

EMERGE or SUBMERGE

Is “cultural relevance” an effective and theologically sound wineskin for the emergent church
or is it moving Christianity toward oblivion?

By Dave Livermore, Ph.D.

I remember right where I was sitting. The 5 of us gathered in the coffee shop were the executive team of Sonlife Ministries. We were in the midst of hammering through an evolving manifesto intended to shape the future of Sonlife. We reaffirmed our new mission statement and it was time to declare our core values as a ministry. It was an invigorating discussion as we described the way our values would be what would make or break us. We had some rich debate over whether to use Christological versus theological, discipleship versus discipling, and so on as we deliberated over these most important issues for the future of Sonlife. But all in all, we had wide agreement in articulating the values we knew were latent within us and were now being pounded out on paper. Soon into this process, I suggested “Cultural Relevance” as an important addition to the list we were compiling. I knew it was nearly stating the obvious among a group of friends who have given our lives to ministering to the emerging generation and to engaging the church with culture. And I received nods and affirmation from everyone except my friend Luke. In fact, not only did Luke not give nodding ascent, he went into a fifteen-minute diatribe on why “cultural relevance” wasn’t one of the values to which he wanted to tie his line for the future.

At first I thought he just needed another shot of espresso. I mean as much as Luke has been a mentor to me for several years, there was no way he was going to talk me out of the essential role of cultural relevance for effective ministry. In fact, for a second I was having a *deja vu* with my days growing up in fundamentalism. The ills of attending movies, using playing cards, and listening to rock music were all flashing in front of me as I remembered the countless messages on “Flee the world”! Worse yet, I’ve given countless hours over the last few years exposing the colonialist insensitivities of so many Western missions endeavors. The importance of cultural relevance isn’t something I had just thrown into our discussion on a whim. I have invested all kinds of energy in trying to understand why it’s so important to study culture and engage it accordingly. So I initially concluded this was just one of those areas where I would have to “agree to disagree” with Luke. But his passion and resolve to talk this through started me down the road of rethinking my position on “cultural relevance.” And here I am more than a year later, still meandering over whether or not cultural relevance is an appropriate value for effective ministry.

Clearly I wasn’t the one going out on a limb in suggesting “Cultural Relevance” as a core value. You don’t have to look far to find endless numbers of documents from emergent ministries that site “cultural relevance” as one of their core values. In fact, google “cultural relevance/church” and you get something like 185,000 results in .28 seconds. Change the terms to “cultural relevance/youth ministry” and there are 156,000 results in .19 seconds. Okay—so that’s not exactly scholarly research but I don’t think any of us need much statistical data to know that “cultural relevance” is a driving value in youth ministry, the emergent movement, and the American evangelical movement as a whole.

How am I using the term “cultural relevance”? Mittelberg’s (2000) use of the term in his book *Building a Contagious Church*, is similar to how “cultural relevance” is used throughout mainstream evangelicalism. In describing a church service for Gen Xers, Middleburg writes,

I walked into a crowded gymnasium. I was handed a bag of popcorn on the way in, along with a program that said “Axis at the Movies.” The atmosphere was dark, noisy, energetic, and filled with edgy music pouring through the high-powered sound system. Soon the stage lights came on and the music kicked in at an even higher decibel level for the portion of the service labeled in the program, “Band Jam.” In fast-moving sequence, youthful men and women stood up front and greeted us, led us in a few upbeat worship songs, performed a true-to-life drama, and showed clips from the recent movie “The X-Files.” Then a casually dressed teacher got up and presented an honest, hard-hitting message about how we can all search for truth – and find it – in the Bible and ultimately in Christ Himself.

It was one of the most **relevant** events I’d ever seen.

Why? Because this was a ministry designed to reach people in their 20s – from Gen-X – who grew up with these kinds of media and communications, and who needed to hear biblical teachings in language they could understand.

Relevancy is a relative concept. Different audiences, different events. Both well designed for the people they were intended to reach, and for the intensity-level of evangelism they were trying to execute. The message didn’t change, but the methods certainly did.

It’s the basic missionary principle of contextualization. **As our church puts it in our list of core values: “We believe that the church should be culturally relevant while remaining doctrinally pure”** (p. 344).

Cultural relevance, as I’m using it, is simply learning the cultural realities of the contexts where we minister and mirroring those cultural threads in our ministries. When we embrace “cultural-relevance”, we take on a Mittelberg-like assumption that says “We offer a timeless, transferable message with relevant methods”. My interest is in exploring the theological and sociological validity of embracing cultural relevancy for effective ministry to the emerging generation in the church. In order to explore this, I’ve used three case studies—The evangelical church at large throughout the U.S., the evangelical church in China, and the so-called “emergent church” in the U.S. These case studies are broad, however I wanted to examine these larger movements as a way to gain understanding on how emerging ministries should treat the issue of cultural relevance. I have provided analysis of each movement and have concluded with some suggestions for emergent ministries as it pertains to cultural relevance.

MAKING A CASE FOR “RELEVANCE”—The Evangelical Church in the United States

Never before in the history of the church have we had more “relevant” Christian products and programs than what exists in the U.S. today. We have Christian music, movies, mints, t-shirts (Argue & Livermore, 2004), belt-buckles, art, journals, phone books, novels, websites, videos, pens, candy bars, magazines, camps, resorts, coffee shops, schools, political groups, radio

and TV stations... Need I go on? If yes—open up the “Christian yellow pages” where you can find your Christian physician who can refer you to a Christian weight-loss program or a Christian aerobics group or a Christian retreat Center. Okay, I’ll stop. Oh wait! Just let me share a few more. Have you seen the key chains that say “Got Jesus?” or the stuffed ducks wearing rain gear labeled “Showers of Blessings”? (Wittmer 2004, p. 67). Hey—I live in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I could share 20 more pages of examples but I promise I’ll move on for now.

