

THE EMERGING CHURCH:
HOW SHOULD SOUTHERN BAPTISTS RESPOND?

A DENOMINATIONAL ANALYSIS PAPER SUBMITTED TO
MR. JOHN MUETHER
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE COURSE
THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD

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OVIEDO, FL
MAY 18, 2007

“Don’t go to Disney World. Don’t let that evil company have any of your money.” We all remember that war cry from leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention in response to Disney World officially hosting “Gay Day.”¹ I appreciate the sentiment and desire to be wise stewards of our resources and live in accord with stated beliefs. But what the proponents of the boycott failed to recognize is that Disney merely saw a demographic for specific marketing and a chance to turn a profit. Hosting “Gay Day” was a decision based on the financial prospect rather than a desire to endorse homosexuality. The problem is that we as Christians have allowed ourselves to become a demographic just as the homosexual community has. Yes, Disney World does have an official “Gay Day,” but we never hear any complaints about “Night of Joy,” their two night Christian music festival held for the same reason – to turn a profit. Consider how Washington and Hollywood treat Christianity. Christians in America have become a key demographic for politics as the Republican Party has found a way so that any “good” Christian must be a Republican. Likewise, following the success of *The Passion of the Christ*, Hollywood studios have greenlighted a whole run of “family values” movies and even outright “religious” movies.

Christians have long struggled with how to interact with the culture in which we live. The danger arises when, as in the example of the boycott against Disney, the Baptist convention blindly opposes what they perceive as enemies without investigating further the issues at hand. Had they truly dissected the motives of Disney, they would have been outraged not at their hosting of “Gay Day,” but that they thought that we as Christians could be played and simply hand over our money because they bring in some Christian musicians. We have allowed ourselves to be played as fools.

A failure to fully investigate the issue at hand stands as a major issue in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) today as well. While some of the particulars concern the Missouri Baptist Convention (MBC), the state-level affiliation of the SBC, the questions they raise will only continue to grow in

¹ <http://www.cnn.com/US/9706/18/baptists.disney>.

importance as questions surrounding the emergent conversation and emerging church movements multiply.

Let me begin with a brief history of the issue to set the stage for understanding all that is happening. The MBC formed an ad-hoc theological committee to study the emerging church movement and how they as a convention should respond. They began their meetings in February, but the stakes increased when, on April 16th of this year, they met with Dr. Mark DeVine, Assistant Professor of Christian Theology at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. On that night, he presented a paper entitled, *Fast Friends or Future Foes: The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists*,² to the committee where he thoughtfully articulated both the opportunities and threats to Southern Baptists within this movement.

It is what happened next that has created so much stir. In response to their meeting with Dr. DeVine, Michael Knight, Pastor of First Baptist Church of Viburnum and chairman of the ad-hoc theological committee, drafted a response that was passed by the committee on April 30 by a vote of 4-0.³ That response contained seven particular statements regarding the emerging church movement and recommends specific action on behalf of the MBC to the movement. Before recounting those seven statements, it is important to know that the reason this is so crucial is because the Acts 29 church planting network is currently supported by many within the SBC in general and MBC in particular.

1. Acts 29 is part of the Emerging Church movement;
2. We have great difficulty with the notion or philosophy that a church can be theologically conservative and methodologically liberal. There is an inherent connection between biblical theology and missions methodology;
3. There seems to be levels of immaturity and even rebellion among the leadership of the Emerging Church movement;

² Mark DeVine, "Fast Friends or Future Foes: The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists," available at <http://www.theologyprof.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/theemergingchurchandsouthernbaptists.pdf>.

³"Ad hoc theology committee releases statement," *The Pathway*, available at <http://www.mbcpathway.com/otherstories/article79230c167984.htm>.

4. Acts 29 should not be an organization with which the Missouri Baptist Convention networks by means of our Cooperative Program money, missions emphases and church planting;
5. A commitment to planting indigenous churches in Missouri is not a commitment to cultural compromise;
6. We recognize the diversity of opinion in American evangelicalism when it comes to alcoholic beverages. This does not negate our historic and ongoing affirmation of the resolutions at 57 annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention regarding abstinence as the Baptist position on the sale and use of alcoholic beverages;
7. There are vast theological extremes and a profound depth of doctrinal diversity, even instances of clearly heretical statements, within the Emerging Church movement with which we are greatly uncomfortable.⁴

Not only do these conclusions misrepresent everything that Dr. DeVine said (he even wrote on his blog that he was confused at their statement saying, “Since its release, I have been inundated by folks who have read my article and cannot understand how the ‘points’ listed by Chairman Rev. Michael Knight could possibly be ‘based on’ things I have written or said. I share their confusion.”⁵

But the problems raised by this statement are deeper than merely misrepresenting Dr. DeVine. It is, at its core, an issue of presuppositions and an unwillingness to truly study the question at hand. Therefore, let us evaluate each of the seven statements independently in light of the accuracy of the statement and its implication for the SBC.

