

Spencer Burke

“The Emerging Church: A Heretical Guide”

Episode 34 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

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Spencer Burke is at the forefront of the Emerging Church movement. He founded one of the largest online gathering places for people exploring new paths emanating from evangelical Christianity (TheOoze.com). Author of *A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity*, he pastored churches and beyond-church religious communities for 22 years.

HIGHLIGHTS

This episode is “evolutionary” not because of attention given to the epic story of an evolving universe but because of its exploration of **how Christianity (especially evangelical Christianity) can evolve**. The perspective and way of doing church that Burke (and several others in this series) explore has come to be called the **Emerging Church movement**. Emerging Church expressions **maintain the passion of evangelicalism**, but the **values are transformed in accordance with postmodernism**. Notably, theological **diversity** is viewed as a good thing — despite the challenges of trying to bond people together who represent **different stages of faith development**.

Spencer Burke speaks on **the value of within-church heretics** (e.g., his own Emerging Church movement within evangelical Christianity), and Dowd celebrates the outsider role played by the **New Atheists** in compelling Christianity to evolve. Dowd suggests that “evidence is the gift of science; interpretation is the gift of religion.” Burke devotes special attention to the importance of holding **beliefs** robustly enough to serve one’s life and action in the world, but lightly enough to **maintain openness to further development**.

As well, Spencer Burke **critiques the “standard model” of doing church**, which he concludes is ill-suited to these times because it operates like a “one-room-schoolhouse.” As well, he advocates churches **divesting themselves of volunteer programs** and instead launching church members into established volunteerism available in the community at large. A leader in **creating online community and dialogue**, Burke even suggests that churches of the future will be less and less tied to actual buildings and worship-style “events.”

SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Anyone interested in the Emerging Church movement and/or fostering and thriving with theological diversity within church congregations will find much of value in this conversation. Church leaders of any denomination will find provocative Spencer Burke's suggestions for encouraging diversity and celebrating openness to changing beliefs and vastly different ways of "doing church."

KEYWORD TOPICS

Emerging Church, evangelical ministry, Seth Godin, heretic (an insider who cares about the Church), **Jesus as a heretical Jew, Galileo** (as heretic), **orthodoxy** (originating as heresy), **Chuck Smith, Jesus People movement, Bill Hybels, Willow Creek movement, megachurch, Leadership Network, Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, conversion experiences, the Gospels** (meaning of), **"church beyond religion", "postmodernist evangelical", postmodernism** (a history of), **postmodern literature, McCarthyism, the '60s, Vietnam, Watergate, terrorism, diversity of faith** (importance of), **Christianity evolving, Gil Bailie, spiritual growth, developmental stages of faith, openness to change, absolute truth** (criticism of), **Alfred North Whitehead, science** (as open to change), **science v. religion** (history of the split between), **mechanistic science, evidence** (as premier science value), **interpretation** (as premier religious activity), **nondualistic thinking** (importance of), **Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh, incommensurability of worldviews, New Atheists** (as encouraging religious people to evolve), **God** (not a "supernatural terrorist"), **deep-time perspective, mysticism** (universality of), **communication across worldviews, Thomas Berry, Ecozoic Era, Paul Hawken**, an **"interdependent us"**, **PZ Myers, post-theist, Facebook, global communication, younger generations, George Barna, future church**

BIOGRAPHY

Spencer Burke has been at the forefront of the Emerging Church movement for a dozen years, including his founding in 1998 of one of the largest online gathering places for people exploring new paths emanating from evangelical Christianity: <http://TheOoze.com>. This web community attracts more than 150,000 users each month, from some 90 countries. Since the 1960s, Spencer has been active in some of the central innovations in Evangelicalism, beginning with the tent ministry of Chuck Smith during the Jesus People movement, participation in a youth group inspired by the work of Bill Hybels (who started the Willow Creek movement), and association with Rick Warren in what would later become *The Purpose Driven Life*. Professionally, Burke has spent 22 years in pastoral or teaching ministry. He is the author of A

Heretic's Guide to Eternity (published in 2008); *Making Sense of Church* (2003); and *Stories of Emergence: Moving from Absolute to Authentic* (2003). His personal website is: <http://spencerburke.com/>

SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

Spencer Burke maintains **his own YouTube channel**, where you can sample his conversations with Emerging Church leaders: <http://www.youtube.com/user/cavepaint>

