

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

Or the Modest Newsletter Hitting Today's Hot Issues

Emergent Delusion

by Dana Burkinshaw

You may not have heard of the latest “church movement” focusing primarily on “GenXrs”: the “Emergent Church” (EC), also known as the “Emerging Church.” To those searching for a “new methodology,” a “new wave” or a “new thing God is doing,” this is it. Some say the EC is the next step beyond the “seeker movement.” Leaders of the EC say they have answers for today’s generation. Those answers focus on experience much more than on the Bible. Leaders of the movement insist that in our fast-changing culture, something is happening. What was once a nation with a Christian worldview is becoming a post Christian, unchurched, unreached nation. New generations are arising in our midst without any Christian influence. Thus, we must re-think everything we have done with Christianity over many centuries.

Defining the EC is a bit like nailing jello to the wall, but here goes anyway. It relies heavily on mysticism. Some leaders will tell you that you cannot know truth. An EC service will often meet in homes and will rely on extra-biblical paraphernalia, extra-sensory images, sounds, smells of candles and incense, silence, mystical meditation, making the sign of the cross, touching icons, statues of saints, rosary beads for Protestants, liturgy, yoga-like deep breathing, contemplative prayer and sacraments. They are looking for a full sensory immersion with the divine – an encounter with the Lord using all their senses. Worship is stressed, but some would say more than the Word.

They borrow liturgical practices from Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran sources. They rely heavily on the traditions and views of Church Fathers.

The most visible leader is Brian McLaren whose book *A Generous Orthodoxy* has caught on all over. In it he states that, “The Christian faith should become a welcome friend to other religions of the world, and not a threat.” He states in the book that not all people need to be Christians in order to follow Jesus. Some may be able to be “Buddhist or Hindu followers of Jesus.” The gospel, he says, is good news even for those who reject it!

McLaren is not so sure that individual salvation from consequences after this life is really the message of the Bible. He is uncomfortable with a “hell-centered” approach to salvation. He believes instead in what he calls “planetary salvation” – that God is far more concerned with saving mankind from injustice, oppression, greed, war and environmental degradation in this life.

It offends sinners to hear about the need to repent and believe the gospel as preached by Christ and His apostles. It does not offend them to hear that God is angry about corporations that manufacture products in a way that is deemed not friendly to the environment and that in His judgment He is raising up a cadre of “Christians” to save the planet from the industrialists. For the postmodern young people McLaren is targeting, that is “speaking their language.”

Others either in the EC movement or supportive of it include Robert Schuller, Richard Foster, Brennan Manning, Dan Kimball, Bill Hybels, Dallas Willard, Bruce Wilkinson, Eugene Peterson, John Ortberg, John Eldredge, Dr. Robert Webber, Tony Campolo and Rick Warren, as well as dozens of lesser-known individuals.

Today a new movement is reaching out to young people. That movement is turning to

mysticism and theological pragmatism. One of the key features of the EC movement is the conviction that practice must precede theology. It offers today's youth an undefined, mystical experience and the "hope" that somehow the kingdom of God is emerging in the processes of history to bring planetary salvation. It offers a confused view of the exclusive claims of Christianity.

This is not the language of the gospel. This is the language of "dialectic synthesis" that supposedly promises a better future. How better to resurrect the vain dream of the tower builders at Babel?

Reflections on the Anniversary of a Provocative Article

by Rachel Bauder

Few things please me more than the realization that other Christians object to sentimentalized and secularized worship, and few articles have expressed this objection better than Dr. Hutchens's article "Please Me, O Lord" in the May 2004 issue of *Touchstone*. However, in reading the ensuing exchange between Hutchens and Ms. Amanda Witt in the July/August issue (pages 10-11), it struck me that perhaps some of the terminology that Hutchens employs to describe the secularized church is misleading and imprecise.

Hutchens describes a church that is sentimentalized (illustrated by "In the Garden"), sexualized (illustrated by the young woman who sways as she croons to "be filled") and infantilized (unable to understand or appreciate even the basic doctrines of the Church). As shorthand for a summary of these characteristics, Hutchens adopts the term "feminized." The "feminized" church is one in which "the expression of the feminine is uncontrolled," thus leading directly to the three qualities listed above.

