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Whither  
Now Emergence

**CURRENTS**  
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# Currents in Theology and Mission

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## Dear *Currents* Subscriber:

For several months the editorial team of *Currents in Theology and Mission* has been discussing an exciting new possibility related to the future of *Currents*. We have come to the decision that the time is right for *Currents* to become a fully online, open access journal. While this means that beginning in 2016 *Currents* no longer will appear as a printed journal, it also offers many advantages. The journal will become free of charge for our loyal subscribers, while at the same time opening up the contents of our established publication to a whole new world of readers across the globe. Moreover, this new mode of delivery makes the production of *Currents* financially sustainable in an unprecedented way.

We especially thank you, our loyal readers over the years, for subscribing to *Currents* and ask your continued support and readership as we move to our new format in 2016. We pledge to you our continued commitment to deliver a quality theological journal in support of the ministry and mission of the church as it responds to the ever-changing signs of the times.

We will continue to publish *Currents* in its print format through 2015, in order to give our readers ample time to be informed about how to access the journal in the future and to honor subscriptions already purchased. We gladly will accept one-year subscriptions for 2015, but urge our readers not to extend their subscriptions beyond 2015. If there is any money to be refunded, we certainly will do this upon request, even while allowing readers the opportunity to contribute any remaining amount to support the future of *Currents*.

Beginning with the January 2015 issue, the journal will be published quarterly, in January, April, July, and October.

In future issues we will provide readers ample information about how to easily access *Currents* in its new online format. In the meantime, we look forward to your continued readership and support as we move into the future together.

Kathleen D. Billman; S.D. Giere; Craig L. Nesson; *Currents* editors

From the *Currents* staff: While this issue of *Currents* was in production, our Assistant Editor, Ann Rezny, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The rapid progression of her illness necessitated her departure from the *Currents* team long before she (and we) wished. Our prayers are with Ann, who has been such a valued member of our team. Thanks to Connie Sletto and Kathryn Brewer, whose help in bringing the April issue to publication is deeply appreciated. A fund at [giveforward.com](http://giveforward.com) has been established to help with Ann's medical expenses. <http://bit.ly/1ETnCO2>

# Whither Now Emergence?

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In this issue of *Currents* a fairly diverse cadre of writers continue, extend, and amplify the conversation about emerging forms of Christianity today. In so doing these authors provide a contemporary “read” (analysis, evaluation, interpretation) of the current ecclesial landscape vis-à-vis emergence Christianity.

As with all work of this nature, it is clearly perspectival. These essays are not intended to be polemical, nor to defend all things emergent or emerging, and certainly not to re-hash old, stale arguments about postwhateverism. Rather, these scholars seek to take seriously the generative conversation that has employed some variation of the words “emerge,” “emerging,” or “emergent” over the course of the past few decades, now often expressed in common parlance in much of the literature as emergence Christianity. Our intent is to probe, critique, uncover, and amplify the conceptual, theoretical, and theological underpinnings of emergence Christianity from particular disciplinary (or multi-disciplinary) perspectives. An underlying premise of this project is the Gadamerian assertion that genuine understanding proceeds best through dialogue. Our hope is that this issue of *Currents* respectfully and thoughtfully engages the generative conversation that has become emergence Christianity and makes a small, but nonetheless significant contribution to the continued narration and curating of what emergence Christianity is, at least in part, becoming.

In spite of claims regarding the demise of emergence Christianity, and the shuttering of Emergent Village as an organization, **Tim Hartman** suggests that a theological investigation of this movement demonstrates the depth and breadth of emergence Christianity in the United States and, significantly, overseas. The emerging church movement may not be uniform or structured, but it is by no means dead. Emergence Christianity has moved through its deconstructive beginnings toward a more generative future with constructive theological contributions and collaborative partnerships—across formerly divisive denominational and international boundaries. Emergence Christianity is also making explicit theological contributions to the doctrines of ecclesiology and atonement while implicitly impacting other doctrines and practices.

**Gladys Ganiel and Gerardo Marti** use sociological approaches, including participant observation and interviews in the United States, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom, to assess the significance of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). They identify and suggest that the ECM is a response to the crisis of modernity, not only in religion but also across all spheres of life.

Furthermore, they provide distinctive markers of the ECM as a religious orientation and argue that religious individualism, the formation of pluralist congregations, and the desire to construct a personal faith within a cooperative setting will be widely practiced elements of modern religiosity—not just in the ECM but also in traditional denominations. This essay from Gladys and Gerardo is but an appetizer; for a more thoroughgoing, empirically based, and systematic treatment of the ECM see *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emergence Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

The relationship between the emergent church and mainline Protestant denominations has been complicated and, more often than not, tense to the point of misunderstanding suggests **Robert Saler**. He identifies the role of theology as one particularly contested factor in this relationship, specifically the theological themes and methodologies favored by key representative figures on both sides. His essay argues that coming to some clarity on potential symmetries between emergent and liberal theologies will be a key factor in these ecclesial traditions' reception of each other's gifts in the future.

The essay from **Elaine Heath** reflects the approach she uses in her forthcoming book titled *Gospel Bearing: The Theory and Practice of Apostolic Life*, which is a theo-meditative journey through the Apostles' Creed as a framework for how we might live our baptism in a post-Christendom world. The essay here mirrors the structure and format used in each chapter of the book. Each chapter focuses on a phrase in the creed and has two parts. The first section offers a meditation on the meaning of the phrase, followed by three groups of suggested activities that help readers to engage these questions: What does it mean to pray with this phrase? How might this phrase shape deep practices of hospitality? How does this phrase call the Christian community to engage social and environmental justice? The essay included in this issue of the journal focuses on the first phrase of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe."

While there is an increasing interest in the theological and sociological significance of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM) and emerging forms of Christianity that have taken shape in recent decades, **April Vega and Tim Snyder** suggest here that few theologians have immersed themselves into these communities to learn first-hand from their lived theological practice. Their essay considers the musical practices of emerging churches in two ethnographic studies and theologically interprets them within the context of broader challenges in contemporary congregational life.

**Katherine Sarah Moody** engages the work of Peter Rollins and Kester Brewin, both of whom push emerging Christianity to engage with radical theology. Her essay introduces readers to radical theology as a theological tradition that can be traced to the Hegelian notion of the death of God, and to the social

or cultural imaginary that forms at the intersection of radical theology and emerging Christianity. It uses Brian R. Clack's examination of the possibility of religion beyond illusion to present this radical emerging imaginary as a way of reconciling participants to their own death, decay, and nothingness.

Finally, few people have given as much of themselves to the emerging church conversation, and had such an impact on its evolution, as **Brian McLaren**. One of his significant contributions to this generative conversation was his 2004 book titled *A Generous Orthodoxy* (with a super descriptive but super long sub-title), and arguably no one has been more generous with the time, energy, and mentoring given to others over the years than Brian. Though all of the descriptors in the sub-title of the aforementioned book may aptly describe Brian, it is his calm thoughtfulness and depth of kindness that has left a deeper mark on the countless lives that he has touched. We are grateful that he took time to write the preface for this issue of the journal.

I can't sing for you, as did Bilbo Baggins, "softly...in a low voice...as if to himself," a song from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, so I will simply share it in print. "But the time has come," Bilbo Baggins announced, "I am being swept off my feet at last."

The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with weary feet,  
Until it joins some larger way  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.

And so with the singer, the bard Bilbo, we—this cadre of authors and this company of readers—seek to find our way along the Road: following, pursuing, seeking, and questioning, until some larger way is joined where many paths and errands meet. So whither now, or whither then—perhaps we cannot yet say. But I am grateful for those who sing, or in this case, write toward that far ahead day.

Nathan C.P. Frambach

Issue Editor

# A Preface on “Whither Emergent?”

Brian McLaren

*Author, speaker, activist, and networker among innovative Christian leaders*

One of my wife’s aunts is remembered by all as a woman who knew how to tell a story. If the story concerned a fender bender in a New Jersey grocery store parking lot yesterday, she might begin in the mountains of Sicily in the 1940s with a story about her grandfather who grew eggplants in his garden. From there, we might hear about her mother’s eggplant recipe, for which she was going to buy ingredients when the accident occurred. Eventually we would get to the accident itself, but not before any number of fascinating narrative tangents and backstories were thoroughly explored.

I feel the same way whenever I am asked about the history of what has come to be known as the Emergent Conversation. It emerges at an intersection where many fascinating stories converge—stories Evangelical and Mainline, conservative and liberal, moderate and radical, many reaching back farther than one might expect.

My speculations about the future have been especially shaped by the work of Greg Leffel and Parker Palmer. Leffel, in *Faith Seeking Action*<sup>1</sup> explores the components of social/spiritual movements, and Palmer, in his article “Divided No More,”<sup>2</sup> speaks of four predictable

stages in the development of social/spiritual movements.

Emergent began as movements typically begin, according to Palmer, with people who felt divided. Whether Evangelical, Mainline, or Roman Catholic in background, clergy and lay people alike felt that what we were expected to say and do publicly no longer matched with what we believed or felt inwardly. Eventually, some of us refused to live in silence with this incongruence. We wrote or spoke of our frustration, choosing to be “divided no more” (Stage 1).

Others began to emerge from the shadows, saying, “I thought I was the only one who felt this way!” “Communities of congruence” gathered in many venues, in person and online (Stage 2), bringing unlikely allies together to think and speak freely and critically about a wide range of theological, missional, liturgical, spiritual, political, and related issues. These communities created safe spaces to explore questions and answers that were unwelcome in our other places of belonging. Soon, we were speaking with a new hope and confidence, and through books, conferences, websites, festivals, and other means, we began to “go public” with an alternative vision of how things can be (Stage 3).

Next, gatekeepers of the status quo noticed the commotion, and began to inflict costs or punishments on those who felt newly liberated and “divided no more.” Many of us have been marginalized, criti-

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1. Gregory P. Leffel, *Faith Seeking Action: Mission, Social Movements, and the Church in Motion* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2007).

2. Parker Palmer, “Divided No More” in *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 24:2 (Mar/Apr 1992): 10–17.



cized, sanctioned, or excommunicated. As a result, our communities of congruence have sought to provide “alternative rewards” (Stage 4) to sustain and expand the creative and safe space that has been opened—new ways and means of belonging, for example.

Leffel adds granularity to this schema. A community of congruence (also called a “critical community” by other scholars) is not a fully born movement until it has six characteristics:

1. It understands the opportunities and obstacles to forward movement presented by institutions and the elites who manage them.
2. It develops a message to challenge those elites, a message that includes specific proposals or demands for change.
3. It develops a strategy to draw attention to its message and proposals/demands.
4. It mobilizes people to join in this strategy.
5. It develops a movement culture that embodies the message.
6. It enhances the lives of movement participants.

Leffel’s components explain why I usually refer to the Emergent Conversation rather than the Emergent Movement. Although I believe we are at Palmer’s fourth stage, I believe we do not yet manifest all six of Leffel’s movement characteristics.

In particular, although I believe participants are carefully monitoring opportunities and obstacles (Characteristic 1) and thousands of individual lives are being enhanced through participation (Characteristic 6), I do not yet believe clear proposals or demands (Characteristic 2) have been fully articulated and announced. Books, blogs, speaking engagements, and other resources have begun to spread the

message (Characteristic 3), but more dramatic and diverse means need to be employed to reach critical tipping points. As well, although a definite movement culture has developed, expressed through a wide range of events such as the Mesa Gathering (<http://mesa-friends.org>), Christianity 21 (<http://c21.thejopagroup.com>), and Wild Goose Festival (<http://wildgoosefestival.org>) (Characteristic 5), we lack a fully developed mobilization plan (Characteristic 4) to draw larger numbers, needed funds, and more diverse communities into that movement culture.

I feel a mixture of patience and urgency about these challenges. Organic growth cannot be rushed. But progress should not be delayed.

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Internationally, a small group operating under the name Mesa has come together to try to help network the many and diverse “communities of congruence” that are springing up across the globe. The group has enormous potential but has not yet secured funding.

In the U.S., a number of these communities are coming together under the name Convergence Network (<http://www.convergenceus.org>), in partnership with Center for Progressive Renewal (<http://progressiverenewal.org>). Specific initiatives are underway to help a sustainable movement take shape and gain momentum:

- Charter for a Just and Generous Christianity: a simple articulation of vision with ten implicit proposals/demands.
- Common Table Collective: a new national (and potentially international) campus ministry to mobilize progressive Christians of college age.
- 10,000 Vital Spiritual Communities: an attempt to identify, announce, draw attention to, and support congregations that embody “a new kind of Christianity.”
- Leadership Initiative: a project to innovate in the development of new kinds of Christian leaders for new kinds of scholarship, ministry, and mission.
- Convergence Worship Project: a set of initiatives to strengthen “movement

culture” through music, liturgy, and preaching.

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**M**ovement-  
building is  
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science.

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Movement-building is always more art than science. And in ventures of the Spirit, it is a mysterious art whose stories, like those of my wife’s Sicilian aunt, are full of intrigue, backstory, and surprise.

# The Depth and Breadth of Emergence Christianity: A Theological and International Perspective

Tim Hartman

*Assistant Professor of Theology, Columbia Theological Seminary*

## The context of Emergence Christianity

In our rapidly changing context, inventions in technology, transportation, and communication have radically altered how we in the Western world live, relate, and think. Our understandings of ourselves, our cultures, and our faiths will never be the same, and more importantly the scope and rate of the changes occurring raise significant theological questions: How will these changes affect Christian theology in the twenty-first century and beyond? What are the distinctives or the emphases that will connect the God of the Bible, the Triune God, with the people of today and tomorrow? How will theology make these quantum-sized shifts? Over the last dozen or so years, many people in the United States considering these types of questions have been affiliated with so-called Emergence Christianity.

After garnering tremendous attention from 2004 to 2009, Emergence Christianity has receded from the spotlight. What has happened to Emergence Christianity and where has it gone? This essay offers a theological and international perspective on these questions that points to the depth and breadth of Emergence Christianity today. In short, Emergence Christianity has gone both “nowhere” and “everywhere.” From one perspective, Emergence Christianity has not gone anywhere. In

response to changing cultural contexts, the understandings and practices of the Christian faith continue to adapt, change, even evolve. In this sense, Emergence Christianity remains implicit and explicit among conversations about theology and ministry. Conversations about creativity and innovation in theology and ministry can be found throughout mainline and evangelical congregations and denominations.

On the other hand, over the last decade and a half, some things have changed. Certainly, the words “emergent,” “emerging,” and “emergence” went from having no place in a discussion of Christian thought and practices (prior to the 1980s) to naming a social movement that (in the United States) coalesced around Emergent Village (the 2000s). After the demise of Emergent Village as an organization (approximately 2009), this pool of terms has not vanished but has found widespread and varied use (2010 to the present). At this point, emerging/emergent/emergence are used so pervasively—in publishing, social science, theology, and, their home discipline, the natural sciences—that their usage can seem to signify next-to-nothing about the content they are describing. These descriptors have lost any distinctively theological meaning about the Christian faith through overuse and misuse. Yet, “the Church that is emerging”—as Brian McLaren preferred

to describe the movement—has emerged and continues to emerge.

I write as somewhat of an insider regarding the Emerging Church Movement (ECM), though not as a member of any inner circle. I am an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) who has served in a large urban congregation and as a nontraditional church planter. I currently serve as an assistant professor of theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. I first became interested in the themes that would later become labeled as emergence Christianity<sup>1</sup> as I observed the disconnect between established churches and their unchurched and dechurched neighbors. My initial encounter with Emergent Village and many of its leaders came at the first Emergent Convention in 2003 in San Diego. By 2009, I was serving as the board chair of both Emergent Village and a similar organization, Amahoro Africa, whose mission was to connect emerging Christian leaders in sub-saharan Africa. I share these personal details to demonstrate some ways in which I share with other authors who identify with emergence Christianity a sense that existing theological concepts and models may not be communicating to new generations, and also to indicate that I have sought to ask these questions and implement responses from within a somewhat distinctive academic and mainline denominational context.

My interests are explicitly theological and global. Rightly understood, I take Doug Pagitt's admonition to be spot on: the Christian Church in the West does

not have a method problem, but a *message* problem.<sup>2</sup> Today's ecclesial challenges are not merely about how to do church differently, but about what are the distinctive theological questions of our day? As the social and historical context has changed, so must contemporary theological emphases. Christendom-era answers ought not be offered in response to post-Christendom (or post-modern) questions. The blank stares and quizzical looks on the faces of the inquisitive have betrayed deep theological disconnects. The doctrines of Christian theology must be re-examined for their relevance and relative significance today.

Many in the ECM sense that the prevailing themes in theological literature within the United States are preoccupied with questions of the sixteenth century—or, at best, the mid-twentieth century—and not the twenty-first. The dominant issues in today's world, where many people do not believe in sin nor that they need to be saved from anything, are not the Fall, the Cross, and penal substitution. Trying to make sure you end up on the right side of a centuries-long, metaphysical transaction is simply not compelling for someone who is not already asking those questions. A better approach might begin with Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection in talking to people who are already interested in the environment, community, and creativity. We rightly affirm that it is exciting and interesting to be part of the work that God is doing in the world. Better still, people—and I claim all people, not just people of faith—are looking to understand their lives and this world in an integrated way (and as a result are not picking a trio of theological doctrines to emphasize over others). Many yearn for their lives to “make sense,” or to “fit together,” and,

1. For more on the shared characteristics of emergence Christianity, see Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community In Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006) and Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2009).

2. Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005), 162.

quite often, for space to contemplate the mysteries in the universe.

## A contextual theology?

Authors writing from within the ECM can be understood within a larger trend beginning in the late twentieth century towards contextual theologies.<sup>3</sup> This valuing of particular settings and contexts emphasizes affinities between the ECM and Liberation theology or Feminist theology and positions it against avowedly acontextual theological systems.<sup>4</sup> While pervasively remaining a part of Christian thought and ministry—more and more theology is being written consciously addressing the context of the author and his/her audience, churches are continually seeking to adjust their message and methods to attract new members—emergence Christianity (as an entity) seems to some to have disappeared. However, as I will explore below, it may be the case that emergence has actually permeated deeper, beneath structures and thought-patterns than ever before. As emergence Christianity—that arguably began (at least formally) in the United States out of a group of formerly evangelical white men—has permeated deeper into culture, its spread has also gone wider. The topics and themes that once char-

acterized “emergent thinking”—including new forms of church communities, contemporary forms of worship including participatory and contemplative elements, reassessing traditional understandings of the Bible, authority, atonement, religious pluralism, and the essence of the Christian life—are now featured in conferences and consultations among mainline denominations, church-planting organizations, and seminaries across the theological spectrum. In these ways, the recession of emergence Christianity in terms of organized institutions has been more than replaced by the appearance of these themes in many, many places.

Certainly, the categories of Emerging/Emergent/Emergence Christianity have lost much of their cultural cache of the movement’s zenith between 2004 and 2010. Measured by the health and influence of institutions whose origins launched much of the church-based discussion, emergence Christianity is *kaput*—ending more with a whimper than a bang (I am thinking here primarily of Emergent Village). Rumors of the demise of Emergent Village began in 2009, and by 2013 the website had shut down. The former domain name ([emergentvillage.com](http://emergentvillage.com)) that once described “an emerging, generative friendship” now links to a home décor blog featuring posts on “Choosing the Right Countertop...” or “Heating the Pond.” The Emergent Village facebook page ([facebook.com/EmergentVillage](https://www.facebook.com/EmergentVillage)) has not been updated in years. The Emergent Village blog on Patheos’ progressive channel has been reinvented as “Emerging Voices,” and is described as: “a diversity of perspectives from the emergent movement & beyond.”<sup>5</sup> Some have chosen to read these events as the failure of Emergent Village to successfully transition from a

3. More broadly, the ECM could be placed within Stephen Bevans’ “Anthropological Model” in that the ECM “takes context seriously; provides fresh perspectives of Christianity; [and] starts where people are,” as developed in Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 61.

4. For a critique of the ECM as allowing context to have too much influence in its theological reflection, see D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005).

5. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/emergentvillage/>

movement to a lasting institution, or the end of emergence more broadly. Yet, as has always been the case of ECM, emergence Christianity cannot be defined simply and this is no less true of its rumored death.

Emergence Christianity has always displayed certain shared characteristics or family resemblances, defying checklists and formal statements—whether creeds or lists of best practices. A beauty of emergence Christianity has always been its

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local authenticity, creativity, and reliance on the Holy Spirit. From my perspective, Emergent Village—as just one expression of emergence Christianity—resisted the calcifying move from a social movement to an institution and thus gradually disbanded. I think of the ECM a bit like ripples in a lake. Leaving aside questions of causation, Emergent Village made a big splash for about a decade, and just because there are not more splashes, does not mean that emergence does not continue to be rippling out wider and wider while there is also ongoing activity out-of-sight, below the surface.

## Breadth of emergence Christianity

Let me clarify what I mean about the breadth of emergence Christianity with a few examples. Certainly, the topic of emergence cannot be confined to the church and certainly not to North America. Much of the emerging church movement in the U.S. and the U.K. has been broadly understood as a response to postmodernism that presumes some form of the mantra: a new church for a new cultural moment. In 2007, Emergent Village hosted a conference featuring a dialogue with philosophers John Caputo and Richard Kearney based on Caputo's book: *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*<sup>6</sup> This theme appealed to many in the ECM who had evangelical backgrounds familiar with the catchphrase, What Would Jesus Do (WWJD)?, and interests in better understanding the current cultural moment. Through questioning the ecclesial status quo and seeking to respond to the questions of the present cultural moment, ECM practitioners often view themselves as heirs of the Protestant Reformation and, in particular, the Anabaptists. Of course, many participants in the ECM were and are asking questions that would be quite foreign to their sixteenth-century Protestant predecessors, even if these questions are not as unique or original as some hope that they might be. Thus, as heirs of the Reformation, it is not entirely surprising that emergence Christianity has taken many forms. Much of the theological work in the ECM has been deconstructive and embedded within critiques of the church and existing expressions of theology and

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6. John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* with a foreword by Brian McLaren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007).

ministry. These theological emphases are consistent with the origins of the ECM as a *response* to the state and practices of Christianity in the late twentieth century in the U.S. and U.K.

The postmodern response of the ECM in the West can be usefully compared to the flowering emergence of Christianity in Africa and other parts of the developing world. Postcolonial responses to the *status quo* in Christian theology and practices (often imposed from the U.S. or Europe) are in many ways responding to the same failings in modern Christian thought that the ECM highlights. Neither postcolonial theology nor ECM spontaneously arose, and both give considerable attention to the role of the context and place from which they emerged. Second, both the postmodern response in the West and the postcolonial response in the developing world criticize the yoking of culture and religion. This yoking is intensified when it is asserted in a heavy-handed or top-down manner. In the colonial experience, this yoking and conflation of religion and culture was expressed through a process of civilization, Christianization, and commerce.<sup>7</sup> The postmodern assertion of the category of experience and aversion to metanarratives is a reaction to a similar phenomenon in the West.<sup>8</sup> The diverse responses to the previously shared cultural consensus (in the West) and the

imposed cultural narrative (in colonized lands) led to increasingly pluralistic and humbled perspectives about the sources of knowledge and the role of human experience. Third, both the postmodern and the postcolonial assert the importance of human experience in theological and religious expressions. In the U.S. and the U.K., participation in Christian churches has been decreasing while there has been a dramatic numerical increase of Christianity in Africa and other parts of the developing world. These inverse trends have created a shift in the center of gravity of the Christian faith worldwide.<sup>9</sup> The rapid increase of Christians in sub-Saharan Africa and other areas of the global South offers a counter-narrative to the decline and recession of Christianity in the West—particularly among peoples of European descent. The church is emerging then, not in the former Christian heartlands of the United States and Europe as early exponents of “The Christian Century” had anticipated, but in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. One characteristic of this emerging trend is that there is not the need for a new *center* to this emerging Christianity. Instead a polycentric understanding of the presence of the Christian faith in the world flows from a more comfortable understanding of Christianity’s place in religiously pluralistic societies. The role of Christianity in society that is emerging is one in which communities of people are working for the common good through

7. For evidence of one prominent example (of many), see Fidelis Nkomazana, “Livingstone’s ideas of Christianity, commerce and civilization” *Pula: Botswana Journal of African Studies* 12:1&2 (1998): 44.

