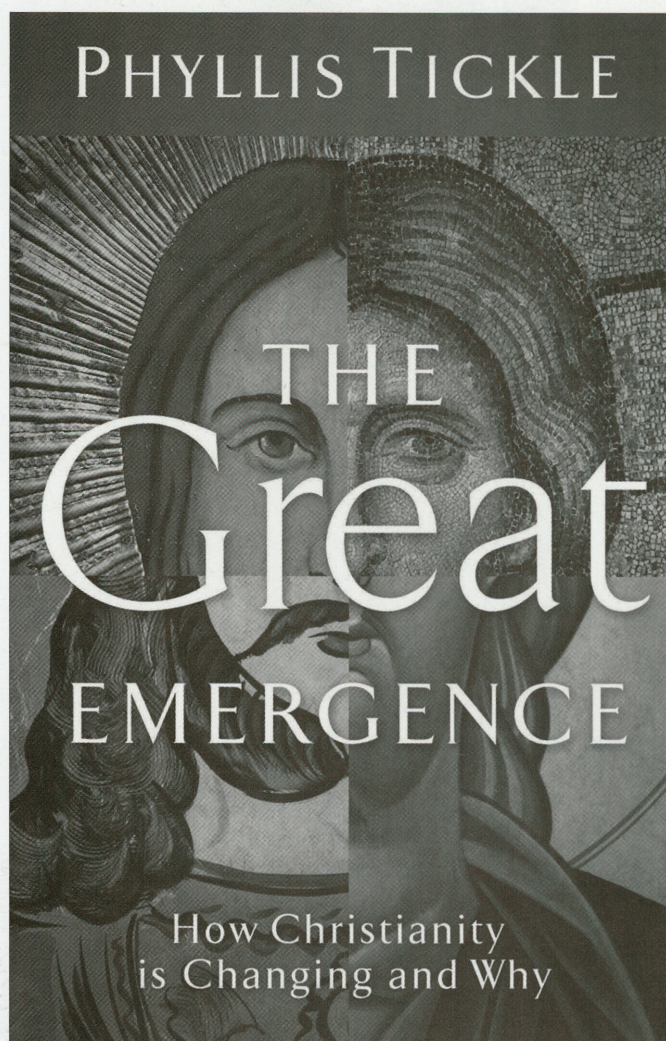


## The Great Emergence: A Semi-Millennial Rummage Sale

Right on Time | BY BRENTON READING



Imagine that a brilliant contemporary of Martin Luther, such as Melancthon or Erasmus, had written a book titled *The Great Reformation* that explored the revolution occurring in the Christian church of their time. If they had our modern self-analyzing sensibilities, they might have traced their own theological fault lines and placed them within the larger tectonic activity created by the universe-shattering discoveries of Copernicus, the

earthshaking explorations of Columbus, and the empowering invention of Gutenberg.

Had such a book been written with brevity, insight, and wit, it would have been a must-read for the relatively few literate individuals fortunate enough to be living through one of the deepest shifts in cultural and theological understanding ever.

In fact, we are living through just such a time and we have the gift of exactly that kind of book. But don't take my word for it. Read Phyllis Tickle's newest work, *The Great Emergence*.

The title alone has the potential to define our current Christian experience in the same way that Thomas Friedman defined our current global context with *The World is Flat*. Tickle sees the Great Emergence as the latest "rummage sale" in a series of semi-millennial cycles. Looking back, she focuses extensively on the Great Reformation, which is the previous event we are most familiar with since we live in its wake.

Five hundred years before the Great Reformation, the Great Schism divided the Western and Eastern Christian traditions. Five centuries before that, Gregory the Great's institution of monasticism reinvented Christianity and preserved culture after the fall of Rome. This occurred approximately five hundred years after the coming of Jesus, which was recognized as so completely transformational that the calendar itself was reset.

Tickle also recognizes that Jewish scholars would continue to trace these semi-millennial cycles back to the time of the Babylonian captivity when the prophets spoke, and beyond that to the transition from the Judges to the beginning of the Davidic Dynasty, and so forth. She also surmises that a similar cyclical pattern could be described in Islam.