Philip Clayton posted a 10-minute interview with Spencer Burke in 2010 on “Theology after Google”: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7YFmSo50jso>

SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and more can be added) at the following url: <http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/spencer-burke-the-emerging-church-a-heretics-guide/>

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **What is heresy?** Spencer Burke is among those who are inviting evangelical Christians into new realms of faith and ways of doing church — as well as ways of doing community beyond church. This is what is called **the Emerging Church movement**. His 2008 book is titled *A Heretic's Guide to Eternity*, and so this conversation begins with the host, Michael Dowd, asking his guest to explain what he means by *heresy*. Burke replies,

In some ways I think a heretic is a valuable place and position that we really need. **Seth Godin** talked about being a heretic in business, but somehow in the religious world we forget that **all of our orthodoxy started as heresy**. I think the key important part of being a heretic is that a heretic is an insider. It's not someone throwing stones against the institution; it's **someone inside who loves and cares and has a passion for the Church**. It's good for all of us to understand that all of orthodoxy comes from heresy at one point in life. **Jesus** was a heretic to the Jews. **Galileo** was a heretic to the Church—but was right, as you know.

As Seth Godin talks about the idea of heresy in the business world, he says **it's good to have people inside the system questioning and asking the tough questions**. I think it's my love of the Church—it's my love of Jesus—that drives me to ask as an insider, not as an outsider. A heretic actually has to be inside the system. And it's our love, care, and compassion for those in the system that drives us to question, “Is this really true, or have we taken a hard stance that might actually be leading us down the wrong road, hurting us rather than helping us?”

Question 1A: *When you hear the word ‘heresy’ what comes to mind? Is it a word that suggests a sense of possibility and improvement? Or does your experience with this word tend to call up negative images? In what ways?*

Question 1B: Now think of a religious, scientific, governmental, or secular institution you are involved with. Has this institution gone through major changes in your lifetime that were regarded as heresy early on?

Question 1C: What about your own worldview? Are there elements of your worldview and your value system today that your younger self would have scorned? If so, please share more.

2. **The Emerging Church form of evangelical heresy.** In this series of 38 conversations, five interviews engaged speakers who self-identify with either “**Progressive Christianity**” or “**Integral Christianity**” (or both). Four speakers self-identify as leaders within the “Emerging Church” movement, which includes the speaker in this episode: Spencer Burke. The remaining three are Doug Pagitt, Brian McLaren, and Sally Morgenthaler. Probably the best way to **distinguish the two groups** are that Progressive and Integral Christians tend to arise from (or remain within) mainline Protestant Congregations, such as the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church. Emerging Church Christians tend to arise from (or remain within) evangelical forms of the faith. **Doug Pagitt** summarizes the Emerging Church movement this way:

. . . **a network of people who are trying to think about what it means to be a person of faith living in the context that we live in today.** It’s a very loose, very open network that has lots of manifestations to it. . . We weren’t talking just about the Church that was emerging; we were trying to talk about emergent thought, emergent faith, **emergent Christianity**, emergent science, all of that stuff. We were talking about emergent theory, not just what new churches will look like.

In this episode, **Spencer Burke characterizes the Emerging Church movement** this way:

When I think of the Gospels, it’s **the motivation of love, care, compassion, grace.** Sometimes what I hear from our Church today is fear, anger, suspicion, control—and those are not the fruit of the Spirit. Those are not the things that God has invited us to be a part of.

[The Emerging Church] is a group of people who have asked, “Do we have to constantly define ourselves by what we’re *against* (or what divides us) rather than **what connects us**? What do we have in agreement with each other?” Then the conversation opened up so that, in some ways, **the questions were as important as the answers** we got. The destination wasn’t the place we were trying to arrive at anymore; it was the journey and those we journeyed with that brought the deep spiritual awakenings as we moved forward. . . . It’s really **church beyond religion.**

At the very end of the conversation, **Michael Dowd** sums up what is meant by “Emerging Church” in his own words:

You and so many others in the Emerging Church movement really are pushing the edges, perhaps more so than almost any others of us now in Christianity. You are asking, **what does it mean to be an evolving faith? What does it mean to be evolving institutions?** What does it mean to be evolving in our understanding of scripture, in our understanding of religious life, in our understanding of Christian missions work, in our understanding of just how to live a Christ-centered, Christ-like life?

