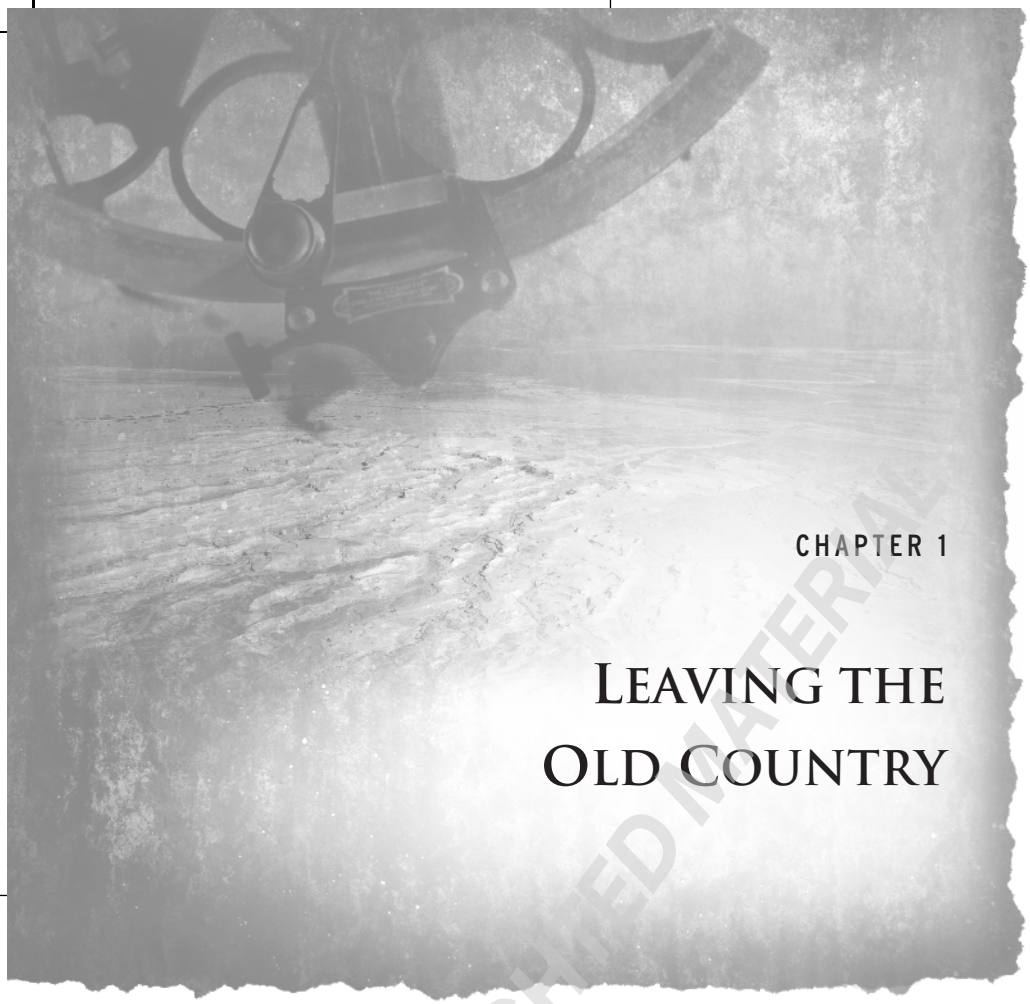

CHAPTER 1

Leaving the Old Country

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WHEN SHE SAT DOWN NEXT TO ME IN FIRST CLASS ON THE flight to New York, I knew that she was the kind of person who regularly traveled there, up front. I was bumped up from coach by the airline, but I suspected that she paid for her seat. To be honest, I was intimidated by this woman, who was probably around my age. She wore torn jeans—the kind that are *really* expensive and come pretorn—complemented by a shabby chic wool sweater. And she was pregnant.

I never spoke to her, just observed. As we were taking off, she was editing a very hip-looking graphic novel with the blue pencil of a savvy New York editor. I, meanwhile, was attempting to hide the fact that I was reading a Bible—how uncouth! And once we reached cruising altitude, she pulled a sleek MacBook Pro out of her bag. I hesitatingly opened my Dell dinosaur and began typing up a Bible study.

I was outmatched. A very vanilla suburbanite Christian pastor from Minnesota next to the hippest of New York editors. "I write books," I wanted to say. But I dared not, for a New York editor is like a unicorn—if

you talk to her, she'll disappear. Or she'll stab you in the heart with her horn.

But then, about halfway through the flight, she closed her Mac and tilted her seat back. What happened next has stuck with me ever since. She took a rosary out of her pocket, draped the prayer beads over her pregnant belly, and spent the next hour surreptitiously praying with her eyes closed.

Neurons in my brain began to misfire. "Does . . . not . . . compute": a New York editor of graphic novels praying the most traditional of Roman Catholic rituals. I thought she was an enlightened, liberal member of the "East Coast elite." But instead she was praying to the Blessed Virgin. I would have been less surprised had she tried to blow up her shoe.

Is there something in the air? Is there a spiritual itch that people are trying to scratch but it's just in the middle of their back in that place that they can't quite reach?

It seems incontrovertibly so.

We are not becoming less religious, as some people argue. We are becoming *differently* religious. And the shift is significant. Some call it a tectonic shift, others seismic or tsunamic. Whatever your geological metaphor, the changes are shaking the earth beneath our feet.

lAs the second half of the twentieth century began, most sociologists, social theorists, and social philosophers were proclaiming that the death of religion was nigh. They were bards of an impending secularism that was lapping onto the shores of all Western countries. We are losing our religion, they calmly—and often approvingly—lectured from behind their podia. We're leaving the myths of this god and that god behind and establishing a new spirituality that is unhinged from the oppressive regimes of conventional religion. New Ageism is a nod in this direction: as we mature intellectually and scientifically, we'll realize that traditional religions are holding us back. We'll achieve our liberation by relying less on the strictures of religions and moving into the promising horizon of "spirituality."

This was, of course, a natural consequence of God's death, first declared by Friedrich Nietzsche in 1882 and touted again by *Time* magazine in 1966.

