

The Emergence of a Prophetic Movement?

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In a darkened hotel ballroom in San Diego, I found myself mesmerized by the ceiling. Though the acoustic tile itself was unremarkable, projected onto that flat surface over my head was the appearance of moving water, glinting with sunlight. On the screen in front of the room, too, were projected images of blue and moving water. I felt as if I were submerged in water—which is exactly what the worship leaders intended, as they led us in prayers of thanksgiving for baptism. There was repetitive chant, reading from scripture . . . and always the water on the ceiling, water before us, drawing us into reflections on the life-giving and death-dealing power of baptismal waters.

After the prayer and chanting, reading and meditation on scripture, the worship leader invited us into a time of intercessory prayer. I was initially startled to hear the recorded voice of Carl Kassel, news announcer from NPR's "Morning Edition," reporting the headlines of that day's news. After each brief news summary, a musician at an electric keyboard led us in singing "Lord, have mercy." Another headline, another prayer for the needs of the world. In that juxtaposition of national news and "kyrie eleison", I recognized in a new way the intimate connection between our reception of information about the world (news) and our offering of that world to God (prayer). Though Carl Kassel has not continued to be my prayer partner, that liturgical experiment stayed with me for weeks afterward, changing the way I both heard the news and prayed for the world.

This was a morning prayer service led by Karen Ward, pastor of The Church of the Apostles in Seattle, an emergent/ “nu monastic” community sponsored by the ELCA, whose stated mission is “to *helpgodchangeeverything*, by participating in god's future within today's culture and our local zipcode, in intentional community around jesus christ.” Though this prayer service itself was at a conference, it represents the kind of worship in which Ward and her community engage each week: drawing together ancient practices and modern tech-savvy culture, particularly aimed at folks under 40 who have been alienated from—or have never been drawn to—more established Christian churches. Ward and the Church of the Apostles represent one of many “experiments” Steve Hayner describes in his article.

As Dr. Hayner helpfully points out, these new experiments in following Jesus are increasingly common around this country and in other parts of the world today. Chances are, even if you don't read Brian McLaren or theooze.com, you have seen headlines about the “emergent church” or “new monasticism,” or you have wondered about that storefront sign down the street that advertises something called “Spirit Garage”.

The gifts of this movement

As someone at the upper end of the age range to whom these experiments generally appeal, I confess that I am attracted to many aspects of the new movement mapped in this article. Their emphasis on authentic community is welcome in a culture which is increasingly mobile and increasingly fragmented. Their rejection of pretension and formality is refreshing (and occasionally alarming!). Their emphasis on living out Christian faith in every aspect of life challenges me in ways I need to hear.

Further, I appreciate that these new sorts of Christians often embrace ancient liturgical and spiritual practices, showing a hunger for traditions that connect them with Christians from earlier centuries. The darkness, the candles, the incense, the appeal to sacraments at the heart of worship—all of this may certainly be superficial, but it may also represent a desire to connect with the Christian movement that is older and deeper than itself. The appeal to multisensory worship is a helpful corrective to forms of worship that are primarily word-focused and do not engage the whole being of the worshiper. There is something right about the “emerging church” impulse to place worship at the center of Christian living, even as many of these communities also seek to dissolve the boundaries between “worship” and the rest of living.

I am also grateful for the ways in which these experiments challenge our old assumptions about what “church” means. As Hayner puts it, “these groups use the word “church” in a very different way than our culturally established references where “church” commonly refers to a building, a program, or an institutional structure. In these new communities, “church” reclaims the more biblical meaning of “gathering” and refers primarily to the people.” If our common use of the word “church” has indeed become synonymous with a building or an institution, then we need to rethink what we mean by church! As I learned in my elementary school choir growing up, “the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is not a resting place; the church is a PEOPLE.” Perhaps these new experiments in Christian discipleship are reminding us of this simple lesson, which we have forgotten in our anxiety about the survival of church as institution.

Questions to this new movement

Dr. Hayner's reflections prompt me in all of these ways to give thanks for the many and varied recent experiments in Christian living. His reflections also prompt me to ask some questions, which I will offer under the headings of *God*, *tradition*, and *culture*.

