

Contemplating the God of Jesus Christ

The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God, by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Trans. Brian McNeil. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008.

Long before he was elected Pope Benedict XVI in 2005, Joseph Ratzinger was a firmly established and highly respected theologian and spiritual writer. As evidence of his intellectual repute, he was appointed a theological advisor at Vatican II at the age of thirty-five and remained in that role throughout the duration of the Council from 1962 to 1965. In 1976, the year before he was appointed Archbishop of Munich and Freising, a collection of his meditations on the Triune God titled *The God of Jesus Christ* (hereafter *GJC*) was published in German. The collection, which is comprised of nine self-contained meditations that also work together as a thematic whole, was compiled and edited from sermons and other addresses given by the author from 1972 to 1975. A new German edition of the book was published in 2006, and an English translation followed in 2008. The meditations, arranged in chapters covering God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, respectively, are offered by the author with the hope that they “may help build a bridge between theology and spirituality, thereby aiding the reader to assimilate personally what the Church’s faith seeks to express” (11).

The meditations in *GJC* are beautifully written and elegantly translated, and they arouse a sense of awe at the mystery of the Triune God, the incarnation of God in Christ, the salvation afforded the child of God, and the relevance of that salvation in a modern world that resists it. Evidently intending to appeal to Christians from a broad range of theological backgrounds, the meditations generally refrain from conspicuously advancing overtly Catholic sentiments. The meditations are deeply philosophical and give evidence of Ratzinger’s own significant engagement with universal human questions concerning the suffering of the innocent, the tendency of the human race toward self-destruction, and the way to the knowledge of God and, ultimately, to God Himself. Ratzinger’s treatment of the relationship between God, man, and the world is markedly

more profound than what is commonly available in studies today that seek to explore that same relationship. It is notable, however, that in a book composed of nine meditations on God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, only one meditation is devoted to the Holy Spirit, and this is the book’s principal shortcoming. Even though the meditations spark contemplation and inspire reverence for a God who is relevant to man today, they cannot fully bridge the gap between theology and spirituality, apart from a proper unveiling of the deifying function of the indwelling Spirit as the realization of the crucified and resurrected Christ.

An Overview

The four meditations that compose the section on God “seek to transfer faith in the triune nature of God from a theoretical proposition to a spiritual knowledge that addresses man in his personal life” (9). Here the knowledge of God depends not on proofs of His existence but on “the relationship that a man establishes between himself and the world and between his own self and his life” (17). *GJC* suggests

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that the experiences of being loved or rejected that emerge from these relationships consequently influence a man’s view of God Himself, and whether he sees God as “a competitor, a danger, or a reason for confidence” will determine if he receives or rejects Him (17). Thus, the knowledge of God is not merely theoretical or doctrinal but emphatically personal. The meditations go further to consider God’s personal presence in Christ, in whom man “can address God as ‘you’, as person, as heart” (24). Beyond merely making God personal to man, however, Christ is portrayed as having descended into the suffering, guilt, and death of man as a sacrifice of love, restoring the image of God in man, and modeling for man a life of prayer in dialogue with the Father and in the unity of the Spirit. For *GJC*, becoming a Christian means entering into that model of prayer, calling God “Father” with Christ, and consequently being drawn “into the unity of God” (35). In these meditations the theme of mutual sacrificial love is prominent, for it is this love that characterizes the nature of and interrelationships among the Trinity and that must find its corresponding expression in man who, as a relational being, is the image of God.

The four meditations in the section on Jesus Christ explore the incarnate Son's humbling, obedience, selflessness, hiddenness with the Father, and ultimate victory over death through resurrection as patterns for living as a child of God today. The man Jesus is presented as the One "whose whole existence is in the shared dimension of his dialogue with the Father" (83), and out of this dialogue He offers Himself as a gift to the Father (67). Thus, the man Jesus is obedience incarnate, and His humanity is "prayer that has taken on a concrete form" (67). For *GJC*, to be a son of God, then, is to "become like Christ by following him" to enter into dialogue with the Father through prayer and to offer one's body "every day as the place where the Word can dwell" (68). Affirming that Christ "remains man forever" (84), the meditations here do not give sole emphasis to the humanity of Jesus; rather, they sound a necessary caution against reducing Him to merely a man at the expense of His divinity. He is "consubstantial with the Father" (86), and it is God in Him who "makes the man precious and infinitely important" (88). Further, those who are His may in turn "become sons through him, the consubstantial Son, and thereby receive the freedom of salvation" (91). The section concludes with a meditation on the resurrection, "an *event* that happens to Jesus himself, between the Father and him in the power of the Holy Spirit" (99), faith in which is an affirmation that "the conquering of death, its abolition in reality and not merely in thought...is in fact possible" for man today (100).

