

## "Is Substance an Emergent or Postmodern Church?"

The problem with this question is that everyone defines "emergent" differently. In the beginning, most people used this expression to refer to out-of-the-box churches that actually cared enough about lost people to separate Biblical truth from legalism. So, back then, I'd happily say: *"Sure, we're emergent!"* But then, other people started to say that this label means: you deny scripture and seek to water it down with bizarre forms of worship. So, I'd start saying: *"Uhh... no we're not emergent!"*

So to be straight up: If you define a postmodern or an Emergent Christian as a person who seeks to undermine scripture, deny basic orthodox doctrine, and do bizarre forms of worship, then, Substance is definitely *not* Emergent.

Of course, when we first launched Substance in late 2004, I only knew about 6 people in the Twin Cities. After going off salary from our former church, we were desperate just to get food on the table for our kids. If the church didn't grow, my whole family would die. So, whenever visitors asked me this question I'd say: *"Well, what kind of church do you want us to be?"* ...and then after listening I'd say: *"Yes. That's exactly what we are!"*

But all jokes aside, I've always taken this question seriously. So before answering here, it's critical that we define some terms.

The term "Modern" and "Post-modern" are actually secular terms referring to philosophies and modes of thinking that have dominated the way we Westerners view the world. For example, the terms "Renaissance" and "Enlightenment" are important historical words which represented a new way of thinking in western culture. In the same way, the expression "post-modern" is a way of explaining how Westerners are changing their ways of viewing the world. So, allow me to give you a short history lesson; and, after doing so, this will help me explain how Substance fits into all of this.

Back in the 1600's, Europe was tired of religious wars. Western thinkers were tired of idiot kings and dysfunctional governments. Most people wanted to do away with the superstition and mysticism which dominated the middle ages. So, the "Age of the Enlightenment" was essentially the dawn of scientific reasoning, (a.k.a., *modernism*). I.e., it was basically a call to systematic intellectual thinking in all areas.

So, Western thinkers began to "systematically" scrutinize everything from governments to the stars in the sky. Everything we "thought we knew" was being filtered through rationalism, empiricism... a left brain experience (the rational side). Everyone was intoxicated with what we call "a Newtonian view" of the universe.

For example, Newton saw the universe like a machine. And after centuries of fear-filled mysticism, people found this to be a very appealing thought. The universe was no longer scary because all we need to do is systematically take it apart. And once we crack its codes, determine its formulas, then suddenly, through science, we're in control. So for those of you who thought that storms were "created by gods when they fight," No. They're simply scientific weather patterns. Hence, modernism

was a reaction to anything mystical, non-measurable or superstitious. Modernism has always been an obsession with formulas and rational dogmas.

But the key idea was this: Through intellectual knowledge, we can evolve ourselves. Through science & rationalism we will eliminate poverty & war. In fact, it's safe to say that "knowledge" became a religion of its own called humanism (the belief that mankind could endlessly better itself). Universities became the church of this humanistic religion. Before long, there were "ologies" for everything: Geology, Biology, Physiology... & of course Theology. All of these same attitudes were applied to Christianity.

So, allow me to break down some of the "modernist" ideals in a nutshell. And remember, this is a grotesque oversimplification. I don't want to be overly reductionist in my explanation; but, I still think that it will help you understand the times in which we live.

Modernist thinkers tended to believe that the universe was:

1. Machine like – not mystical
2. Black & white – no grays in anything
3. Operates with predictable natural laws not supernatural
4. We can reduce it to formulas through intellectual analysis
5. Therefore, we can control all interactions with it
6. & the result: Through rational knowledge we can improve ourselves and free ourselves from the need to fear its complexity.

Now remember these six criteria because we're going to return to these. In a sense, these six characteristics tended to dominate Western civilization. Of course, a lot of good things resulted from these attitudes. Medical science dramatically increased. Technology began freeing parts of the world from disease. And, these types of ideas did the same for Christianity.

Christianity began upgrading itself through new Bible study methods. Textual criticism began resulting in better Bible translations. Catholic mysticism was being uprooted with Biblically sound ideas. Missionary methods became more sophisticated than ever before. However, over time, modernism had all sorts of negative ramifications as well.

So let's return to these same six modernistic approaches to the universe. Except, rather than talking about the universe, let's substitute the word "God." I.e., GOD is... 1. Machine like - not mystical

2. All His truths are Black & white - no grays
3. He operates with predictable natural laws not supernatural
4. We can reduce Him to formulas through intellectual analysis
5. Therefore, we can control all interactions with Him
6. & the result: Through rational knowledge we can improve ourselves & free ourselves from the need to fear His complexity

Unfortunately, 20th century Christianity tended to subconsciously take on these characteristics. Western Christians became almost irrationally non-charismatic (anti-miraculous) as theologians felt this emphasized mysticism over science. Not surprisingly, this paved the foundation for many scholars to begin denying a literal resurrection.

