

EMERGING HOMILETICS: A PENTECOSTAL RESPONSE

Practical Theology Interest Group

Rev. Rick Wadholm Jr.

Providence University College and Theological Seminary

Presented at the 42nd Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies

The contemporary era has been witness to some major shifts in worldview, hermeneutics and (as this paper focuses upon) homiletics. One particular place where this is most evident in the Evangelical branch of the Church is in the so-called “Emergent/Emerging Church Movement” (or ECM as it will be called in the analysis that follows). Any description of this “movement” is bound to be overly simplistic and does little more than offer a caricature at some level.¹ Therefore, instead of attempting to describe the entire movement (particularly with regard to homiletical theory and practice) just one of the primary voices—Doug Pagitt’s—which has had a high impact upon the ECM will be described for introductory purposes followed by a brief discussion of worldview, hermeneutics and homiletics. It is hoped that through a study of this leading voice in the ECM that there might be a more well-rounded perspective of what ECM

¹ See the helpful article in this regard by Roger Olson, “Is the Emerging/Emergent Church Movement (ECM) a Real Movement?” at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2011/08/is-the-emergingemergent-church-movement-ecm-a-real-movement/> [accessed May 24, 2012]. Also, the several articles that suggest this caricaturesque feature with some overall themes which give some sense of coherence to the movement in Scot McKnight, “Five Streams of the Emerging Church: Key Elements of the Most Controversial and Misunderstood Movement in the Church Today,” *CT* (February 2007): 34-39; also see the brief outline of nine common characteristics in Richard L. Holland, “Progressional Dialogue & Preaching: Are They the Same?” *TMSJ* 17/2 (Fall 2006): 207n1: they “identify with the life of Jesus,” “transform the secular realm,” “live highly communal lives,” “welcome the stranger,” “serve with generosity,” “participate as producers,” “create as created beings,” “lead as a body,” and “take part in spiritual activities”; David H. Johnson, “Emerging Churches: Reflections From a Traditionalist Seminary Dean,” *Didaskalia* (Winter 2008): 162. Mark Driscoll, referencing the work of Ed Stetzer, notes three broad strands of the movement: *relevants*, *reconstructionists*, and *revisionists* in “A Pastoral Perspective on the Emergent Church,” *CTR* 3:2 (Spring 2006): 89-91. For two helpful bibliographies on the ECM see Vic Froese, “The Emerging Church: A Select Bibliography,” *Direction* 39:1 (Spring 2010):106-112 and Andrew D. Streett, “A Selective Bibliography of the Emerging Church Movement,” *CTR* 3:2 (Spring 2006):95-99. John S. Bohannon has written an extensive analysis of four prominent voices in the ECM in order to better appreciate and respond to this movement's notion of the homiletical task in *Preaching & the Emerging Church: An Examination of Four Founding Leaders: Mark Driscoll, Dan Kimball, Brian McLaren, and Doug Pagitt* (Self-published dissertation, 2010).

may encompass as well as the potential impact it might have specifically upon the field of Pentecostal homiletics. Pagitt's own model for homiletics will be discussed in its relation to Pentecostal homiletical thinking and practice as a model which might better exemplify what Pagitt is aiming to accomplish.

Doug Pagitt – Introduction

Doug Pagitt pastors a congregation he planted in 2000 in south Minneapolis, Minnesota called “Solomon's Porch.” This church is a self-proclaimed “holistic, missional, Christian community.”² It is in this context that Pagitt has worked out his homiletical theories through the practice of congregational life. In other words, he has written his books and articles, and spoken for conferences primarily as a practitioner and not simply as an academician postulating a new methodology. The primary introduction to Pagitt's model for preaching is laid out in *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Zondervan 2005) and thus this work forms the basis for what follows.

Pagitt suggests there is actually no single proper method of homiletic.³ However, he rejects the majority modernist (in his understanding) approach to homiletics that he has labeled “speaching” for its dependence upon the presentation of the message by one individual where all others present simply listen. His argument is that this form of preaching is actually the creation of the Enlightenment.⁴ Pagitt includes all forms (narrative, propositional, inductive, deductive,

² Their website also states several things which are *not* to be found on the website: “You will not find statements of what our community believes on this site. Belief is a dynamic lived reality and doesn’t lend itself to website statements. Also, you will not find our priorities listed on the site, but you will find them in the lived expression of our community so please join us.” <http://www.solomonsporch.com/who-we-are/whats-not-here/> [accessed 05/19/2012].

³ Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 11.

