There are three things you aren’t supposed to bring up in polite conversation: Politics, religion, and sex. Last month we talked about politics, and tonight I’m going to talk about religion. I hope subsequent presenters don’t feel obligated to talk about sex...but now we have a pattern to uphold, so...

Tonight, I will speak on the Emerging Church movement in America. The Emerging Church movement is incredibly difficult to define; in fact, that is what many of the movement’s figureheads want. I believe it can best be conceptualized as a new, alternative philosophy of how to “do” Christianity that has arisen in only the last fifteen years. It cuts across Christian denominations and across generations. Thus I will first define the movement as best I can and then argue that the rise of this phenomenon is a reaction to post-modern culture in America. I will show how it differs from the traditional church, and its advantages and potential drawbacks. Overall, I believe this new drive in Christianity offers a healthy dose of dynamic energy to a religion that faces institutionalized stagnation.

First, I must introduce the philosophical backdrop for the Emerging Church.

To an ever-increasing extent, American culture is now post-modern. Post-modernism is characterized by a suspicion of concepts of absolute truth, critiques of social constructions, and a reluctance to rely upon human rationality. Post-modernism really began to emerge in America during the 1960s, as a new
generation challenged traditional conceptions of morality and unspoken assumptions of the moral superiority of the Christian West. While modernists had claimed that humans could solve every problem and forever move in the direction of “progress”, post-modernists looked at the Holocaust, Vietnam, and segregation laws and wondered if modern society were really such a good thing after all.

Post-modernism grew to envelop more and more of life. Whole new fields of academic study were invented: women’s studies, African studies, Marxist studies, each of which were developed to challenge the dominant culture that post-modernists saw as oppressive. “Truth” was increasingly seen as relative to each person’s time, place, and culture, and thus dominant narratives were ‘deconstructed’ in order to undermine latent subjugation. Fast-forwarding to the present day, post-modernism is now becoming the dominant paradigm in much of America. One place where the results of this shift have been most felt is within Christianity. Church membership has dramatically declined in the past twenty years, especially among young people. Of course the legacy of Christianity remains strong in the Bible belt, but in the Coasts and in academia traditional Christianity is seen as an antiquated system of hierarchies and rules, a tool of the oppressors.

The Emerging Church grew out of this philosophical climate. Perhaps it makes sense that one of the primary founders of the movement, Brian McLaren, is not a pastor but an English lit professor. McLaren writes in *A New Kind of Christian*, “In graduate school in the ’70s, postmodernism was first hitting the academy through literary criticism. I was exposed to deconstructionism and postmodern thought. I remember thinking, ‘If this kind of thought catches on, Christianity is in
real trouble.” Traditional Christianity is built upon certainty, upon cutting clean distinctions between “us” and “them”, and McLaren slowly realized that this type of thinking wouldn’t survive in a post-modern world that rejected this type of thinking. He, and others like him, began in the mid-1990s to search for other ways of “doing” Christianity while still being faithful to the Bible. More than that, McLaren and others wondered how to reach out to people who not only had no Christian background but also may have dabbled in Buddhism and meditation, or Foucault, and Nietzsche.

So now that we see what the Emerging Church movement is reacting to, what exactly is it? At the risk of being a bit post-modern myself, I’ll quote from Wikipedia: “What those involved in the [Emerging] conversation mostly agree on is their disillusionment with the organized and institutional church and their support for the deconstruction of modern Christian worship, modern evangelism, and the nature of modern Christian community.” I will now discuss the alternatives that are commonly seen in the Emerging Church, evaluating their theology and their effectiveness in attracting post-modern individuals to Christianity, ultimately accepting that the Emerging church is a positive development for Christianity.

A primary distinction is that the Emerging Church often has a radically different take on what it means be a Christian. Traditional Christianity’s message reads like a linear, straightforward, logical proof. “All humans are inherently sinful and in need of spiritual salvation, lest their sins separate them from God forever in hell. But because Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for sins, all a human must do is accept Jesus and ask for forgiveness, and one is a Christian.” It is black and white,
with the transition point being asking Jesus into one’s heart. The emphasis is on the eternal fate of the soul.

