

Title: How did we get here?
Series: Post-modernism goes to church
Theme: 100 years of church history

YMCA – history, London 1844, provide a safe place for men, along with Bible studies to bring the gospel to them. Over time, the gospel part was lost, the social agenda stayed.

Harvard University was founded in 1636 in Cambridge, MA. Named after a minister, John Harvard, who died rather early and left his library and money for a college to train men for the ministry, the founding documents of Harvard wrote their mission statement for the [then] new school....” “The founders said this: ‘Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed, to consider well [that] the main end of life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, Jn. 17:3, and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as well as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning.’” (Plantiga, *Engaging God’s World*, p. ix, sic)

Their express purpose was to train successors for their churches. The plaque on the brick wall just outside the Johnston Gate at Harvard Yard says:

After God had carried us safe to New England
And we had builded our houses,
provided necessaries for our livelihood,
reared convenient places for God’s worship,
and settled the civil government,
one of the next things we longed for
and looked after was to advance learning
and perpetuate it to posterity,
dreading to leave an illiterate ministry
to the churches when our present ministers
shall lie in the dust.

Yale was founded in 1701 in part due to the problems that were already emerging at Harvard.

Princeton – 1746, response to the Great Awakening and to Yale’s and Harvard’s rejection of it.

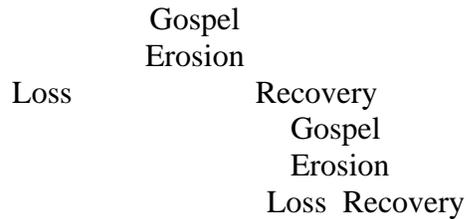
Brown - 1764

Rutgers – 1766, training of ministers

Dartmouth – 1769 - Dartmouth was founded by [Eleazar Wheelock](#), a [Puritan](#) minister from Connecticut, who sought to establish a school to train Indians as ministers to spread civilization and Christianity.

The sad stories of these institutions are a reflection of the theological climate in which they functioned. Time does not permit me to tell them in detail, but I raise them to illustrate that in our relatively modest history as a nation, theological drifting has always been a problem. The 7 churches in Asia Minor reflect the ongoing history of the church.

At any given time there is purity, passion, apathy, persecution, impurity, and doctrinal distortions.



In order to give you a little context, let's go back about a 100 years. Let's start with the religious and theological landscape in America in the early 1900's.

1. America in early 1900's
 - a. Optimistic about changing the culture
 - i. Civil War victory over slavery (The Battle Hymn of the Republic)

By products of the gospel (improving social conditions) gradually replaced the gospel, since so much energy was given to it. Some success (getting rid of slavery and prohibition)

We can bring the kingdom of God on earth through America. We can legislate morality. Getting rid of slavery (very noble) ironically led to a feeling of moral superiority that obviously did not want to live with and next to former slaves and at the same time had no room for the gospel. Meanwhile, there was an enormous mission movement that was taking hold based on the preaching of guys like Moody, and others. Known as the Student Volunteer Movement, never in the history of Christianity had so many young people been moved to pursue missions. Initially, it seemed extremely successful. However, it actually began with problems that brought about its demise.

It by-passed the local church as the senders, supporters and accountability partners for the missionaries. It thought it could engineer the growth and success by the numbers with scientific management techniques. And while at a popular level, missions and the gospel and reaching the world was an exciting prospect, at a deeper level, the foundation of the gospel appeared to be showing some cracks. Darwinism was raising doubts. Marxism and Relativism along with scientific advances were beginning to champion the human spirit. Old line Protestant Calvinism with all of its talk about original sin, the wrath of God and hell were not quite up to par with a new intellectually driven culture.

Victorianism and its dichotomy between the ideal and reality fed a church culture that spoke of ideals but did not connect too well with life. Protestantism under attack from progressive thinking was revealed to be heavy on sentimentality and light on scholarship and intellectual rigor. Seminaries (Princeton in particular, Union – NY had already succumbed) were pressured to give up their rigorous training for more practical course work. This reflected a growing distaste for theological depth, but a pining for more emotive type talks. Gresham Machen was already seeing this enormous problem that was

facing the Presbyterian church. The people did not want theology, they wanted the stories, the pep talks, the flowery lectures. Meanwhile, many aspiring teachers of theology went to Germany for advanced training. There they were exposed to some serious intellectual studies that had done a great deal of work in higher criticism and other liberal ideas. The students were not prepared for this, and many of them became enamored with the degrees and the approvals of their European teachers. This influence in Germany was combined with a growing secularism in America that created a situation ripe for liberalism.

