

**Church of the Open Door and the
“The Emergent Church & Contemplative Movements”**
January 4, 2007

In recent days, the leadership of Church of the Open Door have been approached by a few members and attenders who have come to us asking if Open Door has been changing its direction and/or moving toward what are called the “The Emergent Church” and the “Contemplative” movements. The questions and answers you read below are those of Open Door’s Governing Board and Executive Management Team in response to these questions and concerns.

The leadership has seen a growing voice in evangelicalism that is raising alarms about churches that are exploring emergent or contemplative paths in their shared life. It appears to us in our research into the sources of this concern that there are a few local and national media “voices of alarm” in the general Evangelical culture whose focus is “anti-Emergent and Contemplative.” In their concern that the gospel and church ministry is being adversely effected by these movements they are spreading fear and suspicion through oversimplifications and name-calling of many Christian leaders. Our reason in posting this material is to clarify Open Door’s posture towards these movements as well as our understanding of them. We have met with a few in our body who have made a healthy inquiry of leadership for answers to the alarm they are hearing. There is also some indication that there are a few who are not asking leadership for clarification but may be drawing conclusions from what they hear from sources on the internet, radio, and other media.

Has there been an intentional or unintentional change in Open Door’s direction both in theology and ministry practice that is not being communicated to the congregation?

No. Open Door’s vision and values are clearly articulated and have not changed, and there are no plans to change them—and certainly not to become Emergent or Contemplative.

In another sense Open Door is always changing in that our culture is committed to transformation into the image and character of Christ. We also follow the leading of the Holy Spirit and seek to follow where He leads as we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. That will result in new and fresh teaching and forms of ministry.

We are not a church that tells people what to believe about every doctrinal matter but encourages people to be inquisitive in their belief within a broad orthodox, and theologically conservative, Christian perspective. We also do not present everything in black and white but desire that our people read broadly and hear from many voices in the broader Christian community.

Therefore, we will read and quote approvingly those who some feel are not as black and white on some issues or who do not “pass” a certain theological litmus test. For instance, should an author need to exactly agree with our theology to be approvingly quoted from the pulpit to help a pastor make a point? We do not believe so. Our concern when we quote such persons is veracity, not origin. The idea that we can only learn from those in our strict theological community can seriously limit potential insights and even the work of the Spirit among us. This view is nothing new for Open Door but has been our tradition for many years.

As the leadership explored the sources of some people’s discomfort on this point, we found that a few authors referred to in sermons at Open Door were being labeled as Emergent or Contemplative by biased and ill-informed websites, radio ministries, and books. For example, some of these sources assert that Dallas Willard teaches Buddhism or that Brian McLaren doesn’t believe in substitutionary atonement. We find such accusations to be false and at times slanderous.

If Open Door were to change direction, we would, in keeping with our culture of openness and authenticity, share and discern such a shift with the congregation.

What is the “Emergent Church Movement”?

The Emergent Church is not a denomination or even organization of churches. It is only a publishing house and a loose association of leaders, mainly younger, who describe themselves as being in a “conversation” with one another about how to be the church in what they describe as our “post-modern” culture.

Being that there is no “Emergent Church” or organization as such there is no such thing as an official Emergent theology. Most churches that identify themselves as Emergent are well within the realm of Christian orthodoxy but there are some that are not. When anti-Emergent media accuse people of advocating Emergent theology they usually offer gross generalizations which sadly do not represent what most Emergents believe or are saying.

Open Door has no posture for or against the Emergent Church but, like any voice in the church, listens for what the Spirit is doing or not doing in these movements.

Three untrue “rumors” about typical Emergents:

Rumor #1 - Emergents do not believe in absolute truth and have accepted the implications of this for the truth claims of the gospel and the truths of scripture.

Rumor #2 - Emergents are practicing eastern mysticism that is unbiblical and is being offered as “ancient Christian practices”.

Rumor #3 - Emergents are compromising the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement and preaching a false gospel.

These assertions are not true. For example in regards to untrue rumor #1, emergent authors do not claim that the Bible is not true or the gospel is not unique or absolute in its truth claims. They believe that in the current “post-modern” climate, arguing and proving who is right and wrong is not the best approach to sharing the life of Jesus with others. Demonstrating a life of love is more effective and then moving on to Christ’s truth claims will follow.

Unfortunately, those who believe that presenting rational arguments is the best evangelism method mistake Emergent’s emphasis on the priority of a life-witness of love as “compromising” the Gospel. This is a gross simplification and erroneous conclusion about what Emergent teachers say about biblical truth.

As to rumor #2, Emergents are not embracing eastern mysticism and are truly practicing ancient Christian practices (Meditation on Scripture, Silence, Solitude), which have been used throughout Church history, including the Reformation. These practices have been lost to Evangelicals in recent history, and are now being recovered..

As to rumor #3, Emergents are not compromising the substitutionary atonement but are calling for a fuller embrace of what the atonement and Christ’s work on the cross means for transformation into life change now, not just getting into heaven on Jesus’ merits.

