

Jim Belcher, *DEEP CHURCH: A THIRD WAY BETWEEN EMERGING AND TRADITIONAL*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 233 pp. , pbk \$14, ISBN 978-0830837168. Reviewed by Frederika Oosterhoff.

The emerging church movement receives a lot of attention in evangelical circles, and not only there. Reformed theologians participate in the discussion. The topic is relevant for at least two reasons. Firstly, there is, as will become evident, much in the emerging movement that orthodox theologians rightly condemn and warn against.¹ But secondly, it is not possible to dismiss the entire movement as by definition a lost cause. It arose because of genuine and often justifiable discontent with traditional evangelicalism, and it is asking questions about the church that Reformed people also recognize. These questions concern matters such as contextualization, concern for the surrounding culture, social engagement, the Christian life, mission, and liturgical renewal. The emerging movement is on the postmodern side of the paradigm shift we are experiencing. This means that it may well be in the process of becoming the “new normal” in Protestantism. It certainly won’t pass us by; indeed, aspects of it are already affecting our churches.

The book under review should give us a good understanding of the movement. The author is an insider, who describes in this book his journey from a traditional evangelical church environment (Southern Baptist) via the emerging movement to the Presbyterian Church (PCA – a church that, like the CanRC, is a member of NAPARC). Well acquainted with both traditional churches and the emerging movement, Jim Belcher has come to reject these two in favour of a “third way,” one that avoids the weaknesses of the two traditions but applies their strengths. He calls that “third way” the Deep Church, and informs us of its features by describing how he applies the model in his work at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California, a PCA congregation that he himself planted and that he now serves as lead pastor.

The “why” of the emerging church

The book is easy to read, not in the last place because it combines theological analysis with the story of the author’s spiritual journey. By providing a description of the emerging movement based on personal experience, it engages the reader from the start. It is also balanced. This is refreshing. There is a tendency among conservatives to evaluate the movement negatively, and, as I already noted, they are often right in doing so. Belcher agrees with many of the criticisms. But he also gives *reasons* for the emerging movement by outlining the perceived weaknesses of traditional evangelicalism (and traditional Protestantism in general). He further distinguishes different streams in the very diverse

¹For justified criticisms I refer to Rev. Wes Bredenhof’s informative article on the topic in *Clarion*, 19 June 2009. He limits himself, however, to what I have called the radical wing of the emerging movement and is, in my opinion, rather too dismissive of all postmodernism, “soft” as well as “hard.”

emerging movement. As he observes, it is not fair to judge a complex movement by drawing attention only to worst-case scenarios. (He reminds Calvinists that they are not happy if opponents define Calvinism with reference to the burning of Servetus.) Belcher's treatment of opponents is generous. Rather than simply judging them from a distance, he has interacted with leaders on all sides of the debate, discussed theological issues with them, visited their services, followed their blogs, read and reread their books.

Although emergents disagree among themselves on many issues, they do have common complaints against traditional evangelicalism, and Belcher begins with listing these. They are: (1) the traditional church is captive to Enlightenment rationalism, intellectualism, and individualism; (2) it has too narrow a view of salvation, giving much attention to how an individual may be *saved*, but not enough to how he/she is to *live* as a Christian; (3) it places believing before belonging, using doctrine as a fence that keeps seekers out of the church; (4) its worship is uncontextualized and therefore does not speak to the prevailing culture; (5) by reducing spiritual formation to head knowledge and allowing rationalism to trump experience, its preaching has become ineffective; (6) its ecclesiology is weak in that it gives more attention to form than to mission; and (7) it is "tribal" and sectarian, unwilling to engage outsiders in a postmodern culture, and thereby failing to be a salt and a light.

A varied movement

The emerging movement is diverse. It contains radical, in-between, and moderate wings, and for a proper evaluation distinctions have to be made. Generally, the word "emerging" is used for the movement as a whole, and "emergent" for the more radical wing. Belcher, however, uses another distinction, namely that among Revisionists, Reconstructionists, and Relevantists. The first of these refers to the radical wing, which is associated with the names of Brian McLaren, Tony Jones, and Doug Pagitt. This group has bought quite deeply into postmodernist relativism. It tends to downplay and even reject aspects of biblical doctrine and is so concerned with contextualization that, according to its critics, it risks being insufficiently counter-cultural. The Reconstructionists are more orthodox theologically but have been influenced by Anabaptism and look for a different form of the church and its structures. Those closest to Belcher are the Relevantists, whom he describes as theologically conservative evangelicals who insist on a male pastorate, do not ask for changes in theology or church structure, but want to update worship styles, preaching techniques, liturgy and music, and so make the church more relevant to the surrounding society.

