The Peripheral Church of Postmodernity

By Jim Park

That we are entering a new and uncharted territory in almost all areas of life is succinctly stated by Hans Küng who "depicts the contemporary world as post-Eurocentric, postcolonial, postimperial, postsocialist, postindustrial, postpatriarchal, postideological, and postconfessional" (Küng 1990:40f as quoted in Bosch 1995:1). The optimism which accompanied the rationality of the Enlightenment and the subsequent surge in scientific discovery has been replaced with "pessimism and skepticism" (Gibbs 2000:23), which was heralded earlier in the century by the cynical existential philosophy of Camus and the irrationality of quantum physics.

Jim Park is currently an Assistant Professor of Discipleship and Church Growth at the Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies in the Philippines.

Just how this emerging context of postmodernity has affected the church and the Lord's commission to make disciples in North America is discussed in the following pages. The first section briefly notes how the increasing secularization of society has been increasingly pushing the church from the center to the periphery of society. Given the fact that the church's influence is diminishing, there is a renewed call to re-examine the missionary nature of the church. The article concludes with some observations about making disciples in the postmodern church and a contextual theology of discipleship.

The Decentralization of the Postmodern Church

With the demise of Christendom nearly four hundred years ago, the church has been steadily moving from the center to the periphery of modern society. The symbiotic relationship that shaped both the church and society during the modern era is now being radically redefined by our increasingly secularized culture which has pushed the church to the very edge of society.

At the brink of the twenty-first century, the king who knew not Joseph is the collective culture of which we are a part. The combined impact of the Information Age, post-modern thought, globalization, and racial-ethnic pluralism that has seen the demise of the grand American story also has displaced the historic role the church has played in that story. As a result, we are seeing the marginalization of the institutional church (Regele 1995:182).

As was discussed in the previous article, the church does not even come to mind when many individuals think about meeting their spiritual hunger. While

day, and that the Church of the future is destined more and more to return to a condition of things somewhat like that which prevailed in the Ante-Nicene Church; that is to say, that instead of pretending to be a co-extensive with the World, it will confess itself the Church of a minority, will accept a position involving a more conscious antagonism with the World, and will, in return, regain some measure of its former coherence (1911:xix).

Hobhouse's thesis was that the character of the church was fundamentally altered by the coercive and universal character of the Christendom model. The

> **The character of the church was fundamentally altered by the coercive and universal character of the Christendom model.**

it would be easy to lament the decreasing role of the church in society, other voices have been raised which see a ray of real hope for the future of the church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Walter Hobhouse outlined the ramifications of the church's movement to the edge of modern culture by saying:

Long ago I came to believe that the great change in relations between the Church and the World which began with the conversion of Constantine is not only a decisive turning point in Church history, but is also the key to many of the practical difficulties of the present

clear distinction and tension between the church and the world were erased as well as its sense of mission and commitment. Some of the negative aspects of the Christendom model were then carried over to the modern era by sustaining an overly symbiotic relationship between church and society.

The observation by Hobhouse that a distinct church will become a more effective church is born out in the principles set forth by Christian Smith. He feels that in a pluralistic society religious groups will be relatively stronger which "*create both*

13   2

clear distinction from and significant engagement and tension with other relevant outgroups, short of becoming genuinely countercultural" (1998:118-119, emphasis his).

Smith's study of Evangelicals has found that although they are a thriving religious tradition within the context of a pluralistic society, they do "not fare so well when it comes to achieving [their] goal of transforming the world for Christ" (1998:178). Three of the major reasons Smith puts forth for this lack of mission effectiveness are the negative ways Evangelicals are viewed by others (1998:179-187), the limits of the personal the freedom of individual choice which generates pluralism has a greater value than the absolute truth of the Bible.

Smith rejects the notion that these ambivalences arose out of "external" secularization. Instead, he posits that these principles "are fundamentally the outworkings of the internal subcultural structures of the evangelical tradition" (1998:217). In other words, although an increasingly non-Christian society poses a challenge for the church, its main impediment is ontological not sociological.

