

# The Individuality of Modernity

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By Jim Park

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In the previous article, the social context from which the early church sprung was found to be highly cosmopolitan in nature. Within this environment, the believers of the first century banded closely together in order to bless those inside and outside of their community. The emptiness of today's churches in many areas of the first world has been produced not so much by people's aversion to God or spirituality, but by the deep sociological impact of individualism on culture.

The autonomous individual is one of the most distinctive creations of North American society. This individualism has then been exported and affected many other parts of the world. Studies show



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that modern disciples practice a large amount of individualism, even when they participate in small groups. This is in sharp contrast to the intimate communities of discipleship of the first century.

## The Crumbling Foundation of Christendom

The dramatic shift of the majority of believers from the sufferings of martyrdom to the building of an earthly kingdom was propelled by the vacuum created by the wholesale erosion of the philosophical worldview of the Greeks and the political dominance of Rome. Having gained the ascendancy, the church attempted to create a Christian civilization out of the ruins of the barbaric invasions.

At this historical juncture, the church faced a most critical question posed by Lesslie Newbigin: "How can any society hold together against the forces of disruption without some commonly accepted beliefs about the truth, and—therefore—without some sanctions against deviations which threaten to destroy society (1989:223)?"

The church eventually answered that question by replacing the incredible pluralism which

once marked the Apostolic age by a single brand which tolerated no dissent. This “led the Church into the fatal temptation to use secular power to enforce conformity to Christian teaching” (Newbiggin 1989:223). The strong missionary impetus of the first century to bring the nations under the loving lordship of Jesus was replaced with an effort to bring all the members of society under its own control.

From the translation and study of ancient Greek and New Testament texts, two vigorous but separate movements would emerge—the humanist tradition

ture. . . . Modernity began as a move to untether human life from any external control” (1997:9).

In the past the role of each person was carefully scripted and understood by the society. However, the Enlightenment would arise with the revolutionary idea that all the individuals in the society should determine who they should be independent of others. The next section looks more closely at this epoch changing ideal which was to have such a tremendous influence in the understanding and practice of discipleship today.

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as envisioned by the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation. The decline of Christendom which had strongly regulated both public and private life for over one thousand years, led to the radical re-interpretation of the inner and outer life of the individual.

Alan Roxburgh states that, “the autonomous, rational mind assumed the new public center, while God and Christianity were displaced to a new private center. At the heart of the matter lay a rebellion against the oppressive controls of the Christendom cul-

### **The Emergence of Individualism**

In the Middle Ages Thomas Aquinas had argued for a society built upon a harmonious synthesis where everyone and everything fitted into a fixed position (Bosch 1995:16). In his natural theology, Aquinas clearly placed faith, the church, and theology above reason, the state, and philosophy.

From early in the life of the church it had been taught that God was revealed both by special and natural revelation. The first was grasped through faith,

the latter through observation and reason. For a millennium, religion and science were not competing with one another in epistemological domains.

With the discoveries of the emerging field of objective science, the traditional church-sponsored views of the truth were challenged and eventually overthrown. The absolute truths which the church had taught for a millennia now gave rise to skepticism and the whole program of Rene Descarte to place rationality on the throne where the church and faith once sat. Thus a deepening wedge was pushed between the factual, public world of science and the private world of the individual.

In a relatively short time, the traditional "Christian" society where everyone's position within the group was carefully proscribed, was replaced by a modern worldview whose dominant characteristics were "its thoroughgoing secular nature and its radical anthro-centricity" (Bosch 1995:2). The influences that shaped the new society succeeded in driving a deep wedge between the public person and the private self.

Thus the brave new world of modernity was created—not in the six days of creation but by the dictates of the scientific method. Humanity was to be saved, not by the gospel, but by the steady advancement of science. The god of pure rationality would save Europe from the stagnation of a thousand years of Christendom and the horrors of the Thirty Years War.

Hence the understanding and practice of religion and discipleship itself became an increasingly individual affair. Freed from the restrictions of a traditional society with its strong community-based decision making, the individuals were expected to make their own choice.

