

2007 Wheaton Theology Conference

“Whence Hermeneutic Authority?”

Tony Jones, National Coordinator of Emergent Village

Abstract

Tipp O’Neill famously quipped that “All politics are local.” Maybe so, but the postmodernists have argued that *all hermeneutics are local*. It is our local communities that shape how we see the world, and—as Christians—our ecclesial communities that shape how we interact with the texts of scripture. Stanley Fish calls them “authoritative interpretative communities;” we call them “church.” But in what way does the grand tradition of church history interact with our local iterations of the faith? Does Chalcedon trump Minneapolis? The emerging church movement offers some insight into how coming generations will navigate this relationship between old and new, for in an age of micronarratives, Vincent of Lerins’s exhortation that orthodoxy must “hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all” rings somewhat hollow. Or, maybe, orthodoxy has always been fluid, dynamic, open source...

I. Introduction: What’s a Strike?

For many years, I was a baseball umpire. I started umping before I could even drive. I’d pick up the big, outside chest protector and mask at the supervisor’s house, then ride my bike—with the protector on my back—to the ballfield that I was assigned, somewhere in my hometown of Edina, Minnesota. During my high school years, I umped hundreds of games, sometime two and three a night all summer. These kids were in Little League, and the pitching was, as you might guess, highly irregular. But there was a funny belief among those of us who umped that to wear shin guards was a sign of weakness. So, I spent many summers with very bumpy and very purple shins.

By college, I had moved up to junior and senior Babe Ruth League games, and by seminary, I was officiating high school and American Legion ball. I went to Fuller, in Pasadena, so we umped all year round. Needless to say, umping alongside cops,

firefighters, insurance salesmen, and school teachers was a nice respite from the LaSor inductive approach to learning Hebrew. During my third year in California, I made it to the state high school semi-finals, where I saw my first 90 mile an hour fast ball. I don't know if that pitcher made it to the Big Show, but the twelve Major League scouts with radar guns in the crowd sure intimidated me.

Back in Minnesota, I continued to climb the umpiring ladder. Division III baseball, then D-II, and then, the year of my retirement, my one-and-only Division I game: in a nailbiter, the University of Minnesota Golden Gophers overcame the University North Dakota Fighting Sioux, 16-2. I umped and third base, and I made one call all game. I retired that year, after Julie gave birth to our second child and informed me that she wouldn't be a weekend widow any longer.

Umpiring on the bases—like that D-I game on third base—is a lot like what a police officer friend of mine told me. “Being a cop,” she said, “Is 99% sheer boredom, and 1% sheer terror.” That's why I volunteered whenever possible, to be the plate umpire—“working the plate” is umpire lingo for it. And that's a different kind of terror.

A plate ump sees about 300 pitches in a 9-inning game, and he's got to make a decision on about half of them. Every pitch, you see, is either a ball or a strike. If the batter swings at the pitch, then it's a strike (although, even whether it was a swing or not is often called into question). If the batter doesn't swing at the pitch, the umpire has a

decision to make—a very quick decision. If the ball crosses the plate in the strike zone, it's called a strike. If it does not, it's called a ball.

Simple, right? Well, we umpires had to collectively affirm that we interpret the strike zone according to the “literal, or normal, sense.” (By that I mean, of course, “the meaning which the writer expressed.”) To that end, let me read you the pericope from our almost-sacred text, the Baseball Rulebook, Rule 2.00,

The Strike Zone is defined as that area over homeplate the upper limit of which is a horizontal line at the midpoint between the top of the shoulders and the top of the uniform pants, and the lower level is a line at the hollow beneath the kneecap. The Strike Zone shall be determined from the batter's stance as the batter is prepared to swing at a pitched ball.

May Bud Selig add his blessing to the reading of these words.

It doesn't seem to leave much room for interpretation, does it? Except for that bit about the batter's stance at he prepares to swing, it's there, right there in black-and-white. You might say, “A strike is a strike is a strike.”