It could be said that our current ecclesiological self-

> ## The church has increasingly become just one voice among many vying for the public's attention.

influence strategy as defined by individualism (1998:187-210), and the upholding of the twin ideals of absolute truth and freedom of choice which generally results in an accepted pluralism (1998:210-216). Thus, Evangelicals are constantly placed in a bind by modern society for while they have to witness in order to get their message across they cannot speak too strongly for fear of rejection. They strongly believe in individual conversion but have to work as a group to accomplish their goals. And finally, understanding of the church and its attendant missiology have been shaped by historical processes, for like Shenk says, "The ancient cathedral spires continue to cast long shadows" (1999:130). Modernity and now postmodernity have pushed the church back to the position it originally occupied in New Testament times. The church has increasingly become just one voice among many vying for the public's attention.

Some have noted that the consumer-oriented mega-churches have not adequately dealt with

the underlying theological suppositions of a true biblical lifestyle or evangelism.

We hypothesize that the church in modern culture has succumbed to syncretism in pursuit of evangelization by its uncritical appropriation of the assumptions and methodologies offered by modern culture (Shenk 1995:56, emphasis his).

The emphasis on technique or the "how to" is often not sufficiently grounded or critiqued by biblical theology.

"Competition for the public attention has led some in the modern church to followed the wider society in creating a community of consumers" (Shenk 1995:74-75) which is reflected in the "felt needs" approach of many current evangelistic church programs resulting in a tendency never to proclaim the full message of abandoning all for the cross of Jesus, even when the consumer is joined to the church. Reginald Bibby seems to insinuate that the American church has followed the capitalistic development of production, sales, and marketing (1997:221).

This search for self-fulfillment through the catering of goods and programs has caused some churches to mirror the wider society by spending more on itself than on ministry to others (Shenk 1995:74-75). However, such "marketing insights and tools will prove inadequate as North America moves still further into its postmodern, post-Christian and neopagan phase" (Gibbs 2000:37).

If the current models being used by churches are inadequate to meet the challenge of making disciples then where can the church turn to pattern its life and practice? The surprising answer is not in creating a new model but a returning to the original model as found in the first-century church.

Indeed we may find that the most helpful models might be drawn from the first 150 years of the Christian church, when it began as a movement with neither political power nor social influence within a pluralistic environment (Gibbs 2000:11).

The return to the New Testament model is not without its challenges. The changes at the very core of church life are "deep-rooted, comprehensive, complex, unpredictable and global in their ramifications." Furthermore, "within many congregations, groups exist that represent each of these three mindsets: traditional, modern and postmodern. It is no wonder that church leaders find it hard to secure consensus" (Gibbs 2000:19, 20).

How the New Testament can inform the transition and return of our current communities of faith to the primitive dynamism of the church is the subject of the next section.

The Missionary Nature of the Postmodern Church

As mentioned in the first article, the Great Commission envisions mission and disciple-making as being at the heart of

the church and outlines what shape converted lives are to take in the light of Christ's sacrificed, resurrected and glorified life and as such "*is a foundational ecclesiological statement*" (Shenk 1995:89, emphasis his).

The young church was sent forth to reproduce the community of faith which was begun by Jesus and sustained by the presence of the Spirit. The tiny community was commissioned to leaven the broader society with its unique beliefs, dynamic faith, infectious love, and community. It was a church community endowed with a mission.

The Christendom model of church which followed might be characterized as "*church without mission*" (Shenk 1995:35, emphasis his). As the church moved to the heart of society by using the coercive power of the state to support and extend its influence, every person was under the influence of the church from the cradle to the grave.

At the beginning of the Protestant era, the Great Commission was seen as being fulfilled by the apostles and no longer had any relevance for the nominally converted citizens of the Holy Roman Empire. Luther and Calvin, who fought against the tenets and activities of Christendom, were themselves influenced by this view and argued that the commission was only binding upon the apostles whose office had been discontinued (Boer 1961:18-20).