⁴ Pagitt, *Preaching*, 28, 60-64.

visionary or abductive) of one-way speaking crafted ahead of time as “speaching.”⁵ For Pagitt, this methodology must be surrendered if the church is to become what God has intended it to be. It is not that he is “trying to convince people that speaching is a failure as much as” he is “trying to provide a new way of thinking for those who've already concluded such but don't have the words to go with their intuition.”⁶

His own preference is for what he calls “progressional dialogue” in place of such “speaching.”⁷ Pagitt's definition of “progressional dialogue” is “where the content of the presentation is established in the context of a healthy relationship between the presenter and the listeners, and substantive changes in the content are then created as a result of this relationship.”⁸ He argues, “As a pastor I want to be part of a community where the workings of God are imbedded in all, where the roles of teaching and learning aren't mine alone but instead are something intrinsic to who we are as a people.”⁹

For Pagitt, the form of homiletics which will best serve the church is this progressional dialogue model wherein the entire congregation join themselves to the work of the message. He says,

I find myself regularly redefining my role [as preacher] and the role of preaching. I find myself wanting to live life with the people of my community where I can preach—along with the other preachers of our community—but not allow that to become an act of speech making. Instead I want it to be a living interaction of the story of God and the story of our community being connected by our truth telling, our vulnerability, and our open minds, ears, and eyes—all brought together by the active work of the Spirit of God as we 'Let the message of Christ dwell among (us) richly as (we) teach and admonish one

5 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 52. The first four forms of preaching are noted specifically by Pagitt, but the last two (“visionary and abductive”) are not and I have included them here as likely fitting under the rubric of forms Pagitt would reject despite their being developed/archetyped by two Emerging practitioners. The “visionary” attributed to Rob Bell and the “abductive” (or *integrative*) to Kenton C. Anderson, which are both discussed at length in Ray Anderson's, *Choosing to Preach: A Comprehensive Introduction to Sermon Options and Structures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 221-261.

6 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 114.

7 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 11, 12.

8 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 23.

9 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 23.

another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in (our) hearts' (Colossians 3:16).¹⁰

His goal is nothing short of an overhaul of contemporary models of preaching as he understands them.

Pagitt makes an important point of clarification when he writes,

as important as preaching is to the church, the goal of the church is not to be a 'preaching center.' Nor is the ultimate goal of the Christian faith the creation and health of churches. Rather, the goal of Christians, and of all humanity, ought to be to join in the activity of God wherever we find it. That may lead to preaching, but preaching and church life are not the only way in which God is active in the world.¹¹

Yet he still regards preaching as a “crucial act of the church” even if, in his estimation, as it currently functions it seems to be failing and “broken.”¹² For Pagitt, the greatest problem with contemporary models of preaching is “relational.”¹³ He believes there is an undermining of relationships when one individual (or even a select few) become the voice of instruction for everyone else. It therefore quenches the story of God's work in the lives of others who belong to that community and therefore also have something to contribute. The ECM congregations have tended to “capitalize on the power of story to communicate God's story. There is also a push to share the stories of parishioners with the attempt to name the point where the two stories intersect.”¹⁴

Pagitt believes new forms of preaching are needed because we need a “new us” and this is the church being “*prophetic* in the lives of God's people.”¹⁵ This is considered a move towards a “deep ecclesiology.”¹⁶ He clarifies just how deep of a change he expects this to make on the church when he posits that “there is no way [in his thinking] to separate the method from

10 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 10, 11.

11 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 14.

12 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 18-21.

13 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 21-23.

14 Johnson, “Emerging Churches,” 169.

15 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 35, 158, 159, emphasis added.

16 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 35, 170-174.

the message.” The message and method are inseparable and reveal our “understanding of God, faith, life, authority, and power” one way or another.¹⁷ This new method is therefore intended to speak a new message...a message which is more conducive to the post-modern person. It is this notion which seems to create friction for many evangelicals in their approach to the idea of an altered message proposed by the ECM.¹⁸ In a similar manner, Brian McLaren (another major voice in the ECM) proposes that for postmoderns “showing and listening” are “as important as telling and convincing.”¹⁹

Part of the issue for them both is that knowledge must be held tentatively in a post-modern worldview. There can be no notion of objectified and possessed knowledge which is no longer open to questions, critique and revision. In fact, Pagitt argues for using “provisional language” as a potentially more fruitful aid to discussion since it is not acting as an end-all for the interpretation of Scripture and faith. This is not to suggest that one cannot or should not hold strong beliefs about various matters, but to leave open the possibility of correction, revision or deepening one's own perspective and to admit interpretation as perspectivally influenced.²⁰

So what is the role of the “preacher” in such a context where anyone and everyone is expected to participate and the “preacher” is simply another member of the preaching congregation? Pagitt believes his role is to be a primary studier/preparer because of his theological training and therefore he must bear some responsibility for receiving this training.²¹

17 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 50, 51.