Defining the "third way"

Although he has sympathy for much of its strivings, Belcher admits to some "Calvinist misgivings" about the emerging church, including its moderate wing. Among these misgivings are the movement's tendencies to underestimate the need for roots, for well-established traditions, for creeds and confessions, and for denominational connections. He further notices a tendency to stress "doing" at the expense of believing. These misgivings

led him to his search for a third way. In the process, instead of rejecting all tradition, he made a backward movement to the ancient church – specifically to what he likes to call the Great or Athanasian Tradition – while at the same time continuing to give attention to the need for cultural engagement. This third way, that of the Deep Church, is gospel-centred, confessional, and committed to ancient teachings and the best of ancient church tradition. It is also contextual and missional, acknowledging that there is a public side to Christianity: God has promised to bless the *world*. At the same time it rejects the idea of a social gospel and liberation theology – pitfalls that Belcher believes some of the radical emergent leaders have not escaped.

Postmodern influences

As noted, Belcher follows the Deep Church model in his own church plant, Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, and a large part of the book (chapters 4 – 10) is devoted to a description of the teachings and practices of that church. We read about the Deep Church’s view of truth, evangelism, gospel, worship, preaching, ecclesiology, and culture.

In connection with the first point there is an interesting discussion on the evaluation of postmodernism in both the evangelical and the emerging church. Belcher notes that conservative Christians often reject postmodernism as irredeemably subjectivist and relativistic. His own appraisal is more nuanced. He admits that there is a “hard” postmodernism that rejects all objective truth and all outside authority. But not many in the emerging church, he adds, accept that position. They all, however, reject the opposite stance, namely Enlightenment “foundationalism.” This term refers to the modern belief in objective, self-evident truths that do not need the backing of revelation or of other external authorities and provide “invincible certainty.” Belcher adds that many Protestant Christians consciously or subconsciously subscribe to that modernist foundationalism, believing that by means of logic, reason, and science, they can find the right answers to all questions; that by these means they can even prove the truth of the Bible.

Rejecting modern rationalism

Postmodernism rejects modern intellectualism and foundationalism, and so does the emerging movement. The theory that most emerging leaders embrace, and that Belcher himself also adopts, has much in common, he says, with the critique of Enlightenment rationalism by such Christian thinkers as Abraham Kuyper, C.S. Lewis, Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius van Til, and Nicholas Wolterstorff, all of whom have stressed the limitations of human reasoning, including scientific reasoning. These thinkers have demonstrated that the Enlightenment theory is untenable and shown the need for epistemological and cognitive humility. Their postmodern followers – both Christians and unbelievers – have reinforced and spread the message. Under postmodernism science and

reason no longer have the last word. This means, among other things, that the arguments of science and reason against revelation are no longer self-evident either. In that sense, postmodernism has been a truly liberating movement, and emerging Christians have rightly welcomed and accepted it.

That acceptance does not imply for Belcher a denial of objective reality, nor does it imply a denial of our ability to attain true knowledge of this reality. That is indeed what “hard” postmodernism teaches, and some radical emergents have bought into it. Such “hard” postmodernists are anti-realists: for them there is no objective, universal truth nor is there an objective reality. Belcher rejects this position, insisting that there is an objective reality outside of us of which we can have knowledge. Unlike hard postmodernists, Christians are realists. Because God exists, we have a solid foundation for our knowledge; but that foundation is based not on reason or logic or science, but on faith. Christians believe in order that they may understand. Meanwhile, Belcher adds, we as Christians realize that, because of sin, we do not always see clearly, and this awareness will make us more gentle towards others, realizing that they may offer us valid insights.

Lowering the bar

Much of Belcher’s argumentation as described in the foregoing will have the approval of thoughtful Christians. More controversial, I believe, is his lowering of the bar for membership in the Deep Church. He agrees with the emerging movement that the traditional church has often used doctrine as a means to keep seekers and people with different traditions out of the church. Attempting to remove this obstacle, he suggests the establishment of a two-tier system, dividing the essentials of *orthodoxy*, the so-called Great Tradition (the top tier) from the *particularities* of different church traditions (the bottom tier). Those who agree with the top tier will be accepted as members, even if their particular traditions are different from those of Redeemer Presbyterian. Meanwhile the Presbyterian tradition will be taught and promoted. To quote:

We don’t require a member to subscribe to anything that is outside the bounds of Nicene Christianity and other evangelical churches. Prospective members don’t need to agree with every aspect of our theology. We rally around the unity of the gospel, and tolerate differences, particularly on matters like eschatology, baptism and covenant theology, even as we look to teach, deepen and mature our people, growing them in the Scriptures and in appreciation for our historical creeds and confessions (p. 67, see also pp. 157-9).