However, the focus of *The Great Emergence* is on Christianity, specifically in the North American context. She dis-

Author Tickle



cusses the current scientific discoveries, philosophical concepts, and cultural practices that have disrupted the "cable of meaning that keeps the human social unit connected to some purpose and/or power greater than itself."

These discoveries, concepts, and practices, she says, have punched holes in the common communal story and imagination, revealing the inner cables of spirituality, corporeality, and morality. Assuming society holds together long enough to complete the century-long mending process, the repairs should hold until the next major shift.

Some have suggested that the mending process may be more rapid this time, given our almost-instantaneous global interconnections. However, the level of complexity in the conversation and the number of voices able to become involved may more than offset the gains of more rapid access to one another's thoughts.

This global conversation offers a way to conceptualize movements such as Emergent and the Emerging Church, both of which are arising in the wake of the Great Emergence. These terms are notoriously difficult to define, much to the consternation of those who think they oppose whatever happens to be emerging. Tickle writes, "when pinned down and

forced to answer the question, 'What is Emergent or Emerging Church?' most who are will answer, 'a conversation,' which is not only true but will always be true."

So Emergent and Emerging Church can be described as related conversations within the broader phenomenon of the Great Emergence. (Tickle also offers an intriguing theological distinction between these two phenomena that would be of interest only to those passionate about differentiating between them. So I will leave that until you read the book.)

You will find the book very readable. If there is a fault, it is that Tickle encompasses so much with brilliant clarity and amazing brevity that she leaves readers longing for more. Perhaps this succinctness explains the fact that Seventh-day Adventists are only referenced in relation to our church buildings being a place in which Emergents have been known to gather, along with other atypical locations such as public parks, football stadiums, and high school gyms.

Perhaps Seventh-day Adventists are mentioned only in passing because our denomination has tended toward isolationism and many of our conversations have been rather insular, setting up parallel and in many ways similar conversations to answer our own questions rather than becoming involved in the wider Christian conversation, much less within the public square, to address our common issues.

In order to help us enter this conversation, Tickle's book explores the big questions of the Great Emergence: "What is it?" "How did it come to be?" and, "Where is it going?" In the process, she takes us on a whirlwind journey through history, science, society, and faith.

She asks the central and overarching question in every time of upheaval: "Where now is our authority?" Since Luther, *sola scriptura* has been the resounding Protestant answer. Yet this once unifying cry has been dealt a series of blows beginning with race and slavery; continuing to gender inequality, divorce, and women's ordination; and going on to the final stand over "the gay issue."

"Of all the fights, the gay one must be—has to be—the bitterest," writes Tribble, "because once it is lost, there are no more fights to be had. It is finished. Where now is the authority?"

That is the question we are answering. In describing how we are answering and will continue to answer this

question, Tickle references network theory, describes crowd sourcing, and uses terms such as *global*, *radical*, *relational*, and *nonhierarchical*.

The answer, then, to the great question of our time may not be discovered in our conversation through community. Rather, our expanding conversation through community may actually be the answer.

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**Brenton Reading** writes from Birmingham, Alabama, where he works as a radiologist.

The *Great Emergence* and the *Emergent Church* are hot topics in Christianity today—and the terms can be hard to define. I think the dialogue about these is both powerful and important to Christianity, and I hope that the Adventist faith community will participate more in that larger dialogue. Here at the *Spectrum* Web site, we have posted several different perspectives on Emergence. The discussion for all of these is being routed here, so we hope readers will soak in all the different voices and then join the discussion here.

**Lainey S. Cronk**, Nov. 13, 2008

Hey Brenton,

I'm curious to learn your take on the "emerging/emergent" movement and how it is different from "regular" church.

Is the difference theological? (No creeds, but emphasis on following the teachings of Jesus or "post"-denominationalism and emphasis on the things Christians belief/hold in common. It seems "emergent" language is used to advocate both positions.)

