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Book Review: Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional by Jim Belcher

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Battle of Gettysburg, Confederate General James Longstreet tried in vain to convince Robert E. Lee to pull back from the current battle lines and head south to re-engage Union soldiers on ground of their choosing. Lee refused, believing not only that his Army of Northern Virginia could successfully overwhelm Union forces at the center of their lines but also that any sign of pullback indicated a retreat from battle that Lee found unacceptable. Longstreet's response was that he was not asking for retreat, only redeployment. The subsequent bloodshed that day vindicated Longstreet's appeal.

James Davison Hunter has written a comprehensive analysis of the current state of Christianity in the West and its failure to be the global force for good that Jesus demands. His call is essentially to back away from the current "lines of battle," to get a realistic and practical view of the world as it is rather than as we wish it would be. Many who are heavily involved in the current "culture war" approach to extending the influence of Christian faith will see his book as a call to retreat. To be sure, some of the solutions he suggests are vague, others simply not practical. Still, his overall point is worthy of strong consideration. Christians should take a fresh look at how the spiritual battlefield has manifested itself in our current culture and "redeploy" accordingly.

Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional*. Grand Rapids, MI: IVP, 2009, 233 pp., $17.00.

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Younger church leaders often struggle to strike the balance between the practices of traditional churches in which they were raised and the contrasting practices of churches considered contemporary or "emerging." Most end up feeling like they need to choose sides or that they must end up at one of the two extremes. Emerging leaders argue that the traditional church is old fashioned and disconnected from the culture. Traditional leaders say the emerging church has abandoned the Gospel for the sake of being culturally relevant. Young leaders are often caught in the crosshairs of this debate.

Jim Belcher has sought to remedy this problem by presenting a third way that brings together the best insights of both the traditional and emerging camps. Once an insider to the emerging church movement, Belcher is the founding church planter and lead pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach,

California. He has served as adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University and has published articles in *Leadership Journal* and *Re:generation Quarterly*.

Belcher's aim in this book is to bridge the growing divide between the traditional and emerging camps by providing an alternative ecclesiology that brings together the most helpful insights of both groups. He begins by describing his journey from emerging insider to an outsider and relates the lessons he learned from both experiences. He then provides some defining characteristics of the emerging church by stating that their protests of the traditional church include its captivity to Enlightenment rationalism, its narrow view of salvation, its placement of belief before belonging, its uncontextualized worship, its ineffective preaching, its weak ecclesiology, and its critical stance toward the world (40–43).

In a pivotal chapter titled "The Quest for Mere Christianity," Belcher explains that it is "classic" Christianity that provides the basis for unity among these divergent groups. He describes this classic Christianity by pointing to the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed (54–59). He then argues for a two-tiered system in which the top tier contains issues that define the boundaries of orthodoxy and the bottom tier those theological distinctives that vary according to church tradition (59–61). Both groups should seek unity in the top tier issues and dialogue among the bottom tier ones.

In the second section of the book, Belcher provides the seven components of a deep church, each one a response to the protests the emerging church makes of the traditional church. The deep truth of the deep church rejects the classic foundationalism of the traditional church and the hard postmodernism of the emerging church (84). To do so, the deep church must become a centered-set church as opposed to a bounded-set or a relation-set group (86, 89).

The deep church's evangelism combines the need for boundaries with the need for belonging. Belcher advocates a two-circle model, wherein the outer circle relates to people who belong to the community but have not yet ascribed to its belief system. The inner circle encompasses those people who both belong and believe. This model, Belcher states, allows people to be drawn to Jesus as they explore the dynamics of the community.

The Gospel, fundamentally described by the penal substitution theory of the atonement, is at the heart of all the deep church does. Belcher laments that this perspective is often lacking in the emerging churches. The worship and preaching in the deep church provides substantive biblical teaching in culturally appropriate ways. Again, Belcher laments that in emerging churches a relational hermeneutic guides their preaching and teaching. This hermeneutic puts relationships and community above the authority of Scripture.

Deep Church has a number of strengths. First, the book is well written. Belcher takes complicated concepts like foundationalism and postmodernism and communicates them in a way that is easy to understand. Moreover, his method of telling his own story and the stories of those involved in his church is engaging.

A second positive is that Belcher explains that justification or penal atonement is the heartbeat of the Gospel (114–116). Such an understanding of Christ's suffering is fundamental to getting the Gospel right. Belcher is equally correct to voice concerns that many in the emerging movement have misunderstood the doctrine of the atonement. He explains concerning Brian McLaren, "Brian stresses obedient living, Christ's victory over the powers, and the kingdom. What is missing, however, is 'how' Jesus accomplishes this through the cross, through the blood of Jesus, and forgiveness of our sin" (117). Such is a significant oversight on the part of the emerging movement given the importance of this doctrine to a right understanding of the Gospel.

A third positive is found in Belcher's section on "Deep Preaching." Belcher correctly voices concerns over Doug Pagitt's "relational hermeneutic." Such an approach, that sees the Bible as just one part of the community's conversation, abandons classic orthodoxy and makes the Gospel relativistic. Belcher correctly rejects such an approach as he recognizes that believers "need tradition to help us interpret Scripture faithfully" (153).

A fourth positive is the balance that Belcher brings to the task of contextualization. He does an excellent job of bringing together some of the best insights of the emerging movement—things like the need for relationships, community, and cultural engagement, with the doctrinal fidelity of the traditional church. He abandons the "this is the way we always done it" mentality prevalent in so many traditional churches and looks to Scripture to find answers for the way forward.

By way of critique, though, it is questionable whether Belcher's "third way" is really a third way at all. Belcher's concerns over some aspects of the emerging church are similar to those that most within the "traditional" camp have concerning the emerging movement. Belcher is correct to critique the emerging church's relational hermeneutic, its radical postmodernism, and its rejection of historic orthodoxy. Those features he rejects, though, are foundational to what it means to be emerging. One is left wondering if Belcher's approach is really a third way or if it is simply a statement of his distancing himself from the emerging movement.

Along the same lines, while Belcher's critique of the traditional church's overly pragmatic focus, shallow preaching, and lack of community is on target, he is not

unique in his call for reform in these areas. Belcher's ecclesiology is a healthy one, but in reality, it is simply a healthier version of the traditional church. He has more in common with Kevin DeYoung and other younger members of the traditional church than he realizes.

Another area of critique stems from Belcher's understanding of evangelism. He describes people coming to Christ as being "drawn to the well." While he is correct that there is a component of attraction to evangelism, it is not the only component. The church is commanded to be outward in focus (Matt 28:18–20; Acts 1:8) and should be active in reaching out to the lost, not simply waiting for them to be drawn into the community.

In the end, Belcher's work is a helpful analysis of how the church should blend together the desire to be founded on God's Word, rooted in historical orthodoxy, while at the same time driven by a passion to reach this generation for Christ. His work is especially helpful for younger church leaders who feel caught in between the traditional and emerging camps.

Steve Rundle and Tom Steffen, *Great Commission Companies: The Emerging Role of Business in Missions*, 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011, 239 pp.

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The first edition of *Great Commission Companies* was published in 2003, when the term "Business as Mission" (BAM) was relatively unfamiliar to many Christians. That edition was written to show that God was doing something new and outside the traditional missionary-sending model (7). Five companies were profiled to show various ways businesses could function as ministries. This second edition brings readers up to date on the development of BAM over the past decade. Two of the companies featured in the first edition are revisited, and three new BAM companies are profiled. The book is divided into two parts. Part one (chapters 1–6) provides the economic, historical, and missiological context for Great Commission Companies (111). Part two (chapters 7–12) contains a series of