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“A New Kind Of Christian”

Emergent Christianity and the Redefinition of Contemporary Christian
Doctrinal and Social Boundaries

~
Hannah Ruth Allen

May, 2012

“Doctrine is a wonderful servant and a horrible master”

~

Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore an emerging group of Christians who claim to understand their faith in an ever-changing culture. Emergent Christians are Christians who say they have experienced the power and love of God, but believe that Christianity as it is expressed today, fails to mirror and embrace their experiences as Christians. These individuals' experience of the Christian faith led them to protest violence, embrace questions of sexuality, challenge traditional gender roles, question political authority, and for some, reject the notion of a God that condemns, or reject or the existence of a physical heaven or hell.

My research seeks to understand what a faith that is growing out of experience, rather than established by doctrine, might look like. This paper seeks to distinguish emergent Christians from New Evangelical Christians, understanding that something fundamentally different separates the two. On the surface, the New Evangelicals and emergent Christians might seem indistinguishable, but it is the emergent Christian approach to doctrine, an approach that fuels their desire to experience God here and now, that is causing conflict and disruption among more conservative evangelical communities. By adopting George Lindbeck's cultural linguistic approach to doctrine, Ninian Smart's worldview analysis of the relationship of doctrine to other dimensions of religion, , [David Loy's interpretation of](#) the function of narrative, , [Anya Peterson Royce's anthropological understanding](#) of style, I develop not only a different understanding of the role that doctrine and experience play in emergent Christianity, but also [explain](#) how these relationships to doctrine and experience [divide](#) emergent Christianity and New Evangelicals.

Emergent Christians have [not been analyzed](#) within a religious studies framework. Thus, this work [applies the](#) theories of religious scholars outside of the evangelical Christian conversation to [interpret the religious perspectives of both](#) emergent and New Evangelical [Christians, as reflected in the literature they have written and in the](#) personal interviews [I conducted with them](#), in order to offer a new and more comprehensive understanding of emergent Christianity and its relationship to the rest of the Christian community.

Forward

Throughout my thesis I emphasize the importance of the emergent Christian approach to narrative and experience, [and I explore](#) how narrative and experience provide a vehicle for conveying truth and understanding. Therefore, I find it only appropriate to begin this project with my own narrative, one that explores how my experiences have shaped, influenced and led me to begin my study of emergent Christianity.

Fall, 2005

Baltimore County, Maryland

The sun begins to set and the cold weather picks up-causing the group leaders to usher us all inside. After spending the first half an hour outside playing frisbee and touch football, we gather in the old church classroom. Accompanied by the smell of leftover pizza and stale potato chips, the group of us high-school students stand around, arms folded, eyes focused on the projector in front of us. The two young youth group leaders pick up their guitars and begin to play their rendition of "Brown-eyed girl" followed by a few acoustic hymns (usually something like, "Come Thou Fount" or "Be Thou My Vision"), finishing off with the youth group classic, "Prince of Peace" which of course-invites a two-part harmony.

The room settles after our singing fades and the group of us young preppers sits down cross-legged on the floor. One leader stands up and welcomes any new faces, and acknowledges the old before opening up in prayer.

"Father God, I just thank You for bringing us all here together. We value this time every Tuesday night that we spend just being in the presence of Your word and Your peace. We ask that You use this time tonight to bring us closer to You, and to remember who we are in You.

*In Your name we pray,
Amen."*

My family isn't religious. I knew that we were Presbyterian, and besides being Protestant, I couldn't really explain any further the differences between that and a Catholic. I cannot remember how I ended up at these Tuesday night youth group meetings. One could say that it was the result of the classic evangelical move of "your best-friend-goes-to-youth-group-every-Tuesday-night-and-always-talks-about-how-amazing-it-is-and-you-find-yourself-mildly-interested-so-you-go-and-check-it-out" kind-of thing. Or, taking the more spiritual route: *It had nothing to do with me-I didn't find youth group, youth group found me.*

But *this* Christianity, this *Jesus*, was nothing like I had ever seen or heard of. My youth group friends talked about this Jesus like he lived next door, yet they dressed in the Baltimore prep style I had known, listened to the same music I did, while maintaining this sickeningly precious outlook on life. After my first meeting, they had me. I was envious of their passion, their hope and their community. I wanted to be with them, sing with them and talk with them. But as much as I participated in this group of young evangelicals, something never clicked.

God didn't click.

I had questions, I had doubts and I had frustrations. This Christian message, this story of the saving grace of Jesus was beautiful, to say the least, but I didn't buy it. Surprisingly though, I wasn't turned off by this Christianity. Instead of shying away from my new group of friends, I dug deeper. I lost myself in the local library, poring over Christian apologetics, theological dialogues, blogs and movies. I had never been so interested in anything else, and all I wanted to do was learn more, experience more.

I'll admit-I was doing a damn good job looking like I belonged. However, I feared those conversations that would take place every once in a while where my friends would stand up and share their "Walk with Jesus" or "When they finally accepted Jesus into their hearts"- hoping that I would never be asked to offer my thoughts. While I didn't *actually* have a story, everyone else around me began to think that I did. My family, my teachers and my friends outside of youth group identified me with this community- even though I inwardly rejected these associations. But I concealed my identity, for I wanted to continually be accepted by my Christian friends, even if it meant that I had to hold back my doubts and frustrations.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The classic evangelical words of John 3:16 hid in the back of my head, were continually spoken by my friends, my youth group leaders, and were scattered throughout all of the Christian literature that I was immersed in. This guy, Jesus, was attractive. His concern for the poor, hope for all of humanity, and his care for peace and justice were provocative while his love remained empathetic. His uniqueness couldn't be denied, yet I couldn't bring myself to agree with some of the theology that came with this "Christianity" they were sharing. I fought with my group leaders about major pieces of doctrine that excluded and ostracized others. I hated how some Christians acted towards topics of gender, sexuality, the environment and social justice.

But the truth was, I didn't deny God. Rather, I felt let down by Him. For how could He let me feel so alone and misunderstood-so *different* from these other Christians because I couldn't buy into their particular belief system? I couldn't relate to my strong

evangelical friends with their sense of certainty and conviction, yet I was having experiences and encounters with this “God” character that kept drawing me back into this community, conversations and books. Did these longings, sentiments or feelings mean anything unless I said the magic prayer and “accepted Jesus into my heart”?

While studying in the library my senior year of high school I traveled [past](#) what seemed to be endless shelves of religion books, and found my way to the Christian theology section. I passed over the Bonhoffer, the Osteen, the Haggard, and the Graham. I skipped the Kant and the James, and glazed over the Taylor. I came across a hardback book, whose odd rectangular shape and bright pictures and unique cover might have indicated that it belonged in the contemporary art section. Yet it was the title that drew me in: *Velvet Elvis*.

As I slowly opened up the cover, I slumped down the middle of the stacks, resting my back behind the rest of the Christian authors, and began to flip through. My eyes settled on a particular grouping of words:

This book is for those who need a fresh take on Jesus and what it means for us to live the kind of life he teaches us to live...This is the place that I write from: a place of joy and freedom, as a member of a community wanting to invite others to come along on the journey. We are just getting started. I have as many questions as answers, and I’m convinced that we’re only scratching the surface. What I do know is that the pursuit of Jesus is leading us backward as much as forward.¹

As I kept reading I began to sense that author Rob Bell was articulating similar sentiments [to what](#) I had felt after scavenging around for answers within Christianity. He too didn’t have it all together, and through this work, he was [challenging](#) the rigid constraints, which are embraced by my evangelical friends, [as not really fitting his](#)

¹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 14.

[experience from his “place of joy and freedom... as a member of a community wanting to invite others to come along on the journey.”](#) Bell’s book explored what a Christianity focused on *this life* looked like, and offered a new perspective on the harsh doctrines that I had never been able to embrace.

Bell’s words were different. The Christianity Bell claimed to be “re-painting” was new to me and somewhat... refreshing.

Rob Bell’s *Velvet Elvis* would be the first book of dozens in my journey to understand the difference between this community of Christians, and the seemingly similar community of evangelicals that I had experience in high school.

Maybe my story is similar to yours. Or-maybe this is the first time that you’ve ever heard a narrative like this. Whatever your experience with Christianity, God, or faith, each one of us somehow know that life gets complicated when you have experiences that cause isolation, alienation, frustration, and when those experiences are not embraced or understood by a community. I’ve been there, and the feeling of loneliness is overwhelming but the fear of rejection is almost worse. I hope, however, that this work is one step in the direction of affirming the validity and truth behind experiences and encounters with the divine.

Introduction

Many of the new shifts taking place in Christian practice [today](#) cater towards a younger, more hip, socially aware, and environmentally conscious generation of students and young adults. These Christians are consistently seeking new ways to relate back to the old history of the faith by adapting and modernizing church practices. More recently, many Christian authors, scholars and practitioners have been [connecting](#) their faith to issues of social justice, environmental sustainability, [and](#) [re-evaluating](#) the relationship of faith and politics. These young, 20-30 something Christians are discussing theology in bars, and coffee shops and are translating their practice to fit a more contemporary and ever-changing lifestyle.

In my research, I have identified [these](#) individuals as New Evangelicals.

However, within this young evangelical population, I noticed some Christians who were not satisfied with the traditional understandings of doctrine. These authors, pastors, and individuals question the literal existence of heaven and hell, challenge traditional atonement theories and push to make sense of their doubts within the faith. Within the evangelical community they are often singled out, criticized, labeled as heretics and dismissed as “lost” and “confused”.

In my research, I have identified this community as the emergent Christians.²

[My](#) survey of the literature and interviews with both groups leads me to believe that the [underlying tension in the](#) ongoing dialogue between these two, seemingly

² Many of these individuals self identify as ‘emergent’ or ‘emerging’ Christians. However, there are some who exhibit the same characteristics of what I’ve identified as emergent, but do not self-identify with the community. This is either because they do not know the term, or they are not concerned with specific group identification within Christianity. That being said, I have had to put labels on certain individuals in order to better discuss the two communities, even if the individuals themselves do not identify with how I’ve labeled them.

identical, but internally very different Christian communities, [stems from the](#) emergent Christians' [efforts to articulate their experience](#) of what it means to be "Christian". In response to their understanding of the faith, emergent Christians have received much criticism and backlash from New Evangelicals. However, I believe this response stems from a fundamental difference of interpretation of the function of doctrine within a religious group. Thus, [if we step outside this intra-Christian dialogue and](#) examine [the tension between emergent and New Evangelical Christians](#) under a different framework, [we might understand](#) emergent Christians better.

This work seeks to explore who these emergent Christians are, how they differ from the seemingly similar New Evangelicals and the implications that arise from their relationships. I seek to reclaim the study of emergent Christianity using contemporary models of religion in order to better understand how the group functions. Because the majority of the work on emergent Christians is found within the evangelical literature circles, it is crucial to bring the study of emergent Christians back under the lens of contemporary religious scholarship for evaluation.

[I have concluded from my](#) evaluation of the primary literature and personal interviews [that emergent Christians hold a completely different understanding of the function](#) [and relative importance of](#) doctrine [from the New Evangelicals](#). For emergent Christians, doctrine is just one dimension of six within emergent Christianity, [and](#) experience and narrative [play a more important role than](#) doctrine [in defining their social boundaries](#). [In other words, in contrast to the crucial function doctrine has for New Evangelical to define the Christian community, emergent Christians play down doctrine, and instead stress that shared experiences and shared stories define who is a Christian.](#)

~

The methodology portion of this paper presents an overview of the ways that I researched and selected my materials and sources. I outline the different sources from which I draw and then give a brief outline of the two communities of Christians, the emergents and the New Evangelicals. In the literature review, I present the theories that are relevant for understanding emergent Christians. I draw my theoretical framework from contemporary scholars of religion. By doing this, I determine a way to interpret the function of doctrine among emergent Christians in a way that allows for them be better understood.

Chapter one discusses by theme, the different ideas that stood out within the primary literary sources. Chapter two presents the themes and ideas addressed in the interviews that I conducted. Finally, Chapter three analyzes the evidence found within the primary literary sources and interviews in relation to the contemporary theories of religious studies and summarizes the relationship of emergent Christians and the function of doctrine. I then offer further questions for inquiry and potential directions for future study.

Methodology

Since this thesis is not so much a historical investigation but rather an analysis of [how emergent and New Evangelical Christian talk about themselves and their relations to one another](#), I decided that the best way to research [them](#) was to go directly into the conversation. After some preliminary research, I identified three different groups of people and identities that I needed to explore:

- 1) [People who identify themselves as emergent Christians](#)
- 2) [Conservative evangelicals reacting to and in dialogue with emergent Christians](#)
- 3) [New Evangelicals \(both non- emergent and “emerging” Christians\) reacting to and in dialogue with emergent Christians](#)

My research is thus [compiled](#) from interviews, books written by both emergent and emerging Christians, critiques from more conservative Christians, as well as posts from particularly prominent blogs read by many Christians in the emergent community ([who recommended them to me](#)). [And in order to at least attempt to describe what I observed about them objectively and analytically, as particular examples of general types of religious expression](#), I’ve drawn from [relevant](#) theory developed by scholars of religious studies outside of [this](#) evangelical dialogue

Definitions

I will [focus primarily on](#) two communities of Christians: the emergent Christians and the New Evangelical Christians, [though occasionally I will refer to “conservative evangelicals” from whom contemporary scholars have distinguished the New Evangelicals](#).³ Because of little scholarly analysis of the two groups and the fact that [that self-designation is often at issue in the emergent/evangelical Christian dialogue](#), I have

³ Alan Wolfe, “Opening of the Evangelical Mind,” *Atlantic Monthly* 286:4 (October 2000): *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Free Press, 2003).

had to develop my own precise criteria for the terms ‘emergent’ and ‘New Evangelical’⁴ in order to better describe these communities.⁵ It should be noted that often some groups don’t refer to themselves as ‘emergent’ though I have classified them as so, and vice versa. The same goes for the New Evangelicals. However, in support of my decision, I note anthropologist Barbara Ward’s claim: “There is no reason why anyone attempting an outsider’s analysis of another culture-or his own as if from the outside-should not erect whatever categories seem to him to be the most useful”.⁶ For my research, in order for the analysis to be clear, I had to develop useful categories with which to identify the communities. [I have outlined the characteristics and details of the two groups below.](#)

Emergent Christians

[The term “emergent,”](#) much like the term ‘evangelical’ or ‘Christian’, has been used in many different contexts and situations. [Thus](#) it is crucial that I explicitly define how I will use the term throughout this work. Additionally, [I should point out that the term is still part of a dynamic debate, and that the definition will continue to evolve even as I write.](#) This paper does not [intend to evaluate the validity of the](#) specific theological arguments and truth claims used by emergent Christians [in their self-definition.](#) So if one is looking to use this work as a reference or resource of emergent identity, I must [remind the readers that](#) that I’ve developed [my categorization of “emergent Christians”](#) from all sorts of different definitions, resources, and even conversations. However, I [suggest Tony](#)

⁴ [In Alan Wolfe’s article, *The Opening of the Evangelical Mind*, he distinguishes a group of evangelicals \(whom I identify more or less in this work as New Evangelicals\) who have moved away from the more traditional, conservative identities embraced in the 1980’s. The article articulates how “Now Evangelical thinkers are trying to revitalize their tradition”. *The Atlantic Online*, October 2000](#)

⁵ [See Appendix: Emergent and New Evangelical Christianity Glossary.](#)

⁶ Barbara E. Ward, “Not Merely Players: Drama, Art and Ritual in Traditional China,” *Man* 14, no. 1 (1979): 18-39.

[Jones's *The New Christians*](#) as a [good](#) overview of Emergent Christianity as of 2012. [His](#) introduction to emergent Christianity has been particularly helpful to me for understanding the basic theological and sociological characteristics that make emergent Christians unique.

Emergent identity

[According to Tony Jones](#), the term 'emergent' came out of a [group of leaders](#), a community of "pastor-theologians" who were consistently meeting together to discuss their alienation [they felt](#) from current church practices and their experiences within the evangelical community. Often these leaders mention that they didn't feel "at home" within their church communities, and failed to fit into specific theological, social and ideological categories. Instead of abandoning their faith altogether, these Christians found each other and began to see that they were not the only ones experiencing this sense of homelessness and confusion with the church and their Christian community.⁷ [Typically emergent Christians come from a more conservative, evangelical upbringing and experience some kind of a 'faith crisis' after having many experiences within the church and Christian community at large, as did these pastors.](#) Jones writes that they [had been](#) "tagged with phrases 'emerging church' and 'emerging leaders' in years past, and those phrases came up again on this conference call"⁸. Jones mentions that at the end of that conversation the term "emergent" was born.

Emergent Christians [attempt not only](#) to re-invigorate [the church in ways](#) that relate better to the ever-changing cultural context, but also [to](#) understand that experiences

⁷ Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 70.

⁸ Ibid., xvii.

within the Christian community and a developing cultural context lead to the exploration of a new understanding of doctrine. Some of the new practices might be worshipping in old coffee shops, engaging in theological discussions over a few beers at a local bar, or meeting casually after a Sunday service in the church basement to explore more deeply the concepts highlighted at the normal service. The church music often consists of hymns played with an acoustic feeling, or might be sprinkled with contemporary cross-over artists like Sufjan Stevens. The leadership is either held by one or two individuals or spread throughout the group, each member taking a turn from meeting to meeting.

Emergent Christians are found in many different denominations and groups of Christians. It is not its own particular denomination or new branch of Christianity. Rather, emergent Christians find value and substance in many different aspects of particular denominations while embracing and acknowledging both the positive and negative contributions. Brian McLaren, perhaps the leading figurehead of the emergent Church, explores the concept of emergent by using the analogy of a cross section of a tree. He comments, “Each ring represents not a replacement of the previous rings, not a rejection of them, but an embracing of them, a compromising of them, and inclusion of them in something bigger.”⁹ Similarly, Jones describes the emergent church as “...a mash-up of old and new, of theory and practice, of men and women, and of mainline, evangelical, and, increasingly, Roman Catholic Christians.”¹⁰

What really distinguishes the emergent church from all other forms of new and innovative forms of Christianity is the theological relationship of developing forms of

⁹ Brian McLaren: *A generous orthodoxy: Why I am A Missional + Evangelical+ Post/protestant + Liberal/Conservative + Biblical + Charismatic/Contemplative + Fundamentalist/Calvinist + Anabaptist/Anglican + Methodist + Catholic + Green + Incarnational + Depressed-Yet-Hopeful + Emergent + Unfinished Christian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 314.

