

‘Calvinism in the Emerging Church in NZ’

By Michael Beck

INTRODUCTION

As it was envisaged that this symposium should center on Calvin’s influence upon our various ministries, I thought that it would be fitting to begin by offering a brief introduction to my particular context. This will also allow me to set some delimiters, and lead into the basic thesis of this paper.

First a bit about my background: I was converted to Christianity from a life of nightclubbing, drug taking and drug dealing. Immediately after my conversion (on my way out of this environment), I excitedly sought to share my faith with all who would listen. As a result, a few others came to faith and decided to join me in leaving their old lives behind. While we were determined to do this, one of the first challenges we experienced was that of finding acceptance and belonging in a new community. For this reason, the choice to join (what was then in many ways) an emerging church¹, seemed obvious to us. Not only were there a lot more people in our own age group, but it was easier to relate to on so many different levels.

It was at this church that I would receive a call to ministry, begin my training, and eventually be sent out to plant another church (in New Zealand)². While our new church plant was in many ways also emerging³, as we journeyed along in our study of the Scriptures we became more and more convinced of the truth of Reformed theology, and eventually made the decision to join the Fellowship of Reformed Baptists in New Zealand.

In relation to my topic, this background serves as a two-fold delimiter. Negatively; it should be said at the fore set that I do not pretend to be a specialized thinker in either; a)

¹ I use the qualifying phrase ‘in many ways’ because (while there were many aspects of the Emerging movement that could be seen in the church’s style of youth ministry) for some very important reasons, I would not classify it as an officially Emerging Church [see footnote #7].

² This is the church where I currently serve as the pastor (www.gracenet.co.nz).

³ Quite naturally, we had adopted much of our ministerial philosophy from the church from which we were sent [see footnote #2].

the life and thought of John Calvin or; b) the epistemological and theological intricacies of the emerging movement. Positively, however, I hope that this background does serve to show my personal interest in the subject. Not only am I the pastor of a church that holds to Calvinistic theology, but also, the emerging generation is my own generation. So, while I do not at all assume to be the final word on the subject, I would be greatly encouraged if I could play even a small part in serving you to think through the important issues at hand.

With this in mind, let me begin by offering you the basic thesis of this paper:

There is currently a world wide resurgence of Calvinistic thought that is sure to have a growing influence upon the emerging church in New Zealand. This, in turn, is very likely to present the Reformed community with many unique ministry opportunities. So as to be ready for these, we should be both well informed and warmly engaged.

As far as time and scope permit, I will unpack this central idea under the following five points:

I. CONFIRMATION

We are all busy. Particularly, as pastors, there are many worthy items that require our thoughts and energy. For this reason, I want to begin by making two sub-points that I hope will serve to persuade you that this subject is not simply another red herring to our attention.

A. The Emerging Church is a Reality in NZ.

Ed Stetzer, a missiologist with the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board, very helpfully divides the Emerging church into the following three categories or sub-movements.

1. *The Relevants*: These are theologically orthodox churches that are simply striving to “make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture” (Stedzer 2006:¶3).

2. *The Reconstructionists*⁴: Usually theologically orthodox, this group are primarily united in their common rejection of any organizational model of church.
3. *The Revisionists*: This group is the postmodern rehash of mainline liberalism (operating under the institutional banner: ‘emergent’⁵).

With this definition in place it becomes easier to see the clear presence of the Emerging Church in NZ.

1. *Relevants*: With the great popularity and plainly contemporizing nature of the charismatic and seeker sensitive movements, there is a very clear, visible presence of this group in NZ. This is increasingly so as previously assigned ‘youth pastors’ of charismatic and seeker sensitive churches begin moving on to start new works (reshaped to appeal specifically to a postmodern generation)⁶.
2. *Reconstructionists*: NZ authors like Mike Riddel, Mark Peirson, and Steve Taylor, together with Australian authors such as Michael Frost and Alan Hirsh are seen as pioneers of a the global Reconstructionist movement (Ward 2009:¶1). While this is unusual to observe⁷, it does indeed serve to give us a hint as to the growing reality of the emerging Reconstructionist movement in NZ.
3. *Revisionists*: A walk through Manna Christian Bookstores will show the immense popularity of Revisionist authors and speakers such as Rob Bell and Brian McLaren⁸. Dr Kevin Ward, lecturer at the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand’s Knox Centre for Ministry and Leadership says the following:

...the term “emerging church” is still widespread and gains much attention from younger church leaders in NZ, including many of those accepted for ministry training by the PCANZ and coming to the Knox

⁴ Not to be confused with the theonomist stream of Reformed theology, under the same label.

