

ROCKHARBOR and The Emerging Church

[draft4]

I. Introduction And Definition

Recently, there have been questions and concerns raised from individuals both within and outside of our church community, regarding **ROCKHARBOR's** relationship to the **Emerging Church Movement (hereafter 'EC' or as referenced with the word 'emerging.')** Since many in our church community have been approached with these questions and concerns, we felt we should help equip you to address these issues as they arise.

One of the difficulties in addressing this subject is the lack of a singular definition/spokesman/doctrinal position of the EC. The EC movement does not represent a consistent or well-defined block of thought and practice.

However, there are some distinctions that we can make to help explain our view on these issues. First of all, it is necessary to distinguish between **Emergent** and **Emerging**. Although this may seem a trivial nuance, that is not the case. 'Emergent' is shorthand for Emergent Village ('EV'), an official organization in the United States (see <http://www.emergentvillage.com>). Those associated with Emergent Village include: Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt, Chris Seay, Brian McLaren, and Spencer Burke.

EC is a much harder to define category *that includes EV* but is significantly broader in both belief and practice. In other words, not all of those who would consider themselves a part of the EC would agree or associate with EV.

Perhaps the most helpful set of categories regarding EC have come from Ed Stetzer who serves on the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Missions Board. Stetzer offers the following designations within the EC movement:

Stetzer classifies as *Relevants* those individuals and churches that are simply attempting to translate the gospel and its implications into an increasingly secularized culture. These churches/people share the conservative values of traditional evangelical faith and are concerned with trying to communicate the message of Christ in biblically faithful and culturally meaningful ways.

Reconstructionists, according to Stetzer, argue that the current form/structures of modern, organizational church are frequently irrelevant and unhelpful in reaching lost people. These churches/people typically hold a more orthodox view of gospel and scriptures, but they reject the hierarchical, organizational models of that often accompany the American mega-church movement.

Revisionists go beyond the reconstruction of church form, structure and method to the revision of core Christian belief. Issues such as the inerrancy of the Bible, the



deity of Jesus, sovereignty of God, the substitutionary nature of the atonement, the reality of hell, and the exclusivity of Jesus are being questioned and reformulated in ways that bear little resemblance to historical, orthodox Christian faith.

Using these categories, **ROCKHARBOR** would consider itself a part of the EC movement *only to the degree* that we share some affinities to Stetzer's *Relevants*. So is **ROCKHARBOR** an EC? No, if this means that we are moving away from biblical faithfulness on issues like the deity of Christ, the substitutionary nature of the atonement, the realities of heaven and hell, the doctrine of the Trinity, the authority of scripture, etc. But we do believe that, while not compromising on the core doctrines of the Christian faith, we are called to utilize creative means and methods of communicating the truth of the gospel to the world around us. This approach is in line with the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 9:22: "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." Likewise, we are flexible in our approach to convey the unchanging truth about Christ.

God has called our church to convey and communicate the gospel of Jesus paying particular attention to the 18-26 year old generation. Therefore, we seek relevant forms and methods that help communicate biblical concepts and ideas in ways that are meaningful to younger adults. We believe that the Bible gives ample permission to the church to adapt the means of transmission of the gospel to various contexts. (See Section 2) However, that permission does not extend to adjusting core doctrine to better fit the cultural mood. We grieve that some, in confronting the mistakes and ineffectiveness of the evangelical church, have strayed from core doctrines of biblical faith.

ROCKHARBOR does not have any affiliation with EV and we would seek to distance ourselves from any part of the EC movement where individuals or churches have disregarded clear biblical teaching on central doctrine.¹ We believe there are lessons to be learned from many in the EC camp, and that profound questions are being considered as part of the EC movement. Accordingly, we desire to prayerfully and discerningly engage the EC movement according to the scriptures.

II. Contextualization

From the time of Jesus onward, those seeking to follow him faithfully have wrestled with how best to accurately communicate his message across the barriers of race, gender, socio-economic status, language and culture. As the Gospel moved from Jewish culture to a more pagan, polytheistic Gentile culture, vigorous debate broke out among the early church regarding what was essential to the message of Jesus and what was not. The list of controversial issues they dealt included sexual immorality, food sacrificed to idols, circumcision, Sabbath keeping, and dietary

¹ We also sincerely doubt that many in EV/EC would point to **ROCKHARBOR** as an example of an emerging church.



restrictions.² These issues were controversial precisely because the Gospel was taking root in soil much different from that of Jesus' first disciples. For them, the basic issue was one of accommodation: how Jewish did Gentile Christians need to become for them to embrace the Savior Jesus? Or, to put in another way, how far could the gospel be contextualized³ into Gentile culture before it ceased being the gospel?