¹⁰ Jones, *The New Christians*, xix.

practice [to](#) changing doctrines. Jones puts the connection in this way: “If the emergent church has anything rare or even unique, it’s this nexus of theory and praxis, of innovative theology and innovative practice. These [twin](#) impulses of rethinking theology and rethinking church are driving the nascent growth of emergent Christianity”.¹¹

New Evangelical identity

New Evangelicals and emergent Christians [are virtually indistinguishable](#) on the surface in terms of physical characteristics. Both New Evangelicals and emergent Christians have embraced [the](#) changing culture in terms of clothing style and the way that both communities “do” church. Often both of these communities worship in unconventional places such [as](#) rented schools and gutted coffee houses. Further the worship is contemporary, but also integrates old hymns paired with acoustic guitar and soft drumming. In my research and personal experiences I’ve heard both New Evangelicals and emergent Christians described as “hipster” or “alternative” [and I’ve seen them](#) dressed in Urban Outfitters-like clothing, occasionally sporting thick black glasses. It is crucial to point out that with regards to social concerns, New Evangelicals and emergent Christians [both](#) apply the Biblical call for justice to current [world](#) crises such as global warming/environment depletion, poverty and violence. This makes it that much more difficult [_](#) on the surface, [to](#) understand the distinctions between New Evangelicals and emergent Christians.

While their style and approach to “doing” church may change and evolve with the ever-transforming culture, what makes New Evangelicals distinct from emergent Christians is that this changing culture does not affect or influence their theology. New Evangelicals respond to the emergent call to re-interpret the role and function of doctrine

¹¹ Ibid., xix.

by asserting that there are things within Christianity that must never be changed. New Evangelicals Kluck and DeYoung claim,

“The reason [we] love Christianity and the Bible is that [we] think they are really the only things in this world that don’t need to be periodically “repainted” or reframed.”¹² One

theological concept that fundamentally distinguishes the two communities is the New

Evangelicals’ firm stance on salvation, and the relationship of Jesus Christ to humankind.

This is often presented in a clearly outlined doctrinal system. [Kluck and DeYoung](#)

[express this](#) theology [with Biblical](#) proof texts [and also](#) emphasize the significance of accepting these crucial doctrinal elements [as follows](#):

“Personal faith in Christ, for it to be genuine and saving, must have propositional content.

We must believe that Jesus is the One (“I am he”). We must believe He is from above (John 8:23), the light of the world (v.12), and sent from the Father (v. 16). We may think we have a wonderful relationship with Jesus, and we may even love him, but unless we believe he is the Christ, the Son of God, we will not have life in His name (20:31)”¹³.

In sum, [while](#) New Evangelicals explore [new ways](#) of reaching out to both Christians and [non-Christians](#) by reinvigorating their church practices to [appear more “hip” and more modern](#), [their](#) rigid theology [seems to](#) remain unaffected.

¹² Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why we’re not emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Chicago: Moody, 2008), 64.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 74.

Literature Review: Theories and Texts

For this work, I've identified the following pertinent and relevant texts and theories to be used in [developing](#) a framework with [in](#) which to understand emergent Christianity. [In addition to the](#) primary sources on emergent Christians and New Evangelicals written from [by representatives of](#) the emergent [and](#) New Evangelical [communities](#), I [introducing](#) four different theories [from the academic](#) study of religion [to supply an appropriate critical framework for discussing them](#). This has yet to be done when evaluating and studying emergent Christianity.

[In addition, I have consulted the work of three scholars of the recent history of](#) New Evangelical Christian movements in America, specifically Randall Balmer, Alan Wolfe, [and Diana Butler Bass, for some insight into the cultural historical context out from which emergent Christianity emerged](#), to highlight or touch on emergent Christianity. However, [since except for Butler Bass, these scholars do not](#) specifically discuss or identify emergent Christians [\(or similar groups\) as a recognizable sub-group of New Evangelicals, their usefulness to the subject of my thesis is limited](#).

Review of the literature: Theories

Ninian Smart: The six dimensions of religion

[In *Worldviews: The Six Dimensions of Religion*](#) Ninian Smart offers [a](#) framework to evaluate the [relative](#) function of doctrine within emergent Christianity. Smart [understands every religion to have](#) six separate but [related](#) dimensions, [and highlights](#) how each dimension interacts with one another. [The](#) Doctrinal [dimension of religion is but one of the six; the others are, the](#) Experiential, Mythical, Ritual and Ethical. [Since](#) the major areas of [contention](#) between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals are [their](#)

understanding of doctrine, [Smart's discussion of the doctrinal dimension is particularly useful.](#)

Five Functions of doctrine

[According to Smart, doctrine has five different functions in religions:](#)

- 1) "...to bring order into what is given by revelation and, in story form, in the biblical narrative".¹⁴
- 2) "...to safeguard the reference myths have to what lies beyond, to that which transcends the cosmos".¹⁵
- 3) "...to relate their claims to the current knowledge of the age".¹⁶
- 4) "...to help reflect and stimulate a fresh vision of the world".¹⁷
- 5) "...to define the community".¹⁸

[The fifth function of doctrine "to define the community" seems particularly important to New Evangelicals. The second through fourth functions: "to safeguard the reference myths have to what lies beyond, to that which transcends the cosmos...", to relate their claims to the current knowledge of the age"... and "to help reflect and stimulate a fresh vision of the world" seem closer to the ways emergent Christians understand doctrine.](#)

Doctrine as a flexible dimension

Smart makes it a point to say that too often [Western](#) theologians and scholars of religion try to put together a tidy understanding of a doctrinal system. However, Smart [calls for more](#) "flexibility-a certain degree of looseness-about the way doctrines fit together".¹⁹ Smart's [description](#) of doctrine as a scheme, a picture that is being painted, rather than an organized and structured system, [is more fluid, and better suits the way](#)

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 91.

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

those within new religious movements like emergent Christianity understand how doctrine is related to their experiences.

Seeing Doctrine as vertical rather than horizontal

One Smart's major insights is recognizing that doctrine should be seen in relation to other dimensions of religion. Thus doctrine does not simply function in isolation, but rather is developed and transformed as it interacts with other dimensions such as the experiential and ritual.²⁰ Smart writes, "[Doctrines] are also beliefs that are real in experience and in the practical life of religion. For those who have faith, they are living, vibrant ideas, not just theories".²¹ This understanding of doctrine correlates well with the way emergent Christians describe their experiences of God as informing their interpretation of doctrine or certain practices.

Experience informs doctrine.

One conflict that arises when discussing doctrine is its association with truth and validity, as illustrated by the notion of "right" doctrine. Smart confronts this conflict by urging readers to use "religious experience as a source of knowledge"²². Here Smart argues that religious experiences will and should inform our doctrine. Thus, because of the variety of religious experiences, it becomes difficult to reject or claim one particular doctrine that would invalidate one's experience of the divine. Smart notes that he isn't surprised about this, suggesting that "the whole of our experience revolves around the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 95.

²² Ibid., 101.

mystery of blind and mute nature evolving into conscious beings like ourselves...”²³

Smart’s description of the ways the experiential and doctrinal dimensions of religion are interrelated provides this study with a model of how the religious experience and doctrine function for emergent and New Evangelical Christians. It is crucial to recognize the strength and power that experience of the divine has on informing and developing doctrine and in turn, justifying the existence of “differing patterns of doctrine”.²⁴

A Caveat

Some scholars, like my fellow Wheaton religion major Seth Robinson ’11, have critiqued Smart’s theory, suggesting that suspending one’s past experiences, emotions and understandings of a particular religion or individual might actually be detrimental in trying to conduct an adequate study. I believe that this criticism might only be truly relevant when the area of study is outside the western perspective (for example: the study of a perhaps eastern tradition from a western perspective). However, because we’re coming from a Western context looking at a religious movement that is taking place and functioning with a western context, I believe that this criticism doesn’t hold any weight.²⁵ However, there are certain aspects of how doctrine functions in emergent Christianity that Smart’s text does not cover. Thus, I have supplemented his work with that of Lindbeck, Loy, and Bass.

George Lindbeck: The Nature of Doctrine

While Ninian Smart offers one functionalist definition of doctrine, Lindbeck’s “cultural linguistic” understanding of doctrine offers another useful and relevant way to

²³ Ibid., 102.

²⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁵ Seth Robinson, “*Judging and Being Judged: Rehabilitating Moral Evaluation in the Comparative Ethics of Globalization*” (Undergraduate honors thesis in Religion, Wheaton College (MA), 2011).

explain the ways emergent and New Evangelicals talk about doctrine. Lindbeck writes as Christian theologian, but draws upon the academic study of religion to offer a scholarly analysis of the varying understandings of the function of doctrine in different Christianity communities.²⁶ He develops a pluralistic framework within which they can each be fully understood without being attacked for maintaining “wrong doctrine”. Written with the conviction that a “post-liberal” approach to interpreting doctrine is necessary, and that our current framework is not sufficient, Lindbeck suggests doctrine be evaluated as if it were a “cultural linguistic” system. Lindbeck was responding to discrepancies in understanding the function of doctrine amongst different Christian denominations and movements. He wrote his book in response to a “growing dissatisfaction with the usual ways of thinking about those norms of communal belief and action which are generally spoken of as the doctrines or dogmas of the churches... Doctrines... do not behave the way they should, given our customary suppositions about the kinds of things they are. We clearly need new and better ways of understanding their nature and function”²⁷.

In *The Nature Of Doctrine*, Lindbeck contrasts a cultural linguistic view of doctrine to two other approaches to doctrine – “cognitive” or “propositionalist” and “experiential-expressive.”²⁸ I mentioned earlier how arguments surrounding “right doctrine” or “truth claims” have caused controversy within groups who express different understandings of doctrine. Cognitive or propositionalist understandings of doctrine focus on truth claims, and experiential-expressive attitudes toward doctrine are rooted in

²⁶ Lindbeck draws from the work anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his work, *Religion as a Cultural System* in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 87-125. His contribution to Lindbeck’s “Cultural Linguistic” approach is crucial to note, for upon this foundation he moves forward with “theological use” of his theories.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 16.

personally subjective experiences. Thus, the conversations might yield frustration conflict because the two groups are arguing from two different approaches. To this situation Lindbeck suggests, “The proper response in this case is not to deny the reality on the grounds that it seems impossible, but rather to seek to explain its possibility”.²⁹ For Lindbeck, to be caught up within an internal dialogue over which doctrine is the correct one, one loses what the group or community is offering. With this in mind, Lindbeck offers a third alternative to evaluate theories of religion and doctrine. He suggests one that places an emphasis on “those respects in which religions resemble languages together with their correlative forms of life and are thus similar to cultures”.³⁰ Lindbeck asserts that the Cultural Linguistic alternative is “intellectually and empirically the most adequate”.³¹ In looking at new religious movements within this understanding of doctrine as part of a cultural linguistic system, the movements are justified in maintaining different approaches to doctrine, which, as previously noted, have been developed and built upon experience.

One of the most crucial contributions that Lindbeck makes to the conversation on the study of new religious movements is his understanding of how new religious movements change and still relate to older concepts. In understanding the relationship of emergent Christianity to New Evangelicals or the broader Christian community, this is important. Lindbeck argues that this change and adaptation is justified. He writes,

Religious change or innovation must be understood, not as proceeding from new experiences, but as resulting from the interactions of a cultural-linguistic system with changing situations. Religious traditions are not transformed, abandoned, or replaced because of an upwelling of new or different ways of feeling about the self, world, or God, but because

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

a religious interpretive scheme develops anomalies in its application in new contexts.³²

Lindbeck makes four points regarding the implications of his [cultural linguistic](#) description of doctrine, but I believe that [his](#) fourth point that he makes is the most important and [relevant to my study](#).³³ He argues that even if one group agrees on a specific set doctrine, there might arise within that group differences in interpretation, implementation and defense of that specific doctrine.³⁴ This is a positive, non-reductionist understanding of the presence of contradicting interpretations of doctrine.

[It would be a mistake to criticize Lindbeck for being too universal or relativistic.](#) While his discussion of doctrine might seem all-inclusive and [open to](#) any interpretation, he does [assert](#) that there are some truth claims that are necessary to maintain the religion's center. Like a language has dialects, religions can have different sects and understandings. He argues that these can still be "faithful, applicable, and intelligible. There is thus no theological, just as there is no doctrinal reason for rejecting them".³⁵

However, once these groups start becoming unidentifiable within their [co-religionist](#) (much like when [someone who thinks they're speaking English it is completely unintelligible to other English speakers](#)) they should no longer be considered a part of that group.

³² Ibid., 39.

³³ [The other three implications he cites are as follows. The first being the notion that "creedless Christianity" \(such as Quakerism\) is not exactly creedless. The second is his "distinction between operational and official doctrines"\(74\). The third point that he makes is that "controversy is the normal means whereby implicit doctrines become explicit, and operational official"\(75\). While I believe these other three points that Lindbeck notes are crucial in developing and understanding the nature of doctrine when applying emergent Christianity to a model like the proposed Cultural Linguistic model, the fourth illuminates most what needs to be considered within this specific dialogue.](#)

³⁴ Ibid., 76.

³⁵ Ibid., 134.

David Loy: The World is Made of Stories

While Smart and Lindbeck offer viable models of how doctrine functions in new religious movements like emergent and New Evangelical Christians, other religious dimensions are at play in the Emergent definition of their community, especially what Smart calls the mythic or narrative dimension. But for narrative, I turn to David Loy, author and Zen practitioner whom I found particularly helpful. David Loy explores storytelling as motivation for the real-life expression of doctrine. Both Smart and Lindbeck offer very systematic philosophical interpretations of the role of doctrine and its relationship to other dimensions of religion such as the social and experiential dimensions. However, in doing so, they give the impression of reducing the experiences of new religious movements to the doctrinal realm. Thus, in order to address this, I offer a third, and essential piece to my description.

The title of David Loy's book *The World Is Made Of Stories: How Expressing Doctrine Is Manifest In The Stories That We Tell And Experience* describes beautifully the role of narrative for emergent Christians. In a sense, Loy brings together the theoretical contributions of Smart and Lindbeck, and shows how sharing narratives connects doctrine and real life experiences. With Loy's work, one can get a better sense of how doctrine is to be lived, and is not simply a theoretical element of a religious experience.

Anya Peterson Royce, Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity

It is clear that flexibility and fluidity are characteristic of emergent Christians' interpretation of doctrine. In order to evaluate and interpret this fluidity, Anya Peterson

Royce's distinction between style and tradition proved helpful for categorizing Emergent Christianity's strategies for identifying themselves in relation to other Christians. For Royce, "style" implies flexibility in terms of performing or expressing one's identity, while "tradition" implies adherence to certain standard practices that are inflexible and unable to be adapted. This distinction helps me to define how emergent Christians organize and associate themselves in relationship to the broader Christian community, while allowing for their characteristic inclusiveness, flexible reinterpretation of doctrine, and emphasis the of some doctrines over others.

Emergent Christians both embrace certain doctrinal elements over one another (for example holding higher the benevolent nature of God over the doctrine of sinful humanity) but also hold different views and understandings of certain doctrinal elements (for example, understanding that salvation is something that happens on earth-here and now). With emergent Christians, it helps to recognize that certain expressions of style are expressions of identity. While Royce develops this idea of style for an ethno-musicological study of dance performance in *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity*, her definition of style can be utilized to understand group function and boundary marking. First, Royce works with the definition as outlined by Webster as "a manner or method of acting or performing, esp. as sanctioned by some standard."³⁶ In contrast to tradition, the term most observers use to describe what holds ethnic groups together, style refer to the interaction between groups, and the behavior group members perform to relate to and identify with some groups rather than others. Adopting certain styles suggests that one

³⁶ Anya Peterson Royce, *Ethnic Identity: Strategies of Diversity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 145.

chooses which group(s) to belong to and which to disassociate from; that membership is flexible, based on choice. In other words, “style implies an element of choice.”³⁷

So while Royce is working within the framework of ethnic identity, her use of style in order to explain the interaction between different ethnic groups can and should be transferred to my work in understanding how emergent Christians function as well as understanding their relationship to the broader evangelical community. What Royce says about ethnic dance styles could apply equally to the narrative and doctrinal “styles” emergent and New Evangelical Christians “perform” to differentiate from each other, as well as to the styles of dress, music, and meeting venues they share. In Royce’s words, “to display a style... means that there has been a conscious selection of a particular manner and, implicitly, the rejection of other possible styles.”³⁸ But by keeping this rejection implicit, “style also involves flexibility.”³⁹ If Christianity were this sort of style, then Christians would be free from having to maintain certain unchanging values, and from adherence to specific ancient doctrines, traditional rituals, and beliefs that have become irrelevant for some. Thus, viewing emergent Christianity and New Evangelism as styles within Christianity, helps account for the fluidity of the social boundaries between the two I observed, as well as both the New Evangelicals’ insistence on clarifying the boundaries of Christian identity, and the emergent Christians’ tendency to muddy them.

³⁷ Ibid., 147.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

Historical Context: Alan Wolfe and Diana Butler Bass

Emergent Christianity is a new addition to the conversation surrounding evangelicals in the United States. Though many scholars of religion have yet to discuss the implications of their presence or even acknowledge their existence at all, Alan Wolfe and Diana Butler Bass help describe the general historical context for the appearance of new religious movements among American Evangelical Christians trying to understand doctrine in light of post-modernism. In *The Transformation of American Religion*, Alan Wolfe, a noted scholar of religion and politic in America, evaluated this trend using the example of the development of New Evangelicals out of Fundamental Christianity in the 1980's of the United States. In his chapter, "The Strange disappearance of Doctrine from Conservative Protestantism", Wolfe describes the function of doctrine among Fundamentalist and New Evangelical Christians and its transformation. Wolfe's thesis in this chapter is that there is a lack of doctrine in the Evangelical Church. As Wolfe further explains what he calls "playing down doctrine in favor of feelings", he begins to note how evangelical Christians, in reaction to earlier fundamentalists, maintain a "distaste for doctrine."⁴⁰ But Wolfe goes on to suggest that evangelicals "wish to persuade seekers to adopt the few core beliefs of evangelical theology."⁴¹ This seems to contradict his point that evangelicals have a "distaste for doctrine. In fact, I would argue that their adoption of the "few core beliefs of evangelical theology" is perhaps a stricter interpretation of the role that doctrine plays in living out their Christianity. What Wolfe might be *really* trying to articulate is that evangelicals throw out some of the smaller details of theology found in earlier fundamentalist Christianity. But with that decision however, evangelicals take

⁴⁰ Wolfe, 74.

⁴¹ Ibid.

the basic, doctrine of salvation by faith alone and make it the center of their Christian experience.

While I do not agree with many of the conclusions that Wolfe has drawn in his study, as well as his characterization of New Evangelicals, his motivations for identifying the role and presence of doctrine within these two groups is in step with my evaluation of the function of doctrine within New Evangelicals and Emerging Christians. Most importantly, Wolfe correctly notes that the function of doctrine changes in the recent history of American Evangelicalism. In the case of New Evangelicals, their doctrine reflects a change in order to relate to the context of their surrounding culture. This also applies to the evolution of doctrine in Emergent Christianity.

And I cannot agree with Wolfe's interpretation of the New Evangelicals. In describing New Evangelical history and movements he cites dismissively a student **who had called New Evangelical churches, "new-paradigm churches"** and that "their growth and influence constitutes 'a second reformation that is transforming the way Christianity will be experienced in the new millennium'"⁴². Wolfe says that this comment is "surely something of an exaggeration"⁴³. I'd have to say that Wolfe is far off the mark and that his student was closer to being on point. New Christian movements, including emergent Christianity, are dramatically changing the Christian faith. In fact, Phyllis Tickle, Protestant Church historian and author, even claims that Brian McLaren, one of the fathers of emergent Christianity could be talked about as the next/ new Martin Luther.

