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Footnote Information


Jason Wollschleger

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

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

Emerging Evangelicals has a number of strengths. I particularly appreciated the focus on deconversion narratives and the search for authenticity. This is one important point of divergence from mainstream Evangelicalism that characterizes
the ECM. Whereas Evangelicals’ narratives of faith are often centered around a conversion story, Emerging Evangelicals’ narratives are focused on deconversion. Specifically, deconversion from Evangelicalism and its cultural and organizational trappings. Becoming post-Evangelical is an important step in becoming Emerging and is located in the broader journey towards authenticity. Emerging Evangelicals are seeking to distance themselves from “the conservative Christian subculture, including its born-again narrative of awakening and transformation” (p. 46). And as they seek authenticity “Emerging Evangelicals seek freedom—from loneliness, convention, unwanted authority, dominant paradigms, the prevailing social climate, and impersonal bureaucracies” (p. 46). The focus on narratives of deconversion located within a broader search for authenticity is an important finding that resonates with other research on the ECM.

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

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

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