The final section on the Holy Spirit consists of one meditation. In "The Holy Spirit," *GJC* acknowledges that for Christians "the Holy Spirit has largely remained the unknown God" (105). Presented here as "the unity of Father and Son" (112), the Spirit is characterized as the selfless One who does not appear "as a separate and separable self" but disappears "into the Son and into the Father" (111). In His selflessness He speaks not His own word but that of the Son; thus, His function is to remember, and the church that is of Him "recalls and understands more deeply, penetrates farther into the Word, and thus becomes richer and more alive" (112).

Collectively, the meditations abound with a hope that salvation would go beyond redemption to include a deep and abiding relationship in and with the Triune God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Although the book cannot fully deliver on its own stated intent to bridge the gap between theology and spirituality and, thus, cannot completely fulfill the hope that it admirably fosters for its

readers, it nonetheless makes many affirmable points along the way.

The Triune God, Man, and the World in *The God of Jesus Christ*

GJC deftly weaves together its piercing observations on the Triune God, man, and the world. Basic to the meditations is the supposition that man's relationship with and experience of God make God relevant in the world, for "a God to whom man has no access whatsoever, a God who in reality cannot play any role in the world, is no God" (88). Further, *GJC* posits that God is relevant to man not only because He simply *is* but also because He is triune:

God is—and the Christian faith adds: God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three and one. This is the very heart of Christianity, but it is so often shrouded in a silence born of perplexity. Has the Church perhaps gone one step too far here? Ought we not rather leave something so great and inaccessible as God in his inaccessibility? Can

something like the Trinity have any real meaning for us? Well, it is certainly true that the proposition that "God is three and God is one" is and remains the expression of his otherness, which is infinitely greater than we and transcends all our thinking and our existence. But if this proposition had nothing to say to us, it would not have been

revealed. And as a matter of fact, it could be clothed in human language only because it had already penetrated human thinking and living to some extent. (29)

The revelation of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bears directly on man and should neither be relegated to the stuff of mere intellectual speculation and theoretical propositions nor ignored altogether because of its transcendence and apparent inaccessibility. With this assertion as its premise, *GJC* starts off on proper theological footing.

Prominent in the meditations is an oftentimes poignant portrayal of the relational dynamic between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Central to this dynamic are the love and mutual self-giving that characterize the distinct persons and common action of the three of the Trinity. *GJC* states,

If he is not love in himself, he is not love at all. But if he is love in himself, he must be "I" and "Thou", and this means that he must be triune. (37)

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The Father and the Son do not become one in such a way that they dissolve into each other. They remain distinct from each other, since love has its basis in a “vis-à-vis” that is not abolished. If each remains his own self, and they do not abrogate each other’s existence, then their unity cannot exist in each one by himself: rather, their unity must be in the fruitfulness in which each one gives himself and in which each one is himself. They are one in virtue of the fact that their love is fruitful, that it goes beyond them. In the third Person in whom they give themselves to each other, in the Gift, they are themselves, and they are one. (35)

The Father and the Son are one with each other by going out beyond themselves; it is in the third Person, in the fruitfulness of their act of giving, that they are One. (109)

The Father and the Son are the movement of pure mutual giving, pure mutual handing over of oneself. In this movement, they are fruitful, and their fruitfulness is their unity, their complete oneness, but it is a unity in which they themselves are neither cancelled out nor dissolved into each other. (110-111)

While the language concerning a oneness in the fruitfulness of self-giving seems vague and peculiarly indefinite for a man of Ratzinger’s erudition, it does underscore the point that *GJC* is not a theological exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity. Rather, it is a collection of meditations that aims to touch the heart of the reader by generating a fervent contemplation of the beauty of the Trinity. Its characterization of the Trinity succeeds on this level of meditation, but it also opens the door for other, equally or more obtuse, interpretations of the dynamics within the Trinity that may have little basis in Scripture. In bridging the gap between the theological and spiritual, there is a need for utterance that illuminates the mystery according to the pure revelation of the Word.

