***The Emerging Church[[1]](#footnote-1)***

(Amos 5: 21-24; Acts 18:1-11)[[2]](#footnote-2)

In the 16th chapter of the Gospel we know as Matthew (verse 18) Jesus describes his disciple Simon as “Petras,” as in “rock,” and then says, “On this rock I will build my church. . . .” This event, which has been used for centuries as authority for the Roman papacy, is – as many Biblical scholars now tell us – probably a good example of something added to the original biblical text at a later date. There is no other evidence that Jesus ever established – or intended to establish – an independent church.

Rather, the Christian church arose – *emerged*, if you will – in widely scattered and largely independent communities, beginning in Judea and Galilee but extending throughout western Asia and southern Europe. As described in the only real attempt at history in the New Testament, Luke’s Book of Acts, these “Jesus” communities could be found throughout what is today Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, western Turkey, Greece and Italy.

Acts primarily tells the story of one wandering missionary, the Apostle Paul, planting and nurturing these new communities, but a careful reading makes clear that there were many others spreading different versions of “good news” about Jesus. In fact, it was not for some 200 years, when the Roman emperor Constantine adopted Christianity, that the differing views of who Jesus was began to be consolidated.

My point here is that the early church was not “established” as much as that it “emerged,” initially proclaimed in believers’ houses, meeting rooms, and even public squares and lecture halls. Furthermore, it emerged in turbulent times. Beneath a panoply of apparent peace brought by Roman rule – The *Pax Romana* – lay oppression and terror, increasing taxation, poverty, and unrest.

This turbulence was felt throughout the social order, especially in the sphere of religion. Religion, after all, has usually been the matrix around which social order is arranged. Whether expressed in terms of “spirits of the natural order,” such as in many indigenous societies (for example, Native Americans), or divine pantheons, such as in Greece or Rome , or monotheism, as in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the languages peoples have used to understand the opportunities, restraints and meanings of their worlds have most often been religious.

This was certainly true in the decades after Jesus, when groups of individuals in Jewish communities in and far beyond Jerusalem and Galilee began hearing about the teachings of this prophet, executed by the Romans but somehow still living in his followers’ hearts and souls. And as the word spread it also became known in non-Jewish communities, first to Gentile believers in Judaism, and later taken directly to Gentile communities by fervent missionaries like Paul.

And, as people are wont to do, they talked: to family, friends and neighbors, encouraging others to accept these new ideas. And they began gathering in like-minded groups, trying to fashion their lives around this new “Way” of living. In the midst of oppression and religious turbulence *churches* – widely different but all drawn from the teachings and way of life of this Jesus – churches *emerged*.

Phyllis Tickle, the author of *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*,[[3]](#footnote-3) suggests that every 500 years or so the church – that is, Christendom – holds a gigantic rummage sale, getting rid of ideas and practices that no longer fit, and trying on new ideas and practices. The last such rummage sale, or “hinge time,” as she calls them, was the Great Reformation, in which large segments of the Christian world rejected Roman Catholic insistence on institutional authority, and instead began looking to the Bible for authority.

The resulting 15th and 16th Centuries “protest” rippled through Europe and then the world (even leading to reforms within the Roman Catholic Church), in much the same way as the first Christian movement: beginning in conversations and small groups, and ultimately growing into new institutions and denominations. Hinge times, Tickle observes, usually result in *more* religious choices, not fewer.

There have been other hinge times, of course, each occurring in times of turbulence and each rising from arguments over beliefs or authority, or growing dissatisfaction with the established traditions of their day. Some five hundred years before the Reformation, in a turbulent time known as “the Great Schism,” Christendom split into two never-to-be-resolved parts: eastern (Byzantine) and western (Roman) churches. And some five hundred years earlier, was a period of strife author Philip Jenkins called “The Jesus Wars[[4]](#footnote-4)” when violent confrontations erupted over, of all things, a theological question: was Jesus “fully human *and* fully divine” or “only fully divine?”

For that matter, our reading from Amos took place during yet another such time, several hundred years before Christ, when monotheism was emerging within Israel. “I can’t stand your religious meetings,” the prophet quotes God. “I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to *me*?” Rather, Amos’ God said, “Do you know what I want? I want justice – oceans of it. I want fairness – rivers of it. That’s what I want. That’s *all* I want.” Amos’ God was interested in how people lived and treated their neighbors, not in what they believed or how they displayed their religions.

We also live today in turbulent times. We are embroiled in two wars, recovering haltingly from an economic near-disaster, and destroying our world by letting millions of gallons of oil billow daily into the Gulf of Mexico. Our society is polarized as never before; we are barraged by angry rhetoric; and civility seems to be a thing of the past.