8. For one prominent expositor of this position, see the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) and *The Postmodern Explained* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

9. The phrase “center of gravity” was first applied to global Christianity by David Barrett, “AD 2000: 350 Million Christians in Africa,” *International Review of Mission* 59:233 (January 1970): 49–50. Church historian Andrew Walls, explored this theme more deeply in: “The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture,” in Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement In Christian History: Studies In the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).

collaborations with those of other faiths and no faith, rather than one of asserting so-called Christian beliefs or principles or values on a society. In these ways, the church that is emerging in the U.S. and overseas articulates a post-Christendom theology for increasingly globalized and religiously pluralistic societies.

## Theological developments —present and future

Much of what has passed for theology in the ECM in the United States has been a reaction to prevailing theological norms and the emergent author's personal experiences. There is some work around constructive Christian theology being written from within the ECM broadly understood. Peter Rollins, a provocative writer, philosopher, storyteller, and public speaker from Belfast who now lives in the U.S., has used philosophical and theological approaches to write apophatic theology, that is, articulating the limits of human knowledge of God, speaking of what God is *not*, and seeking to preserve the mystery of the divine being.<sup>10</sup> Quite recently, Tony Jones, formerly the National Coordinator of Emergent Village, has written a new book, *Did God Kill Jesus?*,<sup>11</sup> that offers an assessment of prevailing theories of the atonement from ancient to contemporary before offering his own understanding that begins with "God is Love" and describes

how the crucifixion changed God. Hopefully, others will follow Jones' method—a careful, reasoned argument that frequently engages Scripture—in order to reinterpret Christian doctrine in response to contemporary problems or situations.

Jones' new book and Rollins' work are exceptions to most of the written work published by authors affiliated with the ECM.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, the emerging church movement has exhibited a theology of praxis—meaning that many theological emphases and innovations have occurred at the level of practices, not doctrines. That is to say, the work of the ECM has *primarily* been ecclesiological, presenting new forms of being the church and doing church. (This is not to say that these practices do not have doctrinal implications. Rather, that these implications often remain unexplored by ECM authors.) Positively, ECM authors challenge the lingering bias within academic theology in favor of doctrines (Christology, Theological Anthropology, Doctrine of God, etc.) over practices. My claim is that doctrine and practices are not polar opposites and should mutually inform one another. While academic theology can (rightly) be criticized for its inability to depart the ivory tower and identify real-world implications for its carefully specified systematic theologies, so too the ecclesiologies and *de facto* theologies that are articulated by those in the ECM can (rightly) be criticized on two counts:

First, the ECM might be criticized for not considering how advocating certain faith practices and beliefs affects other

10. See Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (Brewster, Mass.: Paraclete Press, 2006); Peter Rollins, *The Idolatry of God: Breaking Our Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Howard Books, 2013) and Peter Rollins, *The Divine Magician: The Disappearance of Religion and the Discovery of Faith* (Brentwood, Tenn.: Howard Books, 2015).

11. Tony Jones, *Did God Kill Jesus?: Searching for Love in History's Most Famous Execution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

12. Another example of the constructive turn within the emerging conversation (theologically) is Brian McLaren's latest book, *We Make the Road by Walking: A Year-Long Quest for Spiritual Formation, Reorientation, and Activation* (New York: Jericho Books, 2014).



beliefs. The question here is whether any theology—emerging or otherwise—is consistent or seeks coherence as a virtue—a question in which many people involved in the ECM admit they are simply not all that interested. They may be interested in how their practices compare to others throughout church history, but this rarely extends to how those other practices made sense in the midst of a different set of theological commitments. This is one area in which the ECM's justifiable attention to practice might benefit from more sustained theological reflection across doctrines.

Second, theology in the emerging church, when it has been explicitly attempted, has been primarily about deconstruction with lesser attention to alternative, constructive theological moves or their implications. For many in the ECM, the need to deconstruct their prior theological understandings arose from dissatisfaction with their own ecclesial origins in conservative, often evangelical, churches.<sup>13</sup> These people rightly saw that theological construction could only begin through dismantling the restrictive and authoritative theological system that they had grown up with. (Others, including those in the ECM who were raised in mainline traditions, perform less theological deconstruction than institutional deconstruction.) The next move is toward (re)constructing theological and institutional identities. Jones' new book is a hopeful and helpful example of change in this respect. While there is significant engagement with the tradition of church doctrine and its failings, he moves through them to construct his own understanding

13. For a sociological analysis of these origins and the later shifts, see Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

of atonement. This is an active attempt to consider how to understand Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

In a similar vein, Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran minister who founded and is the pastor at the House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, Colorado, a mission congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, wrote her memoir *Pastrix*<sup>14</sup> While the memoir is very much ecclesiological, we must not let the surface details detract from her approach to theological reflection that is based in a deeply honest (often irreverent) experience of God in Jesus Christ. Bolz-Weber has simultaneously rejected aspects of American Christian piety while highlighting traditional elements of historic Lutheranism. While not writing a systematic theology, her understanding and reinterpretation of practices (including church membership, the Eucharist, and preaching) have numerous theological implications (for ecclesiology, atonement, and scripture, among others).

The approach employed by Bolz-Weber and others in the ECM points to an ongoing emphasis within their practices and writings. There is an uncompromising belief that religious ideas can and should have social consequences. In fact, these consequences can be used to assess the credibility and tenability of the beliefs themselves. Once again, this is conviction that those in the ECM often share with

14. Nadia Bolz-Weber, *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner & Saint* (New York: Jericho Books, 2013). Two additional books that combine practices and spirituality from within the emerging conversation are: Mark Scandrette, *Soul Graffiti: Making a Life in the Way of Jesus* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) and Doug Pagitt, *A Christianity Worth Believing: Hope-filled, Open-armed, Alive-and-well Faith for the Left Out, Left Behind, and Let Down in us All* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

non-Western theologians. To give but one example, Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu of Ghana seeks to articulate an understanding of the Holy Spirit that is neither cloistered within academic theology nor captured by a message that is not “truly representative of Jesus Christ and his Cross.”<sup>15</sup> The shared conviction that theology matters is by no means unique to the emerging church domestically or internationally. Yet, in contrast to some forms of political theology that pursue the social and ethical consequences of theological positions, this emerging perspective is more willing to re-think conventional doctrines in light of their implications.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude this essay with a brief recognition and reflection on the working of the Holy Spirit within the Christian church worldwide over the last decades. Certainly, John 3:8 has been on display in our midst as “the pneuma (wind/spirit) blows where it chooses.” The ECM in the U.S. has manifested itself in the Wild Goose festival, the TransFORM network, the Missio Alliance, the Parish Collective, the CANA Initiative, and the Christianity21 conference, among others.<sup>16</sup> These new networks are the offspring of Emergent Village—either directly or indirectly. As the energy surrounding Emergent Village waned, these and other groups were founded. Internationally, MESA provides, in many ways, a parallel global

conversation among emerging Christian leaders, and iEmergence likewise focuses on holistic community and leadership development in indigenous and tribal communities and connecting these communities in different parts of the world.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, in sub-Saharan Africa, Amahoro Africa connects and encourages emerging Christian leaders.<sup>18</sup> In Latin America, La Red Del Camino and Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana both seek to promote integral mission through connections between practitioners and theologians in the region.<sup>19</sup>

These examples are by no means exhaustive but give a sense of the breadth and depth of emergence Christianity domestically and internationally. Most promising from my perspective is the way that in each of these groups the emergent conversation has moved beyond its earliest days that were easy to dismiss as mere talk (complaining about existing structures or theologies) to a place of promoting action that bears witness to the work of God in Christ through the Spirit—seeking justice, planting new churches, and revitalizing existing communities. It is no surprise that ECM-inspired theological writing has also begun to move more consistently from deconstruction to construction out of a desire to more clearly understand, integrate, and articulate Christian faith and praxis in today’s contexts. As we read in John’s gospel, we may not know how these things can be, but we can follow the blowing of the Spirit.

15. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Did Jesus Wear Designer Robes?” *Christianity Today* 53:11 (November 2009): 41. See also, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, *Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations From an African Context* (Oxford: Regnum, 2013).

16. See [wildgoosefestival.org](http://wildgoosefestival.org), [transformnetwork.org](http://transformnetwork.org), [missioalliance.org](http://missioalliance.org), [parishcollective.org](http://parishcollective.org), [canainitiative.org](http://canainitiative.org), and [c21.thejopagroup.com](http://c21.thejopagroup.com).

17. See [mesa-friends.org](http://mesa-friends.org) and [iemergence.org](http://iemergence.org).

18. See [amahoro-africa.org](http://amahoro-africa.org).

19. See [lareddelcamino.net](http://lareddelcamino.net) and [ftl-al.org](http://ftl-al.org).

# The Emerging Church Movement: A Sociological Assessment

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## What we bring to the study of the Emerging Church Movement

With so many voices, groups, and organizations participating in the Emerging Church Movement (ECM), few are willing to “define” it,<sup>1</sup> though authors have offered various definitions.<sup>2</sup> Emerging Christians

1. Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church,” *Christianity Today*, 51.2, February 2007: 35–39.

2. James Bielo, “The ‘Emerging Church’ in America: Notes on the Interaction of Christianities,” *Religion*, 39, no. 3 (2009): 219–232; James Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005); Lloyd Chia, “Emerging Faith Boundaries: Bridge-Building, Inclusion and the Emerging Church Movement in America” (The University of Missouri, dissertation, unpublished, 2010); Gladys Ganiel, “Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland: A Case Study of the Zero28 and Ikon Community,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, no. 1 (2006): 38–48; and Robert E. Webber,

avoid offering any systematic or coherent definitions, which contributes to frustration in isolating it as a coherent group—especially for sociologists who strive to define and categorize. In presenting our own understanding of this movement, we categorize Emerging Christianity as an *orientation* rather than an *identity*, and focus on the diverse practices within what we describe as “pluralist congregations” (often called “gatherings,” “collectives” or

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“communities” by Emerging Christians themselves). This leads us to define the ECM as a creative, entrepreneurial religious movement that strives to achieve social legitimacy and spiritual vitality by

*Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007).

actively disassociating from its roots in conservative, evangelical Christianity. Our findings and rationale for terms and definitions for grasping the ECM are extensively developed in *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*.<sup>3</sup>

Our interest is in the persons, practices, and sociological significance of Emerging Christianity. Our consequent labeling and isolating of the ECM is not intended to ignore the varied and evanescent strands of the movement, particularly when the movement values autonomy, diversity, and dissent, but to find analytic ways to examine the ECM as an intriguing instance of institutional innovation. We do not rely on our theological convictions or on presumptions regarding what the Christian church should be or should not be doing. The ECM has both sympathizers<sup>4</sup> and critics,<sup>5</sup> yet we assert that our interests lie neither in forwarding or retracting the ECM. Rather, we pay close attention to observations of Emerging Christians and their congregations in the United States, Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom in order to understand them on their own terms.<sup>6</sup> In our work, we went

to pubs and restaurants, small informal gatherings and large formal conferences, public events like “beer and hymns” nights and lectures by Brian McLaren, as well as private events like hanging out in people’s homes and attending overnight dialogues that included sleeping on couches and making breakfast together. We participated in these and other settings, saturating ourselves in conversation and reminiscence, because the ECM is a diffuse phenomenon that is not readily captured in any single place or person. Regardless of the (often controversial) figures who write and speak regularly like Rob Bell, Nadia Bolz-Weber, Peter Rollins, and Tony Jones, none of them “define” the ECM—yet they all are manifestations of it.

Within the seeming cacophony of talk and happenings, we find the ECM to be a far-from-settled social occurrence. The relatively small numbers of people who identify as Emerging Christians, or who attend recognizable emerging congregations, has led some observers to proclaim the death of the ECM.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the ECM’s resonance with wider trends and values of “Western” society lead us to conclude that Emerging Christianity will persist, even thrive, as it continues to

3. Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4. Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

5. Carson, Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (Chicago: Moody, 2008).

6. Other recent efforts include Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*; Chia; Philip Harrold, “Deconversion in the Emerging Church,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 6, no. 1 (2006): 79–90; Cory E. Labanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church* (Surrey, England/Burl-

ington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2009); Josh Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2012); and Jason Wollschleger, “Off the Map? Locating the Emerging Church: A Comparative Case Study of Congregations in the Pacific Northwest,” *Review of Religious Research*, 54 (2012): 69–91.

7. On the number of Emerging Christians, see Marti and Ganiel, chapters 9–11. On the death of the ECM, see Scott Daniels, “The Death of the Emerging Church,” *Pastor Scott’s Thoughts*, April 10, 2010, [http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor\\_scotts\\_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html](http://drtscott.typepad.com/pastor_scotts_thoughts/2010/08/the-death-of-the-emerging-church.html), (accessed December 22, 2014).

influence the organization and values of even the most established and “traditional” Christians and their denominations. In the end, sociological study of the ECM contributes to more general understandings of the ongoing relationship between modern religion and contemporary social change, helping us to better grasp how processes of religious individualization take place and are encouraged even within religious communities.

## The social world that prompts the “Emerging” of the ECM

After more than a decade of observation and systematic research on the ECM, we see the “deconstructed churches” of the ECM as a response to the crisis of modernity, not only in religion but also across all spheres of life. Part of the crisis of modernity is the proliferation of institutional demands such that people no longer rely on singular institutions for their ethics, beliefs, or values. Overall, established religious institutions have not adjusted well to these changes. Rather, they cultivate broad and distant organizational forms that remove intimacy and ignore the complexity of selves who can no longer give themselves up to a monolithic religious identity. In contrast, the ECM responds to the lack of trust in religious institutions by deliberately creating “anti-institutional” structural forms, including pub churches, experimental congregations, and neo-monastic communities. Unlike traditional congregations, which evaluate their progress in terms of numerical growth, church attendance, and adherence to creeds, Emerging Christians shun such measures of “success.” Rather, for Emerging Christians success may mean the death of their existing community after a certain period of time, and developing

a flexibility of mind and spirit that questions the very validity of core beliefs. For example, Peter Rollins has talked about deliberately short-term “pop-up churches” as a vital form of Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Even more, Emerging Christians’ standards for measuring success are a challenge not only to traditional Christianity, but also to sociologists of religion who have relied on indicators such as church attendance and adherence to core doctrines as measurements of religious vitality.

Other aspects of the crisis of modernity are increased pluralism and the hyper-individualization of the self.<sup>9</sup> People’s greater awareness of the plurality of expressions of not only Christianity, but also other faiths, has made over-arching narratives in which one’s own religious community has all the right answers seem implausible. Multiple institutional demands prompt the need for understanding how religious commitments fit with various, contradictory domains.<sup>10</sup> The challenge of religious authority (which cannot be imposed) and the challenge of understanding oneself among so many competing institutional imperatives (which cannot be avoided) leads to people having to individualize

8. See Gladys Ganiel, “The Deconstructed Church at Peter Rollins’ Holy Ghost Festival” (May 15, 2014), <http://www.gladysganiel.com/social-justice/the-deconstructed-church-at-peter-rollins-holy-ghosts-festival-in-belfast-part-i/>, (accessed December 22, 2014).

9. Ulrich Beck, *A God of One’s Own: Religion’s Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010); Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in the Pluralist Age* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

10. Gerardo Marti, “Religious Reflexivity: Synthesizing the Effect of Novelty and Diversity on Personal Religiosity,” *Sociology of Religion*, 76, no. 1 (Forthcoming).

their understandings of religion.

The demand for individualization originates in changed social structures that affect every area of life, including religion. The lack of a single, primary “foothold” for personal identity stimulates the peculiarly reflective nature of modern individuals. People are constantly forced to reflect and rationalize their lives in a quest for meaningful coherence of the self. In this context, freedom and autonomy are especially important.<sup>11</sup> Individualism is not simply a value; it is a socially structured and morally enforced “*institutionalized individualization*.”<sup>12</sup> The imperative for individualization does not therefore indicate the receding of structures but rather the reorientation of structures such that new forms of agency are created. The consequence for religion is not abstract syncretism; rather, believers from different backgrounds discover new religious freedoms, change their old religious worldviews, and develop religious identities from a range of sources.<sup>13</sup> One pastor we spoke with painted a picture of what this looks like in practice: “Early on we called it ‘liturgical eclecticism.’ We took a lot of stuff from the Book of Common Prayer, a lot of Catholic stuff. We felt free to borrow not only from our specific tradi-

tions but also from the whole tradition of the church.”<sup>14</sup> In these ways the modern self is faced with an array of competing secular and religious structures through which to enact its beliefs and practices.

But even when principled action seems rooted in individual conviction, it takes its force from being legitimated. So what is crucial here is that the legitimation of beliefs and behaviors do not come from within individuals, they come from

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11. Gerardo Marti, *Hollywood Faith: Holiness, Prosperity, and Ambition in a Los Angeles Church* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Gerardo Marti, “Ego-affirming Evangelicalism: How a Hollywood Church Appropriates Religion for Workers in the Creative Class,” *Sociology of Religion*, 71, no. 1 (2010): 52–75; Gerardo Marti, “The Adaptability of Pentecostalism: The Fit between Prosperity Theology and Globalized Individualization in a Los Angeles Church,” *Pneuma*, 34, no. 1 (2012): 5–25.

12. Beck, 95.

13. *Ibid.*, 140.

organized groups. The ECM has responded to individuals’ needs for legitimation by creating religious communities with loose boundaries of belonging and belief, where pluralism is not just tolerated, but celebrated as a positive religious value. At the same time, emerging congregations encourage people to follow individualized religious paths. One of our respondents put it this way: “Yes, that’s what I envision

14. Marti and Ganiel, 109.

a church should be: a lot of people doing things that feel right to them—but doing it together.”<sup>15</sup> When religious individualization is complemented by a fierce relational ethic, it creates a type of “cooperative egoism” that sustains community life.<sup>16</sup> Emerging congregations straddle the tension between individualization and the longing for community more effectively than traditional religious institutions, with their demands for uniformity and the sanctioning of those who do not conform.

## Distinctive sociological aspects of the ECM

One of our sociological contributions to understanding the ECM is that Emerging Christians share a *religious orientation* built on a continual practice of deconstruction. We deliberately chose the term “religious orientation” rather than “religious identity” as we sought to categorize the ECM. The concept of religious identity has been used extensively in the sociology of religion, but we thought it was too rigid to capture the fluid and deliberately boundary-crossing nature of Emerging Christians—especially those who do not consciously identify with the ECM yet share its values and practices.<sup>17</sup> Of course, a number of distinct religious identities already exist *within the ECM*, ranging from those who explicitly identify with labels such as “emerging,” “emergent,” and “emergence,” to those who discard (or are not aware of) these labels. We stress deconstruction as a practice, noting with Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward that the

practice of “deconstruction” is a form of micro-politics in which actors establish competitive arenas in response to pressures for conformity.<sup>18</sup> When they talk about their previous experiences of Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, Emerging Christians say they felt like they were forced to adopt a false identity, one that indicated a correct religious persona. Now, they encourage each other to critique the beliefs and practices that have wounded them, and refuse to insist on what beliefs and practices to maintain or adopt. The freedom people experience means they frequently describe their congregations as “not judging” and “not legalistic.”

Another of our sociological contributions to understanding the ECM is that Emerging Christians are creating innovative religious structures—what we describe as “pluralist congregations.” This does not necessarily mean that pluralist congregations are diverse in terms of ethnicity or socio-economic backgrounds. Rather, pluralist congregations strive to be open to all and to provide an environment where a range of religious practices is both acceptable and legitimate. Many Emerging Christians have been immersed in multiple Christian traditions through their own life experiences. Drawing on their varied experiences, Emerging Christians actively challenge the forms of religious conformity they encountered in their past and heartily welcome all critiques of institutionalized Christianity. In their quest to create Christian communities where a broad scope of freedom in individual belief and religious conviction reign, they adopt a plurality of beliefs and practices—some of which may

15. *Ibid.*, 34.

16. *Ibid.*, 190–192.

17. See Marti and Ganiel, chapter 4, for fuller descriptions of the values and practices that define this religious orientation, including distinct ways of thinking about the nature of truth, doubt, and God.

18. Stephen Fuchs and Steven Ward, “What is Deconstruction, and Where and When does it take Place? Making Facts in Science, Building Cases in Law,” *American Sociological Review*, 59, no. 4 (1994): 481–500.

contradict each other. In short, Emerging Christians embrace pluralism and value the exercise of religious freedom—*within their own congregations*.

Some of the most important practices of pluralist congregations have been encouraging conversation, dialogue, and debate. While it has been the leaders and public figures of the ECM who have most forcefully articulated the idea of “faith as conversation,” all participants in our research spoke about how important

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conversation, dialogue, and storytelling are to their faith and how their congregations provide a unique arena for this. The aim of Emerging Christians’ conversation is not to settle on established positions or to reach a point where all can agree and therefore stop talking. On-going conversation is in itself a mechanism or a strategy to maintain a plurality of identities and positions. For Emerging Christians, dialogue simply means listening to others’ points of view or positions without trying to change them. This approach to dialogue contrasts to what Emerging Christians see as evangelical dialogic practices: the evangelical has the “right” answers and the purpose of dialogue is to convert others to

that point of view. It also differs from the ecumenical approach to dialogue, which is focused on discovering points of commonality. Participants instead describe the process as a form of pedagogy in which people strive for mutual understanding. People are encouraged to share stories about their personal experiences of faith with others. The open, fluid nature of the ECM conversation places few demands upon people to believe the same things. Indeed, it could be said that for many within the ECM, the purpose of conversation is to generate more questions.

Emerging Christians believe they are living in a changed religious landscape in which foundational Christian doctrines are no longer assumed and many traditional church practices are irrelevant. Moreover, Emerging Christians see themselves as rescuing core aspects of Christianity from the entanglement of modernity, bureaucracy, and right-wing politics. In these ways, Emerging Christians actively deconstruct congregational life by placing into question the beliefs and practices that have held sway among traditional Christians. Emerging Christians also see themselves as rescuing their own selves from the shallowness, hypocrisy, and rigidity of their religious past. We see Emerging Christians as themselves caught in a distinctively sociological dilemma: how to revitalize the Christian “church” while simultaneously avoiding what they see as the “trappings” of church institutions, including robust institutions. Their redefinitions of success (or perhaps *authenticity* is a word they would more likely use) in terms of smallness, impermanence, and open-endedness are important strategies for revitalization.

Sociologists also face a dilemma when it comes to understanding the social organization of the ECM. There is so much variety among emerging congregations that it is difficult to generalize about their



structure or form. The purposes of gatherings are not to “convert” or “lead” people to God through established recipes but to create open opportunities to see, hear, and respond to God. More importantly, the ECM legitimizes individualized/questioning/ambiguous approaches to religious convictions, and that seems to have unique challenges for crafting “religious” organizations (multiple forms and options) and unique challenges for creating cohesive communities (conversation, authenticity, tolerance). What holds almost all these congregations together is their openness and commitment to diversity, and this translates into their willingness to incorporate a range of practices. These “pluralist congregations” promote individualism while at the same time providing a basis for community around shared experiences and relationships. Emerging congregations strike a contradictory balance as they create religious communities in which the autonomy of the individual is held as a core value in the very midst of an often-stated emphasis on relationship and community. Because being an Emerging Christian is a form of personal religiosity that is expected to be intentionally (rather than customarily) enacted, this type of religious self cannot avoid being strategic in its activities, which are selected and enacted according to individual choice.

In short, the ECM does not exist as a free-standing religious form; rather, all the values and practices of Emerging Christians exist within an overarching religious orientation that deconstructs traditional expressions of Christianity and strives to keep conversation flowing. Crucially, this religious orientation is not confined to the pluralist congregations of the ECM but can be found among Christians in traditional denominations as well.