Although *GJC* digresses into prominent social issues from the perspective of conservative Catholic teaching, it does point out that the goal of salvation is the unity of God and humankind and, consummately, for man to “become God” (68). The view is noble indeed, but where *GJC* falls short is in its imperfect treatment of how this most grand enterprise is executed. Most assuredly, the consummation of God’s salvation cannot be accomplished by contemplative reasoning; it can be realized only through the experience of the indwelling and deifying Spirit of Jesus Christ operating in the tripartite being of man, the image of God.

Beyond Meditations: Toward a Fully Realized Salvation in the Economy of the Triune God

For *GJC*, the significance of man’s existing in the image

of God lies in the fact that man, like God, is a relational being. Undoubtedly, man’s existence as a being who relates to others of his own kind is a reflection of that aspect in the triune being of God that is relational, but relationality by itself does not touch the heart of the matter. Image firstly denotes expression, and God’s expression is firstly Christ, the embodiment and image of the invisible God (Col. 2:9; 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). As the image of God, Christ is the expression of the essence of God’s attributes, primary among which are love (1 John 4:8), light (1:5), holiness (Rev. 4:8), and righteousness (Jer. 23:6). For man to be created in the image of God means that he was created according to Christ with the capacity to contain and express God in His divine attributes (Gen. 1:26; Col. 1:27; Phil. 1:20-21). In order for man’s function as the image of God to be fully realized, however, the life of God with the divine nature must enter into man through regeneration (John 3:6; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1:3), and this life, far from being a force apart from Christ, is not only embodied in Christ but is Christ Himself (John 1:4; 1 John 5:11-12; Col. 3:4). Regeneration, therefore, brings Christ, the image of God (Col. 1:15), into man’s spirit, where He dwells (2 Tim. 4:22). As the indwelling One (Rom. 8:10; 2 Cor. 13:5), Christ lives in man (Gal. 2:20; Phil. 1:21), is magnified in man (v. 20), and is the hope of glory, that is, the hope of the full expression of God in man (Col. 1:27; Eph. 3:21). Therefore, beyond being merely relational, man as the image of God is even the more the increase and enlargement of Christ as the embodiment and expression of the Triune God.

GJC states that man is not an abstract image of God, “for that would lead in turn only to an abstract God” (30), and that human beings are “images that require ‘the Image’” (30-31). However, the image of God that man is purported to depict in *GJC* is one that appears to depend merely on right relationships with others. The fulfillment of God’s image in man, therefore, seems primarily behavioral for *GJC*, but the biblical view indicates that God’s image is realized in man through the constituting of Christ as the image of God into man. Moreover, apart from glorified man as the reproduction of Christ, no other image can express God. This reproduction is possible because God is Spirit (John 4:24), and He can be contacted not through the rigors of intellectual exercise or by the aid of visual images but by the exercise of the human spirit (Rom. 1:9). It is in the regenerated human spirit that the divine Spirit as the realization of the crucified and resurrected Christ dwells (8:16), and through His indwelling and enlivening, there is the realization of transformation into His image (2 Cor. 3:18).

GJC rightly points out that “the Spirit is the breath of the Son” (109), that He “dwells in the Word” (108), that He speaks “not out of what is his own” (111), that He is “the

unity of Father and Son” (112), that we come to see Him “not by departing from the Son, but by entering into him” (108), that “He leads to the Son and, through the Son, to the Father” (109), and that “it is the Holy Spirit who builds up” (112). *GJC*, however, seems hesitant to commit to much more than these affirmations and remains content not to probe the intricacies further:

It is of course true that such affirmations are never more than faltering glimpses. We can never know the Spirit otherwise than in what He accomplishes. This is why Scripture never describes the Spirit in himself. It tells us only how he comes to man and how he can be distinguished from other spirits. (109)

But it is precisely in “how he comes to man” that the revelation of who He is comes to the fore, for He comes as the realization of all that Christ is and has to indwell the spirit of man. The absence of this revelation in *GJC* inhibits its meditations from moving beyond a sphere that is merely intellectually and emotionally stimulating.