Nietzsche himself wasn't out to kill God per se, nor was he saying that no one believed in God anymore. He was announcing that that the modern mind could no longer tolerate an authoritarian figure who towers over the cosmos with a lightning bolt in his hand, ready to strike down evildoers. That deity, he said, had been murdered. With the death of that version of God, the Christian morals that upheld all of Western society had been undermined. We were, Nietzsche feared, on a fast track to nihilistic hell. So he went on a search for some sort of universal moral foundation that was not dependent on an unacceptable and medieval notion of God.

That same sensibility was seen by many observers as a move toward a universal (and secular) spirituality: we would realize how much we had in common; we would become more enlightened; we would teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the twenty-first century: we became more religious, not less. Fundamentalisms now thrive in all major religions, churches and religious schools keep popping up, and religious books outsell all other categories. Nowadays you can't find a self-respecting social theorist proclaiming secularism. Instead, they're studying religion and getting face time on CNN explaining to often oblivious journalists how religious Americans really are. Back in the pulpits, ironically, pastors continue to bewail that we're living through the decline and fall of the Judeo-Christian American empire, that secularism is a fast-moving glacier, razing the mountains of faith that have been a part of America since its birth.

But the data just don't back up this interpretation. Just ten percent of Americans are not affiliated with a church or synagogue, and another five percent hold a faith other than Judaism or Christianity. That leaves *eighty-five percent* of Americans who can write down the name and address of the congregation with which they are affiliated.[1] Yes, that bears repeating: eighty-five percent. There are about 255 million church-affiliated Americans.

lWhat *can* be questioned is the level of commitment that Americans have to their churches. They may know the address, but do they know the doctrinal statement? Or the denominational affiliation? Do they care? The answer to the last question is most decidedly no. American Christians care less and less about the denominational divides that are so important to their seminary-trained pastors.

"CHURCH IS DEAD"

In the twenty-first century, it's not God who's dead. It's the church. Or at least conventional forms of church. *Dead?* you say. *Isn't that overstating the case a bit?* Indeed, churches still abound. So do pay phones. You can still find pay phones around, in airports and train stations and shopping malls—there are plenty of working pay phones. But look around your local airport and you'll likely see the sad remnants where pay phones used to hang—the strange row of rectangles on the wall and the empty slot where a phone book used to sit.

There are under a million pay phones in the United States today. In 1997, there were over two million.[2]

Of course, the death of the pay phone doesn't mean that we don't make phone calls anymore. In fact, we make far more calls than ever before, but we make them differently. Now we make phone calls from home or on the mobile device clasped to our belt or through our computers. Phone calls aren't obsolete, but the pay phone is—or at least it's quickly becoming so.

Modern

As an adjective, *modern* can mean current or up-to-date. (For example, a highway rest area with "modern facilities" has indoor plumbing.) In our discussions, however, *modern* refers to an era in Western society following the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution and reflective of the values of those social upheavals.

Similarly, the modern church is changing and evolving and emerging. To extend the analogy a bit, no one is saying that the pay phone was a bad idea. Most people would agree that it was a good idea at the time—it was an excellent way to communicate. But communication was the goal, and pay phones were merely a means to an end.

The modern church—at least as it is characterized by imposing physical buildings, professional clergy, denominational bureaucracies, residential seminary training, and other trappings—was an endeavor by faithful men and women in their time and place, attempting to live into the biblical gospel. But the church was never the end, only the means. The desire of the emergents is

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to live Christianly, to build something wonderful for the future on the legacy of the past.

SIGNS OF DEATH—AND LIFE

As a police chaplain, I've witnessed a few deaths, and the death rattle is a sound that sticks with you forever. In the throes of death, a person often loses the ability to swallow, and fluids accumulate in the throat. In the moments before expiration, the breath barely rattles past these secretions. It is an ominous sound.

We may now be hearing the American church's death rattle (at least the death of church-as-we-know-it). Exhibit A: the fabric of the traditional denominations is tearing. The Episcopal Church in the United States of America appointed a gay bishop, and now African bishops walk out of the room and won't take communion with the presiding bishop of the U.S. church. The Anglican Communion, a worldwide collection of denominations who gather under the rubric of the Church of England, claim that it's the rites of the church and their shared history that hold them together—and that's worked for four hundred years. But those commonalities probably cannot withstand the current pressure of liberalism versus conservatism. Ironically, conservative Episcopal churches in the States are placing themselves under the authority of like-minded bishops in Africa rather than recognizing that the real problem is an outmoded denominational structure and outdated categories of left and right.

That's happening in the "high church" world of Anglicanism. Meanwhile, for over a decade now, conservative forces have been attempting to purge the "low church" Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) of all liberal and moderate influences. Exhibit B: recently, the rapid growth of Pentecostalism in the global South has inevitably encroached on Southern Baptist missionaries stationed around the world, including the biblical "gift of tongues," which some interpret as a private prayer language between the believer and God. The SBC response to this incursion has been to purge its denomination of these influences, so the Southern Baptists are attempting to cast out all missionaries who speak in tongues. Concurrently, they've retrenched in their stance against the use of alcohol. As a result of these and other initiatives, moderate and liberal

Baptists have been sent packing, and they've gone on to set up their own new denominations or join other ones. That won't solve the problem, though, because it's not necessarily the theology but denominationalism itself that's the issue.

The irony of the struggles in the SBC is that the conservative shift is being spearheaded by leaders like Al Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He's also a radio host, frequent guest on CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360*, and all-around Baptist celebrity. But the Baptist revolution in church life started with the Pilgrims and others in Jolly Old England in the seventeenth century who expressly rejected the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church. But at least genealogically, what is Al Mohler other than a de facto bishop of Southern Baptists?

So we've got Baptists who aren't supposed to have bishops with Bishop Al Mohler and Bishop Paige Patterson excommunicating liberals and moderates, and we've got real-life Anglican bishops who won't break bread with one another. Do we need more evidence that the church in America is in trouble? How about when, in 2007, Focus on the Family's James Dobson called for the resignation of Richard Cizik, the vice president for governmental affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE)? Then it turned out that Dobson and his cronies aren't even members of the NAE! Or on the left, the silly television ads from the liberal United Church of Christ, virtually begging people to come to their dying denominational churches by caricaturing evangelicals as having bouncers and ejection seats in their churches.

I could go on.