## **The future of the ECM and the future of Christianity**

On the surface the ECM may appear to be a free-wheeling heterodoxy reacting to the established institutions of contemporary Christianity. But on closer investigation Emerging Christianity can be understood as a peculiarly “modern” religious orientation played out in a distinctive societal context. The practices of the ECM legitimate, and help to create innovative, “pluralist congregations” that straddle the tensions between individualization and community. Yet despite their effectiveness in helping people to critique existing expressions of Christianity and to resist religious institutionalization, emerging congregations remain a minority in all parts of the West, even in the U.S. where they are most prominent. Ultimately, the influence of the ECM may be better judged not by the conventional measures of the sociology of religion—such as growth, identification, attendance, and adherence to particular beliefs—but by how Emerging Christians influence the values and behaviors of Christians outside the movement, drawing others into this distinct religious orientation while remaining within traditional Christian institutions.

This dynamic of influence from emerging to traditional congregations is most obvious in the “Fresh Expressions” movement, which we consider the most prominent example of the ECM in the U.K. Fresh Expressions congregations are typically linked with already existing Anglican or Methodist congregations and command various degrees of autonomy from these traditional denominations. In the U.S., two nationally prominent emerging congregations—Church of the Apostles in Seattle and House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver—are affiliated with the Episcopal Church/Evangelical

Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), and the ELCA, respectively. In such contexts, there is more likely to be significant cross-fertilization of ideas and practices between emerging and traditional congregations. Given the way that Emerging Christians' religious orientation resonates with the individualized yet pluralist West, it seems unlikely that traditional congregations will remain unaffected by Emerging Christians' innovations. Of course, this dynamic may also work in the other direction, with Emerging Christians—while ever eager to deconstruct tradition—potentially softening their critiques of traditional expressions of Christianity.

There is also evidence that the influence of the ECM within traditional denominations is more widespread than has been supposed. In our own qualitative research, we came across multiple examples of pastors and leaders within traditional denominations who sympathized with the ECM but did not want to be publicly "outed" for fear of recrimination or loss of employment. We also observed multiple examples of congregations in traditional denominations, which exhibit high degrees of internal diversity and have adopted some emerging-like practices, such as Fitzroy Presbyterian in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Further, in the U.S., Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe's quantitative study found that a surprisingly (even to us) high 7 percent

of clergy in mainline denominations identified as "Emergent."<sup>19</sup> This ranged from 1 percent of Southern Baptists to 14 percent of Disciples of Christ. Given that many Emerging/Emergent Christians choose not to use the term, these figures may even under-represent their presence among clergy.

The ECM is constantly shifting and current terminology may get lost in the currents of change. Nevertheless our goal has been to describe a type of religious orientation that is not only recognizable across persons and formats transnationally, but more importantly will become more pervasive in all religious environments. As one Emerging Christian told us, his congregation is an "open space where individuals get to work out whatever they need. Individuals are coming together."<sup>20</sup> Overall, our evidence suggests that patterns of religious individualism, the formation of pluralist congregations, and the desire to construct a personal faith within a cooperative setting will be a diffuse and widely practiced element of modern religiosity.

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19. Ryan P. Burge and Paul Djupe, "Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal: An Analysis of the Politics of the Emerging Church," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 53, no. 3 (2014): 636–651.

20. Marti and Ganiel, 195.

# The Emergent Church and Liberal Theology: Ships in the Night?

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## Exploring the divide: sources and definitions

### *What accounts for the theological divide between emergence and liberal Protestant theology?*

Here it is helpful to define the terms in play. For the purposes of this essay, I will define both “liberal Protestant” and “emergence” theology in the West in relationship to the legacy of the Enlightenment; while the matrix of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment legacies would certainly not be the only field within which to examine both strands,<sup>1</sup> I hope to justify this choice by showing how it illuminates both the coherence and the divergence of the two.

In his magisterial and definitive three-volume history *The Making of American Liberal Theology*, Gary Dorrien offers a simple but helpful definition of what is meant by the tradition of “liberal” theology that extends from its origins in the immediate aftermath of the Enlightenment (embodied by such familiar figures as

Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl and Adolph von Harnack) to the genesis and regnancy of mainline Protestantism in the United States: “In essence, it [liberal theology] is the idea that Christian theology can be genuinely Christian without being based upon external authority;” later, he specifies that “the liberal tradition of theology that flowed out of the Enlightenment established the methods and laid the enduring conceptual foundations of modern critical theological scholarship by appealing to the authority of critical rationality and religious experience.”<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that the Enlightenment and its aftermath was largely a question of the relationship of religious epistemology to authority, liberal theology flourished in mainline Protestant contexts that eschewed the presence of an ecclesiastical magisterium, embraced insights from the natural sciences and philosophy, and tracked with the Enlightenment/Romantic prioritization of individual rationality by elevating individual religious experience to a place of honor largely foreign to medieval and Reformation contexts.

It is essential, therefore, to insist at this point that the modifier “liberal” in this context is not related to currently popular distinctions between “liberal” vs.

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1. Indeed, part of the value of Phyllis Tickle’s recent definitive survey *Emergence Christianity: What it is, Where it is Going, and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2012) is its contextualization of emergence theology and practice within a broad, indeed global, historical, and geographical stream.

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2. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805-1900* (Louisville: WJK, 2001), xiii–xvi.

“conservative” strands in, say, party politics; rather, it refers to a specific historical trajectory that configured the relationship between external authority and individual experience in such a way as to condition the theological tradition that followed in its wake according to certain key identifiers.

Broadly speaking, we may name these identifying characteristics of liberal theology as 1) rejection of an identified ecclesial magisterium (e.g., popes or councils) as having final authority over theological production; 2) denial of scriptural inerrancy/infallibility (both in its nascent forms within Protestant orthodoxy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and later in its evangelical/fundamentalist configurations); 3) willingness to have theological beliefs and church doctrines modified according to new insights from other disciplines, particularly science; 4) characterization of doubt as a theological virtue rather than a deficiency in piety; 5) prioritization of individual experience over established ecclesial doctrine; and 6) a tendency to regard the desired “outcome” of Christian piety in ethical/political terms rather than in terms of overly otherworldly/supernatural depictions of salvation (e.g., “going to heaven when you die”). My claim is that, while liberal theology is and has always been a variegated phenomenon, all of its various strands participate in a greater or lesser degree in all six of the aforementioned characteristics.

Meanwhile, “emergence theology” is a far more slippery term to define; however, it, too, can be illumined by considering its relationship to the Enlightenment.

On the one hand, the sources favored by emergent church theology (much like those of the still-vital bane of Protestant liberalism, the so-called “Radical Orthodoxy” movement) tend to pre- and post-date the canon that has shaped theology in

its modern and early post-modern phases; thus, in emergent settings, one is as likely to see engagement between Gregory of Nyssa and the contemporary theorist Slavoj Žižek as with Kant, Schleiermacher, or Sallie McFague. This common move of pairing postmodern with premodern sources in order to move past perceived conundrums in modernity (which parallels the liturgical blending of ancient rites and cutting-edge technology) is amplified in emergent circles by the prominence of thinkers who, following such earlier provocateurs as Thomas Altizer, describe their theological projects as “radical,” most notably John Caputo and Peter Rollins.

The impression that this language gives is that the theology of the emergent church represents a genuinely new phenomenon on the theological scene, one that creatively rereads the premodern sources largely disdained by the Enlightenment and much subsequent Protestant theology through the lens of postmodern thinkers that, despite their diverse methodologies, all hold in common the contention that Enlightenment-based modernity in the West has shown itself to be deficient at best and destructive at worst. And the thoroughgoing freedom of this theology from both its “orthodox” (in the negative, magisterially enforced sense) and Enlightenment roots merits the appellation “radical” by those who practice it—both in terms of theological production and in the sort of communities formed by those drawn to emergence theology.

On the other hand, when one frankly assesses what the constructive upshot of this radical theology might be, including the virtues espoused—invocation of the importance of mystery, the compatibility of faith with doubt, appreciative but non-literal scriptural hermeneutics, and ethical mandates toward non-colonizing respect for the “Other” in a given situation—then

it is difficult to escape the impression that the terminus point for much emergent theology is virtually identical to many iterations of the classical liberal theological tradition: namely, theologically informed progressive ethics and politics.<sup>3</sup> Put differently, when one asks what is “after” orthodoxy in its various iterations, the answer seems to be progressivism in its political sense. Toward the end of his life, the “father of deconstruction” Jacques Derrida had to specify that “justice” in its most robust (even messianic) sense was the one undeconstructible reality that undergirds all other instances of deconstruction to the extent that they are ethical;<sup>4</sup> similarly, when one works her way through Peter Rollins’ marvelously poetic and deconstructively daring texts, one is left with the sense that the “where to from here?” question is best answered in terms of the forms of justice and openness towards the Other made possible by the embrace of doubt (as well as new formations of community that might embody this openness).<sup>5</sup>

But if this is at all true, then it ultimately is hard to see much daylight between it and the goals of liberal Protestant theology. This point occasionally inspired polemics, particularly within the theological blogosphere (where much emergent

church theology, true to form, has thrived in recent years). Jeremy Ridenour, blogger with the influential humanities blog “*An und für Sich*,” recently wrote the following in response to a series of blog posts on the emergent-heavy theological conference “Subverting the Norm”:

In reality, what is being offered here is radical theology-lite. In this genealogy of this new tradition of radical theology-lite we are really getting a liberal theology that is in denial about its roots. Not that there’s anything wrong with liberal theology. There’s a lot of good ideas in the history of liberal theology. It is my contention that the reason why many emergent do not simply accept that they are liberal theologians is that they have bought into evangelical propaganda regarding liberal theology. Due to the fact that many people who are part of the emergent-radical camp are disaffected evangelicals, they simply cannot accept liberal theology and the mainline church. As a result, new words were made up that attempt to outdo liberal theology (see progressive, radical, incarnational, or emergent). Notice that “liberal” is always a dirty word in these circles. Liberal theology is always the convenient straw man that is created to make the new “third way” appear categorically distinct from its conservative and liberal brethren. I find the caricature of liberal theology that is operative in the discourse at Homebrewed Christianity [*a popular online blog also associated with emergence theology*] unacceptable. In many ways, liberal theology is consonant with the radical theology-lite values laid out here: pluralism, humility, belief with doubt, an appreciation of symbolic language and political.<sup>6</sup>

3. For a discussion that encapsulates this tension almost perfectly, cf. John D. Caputo, “On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology” in *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion*, J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister, eds. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), esp. 322ff.

4. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, Gil Anidjar, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), esp. 230ff.

5. This is, on my reading, especially the case with Rollins’ book *Insurrection* (New York: Howard, 2011).

6. Jeremy Ridenour, “Radical Theology Lite,” <http://itself.wordpress>.

Ridenour's point is that emergence theology in its "radical" guise can't have its cake and eat it too vis-à-vis Protestant liberalism: emergence Christianity cannot lift up the salutary nature of doubt, instability of doctrinal formulations, and approval of progressive politics in a manner consonant with the liberal Protestant theological tradition while still employing polemics against liberal Protestantism (or even silence as to its commonalities) as a point of identity.

More charitably, we can say that the relative lack of commerce and dialogue between liberal Protestant and emergence theology represents a missed opportunity for both camps. The constructive task moving forward, then, would be to think through how the trajectories of the two streams might benefit from more dialogue and mutual enhancement/correction. The remainder of this essay will be a small contribution to this project.

### Receiving gifts

It is common among ecumenical theologians to speak of the goal of ecumenics as facilitating "gift exchange" among diverse Christian traditions such that a given tradition is empowered to receive the "gifts" offered by a different tradition. With that in mind, we can ask: how can both the liberal Protestant tradition (to the extent that it remains, for the most part, the dominant theological model within mainline U.S. Protestantism) and emergence Christianity (as it is embodied within the church and para-church communities and institutions chronicled by Tickle and others) better receive each other's theological gifts?

Here I would argue that a clue to moving forward comes from being attentive to each tradition's past. As Tickle and

others have pointed out, a large number of authors and movements associated with emergence theology (e.g., Brian McLaren, Peter Rollins, Jay Bakker, Frank Schaeffer, Tony Jones, Nadia Bolz-Weber, etc.) come from evangelical and/or fundamentalist backgrounds in which debates over scriptural inerrancy, evolution, and various culture war matters that are—frankly speaking—largely foreign to most liberal/mainline Protestant contexts were the theological problems at hand. Identity is always formed to a great extent both by

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the elements of the past against which one sets herself and by the values of the past that one carries forward (wittingly or not) into the future; in the case of emergence theology, we can notice that part of the disconnect between emergence and liberal Protestant theologies is that the latter tends to spar with Protestant fundamentalism as a foreign entity, while the former spars with it as an intimate formative influence.

However, this background of emergence Christianity gives it two significant advantages compared to much liberal Protestant mainline theology and practice. First, emergence Christianity retains

commerce and dialogue with evangelical organs (e.g., such publishing houses as Intervarsity Press, vital seminaries such as Fuller and Regent, etc.) with which liberal Protestantism tends to have fewer inroads. Second, and more controversially, I would assert that it is largely correct to say (along with such self-aware emergence authors as Tickle and Rollins) that deconstructive emergence Christianity retains a deep and pious love for Scripture and its various premodern hermeneutical horizons (interpreted, in Tickle and McLaren's choice phrase, "actually and not factually," which we may notice is ironically a variation on the Niebuhrian formulation "taking Scripture seriously but not literally" so beloved by liberal Protestants) that is inherited from evangelicalism and carried forward into emergence communities.

Meanwhile, for those familiar with now-standard twentieth-century narratives—stemming largely from Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's rejection of the liberal theology taught to them by their esteemed teachers in Germany—of the failure of liberal Protestant theology to ward off the corruption brought on by cultural decay and fascism (e.g., the rise of the Third Reich),<sup>7</sup> the retention of greater seriousness regarding scriptural hermeneutics and Christian formation (e.g., in "neo-monastic" currents of emergence practice) might indeed be regarded as an important corrective. The criticism that Ridenour correctly associates with such emergence organs as *Homebrewed Christianity*, that liberal Protestantism tends in practice to favor ethics to the point that mainline Protestant churches become something akin to "the Democratic party at prayer," corresponds to the criticism

of liberal Protestant theology leveled by Barth and Bonhoeffer: when Christianity becomes ethics, then "ethics" can easily be co-opted into simple bourgeois "good citizenship" that is insufficiently robust to be countercultural when "citizenship" itself becomes co-opted into tyranny and injustice.

All of which is to say that, in a time when mainline Protestantism might profitably look to a number of evangelical streams (especially those who increasingly combine full commitment to evangelical principles of piety but yet have moved beyond focus on "culture wars" in order to apply biblical principles to areas such as global poverty and climate change<sup>8</sup>) for sources of revitalization, the fact that there is such coherence between the ethical visions of emergence and liberal Protestant streams at their best (however unacknowledged such convergence might be) makes the prospect of deeper engagement with emergence trends of clear benefit to those still self-consciously operating within liberal Protestant streams.

But is the reverse true? Of what benefit is greater engagement with liberal Protestant theology to emergence theology, including in its "radical" visions?

Here I would argue that the opportunity present for emergence theology is to participate in what I anticipate will be a substantial rethinking of the aforementioned narrative of liberal theology's weakness in the face of collapsed Christendom, a rethinking that is already taking place. For instance, in her recent text *Theology and the End of Doctrine*, Christine Helmer convincingly shows that Schleiermacher (the "father" of liberal Protestant theology and still its most chastised representative among proponents of the Barthian nar-

7. Cf. Paul R. Hinlicky, *Before Auschwitz: What Christian Theology Must Learn from the Rise of Nazism* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2013).

8. Cf. Brian Steensland and Philip Goff eds., *The New Evangelical Social Engagement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

rative concerning liberal theology's fate) was a far more nuanced and rich thinker of how biblical piety leads to vital Christian community than he has been credited as being.<sup>9</sup> While it may historically be the case that a series of contingencies and internal weaknesses led to liberal Protestantism in both Europe and the United States to cast its lot with strands of Christendom that ultimately proved deficient, the animating critical spirit behind liberal Protestant theology also continues to empower theologians to engage in precisely the sort of deconstructive acts towards justice that "radical" theology commends. For instance, what is Paul Tillich's formulation of "Catholic substance/ Protestant principle" if not precisely a formula for periodic deconstruction in the name of vital piety and justice? And in times when anti-science attitudes are threatening the welfare of billions of the world's poorest, as well as the planet itself, openness to the insights of science becomes less about simple intellectual respectability and more about following Christ's call to care for the neighbor in need.

In short, liberal Protestantism and its wake is due for a reevaluation, and such evaluation will likely uncover that these thinkers are greater than the straw man purgatory into which they have been confined by dominant twentieth and early twenty-first century trends—which will of course be to the good of the whole church.

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9. Cf. Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). For a similar account of Schleiermacher's sense of the place of doctrine in vibrant community, cf. Robert Saler, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), esp. chapter 2.

Moreover, as one of liberal Protestantism's unwitting offspring, emergence theology will be in a prime position to give fresh assessment to its strength and weaknesses—PROVIDED that emergence theologians come to regard such a task as worthwhile.

Convincing these theologians that the effort will indeed be worth it has been one of my goals in this essay. As xenophobic, anti-science forms of Christianity continue to receive a disproportionate amount of press in the United States and Europe, strands of Christian practice that stand for the gains made by theology after the Enlightenment (however ambiguous and in need of further modifications such gains might be) need to be, if not in unity, at least in each other's critical awareness so that the gifts of each may strengthen all.

## Conclusion

At this point, we may say that liberal Protestant theology and emergence theology have largely passed each other as two ships in the night. The interaction has occasionally been marked by curiosity, occasionally by polemic, but often by simple silence. However, given the ultimate coherence between each strand's vision of what it means to live in the sort of vital Christian community that will allow the horizon of one's piety to be shaped by the needs of that which is Other, and the salutary role that doubt and openness to deconstruction can play in that task, the time has come for a deeper theological dialogue between the two camps. Those within each stream, as well as others standing in respectful distance from them (Christian and non-Christian alike), stand to benefit and learn from this engagement "to come" in the future.



# Credo

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I began thinking about this book on December 16, 2012, the third Sunday of Advent, the third day after the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in New Town, Connecticut. While the sun rose that Lord's Day the small community awakened again to the incomprehensible slaughter of the innocents. It had been three days since a masked gunman entered the school and murdered twenty first-graders and six teachers and then took his own life. Adam Lanza used weapons owned by his mother, a gun enthusiast who was also a teacher. She was the first person he killed. On the third day there was no stone rolled away from a tomb, no coming back to life of those children and their teachers, or for Adam or his mother. Resurrection was spoken of in the funerals of many. But the children along with their teachers and killer were all really and truly dead.

How does one pray in the face of such horror? How does one believe?

Where is God? What kind of God is God, if there even is a God? For how could a God worthy of trust permit such evil? These are the questions such an event calls forth.

To add to the pathos the massacre happened during Advent. This is the season in the church year when Christians name the suffocating darkness, the oppressive systems and powers and principalities that are hell-bent on destruction. Everywhere we turn, death seems to swallow life. Advent is the liturgical season that ritualizes our desperation in the night. How long, O Lord, 'till the light comes? Advent is the

yearning to believe in the face of darkness, to trust God in the presence of the raised fist of death. During Advent we remember the words of John the Evangelist, "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overwhelm it."<sup>1</sup> We say it even as the light slips away.

Advent is the liturgical season in which Christians say against all odds, "I believe."

I believe

I believe. I choose to rest the weight of my brief existence upon the bedrock of a God who is Mystery, yet who is made known through creation, through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, through scripture, through every act of love. But coming home to Christian belief has not been easy for me.

I grew up in a family fractured by violence, addictions, abuse, and neglect. We often lived in poverty, not the "we were poor but didn't know it because we had each other and everyone else was poor too" kind, but the kind that is caused by addictions with attendant chaos. My siblings and I are all survivors of years of trauma. We all left home while we were still children. In a slow movement of redemption that only God could orchestrate, in time all of us came to faith, my parents last of all. They were in their late sixties. I crossed the threshold to Jesus when I was sixteen.

Because of the aftereffects of trauma I had my own long years of Advent, waiting for the Light to fully baptize the post-traumatic stress, wondering how long until

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1. John 1:5.

there would be peace. My journey into shalom has been glacially slow at times, largely because of theology. There was the doctrine of a wrathful Heavenly Father who tortures in fire those who don't love him. "What kind of god would torture?" I secretly wondered. That god was a monster. Trusting that god was not possible. With that god, hyper-vigilance would be an ongoing necessity. You never knew when God's rage would start. You would have to be very, very careful not to make God angry. You would never be sure exactly what might tip him off. If there was an eternal hell, I privately thought, it would be better there than with the capricious torture god. At least in hell you would know what to expect.

I thought these things while faithfully going to church and raising my children. These thoughts were the seeds of my vocation. In time I would become a theologian, but first there were years of questions I could not ask.

No one told me early on that there are many metaphors for atonement in the New Testament, each of them limited, each speaking to a particular situation, none of them sufficient on their own. No one said, "That ugly view of God is called Penal Substitutionary Atonement, and you do not have to believe it to be a follower of Jesus. Just look at Jesus to see what kind of god, God is." The torture god was just there, a thing everyone assumed. So I lurked around the edges of Christian doctrine, peeking in the windows, wondering if anyone else could see what I saw.

There was the sexism, too. It took years before I could name how the oppression of women goes hand in hand with a god who uses threats to get his way. The sexualization of women in the church was pervasive. I was told that women and men could not be friends because the relationship would always become sexual. This was

because women were inherently seductive and men were incapable of self-control. The subtext of that message was that my personal history as a survivor of violence was inevitable because I am female. To be female, even a little girl, was to cause such things to happen. To be female was to be responsible for sexual sin, which meant being female was steeped in sexual shame. I learned all of this long before I could describe any of it with theological precision.

In time I began to name the problems with the super-sexed worldview of the church. I wondered why the religious authorities didn't realize they were denying the words of St. Paul to Timothy, to treat women as sisters and mothers,<sup>2</sup> which in a healthy family means an intimate cross-gender sharing of life that is not sexualized. I wondered how the reality of gay and lesbian people's sexuality fit into the mandate against cross-gender friendships. But of course they too were sexualized and consigned to hell, period, no discussion allowed. Sexual "others" did not count just as women's voices did not count. In time I came to see the links between patriarchy and every other kind of systemic evil. I wondered if I could be a Christian and reject patriarchy.

There were many, many sermons about men being spiritual heads of the house even if they are hateful, childish, and narcissistic, and women having to submit to those husbands' violence. I saw gifted women treated as second-class citizens in the church, their voices, power and personhood disrespected and stifled while men who were far less competent were elevated to top positions of leadership. It took decades for me to fully realize that patriarchal interpretations of scripture were only interpretations. They were not the word of God. There were much better,

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2. 1 Timothy 5:2.

more Jesus-like ways to read the Bible and to be a community of faith.

There was also the matter of “justifiable” hatred and discrimination against people who are not like us that stems from patriarchy. This was the implicit or explicit demonizing and stigmatizing of people who don’t accept our religion or are different racially, economically, sexually, or in some other way that challenges our tidy system of who’s in and who’s out, even though the heart of the gospel is that God loves God’s enemies. The central fact is that Jesus came to show us that this is the kind of God, God is—the one who reaches out in love to enemies, who overcomes fear and hate with love. The God of the third way.<sup>3</sup>

You may wonder how I managed to stay in the church at all in light of these problems. I did it for two reasons. First because of individuals along the way who in the words of Oswald Chambers “bore a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ.” I experienced the love of God in them. They were people of compassion, hope, prayer, and courage. Their lives bore no resemblance to the theology that troubled me so. The second thing was, I could not stop reading the gospels. Jesus was irresistible to me. He was nothing like the torture god. He did not sexualize women. He respected outsiders. He was non-violent. Jesus was not impressed with status and often warned against wealth. He welcomed people everyone else loved to hate. He was “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” Jesus, the one who shows us what kind of God, God is.

