

Signs of Emergence: A Vision for Church That Is Organic / Networked / Decentralized / Bottom-up / Communal / Flexible {Always Evolving}, Kester Brewin, Baker Books, 2007 (ISBN-10: 0801068088 / ISBN: 9780801068089), pp.220, pb \$14.99

British church-planter and mathematician Kester Brewin provides a highly readable exploration of a provocative ecclesiology utilizing a technical understanding of “emergence” as interdisciplinary analysis of the ways complex phenomenon may arise out of simple rules or behaviors. Beautiful textual arrangement and a topical bibliography of suggested reading enhances the usefulness of this reprint of *The Complex Christ* (SPCK, 2004) for a US audience. The core content of the book turns on two triads that serve as titles for six chapters (Advent/Incarnation/Emergence and Cities/Gift/Dirt) split by an interlude on “The Character of the Emergent Church.” The fluidity of these categories is offset by reliance on the linear progression of James Fowler’s six stages of faith. Brewin suggests that though many churches are trapped in the “synthetic-conventional” (third) stage, those who move through the disillusionment of the individuating-reflective (fourth) stage will come to the conjunctive (fifth) stage that he contends can be used interchangeably with “Emergent.”

The capitalized pair, “Emergent Church,” is important for Brewin since it distinguishes the specific application of the “science of emergence to church growth” (35) from faddish uses of the verb “emerge.” Though helpful in designating the ecclesiological convictions behind his view, this definition appears to discard the fluidity conveyed by the phrase “emerging church conversation” and identify the subject uncritically with the work of Donald McGavran and Peter Wagner. In contrast to this brief aside, the interlude chapter provides a much thicker explanation of emergent systems utilizing computer, biological, and economic sciences to describe their location between rigidity and anarchy characterized by openness, adaptability, active learning, distributed knowledge, and servant leadership.

By beginning with “advent” as the necessary time of waiting before change, Brewin outflanks attempts to reduce the Emergent Church to a hyper-technologized recapitulation of 1960’s radicalism. He utilizes pregnancy (Mary’s in particular) as a symbol to remind that despite the apparent applicability of Moore’s Law across a variety of unrelated fields, some things resist acceleration. Like Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, *Survivor*, Brewin highlights the seductive power of “feeling useful” that can produce frenetic activity incapable of perceiving its own failure to change matters for the better.

The chapter on incarnation is the shortest and weakest in the book. The idea that God might be moving through Fowler’s stages even as humans are developing increasing capacity to perceive God through their own movement is interesting, but underdeveloped. That the incarnation might be an organizational strategy necessitated by sociological rather than metaphysical realities might be criticized the same way. The potential fruitfulness of both is muted by the strange assertion that Jesus came as a single *sperm* (apparently dependent on Marian chromosomes for a genetic divine-human fusion), reinforcing a suspicion that some readers will find a later quotation of Meister Eckhart - concerning the need to *penetrate* things in order to encounter God - inescapably phallogocentric.

Like Charles Finney more than a century prior, Brewin is anti-mechanistic, but characterizes contemporary pursuit of revival as a desire for instant revolution in which humans are passively transformed by God - an image in stark contrast with the idea of church as an evolving body that displays self-organizing complexity. The comparison he makes between alternative worship experiments and punk

music's cathartic "permission... to imagine new things" (95) suggests a view that the present characteristics of emerging church communities will be (or are being) replaced by something more stable. Such a reading of Brewin would bolster the arguments of those who regard the phenomenon as a kind of neo-Methodism, yet with such strong language about hierarchy stifling creativity and innovation under the mask of "accountability," it is hard to imagine Brewin intends anything resembling a classical expression of *episkopé*.

The connection Brewin makes between learning and memory is particularly significant for churches frequently charged with ahistoricism. Rejecting change for change's sake, he describes the need to remember in order to avoid retrying all the attempted solutions that failed before. The importance of memory for such experimental ecclesiology becomes even more apparent upon reflection that the computational feedback systems he provides as examples are most useful when they have a high number of iterations over a short period of time. The fact that human relationships involve a comparatively low number of iterations over a long period of time indicates a limit to this analogy that could perhaps be offset by a broader appropriation of *tradition as a kind of memory* and *narrative as a means of projecting into the future*. How Brewin's "distributed truth evolving through networks of trust" (113) might relate to a "hierarchy of truths" or a "great cloud of witnesses" remains a task for further exploration.

Later chapters take a more prescriptive tone as Brewin explores some implications of emergent complexity as basis for ecclesiology. In advocating for urban engagement, Brewin asserts that those who seek God in the mountains or remote areas will hear simple, personal solutions. Only those who seek God in the midst of struggling with the persistent troubles and doubts of complex human relationships will perceive God in the upper tier of Fowler's stages. Similarly, the chapter on "gift" provides an instructive challenge to the two-way exchange of the prosperity gospel and certain forms of worship by exploring how the Maori gift-cycle transcends commodification by hiding the reciprocal benefits produced by the system from the one doing the giving. Finally, Brewin introduces trickster imagery through a Christological lens as a model of re-evaluating "dirt-boundaries" in a way that echoes Donald Kraybill's "upside-down kingdom."

Though the concluding reflection on Judas as a symbol of opposition to the decentralized vision Brewin espouses may appear simple vilification to some, it is representative of the radical renunciation of norms that characterizes the discourse. Taken together with a Judas-themed liturgy presented by Peter Rollins in *How (Not) to Speak of God*, this may indicate a growing trend of using the replaced apostle as an unlikely icon of critical self-reflection. Whatever the future of such meditations, the effect of the book as a whole will certainly be to stimulate discussion about how new awareness concerning the forms of spontaneous ordering present in both creation and human society ought to inform a robust missional ecclesiology.

R. M. Keelan Downton

Somerset Christian College