Except...when it isn't.

Here you see the official strike zone, shaded in blue, and the strike zone as it's actually called by Major League ump's in the gray box. Significantly smaller, low and outside. Why? Well, baseball has changed a lot since that rule was penned. For one thing, have you ever tried to hit a 96 mile an hour fastball at the letters? It's nearly impossible. And, on the umpiring side of the equation, the move from the bulky outside chest protectors to the vest protector under the jacket means that umpires crouch lower behind

catchers, lowering their sightline and thus the strike zone. Major League Baseball has also increased penalties against bean balls in recent years, meaning that pitchers have pitched more outside pitches, and the ump's have given them more of those pitches.

Finally, any umpire will tell you that the eyes of a manager standing in the dugout are about belt high to the batter in the box. That means the manager has a good gauge of high balls and low balls—and he'll start barking at the home plate ump if they look too high or too low. But he can't tell if a pitch hits the outside corner, or if it misses by an inch and a half. I can assure you that no ump likes to see players walk, so we steal strikes wherever we can. And, it's easier to steal them outside and inside than it is high and low.

In 2001, Major League Baseball announced that it would be requiring umpires to get back to the literal interpretation of the strike zone, but that didn't even last until the All Star Break. By June, the zone had once again moved low and outside.

Actually, let me put it another way: the Strike Zone was pulled low and outside by the community of baseball: pitchers and catchers, hitters and managers, umpires and MLB officials. And, of course, the beer-soaked fans who scream every time an umpire misses a call.

The hallowed Baseball Rulebook and its myriad interpreters live in a hermeneutical tension with one another, and that tension has resulted in a de facto strike

zone—a working strike zone. There is no one, single authority who determines the strike zone.

But, intriguingly, neither has the strike zone slid down the slippery slope into nihilistic meaninglessness, with umps calling pitches in the dirt strikes. No, the community of baseball wouldn't let that happen.

Of course, it's not lost on me that since the earliest days of the postmodern conversation, there's been story floating around about three umpires,

- The pre-modern umpire says, *"I call 'em as they are!"*
- The modern umpire says, *"I call 'em as I see 'em!"*
- The postmodern umpire says, *"They ain't nothin' 'till I call 'em!"*

This all stems, it seems, from the irrepressible literary critic, Stanley Fish, who years ago told this story about the legendary umpire, Bill Klem,

"Klem's behind the plate," Fish said. "The pitcher winds up, throws the ball. The pitch comes. The batter doesn't swing. Klem for an instant says nothing. The batter turns around and says, 'O.K., so what was it, a ball or a strike?' And Klem says, 'Sonny, it ain't nothing 'till I call it.'

"What the batter is assuming is that balls and strikes are facts in the world and that the umpire's job is to accurately say which one each pitch is. But in fact balls and strikes come into being only on the call of an umpire."

[CONCLUSION, TRANSITION.]

Here's how I plan to proceed: I'll offer a brief description of the emergent church movement, based on my intuitions, my personal history, and my research. Then, I'll

offer some distinctly postmodern philosophical considerations about the nature of the “orthodoxy” that we have inherited from the ancient church. From there, I’ll offer a normative theological proposal about the nature of orthodoxy, and I’ll tease attempt to constructively respond to some of the criticisms of the emergent church with that proposal in mind. And, finally, I will offer a brief methodological suggestion for the future of theology, particularly at the local, ecclesial level.

II. What Is the Emergent Church?

First off, the name: Emergent. The tags, “emerging church” and “emerging leaders” were being used by organizations like Leadership Network in Dallas back in the late 1990s, particularly as they sponsored some of our early work; under Leadership Network, we had been called the “Young Leaders Network,” the “Theological Working Group,” and “Terra Nova.” By 2001, we were out on our own, and felt that we needed a name, a banner, of sorts, under which we could gather. In May of that year, about six of us were on a conference call, brainstorming possible names.