The Jesus of the gospels follows me around and every time I think I can’t take it any more—the sex-mammon-power

virus in the church—Jesus taps me on the shoulder, turns me around and points to the cross. He points to the lepers, the sick, the unclean, the pack of unlikely friends with whom he launched the newborn church. “Well?” he asks, waiting.

**You did not choose me, I chose you**

How much of choosing to believe (or “be-love” as Diana Butler Bass puts it)<sup>4</sup> is in fact a rational choice? Doesn’t be-loving first choose us? “You did not choose me. I chose you,” Jesus says to his disciples, who struggle constantly with fear and pride and not knowing.<sup>5</sup> We are like them, resisting the clear words of God being spoken to us just as they were spoken to Jesus, “You are

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**B**elovedness, not death, not guilt or shame or evil, is the central fact of our existence.

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my beloved, in you I am well pleased.”<sup>6</sup> We are against such love, fight it, explain it away, and attach rules and regulations for its reception. We create hierarchies of worthiness that exclude all but a chosen few, and we want to be among the few even as we know that cannot be right.

Belovedness, not death, not guilt or shame or evil, is the central fact of

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4. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 118.

5. John 15:16.

6. Mark 1:11.

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3. Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee, an imprint of Doubleday, 1998), 98–111.

our existence. We are chosen. We are beloved. To believe is to open ourselves to this central fact—our chosenness, our belovedness—and to respond to it in kind with choosing and loving in return. Belief is about love. It is beyond intellect or will, though in time these habituate to love.

To believe is to climb the mountain of unanswerable questions, to climb with all the equipment we can carry, with ropes and cleats and carabiner clips so that we don't fall into the abyss. We do not realize in our fearful search for certitude that God is there, too, in the abyss. That love will catch us there. To say yes to being beloved is to let go of all the props, take off the gear, undress. It is to stand at the edge naked, and leap out into the sky, to merge, to fly, to fall into the endless keep of God. To do this is to both be-love and be beloved.

Reaching for the light that already shines upon us, welcoming the joy that already enfolds us, opening our hearts to the love that already encircles us, responding to the God who made us—to do these things is to believe.

### Prayer with “I believe”

The journey to belief is unique for each of us. The following prayer activities are exercises that can open our hearts to receive the love of God that is already there for us. These prayer experiences could be engaged sequentially over a period of several days, or in a retreat, over several sessions with a group, or gradually over a period of several weeks, as you are ready to practice them.

**Prayer 1:** Go outdoors into a green space. This can be your back yard, a garden, a local park, a beach, a forest, a meadow, lake, river, or any other natural setting where there are plants, trees, birds, squirrels, fish, insects, or other non-human living things. Open yourself to all the sensory input that surrounds you. What

do you see, hear, smell, feel, and taste? Become aware of the quality of light, weather, air movement, humidity, and temperature. Notice colors and sounds. Pay attention to the multitude of stories that are in process for each living thing you encounter. You may wish to sit for a while, walk, bicycle, kayak, wade, float, or use some other quiet means in order to immerse yourself in the environment. As you bring this experience to closure, open your arms, palms up and arms wide, as a symbol of welcome to what is there. Breathe deeply. Allow gratitude to shape your awareness. Say “yes” or “amen” to the “isness” of creation.

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## The journey to belief is unique for each of us.

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**Prayer 2:** Using a large sheet of paper and markers, colored pencils or other materials, create a map of your life from as far back as you can remember. You may use a metaphor of a road map or a river, or some other symbolic expression that indicates movement or a journey. Draw or symbolically represent times in your life that were spiritually formative. These could be joyous, difficult, hopeful, grievous, or any other kind of situation. After you have completed your life map, reflect on the experiences that brought you to be the person you are today. Welcome the whole story with all its ups and downs, all the joys and sorrows, successes and failures, as a sacred journey. Allow gratitude to fill your heart as you say “yes” and “amen” to the “isness” of your own story.

**Prayer 3:** Using a pen and paper, reflect on significant moments through

your life when you were profoundly aware of being loved. Make a list of these moments. Begin with most recent experiences and work your way backward to as early as you can remember. When your list is finished, fold it and put it in an envelope. On the front and center of the envelope write your own name. In the upper left corner of the envelope where the return address goes, write God's name. Hold the envelope against your heart. Allow gratitude to fill you for all the moments of belovedness that have been given to you. Say "yes" or "amen" to your belovedness. Welcome the love of God that has been given to you in each of those moments.

## Practicing hospitality with "I believe"

The following practices of hospitality flow organically from the practices of prayer recommended above.<sup>7</sup> Even if you do not do precisely what is recommended below, these options can help you think about both giving and receiving hospitable space to others in ways that mediate the non-coercive, non-violent, non-manipulative, self-giving love of God. Often when we reach out to give hospitality to others we find ourselves also recipients of hospitality as we become aware of the gift that the other person is in our own life.

**Practice 1:** Buy a local newspaper for your community. Prepare your favorite beverage and find a quiet place to drink your beverage while you read the paper.

7. Some excellent books to read on the subject of deep hospitality in the Christian tradition include Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image, 1986), and Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); and Letty Russell, *Just Hospitality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010).

Allow your attention to be drawn to various stories and events. As you read each story or notification, pause at the end and recall the prayers you prayed about creation and your own story. Recall your own belovedness. Using a colored marker, encircle the persons, events, or situations that capture your attention. The encircling represents your awareness of the people or event. As you draw the circles extend the love that has been given to you, to those whose stories are in the paper. Honor on behalf of the individuals, events, or situations, God's compassion and God's care for them. Open your heart to solidarity with those who long for the healing and reconciliation of brokenness in stories that you read about in the paper. Fold the paper up and hold it close to your heart. Release the people, events, and situations into God's keeping. Ask God to show you if there is an appropriate way that you can tangibly offer compassionate presence to people who are in one or more of the stories in the paper.

**Practice 2:** Every year millions of people are displaced by war, famine, and political upheaval. Often they have experienced horrific violence. They are forced to flee to refugee camps where they await a time when they can either safely go home or immigrate to another country. Often refugees wait for years before they can leave the camps. Find out whether there are refugees in or near your location. You can easily gather this information from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>8</sup> As you visit the UNHCR website open your heart and mind to the need for hospitality that refugees face. Learn about the process of immigration and resettlement, and what kinds of support are helpful. Bring the refugees who are nearest you into your

8. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home>.

prayer. Visualize divine love enfolding them, and then imagine yourself as the face of a loving God welcoming them to your community. Choose some action that reaches beyond yourself to offer tangible support to a refugee or refugee family. To find out what kinds of supportive actions are most helpful check with International Rescue Committee.<sup>9</sup> Catholic Charities also offers refugee resettlement services in many states. Both of these agencies offer training for individuals who wish to volunteer to companion refugees during resettlement.

## Practicing justice with “I believe”

Practices of justice from an “I believe” perspective have to do with cooperating with God’s mission of making all things new. Engaging in issues of justice often has to do with systems rather than isolated events of harm. For example I began this essay remembering the Sandy Hook mas-

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sacre. The injustice committed against the children and teachers who died was larger than Adam Lanza’s choices and actions. The tragedy at Sandy Hook points to bigger systemic issues of injustice in our nation having to do with insufficient

mental health care and easy access to assault weapons. The systemic nature of the problem is further apparent in the seeming inability of Congress to pass laws that protect citizens from mass shootings. Practices of justice include both individual and communal actions to resist injustice, and to support a just and peaceful world and resist systemic injustice.

**Practice 1:** Return to the paper you used for the first exercise in hospitality. Notice one of the stories you marked that has to do with systemic injustice. Return to the prayer you experienced for that situation. Invite God to show you next steps you can take to resist the unjust system represented in that story and to promote justice in that system. Engage in further research so that you have necessary information in order to take responsible action. For example if the news story that drew your attention had to do with inadequate resources for a public school, find out what kinds of legislation may be pending that could help or further harm that school system so that you can vote in a way that is just. Contact the principal of the school to find out what kinds of volunteer opportunities exist that you could join to help bring about greater justice for that school system.

If none of the stories you circled had to do with systemic injustice, or you no longer have the paper you used in that exercise, choose one of the following options:

**Practice 2:** Using the Internet, find out what kind of resources are available in your community to assist individuals who are experiencing domestic violence. Find out about shelters, educational programs offered by shelters or agencies to prevent dating violence, and find out which area churches participate in these programs. (Often the director or another staff person of a shelter is willing to be interviewed by

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9. <http://www.rescue.org>.

people who are interested in supporting the mission of the shelter.) Contact one of the shelters or agencies and ask what kind of help they need to change state laws or systems within institutions so that greater protection is available for victims of domestic violence. In other words, gather the information you need in order to make an informed decision to act justly to resist domestic violence.

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## Believing is a fluid process. . . .

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### The good news is that God believes in us.

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**Practice 3:** Ecological justice is simultaneously easier and more difficult to act upon than social justice, because in general the earth, water, air, and animals do not have voices or political power to represent themselves in the face of injustice. At the same time, to work for ecological justice is also to impact social justice because environmental destruction always has social consequences that are borne by people, especially disadvantaged communities. Choose one area of ecological justice such as keeping water clean and accessible. Using the Internet, do some research to find out what the major threats are to protecting water and keeping it clean in your state. Find out who suffers the most in your state because of lack of access to clean water. Find out how to resist systems of injustice that privilege those who pollute water. For example learn about mountain top coal removal in West Virginia or fracking in Texas, and what concerned citizens are doing to resist this form of injustice. Find out what steps you can take to help with

this type of eco-justice in your region.

Do at least one thing to resist injustice and promote justice in the area of eco-justice that you have chosen.

## Conclusion

In this essay we began with the struggle to have faith in a world filled with injustice. We looked at the damaging effect poor theology has on many people's ability to believe because violent, hating images of God are all too familiar for survivors of violence. Then we explored the meaning of "I believe" as a process of receiving for ourselves and then passing on to others, God's love. In the final section we turned to three spiritual practices—prayer, hospitality, and justice—that can express "I believe" not just with words, but action. To believe is to love, trust, and act. Believing is a fluid process. Some days we are more faithful than others. The good news is that God believes in us. For this reason we can lean into the journey without fear. As the great Christian mystic and theologian, Julian of Norwich saw in her vision of the hazelnut, which represented all that God has made:

In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it; the second is that God loves it; the third is that God preserves it. But what did I see in it? It is that God is the Creator and the protector and the lover.<sup>10</sup>

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10. Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, Classics of Western Spirituality Series, Translated and with an Introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 183.

# Overture and Variations on an Unsettled Theme: Musical Insights into Emerging Christianity

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## Overture

In their ground-breaking study, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity*, sociologists Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel characterize this movement as “an *institutionalizing structure*, made up of a package of beliefs, practices and identities which are continually deconstructed and reframed by the *religious institutional entrepreneurs* who drive the movement” (emphasis original).<sup>1</sup> Sociologically, they suggest this movement is “one of the most important reframings of religion within Western Christianity in the last two decades.”<sup>2</sup> Theologically, it seems the jury is still out.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, there is little doubt that one of the reasons these two sociologists make this claim is because they see in Emerging Christianity new possibilities for navigat-

ing religious identities and commitments in today’s diverse social life. With this we most certainly agree. Joining in the chorus of scholarly voices looking to Emerging Christianity with hope, this paper takes as its focus the underdeveloped insights of congregational practices of music. By exploring the musical insights of emerging churches, we argue academic theologians ought to pay closer attention to congregational practice. However, before we can proceed, it is important to understand what kind of cultural moment we live in and how such a “culture” shapes social and ecclesial practice.

### *The theme: unsettled lives*

Ann Swidler, in a seminal article in sociology, writes about the relationship between culture and action.<sup>4</sup> Against the prevailing social theories, which inadequately capture the causal role of culture in social action (or practice), Swidler suggests we need two different models for understanding how culture explains action. In settled lives, times in which people *know* how to act, “culture is intimately integrated

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1. Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

3. See Tim Hartman, “The Depth and Breadth of Emergence Christianity: A Theological and International Perspective” in this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission*.

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4. Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51:2 (1986): 273–286.



with action; it is here that we are most tempted to see values as organizing and anchoring patterns of action; and here it is most difficult to disentangle what is uniquely 'cultural,' since culture and structural circumstances seem to reinforce each other."<sup>5</sup> Here, one might think of European religious life before the disestablishment of state churches or American mainline Protestant religious life during its comfortable period of growth and cultural security in the 1950s. However, Swidler goes on to suggest that in *unsettled* lives, culture's role in sustaining traditional or assumed patterns of social practice—what Swidler often calls "strategies of action"—takes on a new role: that of constructing new ways of life.<sup>6</sup> In settled lives, culture can be thought of as inherited, assumed tradition or a common sense. These cultural forms may shape action in indirect ways, but the overall effect is that of continuity in style, and in organization form. During unsettled cultural periods, new *highly coherent* cultural narratives emerge to make a more direct impact on action and therefore produce new strategies of action. Few will wonder whether today we live in settled or unsettled lives. Western religious culture is in the midst of an extended unsettling and arguments abound concerning its future. With this framework in mind, we might say that Emerging Christianity embodies a new theological narrative about what it means to be Christian in this time and place.

These are also unsettled times in Western classical musical culture. In light of the bankruptcies and failures of several major orchestras in the past decade, several prominent classical performers and educators have issued calls to "re-imagine" the

Western classical orchestra.<sup>7</sup> Peter Sachon, from the Institute for Music Leadership at the Eastman School of Music, suggests that American orchestras must embrace cross-genre performances in order to appeal to millennials' artistic sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> Music critic and Julliard professor Gregory Sandow touts the need for classical musicians to perform in venues other than concert halls, such as clubs and bars, in order to embed the music into everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Music educator Gerald Klickstein from the Peabody Institute has argued for changes to be made in the education of classical musicians; in particular, the need to move away from a model that prizes the "virtuoso."<sup>10</sup> Instead, he suggests, performance should be a "normal" part of life. Similar to Marti and Ganiel's notions of a "deconstructed church," Sachon, Sandow and Klickstein's narratives

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7. Vivien Schweitzer, "Survival Strategies for Orchestras," *The New York Times* (May 25, 2011). [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/arts/music/survival-strategies-for-orchestras.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/29/arts/music/survival-strategies-for-orchestras.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) [accessed December 11, 2014].

8. Peter Sachon, "Millennial America," Polyphonic.Org: The Orchestra Musician Forum Blog, entry posted April 8, 2014, <http://www.polyphonic.org/2014/04/08/millennial-america/> [accessed December 10, 2014].

9. Gregory Sandow, "Useful, Fun, Important Book," Sandow: Gregory Sandow on the Future of Classical Music Blog, entry posted December 1, 2014, <http://www.arts-journal.com/sandow/2014/12/useful-fun-important-book.html> [accessed December 10, 2014].

10. Gerald Klickstein, "Learning the Art of Performance," *The Musician's Way Blog*, entry posted October 5, 2014, <http://musiciansway.com/blog/2014/10/learning-the-art-of-performance/> [accessed December 10, 2014].

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5. Swidler, 278.

6. *Ibid.*

call for a deconstructed orchestra.<sup>11</sup>

Mainline churches in America face similar struggles as classical orchestras: a shrinking and aging “audience” (congregations), a perceived inability to relate to younger generations, internal struggles over appropriate models for training professionals (ministers), and a sense that their “product” is no longer deemed valuable by the larger society. Just as internal critiques from some scholars implicitly express that the American orchestra must come to terms with its dis-establishment in American culture and must seek out a new place among the “everyday” of American society if it is to survive, the emerging church seeks its place in a spirit of do-it-yourself religion and, to borrow Brian McLaren’s language, among the “rest of us.” In the following two sections, we explore key insights from our own fieldwork in emerging congregations. In doing so, we hope to give “voice” to the embodied narratives of their congregational practices of music.

## Movement One: Music as Process

Among the sixteen markers of postmodern music identified by Jonathan Kramer,

11. It is important to note that Sachon, Sandow, and Klickstein are hardly margin voices in the conversation about the future of the American orchestra. They hail from historic and elite institutions; they occupy not the margins but rather the very center. Perhaps what is most startling is the call for new forms of music education beyond the virtuosos. While much has been said about the future of theological education, many theologians continue to depend on idealized notions of virtuoso religious or clerical practice. For example, see Bonnie Miller-McLemore, “The Clerical and The Academic Paradigm” in *Christian Theology in Practice: Discovering a Discipline* (Eerdmans, 2012), especially 174–182.

seven stand out in regard to the musical practices of emerging congregations: first, that postmodern music challenges barriers between “high” and “low” styles; second, that it considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts; third, it considers technology not only as a way to preserve and transmit music but also as deeply implicated in the production and essence of music; fourth, it embraces contradictions; fifth, it distrusts binary oppositions; sixth, it encompasses pluralism and eclecticism; and seventh, it locates meaning and even structure in listeners, more than in scores, performances, or composers.<sup>12</sup> Heather Josselyn-Cranson rightly identifies this last characteristic as being the most important to consider when studying musical practices of congregations, as it cautions us against looking for unity where there is none.<sup>13</sup> We can only look for a shared approach to and understanding of musical practices in emerging congregations; there will likely be no shared musical corpus.

This list of defining “postmodern” characteristics also suggests that the musical practices of emerging church congregations must be understood in terms of larger cultural shifts, both musical and ecclesiological. The strategies of the “postmodern” orchestra—embracing eclecticism, breaking down the barrier between the performers and the audience, and the use of visual technology, for example—mirror the strategies employed by emerging church congregations. How-

12. Jonathan Kramer, “The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism,” in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 17.

13. Heather Josselyn-Cranson, “Local and Authentic: Music in Emerging Congregations,” *Worship* 83 (September 1, 2009): 418.

ever, while the goal for orchestras is often described in terms of developing viable business models, in emerging churches, goals are described in terms of ethics and values.

In my (Vega) study of music leaders and pastors in five emerging congrega-

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tions in the Washington, D.C., area, one over-arching theme emerged: explicit concern for the social/ relational aspects of music-making over and against the concern for producing an excellent musical “product.”<sup>14</sup> Congregational musical practices were often explained in terms of resisting and/or offering an alternative to more hierarchical modes of musical production in established American churches. One pastor described it as follows:

If we’re going to support participation and inclusion and diversity, it means that we are giving up to a large extent a profes-

sionalism or a targeted demographic style approach. I think we argue about music too much to the point that it does become too much. I wish we could just come in and pass out tambourines and shakers and hand drums and choose music that day and ask who wants to sing a song, but the church tradition of experience and history is not there for most people. So it takes a lot of intentionality to move that and change that...You can worship with us one Sunday and be playing guitar the next.

Many interviewees also expressed the desire to utilize different musical styles in order to express the “full human experience,” a term which often implicitly referred to a variety of cultures but more explicitly referred to the full range of emotion a person of faith might experience. One volunteer music leader in a smaller congregation explained how his congregation used music to express doubt:

Our mission is really to broaden the definition of worship, so we use a lot of secular music. We’re really interested in songs about doubt, and they help us accomplish that goal better than praise songs. We want people on any phase of a journey to be able to find themselves here.

The Western classical music tradition has historically found primary meaning in the collection of performed, organized sounds that comprise a musical performance. However, emerging congregations locate the meaning of music less in the finished “product” than in the social processes involved in writing, choosing, selecting, and performing the music. In short, they embrace music-as-process over music-as-product. If, as Christopher Small suggests, musical practices “model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships... between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world,” then the ideal

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14. Interviews and site visits were conducted over the course of three years in eight congregations in the Washington, D.C., suburbs.

relationships in these congregations are egalitarian, inclusive, non-hierarchical, and expressive of a full range of human emotion.<sup>15</sup> By embracing a postmodern musical stance, emerging congregations also make profound ecclesiological statements.

## Movement Two: Performance

The embodied narratives we seek to draw attention to appear in both process and performance. Here, I (Snyder) discuss my own ethnographic research of House of Mercy, an emerging congregation with origins in the American Baptist Church but now affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. These observations took place within the context of an ethnographic research project and were complimented by an additional two years of community participation. To complement the process-oriented approach above, I focus below on participant observations of a theatric performance hosted by the congregation. This performance was part theatre and part ritual as the congregation played host to the Funeral Remembrances of Luke, the Drifter — the alter ego of Hank Williams Jr.

From the Fieldnotes: November 2012

I arrived at the Bradshaw Funeral home on a cold evening in October and immediately realized that I had not come to simply witness a theatric-ritual performance. I had not even made it into the door before I was invited to be a part of it. I gave a young man our tickets for admission and then at the doorman's invitation signed the guest book for Luke, offering kind words of

care. Through the large archway into the foyer I was met by Michael, a clean-cut man in his early forties. Michael was dressed in one of the conservative black suits he wore weekly as a funeral director. While all participants who played significant roles in the Funeral Remembrances were encouraged to put their own creativity into their characters, it was Michael's choice to explicitly play out a version of himself that struck me most. It was altogether unclear if one could say Michael was indeed "acting" at all. Others crafted themselves into Luke's lovers and friends who now sat in a side chapel telling improvised stories of times shared with Luke while they waited for the funeral to begin.

The funeral service began with musical arrangements from albums released by Hank Williams as Luke, the Drifter. We were given lyric sheets and invited to sing along. And so we did. The music of the Funeral Remembrances matched the music of House of Mercy, one of the oldest emerging congregations in the United States. Their Americana-folk music is "canonized" in their own homegrown hymnal: *Songs of Mercy: A Hymnal of Country Gospel and Great American Hymns*.<sup>16</sup> The hymnal itself is dedicated to Johnny and June Cash; it contains selections from Willie Nelson, the Louvin Brothers, and Hank Williams as well original hymns by two of the congregation's founders. The music at House of Mercy brings one back to an era long gone, a time when American mainline religion flourished. This is not to say that the music sought some kind of nostalgic return, but rather a critical-reflective embrace, which makes room for authenticity and irony.

16. *Songs of Mercy: A Hymnal of Country Gospel and Great American Hymns*, compiled by C. P. Larson (St. Paul, Minn.: House of Mercy and Sister Black Press, 2003).

15. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 13.

Authenticity through hymns such as Tommy Dorsey's "Take My Hand" and Albert Brumley's "Just A Closer Walk to Thee"—their theological content not at all in tension with that of the congregation more generally. Irony as in when the congregation sings hymns which do not fit with the community's embodied theological disposition: Lewis Jones' "Power in the Blood" and Ira Louvin's "The Great Atomic Power." With this theological diversity liturgically performed, House of Mercy's hymnody is like a chorus of contestation, a musical midrash of argumentation never fully resolved of its tensions. That night at the Funeral Remembrances, we sang loud and faithfully in that musical tradition.

Williams had crafted his alter ego Luke the Drifter to account for the darker side of himself. Through moralistic recitations, the folk singer narrated his life as a womanizer, a drunk, and a bastard. The choice to conduct the Funeral Remembrances for an alter ego, made evident the vicarious nature of the ritual-play. It was, in the words of the Rev. Russell, an attempt to do a funeral, "but with out so much at stake."<sup>17</sup>

## A Subjunctive Practice

Rev. Russell's inspiration for the Funeral Remembrances came from his experience as chaplain at the Bradshaw Funeral Home. There, he presided over funerals for Jane and John Does, the deceased who had little if anyone left around them to call family and friends. Inspired by the nuanced narratives which emerged in those funerals,

17. Chris Roberts, "Luke, the Drifter Shows How to Remember Troubled Lives," Minnesota Public Radio News (October 13, 2011). <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2011/10/13/luke-the-drifter> [Accessed December 30, 2014]. See audio clip.

als, Rev. Russell was inspired to create a space in which others might contemplate death, but without the high stakes involved when one must confront death directly. The event provided "vital means whereby people reimagine and reconfigure received ideas of where they stand in space and time and thereby recover a sense of their own capacity to know and act on the world in which they now find themselves."<sup>18</sup> The Funeral Remembrances played with death in its imaginative invocation of the subjunctive, with a world as if it could be: a world in which congregations provided alternatives to the cultural narrative which seem to deny death; a world in which even drunks and womanizers had crowds at their funerals; a world in which we were honest with ourselves about our very complicated and pluralistic selves. The imagination of the Funeral Remembrances would not have been possible without the multi-vocal and ironic folk music of House of Mercy. The music itself provided an accessible and embodied theological repertoire — both in terms of form (midrashic contestation) and content (a theological anthropology).