⁵ Not to be confused with the more general term ‘emerging’.

⁶ Churches are not necessarily classed as part of the ‘Relevants’ sub-movement simply because they are seeking to make their services more contemporary or contextual. Rather they are part of this group if the externals of their worship service are significantly shaped in a way that seeks to adapt (in particular) to postmodern emerging culture.

⁷ In both other sub-movements, Australasia has learned from and followed pioneers from the UK and US.

⁸ Also, the work of N.T Write (whose theology forms the foundation for much of the writings of the ‘Emergent’ wing) is very popular.

Centre for Ministry and Leadership. One of our courses here is now titled “Missional and Emerging Churches”.

(2009:¶1)

Albeit a very brief examination, I trust that the collection of these aforementioned points are felt to be sufficient to show that the emerging church is indeed a reality in NZ. This moves us on to the second sub-point in seeking to confirm the important nature of this discussion.

B. The Calvinistic Resurgence will (very likely) soon be a reality in NZ⁹

A few items are noteworthy in serving to establish this;

1. While it might not be too surprising to see the Calvinist resurgence spoken of in a recent article by Tom Ascol (in the UK Evangelical Times Newspaper), perhaps far more noteworthy is an article in the March special edition of Time Magazine, which presents what it calls ‘the New Calvinism’¹⁰ as one of the 10 biggest ideas influencing the globe today.
2. Crossway has recently published a book entitled ‘Young, Restless, Reformed’. It is the extended treatment of a well known Christianity Today article published in 2006, in which journalist Collin Hansen sets forth two years of his research into the New Calvinist movement, and leaves us no doubt as to its growing reality.
3. Rated one of the 50 most influential pastors in America, the popularity of Calvinist Mark Driscoll is in many ways on its own, proof of a Calvinistic resurgence among the emerging generation. With a serious emphasis on both doctrine and hard hitting messages, his church in Seattle (called Mars Hill) has flourished to weekly attendance of over 7000 people (majority young adults). Not only are his sermons downloaded all around the world (giving him an international influence), but through his highly successful church planting organization (called Acts 29), churches like Mars Hill are being reproduced all over the globe. Australian Anglican Bishop Al Stewart went to the US to attend an Acts 29 church planting boot camp and told SydneyAnglicans.net that there was much that they desired to learn from Driscoll (Percy 2009:¶3). Those

⁹ Based on my personal experience, I might go even further and suggest that the first signs of the resurgence in NZ have *already* started to occur.

¹⁰ The terms ‘new’ makes reference to a ‘new generation’ that is embracing the ‘old Calvinism’.

who are familiar with Mars Hill's cutting edge emerging-styled church services will see Stewarts' desire as significant step in the process of American-Australasian cross pollination. Indeed, in Driscoll's recent trip to Australia (August 2008), the ten-thousand-seater Sydney Entertainment Centre was filled to capacity with eager listeners (Woolcott 2008:¶1).

4. The Passion worship conference, founded by Louie Giglio, has not only given speakers like John Piper the chance to address *forty thousand* students at a time with radically God-centered messages, but also (under the banner of Giglio's record label 'Sixsteps Records') are producing hit CD's that are blaring Calvinistic lyrics in everything from book stores to university communes (often via airwaves of New Zealand Christian radio). One of the artists signed to Giglio's label, David Crowder (who has become famous for contemporizing old Calvinistic hymns), has recently played at the Parachute Music Festival 2009, NZ - and since then continues to soar in popularity.
5. Emergent leader, Rob Bell, is hugely popular in NZ. While this, due to his Revisionism is cause for much distress, even here there is a significant indicator of the means through which the Calvinistic resurgence will affect the Emerging church in New Zealand. In the foot note of best seller 'Velvet Elvis', Bell urges that his readers move on to read absolutely everything that John Piper has ever written!¹¹ This of course, is especially significant when Piper has strong, winsome, five point Calvinism in *everything* he has ever written - and *all* available on the internet, for free¹²!

These things together, then, are some of the foremost reasons to confirm the relevance of the topic, and urge that a posture of readiness is not a red herring to our time or energy.

II. CAUSES

While confirming the reality of the resurgence, I have already made much allusion to that which I believe to be causing it. However, there is a deeper dynamic that deserves our

¹¹ Foot note #24 in Velvet Elvis.

