



“TAKE AWAY THE STONE!”

BY BILL DAHL

Jesus approached the tomb where Lazarus was laid and said, “Take away the stone!” The immediate response from Martha was fear and trepidation: “But, Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.” (John 11:39). Frankly, Martha’s expression was rooted in the fear of the unknown and an inability to comprehend the capacity of God’s power. Today, humanity continues to struggle with the *smell test of faith* in response to God’s leading toward revealing more of himself to us.

Today, there is an emerging awareness that has begun to waif from within Christendom. Theologian Brian McLaren captures the essence of this scent, suggesting: “We Christians cannot continue to avoid knowing what we already know: that something is rotten in the state of our religion.”¹ Is it possible that, even today, we are balking at the thought of bursting through the barriers that man has somehow sealed the entrance to our understanding of and relationship with God? Are we fearful about what may *emerge*? Let’s follow the aroma, shall we?

Stones In The Road

As I contemplate the scene of Jesus at the entrance to the tomb of Lazarus, several often overlooked, yet terribly poignant realities regarding emergence within the Christian are revealed:

1. The entire scene in John chapter 11 is preceded by Jesus healing a blind man (John 9:1-12). The religious establishment (the Pharisees) began *investigating* the healing (John 9:13-34). In this passage, the Pharisees claim Jesus had broken the rules of the established religious laws, questioned their understanding of God, and threatened the mainstream religious order. Jesus delivers a parable on spiritual blindness (John 9:35-41). The significance here is that Jesus is attempting to significantly *alter the current belief system and practices* of the established religious order of the day. Jesus was proposing and modeling a new, *emerging way* of relationship with God.

2. In John chapter 10:22-42, Jesus continues to deal with the *unbelief* of the Jews. The Jews become so upset, they began picking up stones to stone him (John 10:31). Jesus escapes and persists. Many followed Jesus and *came to believe* (John 10:42). People were *emerging* out of what they had believed, into a new belief system.

3. In John chapter 11, Jesus continues to focus on opportunities to penetrate the walls of belief the Jews had come to surround themselves with, and confine God to. In this chapter, the mind of man is focused on the belief that Lazarus is dead and God cannot do anything *more*. Jesus looks upon the stone man has placed at the entrance to the tomb and recognizes

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a moment to disclose God to man. Jesus was expanding their current notion of God.

I submit to you that Jesus' command to "Take away the stone" is not a phrase uttered some two thousand years ago that has somehow lost its resonance as it has echoed throughout the corridors of time. The history of the Christian faith indicates that this phrase is *the mantra* for the Christian movement. It is a phrase that God inhabits and ordains. It is plain speak to move beyond what we believe we know about God, continue to learn how we relate to him, surrender to his transforming power and reflect his loving witness to this planet, according to whatever epoch of history we find ourselves in (as long as we are certain that we are following God's lead forward and not retrogressing by following some human leader). This, in my opinion, is the essence of what the present day terms *emerging church*, *emerging Christianity* and *emergent* refer to.

Clearly, in this passage, the stone blocking the way to relationship with God is one that had been

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placed there by man. All too often, the focus of teaching in John chapter 11 is on the miracle of Lazarus coming out (John 11:44). The history of the Christian faith has been one of an ongoing effort to remove the *stones in the road* placed there by those who came before us. Sometimes, we reach junctures on our spiritual journey where we are faced with removing a large stone at the entrance to a passageway that blocks our progress. Let's proceed a bit further and explore what this looks like.

What's Inside?

At the entrance to any cave, people tend to pause. The question, "I wonder what's inside?" inevitably arises. Typical responses of the reluctant include: "I don't care...I'm sure as heck not going in there!

What good could possibly come out of a place like that? These are the folks who adore certainty and avoid risk.

Then there are those who respond boldly. These folks typically react with courage when the possibility of exploring the unknown rears its head. Their reaction at the entrance to a cave sounds like this: "Wow! Look at this! Let's see what's in there. Let's take away the stone." These are the ones who make the discoveries that populate the history of mankind. They blaze new pathways for the rest of us to enjoy.

Those who comprise the expedition commonly referred to as the *emerging church* are the risk-takers, the explorers and the adventurers. They are the ones who recognize that "we must learn how to perceive the living God who is building a new world in unexpected places and shapes; indeed, we must learn what it means to enter the

new world of God. In short, we relearn the meaning of being a Christian."²

My experience with these folks is not that *emergent Christians* are rightfully characterized solely on the basis of their love for the journey or the thrill-seeking dimension of faith exploration. That would be a diabolical oversimplification. If there is one overriding characteristic that I have observed among the *emerging church*, it is a love for their leader, Jesus Christ.

So what's the *big deal*?

Frankly, the *big deal* is what the established Christian denominations in the western, developed world have to lose, and are losing. George Barna has said, "It is quite astounding that although Protestant and Catholic churches have raised (and spent) close to one tril-

lion dollars on domestic ministry during the past two decades, there has been no measurable increase in one of the expressed purposes of the church: to lead people to Christ and have them commit their lives to Him."³ For *emergent Christians*, there seems to be agreement that "We have learned that maintaining the status quo serves neither God nor the people He loves."⁴

When things *emerge*, other widely held beliefs, attitudes, pathways, rituals and institutions become displaced and outmoded. They feel threatened. They become insecure and defensive.

But new ideas for new times are needed now. Fundamentally, the *emerging church* is dedicated to the present day challenge of Jesus to *take away the stone...to move beyond the artificial boundaries of where established religion has come to confine us.*

The prophet Isaiah says: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:18-19).

Begin a new chapter in your own personal faith journey with Jesus. Contemplate his call to "Take away the stone." □

1. McLaren, Brian, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI, Copyright © 2004 by Youth Specialties), p. 268.

2. Marsh, Charles, *The Beloved Community—How Faith Shapes Social Justice From the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (Basic Books—A Member of the Perseus Books Group, Cambridge, MA, Copyright © 2005 by Charles Marsh), p. 214.

3. Barna, George, *The State of the Church: 2002* (Published by Issachar Resources, a division of Barna Research Group, Ltd., Ventura, CA, Copyright © 2002 by George Barna), p. 63.

4. Caldwell, Kirbyjon and Kallenstad, Walt with Sorensen, Paul, *Entrepreneurial Faith: Launching Bold Initiatives to Expand God's Kingdom* (WaterBrook Press, A Division of Random House, Inc., Copyright © 2004 by Kirbyjon Caldwell, Walt Kallenstadt and Paul Sorensen), p. 1.

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