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2 **James S. Bielo: Emerging Evangelicals: Faith,**
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6 **Jason Wollschleger**

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10 *Emerging Evangelicals* is the product of a 3 year, multi-site ethnography. Rather
11 than focusing on a single congregation, Bielo followed the Emerging Church
12 Movement (ECM) across multiple social locations. This multi-site, multimodal
13 ethnography involved interviews (a total of 90 full interviews), observations of
14 worship services, conferences, workshops and pre-launch, church planting meet-
15 ings; and textual archiving. Bielo, a linguistic anthropologist, states that the book
16 “is an ethnographic analysis of identities fashioned, practices performed, discourses
17 articulated, histories claimed, institutions created, and ideas interrogated in this
18 cultural field” (p. 5).

19 Bielo identifies the ECM as a reactionary movement that is a cultural critique of
20 the broader Evangelical movement. One of the primary facets of Evangelicalism
21 that the Emerging individuals are reacting to is the perceived inauthenticity of
22 Evangelicalism. Bielo argues that this is one of the defining features of the ECM—a
23 quest or search for authenticity. In addition, Bielo finds there are four other points of
24 dialogue that shape the ECM: the desire to be “missional”, i.e., to be a missionary
25 in one’s society; an ecclesiology dominated by two main congregational impera-
26 tives, church planting and house churches; liturgical practices that provide a
27 connection to church history and earlier forms of liturgical worship, what has been
28 referred to as an “ancient-future” liturgical worship style; and finally Emerging
29 Evangelicals continue in the “conservative Christian tradition of mobilizing in
30 support of political causes” (p. 15).

31 *Emerging Evangelicals* has a number of strengths. I particularly appreciated the
32 focus on deconversion narratives and the search for authenticity. This is one
33 important point of divergence from mainstream Evangelicalism that characterizes

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34 the ECM. Whereas Evangelicals' narratives of faith are often centered around a
 35 conversion story, Emerging Evangelicals' narratives are focused on deconversion.
 36 Specifically, deconversion from Evangelicalism and its cultural and organizational
 37 trappings. Becoming post-Evangelical is an important step in becoming Emerging
 38 and is located in the broader journey towards authenticity. Emerging Evangelicals
 39 are seeking to distance themselves from "the conservative Christian subculture,
 40 including its born-again narrative of awakening and transformation" (p. 46). And as
 41 they seek authenticity "Emerging Evangelicals seek freedom—from loneliness,
 42 convention, unwanted authority, dominant paradigms, the prevailing social climate,
 43 and impersonal bureaucracies" (p. 46). The focus on narratives of deconversion
 44 located within a broader search for authenticity is an important finding that
 45 resonates with other research on the ECM.

46 This book is full of thick description and rich detail. Bielo has a knack for
 47 capturing the essence of the people he interacted with in his 3 year ethnographic
 48 journey through Emerging Evangelicalism. The personalities come through in his
 49 description of their appearance and clothing, mannerisms and attributes, and in their
 50 voices in the text. His descriptions of gatherings and worship ritual are so vivid that
 51 at times I found myself transported through his prose back to my own ethnographic
 52 research of Emerging congregations.

53 This is not to imply the book has no weaknesses. I do have several criticisms of
 54 *Emerging Evangelicals*, primarily with the book's emphasis of the importance of
 55 church planting, traditional gender roles, and evangelism in the ECM. I do not think
 56 that these elements are pervasive throughout the ECM; rather I think they are
 57 inherent in one stream of the ECM. It is my sense that all of these show up so
 58 strongly in *Emerging Evangelicals* because a sizeable piece of Bielo's sample,
 59 especially for the section on church planting (which is where the emphasis on
 60 traditional gender roles shows up), is drawn from individuals in the Acts 29
 61 Network. Acts 29 is specifically a church planting network that was started by Mark
 62 Driscoll. While Driscoll was an early, key figure in the ECM he has since publically
 63 broken with the ECM. Acts 29 also has sought to distance itself from the ECM on
 64 the grounds that the ECM is too liberal and because it denies complementarianism
 65 and traditional gender roles. I have no doubt this was a prominent part of the
 66 discourse during the ethnography I am uncomfortable with attributing these features
 67 to the ECM as a whole. I am also somewhat ambivalent on the attribution of the
 68 term evangelical to the participants in the ECM. While the term clearly situates
 69 them in location to what they are reacting against I am unsure if it is completely
 70 justified to continue using the term, especially given the consistent theme of
 71 deconversion from Evangelicalism. I am not sure that Emerging believers are
 72 Evangelical anymore, but maybe that determination awaits future scholarship.

73 *Emerging Evangelicals* is noteworthy not just for its excellent scholarship and
 74 compelling prose but because it is one of the first book length treatments of the
 75 ECM by a non-insider and/or theologian. It is a must read for anyone studying or
 76 interested in the ECM. It should also be at the top of the list for readers interested in
 77 American Evangelicalism and its discontents.

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