The "feminine elements" in worship, it must be repeated, are those dealing primarily with sentimental froth. The "masculine elements" are those which aggressively insist upon orthodoxy, theology, and preaching.

The problem I see with this is that Hutchens refers to the sentimental froth as "feminine." I realize that this has been a common way of seeing things ever since the 18th century, when (as I understand) the feminine began to be associated with sentimentality in particular. But other than this eighteenth-century association, I cannot discern what in the idea of "feminine" bears such a strong relationship to the three degrading qualities of the contemporary church.

Is real womanliness sentimental, sexualized, infantile, and anemic? Let us ask Deborah, judge of Israel. Or if she be too controversial, let us ask Esther. Or if Esther too is disqualified on account of her disobedience (since she married a Gentile without meeting the conditions set forth in the Law), let us ask Mary Magdalene, who did not croon as she washed the Savior's feet—or the woman who felt a sword pierce her soul as she wept beside the cross. If these be too distant from us for us to analyze knowledgeably, let us ask Julian of Norwich or Jane Austen. What has Elizabeth Bennet to say about the present state of the Church? What thinks Galadriel?

If such women today are rare, it is not because they have become more feminine. If anything, the ancient honorable femininity has been usurped by a sickly substitute. A rotten apple is in many respects more excessive than a ripe one, but it does not have "more applesness" in it. It has less, and that is why it is bad. Likewise, to be excessive in one's sentiments is to be less feminine, in part because it is to be less human ("human" being defined by the capacity for rationality and therefore a sense of what is proportionate or appropriate).

Make no mistake—I agree with Hutchens’s diagnosis that the worship of the church has become sexual, sentimental, etc. But if the problem is sexual sentimentality, we should call it that; if doctrinal anemia, then doctrinal anemia—not femininity. I realize that a matter of terms may seem a pedantic thing over which to quibble, but small errors lead to great ones. The last thing women need is for their daughters to think that being “too” feminine (rather like being “too” sober, “too” charitable, or “too” holy) means the destruction of religion and worship. If anything, the sobriety of holy women should mean its salvation.

I do not know whether a persistent majority of Elves might somehow prevail upon Celeborn to allow crooning in Lothlorien. I do know that Galadriel would never endure it.

The East Seduces the West

by Dana Burkinshaw

Proponents of so-called “Christian yoga” are multiplying and becoming more vocal. The current issue of *Christianity Today* on-line, which is fast becoming the organ of the “religious Left,” has an article by author Agnieszka Tennant who says in her praise of “Christian yoga,” “Christ in, stress out. Holy Spirit in, fear out. God the Father in, carbon dioxide out.” She says that in her gym class near Chicago, “I use unhurried cadences of the air filling and leaving my lungs to lull my muscles and joints into daring postures. My body becomes a mountain. An eagle. A warrior. A cobra [oh really?]. At the end of the exercise, I lie down and become a corpse.”

She should be writing for a science fiction magazine rather than *Christianity Today*. But Tennant says, “I’m an evangelical and proud of it.” She lauds Mark Noll of Wheaton College who has “pried open the collective evangelical mind” to such practices.

Tennant goes on to say that, “It bothers me that people demonize healthful exercise regimens and engage in fear-mongering among evangelicals. Leave that to *The New York Times* [NOTE: They love yoga, too!].” She says, “Yoga has never had a negative influence on me. The three hours a week I spend doing yoga not only make me more flexible. It’s bodily-kinetic prayer. Give me five minutes of yoga and my mind immediately goes to the metaphor of God’s spirit being omnipresent and necessary as air.”

She insists that the Hindu gods behind yoga will never make it on to her mat. Maybe not, but they will make it to millions of others who follow her glowing praise. She says yoga cannot snatch her away from God who has adopted her as a child.

The rapidly-growing popularity of yoga and “Christian yoga” is spreading around the world. The phenomenon is propelled by a video entitled *Outstretched in Worship*. Disciples of it say there is much to be gained from yoga even if some concepts are at odds with Christianity. Daniel Akin, dean of the school theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, says, “Yoga is rooted in Eastern mysticism and is incompatible with Christianity.” He says Christianity holds many opportunities for sound meditation without the aid of yoga.