⁴² Alan Wolfe, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 75.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 75.

She comments, “The emerging church has the potential of being to North American Christianity what Reformation Protestantism was to European Christianity”.⁴⁴

So while Wolfe correctly identifies doctrine and experience as relevant categories for New Evangelicals, he is wrong about how they apply. Further, he fails to talk about emergent Christians. These are significant limitations to his contributions to this discussion.

Diana Butler Bass in *Christianity After Religion* describes the current cultural context of American Christianity in ways that are much closer to what I observed in my research, even though she doesn’t refer to “emergent Christians” specifically. And while she identifies herself as Christian, that is, as an *insider* within the community, her work is the closest thing to a religious studies perspective on new Christian communities like emergent Christians and perhaps the most similar to the work that I am doing here. Her study is grounded in history, theory, and experience, and is written from a non-reductionist perspective. She provides the reader first with a detailed background of what she calls the four different religious awakenings that have taken place in the united states: each highlighting the implications of the new developments within religious communities. Her detailed discussion of the history of Christianity specifically within the United States, but also her critical analysis of ancient Christianity, proved to be an extremely helpful foundation for this work.

Bass offers both a historical and sociological perspective on the transition of Christianity into a “post-religious” context. While her comments calling for a more narrative and experiential understanding of Christianity do not specifically mention the emergent movement or specific denominations, it is clear that her account of the

⁴⁴ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 12.

historical transformation of Christianity from a doctrine centered rhetoric towards a faith that expresses itself, provides for a better understanding of emergent Christianity.

However, Bass's work does not highlight some of the controversies and backlash from the other Christian communities to this transition. My research into the subject of emergent Christianity and New Evangelicals will further emphasize the struggle between the New Evangelical's decision to maintain a stronghold on the authority doctrine and the emergent's understanding of doctrinal fluidity.

One of the most important contributions that Bass makes to this conversation is her re-evaluation of the definition of what it means to be religious. Bass draws from the ancient definition of *religio*, which, as she suggests, emphasizes "a warm, reverberating and sustained affirmation of a personal religion to [a] transcendent God."⁴⁵ By embracing this particular understanding, Bass suggests that individuals are free to move past the obsession with maintaining a right doctrine or set of rules and emphasize instead the roles of narrative and experience. She writes, "*Religio* is never satisfied with old answers, codified dogmas, institutionalized practices, or invested power. *Religio* invites every generation to experience God-to return to the basic questions of believing, behaving and belonging- and to explore each anew with an open heart".⁴⁶ The lens that Bass offers is one I will use in order to better understand emergent Christians and why they believe what they believe, and to better explain certain practices.

⁴⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End Of Church and the Birth of A New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 98.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

Review of the Primary Literary Sources for Emergent and New Evangelical Christianity

The majority of the texts that [focus specifically](#) on emergent Christianity are written [by members](#) the emergent and New Evangelical community. [As I have already said, there](#) is little to no outside religious studies or academic scholarship on the subject. While a few authors (such [Wolfe and Butler Bass](#) do offer insight and some contribution to the historical timeline of evangelicals in the United States, their texts fail to pick up on emergent sentiments, and are written mostly about New Evangelicals and their relationship to the more conservative evangelical community. [Here are the authors and books I discuss:](#)

[Thus I have turned to books](#) written by Emergent Christians, New Evangelicals as well as other Christian authors [for evidence of how doctrine functions within Emergent Christianity](#). It is important to keep in mind that the authors of these texts don't [always fit](#) or embrace the labels that I've outline at the beginning of this work. For instance, some authors identify as 'emergent', some as 'emerging' some as simply 'evangelical' or some just as 'Christian'. This problem with nomenclature continues to exist and appear throughout this paper but throughout this analysis I will maintain the use of the definitions as outlined in the beginning of this work. Further, for clarity, I have identified which texts that I classify as 'emergent' which I classify as 'New Evangelical' and which I classify as still written with a Christian lens, but fails to fall within either of the two discussed communities.⁴⁷ The texts range from Emergent apologetics to reactions of New

⁴⁷ For the sake of this thesis, here is my working classification of who's emergent and who's New Evangelical. Representatives of the emergent community: Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Jeff Gentry, Jan Edmiston, Tony Jones, Matthew Pritchard, Matthew Dyer, Doug Paggit, Karen Ward, Dan Kimball, Peter

Evangelicals. Some were written without a specific agenda to speak to the ‘emergent’ community and were then embraced by the emergent community as a key text in exploring the emergent Christian conversation.

It should be noted that the texts regarding this conversation continue to be published daily. Even the difference in material that is coming out from when I began this project demonstrates how rapidly the conversation is moving. However, the emergent conversation continues to happen within the evangelical community. This is true likewise with the books being published.

***A Generous Orthodoxy* Brian McLaren**

One of the major sources that I rely heavily upon in this paper is the work of emergent pastor and author, Brian McLaren. Brian’s voice is one of the most influential within the emergent conversation, yet his works are exploratory, far from abrasive and are of the simply truth-seeking and question-asking kind. His major work, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, goes back to the Bible and look at the character of Jesus, perhaps assuming that much of His relationship to the world has been lost over history. McLaren calls for “a humble rediscovery of the simple”, and believes that the many different images presented by varying Christian denominations and throughout history are unfinished and incomplete. Through the development of what he calls “a Generous Orthodoxy”, McLaren wants to paint a picture of Jesus that is embraced by the entire world-every cultural context and every tradition. He writes, “What we need is something lived, not

[Rollins and Diana Butler Bass. *New Evangelical: Mark Driscoll, Shannon Trainor, Caitlin O’Connor, Kevin DeYoung, Ted Kluck, and Robert Webber.*](#)

just talked or written about”.⁴⁸ His text [offers a](#) way to evaluate the relationship between Jesus and Christianity, suggesting that, “the two (Christianity and the Way of Jesus) may or may not go together”.⁴⁹

A Generous Orthodoxy and other texts written by McLaren are seen as some of the most vital primary sources on emergent Christianity, as they explore [the](#) disconnect between the perceived character of Jesus and the experience within the church- one of the main sources of controversies for the emergent community. While *A Generous Orthodoxy* evaluates the essential contributions offered up by varying Christian denominations, his work *The Secret Message of Jesus* focuses more on calling into question what it means to be Christian [in this earthly life](#). This particular text goes into further [detail about](#) Jesus is and what that means for those who follow him and call themselves Christian. *The Secret Message of Jesus* sparked much controversy among the New Evangelicals in that it challenges traditional understandings of doctrine such as salvation, atonement, and the literal existence of heaven and hell.

Finally, I had the opportunity to read McLaren’s most recent and [not-yet](#) unpublished text *Why did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World*. This text begins to ask many of the questions as to the role of Christianity in a pluralistic society and how that relates to an acceptance of varying truth claims. [It is](#) written partly as non-fiction and in part as [an imagined](#) dialogue between the leaders of the world’s major religions. Throughout the writing of his book McLaren and Bass were in communication with one another. As good friends and authors writing from the same community, it is obvious that McLaren’s work was

⁴⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 25.

clearly [influenced](#) by Bass's *Christianity After Religion*. I anticipate the publication of this text will be received with much backlash and skepticism from New Evangelicals because many of his [ideas](#) challenge traditional beliefs regarding the fate of non-Christians.

***Velvet Elvis* Rob Bell**

One of the most controversial contributors to the emergent conversation is author and [pastor](#), Rob Bell. Seen as one of the leaders in the emergent dialogue, he most recently came in to the limelight of emergent Christianity with the release of his book *Love Wins*, which re-evaluates the doctrinal pieces of Heaven, Hell and salvation. While Bell has been in dialogue with communities of emergent Christians since the 90's [and has written books](#) with similar underlying theological sentiments, this specific [work](#) has provoked push back of the emergent Christians, and has been roundly criticized by New Evangelicals. His voice in the conversation between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals is loud, prominent and extremely influential to both communities, his words often causing uproar and frustration [among](#) Christians and non-Christians alike.

Throughout my work I've drawn from Bell's two major texts, *Love Wins* and *Velvet Elvis*. *Velvet Elvis* offers to this work an introduction of some of the major points of contention that emergent Christians find within the evangelical Christian message. Specifically, Bell's texts explore how experience should be played up more than doctrine and that doctrinal elements such as; heaven, hell, atonement and salvation should be re-imagined in our current global situation. Bell's texts open the floodgates for emergent/New Evangelical dialogue and are often pointed to as heretical and threatening to the Christian faith by non-emergents.

***Why we're not emergent: (By two guys who should be)* Ted Kluck and Kevin DeYoung**

Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, two New Evangelicals, got together to write a response to the emergent conversation and the different conflicts from the literature produced by authors like McLaren and Bell. Their book, *Why We're not emergent, (by two guys who should be)* is a wonderful example of the differences and frustrations that New Evangelicals have with the emergent conversation. Additionally, it is one of the most comprehensive critiques of emergent Christianity.

Embracing the “hipster” style of dress, and the engagement in social justice and activism as well as understanding the need for a new way of ‘doing church’, make Kluck and DeYoung perfect examples of New Evangelicals. Their book’s subtitle shows that these two look like they should be emergent. This text provides great responses, comments and defenses both theologically and socially against the practices of emergent Christians, as well as what seems to be a warning.

Why We're Not Emergent is one of the main sources from which I draw the critiques offered by New Evangelicals about the emergent church. Their voices are ones of experience and thought but also rooted in concern-for they fear that the emergent conversation is truly a threat to the nature of Christianity. Many of their arguments seem to be rooted in personal experiences rather than critical scholarship, and they are writing from within and to the evangelical community. Yet, I believe that their concerns raised are genuine and should be addressed and understood through the same theoretical framework by which emergents will be evaluated.

The New Christians Tony Jones

Emergent author Tony Jones' recent text, *The New Christians*, is one of the first and most clear representations of the emergent church currently published. Written from within the emergent community and to the evangelical community, it provides a fundamental history and overview of emergent Christianity. This work is especially important, for it is one of the only texts published that explicitly outlines many principles, understandings and ideas of the emergent community. The other authors from whom I've drawn such as McLaren, Bell and Pagitt tend to write from more of a personal, narrative perspective. Their writing does not specifically lay down principles or a systematic evaluation of the emergent conversation. Jones's text offers clear principles and experiences of emergent Christians as well as evidence as to why emergent Christians hold certain understandings. Further, the text offers insight into the New Evangelical critique and perception of the emergent conversation.

The Young Evangelicals Robert Webber

Robert Webber is a scholar of religious studies as well as an evangelical Christian. Further, Webber meets my criteria of what it means to be a New Evangelical. His analysis and compilation of voices in the emerging church is about as close as one can get to an 'outsider's' understanding of emerging/emergent Christianity, aside from the work of Diana Butler Bass. Webber is clearly writing from a Christian perspective, one that seems to critique and disagree with some of the interpretations of emergent leaders like Karen Ward and Doug Pagitt. Thus, his work is representative of the frustration I face when trying to work from outside of the evangelical circle. Just as Bass

lets her more liberal background guide her work, Webber's conservative evangelical upbringing can be traced throughout his writing. This is not to say that conservative evangelicals cannot do critical scholarship. Rather, their work on American evangelicals is helpful and quite useful. However, it seems as though once they begin to discuss emergent Christianity, the scholarship is no longer objective, but comes from a place of frustration and dissatisfaction. These sentiments are reflected in their 'critical scholarship' of emergent Christianity.

Webber's text offers a great analysis of the history of evangelicals and their relationship to the adapting culture and society. He underlines perfectly the concept of orthopraxis (right practice) and demonstrates how "the young evangelicals" integrate new ideas, concepts, art and media into to their worship, practice, and their definition of what it means to be Christian. However, Webber's analysis of "the young evangelicals" is what I've used and adapted as my understanding of "New Evangelicals", specifically because Webber's definition does not highlight the distinction between emergent Christians and the 'young evangelicals' a distinction that, because of the current dialogue, is crucial and necessary to make. This, I believe, is due to the lack of information that Webber had on emergent Christianity when he was writing his book. After speaking with Brian McLaren, I learned that the two were in conversation after the release of the text and that Webber began to get a better understanding of emergent Christianity after his book came out. His knowledge of the subject is reflected in the final text produced before his death, *Listening to the beliefs of emerging churches*, which I will introduce next.

Listening to the beliefs of emerging⁵⁰ churches Robert Webber

Robert Webber's text offers one of the first glances at emergent Christian communities and their leaders. He looks at five different Christian communities which he defines as "emerging" churches. He offers them the opportunity to describe their theology and their certain practices, and then Webber tries to highlight why they're an 'emerging' church. At the end of each leader's chapter, Webber includes commentary and critique from the other leaders. This brings an incredibly useful dialogue about different understandings and stances on certain functions of doctrine, boundaries and community identity.

Webber introduces five church leaders, Karen Ward, Mark Driscoll, Doug Pagitt, Dan Kimball and John Burke. All of the leaders except for Mark Driscoll fit into my classification of emergent Christians. However, Pastor Mark Driscoll maintains an extremely conservative understanding of doctrine while emphasizing new ways of "doing church". Thus, I have excluded him from the emergent label and classified him as a New Evangelical.

At the end of his text, Webber offers a chapter entitled "Assessing Emerging Theology". It might have been more accurate had he entitled it, "Assessing Emergent Theology: a New Evangelical's Understanding" because that title is more indicative of what he is doing. His 'assessment' is written from within the New Evangelical camp, holding their same understanding of the function of doctrine. This, in turn, makes it

⁵⁰ It is crucial to understand here that Webber uses the term "emerging" which, in my understanding, focuses on practice. Of the five church communities outlined in this text, using my classifications, I have identified that only four of them are actually *emergent*. The one that I have not included is Mark Driscoll's church.

complicated and frustrating to read his critique, which is actually a critique of emergent Christians.

What hopefully has become clear throughout this analysis is that one of the major complications in evaluating emergent Christianity is that most of the literature comes from an evangelical Christian perspective, and most noticeably a New Evangelical perspective. This has perpetuated an endlessly circular discussion on the implications of a certain perspective on the function of doctrine. Rather, we need to re-steer the conversation by stepping back and assessing the implications of the different functions of doctrine held by emergents and New Evangelicals. Thus, while Webber's assessment might be a bit more informed thanks to his experience and scholarship, emergent theology will never be held in the same light or given its right evaluation from the perspective of someone who puts an emphasis on "right" doctrine.

Webber's discomfort and frustration with the emergent perception of doctrine is made evident in his second paragraph in which he argues that emerging [emergent] theology maintains "porous borders" and that this is a weakness".⁵¹ What is crucial to note here is that emergent Christians are not only aware of this, but they are proud of it- this is precisely what defines them. His conclusion exemplifies the limitations of many texts that are from written within the evangelical circle. Both emergent and New Evangelical authors will come to biased conclusions that reflect their own personal opinions. It is thus obvious this conversation must be explored outside of the community of evangelical scholars.

⁵¹ Mark Driscoll, John Burke, Dan Kimball, Doug Paggit, and Karen Ward, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches: Five Perspectives* ed. Robert Webber (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2007), 195.

Chapter 1: Evidence of the books

Here I will present the common themes expressed in both emergent Christian and the New Evangelical literature. As discussed in the methodology and literature review sections of this work, the sources are those I have identified as emergent Christians and those I have categorized as New evangelical Christians.

Not a new denomination, group or sect

The emergent community is made up of a diverse group of Christian denominations and backgrounds. The ‘emergent’ label represents an outlook that crosses denominational boundaries. McLaren’s *A Generous Orthodoxy* presents a particularly interesting statement of this view when he suggests that each denomination or sect within Christian history has something positive to offer to the Christian identity, and these different communities embrace one another rather than rejecting certain groups or denominations.

McLaren explains that the term Generous Orthodoxy was coined by Hans Frei, who “sought to move beyond the liberal/conservative impasse of modernity” and to look at a Christianity that “contained elements of both liberal and conservative thought”.⁵² McLaren suggests that a politically based, or right/left centered, theology reveals a foundationalist understanding⁵³ of Christianity whereas Generous Orthodoxy is based on this non-foundationalist understanding⁵⁴. Some of the characteristics of this

⁵² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 14.

⁵³ Foundationalist describes Christian groups who had built their theology on certain foundations- whether it be upon the foundation of an inerrant Bible or upon the foundation of a religious experience. McLaren’s generous orthodoxy suggests that they are not identified by their foundations, but rather by their “common characteristics and commitments” to their communities (15).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

understanding are “strong ecumenical interests, a desire to move beyond the liberal/conservative divide, and a willingness to think through old questions in new years that foster the pursuit of truth, the unity of the church, and the gracious character of the gospel”.⁵⁵

In *A Generous Orthodoxy*, McLaren “seeks to find a way to embrace the good in many traditions and historic streams of Christian faith, and to integrate them, yielding a new, generous, emergent approach that is greater than the sum of its parts”.⁵⁶ He defines the emergent’s goal, of not creating a new denomination or sect, but as “a humble rediscovery of the simple, mysterious way of Jesus that can be embraced across the whole Christian horizon (and beyond). What we need is something lived, not just talked or written about”.⁵⁷

Emergent author Tony Jones agrees that emergents defy denominational classification. He writes, “Emergent isn’t a new name brand of Christianity...It’s a way of thinking...but people are asking me all the time if they’re emergent. If you’re already asking that question, you’re already emergent.”⁵⁸

Right doctrine is not a deal-breaker

The literature makes it clear that there is a distinct difference between how emergent Christians and New Evangelicals approach doctrine and understand its function. Because dissatisfaction with certain doctrines has motivated emergent Christians to explore the role that doctrine plays within their lives, it has led to a new understanding of “Right” doctrines and the realization that perhaps there are different

⁵⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁶ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁵⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 228.

ways to deal with historically rigid truth claims. Additionally, these texts demonstrate that for New Evangelicals, certain doctrines are non-negotiable and many not be changed.

A Generous Orthodoxy not only develops a fresh approach to doctrine, but works out the best place for some Christian doctrine that McLaren believes is either no longer applicable or in need of re-evaluation. McLaren does this by distinguishing between doctrine and doctrinal distinctives, “distinctives being those secondary doctrines beyond the core beliefs contained in the ancient creeds that are unique to this or that denomination.”⁵⁹ I would suggest that emergent Christians are taking up the task of distinguishing between doctrine and doctrinal distinctives within the Christian faith.

Brian McLaren confronts the idea of “right doctrine” in the introduction of his “Generous Orthodoxy”. He insists that the figure of Jesus and the Christian faith must be kept generous and open, and that maintaining a restrictive understanding of doctrine is not within the nature of Christ. He writes, “...the centrality of Christ is combined with openness appropriate for generous orthodoxy...the biblical witness to Jesus Christ as the unique Savior and hope of the world does not demand a restrictive posture concerning salvation for those who have never heard the gospel or those in other religious traditions”⁶⁰.