Also, because of Newton's mechanistic view of the universe, most western

theologians followed suit by becoming obsessed with mechanistic concepts of sovereignty (like Calvinism and predestination). Also, "doctrinal lists" became the obsession of churches everywhere. Pastors became local theologians who created ever-expanding statements of faith so that they could easily identify "who is right vs. who is wrong."

Many historians argue that Christians focused on "correct thinking" more than "correct doing." And maturity in Christ was more defined by the acquisition of correct doctrine more than by a person's ability to exude the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Of course, it's important for me to point out that these statements are massive generalizations. But any student of church history could quickly find evidence to support this.

So, *postmodernism*, in the Christian sense, is generally construed as a reaction to the extremes of modernism. I.e., Christian Postmodernism asks: Maybe God is bigger, grayer, & more mystical than we think? Maybe we haven't "conquered God" with our 800 page systematic theologies? Maybe we can't reduce everything in Christianity to a simple formula? Maybe faith is a more valuable attribute to Christianity than knowledge? Maybe we could use a little more humility when it comes to doctrine & morality? Maybe unknown tongues, healing people with handkerchiefs & other weird Biblical miracles still occur? Maybe God is sick & tired of being shoved in a box?

You see *postmodernism* generally emphasizes "gray" over "black and white", miracles over naturalism, faith over formulas, "right doing" over "right thinking." It tends to prefer *the organic* verses *the institutional*. It prefers team leadership verses autocratic leadership.

Of course, it's a simple fact that, younger generations of Christians tend to gravitate towards "post-modern" approaches more than older generations (for better or for worse). And this is what creates the most debate in Evangelicalism right now; because, people are asking the question: *Is postmodernism truly a healthier way of viewing things?*

My response to this is mixed because, in some ways it's better and in other ways it's worse. Again, every new "filter" has its pros and cons. Postmoderns are less formulaic... and thus, they tend to be less legalistic than Moderns; yet, the downside of this is that Christian postmoderns have a tendency to think that truth is "more relative" than perhaps it really is. So, most Evangelicals define the "Emergent church" as simply a post-modern way of viewing Christianity.

Of course, again realize, the definition of "Emergent" is constantly evolving. Some people define an "emergent" as someone who denies the reliability of scripture, or someone who "waters down the truth". And, if this is your definition, then Substance isn't emergent at all.

Well, once again, it depends on the question: "What facet" of the Emergent church are we talking about? According to E. Gibbs and R. Bolger, the key attributes of an Emergent church are:

- (1). A desire to imitate the life of Jesus;
- (2). A stronger desire to transform secular society;
- (3). A tendency to emphasize communal living and relationships over programs and institutional discipleship.

(4). A passionate desire to welcome outsiders;  
(5) An emphasis on generosity and creativity  
and lastly, Emergents gravitate towards pastors and governance structures that lead through servanthood rather than through power or "control."

So, when I read these attributes, I say: "*Well, of course! Substance is definitely Emergent in its orientation.*"

For example: We are obsessively focused on small groups and home-churches. In fact, we had a national consulting firm evaluate our church health. And after assessing us, they compared us with tens of thousands of other churches nationally. They found that only 2% of churches they've studied "*invite each other out to dinner as much as your church does.*" I.e., our church is extraordinarily relational outside of church services. Thus, according to these definitions, we are tremendously "emergent."

We also have operated our church on less than 60% of its income since the beginning. We have an unusual number of artists, musicians, and videographers. We value missions and church planting in an extreme and inconvenient way. And we have an ability to reach those "outside of the church" like very few other churches. So, in these ways, we are extremely "emergent."

But, other people are creating new definitions of the term "Emergent." There are many emergent thinkers who tend to constantly undermine the reliability of scripture as a guide to spiritual living. Even more, many Emergents seem to believe that truth needs to be watered down in order to appeal to those outside of the church. So, again, in this way, Substance is decidedly NOT emergent.

There are also many "Emergents" who are obsessed with introducing alternative worship forms, even when they don't actually enhance a churches' ability to reach unchurched people. Of course, at Substance, we help plant churches almost every week. Naturally, I LOVE creative thinking church planters; but, some of them are down-right weird. And the worship ideas that many of them have are flat out bizarre. So, in these circumstances, our staff likes to use the term "hyper-post-modern".

Generally, Hyper-PostModerns are Christians who are responding to Modernistic Christianity so dramatically that they are essentially "over-reacting." I.e., their weird church formats and worship experiences aren't actually *more effective* in reaching unchurched people. Rather, the only people they tend to attract are long-term Christians who are simply bored or disgruntled. Obviously, this is not what Substance is all about.

