

The Emerging Church: Another Road to Rome by Roger Oakland

The Emerging Church controversy continues to explode. Perhaps the best way to describe the Emerging Church phenomenon is to compare it to an avalanche. Every day more and more information is being made available regarding what the Emerging Church is and where it may be headed.

The Emerging Church

It is not my purpose in writing this commentary to define every aspect of the Emerging Church. In fact it would require several volumes to do so. Even then, some would say that the Emerging Church was not defined properly.

The common denominator that I see being promoted is the idea that the time has come for Christianity to be reinvented for our generation. In order to do so, the church must provide the environment and the experiences to attract people. Christianity, the Emerging Church promoters say, must become relevant to our postmodern generation. No longer does reason or God's Word hold the answers to life's questions. Experience must become the key factor to encounter spiritual reality.



**A Prayer Station that was on display at Capo Beach Calvary
April, 2005 - with instructions on how to pray with an icon**

The following statement taken from a book written by Chuck Smith Jr. titled *There is a Season* (foreword by Brian McLaren and endorsed by Leonard Sweet) provides insight into how Christianity may be “reinvented” in the future as the Emerging Church moves away from the Word of God towards the concept of experiencing God. Chuck Smith Jr. states:

What would happen if we allowed people to “feel” what we cannot explain, to know with the heart and not with the brain? We would open the door of faith to a

wider audience than if we continued to insist on a rational belief in the facts as the only legitimate starting point of the Christian faith. ¹

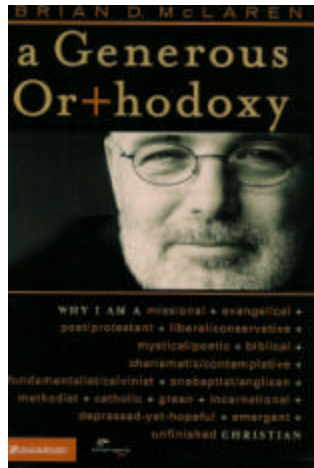
A prayer station created for use during the Emerging Church service that was located at Capo Beach Calvary illustrates what Chuck Smith Jr. means by allowing his congregation to “feel” and “know with the heart and not with the brain.” This prayer station was on display during the month of April, 2005. Further, the prayer station complete with candles, incense and icons featured an instruction sheet to assist church attendees in how to pray with an icon. The instructions stated:

Praying With Icons

- Draw in a slow deep breath. As you do pray, Holy Spirit surround me, fill me, breathe life into me.
- Empty your mind of all anxiety.
- Empty your heart full of desire except for God.
- Focus on one icon and imagine what that person might say to you about God, yourself, and others.
- Read the icons as if the person who painted it wanted to send a message to you. Notice the details.
- The icon is there to remind you of God: to make you conscious of His presence, all around you.
- Pray in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
(option) Cross yourself as you say these words.

Brian McLaren summarizes what the Emerging Church is in the title and subtitle of his book *A Generous Orthodoxy: Why I Am a missional + evangelical + post/protestant + liberal/conservative + mystical/poetic + biblical + fundamentalist/calvinist + anabaptist/anglican + methodist + catholic + green + incarnational + depressed-yet-hopeful + emergent + unfinished Christian.*

¹ Chuck Smith Jr., *There is a Season*, Waterbrook Press, 2001, page 106.



According to McLaren, the goal of the Emerging Church is to formulate a Christianity for the twenty-first century that is based on a smorgasbord of ideas in the name of Christ. There are really no ideas barred. However, based on what we read in Scripture, many of these ideas lack support or are outright heretical.

The Experiential and the Mystical

While I do not plan to comment on the entirety of McLaren’s explanation of what the Emerging Church is, or is not, I will attempt to deal with one particular topic that few Emerging Church critics are exposing. This is the area dealing with what McLaren calls the “post-protestant-pro-catholic-contemplative-mystical” form of Christianity. It is this aspect of the Emerging Church that troubles me the most.