According to *GJC*, the primary function of the Spirit is to selflessly draw men to the Son and, through Him, to the Father, but He does so as a faceless, nameless entity who remains shrouded in mystery. Indeed, the Spirit of reality does not speak from Himself but speaks what He receives from the Son (John 16:13-15), and it is in the Spirit that, through Christ, Jews and Gentiles have access unto the Father (Eph. 2:18); however, it is equally true that the coming of the Spirit of reality, who abode with the disciples and was to be in the disciples (John 14:17), was the coming of the Son in resurrection (v. 8). In fact, the Son could come as the Spirit in resurrection because in resurrection He “became a life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45); thus, the Spirit of reality makes real to the believers the Lord Christ who, as the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; 4:5), is now the pneumatic Life-giver (3:6; cf. John 5:21).

The Spirit who indwells the believers, then, is “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19), that is, the Spirit of the God-man who, in His divinely enriched humanity, conveys to man the effectiveness of His death, the reality of His human living, and the power of His resurrection. It is this Spirit who makes true spirituality possible in man, for He mingles Himself with the human spirit to reproduce the mingling of divinity with humanity in regenerated humanity and, thus, to enable the reproduction and continuation of the living of the first God-man. Apart from the mingling

of the divine and human spirits, no striving for spiritual experience will yield the fruit of a genuinely spiritual living.

Concerning the goal of God’s salvation, *GJC* states, “Man wishes to be God, and this is indeed his destiny” (72-73), but the deification offered by *GJC* is ultimately hard to pin down. There is, on the one hand, this exceptionally well-conceived view:

[F]or it is through the Resurrection that his human existence is brought into the trinitarian dialogue of eternal love itself. His human existence can never perish again; beyond the threshold of death, it rises up anew and takes on its fullness anew...The Resurrection teaches us something that now possesses eternal validity: he *is* man. He remains man forever. Through him, human existence has been admitted into God’s own being: this is the fruit of his death. We are *in* God. (84)

Christ’s humanity was indeed brought into divinity and designated the Son of God in resurrection according to the Spirit of holiness (Rom. 1:3-4), thus constituting

Him the Forerunner and Prototype according to which His redeemed and regenerated elect are made the many deified God-men, brothers of Christ the Firstborn (8:29; Heb. 2:10-11; 1 John 3:2). In other places, however, deification for *GJC* seems to be little more than Christlike imitation:

Deification is not accomplished by objectively following Christ apart from His indwelling presence. Deification is accomplished by Christ as the transforming, deifying Spirit, who dispenses Himself into man’s tripartite being.

We become God by sharing in the gesture of the Son. We become God by becoming “child”, “son”... (68)

Our salvation means becoming “the body of Christ”, becoming like Christ himself. (68)

We become like Christ by following him, descending and ascending. (68)

Ultimately, deification is not defined by Christlikeness, nor is it accomplished merely by objectively following Christ apart from His indwelling presence. Deification is accomplished by Christ as the transforming, deifying Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18), who, in the divine economy, dispenses Himself as the divine life into man’s tripartite being of spirit, soul, and body (Rom. 8:10, 6, 11). Through the processes of sanctification (1 Thes. 5:23), transformation (Rom. 12:2), conformation (8:29), and glorification (v. 30; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; 2 Thes. 1:10), man is made God in life, nature, constitution, and expression, but he does not become a part of the Godhead and will never be an object of worship. Apart

from the operation of the life-giving Spirit, true spirituality and, consequently, the goal of God's full salvation can never be realized.