¹² John Piper's ministry resources may be found at the following Web address: <http://www.desiringGod.org>

attention. Of course, at some level, much of this movement might be explained by the emerging generation's rebellion of all things modern, and of their new found appetite for mystery, paradox and the transcendent. Young Calvinist pastor, Joshua Harris remarks "I do wonder if some of the appeal [of Calvinism] and the trend [of the resurgence] isn't a reaction to the watered down vision of God that's been portrayed in the seeker oriented churches" (Hansen 2008:21). This might well be so. Yet, I believe that the situation may also be assessed at a far less abstract level. After two years of research, Hansen concludes that "[John] Piper, more than anyone else, has contributed to a resurgence of Reformed theology among young people..." (2006:¶4) Declaring the same God-entranced vision of his self confessed mentor Jonathan Edwards, his signature book (Desiring God) has sold more than 275,000 copies and, as Hansen says, is "practically required reading for college age evangelicals..." (2008:32). As already mentioned, it is not insignificant that this prolific speaker and author, has made all of his work available on the internet for no charge at all. While Piper is important to mention for these reasons alone, there is yet another aspect of his ministry that I believe captures so much of what lies at the root cause of his fruitfulness.

In many respects Piper crystallizes what many of the other key resurgent leaders (such as Grudem, Carson, Keller, Mahaney, Giglio) have striven to achieve. While holding to their own theological and stylistic convictions, they have made a strong effort to keep minor issues from getting in the way of the greater goal. And it is for this reason, that they have been able to make such incredibly diverse inroads into the emerging generation. This, then, forms a perfect bridge for us to move on to the next point of discussion.

III. CONCERNS

The concerns that I have are essentially two fold in their direction and application. Beginning with the resurgence itself, it cannot be denied that there are many rough edges. Firstly, there is a very worrisome over-focus on sinful pop culture. While attempting to justify this in the name of missiological thinking; rather than leading to cultural relevance, it often leads to cultural assimilation and worldliness (Macarthur 2006:¶6). Secondly, the growth of the movement does not necessarily correspond proportionately to

its levels of theological discernment. An example of this might be seen in Mark Driscoll himself, who readily confesses that at many points he has had to make things up as he went along (Hansen 2008:146). Indeed, it seems that some of his earlier mistakes are set to stay with him as scarred reminders of this fact. Finally, it should also be said that a large part of the movement is not always completely in line with historic reformed theology, and therefore leaves much to be legitimately concerned about in terms of both *praxis and theology*.

This, unfortunately, does nothing to diminish the other problem, running in the opposite direction. An undeniable challenge presented to those who love the articulation and defense of Reformed theology has to do with the resulting isolation that so often accompanies this task. While it is true that in some instances, separation from those who would compromise on important theological and practical issues is unavoidable, there is also a huge temptation to draw these boundaries for reasons not quite so deserving. And unfortunately, it has often been because of these less-worthy points of conflict that a high wall has separated the Reformed camp from much of what is happening in the broader Christian community. This separation, in turn, has often stifled the ability of the Reformed community to awaken others to her rich theological treasury. It is in this regard that the difficulty of what men such as John Piper and others have had to overcome for the sake of these precious inroads should not be minimized. An example of this may be seen in Piper's great willingness to take the notoriously abrasive and rough edged, Mark Driscoll, under his wing. This could not have been an easy task (aggravated by the fact that they are at polar opposites on so many issues)¹³. Yet, Driscoll describes their time together as 'incredibly transforming' (2009:#3) and has since shown a far greater stability and maturity in his own immense leadership task.

¹³ As one very small example of differing philosophy, where Driscoll is well known for his high familiarity with pop culture and media relevance, Piper works in exactly the opposite direction by choosing to keep television out of his home.

Related to this, Hansen reports that John MacArthur has been one of Driscoll's favorite bible teachers (2008:145). MacArthur, however, has been a very harsh critic of Driscoll. In this regard, Driscoll's comment to Hansen is worth reflecting upon¹⁴;

“If John MacArthur would have called me or emailed me, I would have got on an airplane, flown to LA, and welcomed his counsel... if somebody who's been serving Jesus faithfully for a long time has some helpful advice, I would welcome it, because I am on my own.”

(Hansen 2008:145)

Statements like these help us to realize that much of the problem with the emerging generation has to do with a lack of fathers and mentors. This comment is reflective of the attitudes of so many young pastors (and at many points, including that of my own) who would love nothing more than the mature fatherly guidance of older pastors.

