

SOUTHEASTERN BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
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A BOOK REVIEW OF

JIM BELCHER, *DEEP CHURCH:*
A THIRD WAY BEYOND EMERGING AND TRADITIONAL

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Belcher, Jim. *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: 2009), 233 pages. Reviewed by Jeremy P. Roberts.

Jim Belcher (M.A., Fuller Seminary; Ph.D., Georgetown University), serves as founder and lead pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California.

Previously, he served as adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University and as a staff member of Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena, California. In order to grasp Belcher's text with clarity, the background which led to his writing must be captured.

Belcher and his wife, Michelle, began a small gathering with four other Christ followers who desired a more intimate relationship with Jesus than they had ever imagined. The traditionalism of the historic megachurch of which they were members was bothersome to them. Belcher notes, "The next week, our four friends brought a few more people. This pattern went on for weeks. Within two months we had close to fifty people . . ." (22). "Hope, so often extinguished by the disappointments and failures of life, began to return, slowly. People were being set free . . . it was incredible" (22–23).

It was at this time that Belcher began connecting with young pastors where he lived in southern California, and eventually across the country who had similar thoughts of frustration with the traditional church and passions to see a new movement of God (23–28). Belcher was intrigued by conversations he had with this group that would eventually become key leaders in the emergent church, but he had some reservations and frustrations with the theories being purported in their conversations. Belcher's mentor at Fuller Seminary, President Richard Mouw, taught Belcher to call his reservations "Calvinist misgivings" (28).

Belcher was facing a problem; he was frustrated with both the traditional and emerging churches. He did not want to have to choose a group with which to align the congregation he served as he saw both flawed. This course of events launched the purpose for Belcher to write this text—to circumvent the problems of both groups, grasp each of their positives, and create “a third way beyond emerging and traditional” (the subtitle of the text). After explaining his brief background leading to his thesis, Belcher divides his text into separate sections of introducing the reader to the emerging church, followed by addressing the issues that divide emerging and traditional Christians, and finally a development of his middle-ground—*Deep Church*.

The Emerging Church

Facing the daunting task of defining and labeling the emerging church is like shooting a moving target. The emerging church movement has oft changed in fifteen years, and continues to metamorphosize. Despite the evolutionary aspect of the emerging church, Belcher seeks to clarify the identity of the emerging church.

Belcher identifies this group as the antithesis of the traditional church in seven areas: [1] Captivity to Enlightenment rationalism, [2] A narrow view of salvation, [3] Belief before belonging, [4] Uncontextualized worship, [5] Ineffective preaching, [6] Weak ecclesiology, and [7] Tribalism (40–43).

Belcher trifurcates the emerging movement, and clarifies this group is far from unified. The three main groups he identifies, with help from missiologist Ed Stetzer, are [1] relevants, [2] reconstructionists, and [3] revisionists (45–47). Belcher and Stetzer identify *relevants* as members of the emerging family who are most similar to the

traditional church who are simply “trying to make their worship, music and outreach more contextual to emerging culture” (46). *Reconstructionists*, according to Belcher and Stetzer, experiment with “. . . informal, incarnational and organic church forms such as house churches . . .” and “. . . are aggressively planting new churches” as they “. . . look to the pre-Constantinian early church as their model” (46). The *revisionists* summate to gain the most attention and are the most theologically liberal of the three branches of the emerging movement. *Revisionists* question issues “like the nature of the substitutionary atonement, the reality of hell, the complementarian nature of gender, and the nature of the Gospel itself” (46). Belcher concludes this section by stating that he will primarily critique the beliefs and practices of the *reconstructionist* and *revisionist* camps.

Dividing Issues between Emerging and Traditional

Differing conceptions of truth, evangelism, and worship are all issues that divide the emerging and traditional churches. Belcher prefaces the divisive issues between the two camps by explaining John Stott’s “unity of the gospel,” pertaining to the need for boundaries and Tom Oden’s “new ecumenism,” teaching of his commitment to teaching the Nicene, Athanasian, and Apostles Creeds (53–58). Belcher determines that essentials must be established in order to determine what is uniting and what is dividing between the two groups. He places essential doctrines into one tier while non-essential tertiary issues are placed in a second tier (59–62).

Developing Deep Church

Seven subjects culminate to develop *Deep Church*: [1] truth, [2] evangelism, [3] Gospel, [4] worship, [5] preaching, [6] ecclesiology, and [7] culture. Belcher splits aspects of these subjects into two respective tiers. Picking and choosing what he prefers and with which he agrees, he sifts through these subjects to seek to develop a balanced middle-ground between emerging and traditional churches.

For example, in his chapter on *truth*, Belcher leans closer to the side of the emerging church while explaining his frustration with the traditional church's drift into *foundationalism* (belief that some truths are self-evident). Citing a member of the Emergent Village, Tony Jones, Belcher demonstrates that such a stance began with proper intentions of proving the inerrancy of the Bible, but has led to hubris, over-confidence, and a triumphalistic spirit (79). This arrogant attitude seeks to define who is or is not to be accepted based upon doctrinal grounds. Antithetically, Belcher is quick to underscore that the over-reaction of the emerging church—drifting into the ambiguity of postmodernity—is just as false. Belcher is concerned that emerging churches are on a road that will lead to becoming swallowed by culture, losing the gospel's counter-cultural message (Lesslie Newbigin calls this “syncretism”) (83). In order to find a middle ground between traditionalists' foundationalism and emergents' ambiguous postmodernity, Belcher proposes that *Deep Church* has “. . . fewer boundaries than the bounded-set or even centered-set church . . .” and is “. . . not bounded by foundationalism on the one hand or committed to hard postmodernism on the other” (87).

Throughout this section, Belcher critiques the positives and negatives of each of the seven chapters in order to develop an alternative solution that blends the two camps

together to form *Deep Church*. Specifically in this section, and generally throughout the entire work, Belcher explains what various stances emergents and traditionalists have adopted, the history that led to their beliefs, and the desideratum of each respective belief. The text does not develop new ideas; it sifts ideas in order to form a moderate stance between two opposing theological and methodological camps.

Conclusion

With winsomeness and eloquence, Belcher fulfills the goal of his text; he successfully develops a third way beyond emerging and traditional. A premise upon which the book is based, while not being acknowledged by Belcher, is evident: all protestant churches are either emerging or traditional. This faulty premise is similar to believing all churches either musically worship with an organ, handbells and choir or rock bands with blazing subwoofers and smoke machines without any blended congregations. This false presupposition underlies his entire text and bruises an otherwise wonderful work. A middle-ground between the extremes of emerging and traditional churches is needed, and despite the flaws of Belcher's book, it is an essential read for those interested in ecclesiological philosophy and missiology.