Then Brian McLaren, a devoted environmentalist, said, “You know, when a forester visits a forest to determine its health, she doesn’t climb up into the old growth trees. Instead, she gets down on her knees and digs around in what they call the ‘emergent growth’ at the forest floor. In the ecology of the American church, there are lots of organizations who are tending to the old growth trees, but we seem most interested in what’s taking place on the forest floor, at the emergent church level.”

So, we settled on the name “Emergent” and bought the domain name, “emergentvillage.org.” And we started connecting with others around the globe who were examining the same shifts from modernity to postmodernity that had so intrigued us and had, really, brought us together starting in 1997. The alt.worship crowd in the U.K. became friends, and we made connections with people in Australia and New Zealand. The success of Brian’s book, *A New Kind of Christian*, brought a great deal of attention, too, and increasingly, Emergent Christianity has become a “brand” of its own, for good and for ill.

Both Emergent Village, the organization with which I am affiliated, and the broader emerging/emergent church movement have grown steadily in recent years. But the growth has not been particularly quantifiable, as other ecclesial movements might be. In fact, some (like Dwight Friesen) have suggested that church growth in the 21st century might not reflect the linear, organizational growth structures of the industrial age, but instead the open source growth typified by the Internet and by pandemic viruses. In open source—also known as “scale free networks”—growth looks more like a non-hierarchical web, with hubs of potency that, in turn, foment new strands of growth.

Emergent Village surely stands as one such hub in the emergent church, as does Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, Brian McLaren’s books, Scot McKnight’s “Jesus Creed” blog, and the theological writings of Stan Grenz, John Franke, LeRon Shults, NT Wright, Stanley Hauerwas, and Miroslav Volf. Other organizations, seminaries, colleges, denominations, churches, publishing houses, and websites are

quickly becoming hubs in this network as well. But a network it remains, with no desire to formalize into a bureaucracy that even has the whiff of a denomination. And, in an era of cell phones, blogs, email, webcams, and instant messaging, many of us question the need for funneling-type bureaucracies like denominations.

Recently, as a part of the Lilly Endowment-funded Faithful Practices Project at Princeton Theological Seminary, I visited eight emergent congregations for a weekend. There, I performed mixed method approach research, including observation of worship and programs, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and a survey conducted by all of the congregations in the late spring of last year. The eight churches surveyed were

Cedar Ridge Community Church, Spencerville, Maryland

Solomon's Porch, Minneapolis, Minnesota

House of Mercy, St. Paul, Minnesota

Jacob's Well, Kansas City, Missouri

Vintage Faith Church, Santa Cruz, California

Church of the Apostles, Seattle, Washington

Journey, Dallas, Texas

Pathways Church, Denver, Colorado

Being that I studied just eight churches, my results are necessarily not generalizable across the spectrum of emergent churches. However, each of these

churches has been recognized as being on the forefront of the movement, so they are indicative of the general thrust of emergent Christianity.

In the quantitative research, surveys were distributed to all worshipers at all services at each church last spring. In all, 2020 surveys were returned. The largest church, Jacob's Well returned 647 surveys, the smallest, Journey, turned in 34.

Across the board, these eight churches skew differently from the averages across American congregations. For instance, the average age of worshipers (15 and over) in church on that Sunday varied from 28 at Journey and 29 at Jacob's Well to 41 at Cedar Ridge. The average across all surveys was 32.5. That stands in stark contrast to the average age of American churchgoers, which is 50.

The eight congregations I studied are overwhelmingly white—92% on the Sunday in question.

They were 55% female, and 60% single.

American churchgoers are significantly more educated than Americans at large, and emergent churchgoers are more educated still. 38% report a college degree as their highest level of education, 17% hold a master's degree, and 5% have completed a Ph.D.