1) Acts 29 is part of the Emerging Church movement

There is a lot of confusion surrounding the emergent / emerging phenomenon. But confusion over terminology is much to blame. And that is exactly why Acts 29 has gone out of its way to say that they prefer the term “missional” to “emerging.” They want to distance themselves from the unorthodox, liberal movement that is simultaneously occurring. Scott Thomas wrote an official Acts 29 response to the MBC critique entitled, *Seven Misrepresentations of Acts 29*.

⁴ Allen Palmeri, “Theology committee tackles Emerging Church,” *The Pathway*, available at <http://www.mbcpathway.com/otherstories/article77651c138029.htm>.

⁵ Mark DeVine, “Acts 29 and the Missouri Baptist Convention,” available at <http://www.theologyprof.com/acts29-and-the-missouri-baptist-convention>.

The first of those misrepresentations is “that we are affiliated with the emergent church.”⁶ Acts 29 does not want to be mistaken as such. Mark DeVine, in his response to the MBC, reiterates that statement saying, “When church planters of the ostensibly emerging Acts29 network read Carson [and his critique of the emergent conversation], they react thus, ‘We agree and that’s not us!’”⁷

Ed Stetzer, a very important figure in the SBC as he is now the head of a joint effort of the International Missions Board (IMB), North American Missions Board (NAMB) and Lifeway, describes three very different streams into which people fall in the emerging church movement: the relevants, the reconstructionists and the revisionists.⁸ Theologically, these three streams are very different and, before branding Acts 29, the MBC (and the rest of us) need to evaluate into which category they can appropriately be placed. If we are not careful to get to know them, we run the danger of throwing out the baby with the bath water and not being willing to learn from a group that could teach Baptists something. Evangelism and missions have always been core values to Southern Baptists. Even if Acts 29 is “emerging,” if they are orthodox Christians, we have something to learn from them about how to accomplish evangelism and missions in this postmodern world.

2) We have great difficulty with the notion or philosophy that a church can be theologically conservative and methodologically liberal. There is an inherent connection between biblical theology and missions methodology.

This second statement is incredibly loaded and betrays their presuppositions. That they have “great difficulty” thinking that a church can be theologically conservative and methodologically liberal is troublesome. They make quite a subjective judgment by inherently categorizing these new ministry

⁶ Scott Thomas, “Seven Misrepresentations of Acts 29,” available at <http://acts29network.org/acts-29-blog/seven-misrepresentations-of-acts-29>.

⁷ Mark DeVine, “Southern Baptists and the Emerging Church: Fries or Foes?” available at <http://www.theologyprof.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/mbc-9.pdf>, page 2.

⁸ Ed Stetzer, “First Person: Understanding the Emerging Church,” available at <http://www.crosswalk.com/1372534/>.

style churches as methodologically liberal (as opposed to simply different) without defining what makes them such. But, even beyond that, this judgment blinds them to the possibility that there are such churches that are both theologically conservative (to use their terminology) and innovate in ministry methodology. Just because they have “great difficulty” thinking that such a church could exist does not mean that it doesn’t exist. This rush-to-judgment will prevent them from seeing what might be right in front of them.

With that said, Michael Knight and the committee do make an important observation, “There is an inherent connection between biblical theology and missions methodology.” Absolutely. But what if it is those in the missional movement, such as Acts 29, and not the traditionalists, that have truly connected their theology and their methodology? Dr. DeVine notes that this movement is more about ecclesiology than it is theology. It’s more about orthopraxy than it is about orthodoxy.⁹ But here’s the thing, ecclesiology and theology cannot be separated. Just as orthodoxy informs orthopraxy, so our orthopraxy needs to inform our orthodoxy. One cannot exist apart from the other.