## Finale

We opened this paper with a brief excerpt from Brian D. McLaren's provocative suggestion that in the postmodern world, we may need a full range of artist-theologians to guide us; more scholarly books and lectures likely will not yield new the new practices or ecclesial forms needed to discover what it means to be the church today. The implications for scholarly contributions such as this one are certainly not lost on us. Rather, as both theologians and musicians, we see significant historical parallels between our current unsettled cultural moment and the disruptive theological

18. Michael D. Jackson, "On Birth, Death and Rebirth," in *Excursions* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 211.

turns of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>19</sup>

Lutheran theologian, Vitor Westhelle, has written persuasively on Martin Luther's transgressive use of language.<sup>20</sup> While here is not the place to rehearse the full breadth of Westhelle's argument, three central features of his thesis certainly bear mention. First, Westhelle rightly reminds us of the relationship between language and

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**I**t's not just the church that is unsettled, the church's theology is unsettled and new strategies must emerge.

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power when he writes, "The encoded or canonical official language of hegemonic institutions is not only an instrument for the communication of power, but it is itself the exercise of power that works by depriving other voices legitimacy."<sup>21</sup> While medieval theology suffered from its entrapment in scholasticism, modern theology is trapped within a seemingly endless number of academic disciplines and specializations. But music is a different

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19. Vega is a classically trained harpist and Snyder is a classically trained trombonist. Both perform regularly with diverse ensembles.

20. Vitor Westhelle, "Communication and the Transgression of Language in Martin Luther" in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, Timothy J. Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 59–84.

21. *Ibid.*, 66.

kind of language than that of academic theology. It is a form of what Kathryn Tanner has called "everyday theology," and in both process and performance it is much more difficult to limit to the domain of professionals, academics and other authorized virtuosos.<sup>22</sup>

Second, Westhelle goes on to argue that Luther strategically turns to the language of the carnival to transgress the very boundaries these power arrangements are meant to protect. "With his language," he argues, "Luther brought the carnival to academia, to the pulpit, to the square, breaking down the disciplined frontiers in which these utterances were allowed."<sup>23</sup> For Luther, theology itself was in need of a transgression, it needed new strategies of action to move the church beyond its unsettled juncture. It's not just the church that is unsettled, the church's theology is unsettled and new strategies must emerge.

Finally, according to Westhelle, Luther's turn to the vernacular both in his own theological reflections and, of course, in translating the Bible into German is not primarily about making the Bible or a theological tradition understandable. But rather, "articulating the people's imagery in biblical language" (emphasis added)<sup>24</sup> It is about giving voice to that which everyday people of faith already know. Quoting Luther himself who wrote that, "Christian theology does not start at the top, in the highest altitudes, . . . but there at the bottom, in the deepest profundity."<sup>25</sup> Of course, expressions of this profundity have been frequently discussed in contemporary Luther scholarship including Luther's use

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22. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Fortress Press, 1997), 66.

23. *Ibid.*, 77.

24. *Ibid.*, 81.

25. *Ibid.*, 80.

of woodcut pamphlets and his prolific efforts to create new hymnody. Both forms represent turns to everyday theology.<sup>26</sup> In our study of emerging congregations we see great hope for theological reflection on their embodied practices and narratives. While here we are narrowly focused on congregational practices of music, perhaps what is most needed is for theologians to embrace new patterns of theological research such as ethnography and new emerging forms which see such fieldwork as in and of itself a spiritual practice.<sup>27</sup> For those who embrace such a turn, many other congregational practices remain ripe for further research. As Westhelle points out, Luther's use of language was an exercise in the transgression of disciplined boundaries. If McLaren is right that in our postmodern condition we may need to turn to artistic brothers and sisters, we will certainly find that we academic theologians may need to find new strategies of action for transgressing our own disciplined boundaries.

In conclusion, let us turn once more to our earlier claim that Emerging Christianity embodies a new theological narrative about what it means to be Christian in this time and place. While we find the recent scholarly interest in Emerging Christianity

26. See Philip Ruge-Jones, "Luther's Theology of the Cross in Pamphlet Form" in *Cross in Tensions: Luther's Theology of the Cross as Theologico-social Critique* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2008) and Robin A. Leaver, "Luther on Music," in *The Pastor Luther: Essays on Martin Luther's Practical Theology*, Timothy J. Wengert, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

27. For example, see Christian B. Scharren and Eileen Campbell-Reed, "Ethnography on Holy Ground: How Qualitative Interviewing is Practical Theological Work," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 17:2 232–259.

promising, we would like to emphasize not the particularity of its novel forms of practice, but rather the embodied narratives that come with them. Put differently, if Swidler is correct (and we think she is),

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theological reflection  
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narratives.

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then new strategies of action in unsettled cultural periods such as ours will only be possible with the emergence of new, coherent narratives. Emerging Christianity represents a new embodied story about the future of American Christianity: a future rooted in do-it-yourself religion, in everyday stories of actual people struggling to believe and act in faith, and in ways of being which provide alternative readings of the world as it is and should be. Whether it be new patterns of worship or new rituals for facing the existential questions of life and death, emerging congregations offer new narratives and new practices. In the unsettled lives of congregations, this is most certainly good news.

# Wither Now: Emerging Christianity as Reconciliation to Death, Decay, and Nothingness

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## Introduction

The emerging church is best approached not as a single ecclesiological model but as a *discursive milieu* that is shared by a loose, transnational association of individuals and collectives.<sup>1</sup> Within a specific discursive milieu, not only spoken and written communication but any expressive act or practice shapes what theorists call *social or cultural imaginaries*, which “prime [participants] to approach the world in a certain way, to value certain things, to aim for certain goals, to pursue certain dreams, to work together on certain projects.”<sup>2</sup> While a number of different imaginaries are discernible within the emerging church milieu, I’m especially interested in the imaginary that forms at the points where emerging Christianity intersects with *radical theology*. As my research centers on the new discursive practices of this radical emerging imaginary, I work at the intersection of theology, philosophy of

religion and religious studies. It is from this vantage point, therefore, and with this specific emerging church imaginary in mind, that I approach the question, “Whither now emergence?” I take Peter Rollins and Kester Brewin to be the primary catalysts for this imaginary.<sup>3</sup> They engage with the work of several radical theologians in their own ambitious theological projects, which are more radical both in their critique of existing Christianity and in their proposals for emerging Christianity than those of other emerging church figures. Rollins and Brewin therefore remain on the margins of a marginal expression of contemporary Christianity. But the significance of these two figures depends not on the number of emerging church participants who explicitly enthuse about their work. It stems rather from how the imaginary that can be traced to them is provoking emerging Christianity to a fuller engagement with radical theology. They push for an engagement with contemporary thought, and especially continental philosophy of religion and radical theology, beyond the kinds of cursory references to postmodern thought that are made by others in this

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1. See further Katharine Sarah Moody, “‘I Hate Your Church; What I Want is My Kingdom’: Emerging Spiritualities in the UK Emerging Church Milieu,” *The Expository Times* 121/10 (2010): 495–503.

2. James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 25.

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3. See further Katharine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, forthcoming 2015).



milieu. Rollins, for example, has disclosed that he hopes to influence the direction of the emerging church conversation and has revealed in particular that he aims to transform the contemporary church into a death-of-God collective.<sup>4</sup>

Contributors to this special issue on emerging Christianity have been asked to consider toward what end or purpose the emerging church might be maturing. To that end, this article introduces readers to a specific imaginary that constitutes emerging Christian subjectivity in relation to the death and decay of God and that seeks the creation of transformative collective practices that can reconcile participants to their own death, decay, and nothingness. This is the good news that this emerging imaginary offers wider emerging Christianity.

## Radical theology

For Rollins, Christianity as it actually exists in the West today functions as a fantasy hiding the conditional nature of the systems of belief that we construct to cover the material realities of life as constituted by alienation and separation, loss, lack, and negativity, which are the psychoanalytic themes that Rollins often re-casts in the religious language of sin. Rollins' theological project—which he refers to as a *pyrotheology*—sets fire to “the layers of belief we put over reality to protect ourselves from reality” in order to “ignite a sense of greater depth in life beyond the

need for wholeness and certainty.”<sup>5</sup> As an incendiary theological project, Rollins claims that his is not a work of constructive theology. Pyrotheology's (deconstructive) practice of setting inherited beliefs and practices alight can certainly be undertaken in relation to a number of different (constructive) theological traditions. But his own theological discourse exhibits several features that distinguish it as a distinct (constructive) project within what I am broadly referring to as radical theology. Brewin has also increasingly turned to radical theology in order to explore how a turn might be made away from an obsession with transcendence and from the divine, the political and the technological as demanding and dehumanising supernatural super-powers toward a restoration of humanity through sacrificial love and a celebration of material life.<sup>6</sup>

I use the phrase *radical theology* to signal a variety of loosely associated contemporary theologies that trace their heritage back to the work of Hegel. While the notion of the death of God is frequently associated with Nietzsche, it was given what Gavin Hyman calls “prior philosophical expression” by Hegel, for whom philosophical truths about the historical movement of Absolute Spirit are metaphorically represented in the Christian religion.<sup>7</sup> In a form of death to God's self at the Incarnation, God the Father moves out of his transcendent remoteness to live

5. “Theory,” pyrotheology.com.

6. See in particular Kester Brewin, *After Magic: Moves Beyond Super-Nature From Batman to Shakespeare* (self-published, 2013). Brewin's current writing project characterizes the human quest for physical, intellectual, and spiritual altitude through technology, drugs, and religion as a quest for the transcendence that would overcome death.

7. Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 157.

4. Peter Rollins, “Church in the Present Tense Video 2,” [www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBFVfwh-YqQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBFVfwh-YqQ). Rollins' comments about the transformation of the existing churches into death-of-God collectives were made during a panel session on his work at the fourth Postmodernism, Culture, and Religion conference, held at Syracuse University in April 2011.

immanently in the world as God the Son and, in Christ's death at the Crucifixion, God the Son is resurrected as God the Holy Ghost, the Body of Christ, the Community of Believers, in a dialectical reconciliation of transcendence and immanence. Reconciliation in Hegelian dialectics is not always interpreted by radical theologians as a higher synthesis, but it's at least possible to agree with Mark C. Taylor that radical theology is not "a novel departure from the Western religious tradition" but represents instead "a reworking of Hegel's most basic insights" about divinity and death.<sup>8</sup>

In tracing radical theologians' roots to the Hegelian death of God in this way, I am also making use of a distinction drawn by John D. Caputo between a form of postmodern theology that descends from Hegel and a form of postmodern theology that descends from Kant.<sup>9</sup> Kant famously sought to establish the limits of knowledge in order to make room for faith. Kantian postmodern theology incorporates the critique of modernist rationality *only to the extent that it is treated as an exercise in epistemological humility*. We believe as a matter of faith, not of knowledge. We are not under the pretension that we are

8. Mark C. Taylor, *Disfiguring: Art, Architecture, Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 155.

9. See especially John D. Caputo, "On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology" in J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister, eds, *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 271–353; and "Two Types of Continental Philosophy of Religion," in *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 87–116. I also make use of this distinction in *Post-Secular Theology and the Church: Truth, Tradition, Transformation?* (forthcoming with Wipf & Stock).

able to achieve metaphysical knowledge of God. We are not God. We are doubtful, and confess our fallibility and finitude. We are tolerant of other worldviews; ours is a *generous* orthodoxy. We can make strategic use of atheistic critiques of religion *insofar as* they enable us to discover the God beyond religious idolatry and a faith beyond religious ideology. But, ultimately, we are able to keep our faith safe from the full force of these criticisms, since atheism too must be humbled.<sup>10</sup>

Hegel also takes the world as the horizon of thought and knowledge, but he locates religion within the world and proceeds to then think God *in space and time* as well. He can therefore be seen as proposing the possibility of a form of theology beyond classical two-worlds theology (this world and the next), which ultimately represses the material—even if radical theologians like Caputo also see in much of Hegel's own work just more metaphysics.<sup>11</sup>

10. See, for example, the Kantian postmodern theology of Merold Westphal. For example, the stated goal of Westphal's *Suspicion and Faith* is to engage with atheist critiques of religion to enable readers to discover a God beyond the idol "God" and to find a richer form of their existing faith beyond instrumental religion. See Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007[1998]), 13. Rollins' own work runs the risk of being read as a Kantian rather than Hegelian postmodern theology, especially when his later, more radical, theology is read through the lens of his earlier negative theology. See Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*.

11. See John D. Caputo, "The Perversity of the Absolute, the Perverse Core of Hegel, and the Possibility of Radical Theology," in Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett and Creston Davis, eds, *Hegel and the Infinite: Religion, Politics and Dialectic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 48. For an introduction to Caputo's radical theology, see Moody,

For Thomas J.J. Altizer, for example, taking Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God seriously as "the collapse of any meaning or reality lying beyond the newly discovered radical immanence of modern man, an immanence dissolving even the memory or the shadow of transcendence," means refusing Hegel's final reconciliation between transcendence and immanence in favour of a thoroughly immanentist or atheist gospel.<sup>12</sup> Radical theology is a form of theological rethinking in the light of the death of God that is therefore first of all a radical "unthinking of every established theological ground."<sup>13</sup> While the death of God is understood in different ways by different radical theologians, when I say that God is dead I do not mean that a specific idolatrous conceptualisation of God has been revealed as such. Nor do I mean that a distant God beyond space and time once lived but has now died in order to enter into the world through the unfolding of human history. I mean that God does not and never did exist as a metaphysical or supernatural entity. Something else is going on in the word "God"—something other than propositional representation. Kantian postmodern theology is a way of keeping God and our belief in God safe through the death of only a certain concept of God, but in Hegelian radical theologies nothing, not even God, is safe.

Radical theologies are rooted in the materialist critiques of religion proposed by figures like Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, but radical theologians deploy this critique not in order to dispose of religion but to discover its potential. Freud classified

as illusionary those beliefs that circulate around the compensatory "nucleus of a loving God, an afterlife of bliss, and a cosmic moral order" found in modern, western, monotheistic religions like Christianity.<sup>14</sup> But a reductionist understanding of religion prevented him from considering its materialist as well as escapist dimensions. Marx, too—who said that religion is not only an expression of, but also a protest against, real distress and suffering and yet never returned to this theme of religion as protest—had a similarly restricted view of religion: it is "static and uniform, violating the original basis of the materialist critique of religion that begins with Hegel's locating of religion *within* history."<sup>15</sup> Radicalising the materialist critique of religion by returning it to its Hegelian roots, in which religions are treated as imaginative figures and through which theology becomes an analysis of what is going on *in* these figures, radical theologians think religion otherwise.

Following this trajectory of radical death-of-God theologies, Rollins and Brewin also suggest that stripping ourselves of the illusionary and escapist dimensions of Christianity can radicalize our understanding of this religion and enable us to glimpse its revolutionary materialist potential, which I shall depict by turning to philosopher Brian R. Clack's recent examination of the possibility of religion beyond illusion. For Freud, religion is nothing more than a palliative. We find it necessary to employ certain consolatory

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#### *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity.*

12. See Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (London: Collins, 1967), 22.

13. Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Call to Radical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 1.

14. Brian R. Clack, *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion: The Pains and Consolations of Existence* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014), 84.

15. Jeffrey W. Robbins, "Necessity as Virtue: On Religious Materialism from Feuerbach to Žižek," in Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt, and Jeffrey W. Robbins, eds, *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 235.

cultural measures to endure life—principally, intoxication, enjoyment of art, sexual love, and religious belief. Religion is one of several “auxiliary structures” needed to support and strengthen the precarious edifice of our existence.<sup>16</sup> It relieves the symptoms of “common unhappiness” without curing this condition.<sup>17</sup> But Clack highlights that, while palliation in the face of human suffering, insignificance, and death is necessary, there are both escapist and realist dimensions to the palliatives that Freud identifies, including religion. According to Clack, the ameliorative function of belief in a benevolent God or Providence, an afterlife, and a moral order is dependent upon the absolute truth of these claims, which is unsustainable in the face of the material realities of the world. Religion cannot survive, therefore, when it is exposed as nothing more than a palliative. Or, rather, *religions with these consoling features* cannot survive *in their current form*, for Clack also wants to suggest that Freud’s “overly restrictive conception of religion stops him from seeing other, non-compensatory possibilities in religious ideas and practices”—possibilities that take religion as palliation in realist rather than illusionary directions. Clack therefore poses the key question, “what might be left once religion has been shorn of all escapist characteristics?”<sup>18</sup> This is also a question posed by Rollins and Brewin.

16. See Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 21 (London: Vintage, 2001), 75; and Theodor Fontane, *Effi Briest* (London: Penguin, 2000), 212.

17. See Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, “Studies on Hysteria,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* vol. 2 (London: Vintage, 2001), 351.

18. Clack, *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion*, 171 and 146.

In the rest of this article, I will frame the radicality of the emerging imaginary that can be discerned within their work as its potential to reconcile us to the death of God through performatively staging the decay of God and priming participants to accept their own death, decay, and ultimate nothingness.

## Death

I want to begin my argument about the significance of this emerging imaginary by suggesting that the *religious* move is not that of recognising humanity’s *impotence* in the face of the temporal and spatial vastness of the universe, as one might expect, but that of insisting on the delusional fantasy of humanity’s *importance*. This means that the truly *materialist* rather than *escapist* and therefore *irreligious* move is to hold to humanity’s insignificance, to refuse to abdicate responsibility to a heavenly realm and to direct energy instead to the transformation of life on earth. What Julian Barnes refers to as “the sin of height” and what Brewin further characterises as “our fascination with transcending our limited finitude” translates into a quest for altitude through technology, pharmacology and theology: “The hope of flight is the hope of overcoming death.”<sup>19</sup> But, for Rollins and Brewin, Christianity can refuse to take flight; it has the potential to reconcile us to our finitude.

Rollins has stressed the importance of what might be called sublimation this regard. Using Kierkegaard’s characterisation of poets as those whose lips are fashioned

19. Julian Barnes, *Levels of Life* (cited in Kester Brewin, “On High: LSD, The Space Race and The Human Quest for Altitude” <https://medium.com/@kester-brewin/on-high-e67f11488d65>) and Kester Brewin, “Work in Progress: On High” (April 10, 2014) <http://www.vaux.net/work-in-progress-on-high/>.

as to transform terrifying cries of anguish and suffering into beautiful, blissful music, Rollins suggests that poetic, artistic or musical works offer us the opportunity for emotional catharsis, such that we are neither overwhelmed by our own suffering nor repress it and thereby disavow our full humanity. He proposes that the public expressive acts of the churches can and should function in a similar manner, creating ritualistic spaces in which we can form a relation with “the anxiety brought about by the sense of death” without that anxiety crushing us.<sup>20</sup> Simon Critchley explains further that the work of sublimation is a “creative artistic activity that produces beauty” and that the function of beauty is “to realize the human being’s relation to death.” Art reconciles us to death not by adequately representing death but by providing us with “an aesthetic screen” that traces the excess of death with respect to representation in such a way as to allow us to have a relation to death’s outline, contours or profile without such a relation overwhelming and destroying us.<sup>21</sup>

Two “transformance art” gatherings staged by Ikon, the Belfast-based collective founded by Rollins in 2001, illustrate the difference that sublimation can make.<sup>22</sup> Both titled “The End,” the first was held inside a large industrial barge in Belfast and was performed with an audience of about

thirty as part of Rollins’ *Idolatry of God* retreat in April 2013, while the second was presented at Cheltenham Race Course to a much larger audience as part of Greenbelt Christian arts and justice festival in August that same year.<sup>23</sup> In Belfast, we sat on chairs arranged in rows with an aisle down the center, facing a black coffin decorated with dead flowers behind which the opening sequence of Lars von Trier’s (2011) film “*Melancholia*” depicted the total destruction of Earth; in Cheltenham, we sat on the floor surrounded by softly flickering images of the Sacred Heart, not of Our Lady Mary but of Our Lord Elvis, and faced a small plastic toilet. In the barge, a mirror inside the coffin reflected back to us our own image and we filled out our own death certificates; at Greenbelt, we wrote down what we hoped our legacies would be, only to have them mocked and dumped into the toy toilet.

The difference between the two performances of “The End” can perhaps be traced to the reactions of the audience at that first Belfast event, which were twofold: either participants felt that the piece revolved around ideas, images, and themes about endings, mortality, and death that were overfamiliar, quickly drawing intellectual assent but thereby failing to impact on an emotional, existential, or embodied level; or participants over-identified with these very same ideas, images, and themes, thereby finding themselves confronted too acutely. The Belfast performance had too adequately represented death, failing to create an aesthetic screen. In the end, “The End” was either insufficiently artful or insufficiently protective. When Ikon performed “The End” again later that year, they took a very different approach to their theme, seeking to enable a ritu-

20. Peter Rollins, *Insurrection: To Believe is Human; To Doubt, Divine* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), 179. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Alastair Hannay, trans. (London: Penguin, 1992), 43.

21. Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2008[2007]), 72–74.

22. The term “transformance art” has been adopted by Rollins, Brewin, Ikon, and others to describe experiments in performance art that seek to provide a space for radical subjective transformation to take place.

23. Fuller descriptions and analyses of these performances are given in Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*.

alistic confrontation with death through juxtaposing serious and comic, even absurdist, elements. “Instead of death being a tragedy,” Rollins reflected afterward, “it was a comedy.”<sup>24</sup> Like poets, artists, and musicians, comedians can also facilitate an encounter with “the pain of being human” without overwhelming their audience.<sup>25</sup> Like any art, humour, too, can become “a practice of minimal sublimation,” enabling us to approach our relation to death without being overwhelmed by it.<sup>26</sup>

## Decay

During Ikon’s Belfast performance of “The End,” the coffin was thrown down onto the ground, breaking open and spewing forth a cloud of dust that we slowly began to breathe in. During the silence that followed this act, we each tried to resist the tickle at the back of our throats, none of us wanting to be the first person to cough. Perhaps we didn’t want each other to know that this part of the event was having a bodily effect on us for more profound reasons than mere social embarrassment. Brewin draws

24. Peter Rollins, in “Interview with Kester Brewin and Peter Rollins,” Greenbelt Arts Festival, 26 August 2013. This interview will form the basis of a book chapter, Katharine Sarah Moody, “The Betrayal of the Magic Trick and the Death and Decay of Church: A Conversation with Kester Brewin and Peter Rollins” (working title), which will feature in a collection of conference proceedings from *Subverting the Norm II: Can Postmodern Theology Live in the Churches?* (Drury University, Springfield, Missouri) April 5–6, 2013, edited by Katharine Sarah Moody and Phil Snider (forthcoming with The Davies Group Publishers).

25. Peter Rollins, “The Contemporary Church is a Crack House” (March 1, 2012) <http://peterrollins.net/?p=3578>

26. Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 11. See further Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002).

a distinction between death and decay to suggest that it is perhaps not the nothingness of death that many of us fear but the nothingness that is signalled by decay. The decaying body is feared because “it is no longer fit for transport or use elsewhere.” The recently deceased or preserved dead body appears as though it might remain at least functional in another world, but the decaying dead body is in the process of returning to *this* world. It thereby “tells us something about our place in the material cycle of things: we are not elevated . . . we were dust, and will be dust again.”<sup>27</sup> We are finite beings. One day we will be dead and gone. But, especially through our quest for transcendence, we tend to disavow the knowledge that death means a return to this world rather than a flight to another. We know that we cannot escape death, and yet in our everyday lives, material actions, and social interactions we turn to technology, pharmacology, art, sex, or religion to help us achieve distance from this knowledge, enabling us to persist in activities that thereby maintain the ideological illusion that escape is possible and structural change in the here and now therefore unnecessary.