This might be an overly bleak picture of church life in America. Maybe the church you go to is fine, and maybe you're relatively happy with your church, even if there's a little uneasiness that things are not quite right. That's what the surveys say. But if the evangelical pollster George Barna is correct, upwards of twenty million "born again" Americans have left conventional churches for home groups and house churches—or no church at all.[3] And that's the real story here, that a generation of Christians—many of them under forty—are forsaking the conventional forms of church and gathering in new forms.

Some 225 million Americans voluntarily claim Christianity as their religion, and ninety percent of them can tell you what church they belong to. But out on the fringes, on the frontier of American Christianity, is another ten percent who are leaving their parents' churches, vowing never to return. It's not the faith they're forsaking but the particularly polarized form of church life—the

attitudes, forms, and institutions—they've been offered at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

This phenomenon is not simply a fad (although there are faddish elements) or youthful hubris (though there's some of that, too) but rather a harbinger of the future of church life in America. A new church is emerging from the compost of Christendom. Many in conventional Christianity, both on the left and the right, are concerned about the emergent church; others find it a hopeful trend. In any case, it is significant.

But what led to the emergent church movement? Disaffection with the theologies, attitudes, and institutions of American church life surely played a part, particularly with the poles of left and right that have become so prominent in the last quarter-century. Often segregated into the "mainline left" and the "evangelical right," they've both got irresolvable problems, from an emergent perspective.

A new church is emerging from the compost of Christendom.

THE PROBLEM ON THE LEFT

Potential mainline preachers have to pick a flavor of Christianity early on in their careers—Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, Quaker, Baptist—the list could go on and on. Like ice cream, these are the main flavors, but there are also all kinds of exotic variations—Baptist Chip, Baptist Swirl, Low-Fat Baptist Lite, and Double Baptist Chunk.[4] The pastor then becomes a one-flavor guy. He goes to *that* seminary, learns *that* theology, buys into *that* pension plan, and goes to *that* annual trade show. This is not to disparage the erstwhile pastors—they really have no choice; they don't get to pick a new flavor on a whim. That's how the system of getting to be a pastor is set up; those are the rules by which the players are bound to play.

Mainline Protestantism

The older, established Protestant denominations, including Episcopalian, United Methodist, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterian. Also known as "name-brand Christianity." Mainliners tend to lean to the left, both theologically and politically.

But as young pastors are learning every nuance of their flavor of the faith, nearly everyone else in America is becoming less interested in a steady diet of one flavor. Americans are moving to Church of the Van-Choc-Straw (a.k.a. Neapolitan). American Christians care little about the denomination label on the sign in the parking lot or the church's stand on predestination. I found this out a few years ago as a young pastor myself. I stood before a "new members" class at Colonial Church, an old-line denominational church, and asked how many of the seventy-two persons there wanted to join Colonial because it's a Congregational church. Just two hands went up. The other seventy said they were drawn to Colonial by the choir, the preaching, the children's ministry, or by a friend. The proud Congregational heritage of Colonial Church—represented by a glass-encased chunk of the *Mayflower* in the entryway—meant nothing to them.

Dispatch 1: Emergents find little importance in the discrete differences between the various flavors of Christianity. Instead, they practice a generous orthodoxy that appreciates the contributions of all Christian movements.

It's similar to the way that being a European has changed. Before 1995, a French citizen had to stop at every border in Europe, show her passport, and get it stamped; the borders between countries were definite, and they were guarded by soldiers with guns. She also had to visit a bank and change her francs into lire or pounds or kroner. But with the formation of the European Union, every European in the twenty-seven EU countries now gets an EU passport, and the borders are unguarded—Europeans now travel freely between EU countries, and most use the same currency.

Similarly, Americans pass from church to church with little regard for denominational heritage—their passports say "Christian," not "Lutheran" or

"Nazarene" or "Episcopal." Some in the American clergy have gotten hip to this new reality, but far more are beholden to denominational structures for their self-identity (and their retirement funds).

What's interesting is that when asked, most mainline clergy express great chagrin at this situation. They agree that denominations are an outmoded form of organized Christianity, but they can't seem to find a way out.

Although denominations existed in nineteenth-century America, the first three-quarters of the twentieth century can really be seen as the Golden Age of Mainline Protestantism. In fact, the flagship magazine of mainline Christians, founded in 1900, is titled *The Christian Century*.

The postindustrial era was one of big organizations: universities, corporations, and nation-states were all growing in size and adding layers of administrative bureaucracy to cope with the other big organizations in the world. Christian leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century wanted to play in this arena too, so they followed suit and founded denominational headquarters in New York and Chicago; they added layers of bureaucracy (called "judicatories") and middle managers (often called "bishops" or "district superintendents"); and they started their own publishing houses, colleges, and seminaries.

The well-meaning members of denominations built these institutions to advance the gospel in a world of large, monolithic organizations. But we've now come to realize three problems: first, the gospel isn't monolithic; second, it's inevitably destabilizing of institutions; and third, for all their benefits (like organizing society and preserving communal wisdom), bureaucracies also do two other things well: grow more bureaucratic tentacles and attract bureaucrats.[5] So a crust of bureaucracy grew over the gospel impulses of the denominational founders, thickening over a century to the point that according to conservatives, the gospel has been suffocated right out of the mainline denominations.

Lillian Daniel is a pastor in the United Church of Christ, a notoriously left-leaning denomination founded in 1957. She's also active in the labor movement and an outspoken proponent of progressive causes—a passionate person. Reflecting on the biannual General Synod national meeting, she moaned, "We used to be a group of revolutionaries. Now we're a group of *resolutionaries*." Operating by the distinctly nonbiblical Robert's Rules of Order, she said, the convention has devolved into a gathering of persons who read resolutions that are then voted on and promptly ignored or forgotten. The resolutions range from those for gay marriage to those against gay marriage, from

a call to study the imprisonment of native Hawaiians to "saving Social Security from privatization." The resolutions pile up; then they're read, seconded, discussed, voted on, and filed.

Lillian thought she was joining a movement, but she was joining a bureaucracy. And that bureaucracy tends to quash the passion of the many Christ-centered and enthusiastic persons therein.

