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Ordinary Community: Missional Communities as a Helpful Ecclesial Response to the Problem of Postmodernism and Consumerism for the American Evangelical Church

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

ORDINARY COMMUNITY:

MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES AS A HELPFUL ECCLESIAL RESPONSE TO THE
PROBLEM OF POSTMODERNISM AND CONSUMERISM FOR THE AMERICAN
EVANGELICAL CHURCH

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX
EVANGELICAL SEMINARY IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR
OF MINISTRY

BY CHRISTOPHER W. MARSHALL

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.

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ABSTRACT

There is a storm approaching the shores of the American evangelical church that is two-fold. First, there is a macro shift in cultural worldview from modernity, which was embedded in the tenets of the Enlightenment project to a new era called postmodernity. Postmodernity is characterized as a harsh reaction against the utopian ideals of the modern world. What is the appropriate ecclesial response of the American evangelical church to the postmodern world? Secondly, the dominant cultural challenge to Christianity in America is the organizing of life around the attachments of a consumer lifestyle. Consumerism dominates American life however it is not a satisfying pursuit. In the face of the false idol of the consumer lifestyle, how can the American evangelical church be an antidote to the problem of consumerism? I claim that missional communities are a helpful ecclesial response to the problem of postmodernism and consumerism in America because they are communal, simple, and sent-out intentional communities of faith offering an alternative narrative of hope.

Chapter 1 provides a description of the problem facing the contemporary American evangelical church. Chapter 2 describes the massive cultural worldview shift from modernity to postmodernity and seeks to locate both challenge and opportunity within that shift. Chapter 3 reports on the mythology of the American dream and the trappings of consumerist lifestyles. Chapter 4 surveys the primitive church for helpful contributions of how to express life as a community of faith. Chapter 5 surveys Christian history for contributions from spiritual ancestors to inform missional communities today. Chapter 6 reports on the unique leadership challenges of today's sent out communities

through the example of Pauline communities. Chapter 7 concludes the research study with the beliefs and practices necessary for missional communities today to offer an alternative narrative of hope.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“Imbued with the vision of God’s program for the world, we must claim the new postmodern context for Christ by embodying the Christian faith in ways that the new generation can understand. In short, under the banner of the cross, we must ‘boldly go where no one has gone before.’”¹

In the history of the western church, scholars have discerned six unique paradigms of thought and traditions that are roughly sequential with each distinct worldview overlapping with the one that follows. Robert Webber reports the summary this way:

It begins with primitive Christianity (the first century); the common era, with the emergence of classical Christianity (100-600); the medieval era, with the formation of a distinct Roman Christianity (600-1500); the explosion of the Reformation and the growth of Protestantism (1500-1750); the modern era, with the growth of denominations (1750-1980); and the postmodern now emerging (1980 -).²

Throughout Christian history, the Church has struggled to locate its place when it finds itself at the transition of macro worldviews. As the Church has thrived in one paradigm, how can it respond and incarnate the Gospel when the norms of that paradigm have been drastically altered? Ecclesial formations rise up and are embedded within their particular culture in their particular times, but what ought the Church do when the particular time and its cultural milieu changes?

Contemporary American evangelical Christianity, and increasingly globally as well, is finding itself at a crossroads in terms of a massive shift in macro cultural

¹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996) 10.

² Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 13.

worldview that is defining the transition from one era to another. The implications of this shift are expansive and provide perhaps both a challenge and an opportunity to the future of the American evangelical church. Ecclesial business as usual will not produce its intended results and may not be sustainable under the auspices of our previous assumptions about the way ministry works and how people can be reached with the hope of the Gospel.

Small, simple, missional faith communities have already been launched and sent-out over the past decade as early adopting American Christians responded to the shifting ground beneath their feet. Surveys contend that millions of Americans regularly attend and practice their entire ecclesial life within the context of a house church.³ The Barna group reports that, “by the end of the next decade, 40% of all church-attending Christians will be worshipping God outside the parameters of a traditional congregational context.”⁴ In contrast, others are skeptical of such widespread shifting in ecclesial loyalties and constructs. In response to popular literature about emerging congregations that are more akin to the paradigm of first century Christianity, Robert Wuthnow warns us to be cautious to draw such overarching conclusions. “But we need to be skeptical about these arguments. Usually they are drawn from the personal experience of a few people, rather than from respectable research.”⁵

If George Barna’s statistics do in fact prove to be correct, it will dramatically restructure the entirety of our evangelical ecclesial strategies. How will this shift impact

³ Phyllis Tickle, *Emergence Christianity: What It Is, Where It Is Going, Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 145.

⁴ *Ibid*, 183.

⁵ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 6.

pastoral leaders? What are the implications for how worship gatherings are organized? How will the stewardship of resources be handled? How can church history and the scriptural narratives help inform these new ecclesial structures? What are the dangers inherent within these changes and what will the future challenges become? These are all the pragmatic and ecclesial questions that will be required to have attention paid to them for the sake of the gospel in the American context today. Firstly, we must consider the expanse of these cultural changes. If there is in fact a storm on the horizon, what is the forecast and how ought we to prepare for its implications?

Effective missiology is anchored in the idea that the church has to engage its culture, learn of it and then communicate the gospel in a way that is indigenous to the people while remaining faithful to the Scriptures. Gibbs and Bolger report this urgency in this way:

The church must recognize that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution and that nineteenth-century (or older) forms of church do not communicate clearly to twenty-first-century cultures. A major transformation in the way the church understands culture must occur for the church to negotiate the changed ministry environment of the twenty-first century. The church is a modern institution in a postmodern world, a fact that is often widely overlooked. The church must embody the gospel within the culture of postmodernity for the Western church to survive the twenty-first century.⁶

While the Protestant evangelical church thrived in the glory days of modernism, it does so no longer. The modern institution of church has largely lost its privileged position and finds itself on the margins of culture in the same space as other recreational and non-profit organizations.⁷ Postmodern generations have largely chosen to ignore the

⁶ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

organized church as having little to no relevance for their spiritual longings.⁸ The American evangelical church has a choice of how to respond. They can choose to live in denial to the storm cresting on their shores. They can center their identity in a kind of fatalistic lament that such gloomy changes are upon them. They could build up walls of protective parameters to defend themselves against the fearful outside culture. Or, for the sake of the gospel of Christ in the world, they can choose to “venture forth in mission.”⁹

Research is pointing to a trend that the future of American evangelicalism is not finding a home in the life and heart of the generations following the Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers have been the dominant generation in shaping the life of the American evangelical church but they are not a part of the future, as they grow older they are quickly becoming its past.¹⁰ From a pragmatic standpoint, it has been the Baby Boomers who have transitioned largely to being empty nesters with time to serve on ecclesial committees and committed income to place in the offering plate.¹¹ These are not the trends of the emerging generations following the Baby Boomers. Because they lack in sheer number to the Baby Boomers, they have not been studied well and are largely not understood by religious leaders and scholars.¹² In addition, they do not share the same sense of hope and optimism about the world they live in. Len Sweet reports on the words of a member of Generation X who says, “My generation inherited not free love but

⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁹ Ibid., 18.

¹⁰ Wuthnow, 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 1.

¹² Ibid., 2.

AIDS, not peace but nuclear anxiety, not cheap communal lifestyles but crushing costs of living, not free teach-ins but college's priced for aristocracy.”¹³

As these emerging generations have grown up in a consumer culture, they largely see their ecclesiology as another consumer option. They are not choosing local church as the source of support and stability thus forcing them deeper into a kind of rugged individualism defined by their consumerism.¹⁴ “The single word that best describes young adults’ approach to religion and spirituality – indeed life – is tinkering.”¹⁵ They do not share the long-term commitments to ecclesiology as their Baby Boomer parents and Baby Builder grandparents did that helped shaped our American evangelicalism today. They see church life as one consumer option amongst many other options to organize their lives around. This provides a great challenge to the American evangelical church and its strategies to structure itself into the future. How can you plan for a future that may not be there? Wuthnow challenges with this central argument from his book, “that unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt.”¹⁶

Not only may these emerging generations not choose our present ecclesial structures, if they do they will not have the fiscal clout or the long-term commitment of their Baby Boomer parents. They live in a world of economic downturn and uncertainty that is coupled with a lifestyle of consumer appetites. The cultural milieu is one of debt,

¹³ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 118.

¹⁴ Wuthnow, 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

work, stress, fears about job security and an uncertain future.¹⁷ If a young person is unlikely to be employed at his or her job for more than three years, they are less likely to make long-range ecclesial commitments.¹⁸ The Baby Boomers flourished in an age of unparalleled affluence that constructed much of the expansive reach of American evangelicalism today. However, the question is, can this be sustained without nearly the time and financial capital needed to operate business as usual? It is reported that young adults under the age of 25 have expenses that exceed their after-tax incomes by at least 20 percent annually.¹⁹ They are pre-occupied with paying off loans, getting their heads above the water financially and working longer hours at work to increase income opportunity to pay off present and past debt.²⁰

The research is showing that young people are organizing their lives around the resources needed to support their consumer lifestyles. They sink shallow roots in their community because it is imperative that they be open to being readily mobile in order to please their employers.²¹ Regular church attendance, commitment to serving the programs of the local church and pledging financial offerings that were of high value in earlier periods of American history is not so anymore.²² These emerging generations simply lack the margined capital to turn the crank of the American evangelical ecclesial machine. Darrell Guder reports,

¹⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Ibid., 36.

²¹ Ibid., 49.

²² Ibid., 65.

The crises are certainly many and complex: diminishing numbers, clergy burnout, the loss of youth, the end of denominational loyalty, biblical illiteracy, divisions in the ranks, the electronic church and its various corruptions, the irrelevance of traditional forms of worship, the loss of genuine spirituality, and widespread confusion about both the purpose and the message of the church of Jesus Christ.²³

It is not that these emerging generations do not believe or are against the tenets and Christian ethics of the Scriptures, it is simply that their consumer lifestyle is what they are choosing to organize their lives around and this has serious implications for the future of the American evangelical church. Many do believe in God, life after death and the divine nature of Jesus, but they seldom, if ever, attend religious services.²⁴ In severe contrast to the previous Baby Boomer generation, they are rejecting the bigger is better mega-church model in search for smaller congregations with an increased focus on community.²⁵ The emerging generations prefer a smaller church culture where they have the chance to be informal, to have a sense of ownership over the worship gathering and more poignantly to foster more authentic friendships.²⁶

If the ecclesial model offered to them is absent of the experience of genuine community, it is a compelling reason for them to stay away.²⁷ Wuthnow offers this chilling warning to the American church today: “If religion is an institution that provides support and guidance during moments of major life transition, a larger number of young adults will face these transitions without such support and guidance. They will seek it

²³ Darrel J. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 2.

²⁴ Wuthnow, 215.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 223.

elsewhere, to be sure. Religious organizations will simply be less relevant for many than was true in the past.”²⁸ Guder adds:

The context of modernity, with its philosophy of individualism and personal freedom, assumed that persons shared some sense of communal identity. This condition no longer exists for most people as a primary framework for understanding life. The structures that previously shaped such community have eroded. With this erosion, persons find themselves very alone.²⁹

There is an opportunity within the loss of community for a sent out *ekklesia* to provide an alternative narrative of belonging. Precisely at the void of where culture has need, *ekklesia* can be sent as a new reality for people to understand that surely God is with them in the life of the ordinary. David Bosch reports that the church has lost its position of privilege. “In many parts of the world even in regions where the church had been established as a powerful factor for more than a millennium, it is today a liability rather than an asset to be a Christian.”³⁰ This choosing away from our present ecclesial models in America is a part of the storm clouds on the horizon for the American evangelical church.

Stanley Grenz suggests that as the worldview of modernity dies all around us, we appear to be entering into a new epoch – one termed postmodernity.³¹ I will report on the postmodern stinging critique on modernity in chapter two of which our American evangelical church finds its centered structure. Len Sweet reports that, “In the midst of one of the greatest transitions in history – from modern to postmodern – Christian

²⁸ Ibid., 70.

²⁹ Guder, 43.

³⁰ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 364.

³¹ Grenz, 11.

churches are owned lock, stock, and barrel by modernity.”³² However, if postmoderns are skeptical of modern structures, that does not mean that they are not hungry for spiritual experiences. Sweet continues, “Western Christianity went to sleep in a modern world governed by the gods of reason and observation. It is awakening to a postmodern world open to revelation and hungry for experience.”³³ For many, there is a sense of void as to what to do. Does the American church know what a postmodern or post-Christendom expression of faith even looks like?³⁴ In a culture of reactivity, how can the American evangelical church respond to the challenges upon its shores and offer the Gospel narrative in a way postmoderns can understand and respond to?

Coupled with that reality is a failing American economy that is steeped in compounding debt due to systemic greed and insatiable consumer appetites. Global economic scarcity is the new monetary reality and advanced economies like that of the United States have “reached the crisis with arguably the worst fiscal outlook ever faced in the absence of a major war.”³⁵ 49% of business executives when looking at the future reported in a poll that they believe: “We are living in revolutionary times and are at the very beginnings of an entirely new economic era that requires a fundamental reinvention of how we live, work, and play.”³⁶ The dawn of postmodernism and perilous global

³² Sweet, 28.

³³ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁴ Gibbs and Bolger, 29.

³⁵ Octaviano Canuto and Danny M. Leipziger, *Ascent After Decline: Regrowing Global Economies After the Great Recession* (Washington D.C.: The World Bank, 2012), 89.

³⁶ Sweet, xiv.

economics has crested upon the shores of the American evangelical Church and the question that remains is how should she respond?

In addition to the problem of postmodernism, the contemporary American popular culture is largely built upon the mythology of the American dream. That myth embodies the idea that personal fulfillment and meaning can be found within the attachments of a consumer lifestyle. In order to address this problem, I have researched missional community church planting because I believe that simple, communal and sustainable church structures can be strategically effective at confronting American consumer culture so that more of these intentional faith communities can be sent out to offer an alternative story of belonging. Although there are many traditional models of church planting, I claim that missional communities can be a suitable ecclesial response to the present and future challenges of postmodernism and consumerism to Christianity in America because they are simple, sustainable and sent-out intentional communities of faith. Sweet adds, “Like the church of the first century, the twenty-first century church must learn to measure success not by its budgets and buildings but by its creativity and imagination.”³⁷

“In the emerging ecclesiology, the church is seen as essentially missionary.”³⁸ The term missional carries with it a kind of ambiguity in the contemporary western church context and quite another definition in its historical context particularly in reference to the movements of imperialist colonialism of modern Christendom. Within the purposes of this research project, I will use the term missional to simply be defined and understood as the act of being sent. For a community to be truly missional, it ought to

³⁷ Ibid., xxi.

³⁸ Bosch, 372.

have the mobility and construct of being sent into neighborhoods to incarnate a Gospel community where people live and work. To be missional is to be mobile, to be fluid in construct, flexible in time constraints and sent amongst the places of the ordinary. In the spirit of the Incarnation of Christ, to be missional is to embody the first rule of missiology; which is to take on the sacrifices required to understand a people until they know that you understand them. To be missional is to earn trust in the ordinary flow of life in the midst of a skeptical and unbelieving culture.

David Bosch states that, “The term ‘mission’ presupposes a sender, a person or persons sent by the sender, those to whom one is sent, and an assignment.”³⁹ These communities are not sent simply to hang out in neighborhoods, but to carry out the imperative mission of God to be reconciled with his Creation. *Ekklesia* is a sent and pilgrim people on the move and on mission, not a static structure on the street corner. Missional communities as an embodiment of *ekklēsia* according to Bosch are sent as a “sacrament and sign.”⁴⁰ It is a sign in the sense that they exist to point the unbelieving culture to the God of Creation and his Kingdom that has come on earth as it is in heaven. It is a sacrament in the sense that it is the very representation of that God incarnated amongst all his children whether they embrace him or not. Missional communities are sent to people who may never step foot into an existing church meeting in a particular place and at a particular time.

As the *ekklēsia* is sent on its pilgrimage amongst the neighborhoods of its embedded culture, it must remain rooted in the narratives of the Scriptures and the

³⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

identity as a people representing the one Triune God. The church has a missionary role only if it is being different from the world as it is sent to be in it. Bosch argues,

Precisely for the sake of the world the church has to be unique, in the world without being of the world. Christ's body, his own 'earthly historical form of existence' is 'the one holy catholic and apostolic church' and as such 'the provisional representation of the whole world of humanity justified in Him', 'the experimental garden of the new humanity.'⁴¹

I am proposing intentional faith communities, representations of the incarnated Christ, to be sent into the postmodern and consumer context that is the contemporary milieu of the American evangelical church.

In the same manner, missional communities are not new. They are part of a received tradition within ecclesial history. Much of what can be learned as a way forward through this contextual storm can be found in the narratives of Christian past. The American evangelical church can have one wise and reflective foot in its traditioned history, as well as a courageous and hopeful foot in its contemporary milieu where the hope of the Gospel is desperately needed. Bosch suggests, "A paradigm shift always means both continuity and change, both faithfulness to the past and boldness to engage the future, both constancy and contingency, both tradition and transformation."⁴² The way forward is often with a look back.

In chapter two, I present the defining and specific shifting context of modernity to postmodernity. This macro worldview convergence brings severe implications to the beliefs and practices of the American evangelical church. I will report on this shift as both a challenge and an opportunity to live out the Gospel imperative of being *ekklesia* in

⁴¹ Ibid., 386.

⁴² Ibid., 366.

this given context. Postmodernity is not a satisfying worldview, therefore, how can the church act as an alternative narrative of hope amidst its nihilistic and destructive culture?

In chapter three, I present materials from the modern social sciences that reveal the story of an emotional and spiritual poverty being experienced in many American neighborhoods. In particular, suburban spaces are designed for individualism and consumerism; not the kind of spaces that foster the meaningful production of social capital. The chasing of the American dream has fostered isolation and loneliness, a type of suburban ghetto. The dominant narrative that suburban people organize their life around is that of consumerism. It follows the story that meaning is bought, but the reality is that it is a faulty goal. People find themselves searching for more but yet finding themselves spiritually and emotionally with less. Popular attractional church planting actually is designed along the same American corporate philosophy of the exchange of goods and services based upon consumer desires. If consumerism is a portion of what ails us, a strategy only of more of the same I suggest is not the correct solution.

In addition, there are crises already on the footstep of the American evangelical church in the form of economic recession and ongoing fiscal scarcity. If a majority of the average church budget is set aside for buildings and salaries, what will be the result if economic scarcity causes the budgets to fall short of their debts? Garnering consideration for future generational giving patterns, will millennials value physical structure and trust in large organizations enough to curve their consumer spending to fund the present projected budgets? How can simple, local and sustainable models of church planting be positioned as strategically prepared at the onset of these challenges?

In chapter four, I present that the biblical story of the Gospel has been closely attached to a community of followers who organized their lives around the Kingdom teachings. The primitive biblical community lived peculiar lives of shared resources, counter-cultural values and expressed their belonging as intentional fictive family. This fictive family found its milieu within the first century idea of Mediterranean Patrilineal Kinship Groups. Patrilineal Kinship Groups were how they defined what family was and it is a vast contrast to the western American construct of family that leans towards individualism within biological attachments. We need to understand Patrilineal Kinship Groups within the first century context so that we can rightly apply its powerful and communal teachings without assuming they shared our construct. I will outline Church as missional, Church as community and Church as hope for today's culture.

In chapter five, I will present materials from Christian history and thought that inform today's missional communities from their historic contexts. I will pay attention to primitive church in their early communal life, Celtic Christian communities, monastic traditions, John Wesley's class meetings and early American Quakerism. Simple, small and intentional communities of faith are not new in the history of the church; they are rooted in a deep legacy of shared living. I will report on what these communities of the past can encourage in today's modern expressions. In addition, I will pursue the question of what do these historic constructs have to warn of upcoming pitfalls and challenges yet ahead for today's missional communities? Each of these communities of faith expressed themselves as a peculiar people going against the grain of their contemporary culture to live an alternative Kingdom story.

In chapter six, I will pursue the specific leadership challenges of this new paradigm of ministry that is largely dependent upon bi-vocational leaders and pastors. Missional communities can address the postmodern challenge away from only ecclesial models of singularity and can offer dispersed and organic community networks, but not without its enormous challenges and cross-pressures of leadership dynamics. What kind of leadership is required for these dispersed networks of intentional decentralization? How can the Pauline communities of the primitive church in Graeco-Roman context inform the leadership of contemporary missional communities of today? What are the personal identity challenges of bi-vocational missional leaders and how can they build models of dependency upon God and away from crises of faith? Specifically, what is required of missional leaders in this ministry paradigm that harkens back to a rooted context in primitive church history?

In chapter seven, I conclude with present materials of what ten years of experience within the American missional community story can teach the future of the movement. What are the practices and beliefs of these communities that have been effective in missional engagement of the people living within the trappings of consumerism and individualism? Without large budgets to meet, how are these communities focusing their financial giving? Without the anonymity of larger churches, how are small intentional communities confronting the issues of individualism and consumerism? Within their successes, I will report on the survivability issues facing these small communities.

In conclusion, I claim that uniquely evangelical missional communities can be a suitable ecclesial response to the present and future challenges of postmodernism and

consumerism to Christianity in America because they are simple, sustainable and sent-out intentional communities of faith. I present our solution to be strategically constructed as an alternative story and a hope to the emptiness of the consumer dream.

CHAPTER TWO

THE DAWN OF POSTMODERNISM

“We are apparently experiencing a cultural shift that rivals the innovations that marked the birth of modernity and of the decay of the Middle Ages: we are in the midst of a transition from the modern to the postmodern era.”¹

It has frequently been said that defining postmodernism is a lot like trying to nail congealed gelatin to the wall; it inherently lacks the constitution to allow itself to be pinpointed with any amount of objective clarity. At its base etymology, postmodernism literally means after-modernity. However, that is only descriptive of its relative positional space within historical epochs. Stanley Grenz defines postmodernism as a “rejection of the Enlightenment project and the foundational assumptions upon which it was built.”² The Enlightenment’s mission to search for universal and objective truths is what has come to define the period of time scholars refer to as modernity. To understand postmodern thinking, one “must view it in the context of the modern world that gave it birth and against which it is reacting.”³ Postmodernity is subsequently a radical reaction to and rejection of these tenets in a protested cry of the Enlightenment being a complete and utterly failed project. Grenz sums it up well: “The postmodern consciousness pervades the emerging generation, and it constitutes a radical break with the assumptions of the past.”⁴

¹ Grenz, 2.

² Ibid., 5.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Grenz, 13.

The origins of the postmodern worldview seem to have its beginnings from French philosophical influences. James K. A. Smith describes it this way: “Postmodernism, whether monster or savior, is something that has come slouching out of Paris.”⁵ With its roots steeped in philosophy, postmodernism is neither a theory nor a creed, but rather it is more akin to an attitude or an outlook on the way the world is.⁶ It is quite difficult to understand another’s worldview if it is distinctively opposite of your own. It requires a lot of critical hard work to recognize the culture of another, let alone the culture you inhabit. Heath White states: “The common sense of a person influenced by postmodernism is not the common sense of a modern, and a pre-modern person has yet a different kind of common sense.”⁷ Our worldviews are the very framework in which we differentiate our experiences and our informational input from outside influences to help interpret and make sense of our world. The postmodern worldview that originated in France has come to have monumental impact on the American way of life, as it has for most western cultures. Postmodernism is not a passing fad, as some have suggested, it is our new reality. As David Lehman aptly puts it, “The Twentieth Century is the name of a train that no longer runs.”⁸

Robert Webber, in his book on *Ancient-Future Faith*, summarizes the origins of modernity and its embedded relationship with the Christianity of its day:

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 19.

⁶ Heath White, *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ Sweet, xiii.

Rene' Descartes was the father of the modern emphasis on reason. His famous dictum was, 'I think therefore I am.' His empirical method of scientific observation and rational deduction permeated every discipline, including biblical studies and theology. A critical methodology was developed that affirmed the ability of the mind to understand truth through science and reason. This method of rational interpretation was applied to the study of Christianity.⁹

Systematic theological constructs were put in place to build perceived metanarratives of objective universalities of proper Christian thought and life. With empirical reason at its defined core, the Christian metanarrative was a matter of objectivity of defined truth claims about the one true deity. The overarching metanarrative was meant to bring clarity and focus to the life and mind of the believer as it was embedded in certainty, free from doubt. The metanarrative was derived from close empirical study of the biblical text and to provide stories that "make sense of out of life by providing an interpretation of the world from its beginning to its end."¹⁰

At the birth of modernity, what Jürgen Habermas called the "Enlightenment Project", it became the goal of the movement of the humanist intellectual quest to discover all the secrets and truths of the universe in order to "master nature for human benefit and create a better world."¹¹ The modernist ideals were lofty; they believed in the possibility and the attainment of a kind of utopia on earth where rationalism and freedom could replace the superstitions and tyranny of their past. No longer did they need to live in fear of their world if they could objectively know it and thus control it for the benefit of all humankind. In this way, modernity assumed that knowledge was certain, objective

⁹ Webber, 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19.

¹¹ Grenz, 3.

and good.¹² Those in the Enlightenment project were very optimistic about their future; they believed that progress would lead them to the world they believed was possible. For the modernist, progress was inevitable. Science, coupled with the power of education, would eventually free them from the vulnerability to nature and even the social constructs they found themselves in.¹³ For the modernist, confidence was high that humans could solve their grand problems and control their chaotic environment in a way that produced utopian ideals.