But, again, what if it is those whom Dr. Stetzer labels “the relevants”¹⁰ that are truly integrating their theology and methodology? Consider these words from Scott Thomas, Acts 29 Network Director,

Acts 29 Network exists to start churches that plant churches. God is significantly using our network to influence and shape the church planting culture through both rock-solid theology and contextualizing the gospel. We will not waver on either of these commitments. We won’t water down our theology to reach more people and we won’t attack the culture in the name of Christianity. We are planting churches that are missionaries in their respective communities sent by Christ with the gospel (John 20:21).¹¹ The theology of Acts 29 takes very seriously the Great Commission of Matthew 28 and seeks to facilitate, enable and help the planting of new churches.

⁹ Mark DeVine, “Fast Friends or Future Foes: The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists,” available at <http://www.theologyprof.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/theemergingchurchandsouthernbaptists.pdf>, page 7.

¹⁰ Please see Dr. Ed Stetzer’s article referenced previously for a definition of his terms.

¹¹ Scott Thomas, “Welcome to the Acts 29 Website,” available at <http://acts29network.org/about/welcome>.

According to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message (BF&M), under section “XI. Evangelism and Missions,” we read, “It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.”¹² It has long been the application of this statement among Southern Baptists in our foreign missions to contextualize the ministry and to seek to plant indigenous churches led by indigenous leaders. All that Acts 29 is doing is applying that principle to church planting efforts in the United States. Just as it is ideal to have a pastor from Uganda plant a church in Uganda, who better to plant a church in Philadelphia than someone who grew up there, roots for the Eagles and hates the Cowboys? Relationally, he is already worlds ahead of someone coming in from the outside to plant a church there. So yes, theology and methodology are inherently inter-related. And I think that is exactly what organizations such as Acts 29 do better than the 89% of Baptist churches that are in decline.¹³

3) There seems to be levels of immaturity and even rebellion among the leadership of the Emerging Church movement.

On this point, the ad-hoc theological committee of the Missouri Baptist Convention is absolutely correct. The leaders of the emerging (missional) movement are rebelling. So the question needs to be asked, “What are they rebelling against?” Are they rebelling against historic, orthodox Christianity? No. They are rebelling against the brand of Christianity that has dominated American culture for nearly thirty years, and that is the mega-church, seeker-friendly, Christianity-lite version of Christianity that has more in common with a Fortune 500 company than it does the structure, passions and mission of a 1st century church.

The pastors that are the faces of the missional church movement are young, brash and sometimes they even curse. But maybe God isn’t done with

¹² “The Baptist Faith & Message,” available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>.

¹³ Mark DeVine, “Fast Friends or Future Foes: The Emerging Church and Southern Baptists,” available at <http://www.theologyprof.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/04/theemergingchurchandsouthernbaptists.pdf>, page 7.

them yet. Sure, they still have some sin issues in their own heart, but they would be more likely to admit that than most Christian leaders of the past.¹⁴ Though there is still much maturing to take place in their lives to be sure, in their rebellion, they offer an important corrective to the Church in America. And, might I remind you, that Luther's stubborn rebellion transformed Christianity and that the arrogant, prideful, brazen Peter was Jesus' best friend and leader of the Church. God isn't done with them yet, but let us be careful not to miss God's work through them in the process.

4) Acts 29 should not be an organization with which the Missouri Baptist Convention networks by means of our Cooperative Program money, missions emphases and church planting.

While certainly it is the right of the MBC to give their Cooperative Program money where they please, they do need to be careful that this does not sound like a directive binding upon local congregations. The SBC statement on autonomy prohibits such a directive saying, "We affirm the autonomy of the local church. Each church is free to determine its own membership and to set its own course under the headship of Jesus. It may enter into alliance with other churches as it chooses, so long as those other churches are willing."¹⁵ The MBC can make this imperative binding upon its staff and budget, but it cannot direct its member churches not to participate in the Acts 29 network or it would be in direct violation of the statement on autonomy.

5) A commitment to planting indigenous churches in Missouri is not a commitment to cultural compromise.

Here, at last, we come to the heart of the struggle the MBC has with organizations such as Acts 29. They believe that for the sake of growth, those in the emergent/emerging (notice that they inseparably tie the two together) have

¹⁴ See Mark Driscoll's book, *Confessions of a Reformation Rev.*

¹⁵ SBC Position Statement on Autonomy available at <http://www.sbc.net/aboutus/psautonomy.asp>.

sold out. All of this uprising can be, more or less, directly related to The Journey, a SBC and MBC-affiliated church in St. Louis, which began holding a monthly discussion group entitled “Theology at the Bottleworks,” that meets at a local pub. The outcry resulted from many in the MBC because of this tactic of meeting in a bar for a discussion group. But does this mean that they have forsaken orthodoxy? No, it simply means that have taken seriously Paul’s declaration in 1 Corinthians 9:22-23 where he says, “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” What is at stake is not heresy on the part of The Journey, but a chance to enter the world of sinners on the chance that they, like Jesus, might be mistaken as drunkards.