Similar debates rage today in the American church regarding the EC's insistence that the gospel of Jesus has been too bound to modern western culture and must be deconstructed in order to be translated afresh to emerging generations. To put it another way, on one end of the continuum there are those who feel there is no problem with either the wine (the eternally true gospel of Jesus) or the wineskins (the culturally-bound expressions/forms/methods used to communicate the gospel). There are others who see the need for fresh wineskins (Stetzer's *Relevants and Reconstructionists*) while leaving the wine unchanged. And, at the far end of the spectrum there are those who see the need to re-examine both (Stetzer's *Revisionists*).

ROCKHARBOR's position is the middle one: we see the need (and the biblical mandate for) fresh expressions/forms/methods of contextualization - that is, new wineskins - while remaining faithful to the revelation of God through the scriptures. This mandate was established by Jesus himself and modeled by the early church, particularly through Paul's missionary efforts.

Take, for instance, the 4 gospels. Though they share common material, each is contextualized for a different audience so that each one presents the gospel in the most effective manner to four different cultural groups. This was done without compromising the gospel message of Jesus as God in the flesh, who lived a sinless life and died on the cross for the sins of the world, rising on the third day, ascending into heaven where he reigns until he returns. ⁴

² E.g., See Acts 10 (Peter and Cornelius), Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Council), Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 10, and Galatians 1-3.

³ By contextualization we mean the process of translating the gospel from one cultural understanding to another so that those barriers that are non-essential to understanding and embracing the gospel can be removed.

⁴ Adapted from Radical Reformation, Mark Driscoll, 2004, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 56-7.



	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Author	Jewish Christian, former tax collector	Jewish Christian, associate of Peter	Gentile Christian, doctor	Jewish Christian, a part of Jesus' inner circle
Primary Audience	Jews	Romans	Gentile, Theophilus	Greeks
Portrait of Jesus	Jewish Messiah and King	Son of Man, faithful servant	Perfect man	God (logos) incarnate
Jesus' genealogy	Traced to Abraham and David, showing Jesus as the fulfillment of OT prophecy	No genealogy; emphasizes Jesus' actions	Trace to Adam to show Jesus was fully human	Jesus as the eternal word of God
Notable Features	Arranged around 5 long discourses; 60% of book is Jesus teaching; about 50 quotes from OT	Shortest gospel, few OT quotes, explains Jewish words and customs, 150 present tense verbs emphasizing Jesus in action; 35 miracles; 40% of book is Jesus' words	Roughly 50% of book is Jesus' words; 13 women included that are omitted from other gospels; Jewish customs explained	Roughly 90% of book is unique to John; no parables or exorcisms; arranged around 7 "I am" statements of Jesus to prove he is God

Paul employed similar methods. His custom was to speak first with the Jews in a city and then to the Gentiles. Because the Jews used and knew the Old Testament Scriptures, Paul would use them as common ground to present Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and King. But when working among Gentiles, Paul used different methods and language to present the same Gospel. The best-known example of this is Paul's speech at Mars Hill Acts 17:16-34. There Paul begins to build common ground by noting their religious culture and, in the process of presenting Jesus to them, goes so far as to quote two of their poets, Epimenides and Aratus. He does not quote the Old Testament to them since it would not have been a culturally recognized authority.

These examples could be multiplied, but two is enough to show that the earliest Christians felt great freedom to find new wineskins to hold the wine of the gospel. As those entrusted with the same task, we seek to be both scripturally accurate and culturally accessible in way we engage the world and proclaim and embody the message of Jesus. We can be sure that Paul did not agree with what Epimenides or Aratus (who both wrote in praise of Zeus) had written elsewhere, but he affirmed some of their words and showed how they were better applied to Jesus.