A Christian who got out of that scene, Laurette Willis, said it left her vulnerable to “psychic influences” and opened the door to 20 years of involvement in the New Age movement. She says that you can’t put a Christian spin on yoga and that “Christian yoga” is an oxymoron. I suspect “Christian yoga” is coming to a church in your neighborhood. Clearly, the East has seduced the West, even in some Christian circles. Eastern influences are entering all branches of Christianity: mainline Protestant, evangelical denominations and Roman Catholic. It is an equal opportunity deceiver.

Regurgitation of Some Thoughts on Bad Hymn Texts

by Ryan J. Martin

This article is an attempt to give some poor hymn texts—that is, hymn texts not worthy, in my young opinion, to be sung to God—and the *reasons* why I consider those texts bad. Let me begin by generalizing a bit. I believe that “bad hymn” texts¹ can be so for reasons other than theological. This assumption is a driving force behind many of my selections. While saying that, biblical error of some sort is usually right around the corner when the text is bad for other reasons. Furthermore, when these texts are trivial or mere clichés, they still say something “theological.” Thus in a limited sense, my criticisms are theologically driven, though it is not important to me what you call them.

Is this pursuit unfounded? Dare we criticize hymn texts? To some this may seem elitist or arrogant, perhaps even scornful. But although hymns and songs are often dear to our and other’s hearts,² we should not let this deter us from the grave responsibility. Judging hymns is like judging theologies, perhaps even more serious. Would we allow a silly man to preach in our pulpit? Would we allow a heretical doctrinal statement to become part of our church’s confession? I dare say not. Thus we should strive militantly to evaluate these tools for worship, and on a number of levels. Thus we should worship, because error and sentimentality in hymns can often be subtle, yet wreak no little destruction of our affections. Many have observed that semi-Pelagianism is far more dangerous than full-blown Pelagianism.

Thus I humbly offer this incomplete list of some bad hymns, which will serve as fodder for the following meditation on the reasons for their “badness”:

In My Heart There Rings A Melody
Are You Washed in the Blood?
We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations
Rescue the Perishing
Oh That Will be Glory for Me
Power in the Blood
Jesus Loves Even Me
When the Roll is Called up Yonder
The Old Rugged Cross
Just a Closer Walk
I’m Special (Hamilton)
Keep on the Firing Line

It is Glory Just to Walk with Him
Because He Lives
Something Beautiful (pretty much anything
 written by the Gaithers)
Blessed Assurance
Faithful Men (Hamilton)
It is No Secret
Still Sweeter Every Day
Mansion over the Hilltop
My Savior First of All
Ninety and Nine

¹Let me give my standard disclaimer here that not all of the hymns I list should be considered “hymns.” Yet, instead of saying “gospel songs” or what have you, I will use the term “hymns” throughout this piece in a rather general sense.

²I try to talk about what can often be such sentimental attachment in my meager article, “Singing Our Hymns for All the Wrong Reasons,” *Gravitas Paper* 10 (2004).

The first category of hymns among those I listed are those that speak in an improper way of the cross. The cross of our Savior and Lord is not a play thing or trivial matter, and the poetry with which we remember it should not present it as so. Thus we get “hymns” such as *Are You Washed in the Blood?* and *Power in the Blood*. Moreover, these songs that repeat lines over and over again are bad poetry.³ Their texts do not lift our emotions as they ought to be lifted. *The Old Rugged Cross* sounds more like it is addressed to a doll than the tool for our Lord’s execution. We must glory in and love the cross, but we ought not make it anything less than what it was.

Other examples of bad poetry can be found in songs like *Jesus Loves Even Me* or *It is Glory Just to Walk with Him*. Many of these songs fail because they attempted to wallow too deeply in popular culture and have now outdated themselves. They are no longer what they intended to be: in *vogue* or trendy. This may seem hard for us to imagine, but there was a time when these songs were admired in a similar fashion as is today’s standard worship chorus. I think of *It is No Secret*, *Something Beautiful*, *Because He Lives*, *Still Sweeter Ever Day*, and *Mansion over the Hilltop*. These are the kinds of problems we run into when we try to make God trendy or hip or cool or anything else He is not. But this is just one of these songs’ problems. Again, they do not do justice to their Subject. Can anyone say that *It is No Secret* does justice to God’s omnipotence? Or *Because He Lives* to the resurrection of our Lord? Or *Mansion over the Hilltop* to the abode of God Himself? Other problems can be seen in *Mansion* and *Oh That Will be Glory for Me*, that heaven is all about us and our getting to finally be rich or something altogether self-serving. Do not get me wrong: the axiom “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him” has a great deal of merit. But that implies that we are satisfied in Him as Himself, not satisfied that *we* are happy with the same old rubbish that blinds the unregenerate of this age, blessed by the fact that God has happened to come along the way as a fringe benefit.