A CASE STUDY: GO WHERE I SEND THEE

A seminary professor told this story with tears in her eyes. She had an outstanding student, a young man who'd hung around seminary for an extra year so that he could earn an extra master's in youth ministry on top of his master of divinity degree. Throughout his childhood, adolescence, college, and seminary years, he'd been a loyal Methodist, following in the path of his father, a United Methodist pastor. And during seminary, while going through the labyrinthine process of United Methodist ordination, he also fell in love with the idea of being a college campus chaplain. He just sensed that was the right spot for him—in his language, he felt "called." So he applied at a couple of colleges and was selected as a finalist at one of them. But at 10:00 P.M., the night before his final interview at the college, he received a call from his bishop. She told him (on his answering machine) of his first church assignment, a small Methodist church in rural upstate New York. He'd be a solo pastor. Upon hearing the message, the young man swallowed hard and called her back. "Could I have a week to get back to you?" he asked, "because I'm in the running for a college chaplaincy."

"No," the bishop replied. "You need to tell me in the morning. And let me just inform you, if you reject this placement, the next one I give you will be even worse."

The next morning, through tears, the young ordinand accepted the placement of his bishop and withdrew from the college chaplaincy position.

Although the bishop's actions seem indefensible, her power play was merely an attempt to stanch the bleeding. *We can't lose another young pastor*, she must have thought. *I've got too many pulpits to fill to let this guy go to a college*. She might have even considered that he would have a significant pastoral impact on a college campus, but she had little choice. While United Methodist Church vacancy rates hover around ten percent, the vacancies in churches with fewer

than one hundred members—the majority of UMC churches—is far higher.[6] It's been well documented that young seminary graduates rarely want to serve in small, rural congregations. Couple that with the fact that only five percent of UMC clergy are in their twenties,[7] and you can see why the well-meaning bishop didn't want to lose her young charge to the allure of college chaplaincy.

She needed him in the system, like the Matrix needs human batteries. If she let him get away, he might never plug back into the United Methodist Church, and that's not just one less pastor in an already overstretched system; that's one less payer into the pension fund, one less recruiter of future pastors, one less name in the annual yearbook.

In other words, her tactics are understandable in a system that needs more young pastors if it is to survive. But how many potential pastors will continue to play by these rules?

THE PROBLEM ON THE RIGHT

While the mainline Protestants know that they are hemorrhaging members and money at alarming rates, the grass seems greener on the evangelical side of the fence. Fourth-ring suburbs of major metropolitan cities sport glossy new megachurches, their lots full of minivans on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. This is a bloc of the folks who elected George W. Bush, and since then, there's been no dearth of journalistic interest in American evangelicals.

Evangelical Protestantism

The loosely aligned "born again" Christians who hold a view of the Bible that tends toward literal interpretation, emphasize personal conversion to Christ, and generally lean to the right, both politically and theologically.

But if the problem with liberal Christianity is more dire and more obvious, the evangelical movement has its own problems. A century and a half ago, the United States was coming out of the Civil War, and the country was rent in two. Conservative churches in the South were reeling because they had supported the sinful and corrupt practice of slavery.[8] The liberal churches in the North, by contrast, were enjoying success in the wake of military and

moral victory. At the same time, a new kind of biblical scholarship was in its ascendancy in Europe: German professors were using critical literary and historical methods to investigate the veracity of the biblical texts, culminating with Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus* in 1906. Schweitzer concluded, famously, that Jesus of Nazareth wasn't God after all but instead a wild-eyed apocalyptic rabbi who threw himself on the wheel of history only to be crushed by it.[9]

The majority of leaders in the American church embraced these academic trends. These were the mainliners, and they were in the majority. The only other choice in American Christianity was fundamentalism, and this was the backwoods, snake-handling, poison-drinking, Bible-thumping version of fundamentalism.[10]

Fundamentalism

A particularly rigid adherence to what is considered foundational to a religion. In American Christianity, fundamentalism began in the early twentieth century as a reaction to modernism and codified the "Five Fundamentals" of Christian belief: the inerrancy of the Bible, the virgin birth of Jesus, physical resurrection at the end of time, individual atonement of the believer by Jesus' death, and the Second Coming of Jesus in the future.

A group of men started meeting in the 1940s, tired of this liberal-fundamentalist polarization. They wanted to remain faithful to a more conservative interpretation of the Bible but not retreat from society into the woods—they were looking for a "third way" to be Christian in America. They claimed the title "evangelical," which had in fact been around for at least a century already. These men, including Carl Henry, Charles Fuller, Harold Ockenga, and Billy Graham, committed themselves to rescuing the Bible from the fundamentalists and liberals alike, and they did so by forming a network of like-minded organizations. They didn't have a headquarters or a central committee, but they spun a web of connection that now spreads across the United States in the form of Christian youth camps, college ministries, radio stations, publishing houses, magazines, and colleges. Over half a century, these evangelicals—focusing on conservative biblical interpretation, evangelism, and cultural suasion—increased their influence to the point of electing presidents and appointing Supreme Court justices. Though there are evangelical

denominations, their histories are relatively short, and their identities are not nearly as reified as those of their mainline peers.

But it may be that evangelicals gained cultural prominence at the cost of real spiritual, societal, or intellectual transformation. And when measured by the present moral fiber of the United States, the evangelical revolution is a qualified failure—America, it seems, is no more "Christian" in its ethos than it ever was; some people argue that we're less Christ-like than we've ever been. Indeed, one can make the argument that evangelicals have been duped, selling their votes for a mess of pottage. For example, having played an important role in the Republican revolution and the eventual capture of all three branches of government, evangelicals have come to realize that Republican politicos have no serious intention of overturning *Roe* v. *Wade*—in fact, in the six years that Republicans had the White House and both houses of Congress (and, arguably, the Supreme Court), they passed virtually no significant antiabortion legislation,[11] even though many of them had been elected on just that promise. Add to that the relentless assault on Christian values in the form of video games, Coors Light ads, and gun violence, and you simply don't have a "Christian nation."

The evidence is in: millions of individuals "inviting Jesus Christ into their hearts as their personal Lord and Savior" at megachurches and Billy Graham crusades has done little to stem the moral dissolution of America. And ironically, it's the very individualism engendered by evangelicalism that has resulted in this predicament. The primary emphasis of evangelicalism is the conversion of the individual, but that emphasis has also handicapped evangelicals in their attempts to tackle systemic issues like racism and poverty and thus has left them open to manipulation by political forces.