18 Eleonora L. Scott, “A Theological Critique of the Emerging, Postmodern Missional Church/movement,” *ERT* (2010): 343.

19 Duduit, “Preaching,” 123; McLaren favors a move towards a more conversational approach to preaching because he believes it connects better with others, it is more contextually particular and is not a power-play to assert authority over the others, 119. This is echoed by Tony Jones—cited by Travis I. Barbour and Nicholas E Toews, “The Emergent Church: A Methodological Critique,” *Direction* 39:1 (2010):34—who rejects the idea of the ECM being defined by any particular theological or ideological dogma, but by a “shared commitment to robust, theological dialogue.”

20 Pagitt, *Preaching*, 200-204.

21 The following paragraph is taken from a personal interview conducted with Pagitt on January 16, 2012 via Facebook Chat.

Further, he believes that a person such as himself, who enjoys the study of theology and Biblical studies, should carry greater responsibility in order to offer his gifts to the corporate body of believers. He defines himself as a sort of “tour guide” or “art docent” who is knowledgeable about what the tour consists of, but is part of a group where each may and should explore various facets on their own.

In order to better respond to Pagitt's homiletical arguments several questions will briefly be discussed: What do you see (as a question of worldview)? What do you mean (as a question of hermeneutics)? And what do you say (as a question of homiletics)? These questions are intended to aid in the conversation between Pagitt and Pentecostals in the discussion that follows. There is no intention of offering a full-fledged discussion of any one of these questions, but it seems they must be tackled at least in a cursory manner to better understand and respond to Pagitt.

What Do You See? The Question of Worldview

The question of one's worldview is no small matter. It is something, though, that is normally not a conscious understanding, but the very lens through which one views the world. One of the primary ways an individual discovers the various nuances of their own worldview is via exposure to other worldviews. Arguably, one of the leading contemporary worldviews is what has been called “post-modernism.” This view is normally viewed against the perspective of the so-called “modern” worldview. While I cannot take the time to describe all that might be entailed in the post-modern view, I will limit myself to a brief discussion of the post-modern worldview of the ECM. I will briefly describe those aspects that are more readily apparent with regard to the ECM's homiletics.

The issue of what is knowable comes into play in significant ways in an ECM worldview which is more post-modern in orientation. For many in the ECM, “epistemological certainty” must be rejected as the leftovers of modernist notions of knowledge.²² There is no longer certainty, but instead a notion of necessary humility and admission that all knowledge is knowledge on the way toward understanding²³ This flows naturally into the storied nature of post-modernism.

“Story” is key to understanding the worldview of post-moderns' epistemology and reputedly offers a better key to communicating the Gospel in a post-modern culture as previously mentioned in the discussion of Pagitt's work.²⁴ Everyone has a story after all. This means that there are a great multiplicity of perspectives on any given topic and therefore one cannot assert their “story” against all others as the only true story. This aspect requires that the community share their story and listen to the stories of others. This overall story-telling and hearing is a continual cycle wherein the truth is conceived to be shared without domination of any one individual or group's story. This is not considered to be mere opinion sharing, because others are invited into the sharer's experience by listening and participating in that same story.²⁵

What Do You Mean? The Question of Hermeneutics

It is no secret that the ECM has tended to diverge from traditional contemporary Protestant homiletical theory which has tended to focus upon the historical-grammatical

22 See the discussion by John Bolt, “An Emerging Critique of the Postmodern, Evangelical Church: A Review Essay,” *CTJ* 41 (2006): 205-221.

23 This is in contrast to the optimistic ontology and epistemological constructivism found in critical realism, on which see Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning In This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), esp. 259-265.

24 Michael Duduit, ed., “Preaching to Postmoderns: An Interview with Brian McLaren,” *Preaching with Power: Dynamic Insights From Twenty Top Pastors* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 118, 126. For a less specifically post-modern take on narrative preaching see Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004).

25 Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 175.

methodology. The ECM, however, has been regarded as diverging in four primary areas: “Preunderstanding as Variable Starting Point”; “Scriptural Ambiguity”; “Authoritative Community”; and “Personal and Contextual Influence.”²⁶ These divergent areas all flow from the worldview briefly discussed above, but need specific reflection in relation to the task of hermeneutics.

Relativity and, as a corollary, relationality belong to post-modern hermeneutics. There is an inherent tendency to reject any objectifying of knowledge and instead to focus upon the process and relational aspect of truth and therefore of the text of Scripture as truth. The Scripture stands as another member of the community, even if as a leading member. The story of Scripture offers a central story, but not the only story and, therefore, any interpretation must be held tentatively.²⁷ The Church together hears and responds to the Scripture in a manner where there is a community hermeneutic.