To set the record straight, my introduction to the Emerging Church, followed the research I did for the book *“Another Jesus? The Eucharistic Christ and the New Evangelization.”* In the process of doing the research for this book, I became aware of the Roman Catholic “new evangelization program” to win the “separated brethren” back to the “Mother of All Churches.” When I saw the numerous experiential attractions being promoted by the Emerging Church (candles, icons, statues, prayer stations, incense, liturgy, the sacraments, particularly the Sacrament of the Eucharist) it became evident to me what was happening. Another road to Rome was being prepared. Few seemed to be aware. Some, who were aware, simply did not care.



Since becoming aware of the Emerging Church movement, I have learned a number of important things. While others, like me, see this trend playing a role leading to apostasy, those who are

promoting the movement believe such a perception is ludicrous. They are firmly convinced that God is raising up a church in the name of Christ for God's glory.

While they may be sincere in their efforts to be a part of this "move of God" that is sweeping the world, it is my conviction based on Scripture, that they are deceived and don't know it. Isn't this what apostasy is all about – believing that one has believed but instead is deceived?

Many have reprimanded me for speaking out against the Emerging Church. However, I am compelled to state what I believe about this movement based on what I read in God's Word. Our approach to this situation is based on Paul's instructions to Timothy with regard to pointing people back to the truth. He wrote:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will. ²

Roman Catholicism versus Christianity

While I have chosen to focus only on one particular aspect of the Emerging Church movement (another road to Rome), this endeavor alone demand far more space than this commentary will allow. In order to make my point, I will attempt to provide insights into one particular area. There are many avenues, streets and paths that lead the unsuspecting home to Rome.

Church history reveals that a major goal of the church reformers was to turn people who professed to be Christian back to the Word of God and away from extrabiblical experiences and a false gospel that was antichristian. We know the New Testament is full of warnings regarding the apostasy that would creep in after the departure of the apostles. As Paul warned:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. ³

Jude was also outspoken about the apostasy that was underway in his day. He wrote:

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith, which was once delivered unto the saints. For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this

² 2 Timothy 2: 24-26

³ Acts 20: 28-30

condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴

Anyone who reads the Bible can see there is a world of difference between the New Testament Church and the Roman Catholic Church. While professing to be Christian, there are a myriad of beliefs and experiences added to Roman Catholicism that are not found in the Bible. For example, a Christianity that emphasizes Mary sharing a role in the redemption of sins, praying the rosary, praying to the dead for favors and a salvation that is dependent on the sacrifice of the mass, is foreign to the Scriptures. While Roman Catholicism justifies tradition and dogma to be equivalent to the Bible, when tradition and dogma contradict Scripture, both cannot be true.

Roman Catholicism declares that our salvation was not complete by Jesus' death on the cross. Salvation the Roman Catholic way requires the Sacrament of the Eucharist to be administered by Roman Catholic priests. If this is the case, Jesus died on the cross in vain. Salvation is not Roman Catholicism plus Jesus. Biblical salvation is based on faith in Jesus alone!



Pope Holding the Roman Catholic Jesus
The Eucharistic Jesus offered as an unbloody sacrifice

Ancient Future Faith

A major tenant of the Emerging Church requires reintroducing ideas, experiences and beliefs of the past in order to reinvent Christianity for the present. It would seem that to me if the promoters of the Emerging Church were spirit-led in their efforts to go back to the past for the truth, they would go back to the Bible.

However, this not the case! Instead Emerging Church proponents go back to the first, second and third century to find out what Christianity was like then. They say there is a lot to learn from the mystical church fathers that we need to become familiar with. Why not go back to the New Testament church and the Christian principles of the faith that we read about in the inspired Word of God. What if the early church fathers (Roman Catholic Church) were teaching ideas and beliefs that are not found in the Bible? Wouldn't this be misleading?

Back to the Bible or Back to Rome

⁴ Jude 3-4

It is amazing to me to observe what promoters of the Emergent Church are promoting. Many are suggesting that we reconsider Roman Catholicism in order to be more spiritual and in tune with God. What God has revealed in His Word apparently falls short. Or worse yet, mystical experiences that are even similar or identical to the practices of the pagans are being upheld as the new revived hotline to God.

