

# Spencer Burke

## “The Emerging Church: A Heretical Guide”

Episode 34 (transcript of audio) of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity  
[EvolutionaryChristianity.com](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com)

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**Michael Dowd (host):** Welcome to Episode 34 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](#).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via [EvolutionaryChristianity.com](#), where you too can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Spencer Burke](#) is our featured guest. [Spencer](#) is at the forefront of the [Emerging Church](#) movement. A former teaching pastor in an evangelical [megachurch](#), he created [TheOoze.com](#) in 1998, an online community that now has over 250,000 Christians from a hundred countries who connect, around evolving spirituality and ministry in a [postmodern](#) world. Spencer is the author of [Making Sense of Church](#) and [A Heretic’s Guide to Eternity](#), which is an exploration of grace and salvation beyond the confines of religion. Here we discuss “The Emerging Church: A Heretical Guide.”

**Host:** Hello Spencer Burke, and thank you for joining this conversation on evolutionary Christianity.

**Spencer:** Michael, it’s a pleasure. Thanks so much for letting me be part of it.

**Host:** Well, I’ve been looking forward to this, brother. I always enjoy talking to you. So Spencer, you have a reputation lately (it’s even part of the title of one of your books) of being a heretic. I’m wondering if you could explain that for our listeners. What does that mean to you? What does it mean to have a heretic’s guide to eternity and to be considered by some within the Church as a heretic?

**Spencer:** 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?"

**Host:** What you're pointing to is that in many ways what is seen as heresy in one generation could be seen as prophetic by a later generation.

**Spencer:** I think that's true. As a heretic inside the system, I do have a pedigree within the Evangelical Church. Back in the '60s I was in the tent with [Chuck Smith](#) during the [Jesus People Movement](#). In the '70s I was in a youth group that was associated with a guy named [Bill Hybels](#), who started the [Willow Creek Movement](#). Then later in the '70s there was a Christian commune that started the new monastic orders. Later I joined a megachurch, where I was a teaching pastor. We started there with about 600 and, after about eight years, we had a little over 10,000 members.

During that time [Leadership Network](#) pulled together a study group with [Rick Warren](#) and some others. The writings that we came up with became [The Purpose-Driven Life](#) and [The Purpose-Driven Church](#). And then I've been a scout, thinking about the [Emerging Church](#). So either I've been at the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time—I'm not sure which. *[laughter]* But I've been involved from the very beginning with many of these movements. I really am someone who loves the Church and has been journeying with the Church for quite a long time.

**Host:** That's great. How were you raised? I'm curious.

**Spencer:** We didn't go to church when I was a kid, but as I moved toward junior high my dad got involved in politics and the church was one place to meet people. So we ended up in a kind of "[Leave it to Beaver](#)" political, religious world. Then later on in my own life, I had a conversion experience. Since then, I've had many, many conversion experiences of being connected closely with God. The first happened in junior high for me. I went to Bible college; I went to seminary. I was a pastor for twenty-two years. Then during the last ten or twelve years I started a little website called [The Ooze.com](#), where I invited those that had been inside the Church to actually ask the question, "Am I the only crazy one out there?" A lot of people resonated with that.

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.

**Host:** I want to actually call you on an understatement because your website is hardly just a little site. Say more about [TheOoze](#), would you?

**Spencer:** We started TheOoze.com back in '98 and, over the past twelve years it has grown to one of the largest gathering places for people who are thinking about Christianity, Church, and for Jesus beyond religion. It's really church beyond religion. We've gathered about a quarter million different readers every month from a hundred different countries. Now we're just re-launching it because I think that we're taking another turn. Just like I was a megachurch pastor (that's part of my heritage)—and, Michael, I know you share this—we don't rail against our past; we celebrate our past as we move forward into our future. I actually think God is doing something new and different. People all over the world are starting to connect into this reality as we move forward. So even the Emerging Church may have emerged, and we're into the next step of what it might be.

**Host:** One of the things that I clearly remember when you introduced yourself to me back four, five years ago, and which struck me from the start, was that you considered yourself a “postmodernist evangelical.” And I remember having a tilt experience. It was like, “Wow, what do you mean by that?” So would you share with our listeners, what is the Emerging Church? What does it mean to be a postmodernist evangelical?

**Spencer:** Ultimately, I think everything has been shifting. If you think about this, I have a 20-20-20-20 theory. 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.

