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Deep Church

A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional

by Jim Belcher



JIM BELCHER (M.A., Fuller; Ph.D., Georgetown) is founding church planter and lead pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, California. He previously led the Twenty-Something Fellowship and cofounded The Warehouse Service at Lake Avenue Church in Pasadena. He has served as adjunct professor at Azusa Pacific University and was cofounder of the Renaissance Project Skateboard Company. He has been published in *Leadership Journal* and *regeneration quarterly*, and he and his wife and four children live in Costa Mesa, California.

A Review by J.D. Greear

I wanted to commend to you a new book I just finished reading over the weekend, Jim Belcher's *Deep Church*. The book is a good one... somewhere

between good and great... on the great side of good though not necessarily on the awesome side of great... (Blogs are great because you can write 'stream of consciousness...')

The phrase "Deep Church" comes from an offhand reference by C. S. Lewis to describe the kind of church that he believed embodied the essence of Christianity and avoided those secondary distinctions that tend to define and divide Christians. "Deep Church" was Lewis' counterpart to "Mere Christianity"—which Lewis used to describe the faith held common by sincere Christians of all traditions. "Mere Christianity" is a faith shared by conscientious Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox believers, and Lewis believed that returning to "Mere Christianity" could heal the rifts that divided those great traditions.

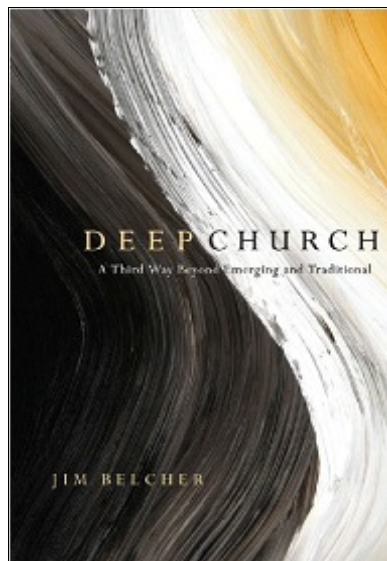
Belcher believes that "Deep Church" can heal the rifts between "traditional" and "emerging" churches today. He feels that these two groups tend to talk past each

other, and the result is that both sides miss out on what the other side has to offer. He attempts to find a "third way" that is neither traditional nor emerging.

"Jim Belcher shows that we don't have to choose between orthodox evangelical doctrine on one hand, and cultural engagement, creativity and commitment to social justice on the other. This is an important book."

- Tim Kellar, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, NYC

The book is an excellent primer on a lot of the ongoing "emerging church" discussions. As people wrestle with how to present Christianity to a "postmodern" culture, they are rethinking a lot of ways we present Christ and do church, and coming up with a lot of different conclusions. As Belcher notes, some believers are not making the proper adjustments, and their fellowships are becoming more estranged from their culture and they are losing any voice they have with the culture (Belcher refers to this as 'tribalism'). Others have so absorbed the culture that they are distorting the message. (Belcher calls this 'assimilation').



Belcher is an outstanding researcher, and you get the sense that in reading his book you get to read about 18 others along the way. Belcher analyses things well, and he makes some dazzling insights throughout. I took copious notes, and am having our staff read a number of the chapters, including "Deep Evangelism," "Deep Gospel," "Deep Worship," "Deep Ecclesiology," and especially "Deep Culture." Yoda (Tim Keller) said about this book, "An important book this is,"

which was enough to make me rush right out to get it.

I found 3 primary weaknesses in the book. **First, it seems like everybody likes to offer "3rd way" prescriptions, because you are appearing to take the best out of 2 other models and combine them while avoiding their weaknesses for a best-of-all-possible-**

worlds 3rd option. However, almost inevitably when you do this, you end up caricaturing the other 2 ways so as to make your 3rd way appear more attractive.