A CASE STUDY: DON'T ASK US ABOUT THE CHICKENS

Known for chicken, Tyson Foods acquired Iowa Beef and Pork Company in 2001, making it the largest producer of meat in the world. Actually, the preferred corporate-speak for meat when you're at the Tyson headquarters in Little Rock, Arkansas, is "protein solutions." They refer to themselves as a producer of "affordable protein solutions."

I visited Tyson Foods in 2006 with a group from Yale University Divinity School's Center for Faith and Culture as part of an initiative called Faith as a Way of Life. Our trip to Tyson was meant to provoke our thinking about faith and business.

We began the day at a "kill plant." That's the industry name for a factory where animals are slaughtered and prepared; they're turned into things like chicken nuggets elsewhere. The plant we visited produces Cornish game hens, which I was surprised to discover are not a particular type of bird but are simply twenty-eight-day-old chickens. In other words, they're young, small birds. Outside of the plant, half a dozen trucks full of live, twenty-eight-day-old chickens are in the driveway. One at a time, they back into a loading dock and dump their squawking load into a trough. Six men, immigrants from the Marshall Islands (a U.S. territory in the Pacific), stand in the "dark room"—lit only by black lights, in order to keep the chickens calm—and hang the chickens upside down in stirrups. The men are amazingly agile, picking up a live animal and hanging it in one fluid movement. One hundred and thirty-five birds per minute leave the dark room, and that same number per minute wend their way on a conveyer system to the kill room. The head of each chicken is dragged through an electrified pool of water, stunning it briefly. That way, the animal is basically unconscious as its throat is slit a split second later by a whirring razor blade.

I really can't describe what it's like to watch 135 birds slaughtered in a minute or, even more overwhelming, to know that there are another 135 coming the next minute and the next minute, hour after hour, twenty-four hours a day, six days a week. Compound this by two dozen, which is how many kill plants Tyson operates. It's a staggering number of chickens that are killed for our consumption each day. Millions.

(Let me be clear: I'm no vegan. I eat protein solutions almost every day. I even hunt for protein solutions in fields and over ponds.[12] So I have no ideological objection to the raising and slaughter of chickens. Still, it was an overwhelming experience to witness the inner workings of a kill plant.)

Because I have no ideological ax to grind, I thought I'd ask a question to each of the groups we met with about the chickens. Scripture is clear: in Genesis 1:24–31, human beings are given the task of caretakers of the earth and the animals and plants that inhabit it. Christians (as well as Jews and Muslims, and indeed all spiritual people) are pretty well agreed on this idea. No one really debates whether we're supposed to care for God's creation. It's a given. So with

this supposed theological consensus in mind, I figured I'd ask, "What about the chickens?"

Before lunch, we gathered in a little, wood-paneled board room at the front of the kill plant. A few workers, on their break, were ushered into the room. They stood against the wall while we Yalies sat around the table. It was a bit awkward. Here we were, the epitome of the "East Coast elite," questioning workers who make about $7.00 an hour slaughtering and prepping chickens. But these line workers immediately put us at ease—they were friendly and gracious. One woman had worked in the plant for thirty-five years; another was a Marshallese immigrant who'd been there for just four months. They talked about how much they appreciated the Tyson Corporation, the health care plan, and the plant's manager. The thirty-five-year veteran told of her daughter's bout with cancer and how the entire plant rallied around her and raised money to support her. They spoke openly about their faith and about the little Baptist and Pentecostal churches that they attend—some of them go to church three times per week. When I asked about the chickens, they answered candidly about the stewardship of the animals. I thought to myself, *A generation or two ago, these people would have been farmers and would have been slaughtering chickens by hand in their barns. All that's really changed for them is the technology and efficiency by which the chickens are dispatched*.

At four in the afternoon, we sat down with John Tyson at the company's headquarters. Tyson's grandfather founded the company, and his father turned it into a massive, multinational corporation. John is a prodigal son. A child of privilege, he became a drug-addled young man with no interest in his dad's company. But after a divorce and chemical dependency treatment, he became a follower of Jesus. Tyson is no towering figure; he stands about five foot nine. He's balding, a bit portly, and dresses in jeans, a golf shirt, and a worn Tyson Foods windbreaker. One could characterize him as a quiet, humble evangelical Christian. He wears his previous failures on his sleeve, and employees and friends speak of him as a truly good person.

And he makes about $5 million per year (plus stock options).

Tyson spoke openly about his life; his children, whom he's raising as a single parent; and the doubts he still has about whether his acquisition of Iowa Beef and Pork was a good idea. Then I asked, "What about the chickens?"

I elaborated: "I'm not asking you to feel guilty about slaughtering chickens; I think you're providing meat to millions of people every day, and I appreciate what your company is doing. But you're also a Christian, one whose job it is to

act as a steward of God's creation. You have literally millions and millions of animals under your care. Do you ever *think* about them?"

He paused for a moment before answering. "Yes," he said, "I do." He paused again, and then continued, "As you might guess, I am hated by some people. I get lots of angry e-mail from PETA [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals] activists, for example. But we've worked hard to develop the most humane ways to kill chickens. We've had significant studies done on what is the least painful and most hygienic way to slaughter chickens, and we invented the electrified pool of water because that's the best way to kill the chickens humanely. Yes, I think about the chickens, and I take my responsibility to them very seriously."

But in the middle of the day, we had gotten quite a different response. After lunch, we met with a couple of different groups of middle managers at Tyson. All men, they were dressed in khaki pants and golf shirts emblazoned with the Tyson logo. These men occupy the vast American strata between $7.00-an-hour kill plant line workers and $5 million-a-year John Tyson. They live in four-bedroom homes in suburban subdivisions, coach soccer, and belong to country clubs. And they all go to church—in fact, many of them told us they attend First Baptist Church of Springdale, pastored by the Southern Baptist celebrity Ronnie Floyd. They have four-year college degrees and maybe an M.B.A. They mow their lawns on Saturday and cheer for the Razorbacks. They're white, educated, and relatively wealthy. To be honest, they're my people. If I worked at Tyson, I'd be a middle manager. I say that because if my forthcoming judgment of them seems unduly harsh, I am also implicating myself.

We had a nice, civil chat, although they were significantly more standoffish toward us due to our Yale connections than were our interlocutors earlier in the day. We were the people that Pastor Ronnie had warned them about. They talked about their churches, their faith, and Pastor Ronnie. But when I asked, "What about the chickens?" the looks on their faces responded loud and clear: *Don't ask us about the chickens*. One man even said as much, implying that I was a leftist tree-hugger with an anticorporate agenda.