Since the gospel must be contextualized in a way that is accessible to the culture and faithful to scripture, God's people must continually review our presentation of the gospel to ensure that the form in which it is presented is the most effective one. As part of this process, we are at liberty to affirm "truths" from non-Christian culture -



art, politics, sports, business, literature, movies – that serve as common ground to show the larger truth of the gospel message (See Appendix A).

The Bible places limits on this process, however. Compromising biblical fidelity and allowing the world to conform believers into its image (something the New Testament calls worldliness) are both called sin.⁵ The scriptures call us to engage culture prayerfully, selectively, discerningly, biblically and redemptively.

We believe that there is objective truth both inside and outside the bible, and that all truth points to Jesus of Nazareth who said he *was* truth. Therefore we are at liberty to quote, engage, learn from and associate with people from both inside and outside the Christian community *even if we disagree with much of what they stand for, say elsewhere, or represent.*

We do not believe that we must dismiss everything an author has written because we may disagree on other doctrinal issues. Similarly, it is an error to assume because an author or speaker quotes a particular author that it means they agree with all that the writer has written or believes. It may be that one particular quote or idea provides a helpful understanding of the subject being discussed. Our main questions in the use of any material are: is it doctrinally orthodox in its approach? And is it useful in helping people to develop maturity in their relationship with Christ? Everything we read or hear, no matter what the source, should be filtered through God's Word. Paul's admonition to Timothy is our guiding rule: "test everything...hold onto the good."

To paraphrase Stetzer,

If we fail to regain confidence in the gospel, subsequent generations will continue to walk away from it. Staying culturally relevant is important, and it is beneficial to minister in fresh, new ways. After all, we must remove any roadblocks that keep people from getting to Jesus. But, in the end, if strategies and systems replace the core of the gospel, its meaning and power will be lost.

III. Spiritual Formation

Some in the Christian community have expressed concern over the issue of spiritual formation. We desire to address some of the questions raised regarding these issues, but would also refer the reader to some articles and books where they are explored more fully.⁶

⁵ See 1 John 2:15, 17, 3:1, 13, 4:1, 4, 9, 5:4-5, 5; James 1:27, 3:6, James 4:4, 1 Peter 2:11; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 Cor. 1:20-21, 27-28, 11:32; Romans 1:18-32, 12:2; Col. 2:8, 20-3:3; Eph. 2:2, 12; Gal. 3:22, 4:3; John 1:1-18; 2 Cor. 10:3-4.

⁶ For a defense of Spiritual Formation and Spiritual Disciples, See Steve L. Porter, "Sanctification In A New Key: Relieving Evangelical Anxieties Over Spiritual



The phrase “spiritual formation” comes from Galatians 4:19 where Paul writes to the churches that he longs for the time that “...Christ is formed in you.”⁷ We believe that ‘spiritual formation,’ ‘sanctification’ and ‘discipleship’ are equivalent terms with the same aim as that of Paul in Colossians 1:28-29, “...that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

We also recognize what has been very well documented elsewhere: that today there is no discernable difference between the attitudes and actions of those within the church community from those outside of it. At best, these types of statistics are a sobering reminder of what many know firsthand: conversion to Christ is merely the beginning, and not the end, of the work Jesus wants to do in his people. The role of the church is to not only bring people to faith but to help bring them to maturity so that they might “...be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). There should be discernable differences between those who have given their lives to Christ and those who have not.

We believe this happens as people become more and more like Jesus. The working out of our salvation is not something we do in our own strength, striving to earn God’s love, but is something that is done in cooperation with God’s Spirit in the context of grace and love. Though spiritual formation is ultimately the work of God within us, we have a part to play as well.⁸ Paul commands us to “put off your old self, which belonged to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.”

This process is described as the process of Christian discipleship and sanctification.⁹ Spiritual formation is built upon a regenerated life in Christ, anchored in the word of God and yielded to the activity of the Holy Spirit in every area of life.

Spiritual formation is rooted in the spiritual disciplines of the Bible practiced by believers over the centuries as well as by Christ himself (see list below). Spiritual disciplines are intentional personal and corporate habits that promote the spiritual growth of both the individual and the church body. Among the spiritual disciplines that **ROCKHARBOR** encourages are:

Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 2008, Vol. 1, No. 2, 129-148; Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1978); Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1988).

⁷ See also Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 3:1-2; 2 Peter 1:5-8.

