people will be raising this sort of question. We would certainly be more than willing to hear from them at *Reformed Review*.

--Christopher Dorn