When it came to the qualitative research, I pursued a phenomenological line of questioning, and I listened for those common terms by which the interviewees described their experience of belonging to an emergent church. The common phrases that rose to the surface during interviews and focus groups were,

- Inviting
- Accepting
- Non-Judgmental
- Inclusive
- “Wherever you are on the journey”

But, intriguingly, almost every reiteration of this theme of openness in the transcripts is followed by a claim that, “This church really believes stuff, strongly I mean,” as if my respondents were anticipating the charges of liberalism. But what came across loud and clear was that these churches are providing a space in which people can ask their questions about God and the world—a third way, I believe, between the cocksure certainties of conservatism and the perceived tepidness of liberalism. There is an attempt, at least, to navigate between these bipolarities—the Scylla and Charybdis of modernity—into a new territory that maintains both the robust identity of the self but also respectfully recognizes the otherness of the Other.

As to the question of how big is the emergent church, it’s far too nebulous a movement to quantify at that level. Our website shows a map of all the Emergent Village

cohorts that meet regularly around the country, so that's one indication of how wide the emergent virus has spread. But, I still think that many overestimate the reach and influence of Emergent, at least to this point in history.

Now, at this point, I might be accused of presenting a sanitized version of emergent Christianity, so let me tell you a little story to show the other side.

Not long ago, I was having a friendly debate with a prominent evangelical professor in front of a couple hundred youth pastors. My interlocutor held up a book—*The Post-Evangelical* by British pastor Dave Tomlinson—which Emergent Village had just published in the States. In the book, Tomlinson argues that the church has been co-opted by nation-state governments, particularly concerning their definition of “marriage.” He goes on to describe that, as an Anglican priest, he's worked with many “unmarried” couples in London who are actually living more Christ-glorifying lives than those who have been officially “married” in the Anglican Church.

Tomlinson then appeals to Karl Barth to argue that the church should reconstitute “marriage” on biblical, theological, and covenantal grounds, and not allow the government to dictate what is and is not a marriage—at least not for our ecclesial purposes. Tomlinson is saying, in effect, that “marriage” isn't a fact in the world that we can point to. Instead, “marriage” *ain't nothing till we call it*. And in the current cultural debate over what is “marriage” and “family,” the church should continue to have a strong voice.

Anyway, back to my debate. My friend held up Tomlinson's book and warned people not to buy it and not to read it. "It's dangerous," he said, "Don't buy it!" He went on to warn the crowd that Tomlinson dangerously relativizes marriage. And then he really shocked me when he said, "If these Emergent guys get their way, pretty soon we'll be having sex with animals!"

What would cause someone to level the charge of inter-species marriage against the emergent church? Well, it's become clear that there are a couple of pressing concerns about the emergent church, and the primary concern for traditional evangelicals is the spectre of *relativism*. And it's into that stew that I'd now like to leap.

III. Philosophical Considerations

The title for this paper, "Whence Hermeneutic Authority?" came to me a couple months ago after a heated conversation with another evangelical academician. This time I was teaching a class at a Nazarene graduate school and taken out to dinner one night by the dean, who was full of earnest and passionate questions about the emergent church. As the conversation wore on, it became clear to me that his fear was that the emergent church either already had or inevitably would break free of the grand, 2000 year tradition of the church because of our apparent disdain for ecclesial authority (historical or present). Unhinged from the Universal Church, we were destined to become heterodox, and he feared that would mean the demise of our important movement.

So I got to thinking, how does the emergent church relate to the history of the church? Well, two noted “texts” came up at that dinner that I think immediately demand deconstruction.

The first is the quote, often touted by theologians, that was first uttered by Vincent of Lerins—“Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus.” He claimed that orthodoxy must “hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” I assume this could be said without irony in the fifth century, but it surely cannot today. If this is orthodoxy, then there’s no *there* there. There’s no such beast, and you’ll search in vain to find it. In fact, I’m surprised that this icon doesn’t show Vincent with one hand behind his back, with fingers crossed. (What makes Vincent’s claim doubly ironic is that Vincent himself was accused of Semipelagianism, a “heresy” that surely afflicts the vast majority of American Christians.)