Slavoj Žižek has detailed how belief has become displaced away from inner conviction to just such an externalised site of material activity, “embodied in my practices, rituals, interactions.”<sup>28</sup> The

27. Kester Brewin, “‘Now I Am Become Death:’ Theology of Decay – Rituals (1)” (December 7, 2011) <http://www.kesterbrewin.com/2011/12/07/now-i-am-become-death-theology-of-decay-rituals-1/>

28. Slavoj Žižek, “Dialectical Clarity versus the Misty Conceit of Paradox,” in Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2009), 297. See also Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge,

identification of this as the real site of belief exposes how we still believe that it is possible to escape death, despite conscious disbelief. We know that we will die, but we don't want to know that we know. As the actual site of belief, our practices reveal that we believe we can overcome this fate, despite our conscious disbelief that this is possible. We resisted the cough because this bodily reaction might let the knowledge that we are nothing but dust percolate into our bodies and embodied practices, thus confronting us with the reality that we will die, decay, and return to dust. We didn't want to ingest this knowledge into our bodies, because we didn't want to believe it. In his most recent book, Rollins references Brewin's work on death and decay to say that decay "confronts us more fully with the reality of the death" and to suggest that emerging Christianity can expose "the decay of that which we probably already know is dead" but which we repress.<sup>29</sup> While we might intellectually affirm our mortality, the Žižekian insight into the relationship between belief and material practice raises the question of whether the individual and communal religious practices in which we engage express instead our lingering belief in the possibility of an escape. What is required are material church practices that, rather than offering an escape from the realities of life, instead make manifest the move from death to decay and to more life.

This move is crucial to material processes; death only becomes part of the cycle of life if it is followed by decay.

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Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 7. For an introduction to Žižek's radical theology, see Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*.

29. See Peter Rollins, *The Divine Magician: The Disappearance of Religion and the Discovery of Faith* (London: Howard Books, 2015). I'm grateful to Rollins for providing me with the unpublished manuscript.

Emerging collectives should not form, therefore, around the *death* of faith in God. After all, this is the crisis that has already happened, back in the nineteenth century when, as Nietzsche observed, belief in God became unbelievable. But as this crisis has been repressed, emerging collectives should form instead around practices that encourage reconciliation to the *decay* of faith in this dead God.<sup>30</sup> Many within the existing churches may affirm doubt and disbelief intellectually, but belief in God remains disavowed, externalised onto church structures that therefore disclose nothing of what Nietzsche called "the divine decomposition," the stench of which would make the death of God fully (materially as well as intellectually) comprehensible.<sup>31</sup> Believing that God is dead as an inner conviction but lacking the material practices that enable us to dispel a displaced belief in God leaves us living under the shadow of a dead but not decaying God, the reality of whose non-existence is thereby not fully confronted. But Christianity has the potential to provide "communal ritual which moves in post mortem to bring about healthy decay,"<sup>32</sup> through which those gathered can confront both cognitively and materially the death and decay of God and their religious beliefs and identities can be broken down to fund more life and an intensification of life.

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30. See Kester Brewin, "Now I Am Become Death': Theology of Decay – Rituals (2)" (December 8, 2011) [http://www.kesterbrewin.com/2011/12/08/death\\_decay\\_rituals\\_2/](http://www.kesterbrewin.com/2011/12/08/death_decay_rituals_2/)

31. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, Josefine Nauckhoff trans., Bernard Williams ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003[2001]), §125 118–119).

32. Brewin, "Now I Am Become Death' (1)."

## Nothingness

Such practices would expose the way in which we are “a pure void utterly bereft of the protection that transcendence guarantees.”<sup>33</sup> In a piece of prose from “The End,” we are reminded that “in our fragility all we can be sure of is that one day, any day now, everything we hold precious will be gone. One day we will be gone. Nothing will remain.”<sup>34</sup> In the final moments of “The End” as it was performed at Greenbelt, we are also invited to blindfold ourselves: “God made everything out of nothing, but the nothing was there first. Before the beginning nobody said ‘let there be darkness’ because it was already there. ... Cover your eyes.”<sup>35</sup> We’re invited to join hands with each other, because this is what we have, “a community of decay” that “comes with no instructions.”<sup>36</sup> With our blindfolds on, we’re told to “Take each other’s hand and leave. This is the end. All you have is each other.”<sup>37</sup> In the end, lacking any transcendent guarantee after the death and decay of God, whether religious or not, we “make it up in the darkness,” we “make it up in the night,” we make it up together, because all we have is each other.<sup>38</sup> There is nothing else, no escape, no God, no one “to save us, save ourselves.”<sup>39</sup>

There can be no evasion of “the hard hypothesis” of contemporary scientific

33. Robbins, “Necessity as Virtue,” 238.

34. Chris Fry, “The Community of Decay,” *Ikon: The End (Greenbelt)*, August 25, 2013.

35. Pádraig Ó Tuama, “Cover Your Eyes,” *Ikon: The End (Greenbelt)*, August 25, 2013.

36. Fry, “The Community of Decay.”

37. Ó Tuama, “Cover Your Eyes.”

38. Fry, “The Community of Decay.”

39. Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 143.

knowledge that life is but “a passing feature of the universe.”<sup>40</sup> Life is terminal, and will end in entropic dissipation. We are specks

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**L**ife is terminal,  
and will end in  
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of stardust in the process of returning to stardust. We are insignificant, unimportant, impotent and impermanent. We are nothing. But such a nihilism is not without *value*. The value of our being-nothing-ness is what Caputo calls our being-*for-nothing-ness*. Meister Eckhart said that life lives without a reason why, because it lives for itself.<sup>41</sup> Life is not *for* anything. It is *for nothing*. Why does life live? Because it lives. And it lives for itself, not because of something other than or external to life itself. For Caputo, “Life is undermined from the moment it is subjected to the economy of a ‘why’ beyond life.”<sup>42</sup> Life is its own reason why. It is for nothing, for no “something else” other than or transcendent to life. It is for nothing but itself. It is for nothing else than more life—meaning not more life and no death, or more life in another world after death, but more life here and now, before death, and not just more life for me, but for others, which might mean giving my life for theirs. And not more life at the

40. *Ibid.*, 223.

41. See Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 10 (cited by Caputo in *The Insistence of God*, 226).

42. Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 240–241.



expense of the quality of life, but more life as the intensification of life, as “the most intense life possible.”<sup>43</sup>

If holding to our insignificance is an irreligious move, then religion in this account of life as being-and-being-for-nothing must be a strange, irreligious religion. It must be an ir/religion, a religion that is for nothing but life, rather than religion as religion-for-something, religion as religion-for-something-else, transcending life, another life in another world. It would be an irreligious religion that understood itself to be but one of the figurative presentations of the states and events that intensify life. Religion provides narratives and images of the “limit states” of everyday life: life, death, birth, old age, marriage, children, sickness, health, joy, sorrow, hope, disappointment, love, hate, goodness, evil, poverty, and excess.<sup>44</sup> What is going on in these figures of religion is an affirmation of life as being-and-being-for-nothing-ness. Life for nothing more than the intensification of life. Life is terminal and palliation is necessary, but religion is to be a real consolation and not an escape. It should return us to the earth, not enable us to fly off to heaven. Religion as an affirmation of life beyond illusion reconciles us to our nothingness, without the escapism of two-worlds metaphysics, thereby providing more than illusionary consolation. Religion can enable us to acknowledge “our fundamental nothingness” and “reconcile us to our nullity.”<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusion

43. See Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), especially 26 and 51–52.

44. See Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 244.

45. Clack, *Love, Drugs, Art, Religion*, 163 and 168.

Whither now emergence? To what end do Rollins and Brewin push emerging Christianity? Caputo suggests that an irreligious “religion’ without religion”<sup>46</sup> can already be found within the historical religions like Christianity, haunting them with the possibility of their materialist potential—though this possibility is often repressed through the escapism of existing religious practices. But I have turned to the work of Rollins and Brewin in order to also illustrate some of the *new* forms of irreligious discourse and communal ritual that are emerging from western Christianity and that build on this materialist or realist potential in order to prime participants to move beyond the escapism of conventional Christianity. The emerging imaginary that can be identified in their work—and that is exemplified in Ikon’s performance of “The End” in particular—is a concrete example of how innovative irreligious practices might reconcile us to our real material conditions of death, decay, being-nothing, and being-for-nothing. The radical margins of the emerging church conversation push participants to approach the material realities of life as constituted by death, decay and nothingness; to value such a nihilism as our being-for-nothing-else-but-the-intensification-of-life; and to work together to form creative communities of the things that are not, of the nobodies and the nothings. It aims to nullify the things that are, the things that repress or seek to escape from their nothingness—including the existing churches. This emerging imaginary therefore encourages Christianity itself to wither and wilt, to decline, die, and decay, to become nothing as it teaches that Christ became nothing, precisely in order to fund new forms of life.

46. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, David Wills, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 49.



# Book Reviews

***Between Magisterium and Marketplace: A Constructive Account of Theology and Church.*** By Robert C. Saler. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-4514-8283-6. ix and 260 pages. Paper. \$49.00.

The new Fortress “emerging scholars” series provides readers an encounter with cutting-edge scholarship by a new generation of theologians. This engaging book does not disappoint, as it ranges widely among authors, sources, and neighboring disciplines in exploring foundational issues related to the social location of theological discourse in the modern and contemporary worlds. The argument is informed by contemporary literary theory and its claim that authorship is inherently a transaction with political force making appeal to “authority.” For theology, after the onset of modernity, the question is starkly posed: to which public is theological discourse directed, church or the intellectual marketplace? Are theologians finally servants of the dogmatic formulations of a theological tradition or are they improvisers plying their trade in the market of competing ideas? [One might here interject a question about how in modernity the “public” of theology shifted from church to academy, an option not much developed in this inquiry.]

The heart of the argument traces these two trajectories historically. The magisterial trajectory as preserved in Roman Catholic theology is exemplified in a stream running from Thomas More through John Henry Newman to present representatives; the alternative trajectory is illustrated as flowing from William Tyndale through Friedrich Schleiermacher to other contemporary theologians. These particular figures are juxtaposed in a detailed and contextualized analysis. More in relation to Tyndale and Newman in relation to Schleiermacher, as contrasting authorial paradigms, each of which appeal to distinctive sources of authority. More and Newman represent a “polis ecclesiology” ulti-

mately grounded in the teaching office of the church; Tyndale and Schleiermacher appeal to church as “a diffusely spatialized event” that especially values creative theological authorship. Each of these trajectories persist into our present theological context. Saler provides recent instances of “polist ecclesiologists” in the work of Reinhard Huetter, Carl Braaten, and Paul Griffiths, among others, whereas Joseph Sittler, G.C. Spivak (interpreted theologically in light of Karl Barth’s Epistle to the Romans), and Vitor Westhelle (Saler’s Doktorvater) represent ecclesiology as event.

Saler concludes that the proliferation of theological viewpoints in the present may be less a matter of “the pernicious influence of the marketplace but rather of the diffusively spatialized character of the churches—that is, the sites of redemptive truth telling—that inspire and norm acts of authorship” (228). In other words, Saler locates his own theological project in line with those who understand that “the church event” (Westhelle) “takes place in a whole host of areas well outside of the boundaries that we have come to expect (and erect)” (238).

This book contributes significantly to foundational reflection upon the nature of theology in relation to two animated portraits of what it means to be church in the postmodern world. One wonders, however, whether here we remain captured by binary categories that continue to undo genuine ecumenical appreciation and mutual appropriation. A generation ago Paul Tillich noted that the character of the church necessitates both catholic substance and protestant principle. One without the other results in a deficit that impoverishes the whole. If today the Roman Catholic Church is suffering from an imposed deficit by disallowing the vitality of a reformatory principle, the Protestant churches continue to suffer from a polemical fragmentation that cries out for consensus about what constitutes the catholic substance of church. The WCC’s Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry process initiated a methodology by which Protestant communions, including the Lutheran, might begin to expand their definition of church beyond reducing it to a



moment, call that moment “word” or call it “sacrament,” by attending to the substance of the “assembly.” This book begs the question of the criteria by which one might recognize the breadth of the church even as it occurs as “event.” How might we construe anew the marks of the church beyond this impasse? Saler’s insightful and generative arguments assist us all the more to comprehend what ails the church in our time on the way toward catalyzing the emergence of a future church beyond either/or categories.

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***The Blessed Virgin Mary.*** By Tim Perry and Daniel Kendall, SJ. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-8028-2733-3. vi and 118 pages. Paper. \$18.00.

Mary matters. So argue the authors of this volume in the Guides to Theology series. Written by one Protestant (Perry) and one Catholic (Kendall) theologian, this brief survey of Marian writings aims at all students of theology, whatever their wing of the church.

In the introductory essay the authors disclose their motivation. If Christians learn about Mary, they will discover both what they all share (commitment to Christ and theological heritage) and what divides them (theological developments and devotional practices). The authors have no pretense that they will be able to reunite the church, but they are hopeful that such a text will make the Christian “other” more understandable.

The authors prepare their readers to look for three recurring themes: Christology, ecclesiology, and devotion. Beginning with mentions of Mary in the New Testament (including an exegetical treatment of the thorny issue of perpetual virginity), the authors then present major figures whose works concern Mary from throughout the history of the church. The Church Fathers (pre and post-Nicene), the Medieval/Reformation thinkers, and modern contributors (Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox) each receive a chapter. Both Kendall and Perry summarize their

findings and the current state of the conversation before an annotated (alphabetical rather than chronological) bibliography closes the book.

This thin volume is a superb introduction and reference for anyone who desires to study Mary and the ample historic reflections upon her. The authors give just enough introductory material to orient the reader to the times and figures without being pedantic. They also provide ample bibliographic information so that the reader can easily access primary sources. Their tone is both honest (theological disagreements remain between them) yet gracious. May this book inspire even more ongoing conversation about the Mother of our God.

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***The Entangled Trinity: Quantum Physics and Theology.*** By Ernest L. Simmons. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9786-0. ix and 205 pages. Cloth. \$24.00.

Christian theology always seeks new faithful ways to articulate the revelation of the living God, and to describe how they experience God in relationship with the larger world. In the twenty-first century, one of the most constructive sources for this type of language and imagery is science, but many Christians have very little scientific knowledge, and indeed, are sometimes suspicious about the overarching relationship between science and religion in general. In *The Entangled Trinity*, Simmons provides an accessible entry for Christians into the science/religion dialogue, and a compelling example of how fruitful such dialogue can be for Christian thought.

Simmons states the basic question behind his work as follows: “What can the current scientific understanding of the natural world contribute to our reflection in a Trinitarian fashion on the relationship of God and the world?” (1) As you might imagine, the answer is, “quite a bit”—and in what follows, Simmons leads the reader through a well-explained, well-illustrated argument



that supports his central thesis: the model of “perichoretic (entangled) Trinitarian panentheism” has value for both understanding and appreciating “the Christian experience of *pluralistic monotheism*” (165).

The book is not nearly as intimidating as the subtitle might suggest. It is organized into three parts, each of which builds on the previous. The first part, “Foundational Concepts,” offers some basic theological insights that ground Christian thinking about God.

The second part, “Trinitarian Development,” leads the reader through a quick tour of Trinitarian thinking, beginning with Scripture and ending in the current context. Both of these parts are very helpful for beginning students, and stand as a quick refresher for more advanced students. The chapters are clear, short, and conclude with a set of key terms, as well as some helpful discussion questions.

The crux of the book comes in part three, “Science and the Trinity.” This is where Simmons demonstrates his facility in using key concepts from quantum physics to describe the work of the triune God and the nature of the relationality between the three divine persons. Certainly, this is the most technical part of the book, but Simmons manages to make even the most difficult scientific theories understandable and interesting.

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***From Enemy to Friend: Jewish Wisdom and the Pursuit of Peace.*** By Rabbi Amy Eilberg. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-6269-8061-7. xvii and 278 pages. Paperback. \$25.00.

This book is an invitation to faith communities and individuals of all faiths to obey the biblical call to seek peace and pursue it. Reconciliation is not the job of professional diplomats alone; peace is possible only when those in the grassroots build it. Sharing Jewish wisdom on peace and conflict, Rabbi Amy Eilberg gently challenges us to pursue peace.

The first chapter examines the nature of

conflict, identifies different kinds of conflict, and assesses their functions. Eilberg briefly introduces the spiritual practices of opening the heart, seeing the other, and sacred listening as essential in the work of reconciliation. In the second chapter, Eilberg draws from her interfaith engagement and offers ways to forge friendships across religious boundaries. Recognizing the differences of opinion—hermeneutical and political—within the Jewish community, Eilberg, in the third chapter, suggests ways to deal with the difference and heal polarization. The fourth chapter discusses the work of reconciliation within the context of Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Eilberg recounts her engagement with Palestinian and Israeli Jewish peacemakers and the way she herself has been healed from mistrust and fear. In the final chapter, Eilberg introduces nine “soul-traits”—kindness, compassion, generosity, self-awareness, humility, curiosity, equanimity, strength, and prayer—of a peace-builder and suggests ways to cultivate them. Weaving in her experiences in spiritual direction, interfaith engagement, and biblical interpretation, Eilberg invites us to follow the Holy One, who is gracious, compassionate, patient, kind, empowering, and forgiving.

Three threads connect all five chapters: 1) Eilberg begins each chapter by sharing her experiences in peacemaking; 2) She faithfully interprets the sacred texts, using her skills in the original language and familiarity with *midrash*; 3) She offers practical suggestions on how to make a real or perceived enemy your friend. Eilberg draws from the wisdom of non-Jewish traditions and invites the reader to learn from Jewish wisdom. Adorned with grace and courage, this book is a valuable resource to peacemakers in all faith communities.

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***Heretics and Heroes: How Renaissance Artists and Reformation Priests Created Our World.*** By Thomas Cahill. New York: Doubleday, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-3854-9557-8. xxi and 341 pages. Cloth. \$29.95.



Thomas Cahill is the bestselling author of *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. That book became the first in a series called the Hinges of History, in which Cahill gives lessons in western civilization for the masses. At least in this sixth volume of the series, however, Cahill does not prove himself to be a reliable guide. The history presented in *Heretics and Heroes* is anecdotal, sensationalistic and not well referenced. Readers should look elsewhere for reliable popular histories of the period. Nevertheless, Cahill's status as a bestselling author warrants a serious review.

The book begins with the premise that the devastations of the plague in the 1300s led to a change in human behavior. Although the plague did change European society in many well-documented ways, Cahill dramatically overstates his case. "Soon enough, there would be no going back to the supernal gentleness of Francis, the light-filled philosophical explorations of Aquinas, the grave vision of Dante, or the sweet playfulness of Giotto" (21). Why make such overstatements? Because they push Cahill's loose and indefensible thesis that the net result of the bubonic plague, the Renaissance, and the Reformation was a new era exalting the individual ego. Can it really be proven that Francis, Aquinas, Dante, and Giotto and their contemporaries were gentler, less cynical, and less egocentric than anyone who came afterward? This thesis does not withstand scrutiny, even if Cahill asserts it as an "undeniable trend" (188).

Skepticism about Cahill's premise proves well-founded when it comes to his presentation of the religious history of the period. For one thing, simple facts are often missed: Lutherans observe Reformation *Day* on October 31 (not Reformation *Sunday*, as Cahill states on page 30); Heidelberg is southwest of Wittenberg, not southeast (166); and King Ferdinand of Austria was not Holy Roman Emperor in 1528 (265). Every book contains minor errors and these are benign. In this case, though, they are symptomatic of a general carelessness with the historical record, as when Cahill asserts that medieval conciliarism "presaged" modern western democracy (168), judges Henry VIII to have been

"a Tudor Stalin" (230), and describes New England Puritans as "super-Calvinists" (268) instead of being but one branch of a much wider Reformed tradition.

Even bigger problems arise, however, when the historical record is misrepresented outright. Since this reviewer has a background in Reformation history, here are a few examples concerning Luther. Against much available evidence to the contrary, Cahill asserts that Luther was somehow "less attracted to the three synoptic gospels" than to the Psalms (171). He believes that Luther's reform came from a "subjectively framed theological challenge" (262), whereas from the outset Luther called for an open council to debate his ideas critically and objectively. He states that Luther "never shepherded a congregation," though Luther was an ordained priest with a call to preach, lead worship, and hear confessions in the Wittenberg City Church from 1514 onward (267). Cahill also calls Luther's inclusion of the word "alone" in his translation of Romans 3:28 a "purposive mistranslation" (224), an objection raised already in the 1520s by Luther's opponent Jerome Emser which the reformer explicitly defended in his tract *On Translating: An Open Letter* (LW 35:187–198). On this point, Cahill perhaps inadvertently reveals the weakness of his sources. Here he seems to have leaned upon *History of the Christian Church* by Philip Schaff, who died in 1893. While Schaff remains greatly admired as a church historian, his work is hardly the best contemporary research available (though it is easily accessible online and is cited authoritatively in the Wikipedia entry on "Luther's Translation of the Bible").

In conclusion, it is understandable that someone writing for a popular audience would want to present salacious descriptions of history. Nevertheless, at a certain point an author's basic credibility is at stake when accountability to the historical record is obscured by fanciful storytelling.

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***Jesus Is Lord—Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies.*** Edited by Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic. ISBN: 978-0-8308-3991-9. 224 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

This book entails ten essays by various authors, focused on readings of the New Testament from the perspective of empire criticism. As the title implies, the New Testament claim that “Jesus is Lord” is an affront to the imperial cult. But to what degree that is the central aim of the New Testament is the more precise question entertained by these essays.

The first two essays (by David Nystrom and Judith A. Diehl) are overviews of the topic, whereas other essays deal with more specific parts of the New Testament. Each chapter has its own bibliography. Nystrom briefly describes the history and the development of the imperial cult, originating mostly in the provinces and not in Rome itself. Diehl describes the anti-imperial rhetoric in the New Testament especially in view of the economic divisions between the rich aristocracy and the lower classes. Providing historical data on Rome and the Jewish revolt, she discusses the ideas about the empire in Roman 13, Hebrews, and Revelation, calling Romans 13:1–7 the “pinnacle of perplexing rhetoric” (56) and Revelation the “most uncompromising attack on the Roman Empire, and on Christian collusion with the empire” (75). Joel Willitts argues that Matthew’s primary purpose was not empire criticism (*a la* Warren Carter) but to show that Jesus is the answer to Israel’s unfulfilled story. Dean Pinter proposes that although Luke does not make any direct comments against the empire, the third gospel presents Jesus’ lordship as categorically different from and superior to Caesar’s. Jesus is Lord of all primarily with reference to the social inequalities intertwined with demonic powers, demoting Caesar’s lordship to a subordinate role. Christopher W. Skinner discusses anti-imperial readings of the fourth gospel, but rightly concludes that

John’s greater interest is the significance of the incarnate Logos. Drew J. Strait explores what some believe is the most pro-Roman writings of the New Testament, the book of Acts. Eyeing various passages, he argues that while it is not the predominant aim of Acts, the book nonetheless displays a subtle criticism of Caesar throughout. Michael F. Bird discusses Paul’s letter to the Romans, a writing in which Neil Elliott sees “Paul’s attempt to counteract the effects of imperial ideology within the Roman congregation.” Bird concludes (only somewhat convincingly) that Romans is not a political manifesto but pastoral theology within the first-century context of the social-political realities of the Roman Mediterranean. Examining the book of Philippians (esp. 1:27; 2:5–11; 3:20–21), Lynn H. Cohick rightly concludes that “both the historical context and the letter itself dissuade us from thinking that Paul was making a coded anti-imperial argument in Philippians” (178). Paul was neither an imperialist nor an anti-imperialist, but was concerned most of all about relations among Christ-followers. Allan R. Bevere considers Colossians and Philemon in view of Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat’s *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, suggesting finally that “while empire can be read into both letters and both letters have implications for empire, anti-imperial sentiments cannot be directly drawn out of either Colossians or Philemon.” In the final essay, Dwight D. Sheets observes that Revelation is filled with a variety of anti-Roman themes, as would be expected from a letter written to cities with historic ties to the imperial cult.