To say that McLaren dismisses all doctrine would be wrong. Rather, he labels *some* doctrines currently upheld within Christianity as “bad doctrine”. Further, he also mentions that many Christians have developed “bad doctrine *about* doctrine”. His writing is his response to these interpretations about doctrine. McLaren then turns to Titus 2:1-3:11, a passage that states clearly the importance of adhering to sound doctrine. In

⁵⁹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 55.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

questioning the idea of a “right” doctrine, emergent Christians open up the definition of what it means to be a Christian and what Christian practice looks like. McLaren asserts that, “...getting it right” is beside the point; the point is “being and doing good” as followers of Jesus in our unique time and place, fitting in with the ongoing story of God’s saving love for planet Earth”.⁶¹ It is this fluidity that New Evangelicals reject.

On the other side of the conversation, this fluidity of doctrine is threatening for the New Evangelicals. In *Listening to the Beliefs of the Emergent Church*, Mark Driscoll expresses his frustration with the emergent rejection of “right” or “correct” doctrine, thus differentiating himself from the other contributors. Driscoll writes systematically, emphasizing the need for Biblical literacy as well as “right” interpretation. He highlights the importance of maintaining a penal substitutionary understanding of atonement, as well as rejecting post-modern, contextual interpretations of scripture (especially when it comes to issues such as homosexuality and women’s leadership). Driscoll believes that emergent Christians are guilty of transforming the message of Jesus to fit with the present-day society so that “Jesus is more acceptable and less offensive”⁶². For Driscoll and other New Evangelicals, without a “right” interpretation of doctrine, Christianity is at risk. He concludes, “What is at stake is nothing less than the gospel of Jesus Christ and people’s eternal destinies”.⁶³ It is evident that to New Evangelicals certain doctrine is non-negotiable.

Doug Pagitt represents a more typically emergent perspective in his section in *Listening to streams of the emergent Church*. His understanding of Theology offers a critique of “right” doctrine or theology. He argues, “Being right, or having right doctrine

⁶¹ Ibid., 214.

⁶² Mark Driscoll etc., *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, 32.

⁶³ Ibid., 35.

or theology, must never trump love. Any theology that accomplishes full knowledge or makes accessible the mysteries of the world and is not love is as useless as the sound of pots banging together”.⁶⁴ He anticipates that his opponents (specifically New Evangelicals) will see his theology as “weak, soft, unprincipled, or otherwise dangerous”.⁶⁵ He emphasizes that Christian theology is not to be beneficial simply to other Christians. Rather, theological doctrine needs to be viewed as a healing doctrine, a doctrine that benefits both Christians and non-Christians alike.

New Evangelicals, on the other hand, have a major problem with re-evaluating the function of doctrine, particularly if it is going to be affecting what they believe are the traditional understandings of the nature of God and the Christian faith. While Mark Driscoll encourages Christians to evaluate and change practice to fit the changing cultural context, at the same time he notes that Christians must do so while holding to “right” interpretation of doctrine. According to Driscoll’s critique,

If both doctrine and practice are constant, the result is dead orthodoxy, which Pagitt is reacting against. If both doctrine and practice are constantly changing, the result is living heresy, which Pagitt is contending for. But if doctrine is constant and practice is constantly changing, the result is living orthodoxy, which I propose is the faithful third way.⁶⁶

Driscoll’s ‘faithful third way’ exemplifies precisely the New Evangelical approach to doctrine, and the result in any other combination, according to Driscoll, is heresy.

Throughout my research I’ve noted that some emergent Christians suggest that doctrine should not be something that is universal, but rather it should be reformed and adapted to local theologies. In her church, emergent pastor Karen Ward utilizes this concept of “local theologies” to ensure that the doctrine is relevant and relatable to one’s

⁶⁴ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 146.

own personal experience and that Christianity is not lost within theoretical concepts of doctrine. She writes,

Our local theologizing has a radical nature, and thus our radical contextualization of Christian faith and practice to our own local times, zip codes, and peoples remains at the same time radically centered and faithful living into the way of Jesus.⁶⁷

This view of theology is on the more extreme end of emergent belief; many emergent leaders that I've already discussed would suggest that this approach to theology is too universal and errs on the verge of losing its foundation in Christianity. The implications of bringing theology to a more local and personal level suggest that doctrine must be fluid in order to be applied to one's personal experiences. Further, Ward doesn't place an emphasis on "right doctrine", for she, like many of the other emergent leaders I've discussed, concludes that if Christianity is only about finding the most accurate theology, and that if salvation hinges on correct theology, then "we're all in trouble".⁶⁸

In *Why We're Not Emergent (by two guys who should be)* New Evangelicals Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck highlight the tensions around doctrinal authority between emergents and New Evangelicals. They mention their agreement with many of the problems emergent Christians have identified within their dialogues and texts. Specifically, Kluck and DeYoung acknowledge that "there is more to Christianity than doctrinal orthodoxy" and agree that all Christians "ought to be concerned about bringing heaven to earth, not just getting ourselves into heaven".⁶⁹ However, the two men note that it is the emergent response to these problems that they cannot embrace. For New

⁶⁷ Ibid., 156.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 164.

⁶⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent*, 22.

Evangelicals suggest that doctrine and theology must “clarify and preserve the faith once delivered to the saints and transfer it intact to each succeeding generations. Certain aspects of revelation never evolve...”⁷⁰

The function of doctrine within emergent and New Evangelicals is different. For emergent Christians, embracing “right” doctrine is not necessarily a deal breaker, and there are different ways to deal with certain doctrines. However, for New Evangelicals, certain doctrines are non-negotiable.

Implications of a fluid doctrine

The emergent understanding of doctrine influences both how emergent Christians practice their faith, as well as how they interpret certain doctrines. New Evangelicals are fearful of this adapting theology for they believe a fluid view of doctrine is a slippery slope to heresy.

McLaren’s evaluation of doctrine begs the question- is there more to Christianity than simply a ticket to paradise for a select few? In asking similar questions, emergent Christians are seeking to understand the implications of having a fluid function of doctrine, suggesting that perhaps there is more to Christianity than an escape to another life. Emergent Pastor John Burke expresses that Christians must move forward, and build our foundations on elements other than doctrine.⁷¹ Understanding the dimension of doctrine as only one key part of Christianity allows for the faith to reach a broader community. McLaren asks, “Was the gospel intended to give hope for human cultures and the created order in history, or was history a lost cause, so that the gospel only could give hope to individual souls beyond death, beyond history-like a small lifeboat in which

⁷⁰ Ibid., 116.

⁷¹ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to streams of the emergent church*. 37.

a few lucky souls escape a huge sinking cruise ship?”⁷² McLaren, Burke, and other emergent Christians, believe that there is more to the Christian faith than this idea of personal salvation, and that by focusing only on the doctrine of atonement, the relationship of Christianity and Christians to the non-Christian world is forgotten and dismissed as secondary.

In his first book, *Velvet Elvis*, Rob Bell highlights perfectly the divide between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals, suggesting that the reformation of the Christian faith happens not only in practice, but also in adapting doctrine and theology. He writes, “I embrace the need ...to keep reforming. By this I do not mean cosmetic, superficial changes like better lights and music...I mean theology: the beliefs about God, Jesus, the Bible, salvation, the future. We must keep reforming the way the Christian faith is defined, lived and explained”.⁷³ Bell continues this discussion of doctrine in his most recent book, *Love Wins*. In his first chapter, “Jump”, Bell argues that doctrine is not the way to know God. Rather, doctrine and theology should serve as the “spring” that influences and informs our experiences. He explains,

When we jump, we begin to see the need for springs. The springs help make sense of these deeper realities that drive how we live every day. The springs aren’t God. The springs aren’t Jesus. The springs are statements and beliefs *about* our faith that help give words to the depth that we are experiencing in our jumping. I would call these the doctrine of the Christian Faith.⁷⁴

Bell goes on further to explore the spring experiences and how experiences illuminate the realities of the function of doctrine. He explores this relationship writing, “[The study and discussion and doctrines] help us put words to realities beyond words.

⁷² McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 55.

⁷³ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 12.

⁷⁴ Rob Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*, (New York: HarperOne 2011), 22.

They give us insight and understanding into the experience of God we're having. Which is why the springs only work when they serve the greater cause: us finding our lives in God. If they ever become the point, something has gone seriously wrong. Doctrine is a wonderful servant and a horrible master".⁷⁵

Rob Bell's *Love Wins* offers many interpretations of the doctrine of salvation. As emergent Christians move forward and past the idea of a personal moment of salvation they move into salvation offered to all of humanity in a global context. Rob Bell speaks to what this might look like, assuring the reader that God offers a large picture of salvation that extends far beyond that of the individual. He talks of "all creation being restored." Quoting Ephesians 1:10, Bell argues, "all things will be brought together under Jesus".⁷⁶

Up until about midway through the text of *Love Wins*, I believe that the New Evangelicals would agree somewhat with Bell's interpretation and understanding of taking seriously the Bible, assuring that it is applied to our current social, political and economic contexts as well as recognizing that Christianity is not to be focused solely on personal salvation. However, in the middle of the text, Bell begins to suggest to the conversation that these views on doctrine functioning as "springs" and "servants" rather than "masters" leads to a re-orientation of the doctrine of eternal salvation. Bell offers that eternal life in heaven is something that is to be lived here, and lived out on earth in conjunction with bringing about the kingdom of God. Bell offers,

For Jesus, eternal life wasn't a state of being for the future that we would enter into somewhere else; it is a quality of life that starts now... eternal life then is a certain kind of life I am living more and more now and will

⁷⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 109.

go on forever. I am living more and more in connection with God, and I will live connected with God forever.⁷⁷

This moment is where New Evangelicals start to get angry.

Bell continues, “This is the life of heaven, here and now. And as we live this life, in harmony with God’s intentions for us, the life of heaven becomes more and more present in our lives. Heaven comes to earth “⁷⁸. This notion of participating in God’s kingdom on earth is not anything new. In fact, New Evangelicals are not opposed to embracing the kingdom of God here on earth now, as long as it is not without keeping one’s eyes set on the hope of a kingdom to come after death. However, for New Evangelicals to forget about the wrath of a very real hell for those who deny Christ, is to lose sight of the nature of God and the heart of salvation and the Christian message.

Taking the Bible ‘seriously’ *not* literally.

A main point of contention between New Evangelicals and emergent Christians is the utilization of the Bible. As emergent Christians are exploring what the role of the Bible is within a Christianity that exists within the 21st century, exploring the role and function of doctrine, they have generally come to understand that the Bible must be interpreted insofar as it is to be applicable to and implemented in our current society and situations. Rob Bell argues that to be followers of God, interpreting the Bible to relate to our current experiences and cultural contexts is crucial. He writes, “...it *has* to be interpreted. And if it isn’t interpreted, then it can’t be put into action. So if we are serious about following God, then we have to interpret the Bible. It is not possible to simply do what the Bible says. We must first make decisions about what it means at this time, in

⁷⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 147.

this place, for these people”.⁷⁹ For emergent Christians, their understanding of the function of doctrine calls them to interpret the Bible in to a context that is relevant and applicable to bringing about the kingdom of God.

While the literature written by emergent Christians claim that they are seeking to embrace a “serious” interpretation of the Bible, New Evangelicals seem to be frustrated that emergent Christians are compromising the Word of God and not taking it seriously. New Evangelicals see this more flexible and fluid understanding of scripture as threatening to the body of the Church and the Christian message. Mark Driscoll argues that emergent Christians are pushing their boundaries and their view of scripture, while sincere, is detrimental. He writes, “Without clear Jesus-centered Bible teaching, the church drifts on a sea of uncertainty, because faith comes by hearing God’s Word and not by seeing an icon, painting, or interpretive dance” (Romans 10:17).⁸⁰ Further, because New Evangelicals look to the Bible for authority on their experiences within the faith, Kluck and DeYoung emphasize the need for literal translations of crucial doctrinal elements to lead them in the right direction, granting them comfort and security. They comment, “I need to know that decisions can (and should) be made based on Scripture and not just experience. These are things that give me peace in a world of maybe”.⁸¹

Watered down doctrine leaves a faith with no substance

Often New Evangelicals criticize Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, Doug Paggit (to name a few) and other emergent Christian leaders for watering down Christian theology, or as Mark Driscoll claims, “seeking the least common denominator”. But McLaren

⁷⁹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 46.

⁸⁰ Mark Driscoll etc, *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, 186.

⁸¹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 28.

responds to this criticism by saying that his approach “consistently, unequivocally, and unapologetically upholds and affirms the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. It also acknowledges that a number of items many hold as vital for orthodoxy are found nowhere in those seminal creeds and adds (somewhat sheepishly) that the creeds should never be used as a club to batter into submission people with honest questions and doubts”⁸². Emergent Christians consistently highlight their love, and appreciation for the history of Christianity, foundational creeds and place a high authority on the Bible.

Though the emergent Christians stand their ground arguing that their understanding is rooted in the Bible and the teachings of Christ, they receive continual criticism from New Evangelical leaders, who warn that the emergents abandoned the foundations of the Christian faith.⁸³ DeYoung and Kluck single out McLaren specifically, warning, “I hope McLaren takes seriously his own criticisms that his books are full of overgeneralizations, overreaching historical reconstructions and just plain overreactions.”⁸⁴

Specifically, when speaking of how emergent Christians use the Bible, New Evangelicals argue that emergent Christians are diluting the message by interpreting the Bible in a fluid way and viewing it as a teaching narrative. As a result, New Evangelicals fear that this produces more uncertainty, confusion and doctrinal misunderstanding. DeYoung and Kluck criticize the emergent Christians, “In our world of perpetual squishitude, why offer people more of what they already have-vague spirituality,

⁸² Brian McLaren, *A Generous orthodoxy*, 32.

⁸³ Richard Mouw identifies these protestant Christians as having a ‘doctrinalist’ function of the Bible. He notes that they “place a strong emphasis on the importance of *doctrine*, and on having the right kinds of doctrinal beliefs.”(143) His discussion on the different protestant approaches to doctrine are helpful in better understanding how the Bible functions within both emergent and New Evangelical Christianity. For more information on his Taxonomy, see his work, *The Bible In Twentieth-Century Protestantism: A Preliminary Taxonomy*

⁸⁴ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 43.

uncertainty, and borderline interpretative relativism? Why not offer them something hard and old like the Law in which we delight, and dare to say and believe “Thus saith the Lord?”⁸⁵ New Evangelicals like these two authors see the emergent approach and demand more solid, concrete doctrine, looking for specifics on the particular traditional Christian elements that define their faith and what it means to be Christian. Frustrated, DeYoung and Kluck ask, “...where is there mention of the hard edges of Christian faith-God’s holiness, divine judgment, the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, human depravity, the necessity of new birth?”⁸⁶

The power of narrative and experience

Emergent Christians understand that truth can be gathered, understood, and explored through shared narrative and shared experiences. However, New Evangelicals cannot grant narrative and experience this status. It is clear that New Evangelicals believe that narrative should inform and support certain doctrines, but it cannot affect or challenge doctrinal status.

Emergent Christians approach religious experiences and storytelling differently than New Evangelicals. In turn, these experiences influence their understandings of the role of doctrine. Throughout *A Generous Orthodoxy*, one doesn’t find an explanation of how doctrine should function within emergent Christianity. Rather, McLaren conveys his understanding and knowledge through stories and shared experience. While this means that support for his understanding of doctrine isn’t as black and white as one could hope to expect, it is instead explored through his experiences and exploration of Christianity in his life. Through this way of making meaning, McLaren embodies a trait of a post-

⁸⁵ Ibid., 85.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 107.

modern approach as he explores how truth and meaning are revealed through practice and lived experience.

Emergent Christians grant narrative and story high authority. Emergent pastor Karen Ward emphasizes that Christian faith must be rooted in personal experience and narrative and that truth is developed and understood through one's journey with God. In describing this relationship she comments, "The power of 'story' in authentic emerg[ent] churches is huge. We can learn to see ourselves connected to God's story only in so far as we have opportunity to tell and reflect upon our own stories, as faith and transformation are birthed by the Spirit in the overlap where God's story and our own human stories meet".⁸⁷ New Evangelicals, on the other hand, embrace the power of narrative and one's story and journey with God, but deem it inappropriate to grant authority to personal experiences that might change or influence one's understanding of key doctrinal elements.

Often, the main source of dismissing a fluid doctrine is the New Evangelical doctrinalist approach to the Bible. However, emergent Christians try to evaluate and understand the Bible as a narrative, and see the stories as reflections of what it means to live a Christian life. Accordingly, McLaren suggests that "[Christians] need to reclaim the Bible as narrative... This narrative approach does not lessen the agony one feels reading the conquest of Canaan with the eyes of one taught by Jesus to love all, including enemies. But it helps turn the Bible back into what it is, not a look-it-up narrative of God at work in a violent, sinful world, calling people, beginning with Abraham into a new way of life".⁸⁸ Emergent pastor Dan Kimball questions how some Christians have used

⁸⁷ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, 79.

⁸⁸ Brian McLaren, *A generous orthodoxy*, 190.

the Bible to support whatever their personal agenda or belief is rather than using it as a base or anchor to hold on to, noting “I want to remember that there is room to float without letting go of the anchor”.⁸⁹ He is suggesting that there is room to explore, journey and experience, as long as one’s faith is rooted Biblically. For emergent Christians that “room to float” must be large enough to actually allow for floating, whereas New Evangelicals (in terms of Kimball’s metaphor) urge the necessity of clinging to the anchor tightly without much floating.

The story of Jesus is what shapes and informs the emergent view of faith and what it means to be Christian. Theology and doctrine certainly play a role in fostering that narrative, but emergents understand that it is a relationship between one’s narrative and the doctrine that paints the full picture of the Christian identity, rather than an experience built around a stagnant and firm doctrine. Doug Paggit, a pastor from an emergent church community in Minnesota, articulates the relationship of narrative (story) and doctrine (theology) as follows, “Theology functions like an adapter that allows the story of God to connect with the story of our lives...Theology is not the story of God, and it is not our story; rather it is the understandings that allow us to connect the two”.⁹⁰ Paggit is suggesting that theology is the link that helps Christians to comprehend their experiences with God, bridging the gap between something so concrete as doctrine and something experienced like narrative.

In *The New Christians*, Tony Jones highlights the reason why emergent Christians are attracted to story, narrative and experience. Further he indicates that emergents gain from sharing in the narratives of others. He writes,

⁸⁹ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, 98.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

...emergents are enamored of story, particularly of telling their own stories and listening to others' stories. The interest in story, too, stems from the desire for better interpretation. To better know one's own story means that one's own biases and prejudices are revealed, and when those are revealed, their implications on one's interpretations can be accounted for.⁹¹

For emergent Christians, Narrative helps bring light to certain experiences with doctrine as well acts as a tool used to reflect on one's Christian behavior.

Dissolving boundaries

From the literature, it seems as though emergent Christians are not worried about drawing or identifying nominal boundaries (Not us v. them...just 'us'). However, for New Evangelicals, affirming certain doctrine indicates membership in the community.