Conclusion

GJC seems designed to engage Christians of varying backgrounds and not only Catholics, who will undoubtedly constitute the book's primary readership. While there are glimpses of Catholic doctrines, these are not prominent, nor are they always easily discernible. The book as a whole seems calculated not to offend Protestant sensibilities, and while non-Catholics may gain a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the Triune God and the centrality of Christ's person and work, a gap still remains between the theology and proper spirituality in spite of the seemingly sublime language of its meditations.

by Tony Espinosa

Great Emergence or Great Apostasy?

The Great Emergence, by Phyllis Tickle. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008.

T*he Great Emergence* (hereafter *Emergence*) by Phyllis Tickle sets out to explain "how Christianity is changing and why" (cover). Its major premise is that "every five hundred years, the church cleans out its attic and has a giant rummage sale" (book jacket). *Emergence* is well written, imbued with unique vocabulary, original terms to describe novel ideas, and arguments that are persuasively presented. The book is concise, and Tickle's writing is efficient. Many of Tickle's insights into history are keen. She aptly describes monumental, shape-altering events scattered in Christianity's history every five hundred years or so, starting with the first "great"—the rise of the papal system, culminating in Pope Gregory the Great. Next, she analyzes "the Great Schism" and its effect on Western Christianity and society. She then moves forward another five hundred years to "the Great Reformation" endowed with the printing press. This sets the stage for the present "Great," which she and her colleagues have termed with anticipation "the Great Emergence."

Emergence does a commendable job of describing how Christendom, society, and science have intertwined for centuries, mutually affecting one another for better or worse. It includes a notably well-argued description of

Western societal changes and controversial scientific theories over the last few centuries and how they precipitated Western Christendom's struggles and crises. Tickle employs a cable analogy involving intertwined threads to illustrate how each "great" event gave society a few centuries or more of stabilizing "consensual illusion" or "common imagination" before the cable began to untwine under weathering and attack (35). But imbedded within Tickle's historical treatments are clues that the reader is being led to one of the book's major conclusions: a condemnation of the Reformation's battle cry of "sola scriptura" (46). The arguments against biblical authority and trustworthiness start softly, but the intensity builds by book's end, where the notion of biblical authority is presumptuously declared dead in everybody's mind except for a few "diehard" Christian "folk" (46, 133).

Even with *Emergence's* interesting and sometimes novel review of church and social history, the book's metaphor of the need for the church to have a rummage sale every five hundred years should not be adopted without reflection. Tickle likens certain modern trends—the current "upheaval" (41) in Christianity—to going through Grandma's attic and finding things that she once considered treasures worth preserving but now must be examined by her descendants to see whether they are good only for a rummage sale. *Emergence* thus proclaims each five-hundred-year event as a great attic cleaning (51-52, 116), some needed housework for the church. A careful reader, however, should ask what exactly was depreciated and sold in each semi-millennial sale. For example, *Emergence* omits the fact that the first rummage sale, which solidified the papal system, dealt a deathblow to the priesthood of all believers. The organic functioning of the members of the Body of Christ was replaced by a hierarchy of paid professionals, careered servants of God. The Head's supply to the Body through "each one part" (Eph. 4:16) was testified in Scripture, but by A.D. 500, the need for the function of each member had been, for the most part, rummaged away. Was this result great? The next sale at the end of the first millennium involved a great division in Christendom caused by misplaced allegiance to vying popes, themselves willing to sacrifice even an outward semblance of unity on the altar of their own selfish ambitions. Also rummaged away was a conscience bound by Scripture. The result was the abandonment of the Word of God for the authority of hierarchy and a severance of fellowship between believers in the East and the West—hardly a positive outcome for the sale. Contrary to *Emergence's* positive view of what followed, the decline of the Lord's organic, living testimony accelerated due to these rummage sales.

By the late 1400s Christendom was rife with relic worship,

indulgence trafficking, and superstition. Bible reading was rare. The Reformers sounded the call for a return to having one's conscience bound by the Word of God and the restoration of the priesthood of all believers. In this instance they rummaged away the superstitions of the day for a return to Scripture's rightful place in personal and corporate Christian life. This was a good garage sale. Literacy blossomed over Europe as the populace longed to read the Scriptures for themselves and to be led by them. During the ensuing centuries, God's people were tested concerning their willingness to obey the Scriptures, and when they were not willing, divisions followed. Still, the problem was not with the Scriptures nor with the loss of papal rule (as *Emergence* maintains) but with man's imperfect willingness to say Amen to God's Word. This is the point that *Emergence* sorely misses.

