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Book Review Essay: Traveling the Emergent Church Terrain

ADAM BARON

I love traveling overseas. I am particularly fond of Europe and have lived in England several times. I enjoy learning about the secular and sacred histories, the diversity of cultures living so close to one another (German, French, and English to name a few), and the *zeitgeist* of the people that make up the greater European landscape. In my various excursions “across the pond” to England, I have learned many things, including the paradox of two cultures divided by a common language! We are similar but different, in the same way anyone traveling around the United States finds similarities and differences in our northern, southern, eastern and western cultures.

In my travels I also enjoy people watching and have become pretty astute at spotting the *tourist* from the *traveler*. The typical tourist, with camera around his neck and money-belt around his waist, often sees only the differences to his native culture and celebrates the discovery that, “They have Starbucks and McDonald’s too!” The traveler is harder to spot because she often blends into the host culture, picks up some of the language or makes a close friend, and leaves with something of that host culture embedded inside her heart.

I begin with these images of travel, foreign lands, and cultural diversity as apt metaphors for discussing the Emergent Church, because for many it represents an unknown landscape. Furthermore, if you are acquainted only with the customs of your particular church heritage (e.g., the Restoration Movement) the *emergent conversation* might sound like a foreign language (or, surprisingly, you might find it magnanimously similar in some of its language and customs to that of your own). To make this journey safe and educational, there are a few important travel tips to consider.

First, whether speaking about the Emergent Church, our own church, or another down the street, we must note the obvious: Different church cultures can be as diverse as entering a foreign country. Second, church cultures, like foreign cultures, have their own histories, ideas, languages, customs, and protocols. Third, as we engage with these different cultures, it is important to identify whether we do so as tourists or travelers. These are critical travel stamps in our ecclesiastical passports. We all have baggage. The Emergent Church has baggage. But, to meaningfully understand the Emergent Church, beyond a McDonald’s style of meaning and into a matrix of missional possibilities, we need to make these concessions. Otherwise, we are sure to be that “ugly American” or “narrow-minded” Christian who arrives late at the Christianity and Culture party, offends the host, and leaves after staining the carpet.

There has been so much copy, craze, criticism, and creativity given to the Emergent Church conversation, that addressing the subject feels a lot like landing in a foreign country and learning the language by immersion. Fundamentally, the Emergent Church and its adherents are seeking to faithfully and authentically engage culture the way Richard Niebuhr imagined¹ but for the twenty-first century. Therefore, as tour

1. See HarperSanFrancisco’s fiftieth anniversary edition of H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

guide and translator, I will frame our whirlwind itinerary into four excursions: the emerging world, the emerging culture, the emerging traveler, and the Emergent Church.

The emerging world is a lot like the waiting lounge in an international terminal. It is not anyone's final destination. Rather it reflects the movement of ideas, particularly the movement of ideas generated in the modern world's assumptions and beliefs about reality (i.e., fathered by the Enlightenment and Descartes), into postmodern assumptions and beliefs (i.e., fathered by Derrida and others with terms like deconstruction and meta-narrative) that are now influencing the postmodern world's assumptions and beliefs. Here we gaze across the waiting lounge and see many things unfamiliar, from language to dress to behaviors. However, beyond the obvious differences, there is an embedded culture-shift taking place that the Emergent Church is seeking to engage. Detailing this culture-shift goes far beyond the scope of mere introductions, but what is vitally important for us to understand is that the emerging world is a postmodern world. It is not an esoteric debate that Christians can opt out of, but rather a worldview that is rapidly defining our times. The flight boards in the emerging world highlight a variety of destinations. The Emergent Church is not waiting for approval to get onboard, but is seeking ways to fold the gospel into this world.