Question 2: *What aspects of the **Emerging Church movement** do you find **attractive** — either personally or because you agree that it would be a good thing for evangelical Christians as a group to move more in this direction? And what aspects do you find **confusing or negative** in some way?*

3. **Valuing outside opposition for urging religions to evolve.** Dowd extends Spencer Burke’s celebration of heresy and heretics *within* the Church by remarking that he also values some of the greatest opponents *outside* the Church. Specifically, **Dowd applauds the New Atheists** for these reasons:

I actually see God at work, Reality at work, in and through people who are far outside the Church. I **wrote a very controversial sermon called, “Thank God for the New Atheists.”** . . . It’s the idea of the New Atheists speaking a prophetic voice—meaning that they’re speaking on behalf of reality, even though, in many ways, they think they’re attacking religion. The New Atheists, of course, being Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne: those who are coming from a science-based, evolutionary perspective but are very hard on religion and religious people. They are objecting to this whole notion that religion is simply to be identified with otherworldly supernaturalism. So I think, ultimately, they’re helping us religious people to evolve. . . I think ultimately that **they are helping us get real about God, guidance, and good news**—that God *isn’t* a supernatural terrorist. God is not a Bronze Age warlord who resides off the planet and outside the universe— **a cosmic bully** who issues the ultimate terrorist message, “Believe exactly what I tell you to believe or I will torture you forever.”

That’s not God! **That God is a delusion, just like Richard Dawkins says.** As if salvation could be reduced to cosmic fire insurance! And so we trivialize our tradition. We belittle and demean the very notion of God, if we don’t have deep-time eyes and a global heart—that is, if we don’t have an evolutionary understanding of reality and compassion that includes the entire body of life, not just our tribe or our religious groups.

Question 3: *Dowd makes this same case — that the New Atheists are actually helping religion to evolve — in about a half dozen of the 38 interviews, but nowhere more boldly than here. What do you make of Dowd’s assertions on **the value of New Atheist opposition**?*

4. **A brief history of postmodernism.** Leaders in the Emerging Church movement tend to be identified (and to self identify) as postmodernists. Spencer Burke reviews the birth and history of postmodernism. He explains,

The first time the idea of *postmodernism* enters into our vocabulary is in Webster’s Dictionary, actually back in the ‘40s, when it talks about **postmodern literature**. Now you know how long it takes to get into Webster’s Dictionary, so the term had been around for some time. Postmodern literature had characters where the hero could be an anti-hero, timelines were mixed up and you could jump from the front to the back. It has **influenced our movies** even till today. There was an effect on literature and even the arts.

Then you move into the ‘60s, and all of culture got swept up in an amazing way. The easiest way to think about it is, in the ‘50s, remember McCarthyism? If you questioned any kind of

authority, you were un-American. Well in ten short years **we moved on to the '60s, and if you didn't question authority, you were un-American.** [laughter] Again, with politics, Vietnam, Watergate—and in a short period of time, **postmodernism influenced our culture and our politics.**

You move another twenty years ahead and you get into the '80s, and it truly affected **the way in which we did business.** Again, you think about the '70s when my grandfather got a gold watch. I have to explain to my kids what that even means. It was the idea that you got out of school and then you worked for a corporation for 40 or 45 years, and they gave you a gold watch and retirement and medical insurance—they took care of you.

In the '80s we downsized, and, again, everything shifted in amazing ways. Add another twenty years to that, and you can look at the year 2000, the new millennium. I believe another amazing shift has happened in spirituality—not just Christianity. I think **a whole group of people had to deal with different kinds of religions.** And of course, terrorism came on the front—and in the name of religion.

Question 4: *Where do you see yourself in relation to postmodernism? Have your values generally been in sync with the shifts brought about by postmodernism, as outlined by Spencer Burke? Would you consider your religious (or spiritual) views to be postmodern, or modern, or perhaps traditional? Or might they be something altogether new, perhaps what some guests in this series have called “integral”?*

5. Religious evolution from one generation to the next. Michael Dowd reads a 1990 quotation from Gil Bailie, which ends,

The Christian movement today is still in the elementary stages of working out for itself and for the world the implications of the Gospel. There isn't the slightest doubt that **the greatest and boldest creedal assertions are in the future—not the past.** It may be only at rare moments that this flawed and unlikely thing that we call Church even remotely resembles something worthy of its calling. But it is nonetheless **embarked on a great Christological adventure.** Even against its own institutional resistances, it is continually finding deeper and more inspiring implications to **the Jesus event.**