Emergence declares that the time has come again for "re-traditioning" (28) the church under the leadership of modern "innovators" (58). Most readers would not argue against Christians needing to be ever open to new light from God's Word and for recovering what was lost through the Dark and Middle Ages. But the reader of *Emergence* discovers soon enough that the innovation, the new tradition being promoted, is a depreciation of the Bible's authority, not a faithful recovery of its truth and practices.

Emergence devotes an early chapter entirely to lauding Darwin, Freud, Jung, Campbell, and others for their theories that caused people to doubt the veracity of God's Word. These tired and very debatable theories are treated as victors in their battle against Scripture. Then *Emergence* tells us that "one of the Great Emergence's central thrusts...has been to attempt an accommodation" (read *capitulation*) between Bible-believing Christians and those of more liberal theology (66). Much of the remainder of the book is devoted to connecting science and social events of the last few centuries to the withering away (47), the "erosion of sola scriptura" and the "gathering center" of the Great Emergence (98, 131). Ultimately, and amazingly, *Emergence* roots the new movement to the drug culture of the late twentieth century and Timothy Leary's crazed effect on youth (98). This is an astounding claim that calls to mind the warning that the branches can be holy only if the root is holy (Rom. 11:16).

Emergence brands the Reformation's great pronouncement—sola scriptura—as the "creation of a paper pope" and that the "new Christianity of the Great Emergence must discover some authority base...of its own" (46,

150). *Emergence* tells us that for many in the new movement, whether the virgin birth actually happened does not matter (149). The story is beautiful enough, regardless of whether or not it factually occurred. This kind of thinking demotes Scripture to the status of fables, and while Tickle does not seem to hold this view, she seems okay with the thought that other "emergents" do.

Emergence wrongly identifies charismatic and Pentecostal Christians as another group of "emergents," misunderstanding their stress on being led by the Spirit as yet another example of the dwindling role of Scripture as authority. While there have certainly been extremes among some of these believers, the vast majority treasure the Scriptures as God's word. Most of them teach that as we are being led by the Spirit, He will not lead us in ways that contradict the Scriptures. In fact, the Word of God is the reliable gauge for any interpretation of the Spirit's leading. If His "leading" contradicts the Scriptures, it should not be trusted.

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Emergence's emphasis on rethinking the Scripture's status, embedded within its "central question: 'Where, now, is the authority?'" (72), is an effort at some level to salve the crisis of conscience that occurs when a believer demotes the Scripture's authority to accommodate the demands of the present age. *Emergence* notes that many need to "shed the weight" of guilt (42) that

is associated with an inward protest of conscience when a believer is influenced to question the truth of Scripture. Rather than helping a struggling believer to turn back in faith to the veracity of the Word, *Emergence* encourages its readers to shed this safeguard of their conscience by simply understanding that the "Great Emergence" is an inevitable "product of a recurrent pattern in Christian affairs" (41). We seem to be told that this new configuration of authority is irresistible and unstoppable, so one should not feel personally responsible (or *irresponsible*) for acquiescing to it.

Emergence's desire to assuage the guilt of a conscience that abandons the authority of the Scriptures can be seen in its treatment of homosexuality. Tickle acknowledges that her denomination has been shaken by division and separations over its ordination of "an openly homosexual bishop" (137). As a result, some congregations and individuals in North America have abandoned or threatened to abandon their communion with this branch of Christendom. Even more virulent has been the reaction of congregations abroad, such as in Africa. These believers were appalled at

the North American branch's decision to disobey or explain away the Scripture's voice in the matter. Instead of "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), they were introduced to a new standard, that only the portions that do not disturb us are God-breathed. If Scripture is only an optional influence on the church's stance, then the decision to ordain homosexual priests can be justified. To their credit, many of the denomination's congregations abroad have the courage to speak up against this and testify of their own faithfulness to Scripture's authority.