Clearly we have resources for “cultural relevance” unlike any generation of the church before us. We appear to be quite at home in the culture around us. In fact, of all the religious followers in the U.S., Christians tend to be the quickest to jump on whatever cultural fad has most recently hit mainstream culture (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989).

Our embodiment of the American culture in which we live is not limited to products and Christian resources. Ideologically, American culture has shaped the lives of most evangelical Christians and our churches every bit as much and more as non-evangelicals and their institutions of faith. This is seen in three dominant threads that run throughout American culture—Individualism, Isolationism, and Consumerism. All three threads are ubiquitous throughout our evangelical churches. Consider each of these for a moment in light of their presence in mainstream culture and the evangelical church alike.

Individualism

“Have it your way!” That’s the mantra of the “me culture” in which we live. The importance of the individual is a foundational value of our American, capitalistic heritage. We were founded as a republic that was formed in reaction against socialism gone awry. As a result, Americans are driven by the attitude that says, “I’ll think what I want, do what I want, go where I want, and be responsible to no one but myself”. In fact, the American dream of the 21st Century is less characterized by the 4-bedroom home with a white picket fence, a mini-van, and 2.5 kids. The American dream has become getting to a place where you get to do whatever you want without the bother of anything you don’t want to do.

Individualism has crept into the church where the average believer is most interested in their personal needs and personal formation at the expense of what’s best for the community. Personal devotions, personal retreats, personal purpose and life plans, and personal gift assessments are at the core of what happens under the name of “discipleship” in most American evangelical churches. Personal commitment is an obvious need in our following of Jesus however our American world of individualism has secularized our following away from a sense of following in community with others (Argue & Livermore, 2002). “Americans practice their faith in ways so personal and individualistic that their practices blend seamlessly into the culture around them” (Wolf 2003).

Communion is taken individualistically, programs are set up with the individual in mind, and evangelism, formation, and service are all tailored around individuals rather than around the shared needs and gifts of the local church community as a whole. Sermon applications most often refer to individual assimilation of the moral from the text rather than also including communal assimilation. Clearly the American cultural ideal of individualism is pervasive in American Christianity.

Isolationism

Closely related to our individualism as Americans is our isolationism. We haven't always been isolated though. For the first two-thirds of the 20th Century, American life was characterized by ever-deepened engagement by people in the life of their communities. Club meetings, bowling leagues, poker game nights, Kiwanis groups, religious gatherings, and sports leagues had continual growth through the 1960's. However, "Silently, without warning—that tide reversed and we were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities over the last third of the century" (Putnam 2000, p. 27).

Our modern buildings and sprawling suburbs have come at the expense of relationships. We work so hard at manicuring our yards, which sit on ever-widening boulevards. Our 2-3 vehicles allow us to shop where we want and work where we want and "best" of all, we can drive them into our remote controlled garages without having to ever stop to talk to the passing neighbor (Blakely and Snyder, 1999). It wasn't too long ago that most Americans had one primary circle of relationships. Within that circle, several networks of relationships overlapped—extended families remained in the same communities, people worked with fellow church-members, who shopped at the same stores and attended the same sporting events. Today, the Average American family has several circles of relationships—the kids' school friends, mom's work friends, dad's work friends, extended family scattered around the nation and world, church friends, neighborhood friends, etc. As a result, life in the suburbs becomes rather lonely and fragmented (Putnam 2000).

Again, there is little notable difference in the fragmented, isolated lives of American evangelicals and their neighbors. Church members have moved to the suburbs along with their fellow citizens. Evangelical churches gravitate away from starting or staying in urban areas and locate themselves in or beyond the suburbs, where land is cheap. The former farmland can be transformed into sprawling mall-like structures offering "advantages" like safe streets, low taxes, and "affordable" homes and church buildings for parishioners. But for exactly the same reasons that make it affordable, the "exurban frontier" does not offer many accessible public spaces where churches can live in community much less evangelize others into their communities of faith. (Wolf 2003, 202).

Media critic, Quentin Schultze (2004), contends that the Christian music industry has further perpetuated individualism and isolationism. Schultze believes Christian music tours have taken church pastoring away from the world of local, personal relationships, premised on trust and familiarity, and into the impersonal world of entertainment, characterized by the market-driven terms of production and consumer choice. These are just a few of the ways isolationism is embraced and expressed in most evangelical churches.

Consumerism

Individualism and isolationism are closely related a third thread which is pervasive in both American culture and in the evangelical church—Consumerism. The driving premise of consumerism is “rights over responsibility”. Consumerism promotes the ills of individualism and isolationism because it leads us to a preoccupation of defending our property and rights with indifference to the poor and needy (Webber 2003).

Consumerism drives us to demand more, more, more. Few things demonstrate our obsession with “stuff” more than the self-storage industry. While the average American home has doubled in square footage over the past 25 years, a billion square feet of America has been committed to storing things that won’t fit in our homes. Self-storage is a 13 billion dollar industry in the United States; that’s more than the sum total of the music industry in the U.S. The owner of Epic Group, a self-storage business in Ventura County, California speaks from personal experience. He rented a unit to hold his daughter’s Barbie dolls and toy horses after she left home to attend Stanford University. “She wouldn’t take them. And they have sentimental value,” he said (Cason 2001).