“Postmodernism is characterized by a deep hermeneutic of suspicion.”¹⁴ The postmodernist¹⁵ simply cannot accept the overarching universalities of truth claims and objective assertions that modernism has set forth. Modernity was on a quest for assurances of seemingly impartial scientific data of which is now held under a skeptical light. Postmoderns are suspicious that data is ever impartial or unbiased; but rather that the interpreter of data induces meaning from the information in their own dialogue with it. They do not believe in any one meaning or universal conclusion of actuality because there is not a transcendent center to it all, just your experience of it within your cultural context.¹⁶ “Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal.”¹⁷

¹² Ibid., 4.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Smith, 86.

¹⁵ For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘*postmoderns*’ will refer to people who may be unaware of the philosophical constructs of postmodernism, but are influenced by it anyway, and live their lives accordingly but even perhaps subconsciously.

¹⁶ Grenz, 6.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

Not only is postmodernism skeptical of objective truth claims to have any universal merit; they are skeptical of their intended functionality. They see the struggle for power within the universal truth claims and suspect that the only assertion we can know is that it is the winners who write history. Heath proclaims that: “The modern claim to tell objective history is, for the postmodern, a too convenient mask for the exercise of power.”¹⁸ Postmoderns long for a more level playing field when it comes to sources of authority and prefer to move away from the mechanistic hierarchies of the modern world. Modernity attempted to write an overarching story to explain everything; a metanarrative to bring objective meaning to the constructs of life. The modern ideal would be that this metanarrative was true at all times for everyone in all places; truly a universal certainty. This intention for universality is not a shared ideal amongst the postmoderns; they are suspect of the power play within the grand claims of the story. To embrace a given metanarrative and claim its universality is to give members of the favored group a license to feel and act superior to the members of the non-favored group.¹⁹ Postmoderns will reject the preferred hierarchy of modernity to act in certain superiority of one cultural context over and above another. Their skepticism of modern bias comes from a longing for more equality for all; they will confront the bully of modern arrogance to protect the legitimacy of other cultures and their relative embedded narratives.

In the place of the singularity of universal truths, the postmoderns turn to a more preferable position of pluralism. In stark contrast to the world of modernism, postmoderns are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good. With all the

¹⁸ White, 149.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

humanistic optimism of a better world through the scientific worldview and objective knowledge over the last century, postmoderns have replaced that optimism with a “gnawing pessimism.”²⁰ Terry Eagleton states that: “Postmodernism is against essentialism; but is also against metanarratives, universal Reason and non-pluralist cultures, and these views are arguably essential to it.”²¹ This pessimism defines the postmodern mindset, they are not at all hopeful about the emerging future. Preferable values and ethics for societies and people groups do not exist universally because they are only contingent on the local culture; they lack absolute relevance in all cultures.²² Precisely because they have given up any claims to certainty, postmoderns lack a confidence that humanity will ever solve the world’s great problems.²³ What results is a kind of nihilism that does not satisfy the basic human search for meaning and purpose. In the world of postmodernity, one cannot resolve the basic life questions because there simply is no right or objective answer to it all.²⁴

Moderns believed they were able to see the world as it really is and in stark contrast, the postmoderns believe that all to be an illusion.²⁵ They would contend that there is “no fixed vantage point beyond our own structuring of the world from which to gain a purely objective view of whatever reality may be out there.”²⁶ For the postmodern,

²⁰ Grenz, 7.

²¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 103.

²² *Ibid.*, 97.

²³ Grenz, 7.

²⁴ White, 49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

all truth is relative to its individual context and interpreted for its usefulness within that construct. Grenz describes it this way: “There is no absolute truth; rather, truth is relative to the community in which we participate.”²⁷ Postmodernity has an exalted view of community, as it is the very foundation that enables the individual to understand any sense of functional truth. However, that community-based understanding of truth is only assumed to be applicable to that particular cultural context. Postmodern truth is relative to the community in which a person is participating and since there are many human communities then the logic plays out that there must be many different truths.²⁸ In stark contrast to modernity, postmodernism proposes a radical kind of relativism and pluralism. The days of allegiances to common sources of authority for universal application are over; they reject the previous assumptions that these power centers should be respected or even are legitimate.²⁹ Perhaps Steven Connor sums it up best by saying that the postmodern condition “manifests itself in the multiplication of centers of power and activity and the dissolution of every kind of totalizing narrative which claims to govern the whole complex field of social activity and representation.”³⁰

Postmodernism is drastically different than the context of modernity and this can be a cause for great fear and concern. However, as evangelicals who have the Gospel imperative to incarnate the good news of Christ and his Kingdom into its given culture, the American evangelical church ought to be listening with an ear to understand. Webber implores us to listen in a way we can respond to: “These philosophers are setting the

²⁷ Grenz, 8.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Ibid.

trajectories of the future by describing the dialectic, interactive view of life that prevails in our Western culture. It is in this culture that we are to communicate, embody, and live out the Christian faith.”³¹ The Incarnation is our model to show us that it is about personal sacrifice to embody another’s culture, not to remain in the safety of our own.

POSTMODERN ECCLESIAL CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

“A failure to help people work through the implications of postmodernism will leave the church in its own self-imposed ghetto where it can only speak to those who are already inside its limited circle of influence.”³²

With the storm of postmodernism and its far-reaching implications upon the shores of the American evangelical Church, the ecclesial response is yet to be decisively determined. This great transition from the modern era to the postmodern era provides perhaps both a grave challenge and a new opportunity for the evangelical church in America. To have no sufficient response would be to give up on the mission to reach future generations of the Body of Christ. Having no appropriate response to such a massive shift within culture and comprehensive worldview would relegate the American evangelical church to the sidelines in a spectator role as the pluralistic options line up to propose their respective metanarratives to these same emerging generations. I claim that the American evangelical church has within its own narrative history the constitution to address this crucial shift in macro-culture and worldview assumptions. There is yet an opportunity to look back in order to find an ecclesial way forward. If not, the emerging future may evolve without significant voice from the American evangelical church.

³¹ Webber, 22.

³² Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 205.

“Twenty-first century America, however, is rapidly becoming a postmodern place. If this pattern doesn’t change, we can expect some kind of a disconnect between churches and the surrounding postmodern culture as the twenty-first century progresses.”³³

A curious challenge at the onset is the historical marriage between American evangelical Christianity and the Enlightenment project. Grenz reports, “As George Marsden correctly concludes, in some sense evangelicalism – with its focus on scientific thinking, the empirical approach, and common sense – is a child of early modernity.”³⁴ At the height of modernity, Evangelicalism was like a Protestant crescendo that rang shockwaves throughout the western hemisphere and in particular the United States. Great orators of the faith proclaimed objective truths of the Scriptures at a time when they believed their comprehensive and systematic theologies were not merely the suggestions of a remnant community; but rather the actuality of all things. American evangelical Christianity was birthed largely at the zenith of British modernism and exploded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as it spread to the young nation that was in the process of maturing and expanding.

Within the context of modernity, the evangelical presentations of the gospel have been largely focused on the cognitive ascent to doctrinal propositions. Coming to the right conclusion on the important historic and linear points of information would add up to the experience of salvation. It was largely a matter of the intellect; believe the right theology and that was entrance into the kingdom of heavens. Evangelicalism born in modernism exalted the rationalistic apologetics for the existence of God because it was

³³ Ibid., 205.

³⁴ Grenz, 10.

always working for the credibility of the faith to defy the scientific and philosophical arguments of its day. The questions they toiled with were how to explain objectively the existence of God, the trustworthiness of the Bible and the historicity of Jesus and the Resurrection.³⁵ However, how can the evangelical American church present the gospel to a new context in which the postmoderns reject all claims to absolute truths or universal propositional statements? The ultra-rational form of gospel proclamation made a lot of sense and had a home with the context of modernity. As we continue to merge into a widely accepted postmodern context, how should we proclaim the gospel in a way it can be understood and responded to? “We must think through the ramifications of the phenomenal changes occurring in Western society for our understanding of the Christian faith and our presentation of the gospel to the next generation.”³⁶

In an age of digitalized and global culture, postmoderns are exposed to many warring traditions and metanarratives, which only undermine the assumption that one of them is the universal religious certainty for all. The glory days are gone of American evangelicalism where Christianity was portrayed as the unquestionable true faith and anyone who denied it as such would be considered dishonest or just plain ignorant.³⁷ Simply having rational statements about the faith is not convincing for the postmodern. They see life far more holistically and are interested in the experience of Christ more than the proposed linear information about Christ. “Members of the next generation are often unimpressed by our verbal presentations of the gospel. What they want to see is a people

³⁵ Ibid., 161.

³⁶ Grenz, 162.

³⁷ White, 135.

who live out the gospel in wholesome, authentic, and healing relationships.”³⁸ Can the evangelical American church find ways to answer this longing for meaning, community and authenticity?

One of the great opportunities for the American evangelical church in its wrestling with its response to the rampant diversion in macro-worldview is simply that postmodernity doesn’t work. By having a complete distrust of certainty and an aggressive deconstruction of their inherited modern tenets, postmoderns are left with no proposed solutions. Under a total rejection of the immediate past, postmodernism does not offer any constructive new proposals. “Postmodern thinkers have given up the search for universal, ultimate truth because they are convinced that there is nothing more to find than a host of conflicting interpretations or an infinity of linguistically created worlds.”³⁹ They exist to offer a stinging critique of the Enlightenment project but in its own void of constitutional construct, it is left with only an enlightened position of nihilism. At the end of history, the postmodern does not envision any better a world than the one it inhabits.⁴⁰ This kind of nihilism stands in deep contrast to the proposed utopian progress of modernism. Within the artistic and digital postmodern culture, one can find a theme of this celebrated dark worldview where life and the world is devoid of meaning or any true purpose to our existence. The coldness of postmodernism can celebrate this lack of constitution as the courage to face life and the scarcity of truth or meaning head on

³⁸ Grenz, 169.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁰ Eagleton, 134.

instead of being duped by the false assumptions of modernism. However, Nihilism is experientially empty; the postmodern mindset is not a satisfying worldview.

Without a perceived construct of truth and actuality, postmoderns carry with them a tremendous sense of being uprooted. The footings of their world and how things work are always shifting beneath them; if nothing is true then nothing can be depended upon. “Many postmoderns carry the sense that, in refusing to acknowledge anything fixed, larger than themselves, to which they are accountable, they have lost touch with something important.”⁴¹ Experientially, postmodernism doesn’t work in terms of answering humanity’s historical quest for truth to its biggest questions of meaning, purpose and ethical direction. Postmoderns may suggest that at best, we can only judge our interpretations of the proposed metanarratives based upon pragmatic standards, on the basis of “what works.”⁴² This raises a crucial question for this time of great transition: Is the American evangelical church ready to be experienced as one metanarrative of many options available to the postmodern in order to see if it works as opposed to being in the power position of it being assumed it was the truth?

In this place of pragmatism where postmoderns are searching not for universal truths, but simply what works and what makes sense of their current world, it appears there is opportunity for the American evangelical church to respond. Their longing is not for what is true; but for what is real, genuine and authentic. No longer can the church simply try to offer a linear apologetic; in the trenches of postmodernity, they need to live their apologetic. James K. A. Smith says, “Postmodernism can be a catalyst for the

⁴¹ White, 131.

⁴² Grenz, 164.

church to reclaim its faith not as a system of truth dictated by a neutral reason but rather as a story that requires eyes to see and ears to hear.”⁴³ To invite postmoderns into this kind of experiential faith, American evangelicals have to change the way they offer a proclamation of the gospel. The Christian gospel must be offered in terms not of intellectual commitments but of transformed character and renewed lives.⁴⁴ Participants of the inviting community would do well to draw others to Christ through the embodiment of the gospel in their shared life.⁴⁵ The postmodern world is messy; it wants to see behind the curtain. It is not interested in the sterile arguments and propositions of exalted rationalism, rather they are seeking out an experience of something to offer them safety and rootedness in an otherwise cynical world. The holism they seek can be found in the experience of a gospel community. Stanley Grenz said it best in referring to how to respond to the postmodern ministry context:

Our anthropology must take seriously the biblical truth that our identity includes being in relationship to nature, being in relationship with others, being in relationship with God, and, as a consequence, being in true relationship with ourselves. All these emphases are evident in the ministry of our Lord, who spoke about and ministered to people as whole persons and as persons-in-relationship.⁴⁶

For the postmodern, they view life on earth as fragile and fleeting. Their best hope is to create harmony within humankind through a dependency on a new attitude of cooperation and away from the modern mindset of conquest.⁴⁷ Postmoderns are seeking wholeness to their lives unlike the compartmentalized and mechanistic world of

⁴³ Smith, 28.

⁴⁴ Grenz, 173.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 169

⁴⁶ [*Ibid.*](#), 172.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

modernity. A part of this wholeness opens them up to religious or spiritual aspects to life as long as they can experience it authentically and not simply be instructed on truths. “Indeed, postmoderns affirm that personal existence may transpire within the context of a divine reality.”⁴⁸ They may not believe in an overarching universal claim to truth, but they are open to relative spiritual experiences and to the views of others; tolerance is a part of its DNA. Metaphorically, postmoderns set out a wide round table and all possible spiritualities have their place at the table to offer its perceived truths and proposed solutions to the human condition. It is at this very table that the American evangelical church needs to show up and proclaim its gospel of hope to a broken world of chaos. The Christian metanarrative can be offered as hope, “a precious commodity for human beings; no matter what suffering occurs in the present, it will all be made right in the future. For history is trending toward justice, toward redemption, toward good things.”⁴⁹

The American evangelical voice can offer its worldview of hope to the void of meaning and truth the postmodern condition creates. Experientially, evangelicalism can have a seat at the postmodern roundtable of proposed possibilities. The postmodern relational reality is one of failed marriages, bitter divorces, and half-hearted reconciliations, not only amongst individuals but also among people groups and nations.⁵⁰ Christianity can confront the postmodern tendencies towards cynicism and pessimism with divine promises and a gospel metanarrative of hopeful redemption. Symptomatic to the postmodern condition is a lack of center, no dependable foundation

⁴⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁴⁹ White, 151.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 147.

of truth or focus. Evangelical Christianity has the opportunity to stand in this gap and offer a compelling Christ in the face of rampant skepticism.⁵¹

However, Postmodern thinkers have completely given up the Enlightenment's quest for universal and timeless metanarratives for the individual to ascend to. In exchange, postmoderns look for truth and meaning within a particular community; at its core postmodern society lends itself to being a communal society.⁵² Truths are relative to their particular and embedded context and culture. Trust is earned in the reciprocity of relationships within that community and truths are worked out in real-time for their pragmatic value. If community is the language of the postmodern culture, then this means that our gospel must address the deep human need within the context of community and embed Christian truths there.⁵³

The American evangelical church needs to make a large transition away from an orientation of church being a place to go and re-emerge as being defined as a people to belong to.⁵⁴ Phyllis Tickle explains it this way: "Authority within any Emergence grouping is granted by the group itself rather than by any extrinsic authority, and always on a commutable basis."⁵⁵ If community is language of postmodernity, then it is a language that the American evangelical church can speak well. Within the evangelical church that was born in modernity, the base ingredient as James K.A. Smith puts it, was the individual. Therefore the modern church was more about a kind of private affair

⁵¹ Grenz, 164.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵³ [*Ibid.*](#), 169.

⁵⁴ Tickle, 119.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

between the individual and God. “Modern evangelicalism finds it hard to articulate just how or why the church has any role to play other than providing a place to fellowship with other individuals who have a private relationship with God.”⁵⁶ In the communal world of postmodernity, this focus on individualized and private faith will not translate well.

This challenge to community provides a great opportunity for the American evangelical church to take a look back within its own scriptural narratives to find a way forward to help them with a more communal recipe for church. Len Sweet believes the church ought to completely re-orient itself as a participative community and adds that, “Postmoderns want interactive, immersive, in your face participation in the mysteries of God.”⁵⁷ In this way the challenge of postmodernism can actually help the American church recover one of its most inherent qualities of being the body that was devalued in the hyper-individualism of modernity. This organic model of community has a countercultural effect within modernity and it may find resonance within the inclinations of the postmodern heart and mind. “But the church will have this countercultural, prophetic witness only when it jettisons its own modernity; in that respect postmodernism can be another catalyst for the church to be the church.”⁵⁸

What the American evangelical church does not need more of is any reflection of cold and stale religion based in the linear mind only. Postmoderns have no patience for religion or blind obedience to ecclesiastical structures to perpetuate more of the modern

⁵⁶ Smith, 29.

⁵⁷ Sweet, 72.

⁵⁸ Smith, 30.

paradigms. Their spiritual hunger is not satisfied under the guise of propositional truths and the holiness standards of an official body of overseers in some other space not in the immediate community. “Postmoderns want participation in a deeply personal but at the same time communal experience of the divine and the transformation of life that issues from that identification with God.”⁵⁹ It is relationship and not religion that postmoderns are seeking after, this is the heart of its contextual culture. Within this milieu the church exists to incarnate connectedness.⁶⁰ The following of Jesus is not about a personal relationship only but a collective identity as followers. Postmodern Christianity will be defined not by my Christianity, but by our Christianity. The Postmodern church will not be one of a centralized institution, but rather one that is decentralized and complexified.⁶¹ Missional communities are sent out and intentional local communities of faith that can be uniquely designed to meet this hunger to experience the Christ of the Gospel in a kind of Kingdom collectiveness.

If it is in fact in small and local communities that postmoderns search for and determines fixed meanings, then it is absolutely crucial that the American evangelical church offer an option of dispersed and sent-out ecclesial communities to these missing children of God. The role of community will become incredibly crucial when we consider how the role of authority and the interpretation of the Scriptures are translated. With a decentralized leadership in sent communities, where is authority found? How are the Scriptures to be interpreted? James K. A. Smith suggests that dependent role where it has

⁵⁹ Sweet, 112.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 120.

always been with the Church in history; that is to the Holy Spirit. “The same Spirit is both the author of the text and illuminator of the reading community.”⁶² Missional communities sent-out into postmodern culture have the same vulnerability towards heresy and misinterpretations as the Church has always had in history and leadership must depend upon a hefty doctrine of the Holy Spirit to guide the body into her ecclesial future.

Within the center-less context of the postmodern culture, the Scriptures can play a crucial role at offering a constructive narrative of hope. However, that hope will not come from a top-down hierarchical education model, as has been the norm within the Evangelicalism of modernity. There is not an audience of listeners who need to be entertained and the narrative need not be reduced to a commodification theme for consumer culture; rather the ancient Scriptures are available to the community for participative learning. “As we participate in the worship of a deconstructive church, we find that the Text is central for shaping our interpretation of the world.”⁶³ We do not need to back away from the proposed truths of Scripture, for they remain the very words of life and serve as an invitation for all to encounter. However, they cannot be assumed to come from a universal and singular source of authority as in the modern past.

In the postmodern context, the truths are interpreted from within a local community and offer a narrative for ordinary life. “Rather than trying to translate the biblical story into a contemporary, more acceptable narrative, the postmodern church

⁶² Smith, 57.

⁶³ Ibid.

seeks to initiate listeners into the narrative.”⁶⁴ The traditional gift of teaching/preaching in the postmodern context is to be coupled with the gift of hospitality. It is an invitation into a learning community to find the embedded truths of the Scriptures for ordinary life. The postmodern seeker gains trust in the truths of the Scriptures by experiencing the life of the community. It is the role of the community to live the metanarrative in front of the seekers. As James K. A. Smith rightly puts it, “Our storytelling should be supported by our story living.”⁶⁵ As the local faith community practices communion, sacrament, generosity and caring for the justice needs of the neighborhood, it is proclaiming what it looks like to be citizens of the Kingdom of God. The more they practice the Story together, the more it becomes inscribed into their character. Postmoderns may not have value for metanarrative claims, but their hearts long for meaning found in compelling local communities where they can participate and earn trust in a micro-narrative.

In this way, as the American evangelical church responds to the challenge of postmodernism, it can see the changes as an opportunity to re-embrace something primal about itself. Fundamentally, *ekklesia* is a gathered people who are then sent in mission to the world they find themselves in. The primitive church is a beautiful heritage of this orientation of being a gathered and sent community. Although postmoderns may appear to put faith claims on the defensive, it may in fact be offering an opportunity for a manner of interpreting theology in a communal way that is directly tied to praxis in the world.⁶⁶ Robert Greer suggests, “The community in which we are members presses on us

⁶⁴ [Ibid.](#), 77.

⁶⁵ [Ibid.](#), 79.

⁶⁶ Greer, 14.

language, definitions and an ordering of reality at an intuitive level that serves as a foundation from which we then think and work through its implications.”⁶⁷ Community can be the language and structure of the postmodern church; missional communities can have the opportunity to speak this language.

Within postmodern communities there is a kind of free for all in thought and practice as there is no definitive center of truth and structure. This is not orthodox Christianity, and thus Christians have no reason to embrace a postmodern worldview or adapt itself to its nihilistic ends.⁶⁸ However, using the medium of community, the American evangelical church can offer an alternative narrative where Christ and the Kingdom is in fact the center to experiencing evidential truths. The truths of Christ’s life and teachings can be offered as a kind of wager of possibility for the postmodern heart and mind to understand and respond to. It’s not about arguing for the historicity of the Jesus of Nazareth to attain objectivity as in the modern world; it’s about offering his kind of spirituality to a hungry heart with no answers in real-time experience. “Yet even here we are required to make a wager. Without any means to independently verify the facticity of Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection, we wager that they truly took place and that they therefore have relevance for us today.”⁶⁹

One of the reasons postmodernism has become such a thorn in the flesh for the Christian church is that its infrastructure and model is thoroughly modern. While postmodernism is an enemy of our inherent ecclesial modernism, it can actually help us

⁶⁷ Ibid., 187.

⁶⁸ Sweet, xvii.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 187.

remember parts of our ancient heritage.⁷⁰ This is not a world and challenge for the American evangelical church to be afraid of, it can be seen as yet another missional opportunity to respond to and offer the hope of Christ in the language of small and local community. At this historic crossroads of culture, the American evangelical church is in fact continually called to bear witness of the life and teachings of Jesus the Christ.⁷¹

James K. A. Smith says, “While in modernity science was the emperor who set the rules for what counted as truth and castigated faith as fable, postmodernity has shown us the emperor’s nudity. As such, we no longer need to apologize for faith – we can be unapologetic in our kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel narrative.”⁷²

In the face of such drastic cultural shifting, it is rational to think that the means by which we practice ecclesia will also change or at the very least we can offer missional alternative options to the postmodern world. It is likely that the worship of the future may not resemble anything we have seen during the era of modernity. In the worship of the pre-modern world, the Eucharist was the high point. The worshipper met Christ in the wine and bread and this defined the Christian gathering more than any other element.⁷³ In the transition to modernity the focus turned to the centrality of the sermon or for the transference of knowledge from the singularity of the professional clergy.⁷⁴ Heath White sums up the worship macro-shift this way: “Premoderns placed their trust in authority. Moderns lost their confidence in authority and placed it in human reason instead.

⁷⁰ Smith, 23.

⁷¹ Greer, 205.

⁷² Smith, 71.

⁷³ White, 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

Postmoderns kept the modern distrust of authority but lost their trust in reason and have found nothing to replace it. This is the crux of all postmodern thought.”⁷⁵

Many may find it surprising that the worship and value structure of pre-modernity may in fact be more suitable for the postmodern world.⁷⁶ Leonard Sweet proposed that: “The ancient ways are more relevant than ever. The mystery of how ancient words can have spiritual significance in this new world is evident in the culture quest for soul and spirit.”⁷⁷ Pre-modernity more resembled a world that valued the community over the individual and understood that faith and mystery were not antithetical as the assurances of modernity suggested. “A thoughtful engagement with postmodernism will encourage us to look backward. We will see that much that goes under the banner of postmodern philosophy has one eye on ancient and medieval sources and constitutes a significant recovery of pre-modern ways of knowing, being, and doing.”⁷⁸

The American evangelical church can find a way forward by looking back at its own heritage and history. Perhaps the most effective strategy the postmodern church could employ would be to learn from its ancient past. It has been suggested that the best way to reach the aimless postmodern mind and heart is through the recovery of predictable tradition and immersion into the structures of liturgy.⁷⁹ Not a liturgy of monotony, but one of transformation in ordinary life. Jason Evans, former pastor of the missional community, Matthew’s House in Vista, California speaks experientially about

⁷⁵ [Ibid.](#), 41.

⁷⁶ [Ibid.](#), 84.

⁷⁷ Sweet, xvii.

⁷⁸ Smith, 25.

⁷⁹ [Ibid.](#), 25.

this dynamic and reports, “We needed a way of life, a way to pattern our lives on Jesus. Historical practices are the way to do this. They make sense of the world and provide a framework for our lives.”⁸⁰

The ecclesial liturgy works itself out into the local context; in the neighborhood. Worship is galvanized into acts of justice and “disciples are passionate about justice.”⁸¹ Replacing the empty nihilism of postmodern philosophy with grounded and tested formations for spiritual discovery and experiences. In a world of unknown chaos and broken relationships, a renaissance of our ancient heritage and liturgies provides a framework of being rooted and settled in our embedded communities. It is a look back to find a way forward into the given context of our day. The American evangelical church as sent out missional communities can participate in a received tradition that translates well to the chaos of postmodernism.

Thomas Oden argues in a similar manner and contends for a postmodern orthodoxy, which seeks to embody the ethos of classical Christianity by which he means “the Christian consensus of the first millennium.”⁸² The primitive church was faced with the challenge of proclaiming the gospel of Christ as well in a pluralistic culture of Greek and Roman mythology. Within the barbarism of the ancient world and at the onset of the chaos of rampant persecution, the primitive church found grounding through the organization of their community life around their rich liturgical worship. The ritual and rhythm of these ancient practices formed within them what they could depend on when

⁸⁰ Quoted in Gibbs and Bolger, 217.

