

The Cotton-wool Gospel and the Emerging Church Movement

by Jeremy James

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles warn again and again about the infiltration of the church by wolves in sheep's clothing. These warnings are unusually strong and are meant to put all Christians on alert. Alas, few Christians have been paying attention. The wolves today are exceptionally active...and exceptionally clever in how they pursue their objectives and misrepresent, distort and undermine the true message of Christ. Many of them are trained and funded by anti-Christian organisations whose goal is the destruction of true Bible-based Christianity. Indeed, some highly respected 'Christian' authors and leaders today are willing servants of these antichrist groups.

We shouldn't be surprised by this. Rather it is something we should expect Satan to do in his ongoing quest to destroy Christianity and lure even more victims into his web of deceit. Deception is the hallmark of the age we live in.

The following is a list of some of the key differences between true Biblical Christianity and the 'new' watered-down version which has taken hold in the United States and elsewhere. In my view, every true born-again Christian should become familiar with this cotton-wool gospel, the clever way it is packaged and presented, and the real agenda behind it.

This 'new' type of Christianity is often referred to as the Emerging Church Movement. Not all churches which subscribe to this philosophy are formally linked to the Emerging Church or have adopted all of its characteristics. Nevertheless, a significant number of the following features will be evident in most of them, even in churches which formerly stood with true conviction for the gospel of Christ.

To make the list a little easier to follow, I have sorted the characteristics into groups. However, like the leaven that the Lord warned us about, each has a tendency to spread until the entire body is affected. So, if your church has only a few of these characteristics at present, be watchful nonetheless – the Emergent mind-set has an unusual appetite for new ideas.

A great deal more could be said about each of the characteristics, but a short summary must suffice:

God's Judgment

1. There is little emphasis in the Emerging Church on the judgment of God and the offensiveness of sin in the eyes of the LORD. The sinfulness of sin is quietly pushed into the background. The degree to which our sin offends and pains the LORD is all but forgotten

2. As a result there is little or no emphasis on repentance or the need for repentance. Christians are hardly ever reminded that even after they are saved they are still sinners and need to repent daily. True Biblical repentance involves turning away from sin and, with God's help, changing those aspects of our lives which are displeasing to Him.
3. The fear of God is either ignored or greatly downplayed. This is central to Scripture but it hardly finds a mention in the cotton-wool gospel. Instead the emphasis is almost exclusively on God as 'love,' as though His love was in some way separate from His impartial judgment and His awesome holiness.
4. This in turn means that the concept of hell is pushed far into the background. When it is discussed it is generally treated as a term that has often been misunderstood or over-emphasized in the past. The cotton-wool gospel finds it very difficult to preach that God will judge and punish sinners. Many prefer to think of hell as annihilation rather than a real place of torment.
5. A net consequence of all this is that the Emerging Church has almost completely lost sight of the need for unconditional, repentant obedience to the will of God. Emerging Church leaders place little emphasis on the central importance of unwavering obedience to the word of God and His unchanging commandments.

The Bible as the Only Word of God

6. There is a marked shift away from the Bible as the infallible and literal word of God. It is increasingly being seen by the Emerging Church as a 'wisdom' book, much like the so-called holy books of other world religions.
7. There is very little emphasis on daily Bible study or any Bible study regime. Instead members are urged to study the writings of modern experts. Many of the books recommended by Emerging Church leaders are in step with the Emerging Church agenda and often contain material which Christians of the 19th century would have found offensive.
8. There is a strong emphasis on psychology and modern self-help philosophy in the Emerging Church movement. Many passages in Scripture are being interpreted as though they were early versions of modern psychological concepts.
9. There is no standard Bible translation. Instead Christians are being encouraged to seek out a translation that suits their particular needs, including translations based on superficial scholarship and weak theology. Some of these so-called 'bibles' are little more than a human paraphrase of the original text.
10. The Emerging Church is very vague about the Rapture, the Tribulation and the Millennium. It tries to justify this by interpreting many passages in Scripture as allegorical rather than literal.