Consumerism is alive and “well” in churches too. In fact, it’s been said that a thumbnail sketch of Church history can be synthesized as follows: The church began in Jerusalem as “Mission.” It moved to Rome and became “Institution.” From there it found it’s home in Europe as “Culture”; and it crossed the Atlantic and became “Big Business” (Webber, R., personal conversation, 03 October 2003). Do a little ethnography of your own in this area by wandering through the exhibit hall at the next Youth Specialties convention or by loitering in a Christian bookstore. Consumerism doesn’t show any signs of waning influence.

Of course Christian t-shirts and mints are the least of how consumerism has shaped American evangelicalism. Economically, evangelicals consume along with the rest of their fellow citizens. In fact, evangelicals have the highest rates of upward mobility of all religious believers in the United States (Wolf 2003). In addition, most evangelical churches are building “bigger and better” buildings and offering more and more programs and options to meet the demands of the isolated individuals in their midst. Options rule! The church with the most customized offerings “grows” the fastest. And when it fails to give its consumers what they want, they think nothing of leaving and consuming at the local church around the corner.

Secular sociologist, Alan Wolf of Boston University, believes the infusion of consumerism in the American evangelical movement helps to explain the unprecedented success of simplistic books like *The Prayer of Jabez*. Wolf writes, “What is offered in Wilkinson’s book is a conception of religion so narcissist that it makes prosperity theology look demanding by contrast...One searches this exceptionally thin book in vain for any statement indicating that Christian prayer is an act of sacrifice. In Wilkinson’s form of Christianity, you get far more than you give” (p. 33).

Consumerism has also shaped evangelical churches in more subtle ways. Consumerism seems to be a major predictor in causing American evangelical churches to lower the bar for how they call people to follow Jesus. The church has toned down its hellfire preaching in favor of more culturally relevant messages that tap into the consumerist ideals of its members. This is done in an attempt to meet people where they are; but are we taking them anywhere once we “meet” them there?

More Americans than ever before call themselves born-again Christians, but the lord to whom they turn rarely gets angry and frequently strengthens their self-esteem. Wolf (2003) writes,

Traditional forms of worship, from reliance on organ music to the mysteries of liturgy, have given way to audience participation and contemporary tastes. Some believers are anxious to witness their faith to others, but they tend to avoid methods that would make them seem unfriendly or invasive. If Jonathan Edwards were alive and well, he would likely be appalled; far from living in a world elsewhere, the faithful in the United States are remarkably like everyone else" (p. 3).

Consumerism, like Individualism and Isolationism, reigns in the American Evangelical Church. As a whole, American evangelicals mirror their neighbors in their spending habits, their recreational choices, their dreams about retirement, and their demands to have their needs met.

Summing up The Evangelical Church in the United States

The predominance of individualism, isolationism, and consumerism in American evangelicalism demonstrates our relative "success" with having achieved cultural relevance in the church. Mittelburg (2000) lauds the value of the culturally-relevant, dark, noisy, energetic fast-paced service he experienced, In contrast, Wolf (2003), who acknowledges he's not a professing Christian writes, "Watching sermons reduced to PowerPoint presentations or listening to one easily forgettable praise song after another makes one long for an evangelical willing to stand up, Luther-like, and proclaim his opposition to the latest survey of evangelical taste" (p. 257). Evangelicalism's problem is its strong "desire to copy the culture of hotel chains and popular music that it loses what religious distinctiveness it once had" (Wolf 2003, p. 257).

Notice how Wolf describes his experiences at Willow Creek and Saddleback while he was conducting his research on American evangelicalism. He writes,

Willow Creek...displays no cross on it's building, but that does not mean it lacks one. "We do have a cross," as a tour guide explained. "We bring it out for special occasions, like baptism." This openly strategic way of thinking about religious identity is common in evangelical circles; one survey of mega-churches found that more than half of them refrain from placing religious symbols in prominent places. (pp. 114-15).

Rick Warren...does not come close to even mentioning hell. On the day I heard him in the summer of 2002, Warren was in top form; he is without doubt one of the most captivating public speakers to whom I have ever listened. Addressing himself directly to the question of sin, which he prefers to call temptation, Pastor Rick begins by pointing out that..."Too much self-discipline can be a bad thing". (166)

Wolf's (2003) concluding assessment of the evangelical landscape in the U.S. is that while we are a movement of people who believe in a supernatural creator, there is little we do that appears very supernatural. We blend into the modern American landscape. We live in the suburbs, send our children to four-year liberal arts colleges, work in professional capacities, enjoy contemporary music, shop in malls, raise confused and uncertain children, and we relate

primarily to people with whom we share common interests". Churches end up competing to be relevant rather than striving to be missional.

The obsession of the American evangelical church with "cultural relevance" is symbiotically related to the role of pragmatism in mainstream, evangelical churches. The starting point for most contemporary churches has been, "What works?" This is evident in looking at who is leading the prominent churches in the movement. "The central figures [are] no longer the scholars who had been prominent in the immediate post-war years but rather a host of managers, planners, and bureaucrats—and not far behind them, marketers. This new set of leaders view growing a church, or for that matter, any Christian ministry as essentially no different from growing a business" (Wells 1994, p. 71).

Pragmatism, efficiency, and effectiveness have been the hallmarks of doing church in the 80's and 90's. "What's right? What's true?" Those questions seem to be "assumed" at best and at least subconsciously, are deemed irrelevant. In his book, *Dining with the Devil*, Guinness (1994) writes, "Today theology is rarely more than marginal in the church-growth movement at the popular level. Discussion of the traditional marks of the church is virtually non-existent. Instead, methodology is at the center and is in control" (p. 26).