⁸¹ Smith, 142.

⁸² Michael W. Nicholson, *A Theological Analysis and Critique of the Postmodern Debate: Mapping the Labyrinth* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 275.

life was chaotic. When Vincent of Lerins spoke of this ancient ecumenical orthodoxy he used this Latin phrasing: “quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est”, meaning that which has been everywhere and always and by everyone believed.⁸³ “We need to return to the consensus of the first millennium not because that era was more brilliant or exciting than any other but because of its close adherence to apostolic faith and because a more ecumenical consensus was achieved in that period than any time since.”⁸⁴ The primitive church worked out its ecclesiology amongst the pluralism of its day and helps us with a way forward by looking back.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD AS ECCLESIAL HOPE

“The postmodern situation requires that we embody the gospel in a manner that is post-individualistic, post-rationalistic, post-dualistic, and post-noeticentric.”⁸⁵

Stanley Grenz in his summary statement above contends for a postmodern church that is organized in community, utilizes all the human senses, seeks holism and can discern the difference between rote knowledge and Godly wisdom. The American evangelical church does not have a choice in the fact that the culture has moved from modern to expansively postmodern. However, the church does get to choose if and how it will respond to these challenges. Can the evangelical church in America see opportunity on these new missional shores? Is it even possible that the postmodern critique of

⁸³ Ibid., 275.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 275.

⁸⁵ Grenz, 167.

Enlightenment tenets actually can help the church get closer to its primal Christian theological understandings?⁸⁶

Postmodernism is a critique not against Christianity, but against modernism.

Modernism as a line of thought is roughly three hundred years old and is finding itself on shaky ground moving forward. In contrast, Christian orthodoxy has remained a steady societal influence and servant of the good of humanity for over two thousand years.⁸⁷ The Kingdom of God is supra cultural; it stands outside of macro-philosophical shifts because it is not a description of a given time but rather the totality of all things under heaven on earth. To follow this same logic, though postmodernism is becoming deeply entrenched as the emerging worldview for generations, it too shall pass and the Kingdom of God will move on. Theologically, we are not to be afraid of postmodernism. Crystal Downing says it quite plainly, “Christianity will outlast postmodernism.”⁸⁸ The culture and time that we happen to live in is our missiological context, it is not our identity or security. The Kingdom of God is the only place we will find the answers our hearts long for. Theologically we anchor ourselves in the Kingdom that never ends, not in the nihilistic chaos of postmodernism. We live in service to the brokenness of this world as people of hope anchored in the grand narrative of the Kingdom.

Within modernity the church has tended to be associated with a place rather than the embodiment of a redemptive community. The modern church served as a space for individuals to search for answers to their questions or perhaps as just one more option to

⁸⁶ Grenz, 165.

⁸⁷ Crystal L. Downing, *How Postmodernism Serves My Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 230.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

satisfy their consumerist desires.⁸⁹ When this happens, “Christianity becomes intellectualized rather than incarnate, commodified rather than the site of genuine community.”⁹⁰ Reducing the gospel to an attractive consumer option in order to find relevance to the postmodern individual consumer will not satisfy. Rather, as with all consumer products, it will be high on promise and short on delivery. The experiential hope of the gospel must be incarnated in the language of community where postmoderns can journey within its narrative while discovering its truths.

As Christians, we do not wander aimlessly through the endless myriad options of spiritualities on the planet today. We have a grand narrative that is Christ and his Kingdom. We have the Scriptures that teach us of what God has done in the history of his Creation in order to bring redemption upon the fallen humanity and environment. We boldly proclaim that the key and center of this narrative is the person of Jesus of Nazareth who is the incarnate very Son of God.⁹¹ Though missiologically we can proclaim this gospel at the postmodern round-table of narrative options, we do not bow a knee to the relativism inherent in that worldview. Though pluralism is our missionary context, it is not the gospel of Christ and his Kingdom and we need not proclaim Christianity as one faith option amongst many others. “The gospel is inherently an expansive missionary message. We believe not only that the biblical narrative makes sense for us but is also good news for all. It provides the fulfillment of the longings and aspirations of all peoples. It embodies the truth – the truth of and for all humankind.”⁹² Though the context

⁸⁹ Smith, 29.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹¹ Grenz, 164.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 165.

and manner of the gospel presentation changes in the postmodern world; the call to its proclamation must not be compromised. A world without a gospel of hope proclaimed in every neighborhood and people group on earth is the lost and nihilistic chaos of postmodernism. Rather, it is within the darkness of nihilism that the American evangelical church has an opportunity to embody its message of hope that it might find a home in the postmodern heart and mind.

Communication is a two way street, as missionaries in the postmodern context the American evangelical church must become receptor oriented. Within the modern world, the focus was on the objectivity of the evidential truth claims. Rarely was the manner or communication approach taken into consideration for its relevance. As the church considers how to respond to the postmodern world, the primary question is not how should we proclaim the gospel, but rather how do postmoderns learn and come to conclusions? What are the factors that woo the postmodern heart and mind? We must answer that question if we are to have hope for future generations of faith. “Our task as Christ’s disciples is to embody and articulate the never-changing good news of available salvation in a manner that the emerging generation can understand.”⁹³ In this space where our knowledge of culture intersects with the work of the Holy Spirit to draw missing children into the gospel and hope of Christ can be beautifully manifested. As the American evangelical church responds to the postmodern world strategically with understanding, then the life-changing encounter with the triune God from whom our entire lives derive their meaning can take place.⁹⁴

⁹³ Ibid., 174.

⁹⁴ Grenz, 174.

Ultimately, postmodernism does not work. Its only evidential end is the nihilistic chaos that it celebrates in its war against the false universalities of modernism. Though it longs for authentic community, without the truthful constructs of a narrative of ethics, its sense of community becomes a dangerous spiral into undefined anarchy. It may be true that the Enlightenment is a failed project, however its accusatory adversary of postmodernism as well offers no constructive way out of the human condition either. Christ and the Kingdom is the only way out of these worldview quandaries. “Jesus Christ challenges both the rigidity of modernism and the relativism of postmodernism, replacing them both with life. Jesus Christ, therefore, is the way out of the box.”⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Greer, 210.

CHAPTER THREE

CONSUMERISM AND THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” – Mary Oliver¹

The existential questions of humanity are the same at any point in time within recorded history. They are the same in any economy, in any political system and within the milieu of any particular culture. The questions may vary in importance, however they typically carry the thematic structure of the following: Who am I? Where did I come from? What is my purpose? Where do I find meaning? Is this all there is? What happens when I die?² These questions outline the longings of our human hearts; they dictate what we organize our lives around. The answers to these profound ponderings become formative attachments psychologically, spiritually, emotionally and then deeply influence the pragmatic choices of our physical lives. We organize our lives around what we believe to be true and meaningful, the cost is high about how we answer these critical questions.

In this chapter, I propose to map the dominant American and specifically suburban construct that answers these questions; that is the attachments of a consumer lifestyle. I will focus my attention on American suburbia, as that is my particular missional context. As Lendol Calder explains, “The ideal consumer is someone who believes the meaning of life is to be found in consumption, so that it is in consumption he

¹ Jay McDaniel, *Living from the Center: Spirituality in an Age of Consumerism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 57.

² Lendol Calder, *Financing the American Dream: A Cultural History of Consumer Credit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

or she feels most fully alive and human.”³ Today’s suburban consumer life is tightly rooted within the idea and elusive hope of the American Dream. However, after a century of promoting its promises and products, the consumer life has not delivered on its lofty aspirations. Overwhelming economic debt, increased unhappiness, emotional isolation and an unsustainable environmental future has been the result. Americans were sold a cultural bag of goods that turned out to be a fool’s gold. The consumer story is about the acquisition of more, but the result has been a narrative of declension. The mounting evidence is that consumerist behavior may produce short-term happiness, nevertheless causes long-term damage to people and the world they live in.⁴ Citizens are hungry and searching for compelling narratives of meaning and truth; where can they find an alternative story?

Searching for meaning, hope and fulfillment are not economic questions, they are deeply spiritual longings. The American evangelical suburban church can be uniquely situated to answer these longings with a holistic Gospel community. However, this is only the case if they are in fact living the alternative story themselves. I will propose that much of what has been constructed as the American suburban church has at times followed the same attachments of consumerism and the commodification of spiritual experiences. Vincent Miller suggests: “Many believers are quite content with a form of religious practice that combines consumerism and professional middle-class

³ Calder, *Financing the American Dream*, 8.

⁴ David M. Ricci, *Good Citizenship in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 172.

sensibilities.”⁵ If the church is living and offering the same manic and unfulfilling consumer story, how can it embody an alternative narrative of hope?

To conclude, I will propose what a hopeful ecclesial response to the present and future challenges of consumerism to Christianity could look like. There is a perceived relational poverty in connection to severely reduced social capital within suburban America.⁶ The dominant paradigm is to organize your life around the consumer dream, not in the belonging to an authentic and meaningful community. As a response, what are the practices and beliefs necessary for American church to address consumer culture and offer an alternative story of belonging?

THE ORIGIN OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

“We used to build civilizations. Now we build shopping malls.” –Bill Bryson⁷

The term “American Dream” is attributed to the historian, James Truslow Adams, in 1931.⁸ That dream originated with the idea that life could be better, richer and fuller for each person according to their ability or achievement.⁹ With enough hard work, intelligence and effort, one could realize the fruit of their aspirations and experience the fulfilling life they longed for. At its very foundation, the American Dream is about

⁵ Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 224.

⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 19.

⁷ Andrew Bennett O’Reilly, *Consumed: Rethinking Business in the Era of Mindful Spending* (New York: 2010), 3.

⁸ Calder, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

upward mobility. This ascension was written into the fabric of what it meant to be American in its history and what the Federal government had invested interest in. President Abraham Lincoln, in a speech in Cincinnati, Ohio on September 17, 1859, stated:

This progress by which the poor, honest, industrious, and resolute man raises himself, that he may work on his own account, and hire somebody else, is that improvement in condition that human nature is entitled to, is that improvement that is intended to be secured by those institutions under which we live, is the great principle for which this government was formed.¹⁰

The American Dream was never meant to be a zero-sum solution; the goal has always been to end up with more than what you started with.¹¹ The U.S. government promotes the consumer lifestyle within the interests of fostering prosperity for the nation and its citizens. Andrew Bennett O'Reilly goes as far to say: "Hyper-consumerism was no fluke, nor was it inevitable. Instead, it was conceived and promoted precisely as a means of growing wealth primarily for the benefit of governments and corporations."¹² Those who could profit saw opportunity to perpetuate a system of desiring more that would revolutionize and thus define what it meant to American. There emerged a notion that work was really not about a means by which people would create and maintain political freedom, rather employment was more an activity "by which they earn enough to buy the endless supply of commodities that capitalism can produce."¹³

¹⁰ Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

¹² O'Reilly, 5.

¹³ Ricci, 137.

At the turn of the twentieth century and surely by the end of World War II, America had raised its means of production and development to an unparalleled level to gain victory in the war effort. At its conclusion however, there was not a return to a simpler time; there was a redefining of the American way ushering in the age of consumerism. Surveying the advertising from this period of time, one can see the shift from providing information about products to promoting the emotional benefits of the product within a uniquely American consumer way of life.¹⁴ Noll and Eskridge put it this way:

The combination of new machinery and hard work flooded America with a deluge of consumer delights that threatened to destroy the nation's economy unless people increased their spending. Consequently, business leaders, salesmen, and advertisers strove to demolish the Protestant's ethic's emphasis on frugality and moderation. They insisted if Americans practiced plain living, the results would be economic disaster. Consumption was thereby transformed from a vice to a virtue, to a new necessity.¹⁵

Consumerism was now the new American way of life. Profitability was on the rise, the economy surged and the short-term feelings of narcissistic greed were being met. However, as I will continue to propose, the products and attached meanings being peddled to the consumer were a fool's gold. Never could they fulfill the promises of the great American consumer dream.

SELLING THE CONSUMER DREAM

“Modern man is drinking and drugging himself out of awareness, or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing.” – Ernest Becker¹⁶

¹⁴ Larry Eskridge and Mark A. Noll, *More Money, More Ministry: Money and Evangelicals in Recent North American History*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 43.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁶ Tim Kasser and Allen D. Kanner, *Psychology and Consumer Culture*, (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2003), 127.

Advertising connected the products they were selling with the dream, hope and promise of the good life. To be a good American was to be a good consumer, contributing to the wealth of the collective regardless of cost or risk. The products were not what they needed to survive; they were sold as what they needed to feel good about themselves. Advertisers focused on the “Therapy Factor.” Ads were designed to evoke emotional responses within consumers to achieve “psychic satisfaction from the things they could buy to displace any unhappiness or frustration that any person might feel.”¹⁷

The French theorist, Jean Baudrillard, suggests that consumption is really not about the acquisition of material needs, but rather is addressing idealized needs within the consumer’s mind. The commodities become like building blocks of personal identity, symbols of communication to other human beings or “therapeutic remedies for the problems that ail us.”¹⁸ It is long thought that Romanticism would be the enemy of material consumption. One could make an argument in actuality that it was the Romantic ideals that paved the way of daydreaming and yearning for this world of progress and utopia ready for our consumption. “Technology may have provided the machines, but the Romantic poets loaded the software.”¹⁹

The promise of fulfillment and not the actual concrete experience of it was what fueled the consumer revolution. The American Dream is never actually realized because you can always have more, acquire more, achieve more, upgrade more etc. The promise is the more you consume, the happier you will feel but you never fully arrive. There are

¹⁷ Ricci, 143.

¹⁸ Calder, 7.

¹⁹ Matthew P. McAllister and Joseph Turos, *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 233.

no actual scientific demonstrable principles to measure achievement. Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach their goals.²⁰ Advertisers call this form of marketing puffery, attracting consumers via emotional impulse as opposed to explicit information. If there are no specific facts stipulated, then no facts can be disproved as a liability against the seller.²¹ The consumer never fully arrives at contentment and that drives them to pursue the next sale and the next commodity of consumption. The cycle has no end and that is how those in power and profit prefer it.

These products and the happiness they provide were designed to be short-term, not lasting. If the products provided true felicity on the basis of finite ownership, then the cycle of consumerism would end. Planned obsolescence is a part of the model in order to continue to sell the additional things the consumer system cannot stop producing.²² Consumer culture applied obsolescence to nearly every kind of product as a way to regulate market demand. Products were to be thought of well beyond their material function, they could be seen as the latest fashion accessory applicable only to the present trends.²³ A new season with new trends and new products were produced for new consumption. Fashion is sold based upon distinction to others forming personal identity and the treadmill of constant insecurity on the behalf of the consumer is what the producers are banking on.

²⁰ Cullen, 7.

²¹ Ricci, 193.

²² *Ibid.*, 191.

²³ McAllister and Turos, 25.

In addition to personal fulfillment and planned obsolescence, the selling of ‘the good life’ was paramount in the new American revolution. The good life was about leisure, avoiding hard work and having more time for the consumption of more leisurely products. As modern products and modern ways of selling these products developed, convenience became a major value in modern consumer culture. It was through the power of advertising that leisure became a heightened goal of modern living, far more than just an attribute to sell a product.²⁴ Advertising was no longer about selling the function of a product; it was about the selling of a way of life. Living the good life was what it meant to be truly American. It is this idea that has grown like a virus in the American worldview; the American dream is now a benchmark cultural assumption about how the world works.

The American consumer began living a quality of life that most on planet earth could not. Just 1/5 of the world’s population has the freedom and opportunity to be classified as consumers, Americans being a large portion of that population. The remaining percentages are broken into 3/5 of the world classified as sustainers, and the final 1/5 are destitute in absolute poverty.²⁵ Over the last 125 years, consumer culture has become a crucial distinction in what it means to be a good American compared to the rest of the world. Not only did advertisers and marketers make the connection between consumption and citizenship, but the government leaders looked to consumerism as an important form of enfranchisement.²⁶ You do not need to look any further to see this

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

²⁵ McDaniel, 69.

²⁶ McAllister and Turos, 298.

connection than the response after the 9/11 terrorism act. “Enjoying life, shopping, and playing, filling leisure time by visiting theme parks, buying jewel-studded flags and star-spangled dog accessories serve as the props for contemporary citizenship and are the surest signs the terrorists have not won.”²⁷ Clearly we see that the perpetuation of consumerism is the bedrock foundation of the elusive American Dream.

THE COST OF CONSUMERISM

“It is often forgotten, but from Plymouth Rock to the present, American dreams have usually required a lien on the future.”²⁸

At the conclusion of World War II, America set off on a course to build a better world of tomorrow through consumerism. There was an ideal from governance that the momentum from war victory could be harnessed into the new searching of the good life. This emerging strategy hoped to create order, democratize abundance and secure permanent peace to a fragile collective psyche of the traumatized population.²⁹ Because these strategies were largely rooted in plans to improve the world artificially through consumer spending, these projections were doomed to not become an actualized reality. Many corporate elites and the military have become better off financially, however, most of the average middle-class of America find themselves less well off than their parents

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 307.

²⁸ Calder, 27.

²⁹ Cynthia Lee Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 177.

who grew up under the Great Depression and World War II.³⁰ Cynthia Lee Henthorn states it this way:

Certainly, the utopian concept of a ‘better America’, even in retrospect, appears harmless and well intentioned. Yet America’s World War II victory ultimately gave rise to an illusory paradise that today is anything but utopian. This dichotomy should prompt us to consider whether it is time for a reality check about the dystopian side of war born progress that we have since the 1940s, been so effectively trained to ignore.³¹

Psychologists understand now through years of study that consumerism affects the individual’s entire sense of self, their responsibilities and their chance of happiness.³²

Experts measure this sense of self through consumerism as “Materialistic Value Orientation.” MVO refers to the “culture of consumption’s constellation of aims, beliefs, goals and behaviors”³³. These scientists are looking for connections between a citizen’s MVO and their SWB, or subjective well-being. A strong MVO is one way in which people compensate for worries and doubts about their self-worth, their ability to cope effectively with challenges and their relative safety in an unpredictable world.³⁴

Consumers are seeking pleasure and life out of things that are dead.

Every society appears to tell a story about happiness, about how individuals can satisfy themselves and feel both subjectively and objectively good. The cultural system of advertising gives a very specific answer to that question for our society; the way to

³⁰ Cynthia L. Henthorn, *From Submarines to Suburbs: Selling a Better America, 1939-1959* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2006), 242.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 243.

³² Ricci, 186.

³³ Kanner and Kasser, 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

happiness and satisfaction is through the consumption of objects through the marketplace.³⁵ The crucial question is: Do we get happier as a society as we get richer, as our standard of living increases, as we have more access to the immense collection of objects? The issues are complex but the increasing research in this area points to the negation of this premise. With the exception of a certain level of poverty avoidance and comfort, material things stop giving us the kind of satisfaction that the “magical world of advertising insists they can deliver.”³⁶ Consumerism not only doesn’t offer what it promises, it keeps us from the very things that do. Material consumption beyond real need is a form of psychological junk food, it satisfies only for a moment and ultimately often leads to depression.³⁷

The verdict is in and the studies reveal that materialism not only doesn’t produce the fulfillment it advertises, it actually works against a person’s sense of well-being. From a psychological perspective, consumerism will never make a life more worthwhile than it otherwise would be. Research is showing that personal happiness correlates not with income and material possessions, but with healthy relationships, meaningful work and enough leisure time to enjoy them.³⁸ Psychologist Philip Cushman suggests that advertisers and major corporations seek to reassure or soothe us with products. However, advertising cannot create a web of meaning like a rich communal, shared culture can, and

³⁵ McAllister and Tuross, 419.

³⁶ Ibid., 420.

³⁷ Robert Costanza, *Macroeconomic Theory and its Failings: Alternative Perspectives on the Global Financial Crisis* (Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 2010), 43.

³⁸ Kanner and Kasseer, 83.

so it substitutes with what he calls lifestyle solutions.³⁹ Cushman prescribes education and consumer awareness as the antidote to these false hopes and assumptions. He believes people can be taught to recognize the manipulation inherent in advertising and better understand the motives underlying their own consumer behavior.⁴⁰

There is a great irony in advertising in that it draws the consumer further away from the things that actually have the capacity to bring satisfaction, that is meaningful human contact and not material things.⁴¹ The call to consumerism reduces our abilities to attain happiness because it cajoles us towards things and not people. If we really wanted to create a world that reflected the answers to our longing for fulfillment, then the consumer culture would not be it. Rather, it would be a society that stressed and built institutions that fostered social relationships, not ones of endless material accumulation. It is the market that appeals to the worst in us, our elements of greed and selfishness. It is also the market that keeps us from the characteristics that are the best in us; that is compassion, caring and generosity.⁴²

One final element to note in terms of the cost of consumerism is simply the realization that endless consumption is not sustainable for a prosperous economy or a healthy environment. Consumers are carrying unsustainable debt ratios. The New York Times reported in 2007 that the average debt in the United States was \$121, 650, while

³⁹ Ibid., 114.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 120.

⁴¹ McAllister and Turos, 421.

⁴² Ibid., 421.

the average savings for the same individuals was less than \$450.⁴³ Time magazine quotes President Obama projecting the future of consumer spending: “The engine of economic growth for the past twenty years is not going to be there for the next twenty.”⁴⁴ Our spending habits and debt ratios are not sustainable, change must happen.

The original intent of consumerism was to make sure there were enough consumers for all the production companies could get to market at World War II level of effort. Presently, we are consuming far more than we can produce as a nation and as individuals. In fact, as a country we do not really export much to the rest of world except “entertainment, hip hop and pornography.”⁴⁵

Environmentally speaking, our consumption and waste do not project well for a sustainable future for the entire planet. It is not just a pressing issue for the consumers within the milieu of the American Dream that are on a spiraling crash course. Our present levels of consumption, pollution, and population growth are quickly eating up Earth’s carrying capacity. Environmental scientists measure carrying capacity as the maximum number of individuals that a given environment can support long-term.⁴⁶ The projections are that our future existence on this planet are not just problematic, but actually are improbable.

The stakes are simply too high to ignore the cost of consumerism on our environment. We ought to be seeking a “progressive and humane collective solution to

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⁴³ Clive Crook, *Opposing Viewpoints: The Middle Class is in Debt*, (New Haven: Greenhaven Press, 2010), 31.

⁴⁴ Andrew Bennett and Ann O’Reilly, 126.

⁴⁵ Crook, 33.

⁴⁶ Kanner and Kasser, 70.

the global crisis and ensuring for our children and future generations a world fit for truly human habitation.”⁴⁷ The answers to true happiness, fulfillment, healthy self-identity and a sustainable environment are once again the very ideas and activities opposite of conspicuous consumption. Global Analyst, Alan Durning, I think says it best: “The very things that make life worth living, that give depth and bounty to human existence, are infinitely sustainable.”⁴⁸

CONSUMER CHURCH

“In a world churning with God’s wonders, designed to inspire our imaginations and draw our souls heavenward, the programmatic church is dark by comparison.”⁴⁹

It is impossible to write the history of the growth of evangelical Christianity in America without seeing its attachments to the capitalist markets. Follow the money and you can follow the growth of the religious institutions in the United States. At the turn of the 20th century, the US moved from an agricultural to a manufacturing and then to a service economy. The explosive economic growth made large sums of money available to religious organizations like never before.⁵⁰ In order to manage the market driven success, Protestant denominations and large organizations adopted “managerial methods, strategies, and values that had been developed by business corporations.”⁵¹ By the 1990s,

⁴⁷ McAllister and Turos, 427.

⁴⁸ Kanner and Kasser, 83.

⁴⁹ Skye Jethani, *The Divine Commodity: Discovering Faith Beyond Consumer Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 11.

⁵⁰ Eskridge and Noll, 16.

⁵¹ Eskridge and Noll, 16.

the state of evangelicalism in America was thriving and its internal working culture more closely resembled the business world than ever before. Consumer ideals and leadership techniques had entered the church.

The American church began to resemble a consumer corporate entity, a far cry from its primitive and communal roots. American churchgoers began organizing their lives around the good life, the trappings of a consumer culture. The American church used the slick marketing tactics of the advertising world to create an experience for feel-good consumption. At times, the American church reaching out to spiritual seekers more resembled the electric white light of the franchised stores and restaurants around it, reflecting the values of the culture and not of the heavens.⁵² Skye Jethani describes the phenomena this way: “This church is a corporation, its outreach is marketing, its worship is entertainment, and its god is a commodity. It is the church of Consumer Christianity.”⁵³

If God was perceived as a commodity to consume, then no longer could he hold a place of reverence and transcendence. Within a consumer worldview, God has no intrinsic value apart from his usefulness to us. He becomes not a sovereignty we submit to, but rather a tool we employ, control and another commodity on the long list of resources we plunder. “We ascribe value to him based not on who he is, but on what he can do for us.”⁵⁴ In this manner, God loses some of the holiness of his deity in lieu of being a kind of vending-machine god of trinkets and personal pleasures.