The emerging culture is synonymous with the postmodern emerging world. It is a plane full of passengers from Dubai to Detroit, all heading to Bangkok. The vast enters into the particular when describing emerging culture. In the last 150 years there has been a migration of people from the rural, with all of its assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors, into a new urbanization, globalization, and technocratic culture that is forming us globally. In this global plane there are pilots from Sydney, stewards from London, tribesman from Bangui and youth from New York City, successfully branded with Western gadgets while remaining distinct. It has led to degrees of alienation, vulnerability, and pluralism. The biggest turbulence felt has to do with truth. The objective, rationalistic, individualistic, and linear have been replaced with the subjective, synthetic, and relational.² After pleasantly greeting your neighbor on this long flight, the facts remain that we now live in an emerging culture that must wrestle through such differences. The good news is that in the first century, the gospel spread in a pluralistic society. The Emergent Church is trying to participate in these emerging conversations by recapitulating its message in such a context and not apart from it.

The emerging traveler is in your midst if there is anyone in your church under the age of thirty-five. But, they aren't sitting in first-class or the equivalent front row of your congregations. Look to the back rows. These travelers identify with a sampling of ecological, technological, social, and spiritual consumerism. Far from the comforts of modernity's home, the emerging travelers are not disengaged, but passionately engaged in finding meaning within the collage of contemporary life. As CNN is broadcast through the onboard monitors, emerging travelers are being shaped by an eco-awareness and social tribalism like never before. Focused through the lenses of seemingly disjointed meaning, these travelers create mosaics of meaning through technological skill and human relations in the absence of transcendence and in the immanence of nuclear despair. They have adapted and innovated their upbringing on televisions, microwaves, and computer monitors in pursuit of authenticity, immediacy, and intimacy. This kaleidoscope of flight options has led to spiritual pursuits in many ways as a reaction against institutional Christianity as much as in finding innovative ways towards it. The Emergent Church resonates with them as it tries to reach them on such a journey.

It may very well sound like an oxymoron, but the Emergent Church is a future-minded "restoration" movement. The Emergent Church is not a mere "break-away" group. It seems to be more about the *process* of being the church, based on principles that impact *praxis*, versus merely describing itself as postmodern. In the same way that Christ's incarnation moved God into the neighborhood, the Emergent Church is seeking to be incarnational (the difference being that the postmodern landscape looks more like a matrix than a neighborhood). There isn't any clear certainty of where this flight will land. As a result, it is no surprise that

2. Michael Riddell, *Threshold of the Future* (London: SPCK, 1998), p. 105.

many Christians see all of this as a threat rather than an opportunity. The Emergent Church is re-imagining itself alongside the emerging world; culture and travelers as they react, retract, and respond to the changes that are taking place. It is pre- and post-modern, missional, contextual, alternative, and generous. It is in pursuit of orthodoxy that it believes models the original intent in its orthopraxy to be a city on a hill. The Emergent Church is not postmodern in its conformity to all related ideas. Rather it is emerging from modernity, and therefore seeking to rearticulate itself.

The following book reviews and recommended books, Web sites, and blogs represent a small sampling of theologians, missionaries, ambassadors, cultural critics, and practioners who are emerging in countless places in our emerging world. They are well worth examining as you travel and engage in the conversation.

EMERGING CHURCHES: CREATING CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN POSTMODERN CULTURES. **EDDIE GIBBS AND RYAN BOLGER, (GRAND RAPIDS: BAKER, 2005).**

Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures is arguably the best place to begin a thoughtful and open examination of the Emergent Church. It will give you a picture of the larger cultural context and thorough examples detailing specific Emergent Churches. If you are partially informed, not informed at all, or have only heard about the Emergent Church from second hand sources, this book will provide you with all of the essentials.

Eddie Gibbs is the Donald A. McGraven Professor (emeritus) of Church Growth at Fuller Theological Seminary. Ryan Bolger is Assistant Professor of Church in Contemporary Culture at the School of Intercultural Studies and Academic Director of the Master of Arts in Global Leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary. These authors are academics and devoted churchmen who are deeply committed to the life and influence of the church. Eddie Gibbs has been tracking trends in the church for decades and Bolger writes for a new generation committed to seeing its impact in culture versus mere segregate. Their book has been described by Andrew Jones, a leading voice in the Emergent Church conversation, as "Quite simply the best book yet on the emerging church."