So what if we assume the validity of the pragmatist's starting point for a second. If we were to evaluate the American evangelical church over the last 25-30 years on her own terms of pragmatism, has cultural relevance worked? How effectively have our seeker sensitive, non-offensive, shopping mall like approaches to the Gospel, complete with cool music and movie clips been in effectively calling people to follow Jesus? Statistics demonstrate it's not been a very effective strategy. That's the short answer.

The evangelical church has had little lasting impact upon American culture. Instead, the philosophy, methods, and style of the secular culture have invaded the Christian Church. "Rather than adjusting the secular culture, the grand evangelical experiment in cultural relevance has produced a Christian culture that is virtually identical with secular culture. Many churches are businesses. Their pastors are CEO's. The worship services offer entertainment....A Christian ghetto has been produced. While Jesus told his church to be in the world not of it, the culturally relevant evangelical is *of it but not in it*" (Matzat 1998).

Here's a more daunting finding that's quantitative in nature—There isn't a single county in the United States with any higher percentage of Christ-followers today than there was 25 years ago (Barrett, Kurian, & Johnson eds. 2001). Clearly the results of "cultural relevance" aren't impressive. It would be overly simplistic to suggest "cultural relevance" alone is the cause of Christianity's decline in the United States. However, clearly our obsession with cultural relevance should be in question!

Lest I come off as saying everything that's happened in our evangelical churches the last 30 years was a waste, that's not my sentiment at all. Clearly God has done some marvelous things in and through us, and often despite us. My friend Bill Clem talks about "spiritual alchemy", the process whereby God turns "lead" into "gold". Much of the culturally driven ministry that's occurred over the last several years has produced some God-honoring results. My interest is not in undermining the noble attempts of some men and women of faith. Instead, how we can

more effectively embody Christ's presence through our churches rather than simply allowing the ends to justify the means.

MAKING A CASE "AGAINST" RELEVANCE—The Chinese Christian Church

Travel with me to the largest country in the world—China. Christians are reported to have first entered China in 635 AD along the Silk Road that connects Jerusalem and China. Some records suggest the Gospel may have entered China via travelers on this road just decades after Christ's death. The church established in 635 by Nestorian Christians was established primarily among foreign groups rather than Chinese. As a result of their irrelevance, the Christian influence waxed and waned and was nearly absent for several centuries (Yun, 2002).

Protestant missionaries followed the Western trade and imperialism boats to China in the mid-19th Century. J. Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission in 1865 and began to establish churches and hospitals. By 1949, there were about 20,000 Protestant churches with over a million members in China, however the church was largely irrelevant and not accepted as an indigenous faith. Soon thereafter, all the Christian missionaries left because of the Cultural Revolution (Taylor, 1971).

When the churches began to open in 1979, it was discovered, even to the Chinese Christians' amazement, that there were at least 6 million Christians. God's Spirit moved among these churches and they were truly "Chinese" in the flavor of their worship, discipleship, evangelism and leadership structures. Given the restrictions of the Chinese government, nearly all the churches in China are heavily indigenous. Thousands of Chinese, young and old, continue to turn to Christ daily. So while my examination of the Chinese Church was supposed to be a case "against" cultural relevance, perhaps this lends more support FOR relevance than AGAINST it. But is an indigenous church synonymous with cultural relevance? Perhaps it depends upon how you define the terms. At the very least however, the Chinese Church gives us a picture of a paradox—an indigenous church that's not all that "culturally relevant."

Let me explain my reason for contending that the Chinese Church isn't all that relevant. China is the home of yin and yang and other concepts and practices admired by New Agers. This nation has been steeped for thousands of years in non-Christian religion and then mercilessly indoctrinated into atheism. Meanwhile, millions of Chinese have been called by the Chinese Christian Church to turn their backs on most of what pervades their culture.

The Chinese government separates Christian parents from their children. The government indoctrinates the Christians' children in Taoism and atheism. These children are taught that their parents are "negligent and abusive" parents as evidenced by their faith in Jesus. Pastors are told to teach the Bible in a way that makes it subservient to the government. However, parents and pastors persist in their faith; and the countercultural, Chinese church continues to grow.

Brother Yun (2002), a key leader among the house church movement in China, has been in and out of prison for the last twenty years for his bold, rebellious faith. Yun calls his fellow church members to live as resident aliens (1 Peter 2.11) whose hope is not in the here and now but in what lies ahead. This doesn't seem like a very effective "church growth" strategy at face value.

So what if we ask the pragmatists' question in response to the lack of cultural relevancy in the Chinese Church. Has it worked?

Nobody really knows how many Christians there are in China. Accurate statistics are hard to come by. However, Chinese Christ followers are thought to number 80 million. Some researchers put the figure at 100 million. In the face of sometimes terrifying government opposition, and culturally irrelevant lifestyles, people are committing themselves to a spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ at a rate averaging about 28,000 new converts a day (Barrett et. al., 2001).

The story is told of a pastor in a mountainous region of China who was imprisoned for 23 years. While in prison, he prayed for the 170 Christ followers in the country where he was from, even though he had no news of them. When he was released in 1986, he asked his son about them and was told that there were now 5000. He conducted a survey, which verified this figure. He resumed his labors, and two and a half years later there were 56,000 believers out of a population of 60,000 (Hails).