The Vincentian Canon of universality, antiquity, and consensus is met head on by the postmodern canon of radical locality, the biases of history, and dissensus. Let’s take these one at a time: Vincent wrote, “We shall follow universality if we confess that one faith to be true, which the whole Church throughout the world confesses.” Postmodernism is, of course, famously characterized by an incredulity toward just such metanarratives. And our world of blogs and 24-hour news channels show us just how unreasonable Vincent’s universal vision is, for we see pictures of Anglican bishops in the global south who won’t even share the Eucharist with the presiding bishop of the

Episcopal Church. And we read reports of Baptists divorcing from one another. Even the Roman Catholic Church shows constant signs of disagreement (although, notably, disagreement among Catholics rarely begets divorce, for here, *universality* is not necessarily of belief but instead of the spiritual efficacy of the Eucharist).

Vincent continues, “*Antiquity*, if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is manifest were notoriously held by our holy ancestors and fathers.” In this quest to know the interpretations of the church fathers, friends like Chris Hall and Thomas Oden have been of great help. But even in the pages of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, one finds those hallowed fathers sometimes at odds. Not to mention all of the brilliant voices of the ancient church who were silenced by those with bigger theological muscles—we Protestants thank God that others were not silenced, voices like Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and Servetus. Oops, strike that last one. To the claim of antiquity, we who are educated white males—the history writers—are today chastened by feminist historians (what did the ancient mothers believe?), and theologians of color (what did the ancient slaves believe?). These silenced voices were not a part of the Vincent’s venerated antiquity, and their silence haunts our appropriation of ancient sources.

Finally, Vincent concludes, “*Consensus*, in like manner, if in antiquity itself we adhere to the consentient definitions and determinations of all, or at the least of almost all priests and doctors.” But Lamin Sanneh argues that we should not quest after an unrealizable consensus, a Global Christianity, but instead should embrace a World

Christianity in all its mosaic beauty. For, as he writes, as each new indigenous culture discovers the gospel, they will help us understand it better and see its great beauty.

So, while Vincent exhorts us to hold fast that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all, you'll have about as much luck finding that elusive thing as you will be hunting Jackalope in South Dakota. No such universal, a-contextual orthodoxy exists. Instead, orthodoxy is a mess, a beautiful mess.

The second "text" I'd like us to consider took place just a couple years after Vincent's death—this is actually an event that I'd like us to read like a "text": The Council of Chalcedon (for this, too, came up in my dinner with the dean). In the fall of 451, 500 ecclesial elites gathered to revisit their decisions of two years previous at Ephesus. Emperor Marcian asked Pope Leo I to preside, but Leo instead sent his legate, Paschanius, to run the meeting. Paschanius refused Dioscorus a vote at the council, for Dioscorus had earlier called for the excommunication of Leo. Paschanius reinstated Theodoret, but the other bishops were so upset by this that Theodoret was made to sit in the nave of the church with Dioscorus. Marcian then pushed for a new creed, but the bishops said the old one was good enough—they were more interested in voting on the excommunication of Dioscorus. But when 13 Egyptian bishops refused to sign Dioscorus' excommunication decree, all present reconsidered and said, "Maybe we do need a new creed." But they couldn't agree on one. By this time, proceedings were starting to fall apart, and Paschanius threatened to close the whole council down and move it to Italy if everyone couldn't fall into line. Begrudgingly, a majority opinion was

reached on several major issues, including the exile of Dioscorus. Immediately following the close of the council, the Egyptian bishops led the Oriental Orthodox Church to leave the Catholic Church in a major schism.

They'll all be appearing next week on the Jerry Springer Show.

But seriously, this was a messy, messy meeting. That's another way to say that is was a *human meeting*. That's why I can only imagine what Michel Foucault would have said, had he been in attendance in 451. It's not too hard to imagine: he would have found an event laced with the politics of power. That's what Foucault opened our eyes to, that power is endemic to the human situation: "Wherever two or three of you gather, power dynamics will be among you."