The book provides a brief look at emerging culture, the Emergent Church's birth inside these cultural changes, and nine missiological convictions that the Emergent Church is seeking to champion. The nine missiological convictions make up the bulk of the book and require scrupulous examination if you want to understand the Emergent Church's heart and soul. Far and away the strength of this book is in Gibbs and Bolger's five years of research and their detailed conversations with key individuals in the United States and United Kingdom, who have already been leading and planting Emergent Churches for several years.

In the church there are many who think of this Emergent Church Movement as a relatively new phenomenon. However, in the way this book explores the Emergent Church's history and practioners, it reveals a seasoned self-reflection and examination of its own attempt at genuine historic orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Furthermore, the authors state, "Emerging churches destroy the Christendom idea that church is a place, a meeting or a time. Church is a way of life, a rhythm, a community, a movement" (236). This is most clearly evidenced throughout the book by the Christian narratives of fifty leaders (mostly under the age of forty) who are from the Emergent Church. You will enter the conversation at a very personal level if you only read the appendix, which details the stories of these church leaders in their own words.

HOW (NOT) TO SPEAK OF GOD. **PETER ROLLINS, (LONDON: PARACLETE PRESS, 2006).**

Every once in a while someone comes along and generates the equivalent of a Copernicus revolution or Einstein-like theory of relativity to the way we comprehend life. In his debut authorship, Peter Rollins does this by jumping into the deep end of the Emergent Church conversation as he seeks to frame the epistemological foundations of its theology and praxis in *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Unlike so many other excellent books on the Emergent Church that approach the conversation from primarily descriptive postmodern angles, this book is written about the Emergent Church, theology, and mission from the angle of *being* a

postmodern Christian theologian and practitioner. Rollins examines long held Christian presuppositions about epistemology, ontology, and theology through the lens of postmodern deconstructionist theory. In other words, Rollins assumes that the average reader, person in the pew, or preacher in the pulpit brings a large measure of meaning into all the orthodoxy and orthopraxy that they believe. As a result, he challenges the reader to recognize the sources, strengths and inadequacies of these things, stating, "This is not a revolution that seeks to change what we believe, but rather one that sets about transforming the entire manner in which we hold our beliefs" (7).

This is a daunting task, but welcome news to many in the emerging postmodern matrix who have found modern presupposition about faith inadequate. However, it generates worry amongst those who have built their entire belief system on these same presuppositions. Nevertheless, Rollins takes up the task in two forms throughout the book. The first half of the book, titled *Heretical Orthodoxy: From Right Belief to Believing in the Right Way*, addresses a litany of theories pertaining to how the church has largely understood or misunderstood its epistemological relationship to God, the Bible, divine presence/absence, doubt, and soteriology, to name just a few. Rollins examines and re-imagines these foundational themes in deep and sometimes opaque hues. The second half of the book, titled *Towards Orthopraxis: Bringing Theory to Church*, gives practical examples from liturgical services that his Irish community (called Ikon) has performed in an effort to put Christian flesh on the bones of their postmodern epistemology. There are ten liturgies described that correspond with traditional seasons in the Christian calendar (like Advent) and develop Christian themes pertaining to spiritual formation. As a warning, they are very creative and radically different from the average welcome, songs, offering, and sermon motifs experienced in most churches. Performed in a back alley pub called Menagerie (to whom the book is dedicated), they might very well put off many readers.

Whatever you make of this book, it is quickly becoming essential reading for many in the Emergent Church. I recommend to the reader that you sit for a long time with it, because I suspect that many will find it difficult, even disturbing, in places. However, many others are finding great hope for Christianity in its 140 pages of density and velocity. Moving as fast as postmodern culture seems to be moving, *How (Not) to Speak of God* is fresh off the press and is making a large impact, primarily because it articulates a new epistemology, ontology, and theology, not in the abdication to postmodernity, but in light of it.

LIQUID CHURCH: NEW PATTERNS OF CHURCH IN POSTMODERN CONSUMER CULTURE. PETE WARD, (PEABODY: HENDRICKSON, 2002).