The phenomenal growth of the Chinese Church can be traced primarily to God's sovereign grace. Chinese church leaders will be the first to tell you their growth as a national church lies only in the supernatural work of God in their midst. They're quick to acknowledge the many weaknesses of their churches. By no means am I trying to set up the Chinese Church as the model we should all emulate. I find it interesting however, that when pressed to describe the contributing factors God has used to grow the Chinese church, Chinese believers point to the following predictors—the quality of life shown by Christians amidst adversity, the emphasis on prayer, the effect of miraculous healings, and the zeal for evangelism (Hails). Nowhere is there any mention of the desire to be culturally relevant and it's role in their growth as a movement.

As I already mentioned, the Chinese church has seen its greatest growth as its become most indigenously Chinese so in that way, it doesn't seem much like a case against relevance. Clearly there's an element of contextualization and relevance that must be factored into their growth. But there's much about the Chinese Church that remains a living example of cultural "Irrelevance", or perhaps better put—as an indigenous countercultural movement of God's People who instead are forming a kingdom-culture rather than simply mirroring their mainstream culture. Indigenous expressions of God's people that embody Jesus in a contextually understandable way must happen; but we must choose carefully which cultural realities to protest and which to embrace as we form a kingdom-oriented culture through the Church.

AN EMERGING CASE—The Emergent Church in the U.S.

So how does the emergent movement fair in this issue of cultural relevance? Is their quest for relevance rooted in a desire to be a "relevant" countercultural community that embodies Christ's presence? Or is it just another form of what the evangelical church has been for the last 30 years wherein we simply mimic American culture in "Christian forms." There are several problems with my question. For one thing, it's way too soon to answer this question. Furthermore, emergent churches are so divergent from one another. There's not yet any single church that is seen as the model emergent church like Willow and Saddleback have been for the seeker movement.

At the same time, it's helpful to explore how the emergent church is handling the issue of cultural relevance. A *Christianity Today* reader asserts that the emergent movement is just another expression of the evangelical church described earlier in this paper. Dave Fleming writes, "I agree that much of what is called 'emergent' is just the same ol' evangelical trailer with new siding. A marketing strategy, if you will, to reach a new 'target'. Much of what is occurring at the grass roots in churches...is an infatuation with cultural relevancy" ("Readers..." 2004).

It's hard to find a book about the emergent church with any more popularity than Kimball's book, *The Emerging Church*. It's easy to be endeared to Kimball's heart for the young adults to whom he ministers. He demonstrates a good grasp of postmodern thought but seems more compelled to love and serve those in his ministry rather than to engage in endless philosophical debate.

What has often intrigued me however, is that so many leaders who clearly come from the first case study, the mainstream evangelical church, seem really excited about Kimball's book. Perhaps this is because a significant part of the book focuses on worship, a primary area of focus for the seeker-sensitive church leader. Kimball gives ideas on multisensory worship, use of sacred space, and inclusion of symbolism and the arts in a way that has a "vintage-faith feel" (p. 134).

To some degree, I fear Kimball takes the same pragmatic-type of approach that has driven the mainstream evangelical movement. Countless seeker-sensitive churches have begun marketing towards "postmoderns" by creating services specifically for them. This is exactly how Kimball's ministry, Graceland, began. Drawing in 20-somethings through the use of candles, art, and poetic form is not enough to serve the countercultural calling we've been given.

What about emergent groups like Relevant, publisher of *Relevant Magazine*. Relevant publishes books, like Kary Oberbrunner's (2004) book, *The Journey toward Relevance*. Oberbrunner writes, "You want to be relevant. There is no alternative. Irrelevancy is not an option. When has being obsolete, archaic, or ineffective ever been a viable choice?" (p. 12). The assumption of Relevant and their resources appears to be that cultural relevance is a given. It's just a matter of how to flesh that out.

In similar fashion, Rogier Bos (1998), founding editor of *Next Wave of the Ooze* writes an article where he considers what a church for TV personalities Dharma and Greg might look like. Bos writes, "So what kind of church do postmodern people need? What style of ministry is going to be effective in reaching a postmodern people? Where will Dharma and Greg feel at home? What type of church will speak a message that they can understand, and that will appeal to them." These questions have value but they begin at the same pragmatic starting point that has been ubiquitous in the American evangelical church for the last 30 years. Starting there is certain to continue our bathos place in culture.

Bos' continues with speculating about the Early Church. He writes, "I often wonder about the first Christians. They formed a church unencumbered by historical forms and traditions." Really?! I don't think so. The first Jewish believers saw themselves as a reform movement within Judaism. "They retained many Jewish beliefs and practices and quickly spread to distant regions of the Roman Empire...It is not surprising that Peter and John went to the temple at the

“hour of prayer” (Acts 3.1), taught and preached in its precincts (Acts 2.46; 3.8; 5.20-21, 42; Luke 24.53) and continued to live as Jews in every way” (Patzia 2001, pp 187-88).

Bos goes on to state, “With the memory of Jesus’ words and life so fresh in their minds, and with theological giants like Paul and Peter in their presence, they experienced a level of ecclesiological purity that we probably have never seen again”. Again, I must differ with Bos’ assumptions here. This “big bang theory of church origins” is a myth that has been exposed by many credible New Testament scholars (Wright 1992). “For those who wish to ‘get back to the New Testament Church,’ who feel that the first church is somehow better, more pure, and the like, I propose that there was no normative church in the first century” (Patzia 2001, p. 14).