So it goes with *I’m Special*. These kinds of songs are not even worship, and should be banished to the dark side of the hymn galaxy. Others on the list that do not even qualify as worship include *Keep on the Firing Line*, *Just a Closer Walk*, *In My Heart There Rings A Melody* and *Faithful Men*. I picked out good Arminian songs (though I am not sure even Arminius or any other serious Arminian would sing them) like *Rescue the Perishing* and *Ninety and Nine*. You may think that I am beginning “strain at gnats” now, but I believe these kinds of songs do damage to our image of the unregenerate. They are not simply “wandering” or “away” or “lost” or like a “prodigal.”⁴ We should not view them as poor wretches who have just made a few bad decisions and who will “come back” once we find them. Instead, we should look at them the way Paul does in Rom 3, then let the gospel do its life-transforming work!

The hymn *We’ve a Story to Tell to the Nations* should never be sung in by premillennial assembly.

This leaves the two perhaps most controversial of my selections: *Blessed Assurance* and *My Savior First of All*. My biggest problem with the text of *Blessed Assurance* is that it does not

³Repetition is not bad *per se*, but it must be done with purpose, not as a cliché or as something to fill in the clever tune we have devised.

⁴Jesus, of course, could refer to Israel as “lost,” for they as a corporate entity had often turned their back on God. Now his coming to “seek and save that which was lost” is a call for them to repent and turn to Him as their Messiah.

say much. The first verse is of some value, I think, but the second particularly and third, to a certain degree, are not well written. The second has that interesting yet seemingly extra-biblical idea of “angels descending, bring from above echoes of mercy, whispers of love.” I wish I could say “perfect submission.” As far as *My Savior First of All* goes, I will not be able to prove this song “objectively” wrong, just as I have done a pretty poor job of proving the others “objectively wrong.” But I view the song as on the whole sentimental. I do not think that this gets at grandeur of Christ. I think my meeting Christ will be more like Revelation 4 and 5 than what *My Savior First of All* describes. To be frank, the song is sappy, not worshipful. I hope I do not come across as brash or pompous here. That is not my intent. I am merely trying to have an honest discussion about these texts.

Again, to reiterate, this is not about attacking people who sing these songs. I would never dream of doing that.⁵ Most who sing the songs I have listed have probably never even attempted to evaluate a great deal of their hymnody. This does not make them heretical or guilty of high-handed rebellion. And I do not mean this to be the final word on the subject. I feel most inadequate to this sober task, questioning myself more than the reader is questioning me, if that were possible. I am sure that nearly every reader of this clumsy article will disagree with me *somewhere*. My point is not primarily to determine the final canon of good Christian hymnody. Instead my intent is to provoke thought, and perhaps even critical thought of all of our hymns (not just these)—yea, critical thought of all of our *life* to see areas where we worship God inappropriately. In fact, we will always on this earth worship God to some degree inappropriately. Eliminating these hymns will not give the final answer. But perhaps, as a result of this short piece, you will become *careful* in how you worship for the sake of God’s glory. This is the task of every believer; may we strive in ever increasing vigilance and understanding to do it so as to best communicate the truths which bespeak the Holy One of Israel, the Lord God Jehovah.

Some Observations *by the Editor*

Thank you for your overwhelming response to the plea for submissions. You make me want to make the appeal more often. No, we have a good reserve in reserve. But don’t let that stop you, for we need to write more and more. If I sense that we can keep up a higher level of output, then I will expand the Newsletter. The reason I don’t do it now is that, much as I admire the accordion otherwise, and especially the sound of it, I don’t want to emulate its pattern of expansion and contraction. I am perhaps too little of an optimist.

See if you can read *Murder in the Cathedral* for Friday, eh? The more who read, the more likely we are of having a discussion.

⁵Editorial Footnote: one is tempted to make all sorts of mental observations about this statement. It is a lie on so many levels, that it were perhaps better simply to keep them mental. Enough for now that the outrage of the author has been provoked by the insertion