Creating straw men is good for a "3rd way" presentation, as it makes your 3rd way seem like a common-sense alternative to 2 sides which have good points but some glaring weaknesses. Though it's good for your presentation, it is not always fair to the 2 other ways, however, as you end up making them a foil to set up your 3rd and more excellent way. The method ends up driving your characterization, rather than the realities of what the opposing sides actually believe.

Several times I felt like this is what Belcher did with his presentation of the traditional church (which, to be fair, according to Belcher's classifications I would fit more squarely within). I felt like he created some straw men to set up his "3rd way" that weren't necessarily consistent with reality. This included, for example, the insinuation that everyone who preached in a "classical homiletical" style--i.e., verse by verse exposition, with '3 points and a poem'--was a "moralistic preacher" (emphasizing what we do to change rather than what God has done to change us); and, that Christians who have been involved in politics in the past were only reactionary, single-issue voters with no vision of seeing a society constructed on godly, shalom principles (see, for example, p. 190, or fn 17, p. 230).

One almost feels that 30 years ago there must have been no Gospel-preaching, culture-embracing Christians in the church. But there were! It doesn't mean that there were not excesses and failures by these Christians, just that the facile characterization of "traditional" and "emerging" approaches is not sufficient. I can see a college student reading this and assuming that his pastor, who happens to preach using 3 points, is preaching moralistically. That is not necessarily the case. Almost every Tim Keller sermon I've ever heard had 3 clear points, and some of his best ones even ended in a poem. Many traditional preachers do indeed preach moralistically, but not all traditional preachers do, even among those who use '3 points and a poem.' At this point, the bald categorizations are helpful to Belcher in establishing his "third way," but not helpful for us analyzing what is really going on.

The 2nd major weakness, I thought, was Belcher's use of the Great Tradition. "The Great Tradition" is a term used to describe what orthodox (small 'o') Christians have generally believed for the past 2000 years, without including all the minor doctrinal squabbles that define each of our denominations (think, Nicene Creed). There was a slew of books that came out in the mid-90's

saying that we could heal the rifts between Evangelical, Orthodox and Catholic believers by returning to the "Great Tradition." Belcher believes that "traditionals" and "emergents" also can come together around this "Great Tradition."

There is definitely something to be said for this approach, but the 1st problem with it is (as John Henry Cardinal Newman, a Protestant convert to Catholicism pointed out 150 years ago in *The Development of Doctrine*) deciding who gets to define what parts of the "Great Tradition" we use. Things you might consider to be "fundamental" to the faith I might consider to be irrelevant, and visa versa. Things the church fathers said that I agree with become part of the "Great Tradition" for me; things I disagree with are discarded as contrary

to Scripture. For example, where does the 'inerrancy of the Bible' fit into 'the Great Tradition'? 'The equality of women?' Should the church be unified under one pope in Rome? Does the sacrament become the actual body and blood of Jesus when we partake of it? How about 'salvation by faith alone'? None of those are addressed in

the Nicene Creed, and you can find church fathers and either side of each of those questions. Your Great Tradition may not be the same as mine.

The 2nd problem, a la Newman, is that the creeds of one generation are usually not sufficient to deal with the doctrinal challenges of a new one. Creeds are almost always written in response to a heresy presently at work in the church. Creeds set the "boundaries" for who is "in" and who is "out", as it relates to that controversy. Over time, however, heretics find a way to mold their heresies to fit the wording of the old creeds, and new creeds must be written to clarify again what is orthodox and what is heresy. The Great Tradition needs to be re-clarified in every generation.

Furthermore, every particular culture comes up with its own distinctive doctrinal challenges to the church, and new, clarifying creeds must be written to address these new questions. "The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy" and the "Danvers Statement on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood" would have been irrelevant in Augustine's day; today, however, they are very relevant (and in my view, necessary).

