

DEEP CHURCH

A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional



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IVP Books

An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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INTRODUCTION

Is a Third Way Possible?

The evangelical church is deeply divided. Although evangelicalism has always been diverse, in recent years this fragmentation has threatened to pull the movement apart. Two groups, the traditional and emerging camps, are at the heart of the impending split. In the late 1990s some young evangelicals (now called the emerging church), unhappy with the reality and direction of the church, began to protest. In their writing and speaking they found fault with many elements of evangelicalism. They organized conferences, wrote books and started new churches to make their voice and opinions heard. It has become a movement with great momentum, energy and resources. It has, however, elicited a strong pushback from the traditionalists in the evangelical church.

Ironically, thirty years ago the protest was pioneered by the traditional wing of evangelicalism. Unhappy with what the Western church had become—anti-intellectual, entertainment-driven, success-focused—the traditional church condemned the worst elements with books like *Dining with the Devil*, *The Evangelical Forfeit*, *Selling Jesus* and *No Place for Truth*.¹ These books primarily attack what Robert Webber calls the pragmatists, those who pioneered seeker-sensitive worship that stripped traditional worship of historical and liturgical elements.² The pragmatists also had adopted a business paradigm to structure and run the church, a psychological model of counseling and church-growth philosophy drawn

from marketing theory, all of which the traditionalists condemn.

While this critique was in full swing, the newest generation of evangelicals, termed “the younger evangelicals” by Robert Webber, joined in the protest. In the twenty-first century, some of these younger evangelicals have become known as the emerging church. They too decry the pragmatists’ penchant for entertainment, individualism, unconcern for social justice and narrow theology of salvation—to name just a few points.

Though the emerging church shares much in common with the traditional church, they also include the more conservative wing of evangelicalism in their critique. And the traditional church has begun to fire back. Unlike the pragmatists, whose reaction to the emerging church has been minimal, the traditional church has gone after the emerging movement through books, conferences and blogs. After almost a decade the two sides now are at loggerheads, and it seems the rift will not be healed anytime soon.

The emerging church is composed of many different authors, pastors and church traditions, and therefore does not speak with one voice. What unifies them, in part, is their view that something is wrong with the evangelical church. They are seeking wholesale change, not just reform. But not everyone in the movement agrees on what this change should be.

To be fair, the traditional camp is not monolithic; it cuts across denominational and theological lines.³ But the groups comprising traditional evangelicalism share similar views of culture, epistemology and the church. They also hold a fairly unified analysis of the emerging movement.⁴ Therefore, in this book I group them all under the rubric of “the traditional church.”

SPEAKING A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE?

At the height of the tension between the emerging and traditional churches, Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, who are part of Emergent Village,⁵ reached out to a leader in the traditional camp, John Piper. Since they all lived and ministered in Minneapolis, it made sense to bridge the gap. They met for

lunch and discussed their differences and commonalities. Since that meeting, both sides have written a description of their experience. It is fascinating to read how amazingly different the two accounts are. It paints a vivid picture of the gap between the two sides.⁶

Piper, senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, came away convinced that Jones and Pagitt believe that “committed relationships trump truth.”⁷ This is dangerous, from Piper’s perspective, because it assigns Scripture to a secondary status. As Jones and Pagitt tried to explain how they know ultimate truth in life, Piper was thinking to himself: “I just don’t understand the way these guys think. There are profound epistemological [the theory of how we know] differences—ways of processing reality—that make the conversation almost impossible, as if we were just kind of going by each other.”⁸ After the lunch Piper concludes, “We seem to differ so much in our worldviews and our ways of knowing that I’m not sure how profitable the conversation was or if we could ever get anywhere.” Piper left shaking his head, wondering what exactly Jones and Pagitt believed on the important theological topics. They just would not be pinned down. “I came away from our meeting frustrated and wishing it were different but not knowing how to make it different.”⁹

Tony Jones has also written about this meeting in his book *The New Christians*. His perspective on the same meeting could not be more different. After seeing promotional literature for a conference Piper was hosting that was critical of the emerging movement, Jones offered to meet with Piper as a kind of “olive branch.” Jones wanted to make clear that both sides “share a commitment to proclaiming Christ.” He writes that Piper is a “gentle-looking man, but his theology is anything but gentle.” “He believes that God’s anger burns with holy fire against human sin. Words like *wrath*, *hate* and *blood* peppered his sentences as we dined.” The meeting seemed tense from the start. Piper, remembers Jones, “began by admitting that he’d never heard of me before, and that he really didn’t have anything against emergent Christians per se.” His problem was with Brian McLaren, another emergent author, who has questioned the ver-

sion of the doctrine of atonement that Piper holds dear.

When Pagitt, who is Jones's pastor, asked Piper, "Maybe we can find ways to work together," Piper said it would be impossible without agreement on essential doctrines like the atonement. Because Pagitt and Jones don't hold to Piper's view of atonement, they are "rejecting the gospel *in toto*, and so, by logical extension, [they] are not . . . Christian." When Jones pushed back that through the millennia billions of Christians have not had the same view of atonement that Piper holds today, "The pastor paused, looked at me, and said, 'You should never preach.'" Jones tried to explain that for him the gospel was mainly about reconciliation. It is more than a "fixed point of doctrine that is the litmus test of all ministry," he said. "Everything we do in the emergent church is surrounded by an envelope of friendship, friendship that is based on lives of reconciliation." "In fact," Jones concluded, returning Piper's slight, "I'm not sure it's even possible to be an orthodox Christian if you're not living a life of reconciliation."¹⁰

This exchange vividly makes clear how far apart the two sides are on issues of theology, epistemology and the nature of the church. There appears to be little common ground. Unity seems impossible. Can the two sides get along? Are they really this far apart? Can they work together to build evangelicalism, or are their differences irreconcilable?