But there emerged a problem with those within the new paradigm. How were the communal aspects of modern society to be sustained when individuals differed so widely in their beliefs? Divergent views could only be tolerated if all parties agreed to a pluralistic worldview. As Reginald W. Bibby observes, "The diplomatic way to resolve the problem of diverse outlooks is to decree that they all are relative" (1997:67).

The apparent tolerance of individuals in a pluralistic society is not built on mutual love as created and nurtured by the Holy Spirit in the discipleship community but by "a coexistence of people inward-turned, tolerating one another out of mutual indifference" (Sennett 1994:323). If individuals really do not know each other there will be more of a chance for mutual toleration.

In traditional society the individual was told what to think and what to do. "The individual's place was assured by virtue of conformity to the role or station defined by society" (Shenk 1995:95). Since the Enlightenment, the individual has been increasingly isolated with the potential for both unbounded freedom and insecurity.

Feeling the transition from the stability of Christendom to the rapid change which would characterize the Enlightenment John Donne in 1611 penned:

‘Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone; All just supply, and all Relation: Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot, For every man alone thinkes he hath got To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee (Donne as quoted in Bellah 1996:276).

This new-found freedom which was grounded on the bedrock of individual belief, unconsciously assaulted the New

## **The Growth of Individualism in North America**

The potential of individualism in North America can be seen in 1630, as a group of Massachusetts Bay colonists left Europe and sailed for the promise of freedom in the emerging country of America. Before they disembarked, John Winthrop gathered the pilgrims on board the ship and preached a sermon entitled “A Model of Christian Charity.” During the course of this sermon he warned the group of pursuing their own pleasure. Paraphrasing the Apostle Paul, Winthrop urged the group:

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Testament ideal of a discipleship community built on the foundation of a common faith. The intimate community of believers was being replaced by a community filled with individuals who found it increasingly difficult to find the time or the motivation to meet together for mutual edification. Perhaps more than any other society at that time, North America intentionally embraced and nurtured the ideal of the autonomous individual.

Entertain each other in brotherly affection, we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of other’s necessities . . . we must delight in each other, make other’s conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labour and suffer together, always having before our eyes . . . our Community as members of the same Body” (1971:42 as quoted in Bellah 1996:xxxv).

The deep desire for freedom from oppressive rule was soon

intensely focused on freedom for the individual to think and to act independently of others. Although the more extreme types of independence took many years to develop, its general tendencies were clearly felt by Winthrop and other observers of American culture.

Alexis de Tocqueville, when viewing the American scene in the nineteenth century, coined the phrase “The Age of Individualism.” In the second volume of *Democracy in America* he wrote the following observation about the American society:

Each person behaves as though he is a stranger to the destiny of others. . . . As for his transactions

Thomas Jefferson could say, “I am a sect myself,” and the Revolutionary War hero Thomas Paine confidently asserted, “My mind is my church” (Jefferson and Paine as quoted in Bellah 1996:233). Building upon this strong individualism, Protestant self-reliance taught that “the state and the larger society are considered unnecessary because the saved take care of themselves” (Bellah 1996:x) and when help is needed, the mythical hero is ready to come riding to the rescue:

America is also the inventor of that most mythic individual hero, the cowboy, who again and again saves a society he can never com-

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with his fellow citizens, he may mix among them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but does not feel them; he exists only in himself and for himself alone. And if on these terms there remains in his mind a sense of family, there no longer remains a sense of society (1845 as quoted in Sennett 1994:323).

“Individualism lies at the very core of American culture” (Bellah 1996:142). Individualism in America is deeply rooted. One of the great founding fathers,

pletely fit into. . . . And while the Lone Ranger never settles down and marries the local schoolteacher, he always leaves with the affection and gratitude of the people he has helped (Bellah 1996:145).

The ideal of rugged individualism of American culture was applied to the spiritual experience. The civil religion of America is not based on the Bible but is built on a type of Jeffersonian self-reliance: “The most quoted ‘Bible verse’ in America is: ‘God helps

those who help themselves'; 82 percent believe that is a direct quote from the Bible" (Barna 1998:225). Being a disciple, as well as becoming an entrepreneur in America demanded "taking a sink-or-swim approach to moral development as well as economic success" (Bellah 1996:viii).