Emergence, ultimately, is myopic, admitting that "we are looking at emergent and emerging Christianity from the North American, and primarily the United States, perspective" (120). But if *Emergence* is truly identifying cataclysmic, five-hundred-year-old upheavals in Christian and church expression, then it should not leave out the Lord's present move and testimony in places such as Africa, South America, and Asia. The Body of Christ is multiplying rapidly in those areas, and those believers are, for the most part, passionately devoted to the Scriptures and their predominant role in personal and church affairs. Statistics have shown that the congregations in North America and abroad who experience the greatest growth are those that uphold and honor the Scriptures. When the Scripture's voice is sacrificed to accommodate science or modern cultural trends, there is a decline in Christian witness.

Emergence misses the mark on another matter in its presupposition that stability in society is the church's responsibility. Consequently, it seems to suggest that a harmonious society depends upon an accommodating church. The Scriptures tell us that the church is several things: the Body of Christ, the masterpiece of God, the lampstand, the testimony of Jesus, the corporate warrior of God, the one new man, Christ's extension in time and spread in space, the kingdom, and the Bride of Christ. But the church is never a man-pleaser, seeking the world's approval or acceptance. The church exists for Christ. It is His reproduction, His life-increase, and His spouse. The church is the many grains produced by the single grain that fell into the ground and died (John 12:24). The church's purpose is to please the Lord by fulfilling His eternal purpose on the earth, magnifying and expressing Him, and culminating in the marriage feast of the Lamb. As His Body and bride, she is loyally led by Him, not by modern cultural demands, and is under no compulsion to accommodate the present evil age.

Much of *Emergence's* analysis of Christian history is accurately described; it is a description of Christendom. But history also records another story—one of God's living move, something less obvious and more organic, involving believers whose consecrated aspiration is to live Christ and to be built up with others as His kingdom in reality.

Throughout the centuries these believers have treasured the Scriptures as the breath of God and the final say. Believers like this do not seek a "re-traditioning" but rather a recovery—back to the Scriptures and what they reveal.

Emergence is an attempt to explain Western Christendom's history that has led to its present upheaval and confusion. The book tries to make sense of the conflicts, tensions, and crises that presently afflict organized and hierarchical Christianity. But one of *Emergence's* major weaknesses is the omission of something more hidden yet of much more importance in church history—God's organic expression and kingdom exhibited through living and vital members of the Body of Christ. Throughout most of church history, these two lines have traveled, side by side, one more visible by its sheer size and organization but the other more threatening to God's enemy because it is an extension, a continuation, of Christ Himself. With the former, there is an outward appearance of the kingdom, but it is filled with political wranglings, ambition, and outward forms and rituals. With the latter, there is the reality of the kingdom of the heavens; it is the reality depicted in Romans 14:17—a church life full of righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. (See chart on page 40.) Believers who answer the Lord's call to come out of the outward appearance can become living witnesses of Him and His Word. There has always existed an entirely different and blessed expression of the church life that, when discovered, rescues believers from the afflictions of Christendom's apostasies. Believers who live in the reality of the kingdom long to be faithful to the Scriptures and to honor the authority inherent in them, just as their Lord did in the Gospels.

Emergence offers a suggestion to the question of where authority should rest in today's Christendom. Through several configurations the book seeks to demonstrate a "gathering center" of Christians from different quarters (123). These believers are discussing and accommodating. The world is witnessing an emergence of the middle. To these middle-of-the-roaders, sola scriptura "is now seen as hopelessly outmoded or insufficient" (151). Instead, the Great Emergence has its authority in what it is: a conversation, a dialogue, which involves Scripture, the Spirit, and "community" (ch. 7). It is "a body of people," holding "a conversation" and accommodating one another (104). According to *Emergence*, Scripture has its role but is only one influence in the conversation. Lest it be given too much preeminence, it is tempered by what is supposedly the Spirit's leading and by some undefined emerging hierarchy's understanding and sense of what is right.