That night, as our group debriefed the day, a heated and not very civil conversation broke out. The group—made up of an artist, a novelist, a teacher, a business consultant, a businesswoman, a couple of theologians, and a few pastors—could not agree on the sincerity of the middle managers. Some of us were disturbed at their responses, while others argued that this is the very Sunday-Monday divide that afflicts many American Christians.

For my part, I was disheartened at their answers. But as opposed to laying the blame at their feet, I lay it at their churches'. The church that doesn't challenge its members to face the core ethical issues that confront them every day at work is the church that has abdicated its responsibility. Many churches, particularly evangelical ones, make this mistake, and here's why: too many evangelical churches have emphasized the vertical, just-me-and-Jesus relationship to the exclusion of the horizontal relationships with other human beings and with all of creation. In fact, a major study in the 1990s showed that the individualism inherent in American evangelicalism is directly responsible for evangelicals' inability to diagnose and solve systemic social issues like racism and abortion.[13] In other words, the formula for evangelical growth—namely, individual conversion—also precludes many evangelical churches from affecting the very changes that rally its members. So when I asked about the chickens, it was a theological non sequitur to the middle managers; as long as their relationship with Jesus was all right, everything else would take care of itself. Questions about animal rights or national health care or the minimum wage or immigration rights aren't theological questions. Instead, they're flagged as the "liberal agenda."

As is well known, the permissible range of issues that can be on the theological or ethical agenda at some conservative evangelical churches has been narrowed to two: abortion and gay marriage. In their salvos against other issues—such as global warming—evangelical leaders like James Dobson and the late Jerry Falwell have said as much. A specific example of this kind of thinking comes from Ronnie Floyd himself. In the days following the April 2007 Virginia Tech shooting massacre, Floyd posted extensively about the tragedy on his blog, "Between Sundays." He warned the American church to "*get serious*" and to "WAKE UP!!!" Thirty-three persons had died, he wrote, and they each went to heaven or hell. He then urged his readers to get busy with evangelism because "death is real," and the job of Christians is to "bring others to Christ" so that they won't go to hell when they die.

In Floyd's blog posts about the Virginia Tech shootings, there was nary a word about Seung-Hui Cho's ready access to guns and ammunition. No comment about the epidemic of clinical depression in our country. Not a mention of the prevalence of hurting people in our culture, often adolescents

who are shrouded in anonymity, lost on college campuses with tens of thousands of other students. In other words, Floyd said nothing about the systemic issues that become acute to many of us during times of tragedy. Floyd's question is not how this young man's mind became so twisted in his own mental illness, how he fell through the cracks of our societal net, or how he was able to purchase two handguns and hundreds of bullets with no more than a driver's license. The question was about whether he and his victims had invited Jesus into their hearts before they died.

A stereotypical evangelical response to tragedy? Indeed, but not uncommon either. Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are rightly lampooned, even by their evangelical peers, for announcing that natural disasters are God's retribution on homosexuals, but their pronouncements are just one step beyond the theology harbored by some evangelicals: there's little we can do about the worsening situation in the world, so let's save as many souls as we can before it all goes up in flames.

But here's the good news: evangelical churches around the country are countering this trend and rejecting the narrow political agenda pushed by their leaders. I recently attended a conservative Baptist church that devoted an entire weekend to mobilizing their people to stop the genocide in Darfur. They brought in a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda, Celestin Musekura, to speak, and they screened the powerful and graphic documentary, *The Devil Came on Horseback*.[14] There was nary a word about saving souls or activist judges on the Supreme Court. In fact, there was a healthy dose of skepticism about why the Bush administration has dragged its feet on getting involved in Darfur. Some evangelical churches, it seems, can't be stereotyped, and they won't be pushed around by conservative radio hosts.

THE *REAL* PROBLEM: LEFT VERSUS RIGHT

Ironically, the "liberal" Christians in America and the "conservatives" suffer from the same illness. Both are beholden to a scheme that philosophers call "foundationalism," and that leads to their intractable fighting.[15] Since their foundations are different (though related), they are cursed to shout past one another forever, for they are each caught in a philosophical hell called *infinite regression*.

Foundationalism

The theory that at the bottom of all human knowledge is a set of self-inferential or internally justified beliefs; in other words, the foundation is indubitable and requires no external justification.

For the conservative, the sacred text of Christianity is indubitable, established by an internal and circular reasoning: "The Bible claims to be God's truth, so therefore it's true." Many evangelicals have a more sophisticated view of scripture than this, but they're still destined to a life of establishing the veracity of the Bible in the face of contravening evidence and opinion:

"I believe X, Y, and Z because it says so in the Bible."

"Well, how do you know the Bible is true and accurate?"

"I believe the Bible because the apostles died for its truth, and people don't die for a lie."

"What about the 9/11 terrorists?"

"They were deceived. They didn't know they were dying for a lie. The apostles had seen Jesus and lived with him, so they knew he wasn't a lie."

"What about the followers of Jim Jones and David Koresh?"

"Well, the Bible is *really* true because of the reliability of the original manuscripts."

"Do we have the original manuscripts?"

"No, but we have some pretty old ones that are close to the originals."

"How do we know they weren't changed in the early years?"

"Because we have faith in the historical process by which the early manuscripts were copied and distributed."

"So your faith is in history*?!? Does that mean you believe that history is indubitable?"*

"Not all history. Just our history."

"Based on what? Why is biblical history certain and sure?"

"Because it accords with reality."

"What reality? Whose reality?"

And so on, ad infinitum.

This is *infinite regression*, and it's inherent to foundationalist systems. Once presented, an "indubitable" foundation needs to be justified by a whole lot of other beliefs, and they, in turn, need to be justified. An eternal digging ensues, a search for that rock-bottom foundation that is perfectly self-evident. (Spoiler alert: no such foundation exists!)

For the liberal Christians among us, the foundation is what the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) called the "feeling of utter dependence." He posited that every human being has a sense that there's something Out There, bigger and better than oneself; religious systems are simply fallible human constructs that attempt to articulate things about and worship that Being Out There. Religion, he lectured, is essentially a feeling or an intuition, and dogmas are attempts to pin down that feeling.