Finally, Bos concludes, “Where the [Early Church’s] ecclesiological understanding didn’t direct them, they were free to create new forms and traditions as they saw fit, and probably as their culture inspired them. Thus they became a church that had a **tremendous appeal to the world that was relevant**, and, in time, subsumed the whole Roman Empire.” Yeah right! Take a look at Rome or Ephesus in the 1st Century. How did the emperor worship and the crucifixion of believers who refused to bow to an emperor inspire them to create relevant, cutting-edge forms to draw in other would-be martyrs? Was relevance really at the core of the First Century Church’s revolutionary impact?

Again, there’s clearly a tension here. I would agree that the 1st Century Churches took on the indigenous flavor of their cultures to some degree. The Jerusalem church looked very different from the Roman Church and that was largely due to appropriate contextualization or what some might be referring to as cultural relevance. But we have not been called first and foremost to embrace and emulate culture. We have been called to transform culture with the power of Christ and to form a kingdom culture (Niebuhr 1951). If the emergent movement follows the obsession with cultural relevance, I have little hope for its transformational impact on local communities, much less the world.

There are some clear examples of emergent churches that are charting a different course by being countercultural, such as Imago Dei Church in Portland, Oregon. Rick McKinley, founder and pastor of Imago Dei asserts that the demise of the Western church lies in our misunderstanding of the Gospel and the inability to fully integrate truth with everyday life. Imago Dei began with a deep commitment to the Gospel and its transformational impact upon culture.

McKinley calls church members to understand that truth is the starting point for everything that happens at Imago Dei. He says, “This is radically different from people’s opinions, what we like or even want to do but rather we seek to obey God and trust him in faith to glorify Himself through us no matter what the outcome” (McKinley R., personal conversation, 06 January 2004). The congregation at Imago Dei lives out their church values in a very countercultural way. Their church is in a downtrodden part of Portland and church members do life with homeless people, drug pushers, prostitutes and more. It’s not that they enjoy the smell of an unbathed drunk any more than the typical American. But they share a commitment to living the Gospel in an embodied way rather than simply finding trendy, edgy ways to market the Gospel.

Just a few hours north, Mark Driscoll, founder and pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle says, "Mars is not a typical church defined by culture." He is concerned that the emergent movement as a whole is primarily driven by culture rather than by theology. He intends for Mars Hill and Acts 29, the emergent church-planting network he leads, to be diametrically opposed to a culturally driven approach (Clem B., personal conversation, April 2004).

Bill Clem, who was also part of that coffee-shop discussion with which I began, is leading a church planting movement in Seattle called Centrifuge. Bill talks about Centrifuge's ruthless conviction of expressing their countercultural presence in a relevant way. His emphasis is most upon the "presence" part of being a countercultural presence. Bill describes this as living in the radical middle—wherein new wineskins and methods that relate to where people live are used but as a way to call people to the countercultural values and ethics of the kingdom. Centrifuge places far more energy upon calling people to approach the "relevance" side of the middle through incarnational relationships that embody Jesus than they do upon trendy programming and marketing as the driving sense of relevance.

For example, a few months ago, Bill had several church members who wanted Centrifuge to really get behind the massive, afternoon rally James Dobson was conducting at Safeco Field. Dobson was rallying people together against the ills of homosexual marriage. Instead Bill spent the entire afternoon hanging with some homosexual friends and called his congregation to do the same. Bill contends, "We're going to have far more transformational impact upon the gay community by doing life with them than we are by rallying together to talk about their vices and our virtues" (B. Clem, personal communication, 05 May 2004). That's relevance lived out in presence.

Grand Rapids is a radically different culture than Seattle; but Mars Hill Bible Church, where I attend, also oozes a commitment to being countercultural. Rob Bell, the founding pastor of Mars Hill, is anything but the CEO of the church. Though the church is housed in an old shopping mall, there's not much of the shopping mall, consumeristic, marketing feel that remains in the building. For that matter, you may have a hard time even finding the church because there's no sign out front. Sunday services are intended to be gathering times for house churches meeting throughout the week rather than a show for consumers.

Mars Hill is a place where the demands of the cross are made clear, and the emphasis is upon commitment, self-denial, and laying down our lives for Christ. Rob says, "The higher we try and raise the bar, the more people join us. The greater the emphasis we place on the fact that Jesus calls us to lay down our lives, the bigger the numbers" (Webber 2002, p. 144). That's not a very "culturally-relevant" message; yet people who attend Mars describe their craving for honesty. Church members know their questions will be met with honest answers and a belief in the mysterious, untamed, living, and breathing nature of the text.

One more snapshot of a church in the emergent movement that appears to be positioning themselves against culture rather than trying to be desperately relevant to culture is Ecclesia in Waco, Texas. Ecclesia is lead by Chris Seay, who describes his growing distaste in his university years for the ways Christianity seemed more reflective of Western ideas than of Jesus.

On the other hand, Seay sees cultural genres as a great way to get a glimpse into the heart and soul of people. He says, "In music and movies, you see all of these deep spiritual questions. And the people that are supposed to engage those questions have removed themselves. We pull away from culture to the point where we can no longer affect it. Somewhere right in the middle is a really healthy place, but it's a difficult one to find". Seay is another proponent of living in the radical middle in relationship to culture (Staub 2002).

The landscape of churches and ministries aligned with the so-called emergent movement in the United States is diverse and complex. A more complete analysis needs to include thick, qualitative research examining some of these ministries up close. In addition, research should include churches in other parts of the Western world, such as in the U.K., where similar movements exist.

CALLING THE EMERGENT MOVEMENT TO TRANSFORM CULTURE...