Out of all that came, what we have named, the Emerging Church. And it's a group of people that 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.

I don't believe there was ever a modern church, but I do think a lot of people have wed religion and modernity together—and that is really difficult. I also think you'll never find a postmodern church, but the effects of [postmodernity](#) will affect the Church from here on out. So, I'm all about the church—whether I'm in a modern era or a postmodern era. But I don't want to blindly think that culture and knowledge and wisdom have not affected the Church. We can't just simply say that we've always done it this way and believe that we're living in a living, alive God, breathing and moving in God in that way.

**Host:** That leads me to want to ask, if everything in the universe is evolving—including our institutions and human cultures—how do you see the Church evolving? If you look fifty years out, for example, and you imagine a really healthy, vital, vibrant Christianity—a Christianity that has fully embraced an ecological and an evolutionary worldview, what do you think of? How do you see preaching different from the way it is now, for example? Or, how do you see religious education? Or rituals? Or songs? When you imagine a really healthy church, what do you see? What do you imagine?

**Spencer:** Before we predict fifty years, let me be a little philosophical and take a long view of history. So my question might be, what do we think the Church might look like 10,000 years from now? So, the Church looks back at us and says, "Oh, wow, remember those *early* Christians, the *early* church, the church and Christianity in its infancy in 2010?" I think we take such a short view of history so often that sometimes many people think that Jesus is coming back and that we only have a couple more years left. We're shortsighted in understanding our environment. We're shortsighted in protecting resources. We're also shortsighted in thinking that we've arrived rather than we've only just begun.

I do think there's some beautiful ways we can describe the church fifty years from now, but I also think that fifty years from now, we'll get trapped again if we don't hold the long view of history as a possibility.

**Host:** I love it, brother! What you're saying actually reminds me of a quote that I used in my first book, [EarthSpirit](#), which was published in 1990. The quote was by [Gil Bailie](#) and he says,

It was not those closest to the historical Jesus that first gave the Gospel geographical breadth and theological depth. It was Paul, who had never known him. In addition to that, impressive achievements in biblical scholarship have in many ways brought our era closer to the constituent events of the Christian movement than were, say, the Gentile Christians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. If the life and death of Jesus is historically central, then people living 10,000 years from now will be in a better position to appreciate that than we are. Furthermore, when they look back, they will surely think of us as early Christians, living as we do a scant two millennia from the mysterious events in question—and they will be right. For 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.

**Spencer:** That's brilliant. I love that! It's totally in sync; it just makes sense. Even in the [Emerging Church](#), we tend to think we've *arrived*. My son, who is 12, or my daughter, who is 9, will at some point look at me and go, "Oh, *you* did that Ooze.com thing? That's so silly, Dad." *[laughter]* I'll have to leave so much of what I hold dear because I want to embrace *them* as we move forward in our relationship together. I'm sure at some point I am going to go, "Ooh, I don't know if I feel comfortable with that; that must be heresy!" *[laughter]*

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.

**Host:** That's a very insightful thought. It's true in so many ways—politically, religiously, economically: the way that paradigms or worldviews or big ways of thinking tend to shift.

**Spencer:** I also do want to say, though: we have to be very careful not to be rude. When I left paid ministry I volunteered at a church plant called [Rock Harbor](#) in Costa Mesa, and I served there for four years. It was amazing what we did. They had elders and eventually I became chairman of the board of elders. One day we were taking a vote, and they looked at me and said, "Spencer, if you weren't an elder on the board here at the church, would you even *attend* this church?" It wasn't because I was angry or mean, but they realized I had gone to a different place in my spiritual journey—and here I was leading the church. In reality, in many peoples' eyes I had the position and responsibility to try to turn the church in my direction. But I realized that to the 3,000 people in that church, it would have been rude. So, instead of me forcing that on them, it was time for *me* to move on in my journey. 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](#) (and our evolved instincts and quadrune brain: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)).

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.

**Spencer:** 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 light of all of eternity, I am willing to say as a finite being that I can learn today and tomorrow. 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? We've kind of embraced the language of paranoia, rather than discovery.

**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 re-understand. 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 ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)).