ii. Desire for sophisticated approval

- 1) Lack of theological depth by the people
- 2) Popularistic style of preaching
- 3) Liberal influences from Europe (seriously questioned the origin and authority of the Bible)
- 4) New attitudes of triumphalism in America (1912 presidential race was heavily influenced by religion – T. Roosevelt and W. Wilson, not as much Taft)

As noted earlier, the church had been the driving force behind education. Protestant Pastors were usually the most educated and respected men in the community. But, their fall from favor was encouraged by new voices that were coming over the Atlantic from Europe. We don't need a Savior, we can save ourselves. Only the out and out secularists would state it quite that boldly, but the affect on the church's confidence in the gospel and in the Word began to be seen in the changing of the preaching styles and admitted theology. In an effort to keep the favor and the esteem of the world, Protestant leaders thought they could make some tactical adjustments to the church without really changing the message. But the message was already changing. Even Moody, who was a moving speaker relied heavily upon story-telling.

iii. Losing sight of the gospel

What had been a huge missionary movement (Student Volunteer Movement) for the gospel gradually became a means to achieve social reform. Over time, the implications of the gospel became more important than the gospel.

b. Importing Rationalism and Liberalism

Over time, more and more teachers educated in Germany filled the professorships in the Protestant seminaries. They questioned the unity, integrity, historicity, reliability and (by obvious extension) the authority of the Bible. The subsequent loss of confidence in God's Word was replaced with a confidence in man's word. While the pews continued to be populated by people who believed in the Bible, the ministers stopped preaching it as such. They couldn't come right out and say it, but certain portions of the Bible were ignored. The old line Protestants basically had a faith that was disconnected from life. The new Protestants had a faith that was disconnected from the Bible. This set the stage

for the war of ideas and belief that ended up splitting so many Protestant denominations here in the US. We know it as the modernist vs. fundamental debate.

c. Modernist vs. Fundamentalists

Modernism, known as theological liberalism, does not come in and blatantly deny everything. Modernism used much of the same language, but in a different way. For example, the vice-president of the American Bible Society, Coit Gilman, defended higher criticism because it had revealed the Bible's unparalleled role in the "development of personal character, and . . . in purifying and elevating human society wherever its precepts have been read and accepted." Even while they questioned its source, they viewed it as being inspirational, just not inspired. Once the integrity and authority of the Bible is questioned, then major doctrines such as; the Virgin Birth, the Substitutionary Death of Christ, the Miracles of Christ, the Resurrection of Christ, and the literal return of Christ, all came under attack.

Those five doctrines became known as the fundamentals and those who held to them became known as the fundamentalists. By the time the debate became public, most of the institutions and the denominational leadership was already heavily influenced by modernism. The fundamentalists were viewed as knuckle-dragging, theological cavemen contrasted with the suave, erudite, sophisticated, intelligent, educated liberals.

d. Fundamentalists split

The result was that fundamentalists broke from the liberal organizations. Most of the Baptists in the north were liberal, while many of the Baptists in the south were conservative. The Methodists, for the most part, the Presbyterians, the Disciples of Christ denominations embraced this new theology, while some churches, schools broke off and re-formed. Those who reformed became known as "evangelicals" because they still believed and preached the gospel, starting with the lostness and sinfulness of mankind.

One generation later, a guy named Bill Hybels and another named Rick Warren thought that the church had become too ingrown and was no longer a force in the community. Not only that, but the church was not reaching people with the gospel. No one wanted to come to church anymore. There had to be a way of reaching them.

These guys became two dominant personalities in what has been described as the:

2. Seeker-Driven Movement

a. Evangelical make-over

Their observations were that the evangelical church had an image problem. We sing songs that people don't know and don't like. We dress funny, our buildings are unkept, our nurseries are dirty, the quality of our programs is poor, if we expect people to come

to church, we had better fix a few things up. They believed that the we had the right message, we just had an image problem. If we can take marketing methods and apply them to the church, we could reach all sorts of people. Marketing, creating buzz, hype, getting your message out, branding your identity, all became very important themes in this movement. Of course, when you are marketing something, you have to figure out what your audience is. Then you have to find out what your audience wants, then you have tailor your message/product to fit your target audience.