William Carey's essay, *An enquiry into the obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathens* (1792) argued that the Great Commission was not restricted to the apostles with the result that the modern missionary enterprise was launched. As the modern church emerged into a more global society, the missionary movement was reborn.

The primary focus of the Protestant missionary movement was "an emphasis on territory; that is, the territory of heathendom versus the territory of Christendom, on '*going*' as the imperative rather than on '*making disciples.*'" Mission was defined as what happens "out there" (Shenk 1995:89, emphasis his). "The legacy that Christendom bequethed to the church was effectively to reduce it to the status of an institution for the care of the faithful" (Shenk 1999:16).

The result of this narrowing of the Great Commission by the modern church has been to place mission at the periphery of the church's concern. The modern study and training in theology has revealed this same tendency to place mission on the sideline. The study of theology was standardized by F. D. E. Schleiermacher who established the "fourfold pattern" of theological education that included the four disciplines of biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical (or pastoral) theology. Within this schema, theory and practice were often divorced from each other.

Mission was construed in terms of who needs to be won to the church but not its "*very nature*" (Bosch 1995:31, emphasis his). Ecclesiology was largely divorced from its missional intent and was "no longer nurtured by its true source" (Shenk 1999:9). "If ecclesiology has been largely stored in the pantry of the house built by theologians, mission hardly got a foot in the door" (Shenk 1995:42). Theologians who have lost the Pauline focus of nurturing the faith of real believers in real places, "have

If the postmodern church is returning to the same peripheral status it had in the New Testament, "our western culture will require that we approach this frontier in missional rather than pastoral terms" (Shenk 1995:91). "The church needs to move from the *Constantinian* model—which presumed a churched culture— to an *apostolic* model designed to penetrate the vast unchurched segments of society" (Gibbs 2000:187, emphasis his). Kenneth Callahan would agree by saying that "the day of the pro-

> **"The church needs to move from the *Constantinian model*—which presumed a churched culture—to an *apostolic model* designed to penetrate the vast unchurched segments of society."**

ignored the modern missionary movement, choosing instead to maintain a steady provincial and intramural focus" (1995:43).

Therefore when the church emerged from Christendom it did not fully succeed in reclaiming the New Testament prerogatives of mission and community. But some have suggested that the current forces which are now pushing the church further to the periphery could be an opportunity for the church to reevaluate its position in light of the Bible and history (see Roxburgh 1997:7-8).

fessional minister is over. The day of the missionary pastor has come" (1990:4).

As the church has unintentionally moved from the center to the edge of society, mission must intentionally return from the edge to the center of the church. This begins with the clear understanding that since "God is a missionary God, God's people are missionary people" (Bosch 1995:32). Since mission is the center of God's concern it should become the center of the church's concern as well. God's primary focus is not theoretical

or administrative, but redemptive. Mission must be thought of in ontological terms for the church.

To be authentic, mission must be thoroughly theocentric. It begins in God's redemptive purpose and will be completed when that purpose is fulfilled. The God-given identity of the church thus arises from its mission. This order of priority is foundational. Yet for some sixteen centuries Christians have been taught to think of church as the prior category and mission as one among several functions of the church (Shenk 1999:7).

These same sentiments are expressed by Jon Dybdahl, an Adventist missiologist who recently edited a book entitled *Adventist mission in the twenty-first century.* In the introductory chapter of the book he states that "mission gives birth to the church and is its mother. The very essence of the church is mission. If the church ceases to be missionary, it has not simply failed in its task, but has actually ceased being the church" (1999:17-18).

Just as Jesus warned his disciples against putting fresh patches on old wineskins, the church, if it is to survive, must be prepared to make changes in the face of rapid developments. "The issue is not simply one of ecclesiastical reengineering. Rather we are talking about a radically different way of being the church" (Gibbs 2000:219).