**Spencer:** You might think about it in a religious way and then in a scientific way. In a religious way, what if we would have stopped after Noah's Ark? Or what if we wouldn't have listened to Jesus? Or we wouldn't have heard the writings of Paul? Or in 300 we wouldn't have picked up the idea of a Trinity. All the way along the lines, if we would have stopped, we would have missed so much.

What if we would have stopped and not listened to [Newton](#) or listened to [Jonas Salk](#), with the polio vaccinations. See what I'm saying? We should constantly be willing to embrace this next part of what's happening, because it would be tragic if we ever stopped. And, quite honestly, the darkest moments of my tradition have been where we have taken people who have been correct and burned them at the stake. Again, going full circle, those "heretics" have turned into heroes and it's been a dark moment in our life.

Remember in Jesus' day, it was Peter and James who were brought before the religious leadership after Jesus' death. They had been out preaching, and I think it was Gamaliel who says that they're trying to fight these guys who claim to be the Messiahs. There's been a ton of different messiahs that have come up. If these guys are not real, they will pass away but if they are real, they will stay real. You might find yourself fighting against what we would call Reality or fighting against God. 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. That's a beautiful part [that you do, Michael](#). You have invited science and religion to come together, instead of duking it out. Here are these two orphans that finally can find a home again; they're brothers, sisters. They are not enemies.

**Host:** When you look historically, that was definitely the case. Until a few hundred years ago scientists and theologians or 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 ([blog post / podcast](#)). 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* ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)). 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? I know from my own coming into an evolutionary worldview, one of the biggest shifts was how I thought about differences. Prior to an evolutionary understanding, when I basically was a [biblical literalist](#), my understanding of human differences was that our differences were a problem to be solved. One of us was right and the other wrong. So the important thing was getting it right, believing the right things.

From an evolutionary standpoint, however, I've come to see that *our differences are in many cases a solution to our problems. It's like a healthy ecosystem*. It's precisely because of the biodiversity, the diversity of plant and animal and fungus and bacteria and all the different species, that causes the health of that ecosystem—and the same is true in consciousness.

So, Spencer, because this conversational series is really about the emergence of [Evolutionary Christianity](#), the [Advent of Evolutionary Christianity](#) (also [here](#) and [here](#)), how do you see evolutionary Christianity? What do those words mean for you?

**Spencer:** In my tradition, even people in my tribe can think of it in terms of the ability to celebrate all that's in the past and move forward. One of the things that people have difficulty with in the Emerging Church is this non-dualistic thinking. It's very important to be able to move beyond just the polarization into a little bit more of a non-dualistic way of approaching it.

In many ways for me, in my conversion experiences—from black and white, "[Father Knows Best](#)," we're-going-to-solve-all-our-problems: 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 non-approved [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.

**Host:** It's interesting, Spencer, with you saying that, because 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](#),” (a shorter version published in [Australasian Science](#) magazine), and ended up [preaching it many times](#), even in Oklahoma, at the largest cathedral in the state. It’s going to be picked up and published in [Skeptic magazine](#), so science-oriented people really resonated with that message.

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](#), [Victor Stenger](#): 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 and our religious traditions to evolve.

I’m glad I’m playing a radically different role in the body than the New Atheists are, but I think ultimately that they are helping us *get real* about God, guidance, and good news—that [God isn’t a supernatural terrorist](#) (also [here](#)). 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.

And so, it’s one of the reasons why 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.

**Spencer:** It reminds me of the [Evolution of Religion Conference](#) in Hawaii, where we gathered with people from the New Atheist movement and from the sciences—and we didn’t need to say ‘I’m right and you’re wrong.’ It’s the ability to learn from each other.

Let me use another figure who I hold dear and that’s [Thomas Merton](#). He was not only a Christian but he was a Catholic—and he was a mystic, a [Trappist](#) monk. He was invited to speak constantly in other settings; in fact he passed away while in Bangkok at a [Buddhist](#) retreat for mystic monks. He wasn’t invited there because he was a Buddhist. He was invited there because he was a [Catholic Christian mystic](#). They shared wonderful things, but he could

still be strong in who he was. He was invited because he held his beliefs so well—but not in tension with the others, but rather in orchestration, or melodies or harmonies with the others.

I think that we can also hear something similar in these conversations. 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.

