

**From Repentance to Lifestyle:
Replacing Crisis Conversion with Relational Journey**

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There are seven major changes in evangelistic theo-praxis, from a predominantly traditional/evangelical 20th century approach to a progressive/emerging 21st century approach.ⁱ This paper will focus on the seventh; from repentance to lifestyle, and will uncover the shift from a crisis event to a gradual journey.

In the book of Acts, crisis repentance is unveiled as being a normative practice in evangelism. There are dramatic calls for repentance from Peter in the city of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, to the revival at Samaria and on into the missionary journeys of Paul. In the evangelical reading of church history, this practice lasted throughout the Church age and continues still. These historical traces are linked with the evangelistic theo-praxis of figures such as Patrick, Aiden, Francis, Luther, Wesley, Booth, Spurgeon, Moody, Graham and Wilkerson. In other words, the trace from the early church through to current normative evangelistic practice should be that of crisis repentance/conversion.

However, even in the mid-1970s, Walter Chantry saw the disintegration of crisis repentance, stating of the Church in Britain, “They wholly ignore an essential element of the Gospel, namely repentance.”ⁱⁱ His assault comes from the approach that Jesus, the apostles and the early church called those around them to come under the crisis of repentance in a salvific event.

This crisis approach has been questioned by the emerging church, and consequently an argument has developed which suggests that appeals for crisis repentance or conversion should be replaced with, as Rick Meigs terms it, “The way of Jesus”.ⁱⁱⁱ

The fundamental view of many in the emerging church is that most (if not all) are “stumbling into the kingdom” and on the journey between lost and found.^{iv} With such suggestions, a direct challenge on evangelical evangelism is that crisis repentance is not as important an evangelistic practice as guiding a fellow searcher on the path towards being more Christ-like would be.

This emerging church approach has faced criticism from the traditional/evangelical corner of the Church, in perceiving the emerging church as being more interested in social and minor spiritual reform (in the area of behaviour modification) than in spiritual regeneration.^v However, Maggi Dawn suggests that the witnessing Church should “accept that every generation and culture interprets the gospel” and that the Church is to take part in its contemporary generation’s interpretation of the gospel.^{vi} The emergent/emerging generation’s interpretation of the gospel is clearly less crisis repentance and more intentional Christ-likeness and relational journey.

Steve Griffiths contends that the Church is there as a witness to embody the gospel, without words, and certainly without the challenge to repent; but that through mutual journey and friendship, the unchurched might move towards kingdom living.^{vii} This shift in focus has been helped by the emerging church preference of seeing the Gospels as the reference point of becoming more Christ-like than in viewing the wider body of New Testament teaching as being foundational in the shaping of a convert/disciple. Ryan Bolger and Eddie Gibbs go on to argue that “the good news was not that Jesus was to die on the cross to forgive sins but that God had returned and all were invited to participate with him in this new way of life, in this redemption of the world.”^{viii}

Therefore, crisis repentance has been replaced by participation in relational journey, which hopefully leads to the unchurched becoming more Christ-like, living 'the way of Jesus'. In the emerging church desire for authentic experience (a postmodern trait), it is this experience of relational journey that has replaced the traditional/evangelical 20th century soteriological understanding and the 20th century evangelistic practice of repentance as crisis in the salvific event.

However, some questions need to be directed at this shift in evangelistic practice. For instance, if crisis repentance is removed in the process of evangelisation, what does this suggest concerning the seriousness of sin? Also, is it actually possible to live the way of Jesus without the help of the Holy Spirit (as an inner seal via conversion) or is the goal of emerging church relational journey simply behaviour modification? Likewise, would the goal of living the way of Jesus have required the death of the Son of God on the cross? Before the emerging church rush headlong into this evangelistic shift, it is argued in this paper that theological reflection and practical considerations on the part of the emerging church need to be strengthened before embodying cultural changes - changes which will inevitably lead to a sterile form of evangelism and consequently to an unaffected society.

ⁱ The other 6 (as argued in my continuing doctoral research) are: from preaching to discussion; from truth to experience; from certainty to doubt; from eternity to present; from soul salvation to earth salvation; from evangelist to community witness.

ⁱⁱ Walter Chantry, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), p. 48.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rick Meigs, 'What is Missional – A Short Answer' in <www.friendofmissional.org> (_____) <<http://www.friendofmissional.org>> [accessed 09 May 2012].

^{iv} John Webb Kline, 'From the Heart of a Missional Evangelist' in <www.blindbeggar.org> (January 2007) <<http://blindbeggar.org/?p=395>> [accessed 09 May 2012].

^v Thorsten Prill, 'Evangelical Mission Organisations, Postmodern Controversies, and the New Heartbeat of Mission' in *Foundations*, 61:3 (Autumn 2011) <http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-61-article-3-evangelical-mission-organisations-postmodern-controversies-and-the-new-heartbeat> [accessed 17 May 2011].

^{vi} Maggi Dawn, 'You Have to Change to Stay the Same' in *The Post Evangelical Debate*, ed. by Graham Cray (London: SPCK, 1997, pp. 35-56 (p. 45).

^{vii} Steve Griffiths, 'Defining Incarnational Ministry' in <www.opensourcetheology.net> (30 January 2007) <<http://www.opensourcetheology.net/node/1116>> [accessed 09 July 2012].

^{viii} Ryan Bolger & Eddie Gibbs, *Emerging Churches* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 48.