Unless the church of the West begins to understand this, and unless we develop a missionary theology, not just a theology of mission, we will not achieve more than merely patch up the church. We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology, not just a theological agenda for mission; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompany the *missio Dei* (Bosch 1995:33).

While the Lord calls us to become missionary disciples in our postmodern context, the challenge of how to incorporate these principles is ever present. The last section of this article addresses some of the barriers that meet the church at every turn in the making of disciples in a postmodern context.

Making Disciples in the Postmodern Church

From the above discussion it could be posited that the church needs to be radically reformulated into a mission-oriented and disciple-making community of faith in a post-modern world. Some of the steps needed in order to fulfill the Great Commission include the intentional forming of discipleship building communities.

The raw materials for such communities must come from the architectural blueprint of the New Testament. Once the sketches are in hand, workers must be trained and new methods developed to build on the changing grounds of the postmodern world.

Building Community

The building of true disciple-

ship communities within the evangelical tradition has been deterred by placing a premium on individual, personal conversion which has often been seen as an "*event*, to the neglect of an understanding of conversion as a lifelong *process*" (Gibbs 2000:231, emphasis his). If the church is to go forth into the world to make disciples in obedience to the Great Commission, then it is expedient that Christ's body of believers must first be discipled themselves. After all, the Great Commission was given at the very end of Matthew's

must not become "compartmentalized and marginalized" (Gibbs 2000:135) but must be woven into the life and substance of the church.

The challenge of converting the churches which are currently filled with relatively autonomous members into a discipleship community will demand more than merely adding a training seminar, a staff person, an agenda item, or small groups. As Gibbs states, "We are not here reemphasizing the need for small groups, which have often been overlaid on already over-

> **Since mission is the center of God's concern it should become the center of the church's concern as well. God's primary focus is not theoretical or administrative, but redemptive.**

Gospel and at the culmination of Christ's personal and intensive discipling efforts. "It was to people who were themselves disciples that Jesus gave the Great Commission to disciple the nations. The implication is clear—it takes a disciple to make a disciple" (Gibbs 2000:230).

Gibbs states that "undiscipled church members present one of the greatest challenges facing the church, not only in the West but around the world" (2000:231). In order to meet this challenge, making disciples

full and over-demanding church calendars. Rather we are arguing for basic communities to become the very building blocks on which the church is built and is able to expand (2000:232). Just as discipleship was woven into the very fabric of the life of Jesus and the early church, it must begin to permeate every aspect of congregational life.

The modern church has separated the individual from the community and the missional from the administrative concerns of the church. "The modern ten-

dency to separate the spiritual from the practical is played out in the church when decision-making groups are divorced from the disciple-making groups" (Gibbs 2000:232). This is in distinct contrast to the ideal of the New Testament discipleship community which clearly showed that Jesus "did not write a book but formed a community." This community itself was to be "the only hermeneutic of the gospel" (Newbigin 1989:227). True New Testament discipleship communities are rare in contemporary culture. Church researchers of American spirituality fear that a purely personal

The training of pastors, theologians and missiologists for ministry in modern Western culture ought to be based on a biblical understanding rather than historical precedents and theological distortions. Discipleship involves living out the Great Commission (Shenk 1995:89-90).

The paradigm of separating the theoretical from practical theology adopted from Schleiermacher has tended to fragment and distort the other disciplines within a seminary's training. If the seminary's mission is to train the future leaders of the church and the church's mission is to form communities of reproduc-

> **There is a growing recognition by seminaries of the need to balance the study of theology with the practices of spiritual formation.**

faith "will retreat so far inside the individual that it may never come out again. And if it does not, is it really spirituality?" (Wuthnow 1994:36). "The church must not only promote ministry outside of its walls but must primarily be itself the foretaste of a different social order" (Newbigin 1989:231).

