

Emerging Values

The next generation is redefining spiritual formation, community, and mission.

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I snuck into pastoral ministry via the English department rather than the theology department. I wasn't planning on being a pastor, but you know how these things go.

There was a moment in graduate school (it was the late '70s) that I won't forget. Not the moment one of my freshman comp students (I had a teaching fellowship) told me he had trouble with spelling, so he wanted to turn in his composition assignments on cassette tape instead of on paper.

No, it was the moment I "got it" regarding a strange new school of literary theory, then associated with the terms "post-structuralism" and "deconstruction." A chill ran up my neck, and two thoughts seized me:

- 1. If this way of thinking catches on, the whole world will change.*
- 2. If this way of thinking catches on, the Christian faith as we know it is in a heap of trouble.*

I couldn't have articulated why these thoughts so gripped me back then, but my intuition was right, I think. I was "getting" some facet of what we now term "postmodernism," a way of thinking that has both continuities and discontinuities with the modernity from which it grows, in which it is rooted, and against which (perhaps like a teenager coming of age) it reacts.

Another moment came in the early '90s. I had left college teaching to pastor a church. A newcomer to our church, a spiritual seeker, highly educated, highly motivated, and highly skeptical of easy answers was asking tough questions, I was giving (thanks to C. S. Lewis, Francis Schaeffer, and Josh McDowell) my best apologetics-informed replies, and I wasn't getting through.

My linear Liar-Lunatic-or-Lord arguments, either-or propositions, and watertight belief system didn't enhance the credibility of the gospel for my new friend; rather, they made the gospel seem less credible, maybe even a little cheap and shallow.

Oh no, I thought. That way of thinking I encountered in grad school has caught on, and Christianity as I know it is in a heap of trouble.

Since then, I've grown less anxious and much more hopeful about the future as I've discovered how many opportunities arise along with the challenges of the emerging culture. (Modernity, after all, was no Sunday school picnic for the church.)

The way we traditionally expressed Christianity may be in trouble, but the future may hold new expressions of Christian faith every bit as effective, faithful, meaningful, and world-transforming as those we've known so far.

In recent years, as I've met, emailed, conversed, and conspired with many usually-younger ministers in the emerging culture, I've seen three themes—rivers, if you will—that seem to be shaping the contours of ministry. Are these radical,

threatening, and revisionist? Or are they continuous, harmonious, and resonant with our past? Perhaps they're a little of both.

The spiritual formation stream

Compare modern Christianity's quest for the perfect belief system to medieval church architecture. Christians in the emerging culture may look back on our doctrinal structures (statements of faith, systematic theologies) as we look back on medieval cathedrals: possessing a real beauty that should be preserved, but now largely vacant, not inhabited or used much anymore, more tourist attraction than holy place.

Many of us can't imagine this.

If Christianity isn't the quest for (or defense of) the perfect belief system ("the church of the last detail"), then what's left? In the emerging culture, I believe it will be "Christianity as a way of life," or "Christianity as a path of spiritual formation."

The switch suggests a change in the questions people are asking. Instead of "How can I be right in my belief so I can go to heaven?" the new question seems to be, "How can we live life to the full so God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven?"

Instead of "If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would spend eternity with God in heaven?" the new question seems to be, "If you live for another thirty years, what kind of person will you become?"

I'm not certain any postmodern churches exist quite yet. But even in modern churches we can feel a rising tension, a fomenting discontent: why aren't we making better disciples? Why aren't people becoming more holy, joyful, peaceful, content, and Christ-like?

Why, in a Christian subculture served by 24-hour Christian radio-TV, bathed in books and periodicals of unparalleled quality and quantity, instructed by a state-of-the-art seminary system, and inspired by a state-of-the-heart worship music industry ... why are so few of our good Christian people good Christians?

Why is Prozac needed by so many? Why are the most biblically-knowledgeable so often so mean-spirited? Why are our pastors dejected so often? Why do our speakers (both human and electronic) have to blare so loudly to get a response, and even then, why is the response so shallow or temporary?

That discontent may be the ending point for many of us, but it is the starting point for our brothers and sisters of the emerging culture. If Christianity doesn't bear fruit in a way or rhythm or pattern of life that yields Christ-likeness in real measure, they aren't interested. Being "saved" is suspect if people aren't being transformed.

That's why, I believe, we see such a resurgence of interest in Roman Catholic and Orthodox writers, especially pre-modern ones. To find this emphasis on the "renovation of the heart," we have to go back (with few exceptions), way back, to St. John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, Benedict, Ignatius, the Fathers. That's why good Baptists and Presbyterians find themselves signing up for spiritual direction at a local Catholic monastery.