Dr. Robert Webber

Dr. Robert “Bob” Webber is recognized by pastors, denominational leaders, scholars and lay people as one of the foremost authorities on worship renewal. He regularly conducts workshops for almost every major denomination in North America through the Institute of Worship Studies which he founded in 1995.

Prior to his appointment to his present position at Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Dr. Webber taught at Wheaton College for 32 years as Professor of Theology. He has authored over 40 books and is also a regular contributor to numerous magazines and newspapers including *Worship Leader*.⁵

Dr. Robert Webber is one of the influential promoters of the idea that we must go back in order to go ahead. His ideas form one of the chief pillars of the Emerging Church. He has written a number of books dealing with revisiting the past in order to seek direction for the future. One of these books is titled *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*.

In order to clarify what Dr. Robert Webber meant by “ancient-future” I decided to do some research. I found an interview with Dr. Webber posted on a web site called TheOoze.com. Responding to the question “What do you think the North American evangelical church is going to look like 25 years from now?” Dr Webber responded:

Biblical symbols such as baptismal identity and Eucharistic thanksgiving will take on new meaning. The church will be less concerned about having an eschatology and more committed to being an eschatological community.⁶

Over the past several years, I have observed that Dr. Webber’s prediction regarding the future of the church is quite accurate. Many who were once anticipating the soon and imminent return of Jesus are now asleep. Some are saying it appears “the Lord has delayed His coming.” Others are saying “we have been misled by pastors and teachers who have taught us the Second Coming is a literal return of Jesus to set up His Kingdom.” These same people are claiming the “Kingdom of God” will be established here on earth through Christians during the Eucharistic Reign of Jesus.

After reading Dr. Webber’s answer to the question that “Biblical symbols such as baptismal identity and Eucharistic thanksgiving will take on new meaning,” I ordered his book *Ancient-Future Evangelism*. This is what I read on page on page 114:

⁵ www.seminary.edu/aboutnorthern/index.html

⁶ Ibid.

A brief glance at the teaching of the Eucharist from the pre-Nicene period provides insight into the early church's understanding. The Fathers taught that continual spiritual nourishment was provided to believers at this great feast. First it is clear from the writings of Justin Martyr in the middle of the second century that this is no empty symbol. Christ is really present in the bread and wine. He feeds us in the remembrance of His salvation. He feeds us through His presence which is accomplished through prayer.⁷

A Eucharistic Experience?

One might ask the following legitimate question: How do evangelical Protestants like Robert Webber become supporters of Roman Catholic views? In order to find out more about Robert Webber's background and his conversion experience, I discovered Webber's testimony in a book titled *Signs of Wonder: The Phenomenon of Convergence in Modern Liturgical and Charismatic Churches*, published in 1992 by Star Song Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee.

Although the following quote is lengthy, it is important and necessary in order to reveal how Webber's conversion experience occurred. In his own words:

My most memorable encounter with a style of worship different from my own occurred at a weekend retreat more than twenty years ago. I had joined a praise and prayer group while doing graduate work at Concordia Theological Seminary in St. Louis. The group consisted of Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and evangelicals who met monthly to read and discuss Scripture to pray together, to talk, and to just have fun. When the time came for many of us to graduate and move on to new places, we decided to bring our two-year fellowship to an end with a weekend retreat at a local Catholic conference center. It was there we faced an issue we had never even discussed. Could we take Communion together? Could a Catholic priest give the bread and wine to an evangelical? Could an evangelical receive the bread and wine from a Catholic priest?

We were all sitting on the lawn of the monastery near the chapel. The monastery stood on a hill overlooking the rich Missouri farmland, and the smell of the fresh spring grass was in the air. I heard the priest say, "We are going to conclude our retreat with a liturgy in the chapel. You are all of course welcome to come, but I don't know what to say to you about the bread and the wine. As a rule we Catholics only allow other Catholics to receive the body and blood of the Lord. But I have agonized over this separation of our churches, as I know you have."