Certainly believers long to be under the Spirit's leading. Often in daily life the Holy Spirit will use the Scriptures

to speak to us, either as we read it or when the Spirit calls a verse to remembrance for instant application. Also, the Spirit will lead us personally in areas where the Scriptures are silent. But as mentioned before, the Holy Spirit will never contradict the Scriptures. Since all Scripture is the breath of God (God-breathed), and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Breath (*pneuma* can be translated as both “breath” and “spirit”), the two are inseparable. It is not a matter of one over the other, because they are one, and they speak as one (John 6:63) The heart is deceitful and can easily be fooled. Therefore, throughout history faithful Christians have trusted the Scriptures more than their own sentiments, which at times prove to be untrustworthy.

We need the Spirit’s leading, but we need our understanding of it to be checked, balanced, and enhanced by the written word of God. We also should be willing to be balanced by fellowship in the Body of Christ. It is, to say the least, a healthy practice to check

one’s inward sense of leading with fellow members of the Body of Christ—especially the more mature and experienced ones who know the Scripture-revealed truths. But again, the Body should never contradict or ignore the Head’s written word to it. Healthy fellowship between members of the Body will always honor the Scripture’s place of authority—not as optional but as the bedrock of all decisions and guidance.

It is not always a good thing to be great. The Lord Jesus told us that the church should be like a little mustard plant and not mutate into a great tree where the birds of heaven will roost (Matt. 13:31-32). The Great Emergence should take care lest it become the Great Apostasy.

by Gary Evans

Footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible

“**Paul**, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1).

Paul: First Timothy unveils to us God’s economy concerning the church, 2 Timothy inoculates us against the decline of the church, and Titus is concerned with maintaining the order of the church. These are three aspects of one purpose, that is, to preserve the church as the proper expression of the Triune God, as symbolized by the golden lampstands in the ultimate portion of the divine revelation (Rev. 1:12, 20). For the accomplishing of this purpose, the following basic and crucial matters are stressed repeatedly in these three books:

- (1) The faith, the contents of the complete gospel according to God’s New Testament economy. It is objective and is mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:4, 19; 2:7; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 12, 21; 2 Tim. 3:8; 4:7; and Titus 1:1, 4, 13.
- (2) The truth, the reality of the contents of the faith, mentioned in 1 Tim. 2:4, 7; 3:15; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Tim. 2:15, 18, 25; 3:7, 8; 4:4; and Titus 1:1, 14.
- (3) Healthy teaching, in 1 Tim. 1:10, 2 Tim. 4:3, and Titus 1:9; 2:1; healthy words, in 1 Tim. 6:3 and 2 Tim. 1:13; healthy speech, in Titus 2:8; and healthy in the faith, in Titus 1:13; 2:2. All these are related to the condition of life.
- (4) Life, the eternal life of God, in 1 Tim. 1:16; 6:12, 19; 2 Tim. 1:1, 10; and Titus 1:2; 3:7.
- (5) Godliness, a living that is the expression of God, mentioned in 1 Tim. 2:2, 10 (*godly*); 3:16; 4:7, 8; 5:4 (*respect*); 6:3, 5, 6, 11; 2 Tim. 3:5, 12 (*godly*); and Titus 1:1; 2:12 (*godly*). The opposite, ungodliness, is mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:9 (*ungodly*), 2 Tim. 2:16, and Titus 2:12.
- (6) Faith, our act of believing in the gospel, in God, and in His word and deeds. It is subjective and is mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:2, 5, 14, 19; 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Tim. 1:5, 13; 2:22; 3:10, 15; and Titus 2:2; 3:15.
- (7) The conscience, the leading part of our spirit, which justifies or condemns our relationships with God and with man. It is mentioned in 1 Tim. 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Tim. 1:3; and Titus 1:15.

The faith equals the contents of the economy, the household administration, the dispensation, of God. The truth is the contents, the reality, of the faith according to God’s economy. Healthy teaching, healthy words, and healthy speech are the ministry of the truth, ministering to people the reality of the divine truths. Eternal life is the means and power to carry out the divine realities of the faith. Godliness is a living that expresses the divine reality, an expression of God in all His riches. Faith (subjective) is the response to the truth of the faith (objective); such faith receives and participates in the divine realities. The conscience is a test and a check to preserve us in the faith.