God. According to Hayner, these new kinds of Christians have left or have never joined more established churches, but they “have nevertheless discovered Jesus—or more broadly, they have newly discovered a relationship with the Triune God of the Bible.” My question is: how do we know? I do not doubt that the triune God encounters many who are outside of the established church, but I want some clues to help us discern when and how a community has come to know the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Surely this question needs to be asked of every Christian movement: is the God who is worshiped here the same one whom the broader Christian tradition has come to know through creation, on Sinai, in exile, in Jesus Christ, at Pentecost? If a community is intentionally distancing itself from more established churches, how do we know that we are worshiping the same God and not different gods of our own making?

Raising this question may itself be a gift to the more “established” Christian movement, who may too easily assume that we have the corner on the God-market simply because we stand in more continuity with past ways of speaking to and about God. Continuity with the past itself is no guarantee of faithfulness. Yet neither is novelty. How can we discern in each other genuine faith in the triune God of scripture?

Tradition. At several points, Hayner speaks about the “traditional church” and describes these new experiments as “non-traditional.” This raises the question: what is meant by “tradition” or “traditional”? As I noted earlier, many of these new experiments embrace ancient liturgical traditions, so not all “tradition” is being rejected. The slippery term “tradition” can easily become the foil for new movements to reject in favor of something else, so we need to ask what it is about “tradition” that is being rejected. Is it a certain formality of worship? a style of music? a family of church architecture? Is it ways of reading scripture? Language to and about God? Any of these might rightly be challenged. Very few institutional expressions characterize all Christian worship or all Christian tradition for all time.

Further, we need to recognize that there is within Christianity a deep tradition of questioning traditions—a strand of Christianity well represented in the Reformed branch of Protestantism to which Presbyterians belong! After all, it is 16th century theologian Heinrich Bullinger himself who wrote in the Second Helvetic Confession, “we do not permit ourselves, in controversies about religion or matters of faith, to urge our case with only the opinions of the fathers or decrees of councils; much less by received customs, or by a large number of those who share the same opinion, or by the prescription of a long time.” Perhaps the new ecclesial experiments, even as they react against certain traditions, might recognize some continuity with the tradition of Reformed Christianity, which has called the Christian tradition to be continually “reformed according to the Word of God.”

Culture. Dr. Hayner offers insightful comments about our contemporary U.S. culture that has contributed to the emergence of these new Christian experiments, noting that cultural context always shapes the responses of the faith community. He helpfully points out that American culture is increasingly fragmented, postmodern, and technologically centered, and that the Christian church is no longer in a position of privilege in most of our society. Yet Christian communities do not only respond to or reflect culture; they also shape culture. In saying this, I am not arguing that churches necessarily influence popular culture on a grand scale. I am simply pointing out that communities of faith do create their own cultures—their own practices, values, networks of relationships. Culture is not only something “out there” to which we react. It is also something “in here” that we continually shape and re-shape.

My own exposure to these new versions of Christianity raises an additional concern about culture. These experiments in church often seem to interact with only a particular segment of the American cultural spectrum: folks in their 20s and 30s, of social and economic privilege, who are technologically savvy and attentive to the popular media culture. But this does not describe the whole of contemporary American culture. Can preschoolers and elementary school children worship at Spirit Garage? Are people in their seventies and eighties full participants in the communities represented by Emergent Village? Is this a movement that can speak to my children and my parents, or is it a manifestation of church only for my generation and the generation just behind me?

Dr. Hayner concludes his essay by suggesting that this variety of ecclesial experiments should be regarded as a prophetic movement to our culture and to our

current way of doing church. I agree that those of us whose lives and livelihoods are bound up with current ecclesial models need to pay attention to this movement, to learn from and be challenged by it. Yet I think that both “church” and “culture” are themselves not monolithic, but quite varied realities. These new forms of being Christian do respond to some aspects of culture, but they also shape culture, and they both respond to and shape culture in particular, limited ways that may not speak to all people. Likewise, these emerging forms of Christianity do rightly challenge some recent ways of being church, but they also represent continuity with Christian movements in earlier centuries that have emphasized community, praxis, and prophetic speech—as well as Christian traditions that themselves challenge “tradition”! Some of the lessons we learn from this new movement may not be utterly new, but may be new versions of old truths that Christians throughout the centuries have had to learn over and over again.