IS THERE A THIRD WAY?

Most observers of this conflict are caught somewhere in between. Many recognize that something has gone wrong with the pragmatic wing of evangelicalism, and they want something different.¹¹ They desire more depth in worship, a stronger sense of belonging and greater impact in the world. When Bill Hybels, a pioneer of the pragmatic, seeker-driven church, admitted that he had been wrong, that his church had not done a good job at discipling people, his critics felt vindicated.¹² They knew something was wrong and are convinced that a biblical view of the church can be a reality.

But those caught in the middle are confused. They see two groups, the

traditional and emerging camps, echoing their sentiments about pragmatic worship. Both accuse the Western church of being shallow, ahistorical and more focused on pragmatic issues than on real transformation and cultural renewal. Both sides are calling on the church to recover its heritage—the breadth and depth of Christian theology, worship and practice—and be informed by a missional ministry in the postmodern world, all to the glory of God. Yet the two sides can't get along. They are hostile to each other, using their writings and conferences to denounce the other side.

The vast majority of people are confused by the debate. Many have read emerging authors, agreeing with their assessment of the problem and aspects of what they are proposing. But they also have read traditional authors and are drawn to parts of their vision of the church as well. The majority want to learn from both sides. Why don't they get along? After all, don't they want the same thing—a deeper, more robust evangelical church that profoundly affects people and the world? But on the other hand, there must be a reason for all the distrust on both sides. Is it possible the two camps aren't teaching the same gospel and should not be together? Maybe they do have different starting points and different stories. Those in the middle want to find out.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is written for those who are caught in between. They are unhappy with the present state of the evangelical church but are not sure where to turn for an answer. They like some of what the emerging and traditional camps offer, but they are not completely at ease with either. The public conflict makes this anxiety worse, and these people don't know who to trust or believe. What if both are off target? Is there a third option, a *via media*? I believe there is a third way. It is what C. S. Lewis called the "Deep Church."¹³ *Deep church* is a term taken from Lewis's 1952 letter to the *Church Times* in which he defended supernatural revelation against the modernist movement. He wrote, "Perhaps the trouble is that as supernaturalists, whether 'Low' or 'High' Church, thus taken

together, they lack a name. May I suggest ‘Deep Church’; or, if that fails in humility, Baxter’s ‘mere Christians’?”

Second, this book is written for those on the outside who want to understand the debate. They are new to the conversation and want to understand what all the fuss is about. They have heard of the emerging church but have no idea what the term stands for or what it is advocating. The whole conversation seems foreign and is outside their church reality. Why is this debate important? How does it affect their church world? Should it concern them? This book will explain the contours of the conversation, what the emerging church is and desires, and why it has created such a strong pushback from the traditional church.

Third, this book is written for seminarians, those who are attempting to work out their ecclesiology—their theological view of the church, its purpose, structure and goals. Seminary is a great time to test inherited beliefs, dig deeper and then slowly work out in greater depth biblical convictions about ministry. This book lays out the options, the two sides of the debate, so seminarians can get a handle on what they believe Christianity and the church is all about.

Finally, this book is for pastors who have been in the ministry for a while and have begun to question how ministry is practiced in their context. Many pastors who reach this midlife ministry crisis end up burning out and even leaving the ministry. I don’t want to see this happen. Some pastors are disillusioned with aspects of evangelicalism. They are searching for pastoral models that can refire their ministry, their calling and their church. Though they may not know how to achieve it, they know they want a deep church, one that is profoundly meaningful to them and their community, and brings glory to God. This book is for them.

SUMMARY OF THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In chapter two I will define the emerging church, their protest and their plan for change, highlighting seven areas in which they are dissatisfied with the traditional church. Much of this will rub the traditionalists the wrong way; all reform movements tend to do this. The question is

whether or not they are correct. In chapter three, we will examine whether their protest threatens or strengthens the unity of the church. Do they have the same story, or are they too far apart to ever work together for the kingdom? If unity is possible, what is it based on?

In chapters four through ten we will look at the seven major protests of the emerging church in greater detail. In each chapter I have chosen to focus on one author whose work has generated the most pushback or has best articulated an emerging viewpoint being addressed. Though this limits me from capturing the breadth and diversity of the emerging voices, it allows me to dig deeper, listen well and respond in a way that is more helpful to the conversation.¹⁴ It is much harder to set up a straw man when dealing with one author's views.

We will see that in each of these seven protests the authors have a well-thought-out critique and plan for renewal. We will also listen to the traditional church and its pushback, assessing whether the critique is accurate. Then I will demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of both groups, and move beyond them to a third way, the deep church. I will tell stories from the church I pastor, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, and other churches like it, as examples of how to live out deep church.¹⁵ Please note that although chapters four to ten build on each other slightly, they don't *necessarily* have to be read in order. Feel free to skip a chapter and then return to it later on or read the chapters that most interest you first. In the end, they all make up the deep church.

But before we begin this exciting journey, I want to begin with my story and why this topic is so relevant, important and meaningful to me. It's personal.