⁵² Jethani, 11.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

The definition of success became equated with the same measures of the corporate consumer entities. The ABC's of growing a successful church within the church growth industry were Attendance, Building and Cash. The measureables for the American church were now being defined by bigger crowds, bigger budgets and bigger buildings.⁵⁵ Pastors and leaders were faced to evaluate the growing spiritual corporations with the values and teachings of the Jesus they intend to follow. Many of these leaders are convinced that the consumer values now in the church are not only unbiblical, but actually contradict the gospel they claim to believe. David Platt is one of those leaders and he says it this way:

I could not help but think that somewhere along the way we had missed what is radical about our faith and replaced it with what is comfortable. We were settling for a Christianity that revolves around catering to ourselves when the central message of Christianity is actually about abandoning ourselves.⁵⁶

Vincent Miller warns that the root of the problem is 1) the substitution of consumption for traditional religious practices and 2) the distribution of elements of religious traditions in commodified forms.⁵⁷ The root problem is the desire to consume; to solve our deepest needs outside of the meaning of an identity in Christ and his Kingdom. The shape of consumer desire is never fulfilled; this can actually point us to our deep place of need. Possessing doesn't satisfy, but being aware of our unhealthy desires and broken attachments can actually lead us to a meaningful faith. "Consumer

⁵⁵ David Platt, *Radical: Taking Back Your Faith from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2010), 2.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁷ Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 225.

desire is similar in form to traditional religious desires. It resembles more profound longings for transcendence, justice, and self-transformation.”⁵⁸

Can the church in fact become a sub-culture of resistance against the consumer dominance doomed to discontentment by providing the practices necessary to organize your life around a Gospel community instead of the good life? In the same manner that there can be created a mindful consumer, can the American Christian become mindfully detached from the consumer dream? I propose in the affirmative but not without true intentionality of discipline and practice. This is nearly impossible for someone on the individual level; rather, it must be maintained within the context of a community of shared belief.⁵⁹ Religious beliefs and practices have the power to compensate for the shortcomings of the consumer life and can inform through transcendent experience that delivers on its promises. The Church can become a sub-culture of resistance to engage consumerism on its own terms, not as a victim to its dominance, but as a mindful participant.⁶⁰

The radical individualism inherent within consumer culture has eroded many communities of the social capital that once defined the American experience. This same perceived loss of community exists within the church. Sociologist, Robert Putnam, defines social capital as the “connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 106.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 162.

⁶¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

Over the centuries, American churches have been incredibly robust social institutions. Putnam suggests that faith communities in which people worship together are “arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America.”⁶² When Americans organize their lives around the consumer dream and not the communal effects of practiced Christianity, there is a measured loss of social capital that once defined the nation. Americans are going to church less often than they did three and four decades ago and the churches themselves are less engaged with the wider community.⁶³ The loss of social capital is experientially evident and it can be the business of churches to reengage their communities with the vitality of true connection. “Reweaving social webs will depend in part on the efforts of dedicated local leaders who choose to pursue their goals through the sometimes slow, frequently fractious, and profoundly transformative route of social-capital building.”⁶⁴

AMERICAN ECONOMIC SCARCITY

We are living at a moment when, like the characters in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, we are acting out our everyday lives against the backdrop of a much bigger drama: the interplay of great historical forces, both political and economic, that dwarf us and threaten to overwhelm us. The international order that governed the world for half a century after the Second World War is collapsing in crisis. The new global order is yet to be born.⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid., 66.

⁶³ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁴ Lewis M. Feldstein and Robert D. Putnam, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 294.

⁶⁵ Roger Bootle, *Money for Nothing: Real Wealth, Financial Fantasies, and the Economy of the Future*, (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2003), 1.

Much of what has defined American evangelical Christianity was developed at a time when capitalism and the spirit of the protestant work ethic went hand in hand for remarkable production and community development. There was a sense that working hard was a godly characteristic and was congruent with the need to do each individual's part to economically grow and develop the young idealistic nation. Labor was seen as a whole lot more than merely an economic means; rather it was a spiritual end.⁶⁶ In addition, anchored in the spirit of the holiness tradition, the early protestant Americans were strict about avoiding the spontaneous enjoyments of life and thus had more time to produce through longer hours of labor.⁶⁷ This foundation of hard work was the fertile soil for what would become the opportunity for each citizen to achieve the American dream of prosperity and personal fulfillment by producing more than it consumed.

The American government was designed in such a way as to encourage a spirit of entrepreneurship and as a result, this partnering ignited American revolutions of technology and production that has transformed the world over the last 150 years.⁶⁸ As reported earlier in this chapter, by keeping up with production levels at the rate of the Second World War, American consumerism exploded their quality of life. In terms of agricultural food production, Americans learned to produce a lot of food and do it cheaply. This is a feat that every civilization in human history had tried to achieve. Today, Americans on average spend about 11% of their paychecks on food, which is less

⁶⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2003), 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁸ Nicolas Sanchez, Christopher Kopp, Francis Sanzari, *Destined for Failure: American Prosperity in the Age of Bailouts*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 35.

than half of what their grandparents paid previous to World War II.⁶⁹ In comparison to the average size home in 1900, it would be comparable to the typical American's garage today.⁷⁰ Since 1950, gross domestic product per capita has tripled. As Bill McKibben puts it, "We are living three times as large."⁷¹

Though the US economy had grown exponentially, most Americans have little to show for it in terms of quality of life. The pursuit of more and more in the American dream was intended to result in personal fulfillment and existential meaning to one's life. Americans have a lot more stuff but less happiness. The consumer experiment yielded a significant and largely unexpected result. Researchers report that the production of more money buys a sense of happiness up to the point of \$10,000 per capita income to alleviate abject poverty, though after that economic plateau the correlation almost completely disappears.⁷² The number of Americans on anti-depressants has doubled between 1997 and 2007, at a time when the stock market and housing values were soaring off the charts.⁷³ The cycle of consumerism caught many Americans up in a manic rat race for much and more. The harder and harder they worked to buy things of leisure, the less time and energy they had to enjoy the very things they bought.⁷⁴ This is part of the cruel irony

⁶⁹ Bill McKibben, *The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*, (New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company, 2007), 54.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷³ Robert B. Reich, *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 87.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

of rapid economic development amidst a sea of consumer choices; money does in fact not buy happiness.

The 1980s and 1990s in America were a time of unparalleled economic development in its national history. In the early parts of 1994, the Dow Jones index measuring market activity stood at 3,600. By the time the millennium turned the calendar at the start of 2000, the index measured a 225% increase since that point at 11,700.⁷⁵ Roger Bootle hauntingly describes the American worker in the late 1990s this way, “Americans, by and large, are a very religious people and they bring a religious fervor to the subject of making money. The lust after money for nothing went beyond the culture and entered the soul.”⁷⁶ There was great consumer confidence and an almost impenetrable optimism that the future would be more and better of the same kind of wealth production. Families, governments, schools, foundations, corporations and most certainly churches, mortgaged their futures with buildings and structures under the assumption that the wealth needed to pay for them would be there.

However, the more recent economic reality in America is that this time was not actual; rather it was a financial anomaly. The trends were there to be seen but they weren’t wisely paid attention to. The median wage in the United States is the same as it was thirty years ago, the economy has shown signs of severely trending downwards but Americans and its leaders were enjoying the good times of the great prosperity bubble. The expenses of this time were committed within an economic bubble, and then the bubble popped with great consequence to every sector of American society.

⁷⁵ Bootle, 15.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

The National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER), a private research organization founded in 1920 to report on business cycles, stated that the US economy has been in recession since December of 2007.⁷⁷ As a contrast to the housing bubble previous to 2007, it was reported in January of 2010 that an estimated 15 million Americans owed more on their homes than their homes were worth.⁷⁸ The loose lending practices of the banks and economic institutions during the time of a great prosperity for political purposes proved to be irresponsible in hindsight and “effectively set the stage for a catastrophe of unprecedented proportions.”⁷⁹ Systemic and blind greed by both individuals and large corporations created an exponential spending debt that has become the crisis of the day. “As a result, today’s financial system is in peril. Americans have lost confidence in the banking system, their retirement funds have been sharply diminished, and the overall standard of living has fallen.”⁸⁰

The American dream created a prosperous economic bubble, and it was American greed that popped that bubble and has resulted in the new normal being a crushing debt and realized unintended consequences. Americans were forced to wake up to a new reality that they could no longer afford to live as they had been living, they could no longer live outside their means to try and resemble the lavish lifestyles of those on top of the societal classes. Their expectations and aspirations for a better life were dashed in comparison to their unrealistic consumerist dreams during “the Great Prosperity.”⁸¹ It has

⁷⁷ Sanchez, Kopp, Sanzari, 1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸¹ Reich, 64.

become apparent that there will not be a return to the normal of the Great Prosperity because it was the very practices of that normal that launched the American economy into a recession and it will require an entirely different normal to get out of it.⁸² Paul Warburg, an investment banker, writing in March of 1929 during the years of the American Great Depression, said: “History, which has a painful way of repeating itself, has taught mankind that spectacular over-expansion invariably ends in over-contraction and distress.”⁸³ Americans should have learned the lessons of history instead of being seduced by the sordid charms of the illusory Great Prosperity.

At the heart of the economic crisis is a contrast of real and illusory wealth, Americans thought and lived as if they were far wealthier than they actually were. History has revealed this predicament throughout the birth of nations, there is a delicate relationship in the human heart between hope, greed and delusion.⁸⁴ Market leaders created an illusory world of prosperity and in retrospect it appears the majority of citizens did not want to bite the hand that fed them during the Great Prosperity. The result is that the consequences of an imbalanced economy has consequences for all and has left wreckage across the American economic system. The future is severely in doubt not just of not returning to the old normal, but if the recession is just the beginning of a larger slide into a narrative of economic declension for the US. “The end of the wealth illusion may readily bring about the deflation not just of absurd hopes, but of whole economies.”⁸⁵

⁸² Ibid., 75.

⁸³ Bootle, 40.

⁸⁴ Bootle, 1.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 3.

In the Fall of 2008 was the all-consuming bursting of the housing bubble and it struck fear through the economic sectors leading to a reactionary freeze in credit markets all around the world. The bursting of the housing bubble “sent shockwaves through the world’s financial institutions, bringing down many storied financial titans such as Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and Bear Stearns.”⁸⁶ The US government responded largely by monetizing the debt through the power of the Federal Reserve Bank instead of severely cutting spending and entitlement programs. This quantitative easing is simply printing the money supply by large amounts to try and restore the values of the status quo during the Great Prosperity.⁸⁷ The practice of using debt to alleviate exponential debt is a temporary response without dealing with the crux of the economic catastrophe. If effective reform within the current US political environment is not possible, then what will be required is a dramatic change in the paradigm of thinking from the leaders of the American economic institutions.⁸⁸

Even if the fiscal hard sciences can direct the American economy out of its declensionist spiral, the damage has been done to consumer confidences. As President James Madison once famously remarked, “The circulation of confidence is better than the circulation of money.”⁸⁹ Since the American GDP is overwhelmingly dependent upon the consumption of products, the fact that consumer confidence plunged to its lowest

⁸⁶ Sanchez, Kopp, Sanzari, 101.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁸ Sanchez, Kopp, Sanzari, 64.

⁸⁹ Wilhelm Hankel and Robert Isaak, *Brave New World Economy: Global Finance Threatens our Future*, (Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 53.

recorded level in October of 2008 speaks to the crisis at hand.⁹⁰ Citizens reacted in fear to learn that the basis of the economic prosperity was more illusory than actual, in particular reasoning due to the obscene betting on derivative markets. The derivative market exploded in wealth and power over the past quarter century and grew faster than any other branch of the economy.⁹¹ These speculative trading practices of the world banks by the end of 2007 amounted to 500 trillion dollars; or ten times the real world GDP.

The global financial industry in its arrogance was unilaterally communicating behind closed doors that they did not even need the real economy anymore.⁹² These immoral practices required the US government to intervene and leave its preferred economic paradigm of allowing the free markets to operate unrestrained. In this case, the government had no option but to place restrictions in these markets and their action led to greater panic, as it was peculiar to their normative pattern. The general population perceived that their leaders were confused and powerless and thus the deepening plunge of consumer confidence. Panic, fear and volatility have become the new normal for the American economy and the illusory credit crisis has been “transformed into a crisis of legitimacy.”⁹³

The historic consequences are projected to continue as many Americans planned their evidential retirement upon the safety and seemingly magical means of the market to provide money for nothing. Roger Bootle describes this kind of blind investing as an accident waiting to happen for years and its “root causes have been a deadly mixture of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 74.

⁹¹ Ibid. 34.

⁹² Ibid., 33.

⁹³ Hankel and Isaak, 75.

ignorance, incompetence, and optimism. Now comes the reckoning.”⁹⁴ The ratio of savings of Americans during the prosperous years plunged as they overextended themselves on consumer goods and a trust that the market would make their retirement money for them. Consumer spending and high corporate borrowing has led not to a flourishing market but rather a crushing financial deficit in the US private sector.⁹⁵ Bad investing is similar to the practice of the bad consumption of consumer goods, however it lacks even the temporary enjoyment of the product.⁹⁶ Within the American dream during the Great Prosperity was not only the belief in a market dependent retirement, but the aspiration at having a life of retirement leisure earlier than projected. Peter Thomson, chairman of the UK’s National Association of Pension Funds, said: “I don’t think we can carry on- indefinitely – promising ourselves an earlier and earlier retirement and a longer and longer life. It doesn’t stack up. If people retire at 55, their 30 or 35 years of work could be followed by 30 years of retirement.”⁹⁷ Those whose entire futures depend on the financial markets will undoubtedly be shocked awake to the realization that money for nothing was not a sustainable or realistic plan in and of itself.

The US economic future is uncertain and the overly optimistic predictions of a “so-called recovery will be anemic” according to Robert Reich.⁹⁸ Without being overly simplistic, the way out of this expansive and overwhelming economic quandary is for America to return to an identity of producing far more than it is consuming. The question

⁹⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁹⁵ Bootle, 66.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 66.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 266.

⁹⁸ Reich, 5.

of crucial importance for its future if it is to remain a global influencer is, “Can America curb its consumerist appetites for more and get back to the entrepreneurial spirit of production it once defined for the world?” Keynesian economics is based on the balance that in the end, final expenses in the economy must equal the income (National Product) that is generated in the economy.⁹⁹ This is presently not an American reality and the world is watching. The economies of the future are not in the western world as they were embedded during the modern era. By 2025, China will have surpassed the United States as the largest economy in the world and India is right behind them.¹⁰⁰ While many developing countries may envy America’s perceived wealth, military power and capacity for production, “they no longer see the US as an ideal model for their own development – if they ever did.”¹⁰¹

Americans cannot simply hope that governmental fiscal policies will be enough to span the larger cliff that is on the horizon. Through the quantitative easing of the Federal Reserve, it fundamentally pushes the ultimate payment of national debts to the undefined future. Taxpayers today will need to reduce their consumption and increase their savings in the present day just to be able to afford to pay for the future taxes that will be thrust upon them.¹⁰² “The nation stands at the crossroads of its economic life. We can choose to be more productive by making the necessary institutional changes, or we can choose to have the government deliver more goods, more regulations, and more restraints upon all

⁹⁹ Sanchez, Kopp, Sanzari, 185.

¹⁰⁰ Bootle, 11.

¹⁰¹ Hankel, 150.

¹⁰² Sanchez, Kopp, Sanzari, 197.

of us.”¹⁰³ America thrived in its history when it operated within its given freedoms to build a nation of prosperity and wealth with a sense of moral connectedness to its infrastructure. The way out is for America nationally, and its citizens privately, to return to its heritage of producing more than it consumes.

In meeting their different challenges, today’s leaders can achieve something greater, not only avoiding the catastrophe that sink us into a new slump and achieving another golden age of rapid growth for the developed countries, but also facilitating the rapid advance of the rest of the world – thereby opening up the gateway to the economy of the future.¹⁰⁴

ECCLESIAL HOPE AND THE CONSUMER DREAM

What is the hope for the American Church seemingly attached to the dominant worldview of its day, a life of attachment to the consumer dream? What can the American evangelical church do in the face of a fearful and unsure economic future? Simply stated, we need to lead as the church. Consumerism has not ended the time of the American church; we are still here with the narrative of a meaningful life organized around a Gospel community. “Resilience is built on hope, which gives us confidence and strength. Hope is not blind to the possibility of everything getting worse, but it is a choice we make when faced with challenges. Hope brings health to our souls and bodies.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, I would propose that this kind of hopeful leadership could revitalize our churches and communities. We may grieve the changes to culture, we may lament the challenge of consumerism to our daily lives, and we may suffer with our neighbors

¹⁰³ Ibid., 209.

¹⁰⁴ Bootle, 335.

¹⁰⁵ Timothy Beatley, Heather Boyer and Peter Newman, *Resilient Cities: Responding to Peak Oil and Climate Change*, (London: Island Press, 2009), 1.

amidst economic scarcity, however we are a people of the Resurrection. Hope is our lifeblood.

We can lead our spiritual communities back to the place of offering the beliefs and practices necessary to be mindful consumers. We can organize ourselves into small, self-sustaining missional communities that do not require large budgets to operate but rather can create full fiscal margin to give to the economic needs in their particular neighborhoods. We can oppose the empty gospel of more from the American dream with a Gospel of true contentment within the attachments of the God who designed us. The goal of the American dream is to make much of us; the goal of the gospel is to make much of God. “It is God who takes delight in using ordinary Christians who come to the end of themselves and choose to trust in his extraordinary provision.”¹⁰⁶ Missional communities can offer the practices and disciplines necessary to live a life of trust in God, not in the trappings of consumerism. It is in the community of faith where our deepest longings can be answered. Our attachments should be to God alone for our salvation.

Material things are neither bad nor good. It is the role and status they are accorded in one’s life that can be problematic. The key is to find a balance: to appreciate what you have, but not at the expense of the things that really matter – your family, community and spirituality.¹⁰⁷ -Dr. James E. Burroughs

¹⁰⁶ Platt, *Radical*, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Tori DeAngelis, *Opposing Viewpoints: Consumerism May Be Linked to Mental and Emotional Problems* (New Haven: Greenhaven Press, 2010), 38.

CHAPTER FOUR

AMERICAN EVANGELICAL *EKKLESIA* AND INDIVIDUALISM

When individualism works its way into the life of a local congregation, self-preoccupation becomes the gospel of the hour.¹

What is *ekklēsia* (church)? The present American church within western culture appears to be suffering from a crisis of identity. At the very center of New Testament Christianity is a powerful community, a restorative grouping of people devoted to Jesus as their patriarchic center. Their lives, their choices, their behaviors, their politics, their livelihoods all streamed out of their relational connection and loyalty to this new community, this new family. “Unlike the place of Religion in the West today, religion in antiquity was not simply an isolated component of human experience – it was woven into the fabric of daily life.”² Church was not defined as somewhere they chose to go to; rather, it was a people and a life they belonged to. In the landscape of modern American Christianity, this relational centering on family has been all but lost within the capitalist nature of popular church growth theory and it’s subsequent industry. By taking a look back into the first century Roman world of early Christian expansion through house churches, we can find a way forward for an American church trapped in the pitfalls of radical consumerism and hyper individualism.

The story of American evangelical Christianity is rooted in a dynamic shift away from thinking in communal terms to a uniquely individualistic faith. Historically, there was an evolutionary reallocation in evangelical focus as the movement traveled from

¹ J.K. Jones, *What the Monks Can Teach Us: An Ancient Practice for a Postmodern Time* (Joplin: Heart Spring Publishing, 2004), 17.

² Joseph H. Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 7.

England to the new America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Will Samson, Professor of Sociology at Georgetown College, provides this insight:

Many people came to America to get away from oppressive religious systems and to make their fortunes in a wild and free marketplace built on a kind of Darwinian survival of the fittest. In that marketplace, it was tough to sell a religion that required commitment to the group. And so, evangelists during the Great Awakening and the period of twentieth-century revivalism did some product redesign and rebranded Christianity, the act of following Jesus, as something separated from all the mess of having to live together as followers of Jesus.³

American evangelical Christianity then becomes caught up in reactionary response within the spirit of the age. The American story of evangelicalism became one marketed to the rugged individual. Evangelical Christianity in the United States would become a kind of civil religious experience that is understood as an add-on to the idealistic American dream of families and individuals.

In parallel to the movement away from the Church of England is the holiness movement that was born in the radical individualism of the spirit of Romanticism. The holiness movement focused on the personal piety of the individual Christian and on what they felt as opposed to what they thought.⁴

The holiness movement ushered in a new phase in Evangelical history. . . The adherents of Keswick were turning in on a shared but private experience. They were accepting that Evangelicalism, which had come so near to dominating the national culture at mid-century, was on the way to becoming an *introverted subculture*.⁵

³ Will Samson, *Enough: Contentment in an Age of Excess* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 140-141.

⁴ D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 174.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 179-180 (italics mine).

The holiness movement, which originated in England, had a massive effect on the growth of the Protestant church in America. A Christianity of personal choice and private experience in the spirit of the age of hyper individualism is what resulted. This is a far cry from the first century Christian community. The Scriptures portray a communal faith based in family language but we find ourselves in modern models of church that are geared to the preferences and choices of the individual. When Jesus is presented as a personal option within a consumer culture, the church loses a core piece of its historic identity. “Within the evangelical Protestant church we have lost the DNA of Christian community.”⁶ There was a distinct movement away from a focus on community to a focus on the individual.

As reported in the previous chapter, a further development that deeply affects American Christianity is its relationship to consumerism. America is a nation that thrives as a wealthy industrialized society and with the increased wealth; there is an assumption that it leads to deeper contentment and happiness. “With greater wealth comes a greater ability to satisfy our needs and desires, to alleviate suffering and illness, and to carry out our life projects.”⁷ However, this does not describe the contemporary American cultural experience, greater consumerism has not led to more happiness. “While economic development has been shown to generate a steady increase average in happiness levels, after a certain level of development has been reached the effect disappears completely.”⁸ The cliché that money cannot buy you happiness appears to ring true.

⁶ Samson, 143.

⁷ Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the culture can't be jammed* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004), 99.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 99.

The effect of this capitalist development on the church is that ecclesiastical structures become just one more of the myriad of consumer choices. In America, the individual has a powerful connection to choice. You can shop for your church choice as you can what grocery store you frequent, what university you wish to attend or what car you want to purchase. “Our view of God and our understanding of the way we participate in God’s work in the world have become distorted, and we have transformed ourselves into unthinking consumers of products, ideas, and cultural narratives about what will bring us happiness.⁹ *Ekklesia* in America has become a consumer choice, a far cry from a centered and communal identity.

I propose to describe how present day missional communities in America can be shaped and influenced from the first century Christian primitive house churches in the pre-Constantinian Roman Empire. If the missional communities of today can listen to and learn from these primal expressions of their historic roots, they have the power to be an antidote to the present day problems of consumerism and individualism within the American church. I aspire to show a correlation between looking back in order to discover a way forward.

OIKOS AND COMMON MEALS

⁴² They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³ Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵ They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. *They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,* ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.¹⁰

⁹ Samson, 31.

¹⁰ Acts 2:42-47 (New International Version, italics mine).

It is important from the outset of using Acts 2:42-47 as a summary from Luke of the early church in Jerusalem to include the awareness that some scholars believe it to be an idealized summary and perhaps for the sake of argument not entirely accurate. Was Luke projecting an ideal image of the church back on the early Jerusalem Christian community? Roger Gehring argues for its historical reliability:

The results of our examination suggest it was not a Lukan exaggeration that the community organization practiced by the first Christians in Jerusalem consisted of the mutual material support of one another, provided in the form of community goods and in the form of *oikos* structures. In light of practical considerations inherent to their situation and in view of later literary evidence referring to the bread-breaking celebration, the report in Acts indicating that the first Jerusalem Christians gathered together to break bread in the homes of well-to-do members of the congregation should not be doubted. It is also safe to assume they met in houses for other activities such as prayer, fellowship, and instruction.¹¹

In antiquity, individuals within the Roman Empire could find belonging in both public (*polis*) and private (*oikos*) institutions.¹² It was the *oikos* structure within which the primitive church found its identity and the early physical space for its launch of expansive growth throughout the empire. The *oikos* was the domestic residence of an individual that would be utilized for the gathered Christian community, typically necessitating at minimum a kitchen and dining room for hospitality.¹³

It was in these humble and everyday spaces that the church gathered and shared community together. In ordinary domestic structures is where the origins of New Testament *ekklesia* are found. *Ekklesia* was defined as both the process of assembling as

¹¹ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 78.

¹² Richard S. Ascough, *What Are They Saying About Pauline Churches* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1998) 5.

¹³ Ascough, 6.

well as the community gathered itself. Hans Kung describes the original community as gathering at a particular place at a particular time engaged in particular actions. Kung asserts that each *oikos* fully represented the whole church and outlined their actions of *ekklesia* as: proclamation of the gospel, baptism, Lord's Supper, charisms and services.¹⁴ *Ekklesia* was not yet an institution of power, but rather it was a gathered people, acting and living freely in community. Without official physical structure, the life of the community was the structure. "Each individual community, all its members, may understand itself as the people of God, the body of Christ, *a spiritual building*."¹⁵

Many scholars agree that for the first 300 years of the church, Christianity appeared to be illegal.¹⁶ Therefore many conclude that the organization of the early church within *oikos* is commonly perceived to be for gathering in secrecy amidst rampant persecution. However, in its infancy, the largest contributing factor for meeting in private homes was for *access to the kitchen facilities*. "Larger homes had facilities for preparing what became an essential feature for the church, a common meal."¹⁷ The common meal, also referred to as a "love feast", was a universal characteristic of first century house churches. These meals were an extension of the Gospel of Jesus, shared and free. Each time they met, they broke bread; the table was a centerpiece to the community.

¹⁴ Hans Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History and Future* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), 79.

¹⁵ Kung, 79 (italics mine).

¹⁶ Stuart G. Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 10.