Is it one of praxis/methodology? (Meet outside the traditional church building, try unconventional methods of worship, use liturgy, return to ancient worship/spiritual practices, no "top-down" leadership.) Is it one of reaction to the way things have been done by "the institutional" church?

Perhaps a little bit of everything?

**Zane** Nov. 13, 2008

Zane,

I feel very inadequate to speak for emerging/emergent since others smarter than I have trouble even defining the terms.

I would readily identify myself as one of the hyphenateds <<http://chimpanaut.typepad.com/hyphenateds/>> that Tickle mentions in her book, an Adventemergent, if you will. (Perhaps I am the only self-proclaimed Adventemergent because a Google search goes without hits.) According to Tickle, hyphenateds have an emerging ethos yet choose to remain in their denominational setting. We struggle to "mind the gap" between these often-divergent identities.

I like the way Tickle frames emergent/emerging in light of the greater

movement of The Great Emergence, describing the phenomenon as localized communal responses to the larger phenomenon. I like the definition she offers. Emergent/emerging is a conversation.

But the thing I like most about emergent/emerging conversations (online, in books, or in person) is the room to breathe. In Adventism, I sense a stifling spirit of close-mindedness. We have "the Truth" and instead of setting us free it has boxed us in. Emergent authors, Brian McLaren in particular, threw open the windows and even a door or two for me and helped me see new possibilities and dream new thoughts from within the existing structure of Adventism.

So, yes, for me, the main difference is theological, with a primary relational focus after that on belonging, behaving, and believing (apologies to Richard Rice). I like the term *generous orthodoxy*, which to me affirms the historic Christian faith and the biblical injunction to love God and one another while appreciating the wisdom and insight of other truth seekers, no matter where or when they are.

I think there are methodological differences, as well, which are manifest in a variety of ways. I think examples can be seen among various emerging Christians. Another practical difference I would add is that emergents do not isolate ourselves from this world, but rather seek to follow Christ into the world with a missional focus on doing justice and becoming a blessing to the world by sharing and living Jesus' expansive message that the Kingdom of God is here.

Perhaps emergent/emerging has been reactionary in the past. However, I see the conversation turning from complaining about the faults of the institutional church to seeking to work together from within our various traditions to create a more beautiful future.

**Brenton Read**, Nov. 13, 2008

Hey Brent,

Thanks for the thoughtful response (and the information on the hyphenateds, which is a new concept/term for me). I've been hearing more and more about Phyllis Tickle, and hope to read her book soon.

If you have time, check out the following link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=58fgkfS6E-0>

It's a short take/synopsis of the Emerging Church Movement by Mark Driscoll, who identifies himself as a Reformed thinker/pastor. I don't agree with him totally (I'm a fan of McLaren and Rob Bell), but have been paying attention to him because he is one of the more critical voices addressing the emerging church movement, but still a fairly "progressive" pastor in his communication style and ministry praxis.

He identifies four strands/lanes of the Emerging Church Movement. His divisions are a bit artificial/simplistic, and he's polemical, but I think his analysis is helpful in thinking about some of the issues at the heart of the debate. (Replace the term *Evangelical* or *Reformed* in his presentation with Adventist and I think his talk can be contextualized for our denomination.)

Personally, I'm all for a more open, creative, conversational, and Christian Adventism. If this is what "emerging" Adventism means, sign me up!

Zane, Nov. 14, 2008

Driscoll classifies himself as an "emerging reformer" but it seems to me he is just Old School Reformed with a hip wardrobe and urban vocabulary. I think he has stepped away from the emerging part of the conversation. I do like the idea of listening to and learning from those whose opinions differ from mine, but I have a hard time agreeing with anything he says. (His only beef with Dan Kimball and "emergent evangelicals" is that they allow women pastors—the horror!) It seems that having a conversation with him would feel very restrictive and not at all freeing.