You see, at Substance, we still have a high view of scripture. At Substance, we don't feel the need to be bizarre for uniqueness' sake. We're not rebelling from the establishment simply for rebellion's sake... nor do we feel the need to "gray out" the truths of God's Word out of some extreme need to relate to the disenfranchised.

Ironically, unchurched people are not necessarily responding to Emergent churches more than "non-Emergent". From a statistical standpoint, the churches that are "winning" in terms of numeric growth aren't necessarily "emergent" or "non-emergent."

For example, I spend a large amount of time with some of the fastest growing churches in the U.S. It's not uncommon for most of my pastor friends to add over

1000 new unchurched members in a single year. Most of them are not *decidedly* "Emergent" or "Non-emergent". And if I could be so bold: If people would just get busy with the basic Gospel, I don't think we'd even have time to have this debate. Frankly, I'm way too busy helping unchurched people to worry about what cloistered Christians are talking about.

In one month alone, we added over 250 brand new believers to our membership. And I remember one week where we had 3 people confess suicide attempts, 2 people repent of Meth addiction, 12 men ask for help with sex addiction and another 2 people ask for insight about leaving homosexuality. And frankly, it irritates me that I'm writing this article rather than ministering to them. Part of me feels like the Holy Spirit of God is equally grieved that many believers would allow this issue to remain so important.

Of course, I'm not intending to undermine the value of this discussion. The reliability of scripture needs to be safeguarded. Also, the American church needs to make a massive amount of adjustments if it wants to be successful in reaching a postmodern generation of people (or even *churched* people for that matter). But, at the same time, I can instantly think of a dozen items that are higher on God's agenda:

(1). Take for example the amazing quick death of the Evangelical church: Only 5.1% of people in my county even go to an Evangelical church of any kind; yet, pastors in my city find time to continually rant about "Emergence"? Frankly, it's like we're standing on a sinking ship debating about whether its paint is "ivory or off-white." Instead, we should be focused on plugging the hole. At the current rate of attrition, no one is even going to read the Bible anyway. So we've got bigger fish to fry.

(2). The Bible hasn't even been translated into every language yet.

(3). There's an AIDS epidemic that is going to leave over 23 million orphans by this time next year. That means 6 year olds are going to be raising 3 year olds on the streets all over the world.

(4). There's over 8 million people caught in child-sex trafficking... over 27 million people stuck in total economic slavery. (And tens of millions who support this system.)

(5). There's a Christian materialism problem that is totally out of control. Despite the fact that we're the wealthiest Christians who have ever walked the face of the earth, we still manage to live in debt. Church budgets are overwhelmingly self-centered and non-missional. Yet, all the while, over 1 billion, 200 million people live on less than 23 cents a day.

(6). We have a Christian divorce rate that is out of control. This is a devastating cancer that dramatically affects the emotional development and stability of millions of people.

(7). Christians are struggling with sex-addiction at a rate that rivals unbelievers. The American church is completely unprepared to deal with this... lacking both compassion and competence in steering people into healthy sexuality.

(8). Church planting is the only statistically proven way to grow a church movement; yet, ½ of all Evangelical churches are totally living in denial of this fact.

Churches over 16 years old only average 1% growth a year! (Most of which is transfer growth). Yet, we throw our young pastors into these dying churches like firewood on barely hot coals. Our church growth methods are downright ridiculous. (9). And of the 9.1% of people who even bother to consistently attend an evangelical church in the U.S., very few of them have any consistent Bible reading or prayer life AT ALL. So, when we have our fancy discussions about "Emergence", etc., it only reveals that we are totally out of touch with where most American evangelicals are at (let alone most Americans).

But before I continue ranting: Allow me to return to the question: How does Substance relate to this "Emergent Church" issue?

As the lead pastor of Substance, I've made the commitment to focus on things that the body of Christ can easily agree upon. After all, desperate times require desperate measures. Although I have opinions on these matters, I've never felt the Holy Spirit release me preach on them neither here nor from the pulpit at Substance. The unchurched people we target simply aren't concerned with this issue. And because we are so desperate to unite Christians around bigger causes, I simply don't see much wisdom in sounding off my opinions.

After all, whether you're emergent or not, we all agree that we need more of the Bible in our lives and we need to stop the shrinkage of the American church. Whether you're emergent or not, we all agree that we need to stop the pains of poverty, sex trafficking, abuse, adultery, divorce, and prayerlessness.

So, rather than striving to be leaders in this theological debate, most people at Substance simply want to be the practitioners in the body of Christ. We want to plant churches. We want to send out missionaries. We want to see people excited about Christ. And we want to see people excited about discussing his Word.

And if you're interested in these things then, chances are, you'll love our church community. Frankly, the only people we irritate at Substance are those long-term Christians who are more obsessed with "Christian discussions" than they are about ministering to their unchurched neighbors.

So, does that make us "Emergent?" By some people's definitions, "yes." But I prefer to call it "following Christ" (Mt. 4:19).