In this setting, preaching both loses and gains status. Instead of an exercise in *transferring information* so that people have a coherent, well-formed "worldview" (often an upbeat name for "systematic theology"), preaching in the emerging culture aims at *inspiring transformation*. It is in a sense demoted from the center of public worship, bookended by bumper music. It steps down from its pedestal to join singing, the Lord's Supper, prayer, silence, and recitation as one formative ritual or practice among many.

This apparent demotion can actually be a promotion: preaching becomes less and less a well-reasoned argument, and more and more a shared practice among preacher and hearers, in which the Word runs among us like rivulets across a meadow after rain, nourishing fresh green life to spring up. The preacher becomes the leader of a kind of group meditation, less scholar and more sage, less lecturer and more poet, prophet, priest.

In this new context, I believe we will see a new kind of religious professional arise: the liturgist, the artist who weaves threads both ancient and contemporary, creating a textured fabric in which people experience both the exuberant rejoicing of the charismatic and the profound quietness of the contemplative, along with the attentive desire to learn (perhaps most characteristic of evangelicals?) that lies between.

Like a symphony conductor, the liturgist will, I believe, transform public worship from a weekly show or lecture to a weekly experience of group spiritual formation.

In my hopeful moments, I see this new emphasis on spiritual formation as making possible a convergence. What we might call post-evangelicals and post-liberals begin finding one another on this common ground of spiritual formation, welcomed and hosted by our Catholic and Orthodox sisters and brothers. What is *terra nova* for us has been their native soil for a long, long time.

The river of authentic community

Lesslie Newbigin, British missionary to India, may turn out to be one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century and one of the most important guides for innovative Christian leaders in the twenty-first. He was fond of reminding us that Jesus never wrote a book or established a school. Rather, his legacy was a community. The greatest hermeneutic of the gospel, he would say, is *a community that seeks to live by it*. (See [*The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*](#), Eerdmans, 1990, or *The Open Secret*, Eerdmans, 1995.)

I'm not surprised that megachurches developed in late modernity. In a culture that believed secular science and secular government could solve most of our problems, a culture that assumed religion in general and the church in particular were declining industries, it made sense that Christians would find comfort and confidence in large herds.

"See? We're significant! We're big and strong!" our large numbers said to an unbelieving culture that tried to dismiss us. (I am not "against" megachurches. They have and will have many advantages, but ironically, their size may become an increasing disadvantage.)

What happens when the climate changes, when "post-secular" is an accepted term to describe our times, when ivory tower intellectuals join pierced-and-tattooed teenagers in saying, "I'm not religious, but I *am* spiritual"?

Now large numbers become less important: quantity of people becomes less important than quality of relationships. So the "church growth" of the '80s and '90s has given way to the quest for community. This quest is essential, but it's also risky and hard.

Wendell Berry describes how communities around the world are destroyed by the proliferation of "publics" (governments, corporations) that appeal to the self-interest of individuals—see [*Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community*](#) (Pantheon, 1994). In their lust for votes and sales, publics undermine the virtues needed to sustain community while inflaming the vices that tear community apart.

Consider the car dealer who successfully uses a woman's sexy legs to sell cars, and simultaneously weakens thousands of marriages by adding one more straw to the tired back of men's sexual fidelity. Those straws add up.

In this tough situation, the church seeks to build a kind of miraculous community of virtue, a community not based on race, culture, status, wealth, or even religious background, but rather a community convened in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Who else is building community in this world of expanding publics and self-interested individuals? The church is, in more and more places, the only community-builder left in town. Sadly, too many churches function more like publics, sucking people out of their neighborhoods into church activities that isolate believer from neighbor and frustrate Jesus' prayer that his followers would remain *in* the world.

But the quest for community itself can also beguile with a dangerous idealism. In [*Life Together*](#), Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the danger of "wish dreams," where my ideal of Christian community makes me hate the brother who frustrates the achievement of my ideal because he talks too much, talks too little, is too rude or too polite or whatever.

Similarly, the ideal of community itself can become a commodity that people want to experience, much as they would experience Disney World, simply by showing up. It's hard to imagine a more depressing place than a room with a few hundred people who showed up expecting community to happen to them.

So, this quest for community challenges us not to seek community as a commodity, but rather to pursue love (which is patient, kind, not rude, etc.) as a practice, which yields community as a byproduct. We're working against a lot in the quest—not only our native selfishness and surliness, but also massive systemic problems, like these:

1. *Our dependence on automobiles* which isolate us in little glass and metal boxes, transporting us from the glass and concrete boxes of our workplaces, shopping malls, and church buildings to the glass and gypsum boxes of our homes, where we watch the world happen in the plastic and silicon boxes we call TV sets and computer screens. This auto-dependency turns neighborhoods into bedroom communities (an oxymoron), so we sleep, not in communities, but in housing developments. Front porches are gone; back decks have replaced them. Nobody walks down the streets

anymore, or if they do, they're too preoccupied on their cell phones to wave and say hi to a neighbor, much less slow down and sit a spell.