Emerging Christianity, on the other hand, sees salvation more in terms of an ongoing journey, a non-linear path of quote “following Jesus”. The story of the universe is seen as a grand narrative, an eternal adventure story in which the listener is asked to join and become a hero: “Initially, God invited humans to join with him in creating and enjoying the Earth. Humans, however, desired to rule themselves, and rejected God. Evil ensued, including slavery, patriarchy, violence, greed, militarism, environmental destruction, and systems of oppression. God’s heart was so broken by all of this that he decided to enter into the world as a human to show them the way things were meant to be. Jesus lived the way that humans were meant to, living a life that opposed oppression and bridged social divides. Now, God invites humans to join with him in redeeming the world, in bringing love, joy, and forgiveness everywhere. It’s less about a one-time decision than in choosing to follow Jesus’ model every day.

Therefore, the emphasis in Emerging Christianity is on the present life, about bringing about God’s kingdom here on earth instead of just focusing on eternal life. It makes sense then that in the Emerging Church there is a much greater focus on social justice issues. Personally, I believe that this more firmly fits in with the message of Jesus. Over and over Jesus is depicted in the Bible defending the poor, the widows, the oppressed, and the outsiders against the oppressors—even if the oppressors were of the quote “right” religion. For this reason, Emerging Christians are more likely to be progressive politically: unlike members of the religious right,
they don’t blame the poor for being poor, and are much more likely to stand up to the system. For example, one Emerging Church pastor told me regarding the ongoing Occupy Lancaster protests, “There’s a lot of kingdom stuff going on there; I’d really like to go down there and discuss what some of their thoughts are”. By emphasizing a different salvation narrative, Emerging Christians live out their faith differently. And the result of this is that suddenly Christianity is now open to types of people who previously may have wanted nothing to do with Christianity.

Members of the Emerging Church movement are also much more open to theological positions traditionally considered “unorthodox”. While most members do have semi-firm beliefs, they are much more willing to consider alternative views. Fearful of labels and categories, Emergents go to great linguistic lengths in attempts to describe themselves. Describing oneself as a Christian is out, “follower of Christ” is in. Church service is out, “gathering” or “community fellowship” is in. One of Brian McLaren’s books’ subtitles is almost laughable in its attempt to bridge every divide: Why I am a missional; evangelical; post/protestant; liberal/conservative; mystical/poetical; biblical; charismatic/contemplative; fundamentalist/Calvinist; Anabaptist/Anglican; Methodist; catholic; green; incarnational; depressed-yet-hopeful; emergent; unfinished Christian. Emerging Christians are so wary of the constructed identities used by the Traditional Church that they emphasize how they are unsure about parts of the Bible or certain theological concepts. This is a highly post-modern development.

One particularly interesting development commonly seen in the Emerging movement is a general discomfort with the mainstream concept of hell.
Traditionally, hell is thought of as a horrible place of intense, eternal suffering for everyone who does not accept Jesus. Emergents, however, are often uncomfortable with this view of hell. It seems too black and white, and too permanent. Most importantly, it does not fit with their belief that “God is love” (a verse from 1st John in the Bible). This past spring, influential megachurch pastor Rob Bell rocked a lot of conservative boats with his book, Love Wins. Bell’s thesis? God loves humans so much he’ll keep on offering us love and forgiveness, so that in the end hell will be empty—everyone will up and leave, won over by God’s unconditional love in the end. Admittedly, debates about heaven and hell are a specific theological issue divisive even among Emergents, but what’s important to notice is the general tendency among Emergents to react against the “judgmental”, “fire-and-brimstone” caricatures that many people think of when they think of Christianity. Many Emergents seem perfectly willing to sacrifice typically “orthodox” Christian beliefs in order to appear as open to outsiders as possible.