He paused and continued, "I have decided to break with Catholic tradition and offer you the bread and wine. Why? Because it is my experience that all of you are true Christians devoted to our Lord. But I cannot tell you what to do. You may not feel comfortable receiving the bread and the wine. You must make that decision for yourself. If you don't come to receive, your decision will be respected, and if you do come, you will be welcomed."

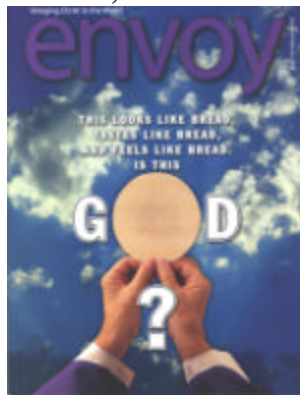
⁷ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004, page 114.

Then I lifted my face toward the sun and felt its warmth. Closing my eyes, I allowed my life in the church to pass before me. My prejudices rose up within me: *What are you doing here? You never worshiped in a Catholic setting, let alone received the bread and the wine from a Catholic priest!* Then I considered the spiritually rich times I'd shared with these people for two years. I heard again my Catholic friends speak of their love for Christ, pray with fervency, and express a real desire to know the Scriptures and live by its authority. Those memories said, *"Go ahead. After all, there is only one Lord, one church, one faith, one baptism, one Holy Communion."*

In that moment, God broke through the walls I had allowed to separate me from my brothers and sisters of different denominations. I am convinced the prejudices we hold and the walls we build between ourselves and other communities of Christians actually block our experience of God's presence in our lives. Our biases cut us off from the spiritual communion of the fullness of the body of Christ. God dwells in his church, and to reject a part of God's church is to reject him. Furthermore, rejecting a part of God's church keeps us from experiencing what the creed calls "the communion of the Saints." **When God broke down my walls, he brought me into richer fellowship with the body of Christ throughout the world.**⁸

Apparently, Robert Webber's experience was life changing. He goes on to describe how he felt and how his beliefs changed. Once again in his own words:

You might say I was surprised by joy! I found myself ministering to God in praise, and God in turn was ministering to me. I had never had an experience like that in my life. In that Catholic chapel, a new worship experience had bumped up against that old prejudice of mine, and a new attitude was born. **I had taken into myself the experience of another tradition, I had been in dialogue with another worship tradition, and I was surely the richer for it.**⁹



The Eucharistic Jesus (Envoy Magazine – Jan/Feb 2000) Catholicism Claims that Jesus is present in the wafer

⁸ Robert Webber, *Signs of Wonder: The Phenomenon of Convergence in Modern Liturgical and Charismatic Churches*, Star Song Publishing Group, Nashville, Tennessee, 1992, pages 3-4. [Emphasis mine.]

⁹ Ibid. page 5, [emphasis mine.]

Webber and Eucharistic Evangelization

As has been documented, Dr. Robert Webber's encounter with the Eucharistic Jesus in a Roman Catholic chapel in the early 1970s was life changing. In his book *Ancient Future Evangelism* published eleven years following the publication of his Eucharistic experience, Webber further clarified that his faith in the Roman Catholic Eucharistic encounter was genuine. In this book he wrote:

The spirituality of the medieval mystics and the spirituality fostered by the sacramental system when it was at its best was now supplanted by intellectual knowledge. The rejection of everything Catholic then led by the Protestant notion that knowledge and spirituality were the same. For nearly five hundred years the spirituality of Protestantism has been expressed in the quest for knowledge. This quest found a happy partner with the emphasis on reason in the modern period. In the postmodern era, however where knowledge is not enough, there is a longing once again for the disciplines that produce a spirituality rooted in the mystical and sacramental traditions.¹⁰

It can also be documented that Webber's books are winning converts. But who is being converted and what are they being converted to? The answer to this question can be found at a Roman Catholic web site called "Ancient and Future Christian Reading List." Several of Dr. Webber's books are posted there such as *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism*. Under the heading of the book there is the following statement:

Webber writes about how many Christians today, especially younger ones, are seeking a faith connected to the ancient Church. Thus, postmodern Christians are seeking an ancient and future faith, one that embraces the past for the future, rather than ignoring the past completely... Editor David Bennett admits that Webber's writings helped lead him to the Catholic Church, although much of what Webber says is far too "cafeteria" in approach. Also, Church Tradition is treated more as an evangelical trend as opposed to what it is: the Truth. Nonetheless, Webber is a good transitional author.¹¹

Robert Webber and the Chuck Smith Jr. Connection

My first introduction to Dr. Webber and his views occurred when I read an article that he had written for *Worship Leader* magazine titled *Wanted Ancient Future Talent*.¹²

Worship Leader is published by Chuck Fromm. *Worship Leader's* editorial board includes Robert Webber as well as Chuck Smith Jr., who happens to be Fromm's cousin. In studying the writings and beliefs of Chuck Smith Jr. it is clear that Smith Jr. promotes ideas that are almost identical to Robert Webber's. For example, consider the following quote taken from Smith's book *There Is a Season*:

¹⁰ Robert Webber, *Ancient Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community*, Baker Books, 2003, page 29.

¹¹ re.net/apcbooks.html

¹² Robert Webber, "Wanted Ancient-Future Talent," *Worship Leader*, May/June 2005, page 10.

The postmodern church will very likely see a revival of rituals ceremonies and sacraments. In their zeal to cut out anything superfluous from Christian faith, the Reformers streamlined the seven holy sacraments of Roman Catholicism and reduced them to just two: baptism and the Lord's Supper... Postmodern Christians already are revisiting the discarded sacraments, and we have much to gain by looking again for the sacred, worshipful aspects of marriage, repentance and confirmation as a rite of passage. The nonrational element of rituals and ceremonies appeal to the postmodern soul. ¹³



***There Is a Season* by Chuck Smith Jr.**

In his book, Chuck Smith Jr. explains that Protestants have much to learn from the Roman Catholic Church. He seems to be sympathetic with the Roman Catholic view that Jesus actually is present in the Communion wafer and that the Reformation hindered the Roman Catholic view that considers Communion to be more than a symbol. In his own words:

By and large, modern faith overrationalized the symbols of worship. For example, believers of various traditions have been frequently reminded that the bread and wine of communion are only symbols and not to be taken literally. Reformation reaction to Roman Catholicism has played a major role in deemphasizing the importance and power of the symbol. So we have been instructed that the power of the sacraments is emblematic and the ritual is powerless and ineffective as a means of grace. ¹⁴

Summary and Conclusion

So in taking this look at statements made by Brian McLaren, Dr. Robert Webber and Chuck Smith Jr., what can we conclude? Is it not reasonable to suggest there is an attempt to reinvent Christianity for our generation and that this reinvented Church is very similar to the church that emerged from the New Testament church in the past? Is it possible history is being repeated?

How can one deny there is a moving away from the authority of God's Word by seductive experiences that have always been promoted by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches?

¹³ Chuck Smith Jr., *There is a Season*, Waterbrook Press, 2001, page 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, page 134.

The eighth chapter of the book of Ezekiel sheds lights on God's perspective of the experiential Emerging Church that is emerging in our day. God allowed Ezekiel to see how the religious leaders of Israel had strayed away from God's Word and were embracing practices and experiences that were an abomination unto Him. We read:

Then said he unto me, Son of man, dig now in the wall: and when I had digged in the wall, behold a door. And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, portrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniah the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? ¹⁵

Time will reveal if this connection between the Emerging Church and Roman Catholicism is correct. Based on the current events that are unfolding, I believe it is safe to say that the Emerging Church road to Rome will become more obvious day by day for those who accept the warnings found in Scripture.

I believe we are seeing the apostasy that Paul warned would be a sign we are in the last days. Is it possible the grand delusion is underway and the world is being set up for a counterfeit bride for the counterfeit Christ?

Hopefully, Christian leaders of our day will reconsider the Scriptures and sound a warning based on the revelation we find in God's Word.

¹⁵ Ezekiel 8: 8-12