Throughout this work I have noted how particularly difficult it is to identify emergent Christians in terms of labeling. This rejection of labels says much about the emergent Christians when compared to the New Evangelicals. For example, New Evangelicals do *not* want to be associated with the title "emergent" or "emerging", because emergent understanding of doctrine threatens their group identity. New Evangelicals are concerned with emphasizing specific boundaries, and they have clear distinctions between who is "in" and who is "out" of their group. Emergent Christians like McLaren are frustrated with the tendency to draw specific boundaries that are accessed only by affirming pieces of doctrine. Further, he suggests that in drawing those boundaries, Christians are deterring from other crucial Christian practices. He notes, "I found this constant judging of in/out, us/them to be fatiguing and distracting from loving

⁹¹ Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 143.

everyone I met as a neighbor, which I was pretty sure should be primary for Christians”.⁹²

In *The New Christians*, emergent author and pastor Tony Jones calls for a diverse, yet communal experience of Christianity, which downplays the different names and identities found within Christianity (denominations, words like “evangelical”, “conservative”, “liberal” etc). He notes, “emergents find little importance in the discrete differences between the various flavors of Christianity. Instead, they practice a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contribution of all Christian movements”.⁹³ It is clear here that emergents are comfortable being within a diverse community of Christians who hold different understandings of specific doctrine and embrace the historical contributions of varying Christian denominations.

In his chapter “Why I am Missional”, McLaren really begins to uncover what a Christianity rooted in Generous Orthodoxy might look like. He establishes that there needs to be a third alternative, a third direction beyond liberal and conservative Christianity, an option that exists outside of the boundaries drawn by history and perception. This third alternative results in a third understanding of doctrine, and throughout this chapter, he explores the implications of this. The idea of Missional Christian faith, McLaren notes, “asserts that Jesus did not come to make people saved and others condemned. Jesus did not come to help some people be right while leaving everyone else to be wrong. Jesus did not come to create another exclusive religion- Judaism having been based on genetics, and Christianity being exclusive based on

⁹² Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 57.

⁹³ Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 8.

belief”.⁹⁴ For McLaren and other Emergent Christians, the benefits of the message and good news of Christianity and Jesus extends beyond the boundaries of believers, over the entire world, for today, on this earth, now.⁹⁵

In his description of emergent Christians, Tony Jones highlights the emergent characteristic of inclusivity, noting that in the eight churches he looked at, words like “openness” and “non-judgmental” were repeated over and over again. At the same time these emergents, much like the emergent Christian leaders that I interviewed and have studied, underscore that they do hold beliefs and that they’re not relativistic. Jones focuses on this particular difficulty through the words of Dallas pastor, Danielle Shroyer. He reflects, “this is a tricky middle path between the certainties of evangelicalism and the openness of liberalism, and the jury is out as to whether this middle ground is really a tenable place to stand”.⁹⁶ For emergent Christians like Jones, this “tricky middle path” opens the doors to the struggle to create and embrace an identity that is centered in inclusions.⁹⁷ Finally, Tony Jones concludes his thoughts on difficulties of defining boundaries with an open-ended suggestion that emergent Christians are not offering any new answers, but are simply searching for a new way to understand particular answers. Often (as I’ve noted here throughout this work) emergents consider this the “third” or “alternative” way.

McLaren acknowledges this ‘third way’ in his text *The Secret Message of Jesus*. He comfortably understands that broadening the boundaries of Christianity and the kingdom of God raises all sorts of theological questions. He notes, “it is true that saying,

⁹⁴ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 120.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 71.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

‘everybody’s in, everybody’s fine, everybody’s an insider’ doesn’t solve all the problems either; it creates new ones”⁹⁸. His response, his third way, is to embrace a “requirement” for membership that is grounded in the “wish to have a change of heart” and the desire to “learn a new way of thinking, feeling, living, and being in the pastures of God”.⁹⁹

To ask emergent Christians to offer a specific statement of faith, would be “disastrous”, suggests Tony Jones. He argues that, “Emergent aims to facilitate a conversation among persons committed to living out faithfully the call to participate in the reconciling mission of the biblical God” and that statements of faith and specific doctrines “can easily become tools for manipulating or excluding people from the community. Too often they create an environment in which real conversation is avoided out of fear that critical reflection on one or more of the sacred propositions will lead to excommunication from the community”.¹⁰⁰

New Evangelicals view boundaries in a completely different manner and function. For them, boundaries must be drawn in order to define who is Christian and who is not, depending on the acceptance of certain theological understandings. DeYoung and Kluck emphasize that the boundaries that are drawn are Biblical and are crucial because “Christianity cannot and does not exist without boundaries. Being a Christian in any Biblical sense requires that we not only say yes to many things, but that we are willing to say no to a number of beliefs and behaviors.”¹⁰¹ Further, the two men question further the foundational beliefs of emergent Christians suggesting that without set walls or distinguished doctrinal boundaries “as one of its defining characteristics”, basic sets of

⁹⁸ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change everything* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 165.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Tony Jones, *The New Christians*, 265.

¹⁰¹ Kevin De Young and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 118

beliefs will fall apart and other people will begin to question an emergent's system of belief.¹⁰²

Kluck and DeYoung as well as other New Evangelicals agree that though the boundaries should not be too high, they must exist in order to maintain certitude within Christianity. The boundaries are there as a security mechanism, because a boundless Christianity is frightening and threatening to New Evangelicals. Kluck and DeYoung argues, "Walls are good if they keep us safe and free".¹⁰³

Boundaries produce more harm than good

Emergent Christians see the presence of boundaries as a hindrance to celebrating many elements of the Christian faith. However, New Evangelicals suggest that it is those boundaries that make them Christian. The "beautiful" elements come later. Throughout their texts many emergent Christians have expressed the implications of setting tight boundaries and lines and suggest that much of Christianity is being overshadowed by the firm presence of boundaries.

Rob Bell shares similar sentiments with McLaren suggesting that when doctrine serves as an indicator of "who's in" and "who's out", Christianity begins to lose much of its beauty, purpose and identity. Maintaining a monopoly on "right" doctrine results in a distortion of what emergent Christians argue is the center of the Christian faith. Further, it acts as a hindrance to celebrating and embracing many aspects of Christianity. Bell writes, "It is possible...to be in, and to believe all of the correct things, and even to be effective at getting others in, and yet our hearts can remain unaffected. It's possible to

¹⁰² Why we're not emergent 24

¹⁰³ Why we're not emergent 128

believe all the right things and be miserable. It is possible to believe all the right doctrines and not live as Jesus teaches us to live...it becomes less and less about talking, and more and more about the experience we are actually having".¹⁰⁴

Emergent communities, particularly Cedar Ridge community in Maryland, emphasize "belonging" before "believing". This focus on belonging welcomes into the community anyone who is interested, and considers them a part of the group without their having to make a firm statement of belief. Emergent Christians hope that in being a part of the community, members will develop a foundation of belief. This interrelation of boundaries allows for the community to be opened wide, and expended past non-Christians. DeYoung and Kluck sees this happening with emergent communities and offer their critique. They comment, "The whole movement seems to be built on reductionistic, even modernistic, either-or categories. They pit information versus transformation, believing versus belonging, and propositions about Christ versus the person of Christ".¹⁰⁵

Shared experiences of doubt unite emergents

Not only are Emergent Christians comfortable saying, "I don't know", but they believe that it is impossible to be Christian without embracing doubts and that these doubts lead to new revelations. New Evangelicals acknowledge doubts, but doubt is not a unifying characteristic, nor is it explored and embraced through shared experiences. For New Evangelicals, initial doubting demonstrates Christian character, but it is to be overcome and not admitted by mature leaders. Emergent author Peter Rollins writes, "In contrast to the modern view that religious doubt is something to reject, fear or merely

¹⁰⁴ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent*, 75.

tolerate, doubt not only can be seen as an inevitable aspect of our humanity but also can be celebrated as a vital part of faith”.¹⁰⁶

In discussing the make-up and diversity of belief within her Church community, Ward emphasizes that her church asks questions and embraces seekers. For emergent Christians in any context, the role of the church is not to dictate answers to questions about theology and doctrine, but rather to “honor the seekers by listening to their questions and hearing their stories- the stories of their lives and of what has brought them to inquire into the Christian faith and life”.¹⁰⁷

New Evangelicals express frustration with the fact that the open and inclusive nature of emergents leads them to refrain from taking specific stances on particularly hot topics. One specific conversation that emergent Christians have noted to be questionable and uncertain is the debate around sexuality, specifically homosexuality. McLaren, Bell and other major leaders are often asked for firm and specific stances on the issue, but they refuse, suggesting that the conversation is bigger, more complicated than coming up with a specific answer or stance. Instead of drawing sides of “wrong” and “right”, they embrace the paradox and encourages conversation. The way that emergent Christians handle these heated topics is a huge problem for the New Evangelicals. While New Evangelicals offer comfortable spaces to discuss controversial subjects such as sexuality, and acknowledge that the answers are complicated, they often look for and try to embrace a biblical stance on certain issues. New Evangelicals DeYoung and Kluck criticize emergent leaders like McLaren, Paggit and Bell for dancing around the topic of homosexuality and suggest that even though it might be out of love and their fear of

¹⁰⁶ Peter Rollins, *How Not to Speak of God* (Brewster: Paraclete, 2009), 33.

¹⁰⁷ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of emerging churches*, 173.

hurting others, “their refusal to take a stance (and sometimes their decision to take an unbiblical stance) also hurts people”.¹⁰⁸

The New Evangelicals are frustrated by the lack of unified opinion and outward conviction. DeYoung and Kluck pose the question, “is it too much to ask that emergent pastors have at least a working conviction on the issue? Maybe an opinion that is based on evidence, but open to reason?”¹⁰⁹ What has drawn together communities of emergent Christians is that the people with whom they surround themselves are all experiencing similar types of doubt and questioning of conventional and traditional elements of doctrine and the church in general. For New Evangelicals doubts should be considered and acknowledged, but cannot play a part in informing doctrine. Additionally, for the leaders of the church to express these major doubts and uncertainties is not only unacceptable but is also detrimental to the church community.

A re-imagination of the kingdom of God

My research has sought to explore some of the different functions of doctrine within emergent Christianity and New Evangelism. However, it is important to note some of the specific theological implications of this fluid function of doctrine as it is manifested in emergent Christianity and how it differs from that of New Evangelicals. This understanding of doctrine has led emergent Christians to re-evaluate the notion of the Kingdom of God and how it relates to this earth. While New Evangelicals affirm that life is not to be lived with the mindset of an ultimate escape to another world and an abandonment of this life, these Christians still affirm that there is in fact a literal Heaven

¹⁰⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why we're Not Emergent*, 47.

¹⁰⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent*, 47.

and a literal Hell that are not *of this world*.¹¹⁰ However, I have noticed that within the emergent community, this doctrinal element of the afterlife has been a source of high contention. Emergent Christians are raising questions like, “If I don’t believe that salvation and escape to another world is at the heart of the Christian Message, then what does it look like to bring about the kingdom of God?”¹¹¹

Emergent Christians address this question by imagining that we’re living in a realized eschatology. Brian McLaren, Doug Paggit and other emergent authors are proposing that what might be important is the word and mission of Jesus, and as his followers, Christians are to bring about the kingdom of God here on this earth *now*, rather than being taken to another place. In turn, this approach can be extended to understanding hell. They suggest that hell is something that is experienced on earth and is manifest in global crises such as poverty, genocide, environmental destruction and government corruption. Often emergent leaders call upon Christians to stop asking how they can attain salvation, and start asking how they can bring about salvation here, bring about the kingdom of God here on earth, for all of humanity. Rob Bell puts it this way, “For Jesus, the question wasn’t how do I get into heaven? But how do I bring heaven here?”¹¹² Not only does this result in a reorientation of what Christians believe to be God’s agenda through Christ, but it dictates the relationship of Christ to the rest of the world, including non-Christians. Bell finishes his chapter by warning the reader that, “...to make the cross of Jesus just about human salvation is to miss that God is interested in the saving of everything. Every star and rock and bird. All things”.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ John 18:36

¹¹¹ This question and more are explored throughout my discussion on “right” doctrine

¹¹² Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147.

¹¹³ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 161.

This realized eschatology makes New Evangelicals very uncomfortable and frustrated. Mark Driscoll critiques emergent leader Doug Paggit, suggesting that his understanding of a realized kingdom of God is one that enforces and supports what looks like a liberal agenda. He critiques this understanding of the kingdom of God as here on earth, as the center of the Christian message as “the center of the liberal theological system”. Driscoll on the other hand, emphasizes that the center must be the cross of Jesus. He rejects the emergent view as an “overrealized eschatology”¹¹⁴, which is the hope for a new heaven on earth before Jesus returns to create a new heaven and earth.

New Evangelicals critique the emergent view that orthopraxy (right practice) is in direct relation to the development of orthodoxy (right doctrine). They say that while it looks appealing, it lacks any direction or substance, and in turn is a threat to the Christian faith. It is clear that when these fundamental and traditional concepts of Christian doctrine are challenged, New Evangelicals are skeptical that without concrete understandings of specifics like atonement, salvation and the afterlife, Christianity loses its meaning and purpose. Kluck and DeYoung lament, “Besides being untrue, orthodoxy as orthopraxy is monumentally unhelpful. It sounds wonderful at first. Jesus is the best way to live. Where’s the harm in that? After all, it is true that Jesus taught good ethics and set a good moral example. But if orthodoxy means I live the right way, the way of Jesus, I have no hope.”¹¹⁵

Further, while New Evangelicals share the same sentiments of bringing the kingdom of God about on this earth, they, unlike many emergent Christians, are confident in an afterlife of a real heaven and hell. When emergent Christians’ understanding of

¹¹⁴ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of emerging churches*, 146.

¹¹⁵ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 113.

doctrine leads them to re-evaluate specific doctrines like heaven and hell, New Evangelicals shake their heads, for they cannot fathom a ‘heaven-on-earth’ being God’s final plan. In the text *Why We’re Not Emergent*, New Evangelicals Kluck and DeYoung spend large parts of the text exploring these concerns about the emergent communities. They write, “[we] understand the emergent concern about living rightly in this life. That was a concern of Jesus. But why are heaven and hell as eternal destinations so routinely marginalized in emergent books? If heaven and hell are real and endure forever, as Jesus believed them to be, they ought to shape everything we do during our short time on earth.”¹¹⁶

Is Christianity is the only way to God?

One of the main charges New Evangelicals level against emergents seems to be that emergent Christians are not in fact Christian at all, but universalists who believe that every religion is the “true” religion. While emergent Christians hold different understandings about the fate and destiny of other religions (some more traditional, some quite liberal and some with no clue), they do point to Jesus as the Son of God, and savior of the world. McLaren asserts the necessity of focusing on Jesus as the Son of God, while embracing questions raised in interfaith dialogue. He writes, “We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time, we can not set limits to the saving power of God... We appreciate this tension, and do not attempt to resolve it”.¹¹⁷

The general sentiment from emergent Christians is that Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation, yet their experiences of God and the Christian faith have led them to

¹¹⁶ Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We’re Not Emergent*, 186.

¹¹⁷ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 295.

believe that God has something figured out for faithful practitioners of other religions.

Emergent pastor Karen Ward shares similar convictions as McLaren. Ward believes that Jesus Christ is the one Savior, but along with McLaren, maintains no certainty about the fate of non-Christians. Her belief is rooted in and supported by her understanding of the nature of God. She writes, “My view of God is high enough to leave such matters to God, while at the same time never downplaying the twenty-four/seven calling of Christians to make bold our witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ”.¹¹⁸

Therefore, rather than using doctrine to define boundaries of who is in and who is out of God’s kingdom, emergent Christians understand Christianity as a benefit to all of God’s children, not just those who identify as followers of Jesus. For example, McLaren reminds his readers, “...in a pluralistic world, a religion is valued based on the benefits it brings to its nonadherents”.¹¹⁹ Further, as emergents seek to apply the Christian message to all of humankind, many believe that the nature of God points to theology that incorporates and involves every faith, while in some way, relating salvation back the figure of Christ. Emergent leader John Burke asks if this is the role or place of the emergent church. He questions, “Can the emerging church build the kinds of bridges to those pursuing other faiths or coming from other religious backgrounds like Paul did? Does our theology have room for a God who works behind the scene, even in other religious pursuits, drawing people to Christ?”¹²⁰ For emergent Christians, the answer is yes, and their practice and understanding of doctrine is formed within that experience and that belief.

¹¹⁸ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of emerging churches*, 146.

¹¹⁹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 121.

¹²⁰ Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Beliefs of Emerging Churches*, 59.

However, throughout my research I've discovered that most of the dialogue regarding emergent Christianity takes place within the evangelical subculture. In the interviews that I conducted and the sources that I've explored, it became clear that the emergent community yearns to interact and reach out to other faith communities and exist within the interfaith context. One example of this is Solomon's Porch church which currently houses a "Rabbi-In-Residence". Yet, while I have seen and experienced some interfaith action, I've noticed (and many emergent Christians would agree) that there is much more talk about interaction with other faith communities than actual implementation. I would suggest that the explanation for this is rooted in emergent Christianity being primarily a dialogue or conversation. Their lack of participation with other communities might be a result of the constant discussion with their opposition. Further, it doesn't help that the movement is rooted and grounded in dialogue and conversation and has yet to move outside of this conversation based theology.

Chapter 2: Evidence of the interviews

Due to the lack of outside scholarship or research on the emergent church in general, a large portion of my research has been built around interviews and interactions with people in the emergent church as well as with New Evangelicals. Having been a part of a community of both emergent and New Evangelical Christians throughout my high school experience, I was able to contact many leaders within the emergent church, as well as leaders within the New Evangelical community.

Throughout these discussions, interviews, and conversations I was able to get a better understanding of some of the complex discussion within this community, as well as first hand accounts of the issues they are currently facing. I received first hand stories, explanations, elaborations and accounts of specific and current movements in both communities that the books were unable to provide. Additionally, because so much confusion and misunderstanding haunts the community, it was refreshing and helpful to have major leaders explicitly spell out some of the major identifying markers of the emergent church as well as their current issues.

This chapter explores the common themes that arose in my interviews with emergent Christians and New Evangelicals and how they relate to and embrace the role of doctrine within their community.

Additionally, there is much to be learned and noted from the way in which the various conversations and interviews took place- some, in alternative coffee shops over bottomless cups of coffee, one in a local taqueria, one in a church office, a few over Skype and a few over the phone. I have organized this chapter in terms of the themes that

arose throughout the interviews, using specific language from emergent Christians themselves, and from New Evangelicals.

Short Biographies of the Interviewees:¹²¹

Caitlin O'Connor and Shannon Trainor:

Shannon and Caitlin are examples of leaders within the New Evangelical community. They both have worked for FOCUS, *Fellowship of Christians in Universities and Schools*, a youth group program for students in private schools along the east coast. Shannon is still employed by FOCUS, Baltimore. I chose to speak with them because of the contemporary, fairly liberal and accepting approach. For me and in my experience, the FOCUS community is one of the better examples of a New Evangelical community. Additionally, because I know them personally, I knew that I would be able to gain access to some of the more personal questions with which they are struggling and gain a good account of the beliefs and doctrinal relationship to their community.

The interview was conducted in a local Baltimore coffee shop.