A final commonly found element in Emerging Christianity is a radically new style of worship. Worship is not just hymns for them, and not even the guitar/vocals/keyboard bands often seen at Evangelical churches. Instead, Emerging worship embraces an immersive, reflective, and more mystical style. Sometimes the band plays from the back of the room instead of the front, to deconstruct the worship hierarchy. Often “worship stations” are set up, in which individuals can wander at will and perform spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation, or journaling. Artistic elements such as painting and dance are promoted. The emphasis is on encouraging each person to make personal
connection with God, rather than just having a worship leader who leads and everyone follows. Rejecting the hierarchical method and promoting a more multi-sensory experience, often incorporating ancient, non-Western traditions, is all another Emergent reaction to post-modernism that makes Christianity more comprehensible.

While we lack time to get into them now, there are many other areas where we see the Emerging Church adopting a more conciliatory tone and open theology. Many in the movement question traditional Christian conceptions of gender, especially dealing with homosexuals and women. The use of military force is also challenged; Emerging Church followers are opposed to what they see as America’s “imperialism” around the world. “This is not what Jesus would have done,” they say, “he would love his enemies”. Another issue is environmentalism—emphasizing that God cares about the Earth, so we should too. Each of these stances can be fully justified biblically, yet many in the traditional church are automatically opposed to even considering such “liberal” theology. And I personally think that’s a shame; such issues are pertinent and require a thoughtful response rather than a knee-jerk reaction.

There are valid critiques of the Emerging Church. The first point: Is this just hipster-ism? Brett McCracken, author of Hipster Christianity, fears that in many churches today the desire to be “relevant” creates a situation in which superficial, stylistic changes are made but the deeper roots of postmodernism are left unaddressed. As emergent pastor Dan Kimball points out, “It takes more than candles during the worship service to be relevant.” Carolyn Haggard, niece of the
controversial pastor Ted Haggard, points out, "The Bible has been relevant for 2,000 years, and popular culture isn’t really going to change that. Saying that we’re cooler than the generation before, we’re more savvy, and we’re obviously more intellectual than the generation before—that’s not something we’d be at all interested in promoting." But this is only a legitimate concern if Carolyn and Brett assume that Emergents are contradicting Jesus’ teachings; however merely wrestling with tough issues is not bad. Emergents correctly understand that our culture is post-Christian and must be approached as a missionary or anthropologist would approach any foreign culture. There must be a humility and an openness to engage with society rather than retreat from it (as our Amish neighbors do) or fight it (as right-wing “Evangelicals” do). And as Rob Bell says, "People don't get the Emerging Church; they think it's about style. But the real question is: What is the gospel?"

Another problem that may potentially arise is a neo-Orientalist mindset, i.e., one that idealizes the East as “mystical, romantic, passionate”, and shows disdain for Western “rationalism, logic, and constructs.” As historian Edward Said pointed out in his landmark book, Orientalism, such a portrayal of “The East” constructs it as the “Other”, providing a philosophical foundation for racism and false constructions of identity. This is most pertinent in regards to worship practices and theology—while Emergents must critique Western ideologies, they must be careful not to throw out valuable practices with the harmful ones. Moreover, exotic Eastern practices of meditation or “breathing” prayers are not without potential drawbacks. Western doesn’t always equal bad, and non-Western doesn’t always equal good. Emergents must keep this in mind.
The Emerging Church movement represents a positive step forward within Christianity. Traditional Christianity makes things too black and white, ignoring the nuances that are far too obvious to post-modern individuals. While the Emerging Church may be just a passing fad in some churches, in others it is represents a deep and difficult wrestling with what exactly it means to follow Jesus’ teachings in the twenty-first century. I believe that this renegotiation is incredibly helpful to Christianity, and better for America as a whole. Too many Christians are hardline conservatives without having at least some openness to other points of view. In our polarized society, any movement that promotes honest dialogue and proposes positive alternatives is immensely valuable, to Christians and non-Christians alike. As we dive into the murky waters of post-modernism headfirst, it’s good to know that our faiths can enter in with us. Thank you.