That quotation prompts **Spencer Burke** to reflect on his own experience at a leading edge of evangelical change,

The people who have the most difficulty with what we're talking about today are the real rebels of just the last twenty or thirty years. The people I mentioned who I journeyed with through the last thirty years were the rabble-rousers. They were the ones that were really the cutting-edge mavericks. **Today they are some of the strongest opponents** of opening up and looking. In reality, **those who are in power the last, fight the longest.**

Question 5: *What comes up for you when you consider the Gil Bailie quotation and Spencer Burke's comment?*

6. **Balancing spiritual encouragement of others with acceptance of where they are now.**

Throughout this series, conversations occur wherein the speakers celebrate both an acceptance of where others are at in their faith journeys, while also inviting folks to sample next possible steps. This issue crops up in this dialogue as follows:

Spencer: I think we always have to **make room for every single person to find, explore, engage, and enjoy that journey—and just be careful not to assume we’ve arrived or to take anything away from somebody else.** Now, that said, there are millions of conversions for all of us, and we should encourage everyone to continue to grow and, as we grow, invite people to journey with us, as well.

Host: That for me was one of the big ahas, or awakenings, of coming into an evolutionary worldview—of really embracing a deep-time understanding of human nature. It’s the fact that **our thinking, our consciousness, is not the same at various times of our lives, and that people are at different stages of their lives.** They think of the world differently and they interpret things differently—and that same person is going to interpret things very differently at the age of 12 or 20 or 40 or 60. That **appreciation of diversity** and for the fact that people are on their own trajectory, that they may not be where you are or where you’d even like them to be. But by trusting in God, trusting in spirit, trusting in time, trusting in reality (however you want to speak about it), this allows me, for example, to **speak in an enthusiastic way** about what’s really important to me, about how I see the world—but do so **not in an arrogant way** or assuming that others are supposed to be where I’m at.

Question 6A: *What has been your experience (either within yourself or what you have seen in others) when **religiously or philosophically diverse people mix**? Is it possible to genuinely celebrate and honor what you might regard as earlier stages in faith development — and to do so without becoming inwardly or outwardly **condescending**? And can you call up any actual experiences in which you were either drawn toward or turned away from a particular group or institution expressly because of its embrace of diversity?*

Question 6B: *What about **mainstream denominations** (such as Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, UCC) in **which theologies might span from scriptural literalist to near-atheist within a single congregation**? Can such churches fully serve the spiritual needs and growth trajectories of such diverse memberships? And can they find **enough coherence** to agree on paths of change and ways of extending outward and serving their communities?*

7. **Practical difficulties of relating across differences in developmental stages of faith.**

Although Spencer Burke **never mentions Integral theory** (a half dozen other guests in this series have mentioned it), nor does he use one of the primary terms in integral discussion, “**transcend and include,**” clearly he is advocating that approach for what the Emerging Church is all about. He says, “We don’t rail against our past; **we celebrate our past as we move forward into our future.**” But he also reveals **the difficulty of attempting to actually apply the transcend-and-include mindset in a church context.** He talks about how he began with a not uncommon mindset, describing it as “black and white, ‘Father Knows Best’,

we're-going-to-solve-all-our problems.” And then he introduces powerful imagery for understanding the practical difficulties in authentically relating to people whose mindset has not moved beyond that level. He explains,

All *that* was **like being a fish swimming underwater**, living and understanding how to breathe underwater. At a certain point, I started to read off the nonapproved evangelical lists. I started reading **Thomas Merton**, who was an amazing Catholic monk, also **Thich Nhat Hanh**, on and on. So I started to poke my head out of the water once in awhile and taste air. Eventually I came to a point where I realized I had **started to move on land** a little differently.

Now, I think it would be really rude for me to go back into the water and just grab all water creatures and put them on land and say, “Just grow up, just wise up.” That’s not their path. But, for me, **it’s unwise to jump back into the water and try to live underwater. I will drown.** I do not find life there anymore. But that doesn’t mean that I can’t go hold my breath, be in relationship, love people. But I know that I find life here on land. I also know that I need to run around and find other people who are on land, as well—and be in relationship in that way. So I’m walking on land trying to find others who are in this conversation, as well. And we don’t have to destroy anyone else. In fact, quite honestly, we may need the entire ecosystem in the long run. So let’s not destroy one area of conversation over another, but let’s always invite everyone to the next step.