¹⁷ Colin Duriez, *AD 33: The Year That Changed the World* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2006) 174.

People living in the first century Mediterranean culture attached a higher symbolic value to the table than is typically found in American western culture today.¹⁸ It is widely accepted that the tradition of sharing the common meal in first century house churches follows the example of Jesus breaking bread with his disciples at Passover in the Last Supper. What has now become a ritualistic, single-serving sacrament in the Eucharist, in its origin, communion was an entire meal.¹⁹ Unlike many Christian traditions today, the early practices of full communion were joyful celebrations, not sorrowful or carrying tones of repentance. The meal was symbolic of their life in Christ, deeply rooted in intimate relationship. “Throughout most of its history, the Christian church has seen in communion its highest act of worship.”²⁰

The common meal was practiced regularly in private homes and was a powerful vehicle by which the expression and proclamation of the gospel was given away. “The mealtime in the ancient Mediterranean society was a highly charged affair affording much more than simply the opportunity to consume nourishment.”²¹ The table was open, all were invited. Even publicans and sinners were not excluded from this meal.²² The Greek historian, Plutarch, referred to the “friend-making” character of the table. It brought a sense of solidarity around the shared experience, affirming all members and penetrating previously held group boundaries. Around the table you belonged, you were

¹⁸ Hellerman, 8.

¹⁹ Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984), 94.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

²¹ Hellerman, 85.

²² Kung, 76.

family. The shared meal reinforced the kinship imagery; the community members became a fictive family.²³

One of the areas of commonality of the six major ecclesiastical structures in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's "An Introduction to Ecclesiology" was the practice of the Eucharistic table.²⁴ Certainly some traditions elevate it in status over others, but all hold it as a best practice for the church. Churches centered on the following of the Christ find that the table is the place where communion with him can be found. In some traditions the Eucharist is clothed in deep ritual, others with a kind of common companionship and others in a mystical union. How or why it is practiced is a debatable area; that it is practiced is widely accepted.

In the first century Pauline churches, the sacramental communion was within the larger context of the common meal. "The meal celebration, as Paul introduced it (after the Jerusalem and Antioch model), was held most likely as an actual meal embedded in the overall celebration of communion (the Lord's Supper)."²⁵ Can the focus on the Eucharist and a common meal be a means for the church to welcome others into community? Is it a resource to experience the sacrifice and limits of sharing, to be about "other" and making sure there is enough for all? I believe a high view of the Eucharistic table and the embracing of the common meal, as in first century *oikos*, can be a way forward for the American church to celebrate authentic community and dispel temptations towards individualism and consumerism. I would suggest that we could learn at least four things

²³ Hellerman, 8.

²⁴ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

²⁵ Gehring, 173.

from the practice of the first century house churches eating together that fits our fractured and manic culture within the American church.

First, it was a common meal, meaning that the expectation was that all individuals would bring something to share with the gathered community. It was not an exchange of goods and services, it was not a program provided by the professional hierarchy, it was a common and collected meal. “Everyone brought along what food he or she could for the meal. Paul apparently took for granted that not only the more affluent but also the poorer Christians, who were not able to bring anything, would be able to eat to their satisfaction from the food brought by others.”²⁶ The American culture of entitlement is a powerful force that affects the American church. People can approach church with the demands of “what can you do for me?” The regular practice of a shared common meal can break down the sense of entitlement to an understanding that church is what we all bring and share together. What the community brings, the community eats. It’s a tangible expression of the golden rule for communal thinking, sharing so there is enough for everyone.

A second characteristic of the common meal that can be a powerful reminder of biblical community is that it is practiced around a table. For the modern American church attendant, their dominant experience may be in stadium style seating or side by side in a pew facing the professional leader. Their physical space creates an orientation of the individual to the professional leader, not to one another. It can be an anonymous experience of individual faith. The table has space for the adherents to sit around. Their orientation is to one another and the meal before them is shared. Symbolically, to have a

²⁶ Gehring, 173.

seat at the table says that you belong. The life of faith is not to be pursued individually, it is a life shared together. In a fractured world, people long for a sense of belonging, the table is a space that offers that belonging.

A third characteristic is the warm and joyful environment a shared meal brings in the life of a community. Around the table, stories are told, laughter is present, joy is pervading and relationships can become deepened. Community is a relational entity; the meal provides space for increasing the power of these connections. “All of us need to become better at listening, conversing, respecting one another’s uniqueness, because these are essential for strong relationships.”²⁷ There is a powerful connection between the listening of one another’s stories, the subsequent laughter and the bonding of a community. Each cackle of joy weaves a tapestry of hope around the table.

The final characteristic that I want to highlight as a response to the first century house churches is that the meal is deeply Christological, being centered in the ancient sacrament of the Eucharist. It follows the tradition of the last supper of Christ with his disciples before his betrayal and death. The meal becomes a physical symbol of why the community gathers, they gather to Christ and to one another. “Wherever the Eucharist is, there is the church. The church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the church.”²⁸ Maintaining the connection of the meal within the context of the Eucharist brings deeper sacramental meaning to the elements, the center is Christ.

Modern day missional communities within America have the same dynamic power to gather around a table, in an ordinary home, share a meal, celebrate the Eucharist

²⁷ Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science: Discovering Order in a Chaotic World* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2006), 39.

²⁸ Karkkainen, 21.

and be church to one another. In this way the missional community becomes an alternative story to the cultural narrative of consumerism and individualism. Christ at the center of the table draws the people into deeper community to one another and then sends them out to their world in service to the same Christ. “Jesus utilized mealtime as a social vehicle to include outsiders in his surrogate kin group.”²⁹ Around the table you find hope in a new family and a calling to invite others into that family. The table is an open invitation to all who are looking for the kind of drink that makes you thirsty no more.³⁰ The common meal is an invitation to an alternative story, an invitation to *ekklesia* found in Christ.

PATRILINNEAL KINSHIP GROUPS

“The social organization of the pre-Constantinian house churches was perhaps the single most common and identifiable characteristic of the Jesus movement.”³¹

A powerful human aspect to the New Testament accounts of the first century primitive Christian *oikos* was its dynamic use of intimate family language. The early Christian community is referred to using familial terms that signifies a warm and caring community of reciprocal relationships. Wayne McCready describes it this way: “The amount of language emphasizing close personal ties, brotherly and sisterly love, greetings with a holy kiss, concern for the well-being of community members, and so on – not only reinforced a sense of community, but it underscored the internal cohesion that

²⁹ Hellerman, 87.

³⁰ John 4:13-14 (New International Version).

³¹ Hellerman, 225.

distinguished the assemblies of early Christians.”³² The primitive Christian community was in the nature of a close family far before it became a powerful and expansive institution in the centuries that followed.

The first century church meeting in *oikos* experienced explosive growth that appeared to meet a cultural need of transient citizens far from home throughout the Roman Empire. The *oikos* was an attractive and dynamic community, it was thought of and experienced as a new kind of family dynamic. “The social solidarity characteristic of the family model, in turn, goes a long way to explain both the intimacy and sense of community so often cited as unique to early Christianity, and the attractiveness of the early Christian movement to displaced and alienated urbanites in the Greco-Roman world.”³³ The dynamic spiritual family community had a gravitational pull for those looking for meaning and belonging.

As twenty-first century readers, we need to be aware that our categories of reference for family in the modern day West are not in congruence with the first century Mediterranean milieu. In the United States, we define family in terms of a “constellation of relationships to a single living individual.”³⁴ That is, those who are in blood relationship in reference to ourselves. For people in a collectivist culture, as was the first century Mediterranean world, they viewed family in terms of consanguinity or a blood connection to a common ancestor.³⁵ For the first century primitive church, Jesus becomes the family patriarch through his sacrificial shed blood for all. All who share allegiance to

³² Hellerman, 22.

³³ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁴ Hellerman, 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

him as their patriarchal identity are invited to become a part of a new family. This new family reflected in the ancient Mediterranean society is best described by Joseph Hellerman as a “Patrilineal Kinship Group.” (Hereafter PKG)³⁶ The PKG was the familial identity of the primitive Christian community.

Unlike the modern U.S. understanding of family where primary emotional support comes from the spousal relationship, within the PKG, sibling relationships were central for emotional dependence. The wife’s primary role was for bearing heirs (sons), not emotional intimacy or relational backing.³⁷ The distinctive familial sibling language of the New Testament finds its context with the PKG understanding of group relationship. In Christ, they became brothers and sisters to one another and that relationship radically redefines their identity. “The ancient Mediterranean world was a collectivist society. The health and survival of the group took precedence over their own personal advancement and well being.”³⁸

The primitive Christian community oriented their lives and loyalties around this attractive invitation into a fictive family. It was within these new surrogate sibling relationships where the caring community found its identity. In sibling solidarity, they protected the family from outsiders and shared resources with insiders in the fictive family. They practiced a kind of unlimited reciprocity within the kinship group.³⁹ “The local church was in many ways a charitable society. The vulnerable members of society, such as widows, orphans, surplus babies and elderly slaves, could be sure of a livelihood

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

³⁹ Hellerman, 48.

if they belonged to the church. There the needy had a family which would see that they were not destitute.”⁴⁰ The resources you had were not for your own consumption; they were for sharing with your sibling group.

However, it was in their treatment of outsiders that distinguished the followers of Jesus from their contemporary Judean sects. The keeping of purity codes acting as boundaries between Israel and the outside world was not a mark of the new community. The followers of Jesus under the New Covenant opened up the doors to invite even Gentiles into the growing family.

By calling into question the ongoing validity of the traditional markers of national identity – the Sabbath, food laws, and the temple economy – while at the same time maintaining exclusive allegiances to Yahweh, Jesus prepared his followers to redefine the people of God as a transnational surrogate kinship group – one that would welcome not only unclean Judeans into the family, but Gentiles as well.⁴¹

I would suggest in summary that the modern missional communities today could yield three learning’s from the PKG understanding of first century Mediterranean families. First is the emphasis of the group over the individual. That your ecclesiological structure is not about you, it’s about other. The commitment to this fictive family takes precedence over personal preference. In *ekklesia*, you are not a consumer; you are a brother and sister to others.

Secondarily, family can be redefined away from biological relationships to a new spiritual family that is primary. There is a kind of leaving and cleaving in this New Covenant community. Significant emotional and spiritual support can now come from these spiritual siblings who also are redefining their lives around the mission of being

⁴⁰ Hall, 22.

⁴¹ Hellerman, 89.

transformed into the image of Christ. The primitive church “implicitly demanded of community members a loyalty that excluded every competing social entity in their surrounding culture – including a convert’s natural family.”⁴² For the follower of Jesus, this is primary and necessitates the belonging to a community that will help nurture this spiritual journey.

Thirdly, this family is to be open to outsiders. This new community is not to be a closed family of inward focused energies. The first century Christian PKG communities were alive, healthy and growing because they kept their families open to those yet outside the Kingdom of God. Though intimately bonded, biblical micro-faith communities ought to be outwardly focused in their orientation to those not in their groupings. “Jesus of Nazareth and his earliest followers adopted and reworked their values to construct their powerful and enduring metaphor of the church as a kinship group. During the 200 years that followed, Christians continued to view the family model as central to their social vision for the communities to which they belonged.⁴³” These findings can be a way forward for American Christians finding themselves within the oppressive culture of individualism and consumerism.

EVOLUTION OF *OIKOS*

While it is important to examine the roots and origins of *oikos* in the first century pre-Constantinian Roman Empire, one must also recognize that the subsequent centuries write an evolutionary narrative of change and adaptation of early ecclesiology. From 50-150 A.D., Christians for the most part met in private homes (*oikos*) belonging to more

⁴² Ibid., 24.

⁴³ Ibid., 215.

well-to-do members of the community that could afford them. In the period of time from 150-250 A.D., we understand that some of the private residences had specific renovation work completed in order to more effectively host the growing faith communities. From 250-313 A.D. there was a movement to construct larger buildings and halls for the exclusive use of Christian worship.⁴⁴ The earliest archaeological finding for a house church is Dura-Europos thought to have been a house church built before 256 A.D.⁴⁵ The small communities meeting in private residences grew to needing more space. The extensions and additions to the private residences developed to a point where they became their own identifiable buildings.⁴⁶ There is no formal basilica or church until the 4th century, when Christianity became the official Roman religion, supplanting the worshiping of the emperor and foreign gods.⁴⁷ The *oikos* once private, became public physical structure over time due to the expansive growth of primitive Christianity.

The first century church believed in an imminent *eschaton*. Following Jesus' words like those in Luke 9:26-27: "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the kingdom of God."⁴⁸ When the Parousia did not happen immanently, it raised institutional questions. The early church had to start building institutional *ekklesia*

⁴⁴ Ascough, 6-7.

⁴⁵ Gonzalez, 95.

⁴⁶ Ascough, 7.

⁴⁷ Duriez, 175.

⁴⁸ Luke 9:26-27 (New International Version).

to help form new converts and decide what to do with kids being born into the movement. If Christ was not coming back immanently, how now should they live?⁴⁹

Change needed to happen to sustain the growing movement, but what kind of change? “Nearly everyone who studies the early history of the Jesus movement recognizes that a change occurs with respect to church structure and organization as one moves from the epistles of Paul to the works of writers like Clement and Ignatius.”⁵⁰ The next generation of Christians were a step removed from the founders. They moderate the fervor somewhat naturally and the ordinary troubles concerning paideia, communal kinship and how to organize community life are the practical pressing issues.⁵¹ Internally they are asking organizational questions.

Oikos was the structure the church originated in a normative pattern, but it was not the idealized static form. *Ekklesia* can and did adapt to its cultural and political surroundings. *Ekklesia* transcends structure; it is the gathered people of God in many forms throughout the history of God’s creation. Today’s form of missional communities of faith in America should not act in a kind of resentment towards larger and more institutional church structures. Nietzsche spoke of the word resentment originating in French as the idea of being “grounded in a narrative of injury or, at least, perceived injury; a strong belief that one has been or is being wronged.”⁵² Missional communities

⁴⁹ Walter H. Wagner, *After the Apostles: Christianity in the Second Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 116.

⁵⁰ Hellerman, 133.

⁵¹ Wagner, 115.

⁵² James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107.

today in America can speak in the language of being against any institutional church structure that is not small, communal, simple or bearing closer resemblance of first century *oikos*. Historically, this kind of resentment is too narrow a view of *ekklesia* structure in its own evolution over time. By the 2nd century, the primitive community was already moving out into larger institutional forms of church. While we can admire and receive formation from the first century *oikos*, we cannot historically idealize it as the only sincere form of *ekklesia*.

There is a temptation to idealize the *oikos* of the primitive church in the 1st century Roman world. Romantically reflecting on their almost utopian spirit of community, it was a snapshot of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. The American church today is entrenched in a distant land far from that primitive spiritual community. Practicing a regular celebration of common meals around the table can produce the kind of intimate and joyous relationships the primitive church was renowned for. Re-embracing a communal identity around the family language of the New Testament can be a model away from hyper-individual Christianity based on consumer choice and lead us closer to the kind of spiritual family we long for. The emerging, missional communities in evangelical America have tended to be perceived as reactionary in their relationship towards other established church structures. Through looking back into the roots of historical Christianity, they can be informed that what they are producing is not new, but rather is a part of the whole of ecclesiastical structures in church history. The gracious response is to embrace humility and peace in ecumenical relationships. This kind of divine peace and grace is what *ekklesia* is all about. *Oikos* is a look back in order to discover a possible way forward.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTIAN HISTORY

We cannot find the resources for dealing with this world responsibly unless we also ground ourselves in the realities of smaller, more intense communities in and through which our full being as the creatures God intended us to be is called forth.¹

The emerging missional community expressions of the church today in America are not new. They are rooted deeply in an example of how God has worked through the church in history. At times in history, the church has taken on the form of a micro-community for contextual purposes as a contribution to the church's mission. We see examples of embedded tribal community in the Celtic Christian movement of Ireland in the fourth, fifth and sixth century. From this ancient land we can learn how Christianity translates well in the cultural language of belonging. As well, the Methodist class meetings in eighteenth century England under the leadership of John Wesley are an example of intentional Christian community not separated from the real world, but dynamically within it. Wesley's class meetings would be seen as a means of reforming and serving the church of his day, not as separatist communities like that of the Quakers in England and Colonial America in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Rather, early Quakerism can serve as a warning to today's idealist communities in their development and what they choose to anchor themselves in. These historic Kingdom communities thought and lived creatively for the sake of the world. I propose to reveal how they can help shape and challenge today's emerging expressions of missional communities in the American evangelical suburban context.

¹ Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *The Ethics of Community* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 168.

CELTIC CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

It is very challenging to speak with a kind of confident certainty about a people and a culture that embodied myth and embellishment over linear reporting of their history. Even as far back as the ninth century, an Irish scholar complained of the Irish habit of preferring fiction to true history in reference to themselves.² They were and still are today an incredibly artistic and creative people. For the Celts, life was not linear; it was a circle of wholeness. The concentric circle attached to the cross of Christ is the lasting symbol of Celtic Christianity and very much is a metaphor for how they worshipped and found their identity in community. Deborah Cronin describes it this way:

But the Way, from a Celtic Christian point of view, is circular, not linear. We journey in spiraling circles of faith and experience, and we dwell within that circle of love that is God. We have our being within God. For those whose lives are dominated by events and timelines, this may be hard to comprehend. But those of us who embrace the encircling presence of God cannot comprehend life with the Divinity in any other manner.³

Over the past decade or so, there has been a resurgence of interest and popularity regarding the Celtic world of ancient Ireland. We, as readers and fans of Celtic culture, can get caught up in our romanticism and perceived truths of a mythical world and idyllic Christian community. There are varying accounts from Celtic scholars compared to the popular writing of western authors in the big business of the Celtic culture. If words are the common currency of cultural exchange, then the fact that the Celtic texts were written in difficult languages and are the product of a world that is dramatically alien to our own can be forgotten when the English reader is presented with something they want to

² Ted Olsen, *Christianity and the Celts* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 7.

³ Deborah Cronin, *Holy Ground* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999), 111.

believe is true.⁴ Celtic scholars have as well intimated that the burgeoning interest from a Christian perspective has more to do with American individualism than it does appreciation for Irish community. “In the first place, the perceived lack of ecclesiastical organization is frequently attractive not because it accords with a new form of church polity, but rather because it resonates positively with the mood of individualism and self-selection.”⁵ It is as well misleading to speak of Celtic Christianity as being a unified whole where in fact the south was influenced by Spain, Syria and Egypt and the north from St. Patrick native British Christianity.⁶ What we do know is what Brendan Lehane supports: “The Irish were looked on as a race of enduring heroes, because it was thought they lived up to the standards they set themselves.”⁷ The Irish passionately tried to live out their idyllic lore.

The Celtic culture of the fourth, fifth and sixth century Ireland was dynamically transformed with the introduction of Christianity through St. Patrick and hundreds of other nameless missionaries from Wales, Spain and the Frankish occupation of Gaul. By the turn of the sixth century, Ireland had achieved a faster conversion than any European country had previously seen.⁸ St. Patrick, as a former slave in Ireland, fell in love with them as a people and longed for their salvation, he had the “proselytizing disease.”⁹ What

⁴ Mark Atherton, *Celts and Christians* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ Brendan Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity* (London: Continuum, 1968), 102.

⁷ Lehane, *Early Celtic Christianity*, 107.

⁸ Lehane, 49.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

Patrick was particularly well suited for was in synthesizing the teachings of Christianity to the already established myths and culture of the Celts and thus revealing a ready-made bridge for the people of the emerald isle to walk across to the God of creation. Muirchu Moccu Machtheni, the seventh century historian of Patrick, in his work *Vita Patricii* wrote regarding providence at play: “Just as God prepared Patrick to be sent to Ireland; so for a long time he had been preparing Irish society to receive Patrick.”¹⁰ It was perhaps quite literally a match made in heaven. As Patrick described the Trinitarian God through the shamrock, the Irish people not only had their eyes opened to this orthodox belief but as well associated that since the shamrock was always with them, so was their God. Deborah Cronin puts it well: “Patrick speaks their language, not just the syllables and words, but the language of their lives and beliefs.”¹¹

My chief interest in the emerging Celtic forms of Christianity of this time period was their tribal form of living, called the *tuath*, as it is a great contrast to American suburban ecclesiastical structures.¹² Resembling some forms of first century Christianity, no Celt owned land by himself or herself, the resources were held in common and care was given to the poor, elderly or incapable.¹³ Irish society of the time consisted of a network of tribes, each thought of as being extended families. A king with an established leadership role, whether small or large, would head individual tribes. These tribes as well networked with other neighboring tribes and could dominate a large area of the country

¹⁰ Atherton, *Celts and Christians*, 131.

¹¹ Cronin, 41.

¹² Jerry Doherty, *A Celtic Model of Ministry* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 44.

¹³ Cronin, 37.

as the Ui Neill did in Ulster where St. Columba would reside and form his vision of monastic community.¹⁴

When Christianity was introduced to a tribal people, they received it as tribesmen and magnified the motif of Christian community. As Muirchu described early Celtic Christianity, he nuanced it in terms of a community, a new people and salvation was in communal rather than individualistic terms.¹⁵ Christianity was explosive in Ireland because most fundamentally it is about a community, the people of God in eternal relationship. James Mackey suggests: “A new religion can never succeed except to the extent that it succeeds in embodying at least the best of the culture to which it comes.”¹⁶ The advent of Celtic Christianity certainly accomplished this in preserving Celtic tribes for the organization of the growing movement.

The one critique of Patrick, being a native to the British church and a consecrated bishop sent out, was his attempt to initially establish the known imperial diocese government of his source. However, the island was not all organized as Britain was with bishops in large towns overseeing the running of smaller villages with priests under their command.¹⁷ “Patrick’s diocesan organization was not a natural bedfellow for a nation of tribal cliques. So diocesan organization faltered and fell.”¹⁸ After Patrick’s death and

¹⁴ James Mackey, *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 35.

¹⁵ Atherton, 137.

¹⁶ Mackey, 3.

¹⁷ Lehane, 101.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

within this faltering was fallow ground for the expansive growth of what would be the key feature of Celtic Christianity, which is monastic community.

“When monasticism came to Ireland by different routes it found a country that could already be described as lay-monastic. So it thrived.”¹⁹ The Irish people tired of the constant warring between pre-Christian tribes and found in Christian monasticism a welcomed alternative. One that was about openness to all, fairness, kept no secrets and had as it’s aim the happiness of the whole population.²⁰ It was disciplined community but as well kept a warmth and creativity that appealed to the imaginations of Ireland’s youth. There was a healthy balance between authority and anarchy that created the ironic but powerful dynamic for compelling Christian community.²¹ One of the compelling elements was the practice of *anamchara* or keeping a soul friend within the monastic community. It was an intentional form of accountability for mentoring and discipling where if a one slackened in their monastic duties, some communities would hold the soul friend accountable as well.²² It was a shared Christianity, true community founded on meaningful relationships.

It is not about a retreat to a mythical Celtic past, but as Donald E. Meek says in *Modern Myths of the Medieval Past*, it is about a “sensitive Christian engagement with the present and the future.”²³ At present in suburban America, we are a far cry from the

¹⁹ Ibid., 101.

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Ibid., 100.

²² Olsen, 94.

²³ Ibid., 179.

tribal thinking and shared living of the ancient Celts. We may long for it, but it is a foreign land far away from the safety of our consumer culture. Jerry Doherty states it this way: “One problem with our world is that we have developed into an individualist society that has become fragmented and uncaring. People desire community, yet are afraid of it.”²⁴ One approach the established church has attempted is to use programs that provide a kind of short-term event to form temporary communities with hopes the feelings will stick when the people get home. It does not take long for people to realize that expecting instant community in programs is futile, what is needed is a long-term shared living like that of the ancient Celtic model of ministry.²⁵ As Doherty writes:

Celtic monastic communities were places of vision where a different world, the world intended by God, could be lived out. All people were created to live in relationship with God. . . . They were attempts at living in true community with God present in their midst.²⁶

I long for my own ecclesial community to be this kind of authentic and intentional Christian community that is on mission in American suburbia; taking a portion of it’s influence from the dynamics of ancient Celtic Christianity.

JOHN WESLEY’S CLASS MEETINGS

“It is interesting to note that many Celtic Christian scholars view the Wesley’s as the natural successors to the Celtic Christian spirit.”²⁷

²⁴ Doherty, 29.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁷ Cronin, 86.

The explosive growth of the Industrial Revolution created a glib picture of life in England during the eighteenth century. Much like today's suburbia, neighborhoods were cheaply built in crowded cities with bad hygiene, poor health and an absence of any real connection experienced between a majority of the people.²⁸ David Watson states: "Indeed, the major contrast between the pre-and post-Industrial Revolution England was less that of capitalism or bourgeois economic control, than the transition from small, family-type social units to the larger society of undifferentiated equals."²⁹ There was a shift in social construction with the increase of urbanization and more people living nearer to one another; it was yet characterized by disconnection. This disconnection created a divine opportunity for people's sense of loss to be met by John Wesley's Methodism uniquely organized into class meetings within the Methodist societies. In Methodism, people found an identity of meaning amidst the masses. They were more than a utilitarian individual to the industrial machine; they were a valued member of an enthusiastic sect of Jesus followers intentionally bound together. In this context of social deprivation, Methodist class meetings brought to many a sense of belonging and a relational identity.³⁰

Wesley originated his idea of the Methodist class meeting while a student at Oxford University with his participation in "*The Holy Club*." During his time at Oxford, someone Wesley respected spoke to him with these words: "Sir, you wish to serve God

²⁸ David Watson Lowes, *The Early Methodist Class Meeting* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1985), 130.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

³⁰ Lowes, 131.

and go to heaven; remember you cannot serve him alone; you must therefore find companions, or make them; the Bible knows nothing of solitary religion.”³¹ This challenge turned into the *Holy Club*, as it was derogatorily known by fellow sneering students. This club met to study the Scriptures in their original languages, spiritually challenge one another, transform their lives according to the Scriptures, share communion weekly, fast twice per week, attend public worship, give benevolently, teach poor children and visit the sick and imprisoned.³² This was a dynamic and powerful Christian micro-community on the campus of the esteemed university as well as a deeply formative ecclesiastical experience that Wesley would not soon forget.