Even while there are some false rumors or perceptions about the Emergent church, there also exist areas of concern about Emergent approaches:

- 1- Emergent pre-occupation with being in “conversation” with each other and the danger of ministry being an ingrown and fruitless dialogue among Christians.
- 2- Emergent “deconstruction” or dismantling of old ways of doing church and other methods of ministry without any constructive outcomes.
- 3- Emergent attempts to relate Christian truth and witness to Post-modernism and an overemphasis of relating the gospel to this philosophical approach just when the philosophy of post-modernism is becoming discarded and is disintegrating as a major force.

Again, while our church may glean helpful insights from Emergent authors or ways of rethinking how to do church, Open Door is not becoming Emergent and has not ever considered anything like it.

Is Open Door becoming “Emergent”?

No, Open Door is not Emergent and is not becoming Emergent nor are we in association with anything that might be the Emergent Movement.

We do read or refer to some authors who label themselves as Emergent (such as Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Doug Pagitt) and find that there are some directions in their thinking that are both causes for caution but also for our serious and healthy consideration. We do not find that there is anything close to what the others are claiming to be true of these leaders although there are things that we definitely disagree with in their positions as well as things we agree with.

What is the Contemplative Movement?

The Contemplative Movement is harder to define than the Emergent movement. There are some authors, publishing and para-church ministries, and retreat centers, Roman Catholic and Protestant that refer to themselves as Contemplative. This is really not a movement as such but more of an approach or posture to the Christian life and practice that embraces quiet and meditation as a source of life in God in order to engage the world from a place of peace and confidence in God and Christ.

Others are not orthodox or even Christian at all and have embraced an unholy blend of Eastern Religious belief and practice and go as far as embracing the occult. There is certainly an alarm that needs to be sounded here. Unfortunately, writers such as Richard Foster, Dallas Willard and Larry Crabb, who are all conservative in their theology, have been linked by some with these unorthodox and non-Christian “contemplatives.” Our journey as a church has been enriched by Foster, Willard, and Crabb, and we believe much of what is said about them by certain people to be slanderous.

Open Door is and will continue to live out its vision and values which call for transformation and Christian Spiritual Formation into the character of Christ. Unashamedly, we stand within this movement and see in it hope for the church to recover its power and witness because we see this as a movement of the Spirit of God in our day.

Open Door is a leader in the Spiritual Formation movement in Evangelicalism and will continue to be in the future. We not only believe that this is biblically mandated but also see Christ’s great commission as calling us to spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is a biblical term (Galatians 4:19) and was Paul’s purpose for the church and his disciples.

With this very important distinction in mind (Contemplative Movement versus the Evangelical Christian Spiritual Formation Movement) we offer the following observations about the Contemplative Movement.

Some Cautions about Contemplative Movement:

- 1- Contemplatives who overemphasize the disciplines of silence, solitude, and meditation can become “navel-gazers” who light candles and even use these practices to neglect their spiritual formation while feeling very “spiritual.”
- 2- Contemplatives who are too experience-oriented and neglect the careful study of God’s word may drift from true formation in Christ into doctrinal and practical error and a kind of mysticism that is unbiblical, unchristian and unspiritual.

Some Contributions from the Contemplative Movement (as found in Richard Foster’s Five Streams, see above):

- 1- Contemplatives rightly challenge the head knowledge and activist Evangelical life that ignores prayer or simply uses it to ask God to bless our agenda or give us the “deal” of a comfortable life.
- 2- Contemplatives rightly emphasize, as does the apostle Paul, the mystery of Christ in us and the union we have in Him that is not just knowing doctrine or having right belief.

Is Open Door becoming a contemplative church or part of the contemplative movement?

No. Open Door is not a “contemplative church,” nor have we had or have any plans to change to a contemplative church.

It appears that Open Door has been falsely “linked” (in actual web links!) to what is called the Contemplative Movement because of our very intentional involvement in what is called the Spiritual Formation Movement. The Contemplative Movement is altogether different from the Spiritual Formation Movement.

Spiritual Formation has become the freshest work of the Spirit in Evangelicalism and is embraced now by almost all Evangelical denominations, colleges and seminaries and para-church organizations. One of the leading organizations in this area is the Spiritual Formation Forum, which holds a national and regional conference every two years. Open Door staff have attended and presented at the Spiritual Formation Forum in national conferences and will do so again.

Christian Spiritual Formation was a direction that we chose to pursue as we studied the scriptures and were influenced by the biblical teachings of Dallas Willard, Larry Crabb, Brennan Manning and others.

These authors have been accused by some of embracing a Roman Catholic works theology, and Eastern Mystical practices and beliefs. We find such accusations to be not only false but slanderous.

While we are not a contemplative church, we have benefited from spiritual practices that might be identified as “contemplative.” For instance, many in our congregation have grown spiritually through the discipline of *Lectio Divina* (which is Latin for *divine* or *sacred reading*), which presents a way to devotionally listen to God as He speaks through the Bible.

Practices such as prayerful meditation of scripture or *Lectio Divina* or practicing “quiet” is a practice of the Catholic Church and not just some Roman Catholic writers. Luther and other Protestants through the church age have practiced prayerful meditation of scripture without embracing “works” theology or other Roman Catholic theology. Jewish practices such as in Jesus’ own day included this kind of meditation. Read Psalm 119 or Psalm 1.