I find myself on the opposite side of almost every issue he has with "emergent liberals." In fact, I was really inspired by the convergence of these "liberal" ideas with some of the best thinkers in Adventism (my opinion). For example, he accuses emergents like Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt, and Rob Bell of questioning God's sovereignty over and knowledge of the future (Richard Rice, *The Openness of God*), denial of substitutionary atonement at the cross (Graham Maxwell and The Good News Tour), a low view of Scripture (Alden Thompson, *Inspiration: Hard Questions, Honest Answers*), and denial of hell (Alden Thompson, *Escape from the Flames*).

Driscoll accuses emergent types of asking questions that shouldn't be

asked, which reminds me of one of my favorite Ellen White quotes:

*There is no excuse for anyone in taking the position that there is no more truth to be revealed, and that all our expositions of Scripture are without error. The fact that certain doctrines have been held as truth for many years by our people is not a proof that our ideas are infallible. Age will not make error into truth, and truth can afford to be fair. No true doctrine will lose anything by close investigation.*

Brenton Reading, Nov. 14, 2008

Hey Brent,

Sweet White quote. Yeah, I don't agree with Driscoll on all his theological gripes with "liberals" and on certain issues, I side with Rob Bell, McLaren, and crowd.

I do, however, see his concern. Driscoll, I believe, was part of the Emergent Village when he began his ministry, but he has distanced himself from this group. Whereas they see themselves engaging in a conversation and remaining open, he sees them selling out from the teachings of classical Christianity—especially when it comes to matters of salvation.

In my opinion, there is valid concern over the tension between style and substance. It is one thing to engage in conversation, to be humble, open, and creative; it's something else to deny that certain things are true. For example, if emerging Adventism entails and embraces "liberal" ideas and rejects "conservative" ones, we've just embraced dogmatism and close mindedness of a different stripe.

There's an added dimension to the debate in the context of our denomination because there is an added theological layer. Whereas Driscoll draws his battle lines on issues like inspiration and atonement (and yes, apparently women's ordination), we must deal with such issues as the Sabbath, lifestyle, and eschatology.

I think all Christians are grappling with the former, which deal with the fundamental identity of Christianity. In my opinion, the latter have secondary importance and their content and emphasis have to do with the fundamental identity of Adventism.

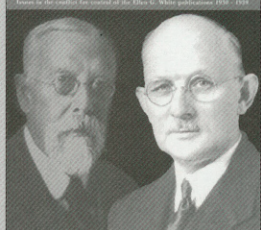
Perhaps stating things this way—of primary and secondary importance—shows my cards. I'm comfortable with an emerging Adventism willing to hold denominationally distinctive beliefs loosely, in the spirit of learning and sharing with others.

I'm not so sure about Christian beliefs in general. I think this throws the baby out with the bath water, so to speak. I would argue that there are certain Christian beliefs (not necessarily the ones Driscoll identifies) fundamental to Christian identity and praxis.

Zane, Nov. 14, 2008

## Have You Read?

### The Struggle for the Prophetic Heritage



Gilbert M. Valentine

Published by Institute Press  
Mission College, Thailand

**Now Available  
from Signs Publishing  
Company, Australia**

SEND ORDERS TO:  
[liz.dunstan@signspublishing.com.au](mailto:liz.dunstan@signspublishing.com.au)

Valentine is also author of  
*W. W. Prescott: Forgotten  
Giant of Adventism's  
Second Generation*  
published by Review and Herald.

To whom did the gift of prophecy really belong? This new book explores the complex and conflicted relationship between the White Estate and church leadership. It explains how it came to be agreed that the "gift" belonged to the whole church. But it took time to resolve the power struggle within the top ranks of Adventist church leadership over the issue. Eventually the White Estate was relocated from California to the General Conference but it was a long and bumpy road from West to East.

### Reviewers say:

- "Valentine is an excellent author and this is a good book" —George Knight
- "I found Valentine's presentation stimulating and probing as he explored the complex relationship between the White Estate and denominational leaders." —Michael Campbell
- "Valentine is not only a superb historian, he is also a loved pastor and a wise teacher. This is a narrative of commendable empathy told with a clear understanding of the problem, the related issues and the outcomes." —Arthur Patrick