Pete Ward is a professor at King's College, London, where he is involved in research into popular culture and theology. He is the author of several books, including *God at the Mall*, *Youthwork and the Mission of God*, *Growing Up Evangelical*, and *Youth Culture and the Gospel*. In *Liquid Church*, he sets out to articulate a vision of the church that will effectively respond theologically and biblically to a variety of cultural conditions facing it. Specifically, in the emerging culture and the Emergent Church, it is recognized that a great deal of emphasis is being placed on the relational praxis of being the church. The Emergent Church is responding by focusing on what it means to be missional, incarnational, indigenous, and local, while at the same time identifying with fluid forms of communication, consumerism, pluralism, and globalization.

What Ward proposes is less centralized or "solid" forms of traditional church, instead emphasizing a de-centralized or "liquid" form of church. In the solid church model, faithfulness is defined by church attendance, success by numbers, and membership in what is often viewed as a club membership mentality (i.e., who is in and who is out). In contrast, the liquid church model places emphasis on the fluid dynamism of how people naturally engage with one another and their environment. Focus is placed on an organic fluidity of interpersonal relationships that shape mission versus the pre-packaged form of spiritually expressed exclusively in programs found only in a church building. The attention is placed upon a network of relationship (MySpace is a perfect example), on articulating the church as a verb versus a noun (i.e., I church, you

church, we church), and the de-centralization of what the church *is* by focusing on what the church *does* throughout the week.

Ward works through these primary theses by maintaining an orthodox frame of reference found in liquid models of church in the New Testament (Chapter 3), the Trinity (Chapter 5), biblical principles (Chapter 7), and spiritual formation (Chapter 9). As he states, "The theology and values of the church are not up for grabs" (65). Rather he makes every effort to understand and respond to the spiritual search of many in a consumer culture (i.e., meeting the marketplace demands), while at the same time listening carefully to how the Spirit through the church might creatively respond. Admittedly, he concludes, "...a liquid church at this point is something of a dream" (87). Nevertheless, he finishes with six dreams he hopes and imagines for the church, if it were more liquid as opposed to its current solid form. These dreams are some of the focus of the Emergent Church. Ward suggests (1) that the church might look less congregation centered and more like a network of "hubs" (coffee house church, pub church, house church, company church, Internet church, or wherever people naturally gather in regular rhythms of life); (2) a community of constant connections modeled on technological forms of relating; (3) the abandonment of congregational structures for other diets of daily worship, prayer, study, and service; (4) leadership shifting from a management style to a holy sage style of directing fellow pilgrims on the way; (5) the development of creative and engaging "product launches" that stimulate and satisfy the wider culture's spiritual appetite; and (6) recreating the general activity of the church to be more interactive to engage all the senses (versus linear and strictly cognitive). In short, this book takes into serious account the deep passions and motivations that drive culture and offers a stimulating way of re-imagining how the church might respond more effectively.

THE COMPLEX CHRIST: SIGNS OF EMERGENCE IN THE URBAN CHURCH. **KESTER BREWIN, (GREAT BRITAIN: SPCK, 2002).**

Kester Brewin is the son of a minister and has himself been involved with a variety of effective ministry ventures in London, England. In 1998 he co-created "Dreamspace" weekend out of which the alternative Christian worship community Vaux came into existence. The purpose of Vaux has been to explore urban theology through various new media forms in a unique gathering of urban Christians. The purpose of this book is to articulate what he has seen, done, and imagined for the church in the context of cultural evolution. Brewin explains in the opening chapter, "This is a book about change. More specifically, it is an attempt to resource the Church with some ideas about how change happens, and how these ideas might be applied to our faith" (1). He believes that the church needs to fundamentally consider the possibility of changing its entire corporate practice. He isn't writing to simply vent frustration or shame the good intentions of well-meaning churches. Rather, he intelligently, humbly, and reverently sets out a vision to empower local communities to engage the complexities of what it means to be the church, while living within the complex organism of our cities and suburbs.