Belcher justifies this with a reference to the need for cognitive humility. While intending to uphold and teach the distinctives of his church, he nevertheless admits that its tradition is not infallible, that other traditions may have not only weaknesses but also strengths, and that we may learn from them. He keeps in mind that throughout its history the church has lacked agreement on several of the “particulars.” Moreover, the definition of doctrinal unity with reference to the top tier alone does away with the fundamentalist attitude that

“everyone is wrong but us,” and underscores Belcher’s own belief that the church should not be defined by what it is against but by what it is for. Not in the last place, it may put a break on evangelicalism’s “pathological tendency to fragment.”

It is hard not to sympathize with such arguments, but one wonders if it is really possible to have an orderly congregational life and worship if room must be made for varieties of opinion on truly important matters. Won’t profound differences in areas like baptism, eschatology and so on, threaten congregational unity rather than serving it? Or is it so that belief in these particularities is allowed but that the beliefs are not to be promoted and practised? In that case, it seems to me, there is little difference with traditional church practice.

Other questions

Another question is whether the Great Tradition – let’s say the orthodoxy of the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed – is indeed sufficient. Kevin DeYoung, a moderate critic of the emerging movement, reminds Belcher that these creeds dealt with issues that came to the fore in the early Christian centuries. Since then, however, various other questions have arisen, some of which have been dealt with in the Reformed confessions. Is it possible, he asks, to relegate issues like confessional statements on the atonement, justification, and the authority of the Bible to the bottom tier? In other words, is there a danger of becoming so ecumenical that important “particularities” will lose their importance?

Lastly, there is a habit of painting all the traditional churches with the same brush. That this cannot be done is evident by Belcher’s own association with Tim Keller’s Presbyterian church in Manhattan, which is not “typically traditional,” but quite apart from that, there certainly are important differences among both evangelical and Reformed churches.

By grace alone

In spite of such shortcomings, *Deep Church* is a rich and much-needed book. There is room also in our circles for serious thought on the issues he deals with: the role of intellectualism in the church, the call for a sanctified Christian life, the need to contextualize and to engage the surrounding culture and to show concern for outsiders, not only abroad, but also at home. The book is also important because of its biblical spirituality. It is Christ-centred throughout. Rejecting a “bounded-set” church (which keeps out people with different traditions), Belcher pleads for a “centred-set” one. He uses the picture drawn by two Australian authors, who write that the large cattle ranches in the desert areas of their country are without fences, but that nevertheless the cattle come home after their wanderings because of the well at the centre of the ranch. That well is a symbol for Christ.

He is and must be at the centre and He will define the body. Belcher adopts this metaphor and refers to his model as the “centred-set church.”

This Christ-centredness rules Belcher’s discussion of the Kingdom as well. We have seen that the emerging movement stresses the need for cultural engagement and Kingdom work. Some emergents, Belcher points out, try to engage in this work while at the same time under-emphasizing the redemptive work of Christ; yet the atonement alone makes such work possible. If the doctrine of atonement is ignored, we cannot enter the kingdom or work in it. *“...Only people radically transformed by the grace of God can live differently. In this sense, the church presents a radical alternative communion to the world. We are to stand apart from the world and its idols, but at the same time welcome the stranger into our midst through acts of hospitality”* (p. 191). Any other view of the kingdom tends toward legalism and will fail. And what applies to kingdom work applies to the entire Christian life. With reference to a work by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Belcher warns that here, too, legalism easily threatens, often because we confuse justification with sanctification. *“Once we become Christians,”* he writes, *“we ignore our justification – that we are saved by grace, through faith, on account of Christ – and focus on obedience, sanctification. We stop preaching the gospel to ourselves and keep trying to live the Christian life. But we can’t live up to the ideal and get discouraged...”* (p. 154).

The solution is always to put justification before sanctification – in our personal lives and in our kingdom work. It’s all of one cloth, and all depends on grace alone. The church therefore must, as Belcher so clearly points out, be gospel- and Christ-centred.