⁸ Phil 2:12-13, Gal. 4:19, Eph. 4:22-23.

⁹ Heb. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 3:1-2; 2 Peter 1:5-8.



- Scripture reading, meditation¹⁰ and memorization (Ps. 1:2; Ps. 19:7-8, 119:11, 105; Mt. 4:4, Joshua 1:8)
- Prayer (Mt. 6:5-15, 7:7-12, 1 Thess. 5:16-18)
- Worship (Ps. 34:1-3; Ps 100, John 4:24, Rom. 12:1-2)
- Evangelism (Acts 1:8; Mt. 28:18-20)
- Generosity towards the church and the poor (1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8 & 9)
- Fasting (Mt. 6:16-18)
- Solitude and silence (intentional time alone spent with God – Lam. 3:26, 28; Ps. 4:4; 46:10; 131:2; Mt. 14:23; Mk. 1:35; Luke 6:12-13)
- Confession of sin (1 John 1:8-9; Ps. 32, 51; Prov. 28:13)
- Participation in biblical community (Heb. 10:24-25; 1 Cor. 12:12-26)

We are opposed to any approach to spiritual formation that is not grounded in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Human beings are lost in their sinful condition and cannot come to salvation without the finished work of Jesus reconciling humanity to God. Knowledge of God cannot be attained by human effort alone but is grounded solely upon God's sovereign choice to reveal himself in creation (Rom. 1:18ff.), Word (Heb. 4:12, 2 Tim. 3:16), His works and incarnation (Heb. 1:1-2) and the Indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14ff., Rom. 8:15-17)

The spiritual disciplines are ways of opening the heart to experience and discern the reality of the Spirit's work in the believer's soul or inner person. That is, it is a way for the believer to attend to, cooperate and participate with the Spirit's work who is attempting to bring about the following realities in our lives (Phil. 2:12-13):

1. that we be strengthened with power in the inner man (Eph. 3:16)
2. that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith (Eph. 3:16)
3. that we be rooted and grounded in love (Eph. 3:17)
4. that we come to know the extend of the love of God (Eph. 3:18-19)
5. that we be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19)
6. that we be given a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God (Eph. 1:17)
7. that we have the eyes of our heart enlightened to know our hope, the riches of his glory, and the greatness of his power toward us (Eph. 1:19ff)

Spiritual formation does not make these realities happen; it only puts the human will in a position to experience or discern the reality of what the spirit has already made available to the inner person on the basis of the finished work of Jesus on the cross. Spiritual formation is grounded in the word and work of Christ and focuses upon opening the believer's heart to attend to the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit:

¹⁰ By 'meditation' we mean consciously focusing on a specific passage of scripture and its relevance to the reader as described in the passages listed above.



1. who is continuously strengthening the believer in the inner person, dwelling in our hearts through faith and loving the believer in the depths of the heart based on the finished work of Christ (Eph. 3:16-19),
2. who is continuously leading and bearing witness to the believers heart that one is a son of God by which one cries out Abba, Father (Rom. 8:14-15) and
3. who is continuously interceding for the believer to be conformed into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:26-29).

IV. Conclusion

While this paper is by no means exhaustive, we believe it is helpful in understanding **ROCKHARBOR's** stance on issues being raised in the larger Christian community. In cases where disagreement is present, it is the desire of **ROCKHARBOR** leadership to embody Paul's exhortation in Ephesians 4:1ff:

I, therefore, the prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of faith.



APPENDIX A – WHAT IS THE “WORLD”

John writes, “Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). James defines religion that God accepts as “...keeping oneself from being polluted by the world.” What exactly is the ‘world’ John and James refer to?

Understanding this is critical to the task of contextualization. We neither want to promote an ungodly separation from the world (which Jesus prayed against in John 17) nor do we wish to promote worldliness in the church. Although here is no verse in the Bible that talks about being “in” the world but not “of” it, this is still a biblical idea. The word translated “world” is used 185 times in the New Testament; 105 of those are in John’s writings. There are 3 meanings attached to “world” in the New Testament.