To ignite a discussion about the emergent church, I brought up the topic of Rob Bell's Book, *Love Wins*. New Evangelicals who aren't too familiar with the term 'emergent' Christianity are still able to relate to Rob Bell's book because they have heard of the controversy that it has sparked. I asked the two of them about the issues that Bell's book raised, and whether Bell's ideas created problems in their interpretation of Christian doctrine.

¹²¹ Throughout my interviews I refer to those interviewed by their first name. In the case of Brian McLaren, It made sense to follow that similar format even though throughout the texts I use his last name.

Jan Edmiston

Jan Edmiston is the interim Associate Executive Presbyter at the Presbytery of Chicago. She just recently ended her job as pastor at the Fairlington Presbyterian Church. Her bachelor degree is from UNC and she achieved her M. Div from Andover-Newton Theological Seminary. She attended Columbia Theological Seminary where her doctorate focused on Preaching as Group Spiritual Direction. I met Jan through my old Pastor from Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. He recommended that I speak with her because of her interest in Emergent Christianity and progressive and liberal theology. Jan represents the older generations of emergent Christians from mainline denominations.

Jan has played a major role in the development of this paper. I have included our conversations in this work because of her significant presence within the emergent community as well as her role as a leader both in the Presbyterian Church as well as among emergent Christians. Jan also represents those Christians who are working within the mainline Protestant denominations, seeking to understand what it means to be a Christian in a post-modern world. Additionally, it is Jan who opened the doors to the emergent community for me. Her direct experience with emergent, mainline and New Evangelical communities equips her to be a major asset to this work.

Matt Pritchard

Matt Pritchard is a staff worker for InterVarsity (University of Pittsburg), a national collegiate Christian fellowship. When Jan Edmiston introduced me to him, I was intrigued by his experiences at a contemporary Christian service that led him to explore the emergent community. Matt offers to my work a lens into how the function of doctrine relates to God's will being done on this earth. He focuses on service and orthopraxis. His

comments on what it means to be Christian, what it looks like to serve and how 'right' doctrine fits in with his experiences is critical to this conversation.

What is probably most fascinating is that the organization for which he works, InterVarsity, is on some campuses quite conservative and more reflective of New Evangelical Christians. However, he acknowledges that the community dynamic changes from college campus to college campus.

Brian McLaren

One of the major leaders in the emergent movement, Brian is an author, a pastor, a professor of English and a community activist. He was the founder of Cedar Ridge Community Church in Maryland, and his text *A Generous Orthodoxy* is viewed as the 'manifesto of emergent Christianity'.¹²² Along with a few other church leaders, Brian started with the creation of The Leadership Network, which he (and others) soon branched from to establish *The Emergent Village*.¹²³ I wanted to supplement what he wrote in his book with personal conversation in response to specific questions that I had about emergent Christianity.

Brian's interview is possibly the most important in this text in that I was able to get access to one of the innovators and movers within the emergent Christian movement. Further, the Skype interview we had was relaxed, informal and extremely comfortable. Brian was open to comments and questions as well as concerns. He spoke articulately and often in the form of a narrative.

¹²² Brian McLaren, About Brian, <http://brianmclaren.net/archives/about-brian/>

¹²³ To gain a better understanding of the differences between the Leadership Network and The Emergent Village, please look to the definitions outlined in the beginning of this work. For a more in depth discussion, visit emergentvillage.com and leadnet.org

Finally, it is worth noting that in my conversations with Brian McLaren, he speaks of his Christian experience as that of a *Christian* experience rather than an 'emergent' experience or 'post-modern' experience. His decision to blur the lines of 'us' vs. 'them' indicates his compassion toward and appreciation of other Christian practices, as well as his view that Emergent Christianity is not a new Christian denomination

Matthew Dyer

Matthew Dyer is the current pastor of Brian McLaren's old church. He and Brian both make it very clear that the church has moved in a different direction since Brian left, yet might look more like the type of community that Brian was writing about in his books before he left his church. Matthew became Senior Pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in January 2006. Previously he worked as a pastor at a Vineyard church in Cincinnati, Ohio as well as at a Vineyard church in the United Kingdom.

Throughout my conversation with Matthew, he disassociated his church from the emergent movement, even though their practices and understandings of the role of doctrine align so perfectly with some of the other emergent communities that I've seen as well as with the examples highlighted in the texts and other interviews. I believe this is he is afraid of what it means to be associated with a name and this post-modern movement. Our conversation took place at his church office.

Today, Cedar Ridge describes itself as a non-denominational church in Maryland that focuses on making disciples of Jesus in today's world. According to their website, they are mission oriented and seek to bring about the kingdom of God on earth while

engaging in a spiritually open and diverse church community-one that extends beyond the congregation.¹²⁴

Jeff Gentry

Jeff is the leader of the Boston Emergent Cohort.¹²⁵ I got in contact with him through the Boston Cohort Facebook page, and we agreed to meet up in Boston to discuss further his relationship to the emergent church. We met at a local Taqueria in Boston for lunch. Jeff is the community relations director of Triangle, a company that assists individuals with disabilities offering them education, professional development and residential services.

Growing up in a conservative Christian household, Jeff attended a Christian college, seminary and was on track to becoming a pastor. After working at a larger church community for a few years he decided to change careers. He began to search deeper into the roots of his faith and system of belief and decided that he wanted to be a part of a conversation that explored the same questions he had. Jeff leads the Greater Boston cohort voluntarily, which is located at The Gathering in Salem, Massachusetts. The community is both theologically and socially diverse, creating a safe place for conversation and growth.

Discussion of themes

The location, context and atmosphere of the actual interview

¹²⁴ For more information on Cedar Ridge community church, visit <http://www.crcc.org/content/page/vision-details>

¹²⁵ For more information on the Boston Cohort or the definition of cohort, see page of definitions.

Each interview that I did was extremely informal. While they varied in locations, contexts and atmospheres, the general informal nature of the interview remained consistent with every individual, whether I was speaking to emergent Christians or New Evangelicals. In terms of the content, the interviews allowed space for my academic pursuits, but then turned personal: in every interview, the interviewee would turn the questions around and ask about my personal relationship to this particular topic.

My interview with Brian McLaren took place over Skype, after I reached out to his publicist to connect us. He spoke from the comfort of his own home, wearing headphones, and even apologized for eating his lunch during our interview. Jeff Gentry suggested that we meet at Anna's Taqeria, a local and popular burrito joint found in Boston and its suburbs. Jan and Matt both spoke with me over the phone, but our conversations extended long past emergent Christianity. The interview with Caitlin and Shannon took place at a local Baltimore coffee shop. Matthew Dyer's interview was perhaps the most formal, as he is a pastor and had an extremely busy schedule and could only meet in his office. Yet, he brought me into his office and the 'interview' turned into a seemingly casual dialogue between the two of us.

There was no distinction between the interview settings, context or atmosphere with regards to speaking with emergent Christians or New Evangelicals.

Speaking and truth telling through narrative

The interviews suggest that narrative seems to play two major roles within Emergent Christianity. For emergent Christians that were interviewed, narrative is the dominant mode in which they described and expressed their experiences. Those

interviewed often found it difficult to find the words to explain Christian faith doctrinally and resorted to telling a story-then proceeding to ask me if I understood.

The second way that narrative arose in the interviews is the conceptual status that emergent Christians give to the tool of storytelling. Specifically, Brian and Jan felt like their Christian faith was shaped by their lived experiences, and the main reason that they've chosen to re-evaluate the role of doctrine is because their life stories have impacted their Christian identity.

Throughout my interviews with both emergent Christians and New Evangelicals, I began to notice how many of the individuals and leaders whom I've classified as 'emergent' were attempting to convey truth through narratives. When asked to speak about his personal understanding of doctrine, Brian pondered, "Doctrine: That whole word itself is really an interesting word" and then went on to tell a story. His decision to articulate the role of doctrine through a personal experience was so typical of emergent Christianity. Brian goes on to share a story about his experiences in South Africa with a group of South African Bishops and showed how his understanding of doctrine was influenced by his experiences. The point I am making here is that instead of articulating a specific, pointed response, he shared with me a story to help me better understand where he was coming from.

Further, I found this trend of expressing truth through narrative throughout my conversation with Jan. At one point, when asked about the implications of inter-religious relationships, she didn't have a specific formulated answer, but immediately responded by telling a story about her son dating a Muslim woman. Her views on the subject were conveyed through the emotional account of her son's struggle to be accepted by family

members, and her own hurt that came about when she heard threats of condemnation to hell by family that she so dearly loved.

These two instances demonstrate the high importance and value that emergent Christians have placed on narrative and conveying truth through personal story. Yet, speaking with New Evangelicals Shannon and Caitlin, I was given the impression that while narrative is useful to articulate a personal experience, it should not take the place of truth or challenge doctrinal status. Specifically, these two leaders would answer the questions that I had with articulated, formulated responses, and the stories they used to support their understandings were examples from the Bible. When discussing the doctrine that emergent Christians were questioning and trying to understand, Shannon responded with firm doctrinal answers, saying, “Well what do these people (emergent Christians) say about after you die? And for one it’s not to say who goes where, but the Bible is pretty clear about that there are two options: The parable of the sheep and the goats. Because the sheep was bringing about God’s kingdom and God says you did all that stuff for me, and then there’s the other people who didn’t do those things who are cast away”.¹²⁶

The stories that Shannon tells here are from the Bible, and not from his own personal experiences. Further, it is clear that his understanding of Christianity is shaped and molded by these Biblical metaphors, and that they’ve led him to embrace a more doctrinally centered and focused faith. Shannon is not against engaging in dialogue about his experiences within Christianity and how they have shaped his faith. However, he is firm in his belief that our experiences cannot alter some central doctrinal elements.

¹²⁶ Shannon Trainor, Personal Interview, November 10th, 2011.

Where is Doctrines place amongst all other dimensions?

The conversation with Shannon and Caitlin was centered on the doctrine of Heaven and Hell, and the implications of the literal interpretation they embrace versus the questioning presented by Bell. Through this conversation it became obvious that there are some doctrinal ‘truths’ that Shannon and Caitlin believe people need to be accepted in order to be called Christians. At the end Shannon does make a comment that “it’s not doctrine that we disagree on...”¹²⁷ Yet, it is obvious that the role of doctrine in Shannon and Caitlin’s theology is not only different from Bell’s, but it is crucial in their understanding of what it means to be Christian.

Thus, for them, sound or ‘right’ doctrine, directly relates to the Christian identity. For both Shannon and Caitlin, having a definitive and concrete understanding of life after death and focusing on the role of Jesus as it relates to salvific theory is not only important, but is the center of Christianity. Without these specific interpretations of the doctrine of salvation and atonement, Christianity is nothing. When discussing the implications of maintaining a more fluid interpretation of this specific doctrine, Shannon seemed startled.

To begin to hold a more fluid function of doctrine for Shannon would uproot the entire meaning of the Christian message. When I pushed Shannon to explain why this understanding of doctrine made him so uncomfortable, he responded with a somewhat generic evangelical Christian tagline. He began to spit out “God Talk” using lines that clearly weren’t of his own creation but from the New Evangelical community.¹²⁸ Some

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ “God Talk” is a phrase coined by Randall Balmer in *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture of America*. He describes it as a “verbal veil” that covers up real answers and

other classic examples of “God Talk” are sometimes, “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God”, “God will bring me through” and “I’m only saved by the blood of Jesus”. Shannon continued, “Have these discussions is important, but these doctrinal elements are also important, I probably wouldn’t be a Christian if I didn’t believe there was a hell, like I am a sinner, and I need a savior so I’ll trust Jesus...if it was just living a hellish life...then I don’t know...”¹²⁹

As Shannon trailed off I could tell that he was conflicted. At 27, this Christian leader was clearly still trying to understand how his doctrinal truths work within his New Evangelical worldview. Finally, at this point in the interview, Caitlin began to speak up. Her explanation really illuminated the boundaries that Shannon had drawn between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals. Caitlin noted that both Shannon and some of the emergent Christians of whom I was speaking are centered and focused on the Bible, yet both come away with different meanings and interpretations. While she ended her part of the conversation by saying that it is imperative that we understand what the Bible says about the central doctrinal themes that we discussed, it was clear that she was aware of the boundaries that her community had drawn and the social implications that came with these beliefs.

While in the New Evangelical community it is evident that certain elements of doctrine maintain superiority and other elements of the community stem from that understanding. Jan’s interview demonstrated that belief is just one of many elements that makes up the emergent community. Jan and other emergents question this role of doctrine. As she notes that in her community, (her specific examples are social) being a

emotions. Instead the “God Talk” covers up true feelings or sentiments with evangelical catch phrases, and vague theological concepts (9).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

Christian and a member of the community hinges on much more than a specific interpretation of doctrine. It is manifest in giving members a ride here and there, offering a hand to baby-sit or cooking dinner for a sick member. Her message here is that “it used to be the case that everybody believed the same thing and you behave accordingly and [then] you belong...”¹³⁰ Now, Jan is asserting that belonging and being a part of the church community comes first. She draws on Christian author Phyllis Tickle, offering that the community “starts with belonging because people are looking for community”¹³¹ and that “the last thing on that ladder (of joining the Christian community) is belief and then you come to believe what you believe”.¹³²

Right doctrine is not a deal breaker

Interviews with both emergent Christians and New Evangelicals revealed a unique difference between the understandings of doctrine, specifically the role of “right” doctrine. The interviews revealed that for emergent Christians, holding a “right” doctrine is not crucial to being a Christian. However, for New Evangelicals, certain doctrines are non negotiable.

The emergent conversation is a venue for individuals to come together to discuss the relevance, importance and influence of certain doctrines that for ages seemed to be non negotiable. Jeff Gentry offers, “The emergent church is a safe place to discuss dangerous theology. And no one is going to hammer you because you’re not trying to uphold certain doctrines of certain traditions”.¹³³ On the other hand, New Evangelicals like Caitlin and Shannon were wary of opening the floodgates of contemplating

¹³⁰ Jan Edminston, Personal Interview, November 7th 2011.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Jeff Gentry, Personal Interview, November 16th, 2011.

‘dangerous theology’. For them, having these conversations is okay, yet must be handled carefully, and that doctrines many not be questioned. This issue was brought up specifically when talking about the doctrines of Heaven and Hell. I mentioned to Shannon that often, these doctrinal “truths” are being further fleshed out and understood, perhaps being questioned and dissected. Shannon responded with hesitancy, saying, “Having these discussions is important, but these doctrinal elements are also important, I probably wouldn’t be a Christian if I didn’t believe there was a hell, like I am a sinner, and I need a savior so I’ll trust Jesus...if it was just living a hellish life...then I don’t know...”¹³⁴ It is evident here that questioning this doctrine of hell and heaven also leads him to question what it means to be a Christian.

Caitlin followed up on Shannon’s comment by acknowledging that in reading the Bible, two people can come to very different interpretations and understandings. However, she asserted that it is crucial that “we don’t screw this up”, to say that there aren’t any “scriptural consequences” would be to challenge what the Bible is saying¹³⁵. Both Caitlin and Shannon realize that individuals will interpret some things in the Bible differently, and come to different conclusions. What makes Christians like Shannon and Caitlin different from emergent Christians like Brian or Jan is that they believe that an interpretation could lead us from a “right” interpretation and that there are indeed consequences if the “right” doctrine is accepted.

Being a part of the emergent church or the emergent conversation means being flexible on what it means to maintain a “right doctrine”. Pastor Matthew Dyer, for instance, described the Cedar Ridge Church community as welcoming diverse

¹³⁴ Shannon Trainor, Personal Interview

¹³⁵ Caitlin O’Connor, Personal Interview, November 10th, 2011.

understandings of the role of doctrine. Our interview seemed to suggest that members of his community articulate different interpretations of doctrine, and avoid stating an ultimate or “right” view of doctrine. Dyer commented, “ We feel dissatisfied with the traditional substitution atonement theory of salvation. We don’t like to think of any. Is it really God’s best possible plan that if you don’t say the right things then you will fry in eternity, a select few? I don’t buy it.”¹³⁶

For this community of emergent Christians, having the “right” understanding of doctrine is not something that will cause one to lose their Christian identity or exclude one from their community. However, by New Evangelical criteria, Dyer’s words and outlook on doctrine would be not only cause for concern, but suggest that his Christian affiliation is open to question. Further, within the specific community of Cedar Ridge, one doesn’t have to affirm any particular beliefs to be a part of their church. Dyer comments that they are a group of people following Jesus and that someone who does not want to follow Jesus would probably not want to be a part of the community, so he stresses, “We aren’t asking anyone to believe anything...but we are following Jesus”.¹³⁷

When describing what it means to be a part of Cedar Ridge, Dyer uses an interesting diagram and concept to articulate his point. Dyer describes Cedar Ridge as a “centered set” community. A community labeled as a “centered set” is not defined by its boundaries, but rather its center (which in this case is Jesus). The opposite would be a “bounded set” a group defined by its boundaries. I am including Dyer’s diagram (see Figure 1) because I believe that it is a clear way to understand this concept of “right doctrine” with regards to the emergent church and the New Evangelicals. The “bounded

¹³⁶ Matthew Dyer, Personal Interview, November 10th, 2011.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

set” community that Dyer describes is one that is defined by who is “in” and who is “out” based on a certain group of doctrines. However, a community that is defined by the center to which they are drawn (Jesus) is not bound by any particular doctrine.¹³⁸ It is apparent that Cedar Ridge believes that they still maintain a “Christian” identity, yet are not totally wedded to certain doctrines and dogmas.

A case in point is the Cedar Ridge’s community attitude toward the doctrine of divine punishment for non-belief. One of the major pieces of doctrine that New Evangelicals keep in the forefront is the consequence that follows for choosing not to believe in God. Consequently, the notion of a benevolent God condemning those who do not believe has been a theological paradox that for many years has been simply accepted by New Evangelicals as mysterious and beautiful. However, Dyer and the Cedar Ridge community push that boundary by challenging conventional assumptions about the character of God. Matthew explained to me why he believes that there is something more to this doctrine of divine punishment, and divine punishment does not fit within his understanding of the nature of God. In his words,

If you believe that God will condemn everyone who doesn’t believe in “Him”, if you don’t believe the way that I think should believe, then they’re going to be eternally punished, suddenly the most important thing is to get them believe to what you believe your whole life is to get them to believe what you believe, save them from hell, and that will effect everything that you live your life. We’ve begun to think, maybe God isn’t that vindictive, maybe there’s more to life than this.¹³⁹

Dyer and Cedar Ridge’s decision to take on the conflicting theologies that stand in the way of their own understanding and experiences of God, and their willingness to

¹³⁸ Throughout our interview Matthew Dyer kept trying to disassociate himself with the emergent community. While I touch on this particular note in this section, I wanted to mention that it was after he described the “centered set” and “bounded set” diagram to me that I got confused as to why he continues to disassociate himself from emergent Christians.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

accept anyone at any stage of faith, demonstrates how this community believes that “right” doctrine is not necessary for membership within the Christian community. Furthermore, Dyer has challenged the Christian communities that hold onto the idea of a “right” doctrine, asking them what the implications of maintaining a “right” doctrine would be and in turn, how that reflects the nature of God.