Unchurched Harry and Mary became the label for the target audience. Harry was in his late 20's to late 30's. Also known as the Baby boomer generation. Church leaders began to study all of the demographics of Boomers. Give the consumer what he wants. The customer is always right.

They are more white collar than blue, they are waiting longer to get married, they are divorcing, they are wealthy, have much disposable income, they love electronics, they love to have choices and are not loyal to a brand like their parents were, etc. So, how does this affect the way we do church? When asked about this, the results were predictable. They did not like long sermons on theology, but preferred practical talks, upbeat music, comfortable environments and first class accommodations. Children's facilities were very important. So, conclusions were made, marketing campaigns were launched and bam, it worked (at least it appeared to work). No more verse by verse expositional preaching. Instead, do talks on topics that will attract and sustain interest. Be relevant. Boring is the new sin. And of course, the Christian publishing companies were all over this. Pulpits were replaced with plexiglass lecturns, organs were gone with choirs and orchestras.

Of course, when you are taking polls and looking at demographic data to tell you what your message ought to be, no one is ever going to want to talk about sin, hell, propitiation, election and predestination or the OT, unless you can find some managerial principles in Nehemiah. So, even though the message was not supposed to change, but only the methods, the message did change.

b. Message modification

Sin was replaced with sickness. Sinners was replaced with seekers (never mind that the Bible explicitly states that people do not seek God). All words deemed too strong or potentially offensive were softened so that we had a kinder and gentler Jesus and gospel. This time, while claiming to believe all of the same truths, the churches that have gone this route have essentially followed the same path that the liberals did over 80 years ago. History is being repeated. Today, there is a great debate going on, over what exactly is an evangelical? We don't even know!

c. Pragmatism – Demographics (live and die by demographics)

If it works is all that matters. What does “work” mean?

When you stand back you can see some real parallels of the seeker movement to modernism. Modernism believed in mankind's scientific and rational abilities to be able to make things better and better. The seeker movement believed that if we applied managerial principles and organizational and marketing ideas to the church that we could engineer success. Modernism also believed that if it was new, and young and modern that it must be better. So, the seeker movement was church by marketing. But, boomers had kids. And the boomers, who were wealthy, were often wealthy because of two incomes, and the kids were being raised by day-cares and other institutional settings and what was often lost on the next generation was a personal sense of identity. Rebellion against parents is nothing new. The boomers thought they were the generation of rebellion and had the drugs and music to prove it. But their kids did not want to look like, sound like or worship like their parents. So, what has been happening, is that the younger generation has been walking away from the seeker-driven type of churches. Church culture observers have said, if you want to reach this new generation, then you can't do it with the same methods that you used to reach their parents (boomers).

So, what is a church to do?

If you accept the marketing model for a church, then you have to either reinvent yourself again (which is what you end up doing every Sunday anyway), or you have separate services for the new, post-modern person. So, now churches need to offer, old-traditional, contemporary (which is no longer contemporary), and emerging.

Big Idea:

Pragmatism is the foundational problem.

Modernity is what helped drive the seeker-movement.

- Bigger is better
- Efficient systems and structures are smarter
- Marketing, demographics, pollsters give us all the information we need to reach a group.
- We can conquer the world for Jesus if we have the right strategy, methods and materials.
- I can achieve whatever I want, spirituality is all about me.

The result has been big events, big religious organizations, churches, seminars, movements, but little tangible evidence of genuine Christlikeness. In fact the demographics of the people inside the churches looks very much like the demographics of people outside the church. The conclusion that is made is, the seeker methods no longer work in a post-modern world. We need new methods based on post-modernism. Hence, in recent years there is a great deal of conversation about the Emerging Church movement.

3. Emergent Movement

Based in part on a post-modern philosophy, the emerging church model is in many ways a reaction to the weaknesses of the seeker model.

a. Reaction to Seeker Weakness

The Seeker Movement assumed propositional truth, but did not like to talk about it (since that is not what the audience wanted). This sets the stage for an anti-authority religion in which we create our own truth based on what our group wants to be like and look like and what feels good to us. The mega-church was programs, programs, programs, and few authentic relationships. It was pro-life, which meant, pro-republican, anti-democrat, hyper-political, homophobic, big-business, and suspicious of world peace, ecology and being environmentally careful. And what characterized the family values republican party? Scandals and hypocrisy. Not limited to them, but rather marks much of the leadership (Enron, Worldcom, etc.)