According to the critique of Richard Holland against ECM hermeneutic (and particularly Pagitt's proposal) is the statement that preaching “is public hermeneutics. It reflects what are the preacher's fundamental interpretations of his world, his task, his people, and most important, his Bible.”²⁸ In Holland's estimation ECM's public hermeneutic undermines the authority and perspicuity of Scripture in as much as it makes Scripture to be only another member of the community.

What Do You Say? The Question of Homiletics

26 As noted by Jason S. Sexton, “Emerging Church Homiletics and the Historical-Grammatical Method,” *SJT* 53:2 (Spring 2011): 159-164.

27 Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined*, 31,125. Also, see the discussion of this point and its critique in Holland, “Preaching Re-Imagined,” 213-216.

28 Richard L. Holland, “Progressional Dialogue & Preaching: Are They the Same?” *TMSJ* 17/2 (Fall 2006): 207, 221.

The final question to be discussed is one of homiletics itself. For Pagitt, and many of the ECM, homiletics is a task under complete renovation. The forms of preaching which have dominated the Church are no longer considered sufficient to meet the needs of a post-modern world. Homiletics has and is undergoing redefinition as it is brought under the rubric of the community story. The place for one individual to take prominence and simply declare “this is what Scripture says” may in fact be nothing more than the artifacts of a positivist modernism where authoritarian control dominates.

The ECM offers a vision of preaching where the Church carries the burden of the message, where the message of God is communally heard and shared in a multiplicity of avenues and forms. The story of Scripture and the story of the community are considered to intersect in fresh ways. This stands in contrast to the narrative preaching approach of Roger Standing which one might have initially thought appealed to the ECM, but may not because it still relies on *one* individual's telling of *the* story. Standings declares, “Christian preaching will always be thoroughly biblical. Its shape and form may vary, as may all the other constituent parts, but it will never depart from its foundational dependence upon the truth contained in the written word of God, the Bible. If it does, whatever else it may be, it is not Christian preaching.”²⁹ So how should one respond to the homiletical proposal of Pagitt and the ECM and its concomitant basis in the post-modern worldview and hermeneutic?

A Pentecostal Response

It is notable that several writers have connected the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements to the ECM. However, these writers have connected it in a negative light believing

²⁹ Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004), 8, 9.

that the Pentecostal manner of reading and proclaiming Scripture is also an undermining of God's "straightforward revelation" found in Scripture.³⁰ This is not to deny that there are strong tendencies apparent in the ECM which may in fact undermine the know-ability of God in Scripture, but this is not necessarily so. There is a movement away from the modernist positivist notions of knowledge and a continuing move toward an experiential knowledge which is more contextually driven. This is not inherently negative. It is an admission of humility all too necessary for the Church. It is a move toward a hermeneutic and homiletic of humility rather than arrogance or power-play (even if there at times seems to be an over-emphasis on what may actually be a false sense of humility).

It has been pointed out that "in general the Pentecostal's experience has preceded their hermeneutics" and therefore they have tended to "exegete [their] experience"³¹ which has sometimes been labeled "pragmatic hermeneutics."³² It is this hermeneutic that seems to best afford an aid to the direction Pagitt proposes the church should move. The Pentecostal hermeneutic demands a congregation living in accord with the revelation of God in Scripture, alive with the Spirit of Christ Jesus. There is a hermeneutical spiral involved in the move from experience to Scripture, from Scripture to experience which admits the living presence and work of the Spirit in the midst of the congregation. The Word and the Spirit are essential in the life of such a community. This element seems lacking in Pagitt's proposal. The Pentecostal union of Word and Spirit seems a better response to the need for conversing with a post-modern world that craves the idea of sharing their story.³³ The story of Pentecostals is the story of Scripture and

30 John MacArthur, "Perspicuity of Scripture: The Emergent Approach," TMSJ 17:2 (Fall 2006): 141, 142.

31 Gordon Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 86.

32 Roger Stronstad, *Spirit, Scripture & Theology: A Pentecostal Perspective* (Baguio City, Philippines: Asia Pacific Theological Seminary Press, 1995), 11-30.

33 See the extended discussion in Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (JPTSSup 1; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic, 1997), 32-47.

this must be the story of the Church. Pagitt reminds the Church that there is actually a necessary sharing in the story, but falls short of including this Pentecostally influenced experience of Scripture as normative.