In 1742, during the infant stages of Methodism in London, the young movement found itself in financial debt due in particular to a chapel construction project in Bristol.³³ Wesley needed to administrate a more effective means of penny collection and settled upon the idea of organizing the Methodist societies into smaller class meetings to systematize his strategy. However, Wesley’s passionate fervor for seeing the world as his parish, capitalized on this opportunity to influence these micro-communities as being more than financial collections, but rather as a means of spiritual growth akin to his experience in the *Holy Club*. This would be a weekly meeting of like-minded persons who would provide mutual accountability for their discipleship.³⁴ These would be communities of six to twelve people and arranged geographically as leaders were

³¹ Wilson T. Hogue, *The Class Meeting as a Means of Grace* (Chicago: S.K.J. Chesbro, 1907), 11.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ Hogue, 21.

³⁴ Watson, 65.

available. There was no division or distinctions amongst the individuals; they were a mix of gender, age, social standing and place in their spiritual journeys.³⁵ The class meetings were known to meet in homes, shops, schoolrooms, attics and even coal-cabins, any meeting place would suffice if it could contain ten to twelve accountable disciples.³⁶ These intentional micro-communities were the engine that fueled the Methodist movement not just numerically, but with spiritual depth and fervor. Michael Henderson states it this way: “The class-meeting turned out to be the primary means of bringing millions of England’s most desperate people into the liberating discipline of Christian faith.”³⁷ This is a lesson to today’s micro-communities in America; they are not solely for social relationships, but are purposed for spiritual transformation into the likeness of Christ for the sake of the world. They are to be missional communities.

By committing to meet together in this space of intimate discipleship, the group dynamics changed from being a meeting of individuals to true Christian community. There was no back pew to hide in this kind of space; you were open to being known while you sought to know others. It was difficult to be evasive or hypocritical and often resulted in these class-meetings staying together for numerous years cultivating intimate friendships.³⁸ There were critics who were alarmed by these Methodists gathering for confession of sin and baring their souls; they perceived it to be narcissistic and even morbid. However, in retrospect, it was a reflection of Wesley’s realistic theology of sin

³⁵ Michael D. Henderson, *John Wesley’s Class Meeting: A Model for Making Disciples* (Nappance: Evangel Publishing House, 1997), 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

and human nature.³⁹ Wesley expected sin to be a common struggle of the individuals thus needing remission and personal challenge to a more Christian ideal. This kind of transparent honesty ignited a spiritual fervor that was unlike the trappings of Anglicanism. Rather, it was reflective of the first century Christian community and its experience of *koinonia*.⁴⁰ John Wesley himself described class meetings this way:

It can scarce be conceived what advantages have been reaped by this little prudential regulation. Many now experienced that Christian fellowship, of which they had not so much as an idea before. They began to bear one another's burdens and naturally to care for each other's welfare. And as they had daily more intimate acquaintance, so they had a more endeared affection for each other. Upon reflection, I could not but observe this is the very thing which was from the beginning of Christianity.⁴¹

EARLY AMERICAN QUAKERISM AS A KIND OF WARNING

One of the chief lessons that we can take from John Wesley's class meetings is in his insistence that they not be a separatist community like the Quakers in his contemporary setting. Rather, it was Wesley who was adamant that Methodists be seen as a means of reforming Anglicanism, not replacing it. Influenced by the tradition of German Pietism, Wesley believed in an *ecclesiola* within *ecclesia*, or little church in the big church.⁴² Within his time, this was Wesley's conviction, to stay completely loyal to his ecclesiastical structure of Anglicanism. Ultimately, Methodism in its expansive growth and unquenchable fervor could not hold the societies within the established

³⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Hogue, 46.

⁴² David Lowes Watson, *Covenant Discipleship* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1991), 24.

ecclesia. Wesley had a gracious view of the Church of England, he believed with all its faults and blemishes that it was yet acceptable to God and therefore he should submit to it.⁴³ In reference to church separation, Wesley himself a historian stated: “The experiment has been so frequently tried already, and the success has never answered the expectation.”⁴⁴ Perhaps Wesley said this in reference to the Quakers of his day to which I will now turn my attention.

As a contrast, the early Quakers originating with George Fox intentionally sought to reject traditional forms of church hierarchy, sacraments, liturgies and paid ministers. They renounced formal worship, prayer and sermons in lieu of sitting quietly as spiritual equals until the divine spirit inspired any of them to speak. The Quakers insisted that these human edifices interfered with the direct communion between the human soul and God Himself.⁴⁵ The Quakers were anti-intellectual which was alarming to Wesley and other Anglicans. Without educated spiritual leadership, it would seem the Quakers could be very susceptible to ignorant doctrine and theological tangents in any individual or mystic direction. George Fox and the Quakers cared not for these alarms, they were by choice avoiding any sort of conformity.⁴⁶ Quakerism became a haven for other like-minded rebels such as William Penn, within whom they could identify themselves and be embraced as co-dissenters from the established political-religious systems.⁴⁷ Rebellion

⁴³ Ibid. 151.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁵ John A. Moretta, *William Penn and the Quaker Legacy*, (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2007), 15.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 9.

has its attractions to the human spirit and today's missional communities can be susceptible to this same spirit of dissension. There is a place for radical change and pioneering new ground, but not at the expense of ecclesial humility for this is the character of the Christ we follow.

Not only did Penn and the Quakers reject the historic Christian creeds passed down from their spiritual forbearers as not being of the true religion from the Apostles, but they as well fell to a kind of rationalism of the day in their approach to the Scriptures. According to Penn, since the New Testament texts were scattered and uncollected for centuries, it was evidence that in fact the church can exist without a canonical Scripture.⁴⁸ Without a historical and authoritative canon, then personal experience and unchecked rationalism would take the throne of spiritual discernment in the name of the Spirit. For Penn, the Scriptures were subordinate to the Spirit and that the Spirit could bring Christ to a man independent of the Scriptures.⁴⁹ Penn recognized the circular vulnerabilities of his reasoning as the primary evidence of the Spirit's infallible assurance of truth was the individual's own experience. This vulnerability led to Penn's belief that the inner light of the Spirit regenerated and restored the faculties of reason as they were intended in their original state as God's creation and therefore could be trusted.⁵⁰ Looking back, we can see that the Quaker divine principle of revelation was perhaps more indicative and dependent on Platonic reason rather than Wesley's submission to evangelical Biblicism as authority. We shall see that fundamentally, this idealist reliance on the human faculty

⁴⁸ Melvin B. Endy Jr., *William Penn and Early Quakerism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 209.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 249.

of reason would not be sufficient for building healthy, lasting community. *Ekklesia* in any form cannot bear fruit unless it remains attached to the vine by which it finds its central source.

Much like the emerging evangelical missional community expressions of the church in America, William Penn and the Quakers seemingly had pure hearts for a kind of utopian Christian community where equality, freedom and divine communion were experienced between each individual and the Spirit of truth. William Penn even believed the establishment of the Pennsylvania colony, within the transformational hopes of his time, to be a kind of holy experiment based on Quaker principles.⁵¹ Penn wanted to establish an open community for all people that he even referred to the refuge of Pennsylvania as a “free colony for all Mankind that should go hither.”⁵² However, as it played out in reality, it was not the victorious community he hoped for. By the late 1680s, it became obvious to Penn that the cantankerous Pennsylvanians were no more descriptive of the kingdom of God than any other collection of sinful humanity on earth.⁵³ As both a spiritual leader and a political aristocrat, Penn evolved away from his ideals of a strict egalitarian leadership model towards something more akin to an apostolic model. This was due to his fear that common people may have a tendency to confuse the Spirit with their own individualistic wills.⁵⁴ This is a far cry from the belief in the Spirit regenerating the faculty of reason to its original created form as mentioned earlier. Within his government principles, as early as 1685, Penn had realized he had

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵² Moretta, 108.

⁵³ Endy, 142.

⁵⁴ Endy, 334.

placed too high a view on the voluntary system and began to place more reins of control on the people as a means of more effective governing.⁵⁵ Melvin Endy Jr. sums it up well: “Penn’s colony was in many respects one of the more successful of the colonial attempts to build a new society, but as a *holy experiment* it was a failure.”⁵⁶

I believe one of the dangers of the emerging missional community expressions of the church in American suburbia is that they can become strikingly similar to the Quakers in their separatism and lack of Biblicism. These emerging viewpoints may in fact be more indicative of a thrust of individualist rebellion as opposed to righteous vision or in congruence with hundreds of years of church history. David Lowes Watson gives this prophetic warning: “For if *ecclesiola* breaks with *ecclesia*, then it becomes detraditioned and vulnerable to the exigencies of its context.”⁵⁷ Within a culture of rugged individualism, being separatist is a keen temptation where we are conditioned with consumer choices in pursuit of what pleases us. As reported in chapter two, in a world of rampant pluralism within postmodernity, the belief in authority structures and objective truth claims can be perceived on the one hand as ignorant and on the other arrogant to make such universal assertions.

As Wesley drew back on his experience in the *Holy Club* for the connection to his class meetings, we can look back and yield wisdom within church history for our present contexts. In terms of ecclesiastical organization, I am proposing that missional communities would do well to pay attention to Wesley’s orthodox focus and submission

⁵⁵ Ibid., 364.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 367.

⁵⁷ Watson, 151.

to: 1) Ecclesiastical unity, 2) Scriptural authority, and 3) Intentional accountability. These are three aspects of his movement that I contend are both informative as well as a warning to today's emerging missional community expressions in America. Utilizing missional creativity within the parameters of ecclesiastical history can be challenging, but we ought to allow our inherited traditions to inform us to stay on Christian mission and not simply live out the cultural trappings of our time.

We need a resurgence of powerful and compelling Christian community in American suburbia. Individualism and consumerism are being reported as sicknesses that have infected our neighborhoods with loneliness and a lack of meaning. Redemptive pockets of community within suburbia can both practice and point to the fulfillment of life as intended by God. The Celts, the Methodists and the Quakers are showing us a way forward by searching our rich past. I resonate strongly with the observation of Robert Bellah:

The first language for most Americans is that of individualism, private property, individual rights, self-reliance, and the sacredness of one's freedom to be left alone by others. But there is also a second, less overt language that they speak which reflects who they would to be as persons. That second language is the language of community.⁵⁸

It is my imploration that American evangelical missional communities only separatism would be away from the attachments and idols of our culture. I propose that our Godly rebellion be in the hope and life of a Kingdom come and a Kingdom that is coming. We exist to live amongst the people of a kind of suburban destitution and serve them with the language of biblical community.

⁵⁸ Kirkpatrick, 60.

CHAPTER SIX

MISSIONAL LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES

“When the church finds itself overwhelmed by the culture, what is it to do?”¹

The church in the emerging postmodern culture within the North American context finds itself in an unsure land with potentially devastating storm clouds on the horizon. In the midst of these shifting winds, business as usual may not be the best practice moving forward. Eugene Peterson puts it this way, “Conventional wisdom tells us that when the problem is large, the strategy must be large. We need to acquire a vision that is adequate to the dimensions of the trouble.”² In the history of the church as with any organization, responses to cultural changes fall crucially at the feet of leadership. It is the role of leadership to have the adequate vision and measured response to carry on the vocation of incarnating *ekklesia* into every time and culture for the sake of the Kingdom gospel.

The question for the church becomes: What kind of pastoral leadership is required? Presently, the dominant model for the local church is one whose principal meeting is as one congregation in a single location and therefore has a leadership structure that is designed to meet the needs to the function of that singularity.³ This singularity is a defining characteristic of modern organizations of which the contemporary American evangelical church structure is largely a product of. Part of the

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, “*Wise Teachers, Sound Teaching*,” *The Christian Century* 116, no. 35 (1999): 1225.

² *Ibid.*, 1225.

³ Andrew D. Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership* (New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 43.

shift within postmodern organizations is an assumption of diversity and pluralism, they do not assume that everyone will desire the same product and therefore do not offer it as such.⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman states: “Modern organizations were large and centralized. Postmodern organizations are decentralized, flexible, relying on subcontracting and networks.”⁵ There is a need for restructuring, retooling, reinventing and rediscovering the church within this postmodern context. Darrell Guder adds: “This is a time for a dramatically new vision. The current paradigm of churches in North America requires more than a mere tinkering with long-assumed notions about the identity and mission of the church.”⁶ I propose that a way forward for the church is to continue planting distributed networks of missional communities similar to those in the Christian tradition of the past, however nuanced with creative missional structure for today.

What does pastoral leadership of these distributed networks look like? What are the challenges that face those gifted and called to pastor and lead *ekklesia* in the evangelical American context today? In this chapter, I will explore helpful paradigms of household leadership within the Graeco-Roman context of the primitive Pauline house-church communities. Secondly, I will examine the evolving idea of pastoral vocation in Christian tradition and its intersection with the missional imperatives of the present day. Within postmodern culture in America, there is increasingly growing distrust in authority figures that certainly affects spiritual leadership, “ministers are a part of that

⁴ Nancy T. Ammerman, *SBC Moderates and the Making of a Postmodern Denomination*, “The Christian Century 110, no. 26 (1993): 896.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 897.

⁶ Darrell L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 77.

celebrated company.”⁷ It is within this postmodern milieu that missional communities are being offered as a helpful ecclesial response to a changing culture as distributed networks of *ekklesia*.

PAULINE HOUSEHOLD LEADERSHIP IN GRAECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

The household is the fundamental context to the Pauline communities, and provides an essential framework for understanding Paul’s assumptions and injunctions about church, and especially his conception of the nature and scope of the authority of its leaders.⁸

In order to gain some footing for leadership proposals aimed at missional communities in today’s context, it is helpful to look back at the household communities of the first century and discover how leadership was utilized then as a basis for interpreting that same role today. Today’s missional communities were not invented in a void of reality, they are a part of a legacy of faith tradition and history of God’s people incarnating *ekklesia* in their time and context. I resonate strongly with Guder’s inference of this sentiment: “The Church’s practices are historical. Within the life of the church we do not construct our own ecclesial practices. We do not have to reinvent the wheel. We learn the patterns of faith, the practices of the church, from those who have learned and practiced them before us. We participate in a received tradition.”⁹

Much like what I am proposing for the church today in the postmodern context, the first century Pauline communities were predominantly based in a dispersed network

⁷ Larry A. Witham, *Who Shall Lead Them?: The Future of Ministry in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 191.

⁸ Clarke, 185.

⁹ Guder, 154.

of homes as opposed to a centralized meeting space. To examine their leadership and authority structures we must locate them within this “multiplicity of smaller units.”¹⁰ The early Christians were members of Graeco-Roman households and rooted in that culture before they ever responded to and embraced the preaching of the Gospel.¹¹ These emerging new Christian communities were a minority within the Empire but they certainly took on the influence and constructs of the culture around them in terms of household structure. The Graeco-Roman culture was a family-oriented society in which primitive Christianity took root and helps us make sense out of the New Testament passages that speak to the explosive growth of the faith through the conversion of entire households.¹² The Provincial Governor Pliny, himself, gives evidence to this explosive growth of the church in a correspondence to Emperor Trajan of the time stating: “The contagion of this superstition is not confined to the cities only, but has spread through the villages and rural districts; it seems impossible, however to check and cure it.”¹³

In retrospect, we can see that the very soil of these communities was fertile ground for the organic spread of the gospel through social networks. Architecturally, a typical Greek or Roman house was limited in terms of physical space thus the groups remained relatively small. With a more micro-organizational structure, it was easier to make relationships the priority and focus on the kind of accountability necessary for effective Christian discipleship. Maintaining this kind of physical group dynamic, the

¹⁰ Clarke, 43.

¹¹ Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹³ David W. J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, *The Book of Acts in its Graeco-Roman Setting* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 120.

communities remained “family-like, personal, friendly and attractive to outsiders.”¹⁴ In addition, the new believers were deeply entrenched in the world around them; they did not withdraw to sacred spaces, at sacred times or in sacred vocations. The *oikos* structure weaved them in as a part of the sustenance of the culture they belonged to, it appears looking back that the early Christians were “in the world but not of the world.”¹⁵

The choice of the private home space by these early believers was not out of a sense of necessity ordinarily, but rather strategic for its convenience of kitchen facilities for the production of a common meal.¹⁶ It was by the act of gathering in community and eating together in private dwellings that the early church offered the Gospel to their neighbors. By the very act of integrating citizens from within their social network to these household communities, the primitive church was reaching out to their neighbors and answering a universal need of all humankind to be “at home, to belong, to be in a family with a sense of safety and security.”¹⁷ Planted in their social context and network, the primitive believers used the warmth of hospitality for the spread of the Gospel and the proclamation of a coming hope. Mark Strom reflects that: “The smaller home-based *ekklesia* remained the most frequent and influential meetings. These simple dinner parties became charged with the Jewish significance of the commonwealth of heaven and the new creation.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Roger W. Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 227.

¹⁵ Gehring, 228.

¹⁶ Gill and Gempf, 121.

¹⁷ Gehring, 304.

¹⁸ Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace & Community* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 171.

To analyze the leadership roles and establishments of authority in the primitive church, we must locate them within the context of these small house-churches and understand how these communities functioned in their cultural setting. Postmodernism has a tendency toward a kind of myopic nihilism and deconstruction of traditional authority structures. From within this milieu, there is a temptation when looking back to idealize these kinds of primitive Christian communities as an egalitarian utopia having little to no leadership structure in exchange for a flatter communal construct. In addition, consistent with postmodern critique of authoritative structures, the apostle Paul is criticized as being manipulative and domineering in order to assert his desire for the acquisition of power and control. Andrew Clarke confronts these accusations head-on:

In today's climate of liberalism, pluralism and individualism the notions of authority and truth continue to be considered repressive. In sympathy with these ideals, where postmodern commentators consider that the goal of Paul's actions and statements was to establish a conformity within the community which would reinforce the apostle's own power base, he is viewed negatively. . . . The apostle then stands for that particular type of patriarchal authority which is viewed antagonistically by postmodern society. It is clear that Paul adopted the metaphor of father, the title of apostle and the injunction to imitate. It is less certain that each of these necessarily presupposes an preoccupation with control.¹⁹

The Roman family did have a clear authoritative structure and it rested nearly absolutely in the head of the household, the *paterfamilias*. This line of authority was written within Roman law and had its subsequent code for honor and respect expected of the other household members.²⁰ The primitive church communities were born into this same cultural context and took on the construct of Graeco-Roman households. The house churches were not an invention of Paul nor any of the other apostles; they were a cultural

¹⁹ Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church*, 213.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.

norm in which the first century missionaries used for the expansion of the Gospel. Through careful investigation of the first century sources, the egalitarianism idea of a utopian community without defined leadership finds no clear support.²¹ There is an authoritative structure, but the crucial question is what kind of leadership is it?

The Graeco-Roman world of the first century was strongly hierarchal and had a kind of preoccupation with the use of honorary and official titles. One could measure their societal influence through the acquisition of religious and political titles of office.²² This is however precisely where Paul and his communities were counter-cultural and displayed that they were deeply influenced through the teachings of Jesus where service and love were the highest ideals, not titles or offices. Neither Jesus nor Paul were egalitarian; they acted with authority, gathered followers, made demands of loyal supporters yet they adopted the language of serving, not domineering and they recommended others to do the same.²³ Clearly they led using personal influence and spiritual power, however the acquisition of power was not their end pursuit. Paul's teaching and modeling of power was diametrically opposed to the dominant culture of his day. The nature of his ministry leadership is characterized by weakness rather than power and his thematic tone is in building others up, not in suppressing them.²⁴ Paul sees himself as a serving apostle on the bottom rung of church hierarchy, existing to build up and love those he is called towards.

²¹ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 103.

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

²³ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴ Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church*, 232.

The most common term or office that Paul used in reference to leadership in the early church communities was that of *diakonia*. *Diakonia* had no equivalent in the Graeco-Roman culture; it cannot be seen as another position of authority to acquire for one's own personal pride and societal resume. The root of *diakonia* in Greek is linked to being a table servant, not a position of ecclesiastical power or professional clergy.²⁵ For Paul, leadership within *ekklesia* was not to be the same kind that operated outside of the household communities. This kind of leadership would be characterized by service and love, not domineering power. They were to be communities called out from the civic world and its intrinsic values, while at the same time see themselves as on mission in service to that same world through acts of love and service. Clarke illustrates it in this way:

Paul demonstrates a conviction that true Christian leadership in God's *ekklesia* is quite distinct from the patterns of leadership which were immediately accessible throughout Graeco-Roman urban culture of the first century. Much leadership in that society was dependent on an integrated power-base. Paul's own example and directive were opposed to such models. The nature of the Christian church and the message of the Christian gospel required a different style of leadership.²⁶

Paul's overseers and leaders that he entrusted to leadership of the early communities were typically the owners of the households of which hosted the *ekklesia* meetings. These citizens and early believers by nature of being household owners were already held in honor amongst the civic community by means of being paterfamilias. This kind of leadership was familial and organically relational, as opposed to institutional or an impersonal ecclesiastical office. The two sets of skills that any of the *diakonia*

²⁵ Ibid., 234.

²⁶ Ibid., 247.

overseers had to possess was that of knowing and teaching the word of God and the ability to care for and lead a small community of people.²⁷ Spiritual maturity and civic respectability were key; these leaders carried responsibility in their authority to host the gospel community and be in mission to its neighbors. These leaders knew their context; they knew their neighborhood because they were intimately a part of it. The household leadership model enabled the Gospel to translate incarnationally throughout the Roman Empire in different contexts but with the same spiritual power exercised through the *diakonia* of service and love.

In Paul's wisdom, power was rarely held unilaterally but rather we see in the first century that it becomes multi-lateral and from counterposed directions.²⁸ As these interconnected communities grew organically, there would become local leadership networks of these household overseers of single communities. This leadership council could over time develop a single overseer for efficiency of leadership and to distribute the resources where the growing *ekklesia* needed it. Power was dispersed within a complex matrix of relative and negotiated power exchanges.²⁹ This became increasingly crucial, as one of the greatest weaknesses of these household leadership positions was the temptation for one to have extremist charismatic influence or be susceptible to heresy. It was within the local council of *ekklesia* leadership where those household overseers with tendencies towards power, control or extremism could be responded to. These churches and networks of leaders were trained by Paul to take responsibility for their own community

²⁷ Clarke, *A Pauline Theology of Church Leadership*, 52.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 128.

life and the missional outreach of their city to the surrounding area.³⁰ As leadership and power were dispersed, so did the Gospel go forth and plant multiple communities of new *ekklesia*.

Looking back on Paul's mission strategy with these new communities, we can see that his main objective was to establish a network of these small cells and then use them as a base of operation moving outward in missional zeal. Roger Gehring refers to these base networks as "center missions" and they represented the foundation of co-workers and diakonia needed for the work of furthering the influence of the local *ekklesia* regional missional enterprise.³¹ These household leaders and their civic influence of a social network was key for these expansions of gospel communities. If Paul visited a local house church he could gain an immediate audience of the householder's friends, family and clientele.³² By nature of the householder's community life of love and service, the Gospel as proclaimed by the apostle often found fertile ground for new conversions of the early faith and zeal for more mission in the region. By being active members of the neighborhood, their community life was lived out loud and their sense of togetherness and care presumably caused the neighborly onlooker to inquire of why they were the way they were as a community. The first century *oikos* was not just a space, it was a socially networked environment.³³ This was the fertile ground for the explosive growth of house churches in the first century.

³⁰ Gehring, 180.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³² *Ibid.*, 188.

³³ *Ibid.*, 193.

In conclusion, what can we learn from the Pauline Graeco-Roman leadership model of the first century in reference to missional communities within the North American postmodern context today? First, we can state that the kind of leadership that Paul modeled was neither egalitarian nor preoccupied with control. Rather it was defined as that of *diakonia*, one acting in the spirit of service and love in mission for the Gospel, but there most certainly was a construct of leadership. Secondly, that this kind of overseer leadership could be enacted by ordinary householders whose lives demonstrated spiritual maturity and civic responsibility. Thirdly, that the hospitable *oikos* of these influential and respected leaders in their neighborhoods were the very fertile ground where their relational networks found safety and a home in the new *ekklesia*. Finally, as the *ekklesia* grows across these relational bridges, household overseers can act within a network of shared resources and power but continue to keep the growing network on a trajectory of disbursement for continued growth as opposed to centralization in the modern sense.

Len Sweet, noted futurist, suggests as a way forward that “the best way into the postmodern home is through the family.”³⁴ Gehring adds to Sweet’s assessment with: “In Western society, where the living and working climates are often quite impersonal, house churches provide the opportunity for intimate and accountable fellowship, in which personal encounters, human warmth, and trusting, long-lasting relationships can be experienced.”³⁵ A dispersed network of missional communities within the American evangelical postmodern context can be seen as a helpful ecclesial response to the challenges of our present day.

³⁴ Ibid., 311.

³⁵ Ibid., 304.