Spencer Burke points to **Thomas Merton as someone who “held his beliefs so well—but not in tension with the others, but rather in orchestration, or melodies or harmonies with the others.”** He then goes on to say,

We’re not asking the **New Atheists** to become something other than what they are, and we’re not asking the **Evangelicals** to be something that they’re not. We’re saying that we probably have more in common than we ever knew. That does not mean that you have to leave the place where you are at present. It is **the ability for all of us to be able to learn and grow.** As I said before, all of our traditions allow us to make those discoveries. It is to be celebrated—not something to be resisted, or to be proud of. It is, rather, something to actually be connected with and embraced as we engage each other in this conversation.

Michael Dowd concurs, quoting his own mentor **Thomas Berry**: “What’s most needed . . . is **the great art of intimacy and distance.** The capacity of beings and traditions to be totally present to each other, while further affirming and enhancing the differences and identities of each.”

Question 7: Overall, this is the same issue that we explored in the previous question. But perhaps these additional passages may have given you some further insights. *For example, consider your own difficulties or ease in communicating with others who differ from your worldview: **How well are you able to balance between over-expressing your viewpoint and under-expressing it?***

8. Conversing across worldviews toward “an interdependent us.” Spencer Burke introduces a term, “interdependent us,” that he describes in this way:

Ultimately it is **our unique individualism** that sets us in this beautiful place to be able to contribute. But it's the **interdependence**, our relationships with each other, that allows us to find these places of common expression. The next step we get to play with is that as individual authentic selves, where there's **the New Atheist** and then there's **the Emerging heretic**, there will be times when we get together and have a conversation and we will find **a new authentic us**. Do you get what I'm saying? These will be expressions that we never even knew could exist without each of us being fully who we are and then engaging together that creates a whole new authentic expression—not taking away from either of the independent voices but creating **a new interdependent us**. That's going to be the only way where we're going to be able to solve some of these very difficult situations that we find ourselves in—whether it be **violence** towards other human beings or violence towards our **environment** or violence towards others in ways in which **economics** happen. I mean, it's a difficult place we find ourselves in, with **the heretic voice** that is challenging us and making us a little bit uncomfortable. And I don't care where that voice comes from. If it comes from within the Church, that's great. If it comes from outside the Church, that's great. I need to have ears to listen.

Question 8: *Realistically, what needs to be at stake in order for us as individuals or groups to persevere to the point where an “interdependent us” might actually emerge across chasms of difference? For example, call to mind situations in your own experience in which families, intimate partners, business partners, employees, and so on actually do persevere through major disagreements — simply because the loss of that relationship would be unacceptable. Now compare that to what is at stake in church or other religious contexts: Is it realistic to expect congregants to persevere? Or will they simply choose another church, a less diverse church, where fundamental disagreements are less in evidence? Overall, what is your experience and your assessment with respect to the prospects of encompassing substantial diversities in faith within religious denominations and local congregations?*

9. **“Evolving absolutes.”** As Spencer Burke mentions, **one of the criticisms of postmodernism** in general and of the Emerging Church form of postmodern Christianity in particular is that diversity is so greatly valued that there is a sense of **“anything goes.”** But Spencer disagrees, saying,

I've been recently playing with **the idea of “evolving absolutes.”** What I mean by that is that I have to live my life each and every day based on the reality that I understand today, based on the rules that apply to where I'm at. When I'm raising my children, or I'm engaging with my religious community or spiritual community, there are rules to the game. It's not just situational, like, “Oh, we have no absolutes”—and that's the argument against the Emerging Church or the postmodern agenda: you have no truths, no absolutes.

Well, in my view, **there are absolutes, but they might be evolving.** And so, even if I feel so strongly I'd stake my life on the truth of this today, the absoluteness of this today, I also know I am finite. . . In fact, I have a little saying, **“If I'm not a little embarrassed about what I said yesterday, I probably didn't learn anything today.”**

It's that **ability to be strong in what you believe, but you're holding it loosely in such a way that when something new is revealed, you don't have to hide it**—because ultimately every religion, every science, almost every culture has language for learning and celebrates thinking about what's next and embracing the new and the different. Why can't we find that celebratory language again?