Even in our religious institutions we are divided and conflicted. Islam and Christianity seem worlds apart. Extremism and militancy grows in almost all major religions. Even within Christianity deep denominational divisions are evident, with the continuum of beliefs ranging from fundamentalism to “new age” spirituality. Some factions even refuse to accept other factions as “Christian.” In our schools, Christian and scientific world views are pitted against each other in, of all places, biology class: Evolution? Creative Design? And against it all stands an increasingly aggressive atheism, rejecting all forms of religion with a religious intensity of its own.

Not surprisingly, then, there are many Christians – some of us, perhaps, among them – who wonder what to believe, what to do. Such people may recognize a religious or spiritual need, but may be tired of the wrangling, of rigidity and exclusivity, of doctrinal divisions, and of the inability or unwillingness of their religious institutions – their *churches* – to address real social, economic and justice problems.

And so, not surprisingly, people are again beginning to gather, in churches, homes, coffee shops or other public places, looking for a better way. Phyllis Tickle says that we are in the midst of *yet another rummage sale*, once again sorting through the Christian closet to see which ideas and practices still fit, and trying on new trappings for size.

Tickle argues that the question of “ultimate authority” is once again in play. For centuries the traditions and pronouncements of the established (Roman) church was accepted as authoritative. In the Reformation, Protestants began looking instead to Scripture as the ultimate authority.

For the past hundred years Pentecostals, and other “charismatics,” have pointed to “personal experience informed by the Holy Spirit.” Out of this, Tickle suggests, a “new church” may be emerging. Today’s Emerging Christians continue to recognize Scripture as authoritative, but in combination with a “spirit-infused community.”

So what does this Emerging Church look like? Some say that emerging Christians

confess their faith like mainliners—meaning they say things publicly they don't really believe. They drink like Southern Baptists—meaning, to adapt some words from Mark Twain, they are teetotalers when it is judicious. They talk like Catholics—meaning they cuss and use naughty words. They evangelize and theologize like the Reformed—meaning they rarely evangelize, yet theologize all the time. They worship like charismatics—meaning with their whole bodies, some parts tattooed. [And] they vote like Episcopalians—meaning they eat, drink, and sleep on their left side.[[5]](#footnote-5)

On the other hand, it may be easier to describe what it is *not*. An Emerging Church is not a new denomination or religion; but it is also not necessarily non-denominational. Few if any emerging churches are mega-churches. In fact, emerging Christian communities may not even have a “church” building.

Emerging Christians are not particularly interested in doctrine or dogma, understanding that there may be many truths – but no complete truth – in differing doctrines and dogmas. They focus instead on Jesus, and the way of life he called “The Kingdom of God.”

Emerging Christians are often open to a wide variety of worship experiences, involving varieties of music, multimedia presentations or even mysticism. There may not even be sermons. The overall picture is of gatherings of concerned individuals exploring common values, and looking for new and better ways to express those values and commitments.

Many Emerging Christian communities grow out of gatherings of members from different churches (or, often, individuals attending no church) who get together to discuss common concerns without predetermined points of view. Some meet in Starbucks, or another coffee shop; others meet in participants’ homes. Some groups grow within established churches – Presbyterian as well as other main-stream denominations – and some may even form new churches within established denominations.

You can find emerging churches throughout the world. The movement reportedly began in New Zealand in the late 1980s, and emerging “congregations” can be found in Australia, the UK, Europe, the United States, and many other countries. It also cuts across many segments of Christendom: my daughter, who teaches sociology in New Zealand, is currently supervising a graduate student whose thesis is on the emerging movement in the Salvation Army in New Zealand.

Cynthia Woolever, writing to Presbyterian clergy in the April 2010 issue of *The Parish Paper*, suggests that we Presbyterians can learn a lot from the Emerging Church movement. For one thing, we can learn new ways of being a church. “Emergents [argue] “that the established Church is not the goal of the Gospel but an instrument to extend God’s mission in the world.” Furthermore, we can learn to embrace new approaches to worship: more expressive and participatory, perhaps more mystical, and incorporating multiple technologies. “Emergent worship practices develop,” she writes, “just like the emergent church, in a bottom-up rather than a top-down way.” Finally, she suggests, we can learn from Emergents’ focus on *doing* the Gospel rather than *discussing* it – on *practice* instead of *belief*.

“I can’t stand your religious meetings. I’m fed up with your conferences and conventions,” the prophet Amos, speaking for God, said almost three thousand years ago. “I’ve had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sand to *me*? Do you know what I want? I want justice – oceans of it. I want fairness – rivers of it. That’s what I want. That’s *all* I want.”

As yet another prophet once said, “Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.”

1. Presented, by Ron Scott, at Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church on July 11, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Biblical passages read from *The Message*, a paraphrase translation by Eugene Peterson. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2008 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years*), Harper Collins, 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Scot McKnight, “Five streams of the Emergent Church,” *Christianity Today,* February, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)