Following Schleiermacher, some liberal Christians claim that Christianity is the best way we know of to make sense of the Being, while others say that Christianity is merely one of many ways. The infinite regression for liberals begins when confronting the work of the Big Three of the modern era, each of whom likened the "feeling of utter dependence" to the morning after a bad burrito. Karl Marx (1818–1883) said it's the opiate of the people. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) claimed it's a fantastic illusion used as a psychological abjuration of every boy's sexual love for his mother. And Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) said that God was merely the way that human beings reassign the misery they feel at living, and he called the coroner. Liberals, with an admirably high view of the intellects of these three, have had a hard time getting out from under their shadows.

So these two boxers, "Liberal" and "Conservative," tired, bedraggled, and lacking enough power to land any more punches, come back to the center of the ring for the next round of their eternal match, and they can do little more than grasp at each other, wrap each other up. There's a lot of clutching and grabbing, and an occasional shouting match on *Larry King Live* or *Hardball with Chris Matthews*. The referee can't separate them, and neither of them has the strength to land the winning blow. But they keep fighting.

Dispatch 2: Emergents reject the politics and theologies of left versus right. Seeing both sides as a remnant of modernity, they look forward to a more complex reality.

Meanwhile, a generation of Christians aren't even boxing anymore. They're flying kites. They've entered an entirely different conception of what game we're really playing. They've opted out of the boxing match between liberal and conservative. They're finding a third way between the bipolar strife that has racked our churches and our society.

CAUGHT IN THE *CROSSFIRE*

Tragically, the polemically charged culture of American politics has seeped into the American church. In an effort to get people's attention, maybe even to get on a TV or radio program, Christian leaders resort to unnuanced attacks on one another. Spokesmen (yes, they're usually men) from the right and the left are continuing the infighting that has so damaged the church in the past and even ratcheted it up a notch. To quote just a few of the more recent, and more inflammatory comments:

> From the left: "The Religious Right doesn't care about the poor."
>
> From the right: "Emergent is limp-wristed, faggoty, homo-evangelical theology."
>
> From the left: "Emergents are nothing more than angry evangelicals."
>
> From the right: "The emergent church is al-Qaeda's ally."

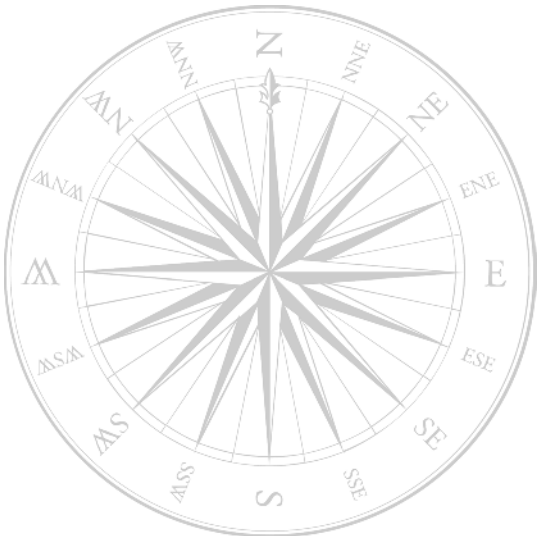
In an era of sound bites and polemics, Christians have too often followed suit. As with the building of denominational bureaucracies in the first half of the twentieth century and the spinning of a web of evangelical parachurch groups in the second half, Christians at the beginning of the twenty-first century are once again allowing the culture at large to dictate public Christian behavior. Christians have once again taken the role of reactionaries.

While emergent Christians are sometimes baited to enter these debates in the blogosphere, most have little interest in the bipolarities of a bygone era, and the constant posturing of the left and the right often seems more successful at raising money than it does at actually solving problems. With reactionaries on one side and resolutionaries on the other, emergents are attempting to reclaim Jesus' role in society: revolutionary.

A couple of years ago, *The Daily Show*'s Jon Stewart went on to CNN's vitriolic *Crossfire* program, looked hosts Tucker Carlson and Paul Begala in the eye, and said, "You're hurting America. . . . Stop, stop, stop, stop hurting America." Stewart was tired of the sophomoric shouting matches that epitomized "debate" on *Crossfire*, and his plea became an overnight sensation. CNN canceled *Crossfire* just a couple of months later, the president of the network explaining, "I agree wholeheartedly with Jon Stewart's overall premise."[16]

Stewart's appearance on *Crossfire* was a sensation on YouTube, as was Stephen Colbert's bitingly sarcastic routine at the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2006. Both of these Gen X heroes walked into the palace and said, "The emperor has no clothes," and a generation of young, thoughtful, disillusioned, cynical Americans cheered. Much of "left versus right" confrontation is a farce to prop up television ratings, keep radio talk show hosts employed, and fill the treasuries of the two political parties. And the church has not been immune to this financially lucrative fear-mongering.

But more and more people are checking out, becoming savvy to the moral bankruptcy on both sides of the "debate." They're looking for a new, third way, both in the church and in society at large.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DISPATCH FROM THE BLOGOSPHERE: MUSINGS OF A POSTMODERN NEGRO

When I first ran across the blog "Musings of a Postmodern Negro," it caught my eye. And it made me a bit uncomfortable. *Negro* was a word I'd been taught to avoid back in middle school. Culturally and politically inappropriate, I was told. Archaic. Offensive.

Yet there it was, across the masthead of a particularly insightful blog. And stranger still, it was paired with *postmodern*. An unlikely couple, to be sure.