Brewin claims, "This is a short book by an amateur." Nevertheless, it is simply one of the most beautiful pieces of thoughtful theology, Christian piety, and the integration of theoretical assessment employing *emergent theory* for the church that I have ever read. In Part One of the book, Brewin masterfully takes seemingly unassociated ideas in chapters on Advent, Incarnation and Emergence, and weaves them together with complex theories of how systems and cities actually operate in Part Two, with chapters addressing Christ in the City, and Gift and Dirt. These opaque chapter titles contain profound content that readers must simply sit with for a season in order to negotiate their complex synergy. Therefore, knowingly or unknowingly, Brewin creates in the reader the very thing he is trying to mediate and measure in his discussion (i.e., a movement from conventional faith development to conjunctive faith). The rubric Brewin employs gives clues to his entire theses for change and evolution toward which he proposes the church must move. He builds his case on James Fowler's book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*.

A book like this debunks any notion that the Emergent Church is simply a passing youthful trend. It also challenges any church practitioner who thinks that by adding a big-screen projector, tea-lights, and some incense, they are culturally relevant and emergent. Brewin comments, "The 'emerging church' is a label which is being stuck on anything that is outside the 'norms' of the Church as most people know it; whereas the *Emergent Church* is specifically about principles of the science of emergence to church growth" (16). Moving from moments of devotional reading to theoretical examination, this book takes you from the valleys to the mountaintops of the Emergent Church conversation.

THE SHAPING OF THINGS TO COME: INNOVATION & MISSION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CHURCH.
MICHAEL FROST AND ALAN HIRSCH, (PEABODY: HENDRICKSON, 2003).

I guarantee to the reader who is deeply invested in the nature and mission of the church, that the only time you will put down this book will be to reflect on its content. Michael Frost is the founding director of the Center for Evangelism and Global Mission at Morling Baptist Seminary in Sydney, Australia. Alan Hirsch is the National Director for Forge Mission Training Network, where he oversees missional leadership development. They are both national and international church leaders, teachers, academics, and most of all missionaries to the West. This book is seminal in its depth, breadth, and creative endeavor to explain the current climate of western post-Christendom cultures and ways the church might reinvigorate and re-imagine its mission in the world.

The Shaping of Things to Come does a thorough examination of this current climate, described as post-modern, post-Enlightenment, post-Christendom, in the same way that many other books on emerging culture and the Emergent Church have done. However, it goes far beyond mere descriptions and provides a missiological frame of reference for what they call the "emerging missional church," around which to border its mission, innovation, ecclesiology, spirituality, and biblical leadership. As missionaries who are academics and academics who are missionaries, as churchmen who are laymen and laymen who are churchmen, as cultural critics who assess trends and trendsetters who create culture, Frost and Hirsch renegotiate the whole conversation about what it means to be the church and what it means for the church to fulfill its mission while embedded in emerging culture. They define distinctions between the church as institutional and missional and set out in the rest of the book to argue for a missional approach in all of its orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

The authors aim to get the church to thinking outside its Christendom boxes. They do this by explaining *The Shape We're in*, (part one), and then advocating an *Incarnational Ecclesiology* (part two), a *Messianic Spirituality* (part three), and an *Apostolic Leadership* (part four). Each section advances and builds upon the assumption that the model, methods, and tools that much of what modern Christendom has employed simply aren't viable anymore in postmodern culture. Therefore, in these three sections, they advocate for an incarnational, contextual, and missional ecclesiology concerning the structural model of church. They creatively pursue an ancient-future model of spirituality that takes into account the Hebraic worldview, the role of acting/serving as sacramental witness, and the medium as the message for the governance of the church's spiritual formation, function and flow. Finally, they explore the subject of church leadership and its necessary transition from the Christendom "top-down" model to a missional mode or "bottom-up" model that advances a whole new *type* of leader if the church is to go forward and fulfill its task in postmodernity.

The Shaping of Things to Come is a wonderful literary example of Christians who are not simply cursing the darkness and drawing demarcation lines. Rather, Frost and Hirsch set the whole Christendom experiment on fire in order to credibly shine the light of Christ again in a postmodern world. Moreover, they aren't just writing about it, they are actually doing it in "emerging missional churches."