11. The Emerging Church is very slow to defend the description of creation that is given in the first eleven chapters of Genesis. Many of its leaders endorse Intelligent Design, which implies that God guided the development of life over a long period of time to ‘create’ the life-forms that we see today. This doctrine is unbiblical.
12. The Emerging Church tends to ignore prophecy, even though around a quarter of the Bible is prophetic and half of its prophecies still lie in the future. This ties in with the way the Emerging Church downplays God’s judgment. Since most prophecies which have yet to be fulfilled are tied into God’s judgment in one way or another, the study of prophecy, especially as it relates to the End Time, is seriously neglected.

True Salvation

13. The Emerging Church seldom mentions the blood of Christ and substitutionary atonement. Many newcomers are given the impression that Christ died for us because he loved us (which is true) but not that he died *in our place*. Increasingly Jesus is being portrayed as a perfect role model instead of Lord and Saviour, our High Priest and Intercessor with the Father.
14. The term *Born Again* is virtually unknown in the Emerging Church. The idea that true salvation requires that we be born again is hardly ever mentioned. Instead salvation is reduced to the formal acceptance of Jesus, membership of a Christian church, and participation in Christian fellowship.
15. The Bible clearly teaches that good works are the fruit of salvation and *not* the cause. The Emerging Church places a lot of attention on good works and social programs. However, this is being done in such a way as to blur the distinction between salvation by works and salvation as a pure, unconditional gift from God through the blood of Christ – a gift which man cannot earn. The Emerging Church presupposes the continual expansion of Christianity and the ongoing improvement in living conditions throughout the world – which is very different from what the Bible teaches.

New Age Sympathies

16. There is an over-emphasis on the ‘feel good’ factor in the Emerging Church. Christians are urged to feel good about themselves and to stop thinking of themselves as fallen, sinful creatures. The idea that people are basically good is a key part of the New Age philosophy and contradicts what the Bible teaches about the fallen, sinful nature of man.
17. Christians are being taught that the Bible is designed, at least in part, to promote human welfare and prosperity and that it contains ‘principles’ for material success. All one needs to do is follow the formula.

18. The idea that God is unconditional love is a major component of the New Age movement, but the understanding of 'love' in the New Age is very different from that of the Bible. The Bible makes it perfectly clear that God's love is *not* unconditional. The New Age understanding of love completely excludes God's judgment and righteousness, as well as our need for total obedience to His holy Word. Not surprisingly, therefore, this phony concept of love is very popular today and has been incorporated, perhaps unknowingly, into the Emerging Church movement. This in turn is leading to what is called 'universalism,' the belief that, in the fullness of time, through God's supposedly unconditional love, everyone will be saved and few souls, if any, will be condemned to hell.
19. Like the New Age movement, the Emerging Church attaches a lot of importance to experience. Followers are often encouraged to interpret Scripture in accordance with their experiences and to live accordingly. This is the very opposite of what the Bible teaches. We should interpret our experiences in accordance with Scripture and not the other way around.
20. The Emerging Church is very fond of 'techniques.' These are portrayed as tried and proven methods for getting closer to the LORD. Chief among these is contemplation, especially as it is taught in the writings of Thomas Merton, the Catholic monk who died in 1968. Among the other techniques advocated by the Emerging Church leadership are meditation, visualization, yoga, chanting, repetitive prayer, and *lectio divina*. The Bible does not teach any techniques based on the use of visualization, imagination or the emptying of one's mind. Rather it warns against all such practices. The meditation mentioned in the Bible is thoughtful reflection on the word of God and His holy works – which is very different from modern forms of meditation. Instead of warning of these dangers the Emerging Church actually promotes them.
21. The Emerging Church is also very open to the use of dreams for spiritual purposes. This too is central to the New Age movement. While God may sometimes express His holy will for us through our dreams, the regular use of dreams as a means of interpreting or discerning the will of God in our lives is fraught with difficulty and wide open to abuse by deceiving spirits. Loyal disciples of the Emerging Church movement are not warned of the need to be extremely discerning in this area and to measure any seemingly significant dream against the exacting standard of God's holy Word.

Ecumenism

22. The Evangelical Church in the US moved away from the principle of Separation in the 1940s. *Separation* is the Biblical doctrine that Christians should separate themselves from non-believers and worldly values as much as possible. The rejection of this principle is now leading many churches to go further and seek common ground with other religions. The Emerging Church is very sympathetic to the view that Christianity should be placed on a more Ecumenical footing. For example, the document, *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (1994) was signed by many leading Evangelical and Roman Catholic scholars in the US.