PASTORAL VOCATION AND THE MISSIONAL FUTURE

We reflect on the past not just for the past's own sake; rather, we look upon it as a compass- and who would use a compass only to ascertain from where he or she has come?³⁶

There is little disagreement as I have reported within civic or religious culture that we are in the midst of a major shift in cultural assumptions, constructs and perceptions of authority structures. Many scholars believe that in the Western hemisphere we are shifting from a modern world rooted in post-Enlightenment tenets to a harsh critique of its presuppositions called postmodernity. These changes can be perceived within every strata of culture but perhaps nowhere is the tectonic shift as largely felt as it is in the arena of churches and religious organizations. Robert Dale states:

New paradigms always create translation challenges –especially for the church, a conserving institution by definition. The church has too rarely anticipated challenges and changes. We have been tempted to live in a world that no longer exists. Consequently, the future has too often surprised the church.³⁷

The vocation of the church to embody the very Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven is far too high a calling to not respond to these shifts with a sense of purpose and complete mission.

Significant breakthroughs in ideas, thoughts and new constructs of organization do not happen overnight. Thomas Kuhn suggests that scientific discoveries rarely happen as a natural outgrowth of the previous knowledgebase, but rather by means of peripheral revolutions.³⁸ There tend to be a few individuals who begin to perceive reality in ways

³⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 188.

³⁷ Robert D. Dale, *Leadership for a Changing Church: Charting the Shape of the River* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 27.

³⁸ Bosch, 184.

qualitatively different than the established mindset of those practicing normal science.

The need for change comes from a small group of pioneers who sense that the existing model is “riddled with anomalies and is unable to solve emerging problems.”³⁹

Historically within the church, those thinking pioneers are not seen as helpful to the mission of the future but rather as distracting voices and perceived as troublemakers within the religious system. It is this author’s view that the pastoral leader of the future cannot be tethered to a desire to be fully accepted by the established thought of the day in exchange for the pursuit of a calling to incarnate Gospel communities where they are not presently flourishing. Pioneers are needed to seek new lands and opportunities, by nature they do not add to the present establishment.

The church can no longer be seen as an entity located in a single facility or an institutional organization and its related activities, but must now be transformed into a gathered people in community as well as a sent people with a common calling and vocation.⁴⁰ The large centralized institutions of the past built on the tenets of modernism with its Enlightenment gods of science, technology and industrialization are increasingly losing their magic.⁴¹ By definition, a missional community is a sent people. They are fast, mobile and resourceful. They can adapt and change according to the land and climate. Missional communities are a gathered people on pilgrimage together. They are the *ekklesia* called out of the world and then sent back into the world; “foreignness is an element of its constitution.”⁴² The emerging paradigm of a pilgrim people is rooted in the

³⁹ Ibid., 184.

⁴⁰ Guder, 84.

⁴¹ Bosch, 363.

⁴² Ibid., 374.

mentality of only habitating a temporary residence, they are on the move have no fixed abode.

If the people are pilgrims and on the move, this would necessitate a pastoral leadership that is also incarnational in its time and space. There is increasingly a movement away from a monopoly of ordained men who hold the power seats of *ekklesia* and do the work of the ministry on behalf of the whole people of God. A generation of pastors are leaving a vocational presence within *ekklesia* and going on the move with the rest of the people on mission. Leaders are incarnating their vocation within the culture in order to offer the ministry of *ekklesia* in the “ongoing life of the Christian community in shops, villages, farms, cities, classrooms, homes, law offices, in counseling, politics, statecraft and recreation.”⁴³ Many are finding that it is no longer adequate for the minister to function primarily within the professional role of being the preacher, administrator of programs and counselor for the flock. Rather, they are sensing a calling to lead the *ekklesia* within the reality of being a church without walls and seek employment in culture where they can engage seekers and the unchurched.⁴⁴ There is a movement from an emphasis on professional clergy, who are center stage in the singularity of the gathered church event, to “Christian professionals who are ministering in the world and in the marketplace.”⁴⁵ Many are finding their calling not in being a pastor to the

⁴³ Ibid., 473.

⁴⁴ Craig Van Gelder and George R. Hunsberger, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 67.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 345.

community, but by locating themselves vocationally as a mission outpost within the community.⁴⁶

The apostle Paul certainly set a precedent for this kind of ministry in the primitive church as a tentmaker to support himself as an apostle so as not to be a burden to the communities he was seeking to reach with Gospel proclamation. Paul shared a like vocation of weaving tent-cloth as Aquila and Priscilla who were early church household leaders within Pauline communities. It is rational to infer that within their tent-making repair shop it was more than just a means to an end of financial sustenance, but rather they were strategically located within the marketplace for Paul's missionary purposes.⁴⁷ There are some advantages to tent-making pastoral leaders in today's context more than just being in closer proximity to missional engagement. Bi-vocational pastors particularly of smaller communities can remain longer because the finances of the church are not dependent on them and vice versa. With longevity in the community, trust comes from the people that the pastor will remain in their neighborhood for the long haul and can develop long-term relationships.⁴⁸ The leader becomes more invested in the community at large and this adds credibility to their Gospel message of love and restoration. In the New Testament leadership heritage of Paul, even as he occasionally received material assistance from communities, his stated missionary policy was to be fiscally independent so as not to be burden for the Gospel.⁴⁹ It is missional strategy to pay the price to

⁴⁶ Witham, 191.

⁴⁷ Gempf and Gill, 172.

⁴⁸ Dennis W. Bickers, *The Tentmaking Pastor: The Joy of Bivocational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 20.

⁴⁹ Todd D. Still, *“Did Paul Loathe Manual Labor?: Revisiting the work of Ronald F. Hock on the Apostle's Tentmaking and Social Class,”* *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 4 (2006): 782.

understand a people until they know that you understand them. Tent-making pastors can contribute towards that strategy by being firmly planted in the social and vocational space of their people.

Away from the singularity of modernism, the postmodern world gives itself towards a more plural way of seeing one's self and one's world. There is no longer a clear and objective divide between the sacred and the secular. Rather, the two worlds are intertwined together to create a more holistic outlook and this strongly applies to the place of vocation for today's missional leader. There is a movement away from clearly sacred vocations like that of the office of clergy, and a movement towards seeing self-sustaining work in the secular marketplace as the very sacred ground God calls a leader to be on mission with his or her community. The Protestant Reformers contribute to this conversation with their conclusion that "all vocations rank the same with God, none more sacred, none more secular than others, no matter how they are ranked by men."⁵⁰

For the Reformers, pastoral vocation was not an office or a title; it was not what you did externally in a particular place. Rather it was a calling and an integral part of who you were in every place and in every time. Their doctrine of vocation stated that the virtue of Christian love is to penetrate everything a person puts their hands to, absolutely everything without the slightest exception.⁵¹ Martin Luther taught that every Christian, everywhere, no matter their function in society, was to measure their life by non-resisting love both internally and outwardly in action as well.⁵² For those discerning a call to

⁵⁰ Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 188.

pastoral leadership, it does not begin with contracted employment from a single religious organization in a particular place and time; it begins right where they are and everywhere. Count Leo Tolstoy said it well: “All men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into close connection with you.”⁵³

The heart of the pastoral vocation is not a means of employment; it’s a calling and a lifestyle of Christian love with particular gifts of leadership but offered to all and everywhere. It is a difficult call; hardship should be expected when one senses a call to a kind of Christian leadership. The history of Christian mission is one of shipwrecks, isolation, sickness, acts of violence and even martyrdom. A calling to such a life on behalf of the Gospel anyplace and anywhere is one of complete submission before God without circumstantial entitlements for what it must look like. William Carey stated it this way: “A Christian minister is a person who in a peculiar sense is not his own; he is the servant of God . . . He engages to go where God pleases, and to do, or endure what he sees fit to command, or call him to in the exercise of his function.”⁵⁴ Leadership within a missional *ekklēsia* on the move is not a ladder-climbing career in consumer America; it is a call to come and die to such selfish ambitions.

While the Reformers are very helpful in helping contribute to the idea of a holistic Christian vocation, as a part of their socio-cultural incarnation, they exalted the role of preaching through their revolution of *sola biblia*. The old priesthood was replaced by the new preacher who had the most important role of teaching the Word of God. Luther,

⁵³ Ibid., 157. Δ

⁵⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996), 161.

himself, would refer to the church as *Mundhaus*, meaning mouth or speak house.⁵⁵ Particularly within the context of early American Christianity, the exalted role of preaching over other acts of service or sacrament created a kind of passivity by turning church into an audience.⁵⁶ Over time in the evolution of Christian America, coupled with the explosion of western capitalism and a dominant culture of consumerism, pastoral leadership is often seen as an exchange of goods and services instead of the Pauline idea of a sent *diakonia*.⁵⁷

Pastoral leaders with a heart for mission find themselves caught in between two worlds and it is not uncommon for a leadership identity crisis to result. Many vocational pastors struggle with their roles to be CEO's of consumer driven ecclesiastical organizations to be a complete disconnect of their heart to serve. The pastoral vocation becomes an unending purpose to fill consumer appetites; *diakonia* is not what is required. Rather what is valued in the American consumer pastor is a keen sense of market dynamics and the ability to supply culturally relevant produced events in the name of *ekklesia*. The skills required for such pastoral work are quite a contrast to the ordinary life of the Pauline household leader. Eugene Peterson speaks prophetically to this present condition:

The pastoral vocation in America is embarrassingly banal. It is banal because it is pursued under the canons of job efficiency and career management. It is banal because it is reduced to the dimensions of a job description. It is banal because it is an idol – a call from God exchanged for an offer by the devil for work that can

⁵⁵ Greg Oden, *Unfinished Business: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 73.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁷ David Fisher, *The 21st Century Pastor: A Vision Based on the Ministry of Paul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 77.

be measured and manipulated at the convenience of the worker. Holiness is not banal. Holiness is blazing.⁵⁸

Missional leaders who embrace a call to be bi-vocational find themselves lost in a personal identity crisis of not being in the traditional pastoral role they were prepared for. In the Western world as in most industrialized countries, work remains as the defining experience of a person's identity.⁵⁹ Bi-vocational missional leaders can question their calling, if they are not working as a pastor, are they really a pastor any longer? It is a personal identity crisis and many have not survived this difficult internal transition of personhood. Eugene Peterson, using the metaphor of the biblical Jonah, encourages today's pastoral leader to embrace this storm in their life internally and externally. That the storm has purpose for greater transformation of the leader's heart and vocation. He implores the leader not to run from the storm, but to allow it to do its work and for God's faithfulness to show up in unexpected ways.

The storm is all encompassing and unmanageable. As such it provides the contextual analogue for the unleashed spirit/wind of God. Storm is the environment in which we either lose our lives or are saved. . . We are in it, prophet and people, sailors and saints. Nothing else matters at this point; it is life or death. Whatever else has been on the agenda is on it no longer. There is this single item: salvation – or not.⁶⁰

Preparation for the leaders of missional communities may contrast greatly from the traditional breeding grounds of bible colleges and seminaries. The high cost of traditional education and the centralization of ordination procedures will increasingly lose

⁵⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 5.

⁵⁹ Paul R. Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 106.

⁶⁰ Peterson, 68.

their rational appeal within the world of postmodernity and economic scarcity. It is far more advisable for young students to study vocations and apprenticeships from which they can find employment to support their missional callings within their given culture. The recent first generation of missional leaders who were early responders to the postmodern ecclesial culture struggled greatly to find employment as the large majority of them had only degrees and experience within ecclesial structures that did not translate well into bi-vocational employment. Wisdom would follow for the next generation of leaders if they perceive their calling to small, simple, intentional and missional communities of faith to prepare themselves with education for an accepted role of employment within their missional context.

Theological education and spiritual formation is then appointed to the local community and not reserved for the centralized spaces of the academy. The shepherding role of seasoned leaders and believers with those younger and seekers of the faith is crucial for the maturing of the local *ekklesia*. Spiritual and theological development then becomes not a degree program but a way of life. The educational paradigm is life on life and not the hierarchical structure of teacher to student as the modern university is built upon. It becomes much more akin to the classical understanding of education of student to mentor that flowed out of the Greek philosophical system and way of life. Education does not happen apart from the local community but intertwined within it. Theology is not a program at special times and special places, but in the ordinary flow of life. The curriculum is the very life of the simple faith community. The role of the missional community is to be sent to live theologically within its given culture.

LEADERSHIP CALLING

The pastoral leaders of today find themselves cross-pressured in a Western culture that is rapidly changing. These changes are challenging the status quo of what *ekklesia* looks like and how it ought to be led. In a postmodern sea of diversity and plurality, *ekklesia* can no longer only be seen as a single institution acting in particular places and at particular times by a particular professional. There is a movement towards *ekklesia* being oriented as an entire sent people into the diversity and pluralities of the dominant culture to incarnate the Gospel of love and restoration. Missional communities can be seen as a helpful ecclesial response to the challenges in American culture through a distributed network of incarnated *ekklesia*.

Leadership of these missional communities in the present day can face their challenges by embracing their received traditions of the past, particularly the Pauline house church communities. Seeing that leadership was not simply egalitarian while at the same time not special or authoritarian. Rather, the leadership was offered by ordinary householders who demonstrated spiritual maturity and a respected civic life. They practiced the warmth of hospitality and this life of love was the very bridge that those in their social networks walked over into a Kingdom life that had come for them. As they grew, their leadership strategy grew but remained as a de-centralized network of distributed communities into their particular contexts. This network formed the base of mission for the explosive growth of first century *ekklesia*.

Today's pastoral leader must see their vocation more holistically and not as a career amidst the American landscape of consumer appetites. Pastoring is a spiritual calling defined by love and Paul's teaching of *diakonia*. There are challenges on every

side in today's context from the pressure to be a capitalist CEO to the identity crisis of bivocationalism. The call to pastor today is a submission to the faithfulness of God working in and through his ecclesial leaders called out and sent back on mission for his purposes in the world. It is not an easy road, strong and courageous leaders will be required. Perhaps Darrell Guder sums it up best: "Because it forms at the margins, missional leadership requires courage and perseverance. Missional communities will be minority churches, and minorities question the veracity of their identity against the ascendant culture. The temptation is to lose hope, to allow the dominant culture to write one's agenda."⁶¹ Now is not a time to lose hope, now is a time to lead. May God continue to spread *ekklesia* in his Creation until the consummation of all things through the calling of courageous missional leaders.

⁶¹ Guder, 200.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION

Church is a weekly gathering, a monthly gathering, and a people committed to one another. For us, the primary gathering point is either a weekly meeting in a home with between five and twenty-five friends or the daily rub of living together in a household community. But primarily, church is the people of God on mission together.¹ –Kevin Rains, Vineyard Central, a missional community in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Postmodernism and consumerism are like storm clouds upon the shores of the American Evangelical church. Their effects are already being tangibly felt in ecclesial contexts and the drastic shift in macro culture brings an assurance that it is our new reality for generations to come. As the American evangelical church, we have the freedom to choose our response. First, we can lament. We can draw up a narrative of declension and allow it to be our centered identity. We can romanticize our recent past and wish that all would just change back to the ways it used to be. Secondly, we could choose to react in fear to the storm clouds and seek separation from our culture in our eschatology. We can work out our ecclesial response into a kind of hunkering down and waiting for Jesus to come back for his Church. However, I am proposing a third option, one of a hopeful and ecclesial response to the cultural and worldview challenges of our day. We can look back into our received traditions and narratives and allow them to inform us for a way forward. As people of the Resurrection, fear ought not to be our response. Rather, we can face these storms with a pioneering spirit that is indicative of our missional imperative to embody the Gospel and offer an alternative story of belonging than our culture.

¹ Gibbs and Bolger, 107.

Economic scarcity makes up a large reality of our missional context for the American evangelical church. Many of the missional plans for expansion of ecclesial structures has been under the assumption of a prosperous US economy where church attenders would have committed and margined income to sustain the efforts. Through the study of this research project, this assumption falls short in harsh reality. The emerging generations largely organize their lives around the trappings of the consumer dream. These consumer choices leave them not with a margin of income to be generous with, rather that live under the crushing pressures of exponential debt.

The monetary reality of the emerging generations is their life amidst economic scarcity is not only not improving, it may yet get far worse as the practices that got us into this fiscal predicament are being compounded at historic levels. It would be wise for the American evangelical church to dream and create structures of *ekklesia* that are not financially costly, but rather can strategically survive in harsh economic times. Through meeting in private residences, missional communities can free up 100% of their share resources to be given to the missional needs of their neighborhood context while modeling what a community of shared resources can look like.

It is in the context of economic scarcity that the missional community can embody an alternative narrative of communal economics and sustainable living through the producing and sharing of local resources. The research has reported that the seeking after consumer dreams may result in the acquisition of more stuff, but rarely if ever in the experience of increased happiness.² The missional community can offer the Gospel as a

² Mckibben, 2.

Kingdom announcement of a sustainable and local economic life where the focus is on other and a life in submission and surrender to the God of Creation. Fiscal experts predict that the economy of the future to take “human satisfaction and societal durability more seriously; we need economics to mature as a discipline.”³ We can learn from the mistakes of experiential consumerism as a spiritual idol in the context of unchecked capitalism, and offer a narrative of sharing and giving which agrees with our intended created nature. Where the selfishness of consumerism leaves us wanting more, the experiential reality of sharing resources with others under the banner of a radical trust in God is freeing and infectious. This is the teaching of the Kingdom of God, a far different economic paradigm than that of the American dream.

The key questions of the local economy of the future are not whether it produces ever larger piles of more stuff, but rather, does it build or take away from community?⁴ For it is community, not only in the Scriptures, but also the social sciences that teach us is the key to physical survival in environmental issues as well as matters of human satisfaction.⁵ The building of social capital through the sharing of resources in the context of the local neighborhoods where the missional communities are sent to is not just a church program, but also a way of life that increases survivability. Wilhelm Hankel says it beautifully:

Educating Americans in financial literacy and to make do with less is just the beginning. . . Postcrisis American may evolve into a healthier place in terms of

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

materialistic objectives. More attention may be paid to the nature of work than to salaries, to leisure time than to the rat race, to friends than to contacts, to spiritual growth rather than to mere economic growth. Slowing things down and settling for 'smaller is beautiful' may be just the right recipe for greater human harmony and a 'civilizing' capitalism.⁶

In addition, these ecclesia attempts would be to generations who it is commonly assumed would hold the same value for physical structure and *ekklisia* expressed in singularity at certain times and in certain places as their parents and grandparents. For the emerging generations of skeptical postmoderns, this is quite opposite of their embedded value system. They think and live in fluid paradigms without much attention paid to strict definitions or rigid structures. They are skeptical of any hierarchical organizations with top-down authority structures proposing linear propositions of truth. As has been reported in this paper, they reject universalities of meta-narratives offered to explain everything, which is in great contrast to how pastors are typically trained to teach and lead.

Without a shared tradition in an ecclesial structure, the common postmodern is showing that they have very little interest in stepping foot into a church but they may consider a missional community as its very language and structure is relationship over hierarchy. The sent community of faith lives its alternative story of hope amongst the trappings of the consumer dream and the havoc it can bring upon the neighbors of that community. The community can powerfully gather around the table of the shared meal as its primitive church ancestors did, offering a new life and paradigm for sharing in a world of individualism and scarcity. The table can then become the place of invitation. Postmoderns in their thirst for authentic community may be attracted to the community gathered around the table of a shared meal and life together in the ordinary. The common

⁶ Hankel, 97.

meal is a sign and sacrament amongst the postmodern skeptics of the shared communion table of Christ. The table then can become the space of storytelling for the narratives of a spirituality centered on the following of the true Christ in community.

From a practical perspective, these missional communities that are sent out to engage the skeptical postmodern and thirsty for entertainment consumer culture, need to proclaim the truth of the Gospel narrative. The life of Jesus is about a death to self, not an embrace of our consumer wants. To come into a Gospel community is to locate your true self in the truths of the Scriptures and obedience to the Christ of the Kingdom. The marketing strategies of the modern seeker church is a wholly other paradigm of gathering people to a singular service as opposed to an invitation into the Gospel story of a community. The late Mark Palmer, former spiritual director of the *Landing Place*, a missional community in Columbus, Ohio, describes this old paradigm as a bait and switch.

When someone makes a decision to come to Landing Place, they know what they are getting into. The American church participates in bait and switch: They get new people to come in the door and make a commitment, and after they make it, they show them what it is really about. It is offensive. It is not honest! When businesses bait and switch, they get shut down. But the church accepts this kind of thing. Successful churches tell us that if we care about outreach, we must bait and switch all day long, offer a soft-core gospel on the front end, hook them, and then give them the hard-core stuff. I don't think this is faithful to how Jesus modeled discipleship.⁷

The postmodern skeptic and the experienced consumer can see right through inauthentic attempts at wooing them into a church gathering. They want to know the genuine truth of the matter at the onset of the invitation. The American evangelical

⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, 57.

church need not participate in the manic pressure filled world of marketing to their sensibilities with more programs and catchy slogans; rather its invitation is a peek into the ordinary and everyday narrative of a Gospel community doing life together. Jason Evans, formerly pastor of the missional community of Matthew's House in Vista, California, adds: "We are not planting a church; instead, we want to embody the kingdom."⁸ The apologetic of a missional community is not in its propositional truths; but in its everyday and ordinary life.

It is an experiential shift to transition from a paradigm of singularity where church is defined as a particular meeting, at a particular time and in a particular place. To have all of the ecclesial life embedded in private residences or un-owned public spaces can have the result of a loss of legitimacy based on the modern paradigm. Alan Creech, spiritual director of Vine and Branches, a missional community in Lexington, KY says:

The systemic need to have a building for legitimacy is still ingrained in people. We feel illegitimate because we don't have a building. The desire to call a place church hinders all expression of the body. These are theological problems that stem from deeper roots. It is all a matter of spiritual formation. Buildings and professionalism create a deformed spiritual formation. The church as located somewhere, in a certain place, in order to connect with God, is not consistent with the New Testament. The 'church in a place' contains and confines spirituality too much. It doesn't allow me to pray without ceasing.⁹

Part of the power of the missional community is that it is the life of *ekklesia* sent into the neighborhoods where people are. They are defined as a mobile people without the fetters of a geographic location or the confinements of pre-planned times for the Spirit to move. Mark Palmer adds that his communities "may get together for a potluck dinner or a night

⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁹ Ibid., 99

of liturgy, but we do not ever meet in a church as a church. We are a decentralized movement of churches.”¹⁰

Spiritual leadership in any ecclesial endeavor is key regardless of the economy, worldview paradigm or missional context. The sent leaders of missional communities will be required to know how to lead fluid relational structures at times without the definitions of office and title. The gift of leadership will be dearly needed but it is not an assumed position of authority, rather it functions often as permission leadership. The leader earns trust amongst the people of the community through his or her daily living and modeling of the alternative narrative of the Kingdom life. Through this building of social capital, the people give the leader permission to lead them. This relational style of leading is in contrast to the top-down hierarchy of modernism but it is as well not a completely flat or egalitarian model. Modeled after the Pauline house church communities, leaders of missional communities are given the imperative to lead a dispersed network of communities on the move to their particular missional neighborhood contexts.

The job of the missional leader is to keep the community in the story of God as taught and revealed through the Scriptures. The Scriptures can be the fixed point of navigation in a world of pluralistic and relativistic philosophies. Being skillful in the leading of discussions of the Scriptural narratives will be needed as the leaders facilitate the communal conversation as opposed to passing on propositional truths. The leader needs to be attuned to the direction of the Spirit as the both lead and participate with the

¹⁰ Ibid., 104.

community. The Scriptures can act as the very anchor to the following of Christ and help the community bear fruit through the storms and trials of ecclesial life in any form.

My own particular ministry context is something I term suburban destitution. Poverty comes in many forms. This is a description of the poverty I see and live in. Subdivisions erected adjacent to golf courses with names intended to instill thoughts of an elite regal countryside but are in actuality built upon the least expensive of construction materials to ensure profitability. The homes are built for individual space; they are cocoons of privacy. This is about private possession; there is no shared story within a larger community. These kinds of households have created a culture of loneliness in American life. Francis Hsu describes it this way: “The kind of houses people build reflects their social training and inclinations – and in turn also forms and restricts the social relationships they engage in and the experiences they undergo.”¹¹ American suburbanites have bought the lies of the consumer markets and learned that they were more than not true; they were expensive. Where is our hope to plant and nurture Christian community in a culture where individualism is king?

Amidst the walls of these excesses of square footage achievements of the American dream are many flavors of the broken family. Not because they want to be, but because they do not know another story. Marriages are often characterized by distance and deception, lacking the oneness of God’s intention in the Garden of Eden. Parenting tends to be wrapped in fear instead of intimacy and connection. Teenage girls raised on idyllic false images of self all the while never comfortable in their own skin. For many of

¹¹ Francis L. K. Hsu, *Kinship and Culture* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1971), 56.

them, life is a beauty pageant they wish they never entered. Teenage boys raised in isolation because their fathers must work intensive hours of employment to both provide for the suburban expectations and to prove their own worth they never received during their growing up years. These teenage boys have access to countless hours of leisure and believe the lies of pornography that the world is about them and their consumption. Often, the moms are just trying to hold it together; all the while feeling like a slave to immediate obligations and wonder if they will ever recover their freedom to think, feel and be loved again. Where is the Gospel of hope for the American suburban family?

