

“Breaking Out of a Box”

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Many of us recognize how deeply we are influenced (or captivated) by the cultures in which we live. In the West, that culture is swirling with possibilities fed by our affluence, technology and freedoms. But it is also individualistic, consumerist, and fragmented. When people gather in churches, be they traditional or emerging fellowships, they are not immune to bowing to the idols of our time, or holding on to the idols of a former time. “Idols” may be defined as anything which we trust apart from God for our identity, security, worth, meaning and purpose in life. Churches, like the individuals, often get caught up in finding their identity in their own ways of doing things, or their security in the comfort of always knowing what to expect when they come to worship. They frequently find their worth in being able to assert the superiority of their particular doctrinal positions, or building and maintaining monuments to their faithfulness. They can even create idols out of their ability to utilize the trappings of the current popular culture to appear “relevant” to the watching world. Churches are places where people cling to what “works” for them. They aggressively build patterns of life together that feed their tastes and support their convictions of how the world should work.

My colleagues have each in different ways pointed out that the emerging experiments of “church” can be seen as attempts to break out of the “old” boxes and to take a fresh look at the call and opportunities of faith. These experiments can be refreshing—and they can be dangerous. The well-worn paths of “traditional church” can

certainly be ruts, but those paths are “well-worn” because generations have found value in these ways of being Christian and in the boundaries which have been set.

In various ways, the church in every age must answer the questions: “How are we to live faithfully in today’s world? How can we break out of our cultural entrapment and live into God’s greater purposes? How can we avoid reducing the gospel into something that merely fits our current culture?”¹ Those of us trying to live biblical faith must always be asking afresh what it means to live in a deepening relationship of intimacy with the triune God, with one another, and with the work of Christ in the world. We must always understand that we live in the face of “powers and principalities” which directly and indirectly resist the powers of God and vie for our allegiance. As we engage the realities of our personal journeys and the sufferings of a fallen world, what resources are available to us? What or whom will we serve? How will we engage the battles? Christian practices—churchly practices—are supposed to support us, focus us, and connect us more deeply for what truly matters in the journey. They are not merely to decorate our lives or to give us temporary solace in the storm.

While I, too, question many aspects of the “experiments” with doing and being “church” which are growing today, I am also finding that these challenges to my own journey are helping me to engage again with the fundamentals of my faith. As I listen to many voices in the emerging churches, I find myself asking questions that are truly foundational and that need to be periodically reexamined with fewer cultural trappings. They are questions like: What is God like? What is God doing in the world? What is the “Gospel”? What is God wanting to do in and through my life—and our lives together?

How can we build, sustain and nourish our own faith and that of people we love? Are there better—more careful and powerful—ways of “telling the story” for this generation?

While enjoying this conversation with my faculty friends, I have also been following a dialog among some of the “emerging church” bloggers on the internet. It has been interesting because it has raised a number of the evocative questions with which those in emerging churches are dealing regularly as they struggle to follow Christ faithfully. It all began with a piece by Bill Kinnon, entitled “The People Formerly Known as the Congregation”² in which he speaks from the perspective of those who were once pew sitters and are now trying to “boldly go where the Spirit leads us,” “to marvel at what the Father is doing in the communities where he has placed us” and “to live the love that Jesus shows us.” This was followed by “Emerging Grace” who wrote “The Penguins Formerly Known as the Waddle”³ in which she affirmed that “many of us are headed down a path where we will no longer fit in with church as usual.” Jamie Arpin-Ricci responded with “The Community Coming to Be Known as Missional”⁴ in which he gave a positive vision of this new movement. John Frye quickly followed with “The People Formerly Known as ‘The Pastor’”⁵ articulating how many pastors, too, have struggled because they “started with idealism about being voices for the kingdom of God and soon realized we became mutated forms of USAmerican business leaders.” Next came Greg Laughery with “The Exodus Church”⁶ in which he talks about how this emerging church is living in this transitional time of wilderness wanderings. And Heidi Daniels wrote “Formerly Known, Take 2”⁷ talking about her own pilgrimage from being a “normal Christian,” trying to live the way that those in her very traditional church world had prescribed, to a new place where she says, “I’m not normal anymore, I certainly don’t

stick with the status quo, I don't have much reverence for sacred cows, and I'm not afraid to disagree with the majority.” The same day that Heidi’s post appeared, so did one from her husband, Mike, (aka “Copernicus” in his blog), entitled “A Former Footsoldier of the ‘Christian Right’”⁸ in which he declares his own exodus from another part of the church and concludes with the statement, “We are discovering that you are only relevant as long as we allow you to be, and we are beginning to revoke that permission.” And the dialog goes on and on, not only between the bloggers, but also in the hundreds of comments attached to these sites.

I would encourage you to read these blogs—and follow some of the comment “threads.” They provide an interesting window into the minds, hearts, and spirits of the people themselves who are involved in and who are leading some of these emerging church experiments. What is evident to me is the passion in their voices. “We’re the generation who likes things raw and uncut and really in-your-face” as one young disciple described his friends.⁹ While the style of worship of these experiments cannot always be characterized this way, the spirit of the participants often can. It’s not a description of rebellion, so much as a discontent and lack of connection with the same-old, same-old. And with them I pray, “Lord, kindle a new fire in me, too. Draw me close. Don’t allow me ever to remain content with the old ways, when you are ever new. Like the Apostle Paul, give me outstretched arms as I affirm: ‘but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.’”¹⁰

¹ A great discussion of the current conflict between the culture and the Gospel can be found in Brownson, Dieterich, Harvey, and West’s *StormFront: The Good News of God* (Eerdmans, 2003). This book grew

out of a wider dialog within the “Gospel and Our Culture Network” and reflects the analysis and concern of many of those in the emerging church experiments.

² Posted March 28, 2007, see http://www.kinnon.tv/2007/03/the_people_form.html

³ Posted April 1, 2007, see <http://emerginggrace.blogspot.com/2007/04/underlying-issues.html>

⁴ Posted April 5, 2007, see <http://emergentvoyageurs.blog.com/1664695/?page=last&msgsuccess=1#cmts>

⁵ Posted April 5, 2007, see <http://jesustheradicalpastor.blogspot.com/2007/04/people-formerly-known-as-pastor.html>

⁶ Posted April 10, 2007, see <http://www.livingspirituality.org/2007/04/exodus-church-part-2.html>

⁷ Posted April 16, 2007, see

http://livewithdesire.typepad.com/live_with_desire/2007/04/formerly_known_.html

⁸ Posted April 16, 2007, see <http://www.theuneditedlife.com/2007/04/16/a-former-footsoldier-of-the-christian-right/>

⁹ “Passion Takes It Higher,” *Christianity Today*, April 2007, p. 32.

¹⁰ Philippians 3.13-14.