The other problem that I found with Belcher's use of the Great Tradition is that the Great Tradition does not always sufficiently address the problems to which Belcher applies it. For example, in his chapter, "Deep Preaching," Belcher notes (correctly, in my view) that both traditional preachers and emergent preachers

"This fine book by Jim Belcher is an answer to my prayer. He has given us an articulate guide to the territory, paying careful attention of the people who are having such a difficult time listening to each other.... His orthodox theological credentials are beyond challenge, yet he also knows that we desperately need to find new ways of being church."

- from the Foreword by Richard J. Mouw

often end up preaching moralism and traditions rather than the Gospel. Belcher calls both back to the Great Tradition. But there are also many churches who define themselves by the Great Tradition that do not preach Gospel-centered messages. For a while, I went to a church in college that quoted the Nicene Creed each week but never actually shared the Gospel. Frankly, the Nicene Creed doesn't explicitly address the differences in moralism and Gospel-centered change. That is something we need to make clear, because the Christianized-Western culture we live in has really muddled it. For this issue, the Great Tradition is a good starting point, but not a good stopping one. We have to restate the truths of these creeds in more explicit ways that make the Gospel clear to our culture.

Lastly, I wish Belcher had been a little clearer on exactly what the Gospel is. At its fundamental core, the Gospel is the announcement that God did for us what we could not do for ourselves by coming to earth to die on a cross the death we were condemned to die and thus propitiating the righteous wrath of God toward us. He was raised to resurrect us from the dead. When we acknowledge Christ as the Lord and trust Him as our Savior, we are forgiven of all of our sin and born again to new life in Him. There are many necessary results that come from experiencing the new birth, but they are the effects of the new birth and not the Gospel itself. Belcher offers some great insights into the Gospel, including a particularly helpful section in which he explains how the penal substitution motif in the atonement undergirds all the others (ransom, cleansing, kingdom living, etc). That said, I think that the loss of the Gospel is the primary problem in much of emerging church's teaching (see Brian McLaren's "New Kind of Christian.") I wish Belcher had been clearer in calling out those who have distorted the Gospel by making it something other than the work of Christ on our behalf. I was particularly disappointed that in Belcher's church's "definition of the Gospel," that his church has used for 5 years and which he thinks summarizes "deep church," he never mentions the cross or the death of Christ (120-21). I don't mean to be too harsh here, but the death of Christ is an indispensable component, indeed the core component, of the Gospel.

The best chapter in the book was "Deep Culture." Here Belcher really seems to be in his element. He argues that Christians should neither "disengage from culture" (as commended by someone like Stanley Hauerwas) or see "Christianity as political power" as certain right-wing pundits call for today. He re-presents Abraham Kuyper's model for engaging culture, whereby Christians are salt and light in helping to construct a society that embodies God's principles of shalom. God does not intend his servants to be ghettoed in the church without influence on the world He created, a world teeming with art, business, science, architecture, media, and politics. The first command God gave to

men was to "tend the garden and keep it," and the church should shine "beams of light" into all arenas of culture, including politics (Abraham Kuyper), to give "signs among the rubble" (Lesslie Newbigin) and to "sketch out in pencil what Jesus will one day paint with indelible ink" (N.T. Wright). Christians, more than anyone, can bring God's shalom to their societies, because they understand the God who created it all and the principles of shalom He uses to govern it (Jeremiah 29:7).

All in all, this was a very helpful book. I commend this book to you church leaders and hope you are challenged, as I was, in reading it! Thank you, Jim, for an excellent book!

About J.D. Greear



J.D. Greear, Ph.D., (born May, 1973) did his degree work in Christian and Islamic theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC. He now pastors a rapidly growing church of 4000. J.D. is committed to the local church and to church planting, having undertaken the goal of planting 1000 churches in the next 40 years. Currently, they have 12 plants around the world. He has authored a number of publications, including *Breaking the Islam Code*. He lives in Durham, NC with his gorgeous wife Veronica and his four ridiculously cute kids, Kharis, Alethia, Ryah and Adon.