The blog was sharp and articulate. Long posts referred to the black liberation theology of James Cone and the radical pedagogy of bell hooks, the hip-hop lyrics of Mary J. Blige, the sermons of Martin Luther King Jr., and the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Here's a taste of one such post, a reflection on Martin Luther King Day:

> The Dream, as I have come to understand it, is an eschatological hope but [also] a liturgical practice whereby the people of God [are] on a journey to do a particular kind of work. That work being a Spirit-intoxicated performance of the gospel and giving a signification/foretaste to the kingdom of God . . . or as King called it the Beloved Community.[17]

The author also wrote openly about the inherent racism in American evangelicalism, yet he did so without anger. Passion, yes, but not anger. And sometimes he wrote with weariness,

> As one who has been engaging a mostly white evangelical community for a couple of years now (three to be precise) I am getting tired. I find myself psychologically and spiritually drained. I find myself battling unconscious racial habits, aesthetics, and narratives all the time. This stuff wears you down. I am almost at a point where I feel the desire to retreat back into a non-white Christian world. Some days I feel burnt-out with the effort. Pray for a brutha![18]

And intriguingly, he wrote about his great interest in the emergent church movement. Emergent churches are overwhelmingly white, at least thus far in the still-young movement. So white, in fact, that the satirical religious newspaper *The Holy Observer* once ran a story, "Frightened Black Family Flees Emergent Church."[19]

I received an e-mail from the "Postmodern Negro," in the summer of 2005. Already an avid reader of his blog, I was thrilled to hear from him. He wrote to express interest in the emergent church movement and in Emergent Village specifically and to get information on emergent churches in his city, Charlotte, North Carolina. That e-mail led to a few phone conversations, a couple face-to-face meetings, and a lasting friendship.

Of all that I've learned about the "postmodern Negro," the most astounding discovery for me was that Anthony is not a professor, a philosopher, a theologian, or a pastor. He works for the Social Security Administration.

Anthony Smith grew up in Birmingham, Alabama. "Growing up in the eighties," he told me, "I saw everything: the crack epidemic, the beginning of the AIDS epidemic, the rise of gangs." In his own working-class home, he saw domestic violence and a parent using crack. "Most of my friends from growing up are either dead from gang violence or the drug trade, or they're in the penitentiary. My closest friend growing up, he's in jail for life for murdering someone.

"That's the bad stuff," Anthony continued. "But the good stuff is that I grew up in a black community that still had a sense of self, a sense of community. All in all, I had what black scholars call a 'thick black cultural experience.'" His grandmother brought him to a black Baptist church every Sunday through middle school, even though his own home was decidedly nonreligious; she was also the first African American woman to be a principal in the school district, and Anthony's grandfather was the first African American elected to the school board. But his father was on the streets, Anthony says, "an old-school brutha."

His mother, on the other hand, read a lot, and she was skeptical of religion. She marched with Martin Luther King in Birmingham in 1963 and stood up to the police water cannons. When Anthony was ten, she gave him a copy of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. A few years after that, she divorced Anthony's father, and they moved, he says, "to the white side of the mountain." There, in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, Anthony actually felt he had more in common with the working-class white kids than the bourgeois black kids.

Meanwhile, his interest in religion waned after his grandmother's death. First, he had philosophical problems with the idea of an all-loving God since he'd seen so many friends gunned down. And second, his image of a black preacher was a man with alcohol on his breath and a gold tooth—"He looked like a pimp," Anthony chuckled.

After high school, Anthony joined the Navy and served on a nuclear submarine. It was there that he became a devout Christian, making a profession of faith on January 2, 1994, in a storefront Pentecostal church. "I remember having a very profound religious experiece," he told me, "a profound awe." His pastor, James Lewis Giles, "was a serious autodidact, an organic intellectual.

Up until I met him, I thought Christianity was basically European, racist, white supremicist religion. But here was an African American pastor who blew that out of the water. He taught me that Christianity is two thousand years old, and I realized for the first time that Jesus was not British!''

Anthony, an autodidact himself, was drawn to Giles and his aberrant—at least in the black storefront Pentecostal world—interest in theology and history. Anthony's journey in Christian intellectualism began when Giles handed him a copy of C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. From there, Anthony began reading voraciously.

And he still reads voraciously. On his lunch break at work, he reads philosophy texts. The floor of his car is littered with books on spirituality, theology, and culture. He's been known to read while driving. He's even infamous among his friends for bringing a book to the movie theater and reading right through the previews by the light of his cell phone.

When I asked him why he reads so much, Anthony said, ''I guess I just need to understand the world I live in. I mean, I had this profound religious experience in the Pentecostal church, but I needed to understand it. And I needed to understand Western civilization and the whole intellectual tradition behind Christianity.''

Anthony's journey into the emergent movement began when he moved out of Pentecostalism, and he felt like a man without a home. An Internet search for the theologian Stanley Hauerwas led him to the Web site of Emergent Village, which led him to read a couple of books by Brian McLaren, which led him to the Emergent Village cohort—a monthly meeting—in Charlotte. Anthony now leads that group together with Steve Knight, and he contributed an essay, ''Practicing Pentecost: Discovering the Kingdom of God amid Racial Fragmentation,'' to *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*.[20]

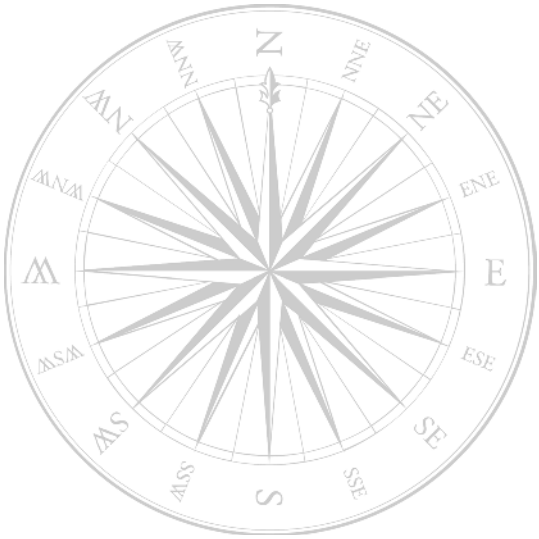
''What I saw in emergent is that we are wanting to see the shalom of God breaking out into the world in God's people.''

When asked what it was about emergent Christianity that would attract such an unlikely proponent, Anthony mentioned two characteristics. ''First,'' he said, ''there is an epistemological humility with this particular movement. Christianity, especially American Christianity, for so long, because of its context, was wedded to imperialism, racism, and sexism. What I see in the emergent church are the conceptual tools and practices that can break out of that imperialistic past.

I thought, 'This is what we need: we need white Christians who can shut up and listen to other folks.'

"And second," he continued, "is the notion of friendship, which I see in continuity with Dr. King and the civil rights movement. King didn't just march with black folk; he marched with Jews, with whites, with liberals. He marched with all kinds of different folks. So in this practice of friendship I saw some very real potential for a shared journey toward shared goals.

"What I saw in emergent," he concluded, "is that we are wanting to see the *shalom* of God breaking out into the world in God's people."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