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Book Review

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Book Reviews

Gay, Doug (2011). *Remixing the church. The five moves of emerging ecclesiology*. London: SCM Press. ISBN 978-0-334-04396-6.

New manifestations of ecclesial life, especially in the USA, have become known as “emerging church” since the beginning of this century. Such events and meetings often lack formal links with institutional churches; yet these “fresh expressions” (as the Anglican Church called them), whether they occur in dance halls or cafés, at people’s homes or on the Internet, have much in common with what we tend to call “church”. Moreover, the participants themselves use labels like “youth church” or, in the UK at an even earlier date, “the Nine O’Clock Service” or “alternative worship”.

This book is “a provisional attempt to theorize the concept of Emerging Church” (p. xiii). The author, a lecturer in practical theology and a minister of the Church of Scotland, sets out to contribute to the dialogue between academic theologians and those active in the church. He does this by way of a reflective “reading” of the Emerging Church project, Practical Theology being conceived here as Church Pragmatics.

Gay draws on his own experience as well as his knowledge of theological literature (David Bosch, Milbank, Moltmann, Volf, Yoder, Pete Ward, Bolger, Gibbs). His perspective is that of an academic theologian reflecting on his own practice in emerging congregations and international debates, and he presents his reflections as five “moves” in the process of emerging: “auditing”, “retrieval”, “unbundling”, “supplementing” and “remixing”.

The starting point is a low-church Protestant re-appraisal of the senses, an interest in the ecumenical movement, and an appreciation of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism and post-colonial missiology (listening to other traditions, or “auditing”). The author sees this move followed by a philosophical and theological rehabilitation of tradition (“retrieval”), comparable with *ressourcement* and clearly apparent in the popularity of the songs of Taizé and Iona. It includes elements from various traditions — detached, however, from their original ties with clerical structures, for instance. An example of an “unbundled” practice of this kind is an Ash Wednesday celebration in an emerging congregation in a Reformed context. The author identifies six innovations or additions to existing church practice in low church Protestantism — the move of “supplementing”. This involves the rehabilitation of ordinary believers, increased attention to the social significance of the Gospel, and the diffusion of productive power through modern technology and social media. Finally, the author sees his own “born-again ecumenism” reflected in the various positions emerging groups adopt in the polarity between survival and mission, between a polity of succession and “procession” (Moltmann), and between “liberal” and “orthodox” theology. Like contemporary DJ’s, emerging groups are “remixing” disparate elements into a new whole. In this final move something new

is created, using elements from various traditions. Analysis of this “new whole” confronts us with “a new kind of Church we are learning to be”: a “pilgrim Church of disciples” that is “richly storied, richly memoried”, “apostolic and catholic”, “liturgically versatile”, “mission-shaped” and “political-prophetic”.

From a participant’s point of view, the author has written a sympathetic essay presenting a hermeneutical model geared to a theological understanding of what is happening in various emerging ecclesial groups. The empirical base of his analysis is small. He tells his story with fervour, but the model itself does not seem strong enough for empirical use. The “five moves” are not so much distinct stages as catchy labels presenting aspects of a complex process in empirical reality. The conversation on emerging churches could, however, benefit from empirical research in the tradition of “congregational studies”. Such a perspective lies outside the scope of this book.

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