And what came out of this messy meeting? Oh, only the standard, orthodox articulation of Christology. The Chalcedonian creed of the two natures-one person of Jesus Christ, as well as every other theological construction from every other council, has human fingerprints all over it. These were messy meetings, rife with power and politics.

What is demanded of us to maintain a resemblance of faith in the face of such deconstruction? Or, to ask it another way, How can Chalcedonian Christology withstand the withering assault of postmodern deconstruction? How can it maintain its hermeneutical authority in a historical-critical age? Every thoughtful confessing Christian will agree: a robust pneumatology. That is, we will affirm that, regardless of

the human nature of the proceedings at Chalcedon, God's Spirit somehow guided and protected that meeting, as well as the other six ecumenical councils. Just as we assert that the Spirit guarded the canon during its formation over about 400 years.

But how is this reliance on the Holy Spirit's intervention not a theological cop-out? How do we not use the Spirit's activity as a conversation-stopper when our hallowed texts and histories are deconstructed?

This is the inherent aporia of orthodoxy, as it is traditionally conceived. Christian orthodoxy, when defined doctrinally, when seen as a set of beliefs, be it bounded or centered, is too easily deconstructable. We are left to rely upon logical-postivism and empiricism to take us as far as it can, then we invoke the Holy Spirit to take us the rest of the way.

And the aporia of conventional orthodoxy extends to the local congregation. I know this first-hand, for I have performed this test in numerous congregations I have studied. First, I read their statement of faith on their website: "At First Christian Church, We Believe..." Second, I start asking the people who attend that church—even the staff members—about specific affirmations in that statement; usually by the second or third person, I hear hesitancy if not outright abandonment about some article in that church's creed. Third, I ask myself, "Just who is the *We* in 'We Believe.'" Churches, of course, are made up of myriad folks who believe myriad things, regardless of what the senior pastor or board of elders posts on the church website.

For very many people, spirituality and theology is a journey. They spend their lives reading books, listening to sermons, and tuning in Christian radio because they want to be challenged, they want to be poked and prodded to believe and live differently—dare I say, better—tomorrow than they did yesterday. When accused of changing his mind on things, Foucault himself retorted, “Well, do you think I have worked [hard] all these years to say the same thing and not to be changed?” Jim McLendon’s definition of theology reflects the dynamism of the discipline: “*Theology* [is] the discovery, understanding, and transformation of the convictions of a convictional community, including the discovery and critical revision of their relation to one another *and to whatever else there is.*”

We in Emergent Village have been asked repeatedly for a statement of faith, a statement of orthodoxy. I asked LeRon Shults, a theologian now stationed in Christiansand, Norway, to respond on our behalf, and he wrote a wonder little blog post about statements and their weaknesses. For Emergent to issue a statement of orthodoxy would be “unnecessary, inappropriate, and disastrous,” Shults wrote, a response to “modernist anxieties.” He concluded his post thusly, “Emergent is *dynamic* rather than *static*, which means that its ongoing intentionality is (and may it ever be) shaped less by an anxiety about finalizing *state*-ments than it is by an eager attention to the *dynamism* of the Spirit’s disturbing and comforting presence, which is always reforming us by calling us into an ever-intensifying participation in the Son’s welcoming of others into the faithful embrace of God.”

But if orthodoxy can not be summarized in a statement, if what it means to be an orthodox Christian is not *state-able*, then what is *orthodoxy*? It is in answer to this question that I would like to propose my thesis.

