



Tickle, Phyllis, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Baker Publishing, 2008).

Initially, I was not very taken by this short book, no matter how gracefully it is written. And then I read on Brian McLaren's blog that he considered it possibly the most important book of the year. I thought I must be missing something. The more I entered Tickle's understanding of the church that is emerging from today's reformation, the more I understood that what she writes here may be truer than I had given credit for.

First, Tickle begins by articulating the notion that every five hundred years (give or take) the church goes through a sort of transformation (the Great Reformation took place roughly five hundred years ago). She then proceeds to review the major transformations the church has undergone in the history of the Church. The Great Schism preceded the Reformation, Gregory the Great and the monastic orders before that, and the time of the

apostles before that. Of course, Tickle finds the church of today in such a situation—*The Great Emergence* (or else no need for this book, I suppose).

Tickle is clear to point out that such seismological shifts are not merely religious ones. There are many cultural, technological, political, environmental, and sociological pressures that have contributed to these shifts. Tickle adequately articulates these elements, even though she provides them only a (necessary) cursory glance.

I am most interested with the section (chapter 6 and following) in which Tickle lays out the conventional view of current denominationalism and theological “grouping” (for lack of a better term) and the emerging center. She lays out the quadrilateral model illustrating Liturgicals, Social Justice Christians, Renewalists, and Conservatives. We don’t always fit so cleanly into such neat categories, so there tends to be an overlapping cruciform pattern in which we find ourselves.

Tickle sees faith communities gathering more toward the center and the emerging expression being one that may be much different than that from which it emerged. In this line of thinking (131), it is not exclusively the hip downtown “emerging” churches, but rather the church universal, the one holy catholic and apostolic church, which is being blown into the center.

That seems to me to be a most intriguing idea, but one that is much too broad. Forgive my ignorance, but I’m still not clear on who exactly are the ones gathering into the center. The entire church universal or those who find themselves closest to the cruciform pattern and where each of the quadrilateral categories converges?

Her last chapter, *The Way Ahead*, seems to be short on details as well. This seems strange to me as Tickle is neither a clergyperson nor an academic, but rather a lay leader and Eucharistic minister in the Episcopal Church. As such, I would have expected some practical engagement with this line of thought. Perhaps this is because the Great Emergence has not been fully realized and is difficult to forecast. “Where exactly it [the Great Emergence narrative] will go remains to be seen, but go it will. There is no doubt about that” (160). I can deal with being vague and ambiguous, but that is a bit much.

Overall, this is a good book—one I’d recommend. Her treatment of the history of the transformational shifts in Christianity is worth the price of the book in itself. The emphasis on openness to diversity becomes crucial if she is correct in her “emerging toward the center” assertion. That will preach!



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