Pagitt's opposition to singular authority seems instead to lead him to replace it with a group consensus of sorts. This does not seem to actually be a helpful direction overall if one were simply to exchange one form of perceived tyranny for another. However, authority is not inherently tyrannical. There is an authority which is imparted by the Spirit as God's word is proclaimed and responded to. "Preaching that lacks authority leaves a congregation longing for the divine voice....Still we need to understand that this authority resides in the truth of the Word rather than in a particular tone we bring to our messages. We need to distinguish carefully between preaching with authority and merely sounding authoritarian."³⁴

Further, the Pentecostal penchant for "testimony" is a sharing of the story of Scripture within the community in a way which intersects with the individual story.³⁵ Pagitt's version of every member sharing their story does not seem to take the Spirit into account as in the Pentecostal expression. The Pentecostal testimony is actually a narrative hermeneutic that requires the Scripture speak with the living voice of God into our contemporary existence and experience. There is no bifurcation between the story of God testified to in Scripture and what one must experience and share as a member of the Spirit-filled community.

Though Pagitt himself is considered the pastor of Solomon's Porch and believes that he shares a primary responsibility to preach, he never expresses any understanding of the gift of "teacher" in the Church. In Pentecostal praxis to not have specific "teachers" within the congregation is to fail to accept the gifts Christ has given to the Church. Some are actually

34 Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 94.

35 Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2009), 128-171; and Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality*, 71-94.

gifted to preach and teach, while others are gifted to administer or evangelize, prophesy or exercise mercy. Such gifts must be honored and facilitated for a healthy Spirit-filled congregation to function to the glory of God and be built into the kind of community they were intended to become. There seems to be a concomitant authority belonging to the gifting of the Spirit within the wider congregation. Any leveling of giftedness may in fact be a denial of the self-will of Christ's Spirit to give freely and abundantly.³⁶

The relational emphasis of Pagitt's proposal and, indeed, of the overall ECM, falls within this Pentecostal experience of the charismatic gifts shared in the union of the love of the Spirit. There are a multiplicity of “gifts” in the Church which have been given by the Spirit. The various members all may and should contribute as themselves gifts to the Church using what they have received by God's Spirit for the mutual edification of everyone. This is essentially the vision of the ECM, though there appears to have been a divorce from this pneumatic appropriation and it thus ends up being programmed (despite the tendency to reject such notions by the ECM). This relational aspect must be recovered in the context of the specifically Spirit endowed community.³⁷

The case could be made that Doug Pagitt has found a homiletical key to addressing people belonging to a post-modern era. However, this assessment might be reaching too far. His re-imagining of preaching may be nothing more than *imagined preaching*. After all, once one has replaced a prophetic message with a congregational think-tank one seems to have left behind actual *preaching*. As a Pentecostal practitioner and pastor there is much to commend in his suggestion that the corporate body *can* and *must* contribute to the overall teaching and instruction

36 The issue of “progressional dialogue” denying the “gifts” given to the Church was brought to my attention in a private phone conversation with Robert Wadholm [January 17, 2012].

37 Dan Kimball, *Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 175.

of the congregation. It should never devolve into the job of one person or even only a select few. This is not to deny the place for trained teachers and pastors in the congregation, but to admit that the wider body must be not only encouraged, but facilitated in contributing to the fullest development of that community. The Spirit can and does equip everyone to contribute. Pagitt has hit upon this, but arguably without admitting this in a more charismatic and pneumatic framework which would seem to offer a stronger biblical basis for his proposal. Instead, it appears to be institutionalized at some level in opposition to the more spontaneous pneumatic contributions expected in a Pentecostal setting (contrary to his attempt to even arrange his book in a free-form “structure”).

Further, his reasoning for the congregational cooperation in the development of a message seems due to his rejection of authoritarian figures. This is not the reasoning for the charismatic contributions in the Pentecostal setting. In the Pentecostal context, the congregation contributes to the overall message, because the Spirit has gifted the various members to contribute. It is a matter of pneumatic life and not control issues. He does propose that this is also due to the need for a corporate voice (that everyone has a story to share), but this corporate voice may be actually muting the voice of the one Spirit who speaks through the various members of that Spirit-endowed community. The remarks of Chris Altmann remind the preacher that “preaching can be more of a community experience than we may have imagined” without having to follow the specifics of Pagitt's “progressional dialogue.”³⁸ His assessment argues in a similar direction to that proposed in this paper (though without the Pentecostal priority).

Pentecostal preaching may in fact be just the answer to Pagitt's suggestion that this is a day for a new vision of what preaching should look like in order to reach this world we find ourselves in.

³⁸ Chris Altmann, review of Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005, in *Homiletics* 33:1 (Summer 2008): 26.