Those who do reach out in this way have more influence than they could imagine. Another example that serves to illustrate this, has to do with Joshua Harris (and his mentor CJ Mahaney¹⁵). Harris not-so-jokingly comments that had it not been for Mahaney's influence in turning him on to good Reformed theology, he would have been left reading nothing more than the latest Christian comic books (Hansen 2008:122)!

Yet, even with many clear testimonies to the immense value of this sort of fatherly mentoring, I am deeply concerned that (due to the abrasive edge of the resurgence) not enough older men and women of the Reformed community will be willing to emulate the leaders of whom we have just spoken. I would urge that this problem first weigh heavily upon us before being uplifted by some of the more readily encouraging points that follow.

IV. CONSOLATIONS

The wonderful reality is that reformed theology is addictive. To quote Joshua Harris, "Once you're exposed to [Calvinist doctrine]", "... you see the richness in it for your own

¹⁴ Firstly, please be aware that I do not want to diminish any sense of appreciation for the ministry of John MacArthur. I am sure that Driscoll had no intent on doing this either. In fact, MacArthur might well have even changed his stance somewhat since the time that Hansen's book was written. Secondly, please note that neither do I here want to undermine the legitimacy of MacArthur's criticism. Instead, I simply wish to use this situation as an illustration of the concern that I have in regard to some of the typical reaction of the Reformed community toward the abrasive edges of the Calvinistic resurgence.

¹⁵ CJ Mahaney is the founder of Sovereign Grace Ministries, and previous pastor of Covenant Life Church. Mahaney had consciously hand-reared Harris to take over from him as the senior pastor.

soul, and you're ruined for anything else” (Hansen 2008:122). This addictive quality has the result of moving many participants of the resurgence further and further back in time as they savor the literary riches of the Reformed tradition. This, in turn, will serve to bring about a greater common interest. In this way, many of the ministries that we have already mentioned truly do serve as strategic bridges from the Emerging movement to the Reformed church. As an example of this, we might say that what begins as a spark of interest in the footnote of an emergent leader’s best-seller, leads not only to the theology of John Piper, but also of Jonathan Edwards, the Puritans, and Calvin himself. This means that more and more Emerging believers (in spite of the fact that they are from vastly different cultural and stylistic backgrounds) will more easily be able to attend typically conservative Reformed services. While they might yet initially find the setting very unnatural, they will at least begin to have a much greater understanding and appreciation of the liturgical tradition itself.

Due to this dynamic, I would expect that Reformed churches will very likely receive a new wave of interest from the emerging generation. Because of their newfound love for the truth (and corresponding desire to be fed from the Word) I believe that many who are currently only beginning to show an interest in Reformed theology, will indeed progress out of emergent circles altogether. In many senses, our own story as a local church (in joining the Fellowship of Reformed Baptists), serves as a testimony to this likelihood. However, if nothing else, there is certain to be many otherwise unlikely opportunities for fresh interaction with those outside the Reformed camp, and particularly of the emerging generation. This, then, brings us to the final brief point.

V. Call

The papers presented at this symposium, are done so in honor of the anniversary of a truly great theologian. And it is without a doubt that the primary reason for which all of us see the due need to honor John Calvin, is because of his faithful representation of what God has said in His Word. For this reason, when we speak of *Calvin’s* continuing effect on an emerging generation, it should be emphasized that we address nothing less than the level at which the light of truth has made advances into the great darkness of so much that pervades New Zealand youth culture. With this in mind, the fact that God has caused

a *new* stream of light to go forth in the resurgence of Calvinism, should give us all much cause to rejoice. As put by DA Carson; “It is time for quiet gratitude to God and earnest intercessory prayer that what has begun well will flourish beyond all human expectation”¹⁶.

CONCLUSION

It seems appropriate, then, to conclude this paper by summarizing some of the key points by way of three questions. It is my hope that they will serve to aid you in the formulation of your own prayerful response.

1. What could you/your ministry setting do in order to properly anticipate the rising interest in Reformed theology amongst the Emerging church? E.g., Does your ministry setting display an unhealthy lack of those who are part of the emerging generation (or future leaders)? If so, how could you take advantage of the Calvinistic resurgence?
2. How can you help those (who begin to show an interest) to understand the vast liturgical and cultural differences between the Emerging and Reformed communities, and so serve to help them along in their potential transition?
3. Will you accept the call to be loving fathers (and mothers) to a resurgence of youth who crave the open arms of both correction and encouragement?

¹⁶ Carson’s commendation on the back cover of Hansen’s book (‘Young, Restless, Reformed’).

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