IV. Orthodoxy Is an Event

In his book, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Jack Caputo writes,

To think *theologically* is to make the mind's ascent toward God, which means toward whatever event is astir in the name of God, where the name of God is not a linguistic object that can be stretched out on the table for analysis. To use the name of God is an unstable, destabilizing act that exposes us to whatever event is transpiring in that name, to whatever chain of events this name provokes. The name of God comes first, while thinking theologically comes as a response, the way one responds to a knock at the door that interrupts your work. Theology comes in answer to the call that issues from the event harbored in the name of God, as a way to hear it, heed it, and hearken to it; to pray over it; and to set the music of this event to words. Theology tries to follow the tracks of the name of God, to stay on the trail it leaves behind as it makes its way through our lives...It is a word forged in the fires of life, in the joys and sorrows of ordinary life, a word we invoke on the most casual as on the most solemn occasions, signaling

something familiar, even commonplace, yet bottomless, always on the tip of our tongue yet incomprehensible. This is because it shelters an event.

In his forthcoming book, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, Caputo returns to the idea of *event*, stating unequivocally that “Events are not names or things but something going on *in* names or things... a simmering potency in a name, a possibility that inhabits the name, what that name is trying to express while never quite succeeding, something that name recalls but never quite remembers, promises but never quite delivers.”

He hearkens to Montaigne, who famously wrote, “O my fellow democrats, there are no democrats,” and then imagines Kierkegaard standing up in church and saying, “O my fellow Christians, there are no Christians.”

To say that Christian orthodoxy is an event is to say that orthodoxy *happens*. (And here, I could just as easily say “Truth Happens,” “Gospel Happens,” or “Christianity Happens.”) Orthodoxy is a *happening*, an occurrence, not a state of being or a state of mind or a state-ment.

It’s a move from the ontological—*orthodoxy is*—to the eschatological—*orthodoxy will be*.

To look at it from the side of our weakness, orthodoxy is an event and not a state-ment because, to put it colloquially, not one of us will score a perfect 100 on the Big

Theology Exam in the Sky. We've all got a little heterodoxy mixed in with all the orthodoxy—and most of us will admit that. I'm wrong about some things; the problem, of course, is knowing what parts I'm wrong about. "O my fellow orthodox theologians, there are no orthodox theologians."

We are, each of us, searching for truth, scratching our way toward orthodoxy. It's the land we will never quite reach, but we can't stop reaching for. I cannot speak of God, and I cannot stop speaking of God. In the prayer of Meister Eckhart, "God, rid me of God."

Looking at it from the side of God in the God-human relationship is far more profound. "Naked Truth," is the phrase of Pseudo-Dionysius—this is God who is ultimately "unutterable," "unknowable," "invisible," "incomprehensible." How does one speak with any confidence of this God, much less pray with any confidence?

Orthodoxy as event acknowledges apophatic humility in the face of this God; it acknowledges that all of our theology—our *logos* about this *theos*—inevitably falls far short of what Dionysius calls the "ONE who is beyond all." It prays with Anselm, "Lord, you are not merely that than which a greater cannot be thought; you are something greater than can be thought."

Orthodoxy is an event because God is eschatological. God is the future, and God calls us into the future. It's that calling, that messianic promise of *future* that destabilizes

us and makes the ground sometimes seem to shift beneath our feet. Not necessarily because God is “changing,” per se, but because God is *dynamically involved* with creation, calling us into God’s future.

Orthodoxy as event is most explicit in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His incarnation was *event*, his being was *event*, his ministry was *event*. He found those who had been marginalized by the structures of the day—he found them at wells at noon and climbing trees and chained in cemeteries—and he swept them back into God’s purposes, all the while promising a Year of Jubilee, and providing glimpses of the reversals inherent in Jubilee. In him, the paradox was enfleshed: God is here, God is to come. In him, the world became pregnant with eschatological justice.

The culmination of the event of Jesus’ life was the event of the Cross, The Event on which everything pivots, the event that destabilizes everything and everyone. It both ends history as the eternal Trinity suffers a breach in its divine relationality and, at the same time, baptizes history by exhibiting God’s extravagant commitment to the creation. Myriad human institutions have been built in an effort to promote the cross, but the cross stands in judgment of all human institutions. Papers are even read at conferences under the shadow of the cross, papers that are an embarrassment to the cross.