Discipleship Training

If leaders in mission are to be trained in forming New Testament communities of disciples then biblical study must be given to this process.

tive disciples then would not the seminary be the very best place to not only study but to experience first-hand what it means to become a disciple in community? Discipleship is a wholistic, ontological concept. Just as discipleship should not be divided in the local church by having separate discipleship and administrative groups, true discipleship training should not be separated in the seminary. One should not have to wait until chapel time to get a "spiritual" message. There is a growing recognition by seminar-

ies of the need to balance the study of theology with the practices of spiritual formation. "In seminaries there is increasing recognition of the need for spiritual formation alongside theological education" (Gibbs 2000:231). Banks concurs with Gibbs by saying that there is a growing consensus that the moral and spiritual formation which began in the home and was fostered in the broader Christian community, "must be an intentional part of seminary training, both inside and outside the classroom" (Banks 1999:25).

Institutions of learning as well as churches need to seek out new forms of common life. In the words of E. Dixon Junkin,

Let us imagine thousands of communities whose members in an intentional, disciplined fashion do the following: (1) pray together, (2) share their joys and struggles, (3) study the context in which they find themselves, (4) listen for God's voice speaking through Scripture, (5) seek to discern the obedience to which they are being called, and (6) engage in common ministry (1996:312).

Training needs to encompass the building of discipleship communities in every aspect of seminary and church life in order to counteract individualism, for

it seems clear that ministerial training as currently conceived is still far too much training for the pastoral care of the existing congregation, and far too little oriented toward the missionary calling to claim the whole of public life for Christ in his kingdom (Newbigin 1989:231).

In addition, if ministers are to train their local congregation in mission to the world then their first and foremost responsibility will be "in the area of his or her discipleship, in that life of prayer, and daily consecration which remains hidden from the world but which is the place where the essential battles are either won or lost" (Newbigin 1989:241).

Busy, postmodern missionary pastors today need to follow the pattern of Jesus who spent time on the mountain of prayer so that he could minister in the valley of need. If the body of believers is truly to become the priestly people of God then they need "a ministering priesthood to sustain and nourish it" (Newbigin 1989:235). If "ministerial leadership is, first and finally, discipleship (Newbigin 1989:241), then ministerial training should follow the Lord's pattern of making disciples in all of its cognitive, communal, and missional aspects.

Summary

This article has discussed how the modern and postmodern aspects of society have increasingly pushed the church back to the same peripheral position in society it once had in the New Testament era.

The findings of Smith in his study of American Evangelicalism showed that although Evangelicalism is thriving within this pluralistic environment, its individualistic underpinnings

have dampened its influence. In addition, church groups have borrowed from the mass marketing and consumer orientation in order to reach society without critically evaluating how those modern techniques correspond to the biblical nature of the church.

It was posited that a return to the periphery of society should generate a renewed discussion concerning the nature of the church in light of history. The central place that mission held in the New Testament fellowship was eclipsed by the nominal conversion of Europe during the period of Christendom. The modern missionary movement paralleled the geographical expansion of the last three hundred years and focused on going to win the heathen which were outside the civilized territory of Europe.

The thoroughgoing secularization and individualism of the postmodern age has given the church a renewed challenge to disciple the increasing numbers of people within the very shadow of its sanctuaries. With this challenge in mind, the building of community and the training of pastors and their members were discussed.

Given the discussion of the last three articles in this series which focused on the community of the first century, the individuality of modernity, and the peripheral church of postmodernity, a synthesized contextual theology of discipleship is now set forth.

Towards a Contextual Theology of Discipleship

The task to fulfill the Lord's command to make disciples at the very start of the twenty-first century must be grounded on a solid biblical, theological, and historical foundation. Such solid grounding is vital as the church moves from a culture impacted by the Enlightenment to the still uncertain culture of postmodernism.

In comparing and contrasting these contexts it was found that they each had a profound affect on the church and its mission. In New Testament Christianity the church was comprised primarily of small, intimate communities of eclectic believers who were actively engaged with the larger society. Urban areas were relatively small and tightly congested, linked by a network of roads which circulated a diversity of people and ideas.