TWENTY OTHER BOOKS THAT WILL MAKE YOU CONVERSANT

- Andrews, Dave. *Christi-Anarchy: Radical Spirituality for a New Millennium*. Oxford: Lion Hudson Publishing, 2001.
- Beaudoin, Thomas. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Burke, Spencer and Colleen Pepper. *Making Sense of Church: Eavesdropping on Emergent Conversations about God, Community and Culture*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Carson, Don. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and its Implications*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- Cray, Graham et al. *The Post-Evangelical Debate*. London: Triangle, 2000.
- Drane, John. *The McDonaldisation of the Church: Spirituality, Creativity and the Future of the Church*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 2000.
- Jamieson, Alan. *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches*. London: SPCK, 2002.
- Kimball, Dan. *The Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Lyon, David. *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000.
- McLaren, Brian. *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.
- McLaren, Duncan. *Mission Implausible: Restoring Credibility to the Church*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005.
- Riddell, Michael. *Threshold of the Future: Reforming the Church in Post-Christian West*. London: SPCK, 1998.
- Sweet, Leonard et al. *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Sweet, Leonard. *Aqua Church: Essential Leadership Arts for Piloting Your Church in Today's Fluid Culture*. Loveland: Group Publishing, 1999.
- Thwaites, James. *Renegotiating the Church Contract: The Death and Life of the 21st Century Church*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002.
- Thwaites, James. *The Church Beyond the Congregation: The Strategic Role of the Church in the Postmodern Era*. Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002.
- Tomlinson, David. *The Post-Evangelical: Why Many Christians Are Rejecting Evangelicalism as Previously Understood*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Ward, Pete et al. *Mass Culture: Eucharist and Mission in a Postmodern World*. Oxford: Bible Reading Fellowship, 1999.
- Webber, Robert. *Ancient-Future Faith. Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999.
- Williams, Rowan. *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context*. London: Church House Publishing, 2007.

WEB SITES AND BLOGS THAT WILL ENGAGE YOU

www.alternativeworship.org

Alternative worship isn't universal in the Emergent Church conversation, but this Web site will introduce you to some of the more creative elements. "Doing Alternative Worship is itself a journey in theology. If you start down the road of Alternative Worship you will be asked many questions about what you are doing and why. Here are some of the answers."

WWW.BRIANMCLAREN.NET

Almost synonymous with the Emergent Church, I cannot leave Brian McLaren out. Here you can read about this one man's mission of hope for the church in emerging culture around the world.

www.emergentvillage.us/weblog

"Emergent is a friendship. Becoming a part of a friendship is a quite different from being part of an organization. It's more like joining a conversation." Here you can join in the United States side of the conversation.

www.faithmaps.org

Offers helpful articles and ideas for the purpose of navigating theology, praxis and leadership in the emerging church.

www.opensourcetheology.net

An excellent source for getting into the theology of the Emergent Church. "The purpose of this website is to develop an emerging theology for the emerging church."

www.tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com

On a small island off the coast of Scotland, Andrew Jones is perhaps one of the most connected people in the emerging conversation. Listen and participate first hand here.

www.the-next-wave.org

"All over the world there is a growing awareness that the world has entered a postmodern era. All around us the effects of this change are visible: in the media, movies, the courts, politics, psychology and religion. The church must learn to live and breathe in the postmodern world, and find ways to be the agent of change that Christ called her to be."

www.theooze.com

"Although many have chosen to fight against our current culture, we believe there is a new, emerging mindset that would rather take postmodernism into account. This cultural shift has created a greater awareness of spirituality and the need for the holy Other."

www.vintagefaith.com

"The rethinking of church with others who are on the same journey."

www.wikipedia.org

If you search this Internet encyclopedia for "Emerging Church Movement" you will be able to quickly and easily access all significant materials and ideas associated with the Emergent Church, from mission and values to critical critiques of the Movement.

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