The Church of Christ will be well served if the emergent movement grows and matures in grappling with what it looks like to be relevantly countercultural. We must relentlessly hold in tension the idea of relevantly countering culture so that Christ might transform culture. The answer isn't through an Amish-like approach to the world that keeps us from having the incarnational presence we've been called to have in our communities. Nor is the answer the continuation of our bathos immersion in American culture that Wolf (2003) observed in his review of American evangelicalism. Robert Webber (2004) suggests that forming a kingdom culture through the emergent church is most likely to happen by living in the radical middle between protesting culture on the one hand, and embracing it on the other (Webber personal conversation, 22 January 2004). Consider the two different sides of the "culture coin".

Protest.

The emergent church movement can most effectively embody Christ's presence by standing as an antithetical reality to many of the 21st Century cultural norms. Central to 21st Century thought is the idea that we each create our own story lines amidst our random lives. The thinking goes something like this: "Life is chaotic and culminates in a painful nihilism. As a result, we must construct our own understandings of life and reality. There is no metanarrative that ties it all together". No way! We must vehemently protest this kind of misunderstanding with great resolve. There IS a grand metanarrative and it's God's Story. God's Story is about God, by God, and for God. He has a mission and he makes no apologies for it. We live in his world, a world destined by the Story he is sovereignly leading.

As we protest the notion that there is no grand metanarrative by living and telling God's Story, we offer the world perspective, meaning, and purpose for life and existence. While life is full of pain and chaos, there is compelling hope that's offered with an assured destiny. That's a revolt against a major tenet in postmodern thought.

For this very reason, we must reclaim the discipline and relevance of theology. Theology is not some boring, esoteric line of thinking. Theology is the study and pursuit of God; it must provide the shape and form of emergent ministries. Many disagree. Erwin McManus of Mosaic is speaking for many in the emergent movement when he says, "Theology just doesn't matter to us. We just want to love people and show them Jesus." (McManus, 2004). Theology HAS to matter. Like Tony Jones (2003) says to youth workers, "It's great that some of us are into

sociology and psychology and anthropology—these will all help us better understand our students. But we need to also be thinking about and doing theology. Let's look at the Bible, the state of the world, and the church, and students; and then let's try to discern what God's up to (p. 49)."

Without theology, we'll be right back to pragmatism (What works?!) ruling the church. Without question, theological education and training is in desperate need of reform. I'm devoting much of my energy in that direction. But without theology altogether, we'll merely have so-called pastors who are little more than technicians offering hollow experiences to people struggling through their chaotic, random lives.

Protesting the absence of a metanarrative in mainstream culture and protesting the pragmatism of the church is the primary reason we need to be teaching God's Word as Story. Everyone is talking about the value of preaching and teaching narratively these days. It isn't new information that narrative teaching is often more engaging to audiences than outlined, alliterated points. But effective communication is not the driving reason for teaching God's Word as story, otherwise we have relegated the "Story" to just one more culturally relevant tool with little long-term impact. However, as we seek to see how our very lives and ministries are shaped and guided by the essence of God's Story, and as we consider the ways God continues to script His story in and through our lives and ministries, suddenly God's Story takes on revolutionary meaning.

Viewing life and ministry in light of the metanarrative brings context to what we are doing by showing how it's connected to what God has started in the past and what he continues to do in our midst. Suddenly the Exodus becomes part of OUR story, not just "Israel's" story. We are connected to the persecution the Ephesians believers experienced in the 1st Century. This is just the beginning of what it looks like to use the metanarrative to shape how we live and minister. "People who allow their own personal story to be shaped around the story of Jesus himself, discover that they are the assembly of the living God, as opposed to various gatherings of the gods of popular culture" (Wright 2003 p. 41).

As we live and minister in light of God's Story, we're protesting the modernistic categories of the past and protesting the contemporary notions that our lives exist without any sense of greater meaning. May we be very culturally irrelevant when it comes to thinking that there are multiple grand stories that lead us all to some nihilistic hopelessness. Instead, "As we come to understand the Grand Story that gives our lives meaning and purpose, the countercultural nature of God's People begins to take root" (Webber p. 154).

The emergent church must also find creative and transformational ways to protest the predominant threads of American culture considered earlier—Individualism, Isolationism, and Consumerism. In the broadest sense, theology and shaping our lives and ministries through the Story of God is the most important way to protest these vices. More specifically, the emergent church must carefully and completely embody the value of authentic community centered around our shared story.

Community is the obvious antithesis to all three threads (Individualism, Isolationism, and Consumerism). Community doesn't sound all that antithetical to American culture because cultural icons like Starbucks laud it as a value of their own. But a countercultural community

that finds its identity in the redemptive story of God goes far beyond going to a place where the barista calls me by name (and where the experience is ultimately intended to increase the bottom line of the stock holders). Community begins to take on a countercultural, transformational effect when we not only enjoy the friendship and encouragement of a community but are also willing to surrender to the authority of the local church community. Communal authority becomes a tangible revolt against individualism, isolationism, and consumerism because the formation, discipleship, and care of the whole are of greater value than just each individual's rights and agendas. Protesting the threads of American culture comes in developing communities in churches where individuals surrender to the community their schedules, their career goals, their money, who they should date, and more. We've all seen community as the middle name of churches where there's little sense of true community. Worshipping in a coffeehouse like atmosphere isn't bad but it's not going to give us the countercultural revolution we've been called to lead. Protesting through community means forming a diverse community whose identity lies in Christ Victor and His Story rather than in the affinity of race, age, or socio-economic disparities.

These methods of protesting culture are just the beginning of how emergent ministries can have a revolutionary impact upon culture. The greatest understanding of what it looks like to protest culture is simply to live out kingdom values—wherein we value money, safety, status, independence, and the like in radically different ways than those who don't follow Jesus.