The tight confines of the city became the breeding ground for an infectious type of new community which was based on a set of relationships influenced by the teachings of Jesus. Having entered and been transformed in community, disciples were sent forth by the community to transform those outside of the community. The conceptual, communal, and missional were linked together in Acts and defined the nature of the church.

The communal culture of the New Testament stands in stark

contrast to the emergence of the autonomous individual in modern society where each person is encouraged to develop beliefs and practices independently from others. This individualism has profoundly affected today's methods of discipleship where personal meaning and fulfillment are often sought in isolation from a worshipping community.

This same force of individualism also hampers the church in its witness to the larger society because it often hinders the members in uniting for the common cause of mission. In order to counteract these influences,

heart of the church's concern. This can only be accomplished through a renewed study of the nature of the church as found in the New Testament. In this respect, the context can be a help instead of a hindrance to the making of disciples.

While the theological study of the matter has obviously begun, the greater sociological challenge of creating community in our age needs to be recognized and addressed. In discussing this issue it is obvious that the clock cannot be turned back in order to re-initiate our society to the communal practices of more traditional societies. As our

> ## If the church is to make disciples in this secular society then mission must move from the edge to the heart of the church's concern.

the church has borrowed from the mass marketing and consumer orientation in order to reach society without a critical evaluation of how these techniques correspond to the biblical nature of the church.

In addition to the influence of individualism, the thoroughgoing secularization of the postmodern age has pushed the church from the center to the periphery of society. If the church is to make disciples in this secular society then mission must move from the edge to the

society is currently configured, the strong pull of individualism counters every effort to leave the sanctity of self for the uncharted territory of community life.

That being said, it is also difficult to posit how the current course of the church will not result in an ever-decreasing role of organized religion in the life of modern people unless a thorough understanding of the New Testament model of discipleship-making is adapted to our modern way of life.

In this very aspect of cross-

cultural adaptation, the New Testament has something to say. The challenge the early church faced in uniting the Jewish and Gentile believers into one community could be seen as somewhat analogous to our own efforts to understand and implement a New Testament Christianity in our postmodern world. The same Holy Spirit who was so instrumental in the formation, nurturing, and expansion of Christ's body (the church) is still available in our day to fulfill the Lord's commission to make disciples in the postmodern world.

These issues must not only be theoretically addressed but practically worked out in real congregations in North America. Newbigin pointed out that the local congregation is the true hermeneutic of the gospel. Individuals must not only see the value of mutual support but must invest the time for this to happen.

Works Cited

Banks, Robert. 1999. *Reenvisioning theological education.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Bibby, Reginald W. 1997. *Unknown gods.* Toronto, Canada: Stoddard Publishing.

Boer, Harry. 1961. *Pentecost and missions.* London: Butterworth.

Bosch, David J. 1995. *Believing in the future.* Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

Callahan, Kenneth L. 1990. *Effective church leadership.* New York: HarperCollins.

Dybdahl, Jon L. 1999. "Adventist Mission Today—Taking the Pulse." In *Adventist mission in the 21st century.* Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald.

Gibbs, Eddie. 2000. *Church next.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Hobhouse, Walter. 1911. *The church and the world in idea and history.* London: MacMillen.

Junkin, E. Dixon. 1995. "Up From the Grassroots." In *The church between gospel and culture*, eds. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 308-318. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Küng, Hans. 1990. *Projekt weltethos.* Munich/Zurich: Benziger Verlag. Quoted in D. Bosch, *Believing in the future,* 40. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995.

Newbigin, Lesslie. 1989. *The gospel in a pluralistic society.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Regele, Mike. 1995. *Death of the church.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Roxburgh, Alan J. 1997. *The missionary congregation, leadership and liminality.* Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press.

Shenk, Wilbert R. 1995. *Writing the vision.* Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

———. 1999. *Changing frontiers of mission.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Smith, Christian. 1997. *American evangelicalism.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wuthnow, Robert. 1995. *Sharing the journey.* New York, NY: The Free Press.