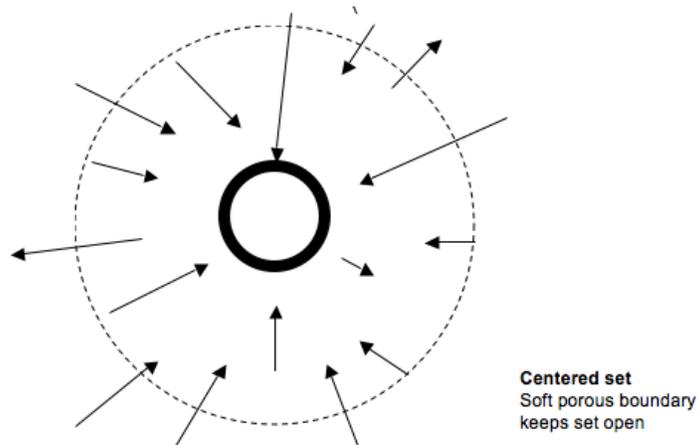


Figure 1¹⁴⁰

That being said, Dyer or any other emergent Christians are not suggesting that every interpretation is valid. Rather, emergent Christians are seeking to be as “truthful and articulate with theology (doctrine) as possible”.¹⁴¹

Dyer and his community at Cedar Ridge are only one example of how a group of Christians deal with the issues that arise from complicated theology. Jan Edmiston shared similar sentiments and frustrations with Matthew suggesting that perhaps Christians are focusing too much on the theological details and therefore missing so much. . At one

¹⁴⁰ *The journey: Cedar Ridge community Church Workbook*, 2012.

¹⁴¹ Mathew Dyer, Interview.

point in her interview, Jan Edmiston, all tied up in her words, simply stopped talking, folded her hands and sighed. She let out the phrase I believe describes emergent sentiment on belief, “We so easily miss the point”¹⁴². Jan here seems to be suggesting that in being caught up in finding the “right” and “accurate” doctrine, much of the Christian faith is lost or misunderstood. Jan is pushing to reclaim what is often overshadowed, misunderstood or forgotten when Christianity becomes all about identifying the proper and correct doctrine. But emergent Christianity is, for Jan, about reclaiming a community of those who are looking to follow Jesus, and bring about his teachings on this earth.

Emergent Christians: Not us v. them...just ‘us’.

Throughout my interaction with the individuals I interviewed, it became clear that the emergent Christians were reluctant to identify with labels like “emergent” and “evangelical” and “emerging”. While I was not surprised, (since one of my main challenges has been to properly identify and categorize the different expressions of Christianity that are being lived out) it was particularly interesting to hear how each individual or community struggled with conforming to a specific name or group. On the other hand, other individuals or communities did not seem to mind at all whether they were included or excluded from certain groups or labels. Thus, in personal interviews, it seemed apparent that the emergent communities with whom I spoke did draw on or identify nominal boundaries. Rather, they would speak in inclusive terminology, frequently using words such as “us”.

¹⁴² Jan Edmiston, Interview.

However, my interview with Shannon and Caitlin demonstrated that this inclusivity was one of the things that differentiated emergent from New Evangelical Christians. New Evangelicals do not want to be associated with emergent Christians, their characteristic ideas, and their communities. Nevertheless, because of the outward physical similarities of the two groups, it becomes easy to group the two Christian groups together. Emergent Christians do not seem to be concerned with the issue of labeling that I've discussed. However, New Evangelicals want the distinction to be clear. Shannon and Caitlin made this obvious by the language that they were using. For example, when referring to New Evangelicals they use the term "Us" and when speaking about emergent Christians, they used the terms "them" or "they". This "*us* versus *them*" language demonstrates that the idea of doctrine as a marker of who's in and who's out was obvious in their tone. Their desire to disassociate from emergents demonstrates that drawing clear nominal boundaries is crucial to their identity.¹⁴³

On the other hand, after speaking with Brian, Jan and Matt Pritchard, I began to understand that terminology is not important for these emergent Christians and that they are not looking to define themselves by name in order to create more boundaries. In fact, Brian commented that when he and other fellow emergent leaders were sitting down to discuss the direction of the emergent movement, they confidently made the decision not to try to create another denomination or group. Believing that they were simply trying to continue the conversation amongst Christians and that they were not starting anything new, they wanted to shy away from drawing any more boundaries that have already been

¹⁴³ Interview, Shannon Triamor, Caitlin O'Connor.

created by varying Christian groups. Thus Brian said, “We wanted to build the widest set of relationships that we could, we didn’t want to create boundaries”.¹⁴⁴

Finally, my interviews with pastor Matthew Dyer and Jeff Gentry suggest that they fit somewhere between the two distinctions that I’ve drawn. While I’ve labeled them both for the sake of this paper as an emergent within an emergent community, Matthew Dyer and Jeff Gentry both seemed to shy away from labels. However, both men believed that drawing boundaries for the conversations they were promoting was dangerous and a hindrance to a full expression of their Christian experience. Jeff wanted the Boston Cohort to be a place that Christians from all different labels could have a place to discuss “dangerous theology...and that no ones going to hammer you because you’re not trying to uphold certain doctrines of certain traditions”.¹⁴⁵

Pastor Dyer speaks more specifically to the elimination of boundaries by calling his community of Christians simply “those who wish to follow Jesus”.¹⁴⁶ While his church displays the characteristics of an emergent community, Dyer is aware that drawing nominal boundaries can include or exclude members. He, like other emergent Christians, seeks to take a more open-ended stance by welcoming to the community anyone who wishes to be a follower of Jesus. Commenting his relationship to the term “emergent” Dyer says, “I wasn’t trying to create an emergent church, any more than I wanted it to be Baptist or Catholic or whatever. We’re just trying to follow Jesus. As Christians, our major goal is to follow Jesus”.¹⁴⁷ His emphases here on moving away from label reveals his wariness about how boundaries have played a part in defining what

¹⁴⁴ Brian McLaren, Skype interview, December 8th, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Jeff Gentry, Interview.

¹⁴⁶ Matthew Dyer, Interview.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

it means to be Christian. He ended by commenting, “Our Theology isn’t our biggest deal, we have lots of beliefs, what defines us is following Jesus”.¹⁴⁸

Emergents are a community united and defined by experiences and doubts

Emergent Christians are not only comfortable saying, “I don’t Know”, but they also believe that it is impossible to be Christian *without* embracing doubts. However, New Evangelicals have a somewhat different attitude about doubt.

The emergent community began to develop out of many small conversations that evangelical sub church groups held to discuss different theologies and theodicies. Many Christians experienced situations that would cause them to question, doubt and fear that their faith would fall apart. However, rather than abandoning their faith, Jan Edmiston urges Christians to embrace their doubts and thus strengthen the Christian community. While they conduct lots of dialogues about which doctrine is “right”, how it is to be interpreted and whether or not it should be thrown out or re-evaluated, at the heart of many emergent communities is an acceptance that not everything within the Christian story has to make sense for it to be true or relevant. This sentiment emerged in my conversation with Jan when I listened to her describe what it looks like to be a Christian in her community. She pleaded for an honest and open community that seeks God in whatever way makes sense, one that embraces and accepts doubt and the authority of all believers:

For emergent Christians there is so much more interest in following Jesus and the other stuff doesn’t really make any sense. Wearing a robe on Sunday morning, wear one or don’t wear one, but that doesn’t mean you’re a Christian. Following Jesus is what it means to be a Christian. And honesty is really important, I see that in the emerging church in that people are much more honest in what they believe and I’ve

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

been with people in a traditional service every Sunday and they don't believe it. Don't come and pretend to be something every day of your life. That's what they thought it meant to be a Christian.¹⁴⁹

To say that New Evangelicals or any other Christian community rejects doubt or skepticism would be false. Doubt and uncertainty is expected- and to an extent accepted, with the end result of a strengthened faith. Yet New Evangelicals insist that their leaders maintain strong beliefs. Jan however critiques this insistence, arguing that everyone should feel comfortable being honest about where they are with their beliefs and faith, and that a dialogue sharing these different opinions will only strengthen the community. She ended calmly, "We say we believe in the priesthood of all believers. We don't live as if we believe that".¹⁵⁰

There is a lot of "Talk" in the emergent church, and not much action

One of the major critiques of the emergent community is that it consists primarily of conversation, writing and lectures. This critique comes both from within the emergent community and from its opponents. Matthew Dyer calls this challenge into focus by noting how much easier it is to write and talk than to put theory into practice. Dyer suggests that the hardest part is taking the sentiments and beliefs that come out of the conversation and implementing them within the community. He notes that for much of the time, the conversation stays solely within the community rather than moving outward. He notes that there might be a lot of listening and acceptance of one another in a church setting, but as soon as the community starts to affirm different doctrines or theological

¹⁴⁹ Jan Edmiston, Interview.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

concepts, “people start having a problem, even people who are happy to talk about it”.¹⁵¹ His frustration is evident when he notes that when conversation “touches the ground it can be a real problem and divisive. That is the challenge and I think that’s the challenge that we’ve been wrestling with here”.¹⁵²

Doctrine as “Healing”

For Brian McLaren, the word “Doctrine” has a particularly interesting history. While he maintains a different understanding of the word itself, he draws upon the writing of his friend, Diana Butler Bass, a Christian scholar who urges that doctrine be understood as “a healing teaching”.¹⁵³ He suggests reconsidering doctrine that hurts and scars humans. Instead, for Brian and other emergent Christians, doctrine functions as a tool that heals rather than one that condemns and hurts. To have a doctrine in place that seeks to provide healing and comfort is a fundamental difference from the way doctrine functions in that of New Evangelicism.

Towards the end of our conversation Brian recommended that people be careful using doctrine because that often gets Christians into trouble when it is connected to power and politics. He comments, “Whatever a person’s doctrine might be, we have to be sensitive to how doctrines ally us with political and economic and powers that can do anything but align us with healing so that our doctrine becomes healing”.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Matthew Dyer, Interview.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Brian McLaren, Interview.

¹⁵⁴ Brian McLaren, Interview.

Chapter 3: Conclusion- Discussion of the themes

Up until this work, there has been little to no critical religious scholarship on emergent Christianity. Not only has this community of Christians within different denominations been critiqued and criticized by their opposition, but also it has yet to gain any recognition or acknowledgement from predominant scholars of religion in the United States. The conversation and study of emergent Christians has been stuck within the narrow confines of an intra-Christian dialogue between competing groups of mostly evangelical Christians, thus perpetuating a conversation that consists of defending individual truth claims.

These conversations that consist of “I’m right, you’re wrong and this is the theological evidence as to why” between emergent Christians and the New Evangelicals prohibit emergent Christians from being able to fully express their faith and identity. The study of emergent Christianity needs to be examined through the lens of religious studies scholarship. This takes it back from conversations about “right” and “wrong”, and makes it more about describing the “why” and “how” of the practices and experiences within their faith communities. This is a more inclusive conversation, true to the spirit and style of emergent Christianity.

Throughout this work I’ve provided examples of the function and role of doctrine and experience of emergent Christians and their criticisms from their concerned New Evangelical counterparts. From this evidence, I have drawn out themes and ideas that help describe the distinctive features of emergent identity as well as their relationship to the New Evangelicals.

Finally, I will conclude by applying functionalist models of doctrine in contemporary religious scholarship to the evidence of doctrine within the emergent community. In doing so, it becomes evident that doctrine plays a different role and serves a different function for emergent Christianity than it does for New Evangelicals.

This application of the evidence to the specific framework helps us to understand three key points about emergent Christian identity.

Most of this thesis has focused on outlining the differences between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals, as well as highlighting the varying themes that define each community. However, now I add something new to the “internal” conversation between emergent Christians and New Evangelicals by analyzing these themes in light of contemporary religious studies scholarship. So now, I will apply the theories of four different scholars to illuminate how doctrine functions within emergent Christianity and what viewing the community in this framework reveals. Throughout this discussion, it is my hope that the emergent Christian community can be better understood both on its own terms and as a particular expression of the general characteristic of new religious movements, rather than being evaluated primarily by its New Evangelical critics based on their understanding of doctrinal truth claims.

Doctrine: One dimension among many

In applying Ninian Smart’s definition of the function of doctrine, it is clear that for emergent Christians, doctrine is only one dimension of the six dimensions of religion, which allows for a large role to be played by the five other dimensions he highlights in his text. For New Evangelicals, on the contrary, doctrine serves as the most important

dimension and that the other dimensions are governed by doctrine. The two groups' relationship to doctrine illuminates the function of doctrine.

In the evidence that I've presented it becomes clear that emergent Christians have a different understanding of the function of doctrine. In order to better understand how this function affects their understanding of belief and community, I will draw from scholar Ninian Smart's definition of doctrine. In Smart's typology of the six dimensions of religious worldviews, doctrine is only *one* dimension among several dimensions of religion. In this light, it is easier to see the alternatives to doctrine that function as identity markers in emergent Christianity. Further, this explains why emergent Christians can embrace doctrine as something that is more fluid and flexible than it is for New Evangelical Christians. Smart allows us to look at doctrines "vertically"-to see how doctrines might relate to other dimensions of religion such as experience or ritual.¹⁵⁵ He asserts, "...I do not hold that each aspect is equally important in a given religion or worldview. They may even vary in importance in the same tradition between one century and the next".¹⁵⁶ Taking his words into consideration, emergent Christians understand doctrines as one dimension among many.

While Smart allows for emergent Christians to embrace doctrine as just one among many crucial dimensions of their faith, interpretation of doctrine as a cultural linguistic system better explains how emergent Christians actually *understand* how doctrine functions within their community. I have demonstrated how emergent Christians differ from New Evangelicals in that they find it difficult to embrace "right doctrine". I have also highlighted many of the reasons that emergent Christians reject the notion of

¹⁵⁵ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews*, 93.

¹⁵⁶ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews*, 8.

right doctrine- for they find it does not reflect the reality of their religious experiences. Lindbeck's words support the emergent sentiment towards "right doctrine". He writes, "The very words "doctrine" and "dogma" have the smell of the ghetto about them and to take them seriously is, it seems, to cut oneself off from the larger world".¹⁵⁷

One of the major points of contention between New Evangelicals and emergent Christians is the New Evangelical's belief that the emergent approach to doctrine is a slippery slope to universalism and abandonment of Christian identity altogether. Lindbeck addresses this concern by suggesting that as long as the particular faith or in this case dialect, is still recognizable enough to be attributed to the particular language of origin, it is still viewed as within that particular language. He writes, "The limits of the language are marked by the point at which variations in dialect become so great that communication is impossible apart from learning the idiom as foreign speech".¹⁵⁸ This understanding allows for emergent Christians to view doctrine as more flexible and fluid, while shying away from "right" or "correct" doctrinal elements as suggested by New Evangelicals.

Loy, Lindbeck, Bass, and the power of narrative

Using Lindbeck's definition of doctrine and David Loy's theory of narrative to examine emergent Christianity makes it clear that narrative and experience function like doctrine does for the New Evangelicals. The New Evangelicals approach narrative and experience by understanding that while the two are important, they are informed by doctrine, but should not inform doctrine itself.

¹⁵⁷ George Lindbeck, *The Nature Of Doctrine*, 77.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

New Evangelicals affirm the importance of the role that doctrine plays in shaping their identity as Christians. However, within emergent Christianity, it is clear that shared narrative and experience have taken the place of doctrine as the primary criteria for belonging to the group. In turn, doctrine within emergent Christianity- is informed and transformed by personal and community narrative as well as by experiences of God and the Christian faith. Their decision to view doctrine in this way is better understood in the light of the work of Lindbeck and David Loy. According to David Loy's understanding of the function of narrative within a religious group in *The World Is Made Of Stories*, the emergent decision to replace doctrine with narrative and experience is illuminated and justified.

Smart writes that one of the five functions of doctrine is "...to bring order into what is given by revelation and, in story form, in the biblical narrative".¹⁵⁹ Here Smart is saying that doctrine sometimes acts as a vehicle for conveying meaning of Biblical narrative within one's personal experiences. It is crucial to note that Smart does not say 'bring into "right" order'. Rather, his words suggest a fluid application, allowing the interpretation to relate to the individual's understanding of the specific piece of doctrine.

Many Christians claim to understand their experiences in light of Biblical narratives. *How* these stories are viewed separates emergent Christians and New Evangelicals. Emergents introduce a more flexible doctrine, one that can be experienced by many different individuals and is not a rigid "yes" or "no" truth claim to be embraced. Loy comments, "Myth avoids this problem by being meaningful in a different way. Religious doctrines, like other ideologies, involve propositional claims to be accepted.

¹⁵⁹ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews*, 88.

Myths provide stories to interact with”.¹⁶⁰ Brian McLaren, Rob Bell, and other major emergent leaders often struggle about how to deal with certain elements of the Biblical narrative that seem to be incongruent with their *experiences* of Christianity. For them and other emergents, the power of experience and story has taken the place of doctrine, and narrative functions similarly to how doctrine does for New Evangelicals. Thus, by using Loy’s interpretation of the function of narrative, the emergent understanding of the role that Biblical stories play is justified.

Often modern Christians such as New Evangelicals and emergents agonize over how to relate to traditions and old narratives found within the Bible. While New Evangelicals seem concerned with getting it “right”, emergents are looking at how to connect these stories to their current experiences. Loy’s words seem to affirm the emergent decision to uncover truth within the biblical narratives. He writes, “The problem is not stories themselves but how we relate to them. We do not see our stories as stories because we see through them: the world we experience as reality is constructed with them”.¹⁶¹ Further, one of Smart’s functions of doctrine underscores Loy’s sentiments. He suggests that doctrine functions in order to “...help reflect and stimulate a fresh vision of the world...” and that “Doctrines have a practical meaning, not just a theoretical one. They provide a kind of vision or way of looking at things, which itself can inspire us to act, and guide our minds in a certain way.”¹⁶² Smart and Loy’s theories account for not only the emergent decision to allow experience to take the place of the role of doctrine, but also their flexible and personal application of biblical narrative to their experiences.

¹⁶⁰ David Loy, *The World Is Made Of Stories*, (Somerville: Wisdom, 2010), 12.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, VII.

¹⁶² Ninian Smart, *Worldview*, 89.

Towards the end of his chapter on the function of doctrine within the cultural linguistic system, Lindbeck makes a prescient comment regarding the use of biblical narrative and its relationship to truth and experience. Here he seems to anticipate the work of McLaren, Bell and Jones as he writes, “Only in some younger theologians does one see the beginnings of a desire to renew in a posttradition and postliberal mode the ancient practice of absorbing the universe into the biblical world. May their tribe increase”.¹⁶³ Emergent Christians allow for their experiences and narratives to inform their doctrinal understanding. Lindbeck seems to suggest that this revitalization of the intersection of traditional stories and doctrine with current experiences is a step in the right direction.