In the conclusion, the editors state the following: “if all one sees is the Roman Empire while reading the New Testament, then everything becomes empire criticism” (211). In contrast, they suggest that Jesus fights primarily against the kingdom of Satan, not the Roman Empire. In my estimation, their judgment is correct: anti-imperialism is not the main concern of the writers of the New Testament, which itself is a helpful caution against undue exaggeration.



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***Just a Little Bit More: The Culture of Excess and the Fate of the Common Good.*** By T. Carlos Anderson. Austin: Blue Ocotillo Publishing, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-9915-3281-0. xix and 257 pages. Paper. \$14.95.

How did we as a society arrive at our current state of extreme wealth disparity? T. Carlos Anderson, pastor of St. John's/San Juan Lutheran Church in Austin, Texas, presents with measured judgment his findings based on extensive historical research and astute cultural analysis. While the predicament in which the U.S. finds itself is an acute instance, there are precedents for this dilemma in "the gilded age" when Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Morgan ruled the economic sphere. The juxtaposition between the 1890s and 1920s with the present era is very effective for granting us needed perspective to see the patterns of our present plutocracy and extreme wealth disparity with more objective vision.

The author frames recent economic trends and scandals in religious terms. Our true American religion, "the pursuit of happiness," has been reduced to monetary measures: commerce, materialism, and consumerism. The author's matter of fact exposé of these phenomena serves to disarm the reader. At the same time an alarm sounds that warns us of the destructive consequences of the game in which we are all caught up. At every step of the argument, we are instructed on the historical precedents that led us to this juncture and confronted by contemporary evidence as we race over the cliff of excess, whether the measures be advertising, health care, or athletics.

Anderson proposes a return to the value of egalitarianism and practice of economic democracy as the way of deliverance from the regressive and even violent inequality under which we suffer. The reader is provided incredible detail and documentation of our current economic, cultural, and religious crisis. The author expresses confidence that as in previous eras the pendulum finally shifted to

correct the drive to economic excess through the mechanisms of political democracy, so our awakening to the present crisis can lead to an urgently needed corrective in our time.

Economic democracy would be characterized by attention to limits on growth, sustainability, coexistence, cooperation, and commitment to the common good: "Yet the two grandest virtues of the American experience, democracy and egalitarianism, have shown themselves to be undeterred by previous eras of excess. That didn't happen naturally; it happened because democracy and egalitarianism—mutually dependent entities—had the support of the people" (229). One only prays that the author's imagination for an emergent new populism and his significant contribution to summoning its revival has reckoned accurately with the overall decline in the strength of political democracy in this era of globalized capitalism. Anderson's vision is our best hope for the future and I hope he is right.

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***Mark: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries.*** By David Schnassa Jacobsen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014. ISBN: 978-0-8006-9923-9, xvii & 233 pages. Paper. \$22.00.

Preachers using the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) may find a valuable companion in Jacobsen's new commentary on the Gospel of Mark. The clarity of language and attention to detail allow readers to access current scholarship on Mark with relative ease.

Jacobsen's concise introduction gives readers a helpful lay of the land in terms of past and present interpretive choices, even as Jacobsen also stakes a particular claim about the nature of Mark as a text. Namely, Jacobsen considers Mark an apocalyptic narrative that points to the person of Christ and the Kingdom of God as the content of the good news, all intended to inspire readers into lives of discipleship that follow Jesus into that Kingdom life.



As he considers Mark's content, Jacobsen offers introductions to each pericope that help to clarify issues with the text as well as situate those verses within the larger Markan narrative. Particularly helpful for preachers, Jacobsen then considers every lection from within the RCL in depth. He even offers fresh perspective for those verses that appear across multiple readings (cf. Mark 1:4–8; Mark 1:9–11).

At times throughout the commentary, Jacobsen beckons the reader back to the introduction for explanation of certain themes common to Mark, such as the apocalyptic nature of the text or Mark's use of intercalation as an interpretive lens. Readers might benefit from a brief explanation within the commentary itself, so that we might not have to flip pages to recall that intercalation points to the way Mark presents certain stories as mutually interpretive tools. Yet, this relatively minor difficulty ought not dissuade readers from engaging Jacobsen's work.

In fact, as preachers and congregations embark upon the homiletical journey through Year B, Jacobsen offers a timely commentary that can positively shape the church's preaching throughout this year.

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***Sticky Learning: How Neuroscience Supports Teaching That's Remembered.*** By Holly J. Inglis with Kathy L. Dawson and Rodger Y. Nishioka. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014. ISBN: 978-1-4514-8878-4. vi and 115 pages. Paper. \$24.00. ISBN: 978-1-4514-8965-1. E-book. \$23.99.

Neuroscience is all the rage now, and understandably it is being applied to reading, learning and teaching, and all aspects of education to good effect. This book enters this field with all the appropriate expositions: chapters on the nature of learning, how memory works, and a helpful review of the basics of neuroscience, how the learning brain works. As such, *Sticky Learning* is an excellent introduction

and summary of "how neuroscience supports teaching."

Where this book takes off in new and extremely helpful directions is in its focus on seminary education, and in its fifth and eighth chapters: Holly Inglis' "Tips for Sticky Learning" and Kathy Dawson's "Reimagining Course Design: A Case Study." The focus on seminary education is a nice plus. For once, teachers of religion don't have to adapt general educational theory to the theological setting. Conversely, everything in this volume is adaptable to non-seminary settings. But it is those fifth and eighth chapters I particularly want to commend. As a Christian education teacher I have long resisted requests to focus on teaching techniques and methods. I deflect such requests by pointing to Parker Palmer's assertions that teacher identity and integrity, community and contextual specifics, and focus on the "transcendent third thing," the subject, make it impossible to find an effective, one-size-fits-all technique for successful teaching. I have pointed people to Karen Tye's *Basics of Christian Education* or Christine Blair's *The Art of Teaching the Bible* or Israel Galindo's *The Craft of Christian Teaching* to expose people to the range of factors involved in the art or craft of teaching. These fine texts have all helped, but people still come back with the "Tell me how to teach!" lament. These two *Sticky Learning* chapters [five and eight] provide 35 pages of specific tips, examples, hints, and plans that go a long way to answering the teacher's lament while still honoring the many specifics of context, culture, learning styles, and neurological movement. I, for one, will rethink and redo much of my teaching because of this book and these chapters.

One final commendation: Inglis and her colleagues enhance their print text with QR codes that provide entre to helpful online enhancements. This not only pushes print boundaries but honors the brain's capacity and need to learn in a multi-modal manner.

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McCormick Theological Seminary*



# Preaching Helps

Pentecost Sunday — Lectionary 15/Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

## Red and Green: Pentecost and the Season of Ordinary Time

This issue of “Preaching Helps” takes us from Pentecost Sunday on May 24 to Lectionary 15 in the middle of July, from a festival day to an ordinary day with a very ordinary name. How can Ordinary Time be shaped by the fire and mighty wind of Pentecost? In his book *Something Is About to Happen*, Tom Long recalls his days teaching confirmation. He was teaching a small class of three teenage girls. “Do any of you know what Pentecost is about?” he asked them. They all looked completely blank as though they had never heard the word (and perhaps they hadn’t). Pastor Long told them about that wondrous day when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus’ followers. There was the sound of a mighty wind that shook the windows and something that looked like tongues of fire. When the wind died down, they began to speak in languages they’d never learned in school. That was Pentecost and what a day it was! Two of the girls nodded as though it sounded vaguely familiar. But the third girl said, “I think our family must have missed that Sunday.” Pastor Long was surprised not so much at her naiveté, but at her sense of wonder that this had really happened in her church.

In many ways we’re not prepared for Pentecost. We spend the four weeks of Advent preparing for Jesus’ birth at Christmas. We spend forty days in Lent preparing for Holy Week and the good news of Jesus’ resurrection. But Pentecost comes and goes quickly, often falling on Memorial Day weekend as it does this year. I often wish we could linger a bit longer after the day of Pentecost to explore the meaning of the Holy Spirit’s presence in our individual and communal lives. If we hear people say, “I’m spiritual but not religious,” perhaps we haven’t preached enough about the Spirit in our congregations. This issue of “Preaching Helps” will focus as usual on the lectionary texts, but if you want to linger a bit longer on the Holy Spirit, you might consider stepping outside the lectionary to preach a sermon series such as the one outlined below. If it’s too late to change your plans for Pentecost and Ordinary Time, perhaps you might linger longer with the Spirit next year. (Feel free to skip this outline and go directly to information about the writers for this issue.)

## One Possible Sermon Series on the Holy Spirit

### Pentecost Sunday: The Spirit Poured Out Even Now

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Acts 2:1–21

John 20:19–23 or 7:37–39

The reality of the Spirit’s anointing in these latter days: women and men, young and old, all classes (including slaves)

**Trinity Sunday: The Spirit Connecting Us to God**

Genesis 2:4b-7

Romans 8:12-17

John 3:1-8

The Spirit as God's connection with us: breath into lifeless clay, God's Spirit speaking with our spirit; the Spirit blowing where it chooses

**Pentecost 2: The Spirit Blowing throughout Creation**

Genesis 1:1-5

Romans 8:18-25

John 1:1-14

The Spirit moving over the deep in creation; the whole creation groaning in labor pains; logos/Sophia with God in creation and made flesh in Jesus

**Pentecost 3: The Spirit Sighing with Us (when we have no words)**

Psalms 139:1-12

Romans 8:26-30

John 4:19-26

The Spirit with us wherever we go, sighing with us when we have no words for our prayers, true worship where Spirit is present (not this mountain or that)

**Pentecost 4: The Spirit Assuring Us of Christ's Presence**

Isaiah 42:1-9

Romans 8:31-39

John 14:18-27

The Spirit is upon God's servant; nothing shall separate us from the love of God; Jesus promised: I will not leave you orphaned.

**Pentecost 5: The Spirit Building Up Community**

Isaiah 40:28-31

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

John 13:1-17, 34-35

Promise of God's presence when we are weary; spiritual gifts for the building up of community (including the gift of tongues); servanthood and love for one another

**Pentecost 6: The Spirit Calling Forth Justice**

Isaiah 61:1-4

1 John 4:7-21

Luke 4:16-21

Isaiah 61 is the text Jesus read in Nazareth: the Spirit anoints the prophet and Jesus to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives. What is the Spirit anointing us for in this time and place?

Now, back to the lectionary readings for Year B, starting with the fires of Pentecost Sunday. As we move from Pentecost and Holy Trinity to the season of Ordinary Time, we welcome three writers in this issue, two who are writing here for the first time and another who has graced these pages before.

**Heidi Neumark** is pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Manhattan and executive director of Trinity Place Shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth and young adults. Her previous experiences in congregational and community ministry shaped her first book, *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*. Her new book will be released by Abingdon Press in October: *Hidden Inheritance: Family Secrets, Memory and Faith*. That book is about her recent discovery of Jewish roots and her grandfather's death in a concentration camp. You are also invited to read more of Heidi's wonderful insights on her blog at [hneumark.com](http://hneumark.com).

**John Rollefson** has been a frequent contributor to "Preaching Helps." An ELCA pastor, John served urban and campus ministries in San Francisco, Milwaukee, Ann Arbor and Los Angeles. He also served interims in Solvang and London. He is retired with his wife, Ruth, in San Luis Obispo, California, where he is a member of Mt. Carmel Lutheran Church.

**Peter M. Wallace** is the executive producer and host of Day1, the weekly ecumenical radio program airing on over 200 stations and online at [Day1.org](http://Day1.org). An Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Atlanta, Georgia, he is the author of nine books, including *The Passionate Jesus: What We Can Learn from Jesus about Love, Fear, Grief, Joy and Living Authentically* (SkyLight Paths).

As we move into the days of summer, I pray God's blessing upon you and the people to whom you preach. May the fire of Pentecost light our way through the long season of Ordinary Time. May God's Spirit breathe with our spirit to awaken and encourage us when we can't think of anything to say. Thanks for your partnership in preaching God's good news.

*Barbara K. Lundblad*  
*Editor, Preaching Helps*

## Pentecost Sunday

### May 24, 2015

Ezekiel 37:1–14 [or Acts 2:1–21]

Psalm 104:24–34, 35b

Acts 2:1–21 [or Romans 8:22–27]

John 15:26–27; 16:4b–15

Pentecost is a festive day and many churches take extra care in adorning worship spaces accordingly. Often, the congregation is encouraged to wear red if at all possible. There is red fabric and often, bright images of flames and doves. To enter the worship space is to sense that something special and exciting is afoot.

The opening of the first reading from Ezekiel could not present a more jolting contrast. The hearers will suddenly be taken out of the colorful scene and led to a very different place—the stark valley of death, strewn with dry bones—human bones. If anything, it seems more like Good Friday than Pentecost. This juxtaposition may turn out to be just what is needed. There will surely be a few people present whose inner reality feels more like the valley of dry bones than the upbeat décor and mood around them. If the Spirit of Pentecost cannot touch them or the many death valleys around us, then it's just a fun day and nothing more.

Beginning with the Ezekiel reading can be a way to meet struggling people right where they are. God sets Ezekiel down in the valley and shows him the bones. When God asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel turns the question back at God who provides the way forward. We might want to explore the exile Ezekiel’s people found themselves in that led them to the kind of despair that says, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Then the preacher can consider the exile

and dry bones in the lives of those present, in the surrounding community, nation, and world: the exile of the reality we expected and the reality we are facing, the exile of a young person’s rejection because of their sexual orientation, the dry bones of foreclosed houses and shuttered businesses, of forsaken urban neighborhoods, of villages emptied by ISIS. The preacher will have no trouble coming up with places near and far where it feels impossible to imagine how such dry, fractured bones might live.

When Ezekiel speaks a prophetic word to the bones, the first sign of new life is “a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” Can crying babies and noisy children be a rattling of bones in the church as new life emerges? What about stress between different groups using the church? Can some of the conflict that may arise from differing traditions, expectations, and opinions actually be a sign of rattling bones? Are some things that rattle us actually a work of the Spirit? In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton writes: “As long as we are on earth, the love that unites us will bring us suffering by our very contact with one another, because this love is a resetting of a Body of broken bones. Even saints cannot live with saints without some anguish, without some pain at the differences that come between them.”

A congregation might consider how a broken body of bones is being reset in their context. What new connections can be made between groups divided by age, race, or language? What new linkages might be forged between the congregation and community or between one congregation and another? This would be a way of seeing what bone-rattling connections the Spirit might work through us beyond

Pentecost Sunday.

In Ezekiel 37, it is the breath—the *Ruah* of God—that allows the bones to live and to stand. The vast multitude that stood on their feet can direct us to a moment in the Acts story: “But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them.” Peter wasn’t exactly a dry bone, but Peter sank beneath the waves and failed and fell many a time. Now the Spirit has lifted Peter to his feet and he stands and bears witness. A connection can be drawn to Easter where “Jesus himself stood among [his disciples] and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’” The one laid in a tomb, now stands. The Spirit of the risen Christ lifts Peter to his feet as the bones were lifted to their feet.

The preacher may wish to take up the theme of bearing witness. This theme relates to the Pentecost gospel when the Advocate comes and sends the disciples to testify. When have we seen people standing up and bearing witness in unexpected ways? The preacher could begin close to home with people who have been brought down by their own failure or by forces they have no control over, people who nonetheless stand up to serve meals, tend the sick, teach children. As I write, clergy are standing before dozens of boxes with thousands of signatures asking that Kelly Gissendaner, a woman on death row, not be killed. One might recall a photo showing Muslim men standing in front of a Catholic church in Egypt, protecting its congregants while they attend mass. Sometimes we stand up by lying down as many have done in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Preaching might focus on the radically inclusive nature of Pentecost seen in the diversity of languages and Peter’s citation from the prophet Joel: people of differing ages, social positions and gender receive the same Spirit and have unique

visions to share. One could point out the diversity of the gathered congregation, whatever that may be, as a sign of the Spirit’s work in our midst. We might ask: Whose voices are missing? Whose dreams are we not seeing as we envision our future? One church I served embarked on a Time to Listen to the Community campaign—going out to have conversations with people who were not part of the church, inviting them to share their hopes and dreams for the community. Another church I served created a dream room where people of all ages could write or draw their dreams for the church and neighborhood.

One poem that I find particularly illustrative for Pentecost is “Mending Wall” by Robert Frost. The winter “frost” and ice have created gaps in the stone wall. He and his neighbor go out to fix it because as the neighbor says, “good fences make good neighbors.” Frost begins to wonder if this axiom is true. Do good fences make good neighbors? It is the rationale for the wall on the border between our nation and Mexico and the security fence built by the state of Israel. Frost counters his neighbor’s words:

Spring is the mischief in me, and  
I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head  
Why do they make good neighbors?  
Isn’t it

Where there are cows? But here there  
are no cows.

Before I built a wall, I’d ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out  
And to whom I was likely to give  
offense.

Something there is that doesn’t love  
a wall.

That wants it down...

Robert Frost wrote of his own identity as wall-breaking frost, but he could have been speaking of our identity as children of God, born of the Holy Spirit, sealed by the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit makes spring mischief in us and through us, pushing boulders aside, splitting through hardened hearts and minds with hope and healing, undoing projects and plans created to wall some in and others out, making connections in a world of neighbors.

*Heidi Neumark*

## **Holy Trinity** **May 31, 2015**

Isaiah 6:1–8

Psalms 29

Romans 8:12–17

John 3:1–17

The readings for Holy Trinity Sunday go a long way in relieving the preacher of any pressure to explain the mystery of the Trinity. No more sermons about the Trinity as a chemical compound H<sub>2</sub>O—ice, liquid, and steam—which turns God the creator into a block of ice. Or God as a piece of fruit (skin, flesh, and seed) or whatever other metaphor we might produce.

Isaiah is worshipping in the temple when he is stunned with a vision of God that leaves him speechless. He can only tell us about the hem of God's robe and the commotion of wings all around. He tells us about the singing of the winged creatures, a song that rocks the house. He tells us about the smoking incense that blurs his outer vision and stings in his eyes, yet illumines his sense of unworthiness and inadequacy. Isaiah describes all of this in words that we echo in our own houses of worship as we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy."

But Isaiah does not give us a picture of God. Out of the smoky haze, one of the seraphs carries a hot coal and touches Isaiah's lips as a sign of God's searing mercy. Isaiah has been branded now as God's messenger, but he has a chance to decide if he will accept the call and he does: "Here am I; send me."

This provides an opening for those who want to preach about vocation. The text makes clear that Isaiah's call to serve God—and our own—is not based on his adequacy or worthiness. It might be a time to lift up the Lutheran understanding of the priesthood of all believers, of vocation outside of "church work." For those who might want to consider "the hem of God's robe," Pastor Michael Coffey has written a wonderful poem on this text titled "God's Bathrobe." The poem can be found at Pastor Coffey's blog; <http://mccoffey.blogspot.com/2012/05/gods-bathrobe.html>.

The Romans reading helps us detect the relational action of the Trinity. The Spirit moves in our spirits to help us know we are children of God and heirs with Christ. We cannot suffer apart from Jesus. Jesus cannot triumph apart from us. This supports a sermon on the Trinity as a way of communicating God's nature as a non-hierarchical community of equality and mutuality that is not closed into itself but wide open, inviting, and life-giving. What does this say about us, created in God's image? About our churches? About other communities?

This reading is a good choice if it is a Sunday when baptisms will take place. If anointing oil is practiced, one might mention that it was once used to anoint kings, priests, and prophets, an elite group, but now the oil glistens on the foreheads of all who come to the font, equally chosen, equally beloved, and coheirs with Christ.

The story of Nicodemus is a story for seekers. Nicodemus is introduced as a Pharisee. He would have been a smart, educated, well-positioned leader and yet something is missing. He longs to understand more about God and about his own path for life. We are told that Nicodemus came to talk with Jesus at night. Some assume that Nicodemus came at night because he didn't want others to see him with Jesus, to appear to be straying into unapproved places. That might be true, but it is also true that for Jewish men like Nicodemus, studying the Torah at night was considered to be especially valuable because at night you can focus intently without the distractions of the day. Or maybe Nicodemus just thought that night was the best time to catch Jesus alone and get his full attention.

"Rabbi," he says, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Nicodemus begins with what he knows and leaves unspoken all that he does not know and longs to know. Jesus answered, "Truly I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

Nicodemus has two questions. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Although these are rather comical questions, Jesus doesn't make fun of Nicodemus. He tries to help him see in a new way: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Being born again is not a formula or a creed. It is life lived open to mystery, being receptive to the movement of the Spirit.

"But how can these things be?" asks

Nicodemus. He is still confused because Jesus doesn't provide a set of rules but a relationship of ongoing trust and love. This is a wonderful story for those who struggle with their own questions and may worry that such questions are unwelcome in church. This text itself has often been used to dismiss questions. It includes one of the most famous verses in the Bible, John 3:16, a favorite slogan of religious fundamentalists, often reduced at sports events where fans just hold up the numbers John 3:16.

*For God so loved the world....*The verse goes on to say that all who believe in God's Son will be saved. God did so love the world and still loves the world but no true love can be reduced to a placard. How strange it is that this very text has been used perhaps more than any other, to close the door on our questions. It's strange because Jesus welcomes Nicodemus' questions without condemnation.

As pastors, we hear many questions for which we have no answers. We might want to name some of those questions or list some of the many questions in the Bible: "Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" "Why do the wicked prosper?" "Why is my soul downcast?"

Few of these questions get direct answers. Rainer Maria Rilke's words in response to the questions of the young poet may help:

...I would like to beg you dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart ... Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.

How can our life in community help us to live with questions that may be unanswerable for now? When Nicodemus leaves his conversation with Jesus, there is no sign that anything is resolved for him. But we meet him later in John's gospel, on two occasions. When Jesus is arrested and the disciples have all run away into the shadows, Nicodemus steps out into the light and speaks on Jesus' behalf. He takes a courageous risk for the sake of justice and truth. And then again, after Jesus has been crucified, a man named Joseph of Arimathea goes to Pilate and asks for Jesus' body in order to bury it. "Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths." All those fragrant spices—a hundred pounds—carried by Nicodemus to bury Jesus. Nicodemus found a way to live with his questions, to risk truth and stand up for justice, and to bear the weight of love. In this way, Nicodemus was born again.

*Heidi Neumark*

## **Lectionary 10/Second Sunday after Pentecost June 7, 2015**

Genesis 3:8–15

Psalm 130

2 Corinthians 4:13–5:1

Mark 3:20–35

*If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,  
Lord, who could stand?*

Psalm 130:3

### **Engaging the Texts**

The first question we encounter in the Bible

is not, as we human types might assume, "Where is God?" (the religious question). But the Bible's initial query is God's to make of the human ones created out of the *adamah* and now hiding in the Garden: "Where are you?" Religion, it turns out, is God's quest for us, not ours for God.

It's a wonderfully told tale, this story of our originating disobedience to God's word. It's not so much a "fall" into sin that is being described as a leap into humankind's innate craving to become the creator of its own destiny, to disavow creature-hood, by knowing good and evil like God. As Bonhoeffer once put it, the pious promise "you will become like God," a seemingly good thing, is essentially the serpent's "religious trick" that would cut out God the "middleman" and God's mediating word as the means of our enlightenment as to how to live morally (See *Creation and Fall*, [New York: Macmillan, 1971]). It's not so much that we are inherently evil as there is something basically screwy about us mortals. There is something that we inherently know is not quite right with our ability to both know and do the good. Something about us "misses the mark" as the Greek word for sin, *hamartia*, signifies.

For an alternate reading that savors the humor and anthropomorphic take on the Creator in the story, see the Yale literary critic, Harold Bloom's *The Book of J* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 181 ff. He has fun theorizing that the author of the Yahwist narrative must have been a woman, perhaps in Solomon's court, so light, playful, and contrarian is her take on the creation story and its aftermath. Bloom considers today's text not at all a "moral tale" but a wry "children's story that ends unhappily." "When we were children," he summarizes the essence of the story, "we were terribly punished for being children."