More anti-authority sentiment (by Post-modernism) is expressed in the desire to find other ways that God speaks to people beside the Bible. Therefore, experience, stories, journeys are emphasized against absolutes, principles and laws.

Seekers were highly individualistic, materialistic, non-committal and out-sourced parenting. Next generation, wants roots, traditions, connection and belonging. Instead of a personal faith, the new generation wants a community faith. Instead of having a better life for me, the X-ers want a better life for the world. The church should be less of an entertainment venue and more of a mission outpost. Talks should not argue about faith but should help us with the dance of faith. Instead of seminars on topics, we want authentic relationships. Instead of a preacher, we want spiritual guides and relational mentors. Without traditions, emergents like traditional looking icons, symbols and such. They are big on candles and atmosphere of spirituality. (Fact is, some are returning to liturgical churches).

b. Same Pragmatic foundation

I agree with many of the observations of the weaknesses of the seeker movement. But, as bad as the disease is, that it diagnoses, the cure is even worse. What more, it is based on the same pragmatism and even demographic-driven model that it resents. (explain)

c. Old liberalism in new shorts, t-shirts and sandals

There is really nothing new under the sun. The new-emerging church model is in so many ways the same old-liberalism. It looks to the culture as the basis for its belief and behavior. The emergent church movement is based on post-modernism. Philosophically, Post-modernism is the belief that we create our own realities within our own language groups. For some, (particularly those who claim to be Post-modern Christians) they claim that there is a real world that exists where there is objective truth, but we cannot get outside of our languages to know it. Therefore, in our practical day to day lives, there are

no universal truths that we may objectively know. Truth is a relative concept and is temporarily constructed and defined within each group, but there is no absolute definition of truth that stands as the rule over all. There is no essence or nature to language. There are only many languages. Meaning is not a matter of what a person meant by a statement, but is just a matter of how those words are used within a social setting or community and how they are viewed by those people at that time, in that place, but are open to being viewed differently by other people in another place at another time.

There are no absolutes, no convictions, no boundaries, just talk, feeling, talk, exploring, but no arriving, journey with no destination and a lot of talk about kingdom, but no concrete understanding of the king. Emergents love talk about the mystery of God, but not the truth of God.

But here is what has happened. The mainline churches in the past bent over backwards to accommodate modernism and to be trendy, contemporary and urban. Today, the mainline churches have been steadily dying, shrinking, consolidating and managing serious decline. The emergent church guys seem to be dead set on repeating the same errors. Rod Bell (Mars Hill church in Grand Rapids) wrote that wherever you are finding “passion and love and exhilaration” there “you are finding God.” If that is true, then we have nothing to offer the world. Christianity may initially be some cool people to hang with, but if no one knows anything with any certainty and we don’t want to be absolute about any truth for fear of sounding judgmental and (gasp) preachy, then what is there to be committed to?

Emergents like to criticize the modern church as being long on apologetics and short on living. I grant you that outlining the faith is not the sum total of Christianity – by a long shot. But, as J. Gresham Machen observed (probably about 80 years ago), “this curious fact – when men talk thus about propagating Christianity without defending it, the thing that we are propagating is pretty sure not to be Christianity at all. They are propagating an anti-intellectualistic, nondoctrinal Modernism; and the reason why it requires no defense is simply that it is so completely in accord with the current age.” (No one is attacking it). Nobody objects to a Christianity without doctrine because there is nothing to object to. At the same time, there is nothing to die for.

Young people will give their lives for an exclamation point, but they will not give their lives for a question mark, not for very long anyway. Once the protest runs out and the emerging church has its own blogdom, and conferences, and church networks, and book deals, there will be no exclamation point, and all that’s left will be ethical intentions and passionate appeals for kingdom living. This will not sustain a movement – the protest will for a while, but once that’s gone there will be no great vision of God (since you cannot know anything about Him with certainty, other than He really loves a lot), no eternal judgment (so you cannot make any clarifying statements about ideas, people, wars, etc.), no reward that is at stake, just a call to live authentically (whatever that is supposed to mean) and to love each other.

The enormous problem facing the emergents is that we cannot live authentic lives, because we are not authentic without Christ (who has revealed Himself in specific terms).

One emergent leader calls modern Christianity – brickianity because it builds such enormous walls. Some of it has, wrongfully (politicizing the church). But, to respond to that, to having a church without doctrinal walls is and will be tragic.

The church has to have doctrinal and practical walls. But, inside is a playground for joy in the gospel. What is a playground without walls? It is a haven for child-molesters.