Diana Butler Bass’s recently published book rides the fine line between discursive text and narrative. Bass’s text, like Lindbeck’s, presents a fluid and relevant interpretation of doctrine Bass also agrees that these interpretations are justified so long as they’re relevant, relative and can still be recognized as part of the same ‘dialect’ or faith. Bass writes, “I do not think it is wise to adapt religions to contemporary tastes willy-nilly... I do, however, think it is exceedingly wise for faithful people to intentionally engage emerging religious questions in order to reform, renew, and reimagine ancient traditions in ways that make sense to contemporary people”.¹⁶⁴ Bass’s work builds on this relationship to experience suggesting that emergent Christians are right in reclaiming their encounters with God that might not be reflected in current Church interpretations of doctrine. She articulates this as ‘experiential belief’ writing,

¹⁶³ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 135.

¹⁶⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 7.

“When belief springs from and is rewoven with experience, we arrive at the territory of being spiritual *and* religious: experiential belief”.¹⁶⁵

Boundaries informing doctrine

My research and experiences with both emergent Christians and the New Evangelicals highlighted how boundaries are informed by an understanding of doctrine. It is clear that Emergent Christians are not concerned with defining boundaries, yet for New Evangelicals, certain doctrine affirms membership. However, by viewing the emergent community as a *style* of Christianity, their decision to define community by participation rather than belief is justified.

Utilizing Lindbeck and the theory of style as proposed by Anya Peterson Royce as a framework for studying emergent Christianity, allows for emergent Christians to maintain more fluid boundaries and embraces their decision to not be concerned with defining these boundaries. However, for New Evangelicals, certain doctrine does still affirm membership. Further, this framework illuminates how emergents maintain fluid and porous boundaries, whereas New Evangelicals enforce their boundaries socially by excluding those who don't share their ideas on doctrine. This is explored by utilizing both Smart and Lindbeck's understandings of the function and definition of doctrine respectively.

Smart describes the sentiments of New Evangelicals in that their community is defined by an acceptance of a set of doctrines. He writes, “[sometimes doctrine is used]...to define the community. Those who belong to the community have to accept a

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 116.

set of doctrines, and anything outside these may turn out to be heresy...”¹⁶⁶ Smart’s description resonates strikingly with New Evangelicals’ beliefs: “Those who deny true doctrine come to be seen as threats to the community and to the assurance of salvation”¹⁶⁷.

Ethno-musicologist Anya Peterson Royce’s theory of “style” helps to explain the quality of flexibility so important to emergent Christians’ attitude towards doctrine. While it is obvious that New Evangelicals are frustrated with the fluidity and flexibility of emergents’ approach to doctrine, seeing emergent Christianity as a style allows emergents to *embrace* some of these characteristics. Viewing emergent Christianity and New Evangelicals as two Christian styles suggests that the two communities function on a level playing field, and that one particular style is not better than another. Rather, the two styles are simply different. Further this approach highlights that the two communities do have similar shared experiences and identities, yet they’re distinguished by their stylistic preferences.

Further, because of the way that emergent Christians characterize style, it looks actually much like the ritual dimension. But by identifying it as a style rather than a ritual, the certain acts or characteristics of emergent style can be flexible.

Finally, analyzing the relationship between emergent Christianity and New Evangelicals in terms of style also recognizes the fluidity of the characteristics with regards to identity. Style, unlike tradition, does not act as a boundary that keeps some in and some out. Rather, style allows these two Christian communities to interact and relate to one another, maintaining different functions of doctrine without creating a division. If

¹⁶⁶ Ninian Smart, *Worldviews* 92.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

style functions as a community marker and boundary, then emergent Christians, who have a flexible understanding of boundaries and derive association from shared experiences should be seen as exhibiting simply a different *style* of Christianity. Additionally, it is clear that New Evangelicals and emergent Christians share a style in how they *do* church, how they dress, how they speak to non-Christians and how they publish their literature (book covers, creative and catchy titles, intriguing fonts). However, while the two groups share many different stylistic traits, their sharing stops at their theology: emergent Christians and New Evangelicals do not share a style of theology. What is more, New Evangelicals will not allow style to effect their theology. Utilizing Rocye's theory of style better illuminates what distinguishes these two groups, although they look almost indistinguishable.

After examining the content of books and interviews from both emergent Christians and New Evangelicals, I recognize that these two communities have two distinct understandings of uncertainty and doubt. The evidence demonstrates that New Evangelicals are socially united by certainty of belief, whereas emergent Christians seem to have come together under this shared understanding of the presence of doubt and speculation. Loy's quotation of Hannah Arendt on the power of story suggestively describes how narrative might accommodate a certain amount of uncertainty: "Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it". Here is precisely how the emergent Christians maintain group boundaries that still allow room for doubt. When Rob Bell shares his narrative of his relationship to Christianity, by precisely identifying it as a narrative and affirming the power of story, his experiences still embody the truth and light that doctrine maintains for New Evangelicals. However,

with story, as Loy suggests, there remains a personal application, the flexibility for it to be true as long as it is true for the one experiencing it.

Drawing boundaries in this way is threatening for New Evangelicals, but in light of Royce and Loy's work, it is not only acceptable to emergent Christians and outside scholarship, but it allows for a more applicable painting of the Christian experience for emergent Christians. As McLaren discussed in his interview, doctrinal boundaries have a history of keeping out, drawing lines, and often being hurtful. He calls upon Butler Bass to show how not only Christians, but also those from other faiths, must reclaim the traditional meaning of doctrine as a Healing teaching. Bass articulates,

Doctrine... actually means a 'healing teaching,' the creeds, as doctrinal statements, were intended as healing instruments, life giving words that would draw god's people into a deeper engagement with divine things. When creeds become fences to mark the borders of heresy. They lose their spiritual energy. Doctrine is to be the balm of a healing experience of god, not a theological scalpel to wound and exclude people.¹⁶⁸

Emergent Christians are looking to utilize the ancient doctrines of Christianity in order to inform theirs and others' experiences and encounters with the divine. The leaders with whom I've spoken understand the doctrines of Christianity to bring hope and power to those who embrace them and that they should function as positive elements in the lives of all. By utilizing Bass's understanding of doctrine, the emergent decision to understand boundaries as they do, as social markers, as encouragement of belonging before believing, their approaches are justified and supported.

Conclusion

These themes are tied together using author Diana Butler Bass's text as she offers this interesting sociological, historical, yet Christian perspective of the future for new

¹⁶⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after religion*, 134.

Christian movements in the United States. Her lens brings to life the realities of emergent Christians and puts them in the broader context alongside other emerging religious movements in the United States. Diana Butler Bass's work introduces a really helpful framework with which to examine not only emergent Christians and New Evangelicals, but also for all other new religious movements.

In conclusion, these findings demonstrate that once emergent Christianity is removed from the circular dialogue within evangelical Christianity, we are able to move past the conversations of who is right, and to learn more about how and why certain groups function and the unique, helpful and insightful contributions that emergent Christians bring to both the Christian community and the broader culture.

What needs to be explored further?

My research has shown me that there is still so much to learn about the emergent Christian community. Each book, interview and article opened up so many more doors in many different directions that I recognize that I have only really scratched the surface. There are many additional elements that I would like to explore in the future. The first is the role that gender plays within emergent Christianity-not only its development but its execution. While theologically Emergent Christians believe in the shared and equal responsibilities of women and men within the Church, (as opposed to some New Evangelicals who still maintain a conservative stance on women in church leadership), the emergent conversation is still heavily dominated by men. Although I did touch upon two women leaders, Karen Ward and Jan Edmiston, the critique of the dialogue being

predominantly male has been brought up by many emergent leaders themselves.¹⁶⁹ This could be attributed to the trend of emergent women coming out of a more conservative evangelical community within which they would not be able to maintain leadership positions. Emergent leaders are aware of the critique and are actively trying to involve more women in the conversation.

The second issue that I believe should be further explored is the relationship between race and emergent Christianity. Many have criticized the fact that not only is the movement led predominantly by men, but that it is led predominantly by *white* men. Because emergent Christians are actively involved in diverse religious, racial, political and socio-economic communities, it is interesting that as of now, the majority of the leaders are in fact white. I would like to push further and see why the group this sentiment has developed in this way.

Finally, there have been many critics from the religious right and the New Evangelicals who suggest (and have done so for years) that emergent Christianity is dead, or that the movement is dying out. What is the reasoning for their words? Is it because emergent Christianity is beginning to spread itself amongst Christian communities and is becoming more normal than unique? Perhaps the critics are trying to ignore and brush over the potential influence of the community. Or, it is truly because these communities are in fact dying out?

What does this mean for the Christianity as a whole?

Emergent Christians are nothing new. Christianity is always and will always be emerging, changing, evolving and adapting to new social, political and global contexts.

¹⁶⁹ Jan Edmiston, Interview.

When Alan Wolfe was writing his *The Transformation of American Religion*, the evangelicals he was describing were the emergents of their time. And now, with a new movement, a new title has had to be developed. Further, we've had to place 'new' in front of evangelical in order to distinguish between two very different (Older Evangelical and New Evangelical) Christian communities. That being said, the New Evangelicals' critique and to try to rejection of emergent communities, looks almost like the objections raised by Fundamentalists about the New evangelicals. For, only five or ten years earlier, these New Evangelicals were the ones proposing just as many jabs and questions to the interpretations of doctrine presented by fundamentalists. Evangelicals were defending a new understanding of doctrine, just as emergents are seeking to do now.

What is unique and attractive about emergent Christianity is that it seems to embrace contradictions, critiques and frustrations with Christian faith as they come along. The wide boundaries and their expression of belief through daily life sets them apart from the New Evangelicals, as they seek to derive meaning through their experiences with God. In turn, they are using these experiences and narratives as their guide. Emergent Christianity can and will act as an example for how Christianity can play a role in bringing together different Christian communities, sects and denominations, and further, it can play a role in the development of interfaith relationships.

In her work, *Christianity after religion*, Diana Butler Bass seems to suggest that this emergent trend is just one more chapter in the history of spiritual awakenings. Further, she implies that this focus on the power of experience shapes not only Christianity, but also other religious communities. She writes, "This awakening will not be the last in human history, but it is our awakening. It is up to us to move with the Spirit

instead of against it, to participate in making our world more humane, just, and loving¹⁷⁰. Her words suggests that emergent Christianity is just the beginning of a new sentiment and understanding of what it means to live out the Christian faith, a faith rooted in experience.

How does this relate to examining other new religious movements?

Emergent Christians are not the only religious community that has been misunderstood and misrepresented. By utilizing the same framework used in this paper to evaluate the role of doctrine within a new religious community, perhaps we can learn more about the particular group and the motivations for their actions as well as how they make meaning from their own experiences. Hopefully in doing so, this will lead to a more open, and tolerate relationship between religious communities as well as strengthen religious literacy within the United States.

¹⁷⁰ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after religion*, 269.

Afterward

Looking back on my experiences with Christianity in high school I always considered myself an “outsider”. I would look at all of the things happening in the name of Christ around the country, around the world, and hoped that I would not be associated with the bigotry, the sexism, the consumerism, the irony and the hurt that came with the identity of being “Christian”. I never once felt “in” or included. Yes I was welcomed, but I never *belonged*. This work has been a journey. I once heard a professor of mine say, “all research is me-search” and in this particular case, I’d have to agree. That night in the library with *Velvet Elvis* I experienced a wind of hope- a moment of belonging. Yes, though I didn’t *believe* everything, I still *belonged*. Even more than that, I felt understood.

There is a line in *Velvet Elvis* that changed the way I understood where I was in terms of my spiritual identity. Rob Bell writes, “Being a Christian is more about celebrating mystery than conquering it”¹⁷¹. For so long I had thought that these divine mysteries and experiences needed to fit into some theological or rational explanation. Yet, the weight of having to make sense of it all was lifted by Bell’s words and a new story began to peek through.

I realize that I might be criticized for this “me-search” being far from the objective material that I first sought to develop. However, I did refrain from indicating which truth claims were accurate or which were more valid. This work was about studying and understanding a group of Christians who, because of the wider community of which they were a part, were unable to fully express themselves or be understood. In

¹⁷¹ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 34.

trying to develop a religious framework through which they could be studied, I began to better understand myself.

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At times, I wake up in the morning with a sense of certainty. I find myself believing that we, as humans, are here for no other particular reason than to try to live and to share in the love of creation with others. In my heart and mind, I contend that this story of God, of Jesus and our purpose here is nothing more than a beautiful narrative.

But other times, I feel overcome by some mysterious presence, some mystical experience that brings me back to those Tuesday night youth group meetings where although I was plagued by doubt, I still was embraced. Still today, I find myself sensing, and wanting nothing more than to be in that experience, that power, comfort and beauty, an experience that makes this reality undeniable. It is different. I've happened upon a conversation, a community and dialogue of individuals with like experiences and similar encounters. I belong to this community of authors, professors, students, mothers and friends who have sensed that our experiences with God reach beyond and past the bounds of the Christian religion. Our collective narratives and experience bring forth a beautiful truth and reality describing the nature and identity of a powerful, loving and unchanging God.

Appendix: Emergent and New Evangelical Christianity Glossary

Understanding the differences between emergent Christianity and new evangelicals throughout my research relies on maintain a cohesive group of working definitions. However, different individuals have a slightly different understanding of some key terms, which in some situations, makes it difficult to critically evaluate certain elements of their interpretation of the role of doctrine. Thus, I've compiled here a list of key terms that are crucial in understanding both emergent Christianity and the new evangelicals. I have chosen varying authors' definitions and examples as support, but for some, I've included my own definition.

Emerging: Pastor Dan Kimball describes the term *emerging* in terms of how specific churches practice. He defines emerging churches as “churches that are exploring what it means to be the church as we enter emerging cultures”¹⁷². This term differs from ‘emergent’ in that emergent Christians and churches find their identity within a transforming culture, specifically aesthetically-and how they “do church”. Emerging Christianity or emerging churches may or may not apply this re-evaluation of church to theology or doctrine. Emerging communities are more specifically identified through practice. New Evangelicals often will refer to themselves as “emerging” but some are afraid of being associated with anything that is close to “emergent”.

emergent: I've decided to use the term ‘emergent’ to identify the community of individuals who explore how to re-invigorate church practice or praxis to fit an emerging context *but also* who understand that experiences within the Christian community and a developing cultural context leads to the exploration of a new understanding of doctrine.

Emergent author and pastor McLaren explores the concept of emergent by using the analogy of a cross section of a tree. He comments, “Each ring represents not a replacement of the previous rings, not a rejection of them, but an embracing of them, a compromising of them, and inclusion of them in something bigger. The tree’s previous growth is integrated into, and in fact is essential to, the tree’s continuing growing and strength”¹⁷³. I believe that this image portrays how I've defined and used concept of an emergent Christian within this work.

Emergent (big E): Emergent describes specific Churches or individuals who identify with the Emergent Village. The Emergent Village began as a group of individuals who met because they were “disillusioned and disenfranchised by the conventional ecclesial institutions of the late 20th century”. These Christian pastors and theologians formed the formal organization Emergent Village, facilitating theological conversation and dialogue around the country. Their mission statement suggests that, “Along with us, the “emerging church” movement has been growing, and we in Emergent Village endeavor to fund the

¹⁷² Mark Driscoll etc. *Listening to the Voices of the Emerging Church*, 84.

¹⁷³ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*. 314

theological imaginations and spiritual lives of all who consider themselves a part of this broader movement”.¹⁷⁴

Evangelical: The term ‘evangelical’ (both ‘big E’ and ‘small e’) has been changing and developing over the past century. It holds all sorts of connotations and needs to be defined explicitly before used in any piece of writing- for each author seems to utilize a different understanding or interpretation. For this study, I really appreciate the distinction made by Brian McLaren in his discussion of the difference between Evangelical and evangelical. He writes, “Big E” Evangelical, as some use the term (especially in the U.S.), increasingly refers to “the Religious Right”...More positively, *Evangelical* generally refers to people who (a) highly respect the Bible, (b) emphasize personal conversion, (c) believe that God can be known and experienced with something like intimacy, and (d) want to share their faith with others¹⁷⁵.

evangelical: McLaren describes “small e” evangelical as an identity that extends beyond practice and doctrine. He identifies it as “an attitude toward God and our neighbor and our mission that is *passionate*”. He uses it in a more “positive” rather than “restrictive” context.¹⁷⁶ The relationship between the two is highlighted in his words “...I know that when evangelicals start acting like Evangelicals, they can become less loving and more judgmental, less involved and more isolated, less compassionate and more critical, less passionate and more anxious, less generous and more controlling. But that shift is a betrayal of the evangelical faith, not a consequence of it”.¹⁷⁷

New evangelicals: Robert Webber writes in *The Younger Evangelicals*,¹⁷⁸ “[the new Evangelicals] are committed evangelicals, but the religious and cultural context that has shaped their particular approach to faith and practice is on the other side of the twentieth century culture”.¹⁷⁹ New Evangelicals adapt their faith and practice to a changing and evolving society, while maintaining the faith, doctrine, and values of their traditional and pragmatic evangelical parents. To put into context, the New Evangelicals maintain an “emerging” practice, whereas their theology remains fairly traditional.

Orthopraxy: “correctness or orthodoxy of action or practice”¹⁸⁰. Often this term is described as “right practice”.

Missional: This is a characteristic embraced by many emergent Christians. It describes their relationship to the message of Jesus as well as a reaction to the seemingly polarized

¹⁷⁴ Florin Paladie, History, www.emergentvillage.org/history.

¹⁷⁵ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* 130

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 133.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 131.

¹⁷⁸ Webber uses the term “Younger Evangelical” to describe what I use here in this paper as “The New Evangelical”. While in this particular text, it seems like he is including Emergent Christians within the “younger Evangelical” category, for the purposes of this paper, I am going to disagree with Webber and argue that they be distinguished from each other. McLaren notes that he met Webber *after* this book was published and thus can account for the error in grouping the two understandings together.

¹⁷⁹ Robert Webber, *The Nature Of Doctrine*, 54.

¹⁸⁰ *Dictionary.com*, 10th ed., s.v. “Orthopraxy.”

Christian faith (liberal/conservative) etc. McLaren describes missional as an “attempt to find a generous third way beyond the conservative and liberal versions of Christianity so dominant in the Western world. The conservative version is preoccupied with the “personal savior” gospel...and the liberal version has lost something vitally important in their engagement with modernity”.¹⁸¹

(Christian) Universalism: The term universalism takes on a different understanding within the Christian context. Universalism is the belief that all religions offer truth and equally offer a path to God, heaven or salvation-depending on the particular context. Within the Christian context, universalism is the belief that through God in Christ all of mankind will be reconciled to God in the end times. The slight distinction is found within the universal saving grace of Jesus extended to all of humankind but carried out only through Christianity.

Realized eschatology: Emergent Christians often embrace a realized eschatology. This is the understanding that the end times are being fulfilled on this earth and provides an emphasis for brining about the kingdom of God on this earth. Many Christians understand the idea of a realized eschatology as a call to focus more on the teachings and sayings of Jesus rather than centering on personal salvation. C.H. Dodd first introduced the term in 1953 in his publication of the text *The Interpretation Of The Fourth Gospel*.

¹⁸¹ Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 115.

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*She kept asking if the stories were true.
I kept asking her if it mattered.
We finally gave up.
She was looking for a place to stand
& I wanted a place to fly.*

~

Brian Andreas