A canny insight of Walter Brueggemann just might curb our own religious ambitions as we anticipate preaching on such a rich and well-known story. Think of the serpent, he suggests, as the creation's first theologian who convinces humankind to trade obedience to God's word for theology *about* God. As such it is a story that insinuates the warning that "theological talk which seeks to analyze and objectify matters of faithfulness is dangerous enterprise." Today's story from the Book of Beginnings further shows how "anxiety comes from doubting God's providence, from rejecting his care and seeking to secure our own well-being." The serpent seduces humankind into believing there are securities apart from the reality of God, and so "failure to trust God with our lives" proves to be "death" (*Genesis* [Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982], 47–48, 54–55).

### Pastoral Reflections

If our Genesis story is about humankind's eternal hiding from God in its seemingly religious quest for God, today's quizzical Gospel story has something of a "Where's Waldo?" quality to it in which Jesus' own family plays a leading role. "What's going on with our boy Jesus?" seems to be the family's concern as they fear he is being harassed by these crowds that are thronging before his very door, to the point that "they could not even eat." Things were evidently getting out of control, and his family—including mother, who here makes her initial entrance into Mark's telling of the gospel—is about to make what we would call "an intervention" with Jesus. For the people were saying, "He's gone out of his mind," whereas the learned scribes who had come down from Jerusalem—the certified smart people—had a diagnosis both more sophisticated and

specific: "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

Frankly, Jesus' responses, as Mark tells it, may not be any more convincing to contemporary hearers than to his original audience. Their conclusion could be ours: "He has an unclean spirit"—or at least "unclear." His babbling about Satan casting out Satan and a kingdom divided against itself, about the need to tie up a strong man before plundering his house and then, finally, his words about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit as the only unforgivable sin—over which the church has been scratching its head ever since—all this ought to give us more than pause.

But then the finale, with Jesus' mother and brothers (and some manuscripts say sisters too) coming and asking for him. And his chilling rebuff about who are my mother and brothers but those who do the will of God! There is no need to tie this all up in one neat bundle or even try to suggest why Mark is bothering to include this troubling episode from Jesus' early ministry. Suffice it to suggest that there are unclear boundaries between mental illness and mental health, then and now, especially where things religious come into play. Could it be that even Jesus could have his moments when his words and behavior could be variously interpreted, even by those who knew him and loved him best? And maybe—just maybe—the only prescription for our human malady first diagnosed in Genesis is to do the "will of God" by heeding God's word while not succumbing to the allures of our native religiosity?

"So we do not lose heart," is Paul's way of putting it. *Soli deo gloria!*

*John Rollefson*

## Lectionary 11/Third Sunday after Pentecost June 14, 2015

Ezekiel 17:22–24

Psalm 92:1–4, 12–15

2 Corinthians 5:6–10, (11–13), 14–17

Mark 4:26–34

*It is good to give thanks to the Lord, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night....*

Psalm 92:1–2

### Engaging the Texts

The chorus of a song titled “The Parables” goes like this:

Story teller, yes, he was the story-telling kind;

He painted pictures in their mind,

It was the way he let them see

How things were really s’posed to be.

It was only last week that we, for the first time in Mark’s gospel, were introduced to Jesus as a “story-telling” man, one who not only healed, exorcized, and proclaimed the kingdom of God but did so “in parables” as today’s text puts it. In fact, it is one of the most characteristic things about Jesus so that Mark goes so far as to claim “he did not speak to them except in parables” (v. 34).

This would be a good Sunday to give your congregation a little taste of “parabolic” preaching which can go a long way toward loosening the grip of literalistic biblical interpretation that so afflicts many American congregations. Start with a simple Greek word study that shows how “*parabole*” means to “throw something out alongside” of something else, and how metaphor and story-telling

are essential to how the truth of the gospel grasps us. Of course I’m not recommending that you lecture your congregation on the niceties of religious language, but help folks to see how Jesus leads the way in helping us be encountered by the non-literal indirection of the gospel of the kingdom of God—both, of course, being metaphors themselves drawn from everyday life. (See, for example, Colin Gunton’s brilliant *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* [New York: T & T Clark, 1988]).

My suspicion is that at least a part of the accusation we encountered last week of Jesus being out of his right mind may well have taken rise from his habitual parable-telling mode of teaching which avoided answering direct questions and instead resorted to the inventive telling of odd tales, many without an obvious point or moral, which nonetheless pointed to the eccentric reality of what God’s kingdom is like. Today we find Jesus using one of his favorite images that will recur in many of his stories, that of the seed and then, more particularly, the mustard seed, common enough agricultural allusions even to Jerusalem religious grandees in attendance. The mustard seed, among the smallest of seeds, becomes the greatest of shrubs when grown, sufficiently large that “the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (v. 32). One of my most vivid memories as a young boy is pulling mustard plants (yellow weeds) out of the oats field of my friend Bobby’s father’s field, and indeed, upsetting the raucous birds who had nested in them. This is what parables do: they activate your imagination and memory and invite you to make connections with God’s “really real,” rooting the kingdom of God in your earthly realities.

### Pastoral Reflections

Today's text from Ezekiel perhaps was in Jesus' mind as he threw out the image of the mustard seed to his audience. For here the prophet is speaking of God's action as a transplanting of a sprig becomes, in time, a noble cedar under which "every kind of bird will live ...and nest" (v. 23). This image immediately sets my mind reeling off to the beautiful Navajo woven tree-of-life rugs I've seen, to the beautiful and delicate Egyptian parchment-like tree, branches filled with all kinds of birds, a piece of artwork given me as a gift on the occasion of their baptisms by Arash, Tani and Bamdad originally from Tehran. Or think, too, of other scriptural trees from Eden to John's Revelation. This is the way our minds work, free associating God's kingdom from a suggestive image. This is dangerous territory, of course, for who can control where an image will take you—or the kingdom of God, for that matter?

The kingdom of God that Jesus evokes in our minds is an alternative reality that is subversive, elusive, and underwhelming to our normal ways of being. I can't help but think of Woody Allen's movie, "The Purple Rose of Cairo," where the Jeff Daniels character strides right out of the movie on the cinema screen to sit next to the Mia Farrow character who is so entranced with the film and the Daniels character. The rest of the film is a story of the confrontation and conflict of these two realities. Farrow's character sums it all up as she enthuses to a friend, "I've just met the most marvelous man. Of course he's fictional. But you can't have everything!"

We Christians, of course, believe that the kingdom of God is the "really real," the already-in-our-midst, though hidden reality pulling us into God's good future that Jesus evoked, embodied, and

promised to bring to fruition. The church is God's "mustard seed conspiracy," as someone has described it. I remember once seeing a banner in a prison chapel that posed the troubling question in nicely confronting metaphorical language: "If you were charged with being a Christian would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

*John Rollefson*

### Lectionary 12/Fourth Sunday after Pentecost June 21, 2015

Job 38:1–11

Psalm 107:1–3, 23–32

2 Corinthians 6:1–13

Mark 4:35–41

#### Engaging the Texts

Finally, after thirty-seven chapters, God steps in "out of the whirlwind" (38:1) to answer Job. Through most of those thirty-seven chapters Job has asked *why me*, and his companions have repeatedly answered, *because it's your fault*. It's a frustrating read. But then in chapter 38, amid some of the most striking imagery in scripture, it becomes all the more frustrating—because God never really answers Job's question. Bottom line: God invites Job to live in humble trust (see 42:3b).

"Who is this that darkens counsel by *words without knowledge*?" (38:2). It is hard not to take that personally, because, let's be honest, we so often don't really know what we are talking about either yet rarely acknowledge that. With Job, let's listen to God and reset the way we approach life. The questions God poses to Job seem like taunts—"surely you know!" (38:5). Yet they morph into a glorious description of the creative power of God.

God answers Job “out of the whirlwind” and uses stormy metaphors to describe divine power. God, it becomes clear, is far beyond our understanding. So rather than producing “words without knowledge” like Job and his notorious friends, let us instead open ourselves to humble trust in God no matter our circumstances.

In contrast to Job’s knowledge-less words, the psalmist exhorts, “Let the redeemed of the LORD *say so*” (107:2). Rather than spilling empty words, let us share stories of redemption at the hand of the same God who, in language that parallels Job, both commands and raises “the stormy wind” (107:25) *and* makes the storm “be still” (107:29). God brings quiet and takes us to our desired haven. In that place we can speak words of praise and gratitude and share our stories of God working amid the storms of our lives. This requires words—not empty words, but words brimming with humble, loving trust.

Paul encourages the Corinthians to acknowledge that God hears and helps in the midst of all sorts of difficulties, trials, and storms, and then to respond with “purity, knowledge [there’s that word again], patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech [note that, too], and the power of God” (6:6–7). Paul says he has been frank with them, adding “our heart is wide open to you. . . . Open wide your hearts also” (6:11, 13). Our words are important. May they convey humble trust and encourage open hearts.

Tempestuous angst pervades these texts, and in Mark we encounter yet another windstorm coming after a busy time of teaching the crowds. But notice Jesus’ reaction amid this tempest: He is so trusting of God’s loving care that he can sleep peacefully. Once roused by his anxious disciples he brings peace to the

sea—just as God did in the psalm. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” (4:40). His taunt echoes God’s questions to Job. Like Job, the disciples are put in their place. Once again God’s message, through Jesus and these other texts, is evident: Rather than fearfully railing against the storms of life, we’re invited to turn to God in humble trust and respond to life with openhearted love.

### Pastoral Reflections

As you prepare this week’s sermon, beware: A storm will break out—in your congregation, in your community, in the world. Whether it’s a literal storm or other natural disaster or some sort of societal brouhaha, outbreak, tragedy, or brawl, you and your people will face some sort of storm. You will hear and perhaps ask many questions about it, possibly including *why me?* If you watch cable news, you will be inundated with a great deal of “words without knowledge” (Job 38:2). Pundits will offer their advice like Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. Many souls will feel abandoned like Job. You can guide your listeners through these texts to reveal a better way.

One event that should still be current is the exile of NBC News anchorman Brian Williams. Within days of the revelation that he had been uttering a great number of “words without knowledge” regarding his experiences in the Iraq war and elsewhere, he seemingly lost everything in a Job-like fashion, including his position as one of America’s top newsmen (at least for a six-month sentence). His journalistic reputation and very integrity have been shattered. The cause seemed so harmless and insignificant, and one may feel sympathy for him because certainly he experienced a traumatic event in the war-torn desert. While Williams assumed responsibility and seemed remorseful and

repentant, you have to wonder if he isn't crying out, "Why me?"

Certainly there is more than one Job-like figure in your congregation who can identify with this shocking, stormy loss of everything they hold dear. Let us seek to lovingly convey that the God who "shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb" (Job 38:8), the God who "commanded and raised the stormy wind.... [and] made the storm be still" (Ps 107:25, 29), the God who "woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!'" (Mark 4:39), is the same God to whom we yield in humble trust, the same God to whom we respond as Paul did, who despite his hardships was empowered to serve in "purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech..." (2 Cor 6:6-7). What is the most truthful speech in the midst of a storm or in its aftermath? "Let the redeemed of the LORD *say so*" (Ps 107:2).

*Peter M. Wallace*

## **Lectionary 13/Fifth Sunday after Pentecost June 28, 2015**

Lamentations 3:22-33

Psalm 30

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

Mark 5:21-43

### **Engaging the Texts**

The Lamentations text belies its name with beloved phrases about God's steadfast covenant love (*chesed* in the plural, indicating loving acts) and mercies that never end but are "new every morning" (3:23). Faithfulness and hope pervade these verses, and the word "good" echoes three times. But reality sets in as life's

harsh vicissitudes are faced, at least for a time. God's weeping, waiting people are encouraged to hope that the Lord will not reject them forever. Despite the grief that can come by the hand of Providence, God will have compassion.

These encouragements are seconded in Psalm 30: While God's anger may flash, his favor lasts forever. "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (30:5). The psalmist's heartfelt, honest prayer is answered: mourning begets dancing; sackcloth is replaced by a garment of joy (30:11). God's faithfulness moves the psalmist from silence to praise. Both these texts that address waiting, weeping, and hoping can find ears and hearts that long to hear their promise in the midst of authentic need.

The gospel, a Russian nesting doll of healing accounts one within the other, echoes this theme of waiting, weeping, hoping. Both individuals seeking healing—Jairus the synagogue leader for his daughter and the unnamed woman—have no doubt been waiting, weeping, and hoping for divine intervention. In both cases, Jesus proves worthy of the hope entrusted in him.

First Jairus approaches Jesus, falling at his feet to beg for help. Jairus expresses faith in the healing power of Jesus and asks directly that Jesus "come and lay your hands on her" (5:23). Jesus goes with him surrounded by a large crowd, among which is the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. Despite the expensive work of many physicians, she has only grown worse. But she trusts in Jesus: "If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well" (5:28). Her healing is immediate, as is Jesus' realization that power has gone out from him (5:30). When he asks

who touched him, the disciples react as though he's crazy—he's smothered by people. Seeing his response, the woman approaches in fear and falls down before him—as Jairus had—and tells him her story. Jesus says her faith has made her well. While this happens, friends of Jairus come with word that his daughter is dead, but Jesus counters, “Do not fear, only believe” (5:36). In the midst of the waiting, weeping, and hoping there is no room for fear, only trust. At Jairus' house people weep and wail, but Jesus declares, “The child is not dead but sleeping” (5:39). The wailing turns to derisive laughter, and then, as Jesus bids the girl to get up, to utter amazement. Jairus and the woman took Jesus seriously; now these mourners must too.

### Pastoral Reflections

I remember a friend lashing out at me after I offered what I thought were encouraging words for his difficult situation. Sometimes in pastoral encounters involving illness, accidents, or death, those hurting may criticize well-meaning companions for offering mere platitudes—“God is good to those who wait for God,” “This won't last forever,” “Joy comes in the morning,” or even “Do not fear, only believe.” If those sentiments are offered without empathic listening and meaningful action behind them, no wonder they are not taken seriously. Yet these are expressions from our texts today. We can either believe them or not. But look what happens when we do take them seriously. In the midst of any crisis it can be difficult to believe in a hopeful dawn, particularly when the crisis has endured for years. Nevertheless, it is the preacher's task to offer the hope of God while offering a bigger picture: God's steadfast love never ceases, God's mercies never come to an

end, God's faithfulness is great, therefore we must believe. Even in the silence, even under the yoke, even throughout the excruciating night, we must wait, weep, and hope.

Sometimes our perception of our problems is flawed; in the gospel, the people wept and wailed over the dead child only to be corrected by Jesus. God is able to change circumstances in a moment, but that moment can come after days, weeks, years of waiting in silent pain. That moment will come, as it did with when Jesus commanded, “Little girl, get up.” Then we realize that Jesus is speaking to us, whoever we are. Frederick Buechner points to this moment as enormously moving:

You who believe, and you who sometimes believe and sometimes don't believe much of anything, and you who would give almost anything to believe if only you could. You happy ones and you who can hardly remember what it was like once to be happy. You who know where you're going and how to get there and you who much of the time aren't sure you're getting anywhere. “Get up,” [Jesus] says, all of you—all of you!—and the power that is in him is the power to give life not just to the dead like the child, but to those who are only partly alive, which is to say to people like you and me who much of the time live with our lives closed to the wild beauty and miracle of things, including the wild beauty and miracle of every day we live and even of ourselves.” (Frederick Buechner, “Jairus' Daughter,” <http://frederickbuechner.com/content/weekly-sermon-illustration-jairus%E2%80%99s-daughter>)

God can give us the power to get up even while we are waiting and weeping, while we are bleeding yet believing. For we hope in the steadfast love of God

whose mercies are new every morning.

*Peter M. Wallace*

## Lectionary 14/Sixth Sunday after Pentecost July 5, 2015

Ezekiel 2:1–5

Psalm 123

2 Corinthians 12:2–10

Mark 6:1–13

*Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease, of the contempt of the proud.*

Psalm 123:4

### Engaging the Texts

July is the month of prophets as we hear today in our Hebrew scripture reading from Ezekiel, next week from Amos, and then from Jeremiah and Elisha in succeeding weeks. It is a good, extended opportunity to reflect on the role of the prophet in ancient Israel, and I recommend taking some time to renew your familiarity with the prophetic tradition using time-tested resources like Abraham J. Heschel's *The Prophets: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962) or Martin Buber's *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1949) as well as the work of more contemporary scholars.

For Christian preachers, of course, this provides the opportunity for us to see both Jesus and John the Baptizer within the tradition of Israel's prophets of old and to consider how God continues to send us prophets in our own day.

Today's reading from Ezekiel is a good place to start since we hear the story of Ezekiel's own initial call from God while limning some of the difficulties of the

prophetic calling which others will also encounter. Ezekiel begins by describing how "a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet (v. 2). The prophetic summons is one that comes from outside of oneself—it is not self-initiated—and, in fact, is often resisted by the recipient (see Jeremiah!). It comes as a calling, Ezekiel goes on to describe, that is a "sending" to the people of Israel with a "Thus says the Lord God" (vss. 3 and 4). These are words the word-bearing prophet cannot expect will be welcomed but will likely be both resisted and rejected by God's "rebellious," "impudent," and "stubborn" people. And yet, "whether they hear or refuse to hear," the prophet is assured, "they shall know that there has been a prophet among them" (v. 5). In other words the success of the prophet's mission is not whether the word of the Lord is heeded but whether it is spoken faithfully. This is a word the church of every age needs to hear. As the prophet of the Exile would declare on God's behalf so memorably, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;

it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish

that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which

I sent it (Isa 55:11)

### Pastoral Reflections

Today's gospel from Mark 6 tells the story of Jesus' return to his hometown, better known from Luke 4 as Jesus' inaugural sermon. Here, too, he astounds the crowd of homies with his teaching. These hometown folks can't help but wonder where this local "carpenter, the son of Mary" with all his brothers and sisters present right here with them, got this wisdom and power. "And they took offense at

him,” Mark says, meaning literally in Greek, they found him a *scandalon* or stumbling block.

But what really scandalized his hometown folks was Jesus’ flippant throwing in their face the old proverb, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house (v. 4).” Here we find Jesus both, in effect, assuming the prophetic mantle and flaunting it in the face of his old friends and family who assumed they knew him so well. And so, “amazed at their unbelief” Jesus shook off the dust of his feet against them where he “could do no deed of power” anyway (except the curing of a few sick people), and bid his disciples to go out and do likewise—which they did with some success.

I often wonder how the early church and its gospel writers found the courage to describe Jesus the great teacher and prophet so honestly as one who failed to convince so many of the truth of his teaching—including, often enough, his own disciples. At the very least those of us who have had our difficult moments in confirmation instruction and stabs at prophetic preaching here might find some consolation. Faithfulness to the prophetic word rather than success in creating a positive response is clearly God’s criterion.

This being the Fourth of July weekend provides the context to be reminded that true prophets always speak God’s word into the midst of the messy politics of their day. Try reminding folks, for example, of the famous words of Abraham Lincoln’s “Second Inaugural Address” spoken just weeks before his own assassination on Good Friday, 1865, where he invoked God’s mysterious will as a prophetic word that alone could cast perspective on the way ahead for an America that was still at

war with itself (e.g., see Ronald C. White Jr.’s, *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech*). Reading the same Bible and praying to the same God as both sides did, Lincoln admitted, only confused the matter. Yet, he promised, “The Almighty has his purposes” and “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Do you feel called to utter a prophetic word from God directed into the midst of the messiness of our contemporary world? Gird yourself and pluck up your courage, as William Sloane Coffin once warned us more timid word-bearers in his prophet-sounding adage, “Hell is truth seen too late” (*Credo*, [Louisville: Westminster, 2004], 53). Take courage from the assurance Paul testified to having received from God through his own “thorn in the flesh” that “my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9). And then wait for the fireworks!  
John Rollefson

## Lectionary 15/Seventh Sunday after Pentecost July 12, 2015

Amos 7:7–15

Psalm 85:8–13

Ephesians 1:3–14

Mark 6:14–29

*Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.*  
Psalm 85:10

### Engaging the Texts

A vision given Amos, an eighth-century prophet, was that of God standing beside a wall, plumb line in hand. This provided a vivid picture of God’s own sense of righteousness (also known as “justice” or simple “straightness/rightness”) by which



Israel's actions were to be measured and rectified. The history of God's chosen people was one rife with acts of "crookedness," that is, behaviors, decisions, and actions that had "fallen out of plumb" with God's expectations. Prophets of the ilk of Amos, (an alien farm worker with no prophetic pedigree), found wielding God's plumb line an onerous, unrewarding task. It meant incurring the accusation of Israel's religious establishment that he was at the heart of a conspiracy against the very king of Israel. Amaziah, a priest of the king's sanctuary in Bethel, spoke more truthfully than he knew, like countless spokespeople for establishment religion after him (including a certain high priest by the name of Caiphas), when he proclaimed of Amos, "the land is not able to bear all his words" (v. 10).

Today's gospel reading tells the story in flashback style of an Amos-come-lately of more than 800 years later who also dared to wield God's plumb line against those in power and was made to suffer for it. Some, it seems, were beginning to think of Jesus of Nazareth as a kind of John the Baptizer *redivivus*, for the same "powers" were detected as being "at work in him" as if he were a latter-day Elijah or another of the "prophets of old" (vss. 14–15). For conventional religionists of the day, prophets were believed to be a phenomenon of the past—and the farther in the past the better! King Herod led the way in jumping to the conclusion on hearing reports of Jesus that it could only mean, "John, whom I beheaded, has been raised" (v. 16).

Mark uses Herod's remark as a segue to narrate the details of a story both so sexy and gory that it has provided titillation not only to generations of Sunday school children but even has inspired the likes of Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss. Herod (also called "Antipas") here is not quite the

villain we expect in light of his "Great" father's notorious cruelty exhibited in the slaughter of the Bethlehem innocents as well as numerous others, as the historian Josephus catalogues his atrocities. Rather it is his former sister-in-law (whom he had married illicitly) who carried a grudge against John's wielding of God's plumb line against her marital shenanigans. And so she successfully connives to have her daughter so enthral Antipas with her wiles as a dancer that an otherwise reluctant king promises to grant her anything she might request. John's head on a platter turns out to be her mother's first choice. And so, through this lurid tale, we learn the story of John's grisly death which Mark concludes in an artful manner, eerily prefiguring the story of yet another politically motivated death soon to follow in his gospel narrative: "they came and took his body, and laid it in a tomb" (v. 29).

### Pastoral Reflections

The real prophetic conspiracy of which Amos, John, and Jesus, were a part, ("conspiracy" literally meaning "breathing together") is of God's inspiration ("breathing into"). The writer of Ephesians goes so far as to call it a "mystery," God's "plan for the fullness of time" (vss. 9–10) which subverts any and all establishment religion that assumes there can be such a thing as a "king's sanctuary" or a "temple of the kingdom" (Amos 7:9). Instead the "mystery" and "plan" God "has made known to us" is "set forth in Christ" as God's intention to "gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth." The Greek word *anakephalaiosastai* is not only a mouthful to pronounce but, as Dan Erlander has enthused in his book *Manna and Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise to Mend the Entire Creation* (1992, 77), it is an immensely rich

word that means not only “to gather up” as translated in the NRSV but also God’s uniting and bringing together the whole creation. God’s “mending of the cosmos” was Krister Stendahl’s favorite way of putting it—God’s *tikkun*, in Hebrew. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us” (v. 7) is Ephesians’ way of describing this “*oikonomian*” of God—God’s “economy” of salvation.

Few have put it better than the Danish writer Karen Blixen, known best by her pen name of Isak Dinesen. In the climactic scene of her short story, “Babette’s Feast,” she put these words into the mouth of one of her characters who is making a kind of banquet feast taking today’s psalmody as his text:

Mankind, my friends, is frail and foolish. We have all of us been told that

grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and short-sightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite.... But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude.... Grace takes us all to its bosom and proclaims general amnesty.

See! That which we have chosen is given us, and that which we have refused is, also and at the same time, granted us. Ay that which we have rejected is poured upon us abundantly. For mercy and truth have met together and righteousness and bliss have kissed one another” (*Anecdotes of Destiny*, [New York: Vintage, 1985], 60-61).

*John Rollefson*



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