**Host:** What you just said reminds me of one of my favorite quotes—one of the few quotes that I have memorized. It is from [Thomas Berry](#), who is my main mentor and who died about a year and a half ago at the age of 94. He said, *“The main task of the immediate future is to assist in the intercommunion of all living and nonliving beings”* in what he called “the emerging Ecozoic Era” of Earth’s development, the ecological age of Earth’s development. He said, and this is interesting, *“What’s most needed to accomplish this task 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.”* I love that quote. It’s about being fully self-expressed, as who I am and what I hold to be important and how I value things, and doing so with full expression, while also giving others the space, the room, the permission, to be their authentic selves, and then finding where there is commonality. As [Paul Hawken](#) often says, we’re at a time in human history when the larger body of life cannot afford for us humans to constantly be focusing on how we see things differently. We need to start focusing on what we can agree on, what values do we share, and then move forward from that place.

**Spencer:** What I love about that and the Thomas Berry quote is that 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.

**Host:** About six months ago [Connie](#) and I got a podcast series going called [Inspiring Naturalism](#), where we interview some of the world's leading scientists as to where they get their joy, their inspiration, their trust, their comfort in times of sorrow and suffering, their gratitude—where they get these deep and *primary*, (you can say) “religious” feeling-states from a *naturalistic* perspective. They don't get these from otherworldly or unnatural or supernatural beliefs but rather from a naturalistic perspective. We recently interviewed PZ Myers, who's the most widely read science blogger in the world. One of the things we were talking about was this notion that 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, PZ 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. I thought that was really interesting, because I also see that in my daughter. I have two daughters, one 20 and one 27, as well as a 25-year-old son. And my 20-year-old has this deep commitment to a healthy future for the planet, and she identifies with other 20-year-olds all over the world. Part of that is because of things like Facebook and Twitter that allow for communication and a sense of identification that's far broader than my grandparents had or even that my parents or my generation had. So it's a really interesting coming together of both our time in history and technology and also this cultural emergence in terms of how we think about religion—*religio*—reconnection to reality, being reconnected to the whole. So it's just a fascinating time to be alive.

**Spencer:** To honor the question that you asked earlier, Michael, and that was, what will the church look like in 5, 10, 50 years from now. I'm realizing, just as an individual, that I need to be in relationship and that's really what the Church is: these beautiful individuals that are coming together for love and support, and then to serve one another and those around the world in the way of Jesus. We're planting a little church here in our local area in Southern California that will not be a Sunday morning event church. It's really going to be more of a network opportunity for people who are in relationship to *be* the Church, to go about doing the things that Jesus invited us to do.

We're still using the parish model that was built on the idea that there was a small little parish town that had a town square and on that town square there was a civil building of some sort, a court or a city hall. There was a one-room schoolhouse, and then there was usually a church building surrounded by this park area. People would literally come in from the fields after six days of work. Many were illiterate, so they needed somebody to read the Bible to them. They'd come in together because they wanted to find out who was engaged, who got married, who is sick and who can we build the barn for. It was all that networking and trying to help and care for each other, and rebuild after, let's say, a tornado or whatever else it might be.

Then you'd even go into the schoolroom that had one teacher who is teaching all grades—from first through sixth. It was the same teacher for all. Whether you were studying science or music, it was the same teacher. Now, skip ahead and we're still kind of running this parish model—even in the [megachurches](#). My daughter, who is nine, has a teacher for PE, another for music, another for math. We've learned that we need to have a third grade and a high school course. 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?

[\[George\] Barna](#) is telling us that 25 million people have left the Church in the last few years. Bill Hybels has told us in a book called [The Reveal Study](#), that people are leaving the Church for all the *right* reasons. They want to really step up, and that means 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.

**Host:** Thanks for sharing that, because your passion, your enthusiasm, your visionary energy clearly comes through. 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?”

**Spencer:** That also is what being fully human, fully connected with Reality, what being fully Christian is all about. So, when something new comes along, there's not the paranoia, or fear, or control, or worry, or anger. Christians should approach these things with love, with grace, with compassion. It's keeping no record of wrongs. It's thinking of the *other* as important as our

place. That's truly what being Christian is all about. So how can we embrace being loving, caring, graceful, compassionate people? I mean, that's the beauty of our call as people of faith, of people of "the way."

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.

**Host:** Amen, brother. Amen. Well, thank you, Spencer Burke, for sharing your perspective, your passion, your energy, your ideas, and your experience with us here on the leading edge of faith.

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