Question 9: *Spencer Burke, by his own example, demonstrates that it is indeed possible for an individual at the postmodern stage of development to hold beliefs and values firmly enough to propel action in the present, but loosely enough to permit those beliefs and values to continue to evolve. Even so, do you think it is possible to expect this balance of strength and flexibility to manifest at the group level, too — that is, at the level of a congregation? What about at the level of church leadership? Could a congregation thrive and evolve if the church leadership exemplifies this ability to 'evolve absolutes', even while the congregation as whole may not?*

10. **Science as an exemplar of openness to new insights.** About halfway through the dialogue, Michael Dowd portrays **the community of research scientists** as an exemplar of the very kind of openness to new truths that Spencer Burke has been advocating for religious communities. Here is their exchange:

Host: That reminds me of a quote from **Alfred North Whitehead**, the process philosopher, where he says, "Religion will not regain its old power until it faces change in the same spirit as does science." What I hear you calling us to, those of us who are devout Christians, those of us who are devout religious people of any sort, is **the need to be open to ongoing revelation** of what's true, of what's so—in the same way that science approaches various theories. **New evidence** can always cause us to rethink or reinterpret or reunderstand. Our religious traditions will evolve to the degree that we have that same stance towards reality and towards what God, what Reality, is revealing to us in each generation and each day.

Spencer: I don't think we have to worry about **heretics**, about heresy. I think we need to have **love** and the ability to **have a sense of security about who we are** and who we are in God, so that we allow all people to speak. We don't have to embrace what they say, **but we can test it and see.**

Question 10A: *What does this dialogue call forth in you? For example, Spencer Burke advocates that religious people "test it and see." **Testing** is, of course, a primary value in science: falsification of an old 'truth' or discovery of a new one is celebrated by the community of scientists — though perhaps not by individuals who made their mark within the now-outdated understanding. **But is "testing" generally valued within the religious mindset and within religious institutions? Overall, to what extent can and should religious institutions value testing and change in the way that science so clearly does? And if religious institutions truly do embrace change, how can that translate through to the individuals served by those institutions?***

Question 10B: ***How does one go about "testing" a religious belief or value? Is it even possible to "test" a religious belief or value and to arrive at a conclusion that a community or congregation as a whole would accept?***

11. **“Evidence” as the gift of science; “interpretation” as the gift of religion.** Although the host, Michael Dowd, has an opportunity to fully express his own views in the final episode of this series, occasionally he takes considerable license as host and moves into an extensive advocacy for a particular point of view. In this conversation with Spencer Burke, Dowd becomes fully expressed on what he calls a **“mutually enhancing dance” between science and religion.** Dowd says,

Until a few hundred years ago, scientists and theologians and religious people were often either close friends or, in some cases, the same person. It wasn't until we began having this mechanistic understanding, the idea that nature is a complex clock and **God is the clockmaker outside this mechanistic universe, that we began seeing this divorce between science and religion.** Theological matters were then devoted to basically the supernatural and otherworldly realm. Science was now responsible for all the other aspects of reality that we actually experience and can measure.

It's only been the last hundred years or so that we've started seeing these two come back together—not to become the same thing, but that they can be in a **mutually enhancing dance.** We recognize that **religion needs to pay attention to evidence.** If religion simply looks to the past, to dreams and intuitions that were given to ancient goatherds and fishermen as the primary way that reality is revealing itself and that God is communicating to humanity, then we do our traditions a terrible disservice. We do humanity a disservice. We do the notion of “revelation” a disservice. But in the same way, **science isn't merely about just describing what's so.** There's an additional element that, in order to be fully human we have to handle, and that element is **interpretation.**

How do we interpret the science in ways that are motivating, that are inspiring, that call us to greater integrity, that help us cooperate across ethnic and religious differences?

Question 11: *What is your response to Dowd's contention that “evidence” is the gift of science? That “interpretation” is the gift of religion? And that religion should therefore value evidence more, while science should recognize that discoveries need to be interpreted in inspiring ways — not just for religious people, but also for secularists who yearn to feel a bond with the universe?*

12. **The “post-theism” of young people.** Dowd briefly tells a story that powerfully indicates that the theism v. atheism divide and dispute may fade in significance as the generations in power today eventually pass forward that role to the now-younger generations. Dowd explains,

Young people are identifying more with other young people of their age, of their generation, worldwide than they are necessarily with the people within their own culture or their own background. And here, **P.Z. Myers is one of the most outspoken atheists, yet he said that his children refer to themselves not as theists or atheists but as “post-theists.”** They're beyond that issue; they're not fighting that fight in the way that he is.