Paul records for us the early Christian hymn:

In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:

Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a human being,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

This song describes a theo-poetical *event*. (And here it should be noted that this hymn was a precursor to the creeds of the early church—they were primarily used *liturgically*; they were sung in joy during the event of worship, not nailed to the doorpost of the domus ecclesiae to act as a gatekeeper.)

And the cross, as event, demands an event from us, a metanoia event. For there is no orthodoxy *out there somewhere*, only here, in me and in you and in us when we gather in Christ's name. God's radical commitment to history in the crucifixion eventified the burgeoning belief of Israel.

V. Turnings

If I may borrow from the syntax of the Savior, let me now circle back to the emergent church and attempt to solidify our approach to orthodoxy and answer the questions, “Whence hermeneutical authority?”

You have heard it said that the emergent church values orthopraxy over orthodoxy, but I say to you, if orthodoxy is an event, then another veil has been torn. There is no difference between the two. “Orthoparadoxy,” as my friend Dwight Friesen calls it, is the dialectical tension in which these two poles stand. Let me put it more boldly: there is no orthodoxy without orthopraxy. It doesn’t exist. People may talk about it, but they also talk about unicorns.

There is no song until it’s sung—it’s just words and notes on paper. There is no strike until it’s called by the ump—“It ain’t nothing till I call it.” And there is no orthodoxy until it’s lived. It is an event that happens when we gather to worship, when we change a diaper, when we read a book, when we present a paper.

You have heard it said that the emergent church vaunts experience at the expense of rational knowledge, but I say to you that all human endeavors, including theology, are experiential. If one knows anything about phenomenology, it is obvious that what human beings do is experience and interpret those experiences. Walking a labyrinth is experiential, and so is reading a theology textbook. Praying is experiential, as is listening to a sermon. There’s no such thing as a human endeavor that is not “experiential”—we

are experiential beings, and our faith practices, be they cerebral or kinesthetic, propositional or narrative, are thus necessarily experiential, too.

You have heard it said that the emergent church is run by relativists, but I say to you that we are all relativists. We walk into the Christian bookstore and choose a Bible off the shelf, one that's been translated by a particular group of people with a particular theological bias. You choose that Bible relative to all the other choices in front of you. And you make a relative choice about where you go to church, what college you attend, and whom you marry. Like the umpire who has to call out "Ball!" or "Strike!" a split second after the ball hits the catcher's mitt, some calls are easy: right down the heart of the biblical plate. But others are tougher, painting the outside corner. We make the best call we can, and live with the consequences.

You have heard it said that emergent churches abandon individual salvation for the sake of communal life, but I say to you that our communities of faith are made up of individual rational actors who have chosen to enter communities of orthoparadoxy, communities where, together, we are figuring out exactly where the strike zone is.

You have heard it said that emergent churches disparage biblical models of pastoral leadership and opted for egalitarian communities, but I say to you that leadership comes in many forms. Some charge that by opening up the Bible—even opening up the sermon—for many voices (including the marginalized) to speak, we are in danger of heterodoxy because we have forsaken strong biblical teaching. But history is clear: the

danger of heterodoxy, even of cults, is far more acute when biblical interpretation is solely the purview of one leader or an oligarchy. Let's put it this way, Jim Jones and David Koresh weren't asking people to talk openly during the sermon about what they agreed and disagreed with.

And you have heard it said that the emergent church doesn't stand under the hermeneutical weight of church history, but I say to you that we are more true to the church fathers because they are part of our dialogue. No, they do not rule over us, but they do enter into our event of orthodoxy with an authoritative voice. Have you looked at Luther's 95 Theses? They're not about systematic theology, they're about the very specific issues of his day. Have you read Augustine's treatises? They are confronting the Pelagianism of his day. And Aquinas? The Islamic Aristotelianism of his day. This is orthodoxy: an ongoing conversation who is God?, who are we?, and what's the relationship between us?

Orthodoxy happens. And I can only pray that it's happening right here and now.