In addition, the disciplines of solitude and silence have been specially targeted by some who have wrongly attributed such practices to Eastern Religions such as Buddhism. Solitude and silence were constant practices of Jesus and of the Temple in the Old Testament. Peter and the apostles in Acts go to the Temple “at the hour of prayer” not only to pray with words and thoughts but to simply “be still and know I am God” (Hebrew word here in context of the roaring ocean of human voices means to “experience in a quiet and meditative manner,” not learn about by study or lecture). We encourage our people to learn to become quiet and to just sit in the presence of God as part of their spiritual practice.

Many who practice contemplative disciplines are within the Evangelical camp theologically. There are, however, those who believe that the practice of disciplines that might be termed contemplative automatically means the practitioner has departed from conservative Christian doctrine. They believe there is something intrinsic in the practice that automatically pulls one away from the Lord. We do not believe this to be so and, in fact, find many of these practices spiritually beneficial and used of God.

Some of those who use the term contemplative but may not necessarily term themselves contemplative are as conservative as Richard Foster who has nothing to do with Eastern Religious teaching but sees spirituality as in five streams (Word, Charismatic, Social Justice, Holiness, Contemplative) which form one river and interflow. Others are not even orthodox or Christian at all and have embraced an unholy blend of Eastern Religious belief and practice and go as far as embracing the occult. There is certainly an alarm that needs to sound here. But to link Richard Foster, Dallas Willard and Larry Crabb with these unorthodox and non-Christian “contemplatives” is not only unfair but unchristian and slanderous.

Open Door is and will continue to live out its vision and values which call for transformation and Christian Spiritual Formation into the character of Christ. Unashamedly we stand within this movement and see in it hope for the church to recover its power and witness because we see this as a movement of the Spirit of God in our day.

What are the cautions in getting information or drawing conclusions from anti-Emergent Church Movement or anti-Contemplative Movement websites and other media (blogs, radio programs, books)?

One of the greatest benefits of modern media and especially the internet is the free and accessible information and communication it affords. One of the downsides is that much of the time this information is not good information and more often can be the source of mis-information – opinions presented as facts or facts that are seriously distorted or erroneous.

It appears to us that there may be a new kind of Fundamentalism appearing in Evangelicalism to combat the aberrations of some aspects of the Emergent and Contemplative Movements. Parts of this movement are good. However, there is a dark side to it, moving away from healthy dialogue to creating an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that has led to slander and guilt-by-association for many good and faithful servants of Jesus Christ. We’re aware of several websites and radio broadcasts where there has been a listing of dangerous teachers and ministries including not only Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, Dallas Willard and Richard Foster but also Irwin McManus, Leith Anderson of Woodale Church and the National Association of Evangelicals, Rick Warren of Saddleback, Bill Hybels of Willowcreek, many Evangelical Seminaries like Bethel, and even Billy Graham!

The way to read the internet or listen to these voices is to discover for yourself what these writers say in their original publications – not taking someone else’s word secondhand – especially when the accusations are so potentially hurtful to the author’s reputation. If you have been exposed to these types of websites and broadcasts, we encourage you to peruse the writer’s own words. If that kind of inquiry is not an option for you then you must decide who and what you will trust for your discernment, a website or media spokesperson or the leaders and members of your faith community.

What is of greatest concern to us and should be feared most is that these teachings lead students and followers to a very narrow and small group of leaders for their diet of truth. While discounting almost all the teachers in Evangelicalism these people set up themselves, their websites, their teachings and their opinions as the only ones to trust. While they are calling their followers to fear and mistrust, it seems that what anyone listening to them should really fear is how much like the Pharisees these teachers behave. What an irony it would be that out of fear of doctrinal error a believer would follow those like the ones who opposed Jesus whose teaching upset the status quo and called for transformation.

What direction do you have for us who still have questions or concerns after reading this?

We welcome your questions and concerns. Please address them to Executive Pastor Keith Meyer at kmeyer@thedoor.org.

Our hope is that people will use their minds and their faith to grapple with these issues in a spirit of community and not a spirit of divisiveness. If after dialogue with us you find yourself unable to

trust leadership here and believe that Open Door is heading in a different direction than we say, you will need to choose if you can stay here. We are sad to see anyone leave but realize that such is the reality sometimes. Even Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement and had to part company.

What is not acceptable is for an individual or a group to mistrust their community and its leaders and to stay and spread that mistrust in others. Nor is it acceptable to deal with any rumors or confusion expressed to you by sharing that with others and not getting your questions directly answered by leadership. To stay in a local church and to have questions and get answers or to wrestle with those questions with leadership is called community in the Bible. To be in mistrust of leadership and to spread that mistrust is called divisiveness in the Bible.

Please pray for God's continued direction for Open Door. We believe He is leading us very clearly into our vision and values and that they reflect the call in the gospel and in the scriptures to transformation and life in the Kingdom of God. May God bless us all in that pursuit of Him and His Kingdom.