Question 12: *What is your response to this story? Have you also sensed **that the theism-atheism divide is just not very interesting to the younger generations?***

13. **The problem with the standard model of church: still a ‘one-room schoolhouse’.**

Spencer Burke criticizes the standard model of church by using the analogy of a one-room schoolhouse. He says,

One of the problems is we’ve got **an event-driven church where we bring everybody into one room, like a one-room schoolhouse, with one teacher.** They’re supposed to be an expert on the environment, an expert on the theology of the *Book of Mark*. They’re supposed to be an expert on family relations and business and pop culture. And we put people who have just begun to journey on this experience in with people who might be teaching group-level courses over at their local seminary. And we say this is supposed to work?

Question 13: *What is your response to the one-room-schoolhouse character of the standard model of church? Do you see church differently? If so, how?*

14. **The future church—divested.** The conversation closes with Spencer Burke speculating on the future of the Christian church:

We can have teachers who have nothing to do with the Church help us understand the Earth. Wouldn’t that be beautiful? We could actually be able to go to an NGO, a nonprofit that actually is brilliant at serving the poor and all they need is volunteers. The church is rich with volunteers, and we are not really good at running nonprofits—especially soup kitchens. **Why don’t we go and join and serve alongside every person of faith? And that can be church.**

So I think in the next 5,10,15, 20 years we’re going to **move outside of the building**, and we’re going to actually begin to be more of a divested church—so we don’t own anything—but rather we’re going to look for venues to help us accomplish our mission of the day. We’re going to look for personalities that can help us learn and grow. And **we will be open to all resources, whether our brand or not.** We will be able to engage in learning and growth and service to the greater community—and we’ll do it **all in the name of Jesus**, I believe. And that’s how the Church can serve, but **we’ll serve alongside every other religious and scientific community**, I hope, and not take away from them, but also **not lose who we are.**

He concludes, “I think we’ve got a great opportunity and a great future. I don’t see it in isolation. I see it in connection—interdependence with all.”

Question 14: *Under what conditions should religious organizations create and implement their own volunteer service work in the community — and under what conditions should religious organizations operate in the way that Spencer Burke advocates? What do you imagine are the advantages and disadvantages of each approach?*

15. **Deep-time eyes, a global heart, and evidence as divine communication.** Throughout this series of conversations the host, **Michael Dowd, has been testing and modifying his hypothesis about what the invited speakers in this series share**, no matter what their difference takes on Christianity. He tends to characterize the common ground in three ways, what he calls “**deep-time eyes,**” a “**global heart,**” and “**valuing evidence as divine communication.**” For example, Dowd tells Spencer Burke,

I am so excited about this series of conversations, because what it’s what I see **we all share**—and I’ve been testing it out with all the various thought leaders in this series, and so far, nobody has objected to it. Everybody has resonated with the idea that no matter what our glorious and at-times infuriating differences represented by all the different thought leaders in this conversation, we all share **a global heart**. That is, we are all committed to the health and wellbeing of the entire human community and the life community. We all have **a deep-time perspective** given by science. We all **value evidence as divine communication**. And I think having those shared values, having some deep shared perspective allows us to see **our differences not as a problem to be solved, but really as a potential solution to our problems**.

Question 15: *Consider the episodes/conversations that you have already experienced in this series. Do you agree with Michael Dowd as to the three concepts for which there is common ground? Why or why not? Do you recognize other elements of a “core commons” that Dowd might not be aware of?*

Supplemental question A: Postmodernism v. the Integral worldview. If you have already discussed one or more of the episodes in this series that focus on Integral theory (especially that of Ross Hostetter or Tom Thresher), then consider: *Identify one or more key differences in worldview, values, or congregational practice between the postmodernism that Spencer Burke espouses and the Integral stance that Hostetter or Thresher represent.*

Supplemental question B: Visit Spencer Burke’s Emerging Church website. Check out <http://TheOoze.com>. Then discuss some aspect of it that very much engaged you — perhaps because it appealed to you, or astonished you, or even repelled you.

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