2. *Our manic pace of life* that wants community, but fast, like French fries, and without the grease.

3. *Our transience*, which means right about the time we, against all odds, get close to a circle of friends, half of them will up and move away.

It's no surprise that in this fragmented world, community becomes a higher value, even though it is so darned hard to achieve and sustain. It's no surprise that interest in house churches increases in these times, where the shared life of a few is so important that even bothering with public worship is optional.

Throwing a small-groups program at this hunger for community is like feeding an elephant Cheerios, one by one. What's needed is a profound reorganization of our way of life, not a squeeze-another-hour-for-"community" into the week.

Of course, maybe a little programmed community is better than nothing, but I expect that this thirst for community will lead to a lot of experimentation in the years ahead. Perhaps many of our churches will become more like Catholic churches in the past, where the ideal parish had a few households where monks or nuns lived in community, practicing radical hospitality that would overflow to the community at large.

Perhaps we'll find that if even a few people in our churches practice this radical hospitality and generous community, their extraordinary fervency will warm us all and model new ways of life for us manic, transient, auto-driven denizens of bedroom non-communities. Or perhaps what we now call small groups will morph more and more into house churches, drawing us into truer life together.

Whatever new and varied forms our search for community takes will require new and varied forms of leadership. I expect that leader-as-CEO, leader-as-scholar, leader-as-therapist, and leader-as-hero/martyr will give way to less dominant styles of leadership, less dominant but no less important. Less like the man behind the curtain in *The Wizard of Oz*, and more like young Dorothy, community leaders in the emerging culture will increasingly resemble the lead seeker in a journey, not possessing all the answers, but possessing a contagious passion to find a way home—and to bring others along in our common search for love, courage, wisdom, and home.

The missional current

I thought the word "missional" was awkward when I first heard it. My spell-checker still tries to correct it. But the word is here to stay, subsuming and replacing more familiar adjectives like missionary, evangelistic, and socially active. *Mission* in this sense includes *missions*, and more. It brings together evangelism and social action, "home" and "foreign." It integrates Christian concerns that range from racial reconciliation to ecological stewardship, doing good works and doing our daily work with goodness (which is an underrated fruit of the Spirit).

Old categories merge in what I believe is a radical shift in our theology, from a system in which "missions" is one department of theology, to a new place where theology is one department of mission.

I was once talking with Dallas Willard about Islam. He dropped this little thought virus: "Remember, Brian, in a pluralistic world, a religion is valued by the benefits it brings to its non-adherents." The virus has taken hold in my thinking, bringing to mind sayings of our Lord, like "the birds of the air" nesting in the branches of the kingdom of God, people seeing the light of our good deeds and "glorifying your Father in heaven," "by their fruits you will know them."

How different is this missional approach to the "rhetoric of exclusion" that worked so well in modernity: "There are blessings to being on the inside. You're on the outside and so can't enjoy them. Want to be a blessed insider like us?"

In contrast, missional Christianity says, "God is expressing his love to all outsiders through our acts of kindness and service. You're invited to leave your life of accumulation and competition and self-centeredness to join us in this mission of love, blessing, and peace. Want to join in the mission?"

I live in the Middle Atlantic region. Our landscape has been carved and nourished by three great rivers: the Potomac, the Susquehanna, and the Delaware. If you moved here from the Mississippi Delta, or the Sonora Desert, or the Los Angeles Basin, you'd feel the difference of our topography, even if you didn't know about the three rivers that give our land its contours.

If you're exploring the emerging culture, all you learn about these three rivers—spiritual formation, community formation, and missional action—will help you find your bearings, settle down, and feel at home.

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Books on Emerging Values

For insights on the postmodern transition:

[*Ancient-Future Faith*](#) by Robert Webber (Baker, 1999)

[*The Younger Evangelicals*](#) by Robert Webber (Baker, 2002)

[*The End of the World as We Know It*](#) by Chuck Smith, Jr. (Waterbrook, 2001)

[*A New Kind of Christian*](#) by Brian McLaren (Jossey-Bass, 2001)

For examples of an apologetic for the emerging culture:

[*Blue Like Jazz*](#) by Don Miller (Thomas Nelson, 2003)

[*Finding Faith*](#) by Brian McLaren (Zondervan, 1999).

Two profiles of the emerging church:

[*The Emerging Church*](#) by Dan Kimball (Emergent/YS, 2003)

[*The Church on the Other Side*](#) by Brian McLaren (Zondervan, 1998, 2000).

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