6) We recognize the diversity of opinion in American evangelicalism when it comes to alcoholic beverages. This does not negate our historic and ongoing affirmation of the resolutions at 57 annual meetings of the Southern Baptist Convention regarding abstinence as the Baptist position on the sale and use of alcoholic beverages.

Obviously, this concern is directly related to the actions of The Journey. And yes, they are accurate in saying the historic position of the SBC is abstinence in regard to alcohol. But I think this statement of the MBC is misleading for three primary reasons.

First, it seems to infer that Acts 29, not only permits partaking in alcoholic beverages, but goes even further to condone it in excess. This is, indisputably, both unfair and untrue. In the article on misrepresentations of Acts 29 quoted previously, Mr. Thomas writes, after clearly stating that they believe drunkenness and abuse of alcohol to be sinful, “We recognize that this is an issue where Christians can and do disagree, so we have no position on alcohol other than that the people should have their conscience captive to the word of God, submit to the leadership of their church or denomination, and do everything for God’s

glory.”¹⁶ That is to say, Acts 29 concludes that the Bible is not definitive on its stance toward alcohol and that it is most certainly not a central tenant of the faith.

Secondly, and this is highlighted by Mr. Thomas’ call to church leadership to submit to their church or denomination, Southern Baptists should submit to their local church on this issue. Even supposing Acts 29 advocated alcohol use, they do not have any ecclesiastical authority. Again, the BF&M, after calling upon Baptists to oppose sin (of which alcohol is not mentioned) and instead to pursue acts of mercy for the needy and helpless says, “In order to promote these ends Christians should be ready to work with all men of good will in any good cause, always being careful to act in the spirit of love without compromising their loyalty to Christ and His truth.”¹⁷ What is suggested is here is that not only should the MBC not be opposing Acts 29, but rather than they should recognize them as “men of good will” and seek to partner with them in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And thirdly, the statement of Rev. Knight makes it sound as if the Southern Baptist Convention has explicitly forbidden alcohol. This is not true. While Baptists have consistently reaffirmed a position against alcohol, nowhere does the BF&M explicitly condemn it. There are many Baptists that do drink alcohol in the clear conscience that they have not violated either the teaching or Scripture or the Baptist Faith and Message.

7) There are vast theological extremes and a profound depth of doctrinal diversity, even instances of clearly heretical statements, within the Emerging Church movement with which we are greatly uncomfortable.

All of the statements of the MBC report build up to this final one in terms of betraying the presuppositions of the committee and their lack of understanding of what is happening in these emerging churches. In fact, it is nearly mind-boggling that they could recognize the vast theological differences at play, yet still lump them all together and make a blanket condemnation. It has already been

¹⁶ “The Baptist Faith & Message,” available at <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

mentioned that groups like Acts 29 have intentionally attempted to separate themselves from the liberal emergent “conversation.” To see the disparity, simply search Google for the phrase, “Mark Driscoll and Brian McLaren.” These two men are the leaders of the two extremes of this new perspective on ecclesiology. The results of that search will quickly reveal a list of sites that document the very public disputes and disagreements between the two men.

The MBC report accurately observes that there are “instances of clearly heretical statements.” Yet hardly does that require an unqualified critique upon the whole. Rather, it should call the observer to due diligence to separate the orthodox from the heretical and the good from the dangerous. As there such extremes at play, Southern Baptists must carefully, diligently and purposefully study the teaching of each before judgment is made.

Conclusion

In Acts 17:11, Luke writes, “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” That warning could prove quite profitable for the MBC and the Southern Baptist Convention as a whole with regard to the emerging/emergent movement. They are “doing church” very differently than past generations. But let us be careful to examine what they are saying and what they are doing against Scripture. In so doing, Baptists will undoubtedly find some who have crossed the boundaries and are no longer teaching Nicene orthodoxy. But maybe, just maybe, in so doing, we will find that the orthodox stream of this movement has something to teach us about how to reach the next generation with the love of Christ, for sake of His Kingdom and to the glory of His Name.