These people are my people; they are me. They are lonely, they lack meaning, and they are broken. This is suburban destitution; this is my ghetto. In a culture saturated with the fallacy of rugged individualism, many in the suburbs are finding themselves lonely. It is this loneliness that drives us into community.¹² This is where I propose missional communities to find a voice to tell an alternative story of a life lived on purpose. A life lived in intentional community with one another and the God who made us and ultimately the One who is making all things new. Life lived in dynamic spiritual community is not a new idea; church history informs us of others who have paved the way. Learning from our past can help us direct a course towards a preferred future. Missional communities can be a Kingdom announcement of hope amidst the emerging generations drowning in consumerism and embedded in empty postmodern values.

¹² Kirkpatrick, *The Ethics of Community*, 62.

Mark Palmer was one of my best friends and supreme model of what leading missional communities in the American evangelical context can look like. He literally gave up his life for it, having passed away at the age of 30 from colon cancer in March of 2006. He believed his illness was a spiritual attack upon his sent life amongst the postmoderns of urban Columbus, Ohio to build authentic community there. He saw his impending death as yet another opportunity to give a proclamation of the Kingdom hope that yet lived in his soul that he desired to incarnate into others. What is *ekklesia*? *Ekklesia* is hope given and sent to a world in desperate need for it. I conclude this paper with Mark's own words of subversive hope. This is taken from his last blog entry before he passed onto the fullness of the Kingdom of God:

And when it seems that hopefulness is the least appropriate response in this situation, let it rise up even more. Whisper your hope when you lie down at night; scream your hope when you wake in the morning. Live your hope as if it is the one and only thing that sustains you in this ravaged world. You will not be disappointed. ▽ - Mark Palmer¹³

¹³ Mark Palmer, "The Wild Goose pt. 1," The Suburban Ghetto, entry posted on July 11, 2010. <http://chris-marshall.posterous.com/the-wild-goose> (accessed December 24, 2012).

APPENDIX I

THE ORDINARY COMMUNITY STORY: A CRY FOR *ELPIDA*

This research project is very personal within the scope of my life; it comes out of a larger story for me that dates back to 1998. There is a common story and I've lived it. There are things they do not tell you when they play the emotional praise songs and try and convince young people that if you really were serious about your faith, the only option is to go into full-time ministry and only then have you arrived in spiritual seriousness. There are things they do not tell you at church camp when you're dehydrated and sleep deprived and they are encouraging you to come forward to throw your stick in the fire one more time because this time you really mean it. You finally will give God your entire life in order to save the entire world and so on. There are things they do not tell you when you are buying your sweatshirt at the bookstore from the evangelical university you chose that is going to help you figure it all out to save the world.

What they do not tell you is how incredibly hard, lonely and isolating a life in ministry can be. You have no stated work hours if you're really spiritual; the unwritten expectations are that you give your mornings, afternoons, evenings, late nights, weekends, whenever anybody calls, summers etc.; you are always on call and need to be on your game. When spirituality is your job, you rarely take time to take care of yourself and I was in that category. I cared for others and neglected myself. The churches I worked at did not do this to me, I did. I did not know it at the time, but my sickness was within me, it was not without. The common story in evangelical circles though is that we hire young leaders and profit off their dynamism and when they get used up, we replace

them. I am not at all alone in that story. In fact many of my closest friends today are that story.

For years I ran as hard as I could, I gave as much as I could, I served as much as I could, I taught as earnestly as I could, I planned as diligently as I could, I lead as dynamically as I could. Then, at the age of 26, I found myself crumbling inside. I had no category for it. On the outside I had all the successes one would look for, on the inside I was absolutely dying. I had no center; I was depressed and heading towards despair. I did not know who I was in the grand scheme of things; I felt utterly lost. There were some leadership challenges that were happening behind the scenes and I lacked the rooting, the foundation or the energy to cope with the storm well. I kept most of this internalized because I did not have a category for being weak and falling apart. I was afraid of letting everyone down, afraid of being left alone if I was not valuable to run the show anymore, I feared I had become a failure and eventually all would find out. I got kudos for being strong and dynamic, so I kept that impostor up front. I was a train wreck waiting to happen and my prayer was that when I wrecked, it wouldn't hurt anyone else.

I decided I would go to seminary to leave the ministry. Yes, you read that right. I figured if I left ministry to go to school that everyone would assume that was natural next step for me. I would be perceived as being serious now about becoming a real pastor. The reality was that I did not want to hurt any of the young people I had worked with for a decade and had the privilege of leading. If I was a role model to them I did not want to disappoint them but I couldn't do it anymore. I was broken and needed saving myself. My wife and I scrounged up whatever money we had and maxed out a credit card for me

to fly to Colorado by myself to visit Denver Seminary because I liked their website and philosophy. They believed as much in character and competency as they did in content. I visited Denver Seminary in a half day and quickly realized it was not where I could see myself figuring my life out. I still had two days or so left so I headed for the mountains.

I drove up to the mountains to find myself and pray every honest prayer I could. I needed God to speak clearly and tell me what to do with my life. I hiked, I drove, I stomped through four feet of snow, I skied, I walked, I thought, I listened and I did not learn anything. God seemingly had nothing to say. I remember sitting in my hotel room my final night all packed up to catch an early flight home. I had come to the Rocky Mountains to find myself and hear from God and I failed, he had nothing to say. I was not only lost but I had spent our last pennies; we were broke. I turned the television on the news in my hotel room and the footage was rolling across the screen of the latest school shooting massacre, the one in Arkansas at that time. I watched the dead count of teens, I watched the horrified look on the faces of students and parents, I watched the blood stained bodies being pulled out of what was supposed to be a place of safety and fun. Personified evil had stolen what was not an intended part of Creation, innocence was lost.

To say that I wept would be an understatement, those images completely undid me. My heart broke that night in deep, profound and haunting ways. I could no longer do church the same as I had. I longed for a new expression of *ekklesia*. If God was true, if God was the center of all reality, if God's Kingdom was actually the hope that we claimed it was, I could no longer do church the same because the church I was doing was not

touching that dark world. Everything I had been taught was how to convince people to go to church, I was not interested anymore. I became convinced that church needed to be sent to where people were.

I had no idea how, but business as usual was broken for me. At 26, I was completely unsatisfied with church as usual, it simply wouldn't do. If these are the issues of my generation, of my culture, things needed to change. Through a desperate weeping prayer, God spoke. He did not speak in the beauty of the snow-capped mountain, but he spoke in a cheap and lonely downtown Denver hotel room. I asked him what could I do, and he said: "Chris, what do YOU want to do? What do you dream about, Chris? What do you long to do with me, Chris? Tell me everything on your heart, I will listen." I do not know about you, but in the deep and desperate times in my life, when I pray the honest kind of prayers, God calls me by name and it undoes me.

I got out the cheap hotel notepad and ballpoint pen and started writing and crying. I did that for four hours that night, I know because I counted. When I read over what I had written, I began to realize that I just wrote the business plan for a church start. However this was not one I had any experience leading or even knew if anyone ever attempted before. God said dream, so I did. The dreaming became a longing, the longing became a vision, and the vision became a virus that I've never been able to rid myself of. That dark and painful night on March 24, 1998, in a lonely hotel room, through tears, my honest prayer turned into a dream statement that eventually gave birth to Ordinary Community Church in May, 2001.

OCC started as a single house church in the northern suburbs of Cincinnati that met weekly and grew from there. There were eight individuals in that first meeting in our family room and today there are seventy-five or so people who associate OCC as their primary ecclesial family of belonging. Presently there are two family house churches that meet weekly and then there is also a teen house church (7th – 12th grade) and a kid's church (6th grade and younger) that meets twice a month on Sundays in their neighborhood spaces. We have had several house churches over the years that have organically been born, rooted, bloomed and then faded away in natural and organic ways. We had a couple communities made up entirely of angry and disillusioned teenagers in the greater postmodern community but yet they found a place for their questions in OCC. We met for their high school years, but as they went off to college, the house church ceased meeting. They blossomed for their season and reflected beauty, then returned to the soil for future plantings. In the world of organic church, no attempt is a failure; it just becomes God's black gold of mulched soil for a new sprout to appear.

OCC has no paid staff, no building costs, no lease, no mortgage, no utility bill and no insurances to pay. 100% of all the monetary giving goes back out to missional needs that either arise organically as we live in the ordinary places of our given communities or to regular projects we partner with that share our values. We are not a large community, which enables us to be fast and fluid in our decision making with monetary resources. Our leadership team is made up of six elders who have spiritual oversight of all the happenings of the community. Our structure is fluid, we live life together, in and around the same neighborhoods of northern Cincinnati. We do not have regular elder meetings because much of our communication happens on a daily basis in the reality of our sent

lives. When there is need, we meet quarterly or so for intentional planning of community events and issues of pastoral care. There are occasional whole community worship and prayer times, fellowship events and camp outs, a yearly winter family retreat and backyard barbecues to provide open and non-threatening space for seekers to join in.

House church meetings have evolved over the years but always start with a shared meal for the reasons stated in chapter four. Eating together has defined much of our community life; it is a physical representation of our shared life and Christ as our communal center. Communion is practiced at nearly every gathering as is our received tradition from the primitive church. We use various liturgies in our gatherings to help tie our contemporary expression of *ekklesia* with the deep history and spirituality of the Christian church. As well we weekly recite a community vow from the monastic traditions of Celtic Christianity of vulnerability and availability to God and one another. In addition we have added a third vow of simplicity to help us remember to organize our lives around Christ and his Kingdom instead of the consumer dream trappings all around us. We use vows much like an AA meeting to remind us each time we gather of why we meet. Each person chooses to opt into OCC at their own choosing, including the kids. We have no marketing plan, but all are invited to come and opt in because of their own spiritual need. Your brokenness is shared in the brokenness of others, we opt in together to meet and experience the God of healing.

Teaching is not a top-down hierarchy of a professional expert to the people, but rather the teaching is shared and experienced as communal. Those with the gift or willingness to teach will simply bring the Scriptural passage for discussion and it is

dissected scene by scene in the form of the narrative being read. We practice a kind of *lectio divina* where the passage is read a few times and then we sit in silence before it to hear with spiritual ears and not assume we already know what the passage is teaching. What follows is a discussion where everyone with insight can give his or her perspective and it weaves together a communal interpretation that we believe is led by the Holy Spirit. In this way the teaching time is not singular, where one person is teaching for 30-40 minutes, but rather its communal where the conversation is shared for an hour or more for deeper learning. We hold to the belief that the Scriptures are our only rule for faith and practice.

When we began Ordinary Community Church, we did not know there were others who share these same questions and ideas to express *ekklesia* in a communal model that fits the postmodern mind but is in contrast to the traditional models of church growth planting that was born in the tenets of modernity. Through the blog world, we came into a larger community of like thinkers and doers that gave us great encouragement in our early years. We went through a time of detox and were too heavily expressing our resentment in our own brokenness towards the traditional evangelical church in America for the first couple years. With these other tribes of communities, we found healing together and learned to love the whole Body of Christ and not remain in emotional places of reactivity and bitterness. We believe strongly that missional communities are just one way of many to express *ekklesia* on earth; it is not a divinely preferred way. However, we also believe, that they are uniquely structured to reach a postmodern world caught in the trappings of consumerism.

One of my closest ministry partners in planting and leading missional communities over the years has been Kevin Rains. Kevin and I have been leading networks of house church communities in Cincinnati for over eleven years now, Vineyard Central and Ordinary Community have been like sister-communities to one another. We were introduced to one another in a very postmodern kind of way. A blogger in New Zealand, Paul Fromont, introduced us by having read both of our blog material online and realized we lived twenty minutes from one another but had never met. Through his prodding of our kinship ideas, we met for coffee within a day and found that together we wanted to live in Cincinnati for the rest of our lives and ask God for his Kingdom to come. That covenant together has never changed though we do it in different contexts, his more urban and mine suburban. We have found incredible value in deepening our friendships together for mutual encouragement, admonishment and sharing like ecclesial journeys.

Going back to the late 1990s, there was a surge of thinking and blogging that linked many of us who were hurt, confused, disappointed and questioning church as we knew it in places like the message boards of TheOoze.com. We were all wondering how the constructs of church as we knew it could translate itself into the murky waters of the future known as "postmodernism." Through those relationships, there were streams of networks that evolved and at some point became lumped together as some phenomenon termed the Emerging Church. The terms for the tribes were hard to keep up with: simple/organic/missional/emerging/neo-reformed/neomonastic/celtic/progressive/ancient-future/epic/communal etc. Most notably was the group known as Emergent, made known most by speaker/author/pastor Brian McLaren, but also Tony Jones, Doug Pagitt and

others in the U.S. but also in the UK, Europe, New Zealand and Australia that I tried to keep up with. What has always been true is the Emerging Church is not any one thing; it is a broad conversation across many camps, tribes and streams.

I had the privilege of working with Brian on several occasions while working with my friend, Jim Henderson, producing Off the Map events. Those events were good fun asking hard questions about how to give away our faith without being obnoxious about it. Brian seemed to quickly become the face not only of Emergent, but the voice of the Emerging Church movement within the U.S. McLaren gave me some personal words of encouragement and belief in my heart and vision for a communal model of church back in 1999 that literally fueled my soul at a time when the church structures I grew up in were painfully dismissive of where I was discerning my calling to be going. To put it bluntly, Brian believed in me when it felt like few others did and for that I have been fiercely protective of Brian "the person" as those on the religious right have dehumanized him at times in writing as they reacted to his writing/speaking.

In 2003, Kevin Rains and I with our missional leader friends hosted an event called "Mayhem" in Cincinnati at the beloved St. Elizabeth's. We had no budget, no denominational backing, most of us had chosen bi-vocational models of ministry, but the blog world was vibrant with conversation and the need for deeper connection to at least tell one another we weren't alone. The tagline was "*Community-Mission-Mayhem.*" The only marketing we had for this meeting was through our blogs at the time, we weren't prepared for what for what followed. We were committed to this not being your typical

Christian conference; we shared meals together and found housing for all the attendees in host homes within the city network of missional communities.

Without a budget, without marketing, over 300 people traveled from each coast, from across borders, from various ecclesiastical traditions for what was a rich gathering. It was a somewhat underground gathering of Christians and leaders who were yet raw in emotion and clarity about what was happening all around us in ministry contexts. Our anointed friend, Beth Keck, led us in worship and Brian McLaren agreed to come and lead our conversation at a fee that I am sure was far reduced from his market value at the time. He was as he still is, a gracious and thoughtful host.

There was a lot of energy in the early 2000s to try and organize these new energies and conversations into central places and relational attachments. *Allelon* was one of those attempts. In 2003 was the first gathering in Eagle, Idaho of like-minded thinkers and doers to try and bring some definition to these ecclesiastical experiences. The central figure who had offered the invitation to many of us was Todd Hunter, former head of the Vineyard churches and he at the time quickly became a spiritual father to many of us. I do not have a roster for those whom gathered for this initial event but it was an international contingent and I remember being shocked in our like thinking. It was at this event that I met Jason Clark for the first time, someone who has become deeply influential to me as a spiritual brother, friend and doctorate mentor for my present ecclesiastical study.

The following year this was followed by another gathering in Idaho with Dallas Willard speaking to us in a retreat-like setting about theology and the Kingdom. We lived

communally, ate together and had countless hours of deep conversation under the stars together in this gathering. There was great opportunity to use these relationships to help encourage others with like struggles, but that would not come to fruition. This was not a time to centralize these bands, tribes and seekers; it was a time for continued diaspora. We were to go back to our contexts in the local and figure it out and work it out in praxis. Many communities did not survive this time. I personally entered into a time of deep loss.

Mayhem, Allelon and the blog world began to form a tribe of communities and friendships for me that have become fictive family. God was clearly moving in the American Midwest and we formed a great relational connection with like-faith communities in Cincinnati, Columbus, Oxford, Indianapolis, Lexington, St. Louis, Michigan and then extended to places like San Diego, South Florida, Idaho and then Vermont. We kept meeting as often as we could to just encourage each other, dialogue, pray, worship, teach and the spurring of each other on.

Locally in Cincinnati, Kevin Rains, Glenn Johnson, Chad Canipe and myself formed what we called "*Fight Club*." We tried to meet weekly for just mutual encouragement, theological ponderings and to pray for one another. These meetings quite literally became the air I breathed; they were central to my calling and my nourishment. We all worked jobs that kept us from being part of conferences, events and the larger discussion of Emerging Church; we were just trying to figure it out in our local contexts. Out of these regional relationships as well I formed a deep friendship with Mark Palmer in Columbus, Ohio and the Landing Place kids as they were affectionately called. Mark

and I adventured together, backpacking in the UK on Cuthbert Island in Northumbria off the north coast of England. We stayed at Northumbria Community, the home of Celtic Daily Prayer, something Palmer, myself and many of our friends found incredibly helpful and spiritually nurturing.

Why were we there? I invited Palmer to come with me to teach in the Ukraine on an invitation I had received to train pastors but more specifically, the younger urban generations that were meeting in small apartment communities. On the way home we planned some UK backpacking because Palmer needed an adventure for healing. His wife Jennifer had just died of stomach cancer at the age of 26 that year, leaving behind Mark, their toddler son, Micah, and a hurting community of Landing Place kids. This was a blow to us as a larger community that was hard to comprehend. We prayed, we fasted, we asked, we longed for healing. Within a few short months, she weakened and passed before our eyes. It did not make sense and it threatened to disillusion us from our ministry callings.

A couple weeks after Jennifer's passing was the gathering in Idaho with Dallas Willard for "Allelon." I will never forget being on the patio at night under the stars when Palmer cornered Dallas in his raw pain and with Rains and I at his flanks, said, "Dallas, you said in your books about being absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, what the hell do you mean by that?" Willard, the seasoned pastor that he is, walked us through a Kingdom theology of grief that I am so thankful for. Without it, I may have never weathered the storm that was yet to come.

Palmer re-married to Amy the year after we returned from the UK. She was an incredible blessing and gift to him, Micah and the Landing Place community. Their wedding that Fall helped all of us to continue our healing through our common questions and longings. In January of 2005, I got a call from Palmer that felt like a shotgun blast through my chest, he had just been diagnosed with aggressive colon cancer. To top it off, his insurance coverage would not cover it whilst he was still buried in bills from Jennifer's treatments. 2005 through 2006 are a bit of a blur to me. I became singularly focused on one task, the complete healing of my friend Palmer. I believed the gospels, I believed the stories, I followed the Spirit in prophetic imagination, and I longed for a resurrection within his cells. We fasted, we prayed, we raised money, we worshipped our God, we worked really, really hard and Palmer still deteriorated. But he was not alone.

On December 22, 2005, early in the morning I received a phone call that my 18-month-old niece, Kate, and a part of Ordinary Community had stopped breathing in the middle of the night due to a rare strand of pneumonia. I rushed to the hospital with one prayer in mind; a resurrection. I layed hands on Kate, still in her mother Becky's arms, and wanted to raise her but the Spirit said no. It was such deep, deep loss for our community. The loss of Kate was a defining moment for OCC. We had a theology of healing; did we have a theology of not healing? As a community we grieved deeply together, it galvanized us and our desperation for the things of God. We learned that every healing is a proclamation of a Kingdom come. We also learned that as a community grieves but holds onto hope, that is also a proclamation of a Kingdom that has come. The loss of Kate drew so many into the Ordinary Community story; we had become a peculiar people on mission to proclaim hope in the brokenness of the

postmodern world. Kate is ever a central part to the story of Ordinary Community; she is never forgotten. We believe deeply that she has simply crossed the veil and is preparing the banquet table that all of OCC will eat from in the consummation of all things.

On March 5, 2006, my "Fight Club" friend and spiritual brother, Chad Canipe, was admitted into the hospital with pneumonia symptoms. The prognosis got worse, his lungs were hemorrhaging and he fell into a coma. He had an autoimmune disease that was not known. We fasted, we longed, we prayed, we asked, we worked so very hard, however on March 10, 2006 my spiritual brother Chad Canipe passed to Kingdom fullness. Standing over his dead body, my hand on his head, with my spiritual brothers Kevin Rains, Mike Bishop and Eric Keck in that hospital room, we said goodbye to our friend. I asked Chad to help us yet, help us to know how to pray, help us know how to move on, help us in his new perspective. Mike Bishop prophetically spoke a sentiment we all knew was true: "This was not just about sitting around smoking cigars on the back porch anymore. We were no longer a few casual friends, joined by common questions and similar hopes. We were now at war."¹

On this same day as we began to make plans for Chad's wake, I received a call from Amy Palmer, Mark was readmitted into the hospital where they found the tumors were overwhelming. Here is my blog excerpt from the next day:

Saturday, March 11, 2006 "To Columbus, and to War"

By divine appointment, we have a Regional Gathering of Missional Community folk who have been journeying together for the past 4 years or so. People

¹ Mike Bishop, *What is Church?: A Story of Transition* (Woodinville: Missio Dei Publishing, 2008), 73.

representing communities of faith in Oxford, Vermont, Florida, San Diego, Indianapolis, Lexington, Norwood, West Chester, Pleasant Ridge and anywhere else I can't remember. We had a planned gathering, and now we are all here to mourn and to grieve with and for the Canipe family. Last night we shared a meal and shared hours of community time, just as Chad would tell us to.

However, none of this is over. Palmer went into the hospital as well yesterday morning with pain. It turns out that there are more tumors causing him extreme pain in and near his bowels. They started a new round of chemo in the morning and it couples with a severe drug with side effects. Palmer was unable to come down and be with us last night, he's quite sick. So, unless he makes an incredible recovery overnight, we are going to him today. The community is mobile and not boxed in to times and places, we go where the Spirit tells us to. Chemo is no longer able to heal Palmer, only trying to manage the tumors. It is God who heals.

This morning, I am quite numb with the tragedies. But. War lives in my body. It carries me on. We go to Columbus to meet our enemy head on. We are not intimidated and we don't know fear. We are His people and He is the source of all life. Just one touch and the news of Palmer's resurrection will ring across the earth. So God, we ride out and meet the one who opposes your Kingdom on earth. We go to Columbus, and we go to War.

Wherever you are, whoever you are . . . you can War with us too. Its time for a Resurrection.²

In Columbus, some of my spiritual brothers helped the Landing Place kids in 64 King ave. process and make sense of so much suffering for such an earnest and faithful community, none of it made sense. I leaned over the body of my friend in his bedroom with Eric Keck and Kevin Rains and we went deep into the Spirit. With the tongues of heaven, the groans of our heart, we prayed. I have felt the heat of healing in my hands in the past and I was convinced it would yet again manifest in the power of the Spirit for the tumors to go back to the hell they came from. The manifestation did not happen, the healing was not to be, and our prayers turned to mourning. Ten days after the loss of Chad Canipe, we lost Mark Palmer.

² Chris Marshall, "The Wild Goose pt. 1," The Suburban Ghetto, entry posted on July 11, 2010. <http://chris-marshall.posterous.com/the-wild-goose> (accessed January 13, 2013).

I still never believed he would die; I refused to see his sickness with my physical eyes, but only with spiritual eyes and what God could and would do. He did not. On March 27, 2006, as I drove to Columbus to help make plans for Palmer's funeral, I prayed a simple prayer, "God, you broke my heart." Jennifer, Kate, Chad and Mark were all gone. None of them resurrected in the way I hoped for, the loss was devastating. I fell into a period of darkness and hung onto faith and community with desperation. We would never be the same.

This is the story of my tribe. This is our Emerging Church story. We were tempted to disband; we were tempted to lose hope. The stench of death, loss and despair was palatable. The Enemy whispered into our ears the taunts of failure; we labored through countless dark nights of the soul in a kind of isolation. God allowed it, perhaps even willed it, who is to know anymore. We would have given over to darkness with the exception of one thing; we follow the Resurrector of which there is only one. In trouble, in suffering, even in death, we swear singular allegiance to the King and it is his nature to rise again.

This research project is very personal to me. I have given my life for it and seen the loss of life around me, I have seen eternity giving birth in our midst. Each day I yet awake with the fellowship of the saints all around me who have gone before me. The beauty of Kate in my heart, the faithfulness of Chad on my mind, the hope of Mark and Jennifer in my soul. In the mystery of the Kingdom, they yet pray for us and cheer us on. We are not dying, rather, we are living. The One we follow is the singular source of life and death has lost its sting.

Ordinary Community is networked with other networks of missional communities to form a larger spiritual family. My ecclesial tribe is called *Elpida*, the New Testament Greek term for hope. We are a loose collection of Christian communities that are rooted together in the same soil. The soil is the ancient Scriptures as a source of authority, the soil is the river of the Spirit that flows directly from the throne in the Temple as taught in Ezekiel 47, of which every tree (community) that is planted in this river teems with life and the fruit of its branches are for the healing of the nations. There is not another river, there is not another source, and there is not another hope nor another way. The Kingdom of God as revealed in the Scriptures is the center, all else is a distraction.

There was a Christian historic tradition for the monks to carve the Latin term *resurgam* on their tombstones; it is roughly translated “*I shall rise again.*” There is only one way to live, be sustained and offer truth to our world and it is the way of God's Kingdom as revealed and fulfilled in Jesus. Out of this hope we long for the restoration of all things, a new heaven and a new earth with the returned Christ. Missional communities can be sent into every subculture, niche and neighborhood in the present American context to embody hope and an alternative story of living there. This is the Resurgam of the American Evangelical Church; it is a subversive and hopeful cry to rise again.

For Ordinary Community and *Elpida*, hope and life is our rebellion in the spirit of Christ. Anything less, anything short will be shown for what it is and be found wanting. We are yet at war and our King is still handing out orders. We have lost friends in this war, but our story is not completed. We will partner with any who reflect the banner of

Christ regardless of ecclesial form or tradition. We swear singular allegiance to the King
and will join arms with all who do as well.

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