1. It can refer to the created universe as in Acts 17:24: “The God who made the world and everything in it...” In this usage “world” is good since God declared his creation to be “good” in Genesis 1.
2. “World” can also refer to the inhabited earth as in John 3:16: “For God so loved the world....” Here the word doesn’t refer to the created order, it means the collective group of people living on the earth. This usage is positive since it reflects the value God places on all human beings.
3. The most important meaning of “world” in the New Testament is “an ordered human system headed by Satan and energized by the demonic that stands opposed to God.”¹¹ In other words, the “world” in this sense is ordered “flesh” (which refers not to the body, but rather to fallen human nature) energized by the demonic realm.

We must be careful to distinguish these 3 meanings from each other where the word “world” is used. Not all references to the “world” are bad ones. This definition implies there are two sources of the “world”:

1. Fallen human nature (1 John 2:16-17) – the structures and systems created in human society can exacerbate individual fallen tendencies (e.g., educational systems, media, economies, entertainment industries, politics, etc.)
2. The demonic realm (Ephesians 6:12) – the enemy takes opportunity and energizes what has already been ordered and organized together (the flesh).

When we are warned against worldliness in the scriptures, this is what we are told to avoid.

¹¹ Thanks to J.P. Moreland for this definition and the distinctions that follow.



There is one other important implication to this understanding of “world”. In the New Testament “world” cannot be taken to refer generally to non-Christian culture, it only refers to the art, media, literature, entertainment, etc., that come from non-Christian culture that is contrary to the Kingdom of God. Non-Christian culture is a mixed bag in this respect: some of it is good and thoughtful; some of it is neutral (whether I eat ice cream at Baskin Robbins or Cold Stone); and some of it is hostile and contrary to the nature and work of God. It is possible for something that is labeled “Christian” to be of the world and likewise it is possible for something that is labeled “non-Christian” to be beneficial and useful for believers.

Proverbs teaches us that we can learn wisdom about life from the study of human society: pay attention to the sluggard, the drunk, the prostitute and the wise man. Proverbs even tells us that we can learn something from observing ants.

Likewise, Jeremiah 49:7 implies that Edom, a pagan nation, had been a source of wisdom and council. 1 Kings 4:29 refers to the wisdom of the Egyptian nation. We have already noted Paul’s quotations from Epimenides and Aratus in Acts 17. Jude, in verse 9, quotes a non-biblical first century text called the Assumption of Moses.

In support of the positions taken above we simply note that the scriptures give us permission to embrace truth, regardless of its source. Of course, truth outside the scriptures will never contradict truth inside the scriptures, but we are in error if we understand the idea of “worldliness” to simply refer to anything not explicitly mentioned in the Bible. The scriptures call us again to theological and prayerful discernment as we engage the culture around us.



APPENDIX B – ROCKHARBOR STATEMENT OF FAITH

The Bible, God's word to us, is central to our relationship with God and each other. While there are some areas where sincere Christians agree to disagree [Romans 14:1-15:7; 2 Timothy 2:23-24; Titus 3:9], the Bible makes clear that certain truths are essential convictions of the Christian faith. **ROCKHARBOR** considers these to be the following:

1. The Bible [all the books of the Old and New Testaments] is the true written message of God to us. We believe the authors of the Bible were inspired by God and are therefore completely trustworthy. The Bible is the final authority on all matters to which it speaks. [Psalm 19:7-11, 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:20-21]
2. There is one God, who exists forever in perfect community as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. [Genesis 1:26-27; Deuteronomy 6:4; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:8]
3. Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God. He is the perfect reflection of God's character and glory. He lived a sinless life and offered himself as the only perfect sacrifice for the sins of all people by dying on the cross. All who believe in Him are declared righteous on the basis of His death. He rose physically from the dead and will return again to earth to reign forever with those who are His. [Matthew 1:18-25; John 1:14, 8:40,58, 11:33; Acts 1:9-11; Romans 5:8-10; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:8]
4. Humans are created in the image of God, but each one has fallen short of God's perfect standard and is in need of salvation. [Genesis 1:26; Romans 3, 5:12-19; Ephesians 2:1-3, 4:18-19]
5. Salvation from our sinful condition is a free gift from God to us. It is not something we earn or deserve. It is offered in grace and received by faith in Jesus Christ alone. Those who believe in Jesus Christ and call on His name are made right with God and given eternal life. [John 3:16, 14:6; Romans 3:28, 8:31-39; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:26-27,36-39; Ephesians 2:8-9; 1 Timothy 2:5-6]