Embrace.

The other side of what it looks like to be a relevantly countercultural presence of Christ lies in **embracing** some of the redemptive qualities of the culture in which we live. We must not allow a countercultural approach to lead us down the road where the American fundamentalist movement lead its followers in the 20th Century nor where the Amish movement has lead them. The tension of being church in the 21st Century requires living in the radical middle between those cultural realities we must protest, and those realities which we should embrace and reform.

Postmodernity is wrought with some God-honoring values, including the quest for spirituality, a craving for intimacy, and the need to move beyond mere science and reason amidst our epistemology. We need to embrace the current emphasis on these values and reform them in order to more effectively embody Christ.

For example, we need to embrace the way postmodernity acknowledges mystery, tension, and pain. Modernity tried to explain all those things away and all too often, our culturally relevant messages have done the same thing. As a result, we've sucked the very life out of God's Story. Simplistic, formulaic approaches to life and ministry are not an accurate reflection of how God relates to his people through his Story. We need to embrace the authenticity and honesty that permeates much of our culture as we serve emergent ministries. We need to pursue people in our communities and embrace their honesty about their restlessness, so that together, we might join St. Augustine in declaring, "Thou has made us for thyself, O God, and our souls are restless until they find their rest in thee" (Augustine 1992 ed.).

Another thread of postmodernism for us to embrace is some elements of constructivist epistemology. Before you write me off as heretical, I already acknowledged our need to

protest the fallacy that there is no grand metanarrative. Absolute truth exists in the Person and Story of God. However, there is some deeply redemptive value to a constructivist epistemology that comes with postmodern thought. While we don't get to create what truth is, we do come to know truth in constructivist ways. There are some things that can be deduced positivistically; however, a great deal of life and reality is constructed through experience and in community with others. My family, my church experiences, and my life journey shape my understanding of God and His Redemptive Story.

Our understanding of truth is always thwarted and shaped by our contexts and limited perspectives. So as we embrace the constructivist notions of learning, wherein we acquire knowledge in community with other learners, we have the potential of gaining a much more accurate understanding of truth. We should embrace a constructivist spirit in thinking about how we come to know truth, including the role of our experiences, our own reading and research of the Bible, the work of the Spirit, and discerning the meaning and significance of discerning truth in community, with other members of Christ's body.

We also need to embrace the value of relationships and the craving for intimacy expressed in much of our current culture. After all, what could be more culturally relevant than living life with people in their worlds?! When defending cultural relevance, we usually point to Jesus. At times we do so carelessly by suggesting Jesus was culturally relevant in every way. Overturning tables and telling a Jewish audience "I AM the temple" was not very seeker-sensitive or culturally relevant.

Yet the incarnation of Christ IS the best picture we have of contextualizing God's mission in a language people can understand. If we poured half as much energy into pursuing incarnational relationships with people, understanding their worlds, and knowing what it means for them to live out the countercultural nature of God's Story, we'd be much further ahead than spending twice that much energy, not to mention financial resources, on doing the latest and greatest trendy ideas. Effective tools for communication and good environments are not bad. But incarnational relationships trump those more hollow forms of contextualization every time (Argue & Livermore 2002, "MTV...")! The most important way we embrace any part of culture is to embrace people themselves, accepting them for who they are, where they are.

Back at Imago Dei in Portland, the emphasis of how to make the Gospel relevant to the local community is not based upon slick brochures and edgy programming. People wrapping their arms around homeless children, prostitutes, and other forsaken members of society live out the truth that is taught through the church. Church members are called to missionally live out God's Story, the Gospel, in their everyday relationships with hairdressers, co-workers, neighbors, and family.

Culmination.

As we speak into and become part of emergent ministries, let us teach, write, and research in a way that calls the emergent movement to return to Peter's ancient metaphor of being "resident aliens" (1 Peter 2.11). That metaphor captures the tension as well as any. To be "resident" is to be present and incarnational. To be "alien" is to be countercultural—forming a kingdom culture.

In the words of N.T. Wright (1999), “We live at a time of cultural crisis...Some people are still trying to put up the shutters and live in a premodern world, may are clinging to modernism for all they’re worth, and many are deciding that living off the pickings of the garbage heap of postmodernity is the best option on offer. But we can do better than that” (p. 195).

Yes! We can do better than that. I don’t want to embrace modernism or postmodernism. I’m not overly concerned whether our students and colleagues include “cultural relevance” in their lists of values. I’m more interested in calling them to minister by becoming a countercultural presence. “As a countercultural community, Christians will proclaim that Christianity isn’t about me, my needs, my happiness, my fulfillment and my meaning. Countercultural Christianity is also not one of many stories or perspectives on life from which we can borrow this or that insight to create our own religion” (Webber 2003, p. 125). Countercultural Christianity is seeing our role as the historical form of Christ today and following Christ’s incarnational and revolutionary life and ministry.

I hope to challenge others the way my friend Luke challenged me—who not only engaged in dialogue with me about this crucial issue, but embodies countercultural following of Jesus in his family, his ministry, his role as part of the Imago Dei Church in Portland, and much more.

Wolf (2003) says, “To people of faith, I say this: ‘You have been shaped by American culture far too much to insist that you remain countercultural. You don’t want to admit the extent to which your religion has accommodated itself to modern life in the United States’” (p. 4). May sociologists like Wolf draw a very different conclusion when they view the emerging church ten years from now. May they see living pictures of Jesus—both our loving, incarnational presence, and our revolutionary, affrontive lifestyle. Soli deo Gloria!

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