23. The Emerging Church believes that Christians have something to learn from other faiths, including Buddhism, Islam and the contemplative tradition of the Roman Catholic church. They believe that all religions have *some* truth and that Christians should learn to identify this truth and use it as a basis for inter-faith dialogue. Instead of issuing a loud warning against the dangers of ecumenism, the Emerging Church is both supporting it and taking active measures to promote it.

Israel

24. The Emerging Church is rapidly moving away from a focus on Israel, as well as God's promises to the Jewish people. Like the Roman Catholic church, the Emerging Church is attracted to 'Replacement Theology,' which teaches that all of God's promises to Israel transferred to the church after Pentecost.

Outer form of the Church

25. The Emerging Church attaches undue importance to strong organization and effective forms of management, often with reference to what has worked best in the business world. The criteria that are used to determine what is best for the church are often those of the world and not those of the New Testament.
26. The Emerging Church directs a great deal of its activity and energy toward increasing its membership. It is concerned less with bringing sinners to repentance than with opening the door to new members in a congenial and agreeable manner and trusting them to come to repentance in their own time.
27. Many of the songs used by the Emerging Church movement have weak scriptural content or inappropriate music.

A Judge-not Mentality

28. While everything we do should be done with love, this love is not permissive. It is not tolerant of sin but includes measured, thoughtful rebuke and correction where appropriate. However, the Emerging Church is deeply committed to a 'judge not' attitude towards one's neighbour and even toward society in general. Even though the Bible teaches that all Christians should endeavour to ensure the purity of church doctrine and the godly conduct of its members, the 'judge not' philosophy – which is designed to promote tolerance and inclusiveness – does not allow them to voice their concerns.
29. The Emerging Church endorses the principle, 'In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.' There is no scriptural basis for this. The principle is used by the Emerging Church to justify its ecumenism, the looseness of its theology, its active participation in the world, and its de facto acceptance of many worldly values. The Bible clearly teaches that many of today's social norms are in conflict with what our heavenly Father requires of us. We don't judge the sinner but we are required to judge the sin. The Emerging Church movement finds it very difficult to do this and routinely turns a blind eye to homosexual behaviour and divorce.

30. Since the Emerging Church is non-judgmental with regard to other forms of Christianity (“in non-essentials liberty”), it hardly ever warns the flock of apostasy, false teachers, or the countless threats posed by the world to the purity of Christian doctrine.
31. Many Emerging Church leaders are critical of what they describe as ‘Christian fundamentalists,’ die-hards who stick to a supposedly narrow interpretation of Scripture. In its pursuit of ‘tolerance’ and inclusiveness, the Emerging Church movement is prepared on occasion to set aside or compromise the unconditional authority of the Bible. Once this starts to happen, further slippage is inevitable.

Beware of the Enemy

32. The Emerging church hardly ever speaks of Satan as a powerful supernatural being, an individual bent upon destroying Christianity and luring everyone he can to eternal damnation. They downplay his existence, his power, his methods, and his goals. And they greatly underestimate his control over this world.
33. The Emerging Church gives little recognition to the very grave dangers posed by the occult, New Age philosophy, eastern mysticism, yoga, and so forth. Neither does it seem to regard the demonic realm as an ever-present threat to modern man.

CLOSING COMMENT: None of the above characteristics (1-33) have any scriptural foundation and many of them are in direct conflict with Scripture. The Emerging Church teaches a cotton-wool gospel that has no power to save anyone. It is warm and soft and pleasing to the touch, but devoid of spiritual nourishment. All who subscribe to it are being led gently toward the long-planned One World Religion that will usher in the Antichrist.

“Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent...”
– Lord Jesus, *The Book of Revelation* 2:5

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Further reading:
Faith Undone by Roger Oakland
A Time of Departing by Ray Yungen
Redefining Christianity by Bob DeWaay
New Evangelicalism by David Cloud
What Is the Emerging Church? by David Cloud
The Great Evangelical Disaster by Francis Schaeffer

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