One of the evidences of this steady journey inward was the decline of the nineteenth century camp meeting. An advocate for these regional camp meetings urged people to "come and settle on the ground at the commencement of a camp-meeting, and they will be better acquainted, and form more Christian attachments by the time the meeting closes, than they would have formed in many years on the ordinary plan" (as quoted in Schmidt 1989:218). The silent passing of the camp meeting into American lore gave rise of regret by some.

The ascent of individualism, and the waning of religious authority were often noted and often lamented aspects of modernity. Scot Thomas Carlyle gave voice to this regret, when he spoke of "the cut-purse and cut-throat Scramble" of nineteenth-century society, "where Friendship, Communion, has become an incredible tradition; and your holiest Sacramental Supper is a smoking Tavern Dinner, with Cook for Evangelist" (Schmidt 1989:216-217).

One of the greatest achievements of modernity was the creation of the autonomous individual, which prided itself in

developing beliefs and practices independent from communities which were rightly judged as historically oppressive. This autonomy has not only separated the individual from the community but causes the devaluation of the very belief system upon which the fellowship is built upon.

Just how far can the journey inward go within both the society and church in America? A number of Evangelical researchers have taken up this question by surveying how individualism in North America has affected the life of the church.

### **Individualism and the Church in North America**

The research of group spirituality within Canada and the United States looked closely at the profile of who is coming to church and how individuals are participating in small groups. Findings indicate that those who are involved in small group communities in America still retain a large degree of individuality which is in distinct contrast to the intimate discipleship communities studied in the previous article.

It is almost self-evident that the interest and attendance in church and spiritual community has steadily declined in Europe, Canada, and America. Proud cathedrals and churches which were built and filled with faithful congregants now stand nearly empty.

Bibby, who has used a variety of solid survey and research tools (1997:xix) to research the church in Canada states: "Mark Twain al-

legedly once commented on a visit to Montreal that ‘One cannot stand on a street in Montreal and throw a brick without breaking a church window.’ These days, with weekly attendance coming in at only about 15 percent in Montreal, chances are pretty good that no one would be hit by the brick” (1997:3).

Bibby found that although Canadians are not showing up at church, they still exercise a latent identification when rites of passage such as weddings, a christening or a funeral comes about (1997:168). Indeed Canadians are “very much in the market for the

spiritual hunger in the society.

Bibby, in quoting Clifford Longley’s summary of the public withdrawal from the state church observes that: “The English have withdrawn their consent to the establishment of the Church of England . . . not by crowding into the cold streets to shout but by not crowding into its cold churches to sing and pray” (Longley 1989 as quoted in Bibby 1997:111).

In contrast to the churches of Canada and England which exist primarily to service their regular and new customers, “American religious groups aggressively

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things that religion historically has been about” (1997:177).

However, individuals in Canada are not even checking out what the church has to offer, “because they don’t expect to find the kind of food they want. . . . It’s as if McDonald’s, Wendy’s, and Burger King are all going under at a time in history when Canadians love hamburgers” (Bibby 1997:177, 179). In short, the spiritual food the churches are offering is not appealing to the

compete with each other in their pursuit of truth” (Bibby 1997:185). A very recent Gallup poll found that there has been a dramatic increase of spiritual hunger in America.

The broad interest in religion has by and large not been translated into a deep, transforming community of faith. George Gallup Jr. and Michael Lindsey found that despite their profession, America’s faith tends to be non-transformational, uninformed,

and independent (1999:3). Research concludes that “faith in America is broad but not deep” (Gallup and Jones 2000:128).

Certainly the dynamics of the New Testament discipleship community are not to be found in the nominal church member in modern North America. The force of individualism has pulled many in North America away from a deep commitment and intimate contact with one another.

However, within the North American context the dramatic emergence of small groups within the last generation has provided a window of opportunity to counteract the steady rise of individualism within the society. However, faith is being both deepened and surprisingly hindered by the current small group movement which does demand greater commitment and contact between people.

### **Individualism and Small Groups in North America**

Perhaps there is no more fruitful place to search for New Testament community than in the small group movement which has emerged as a significant and deeply studied phenomena within American life. Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Social Sciences and the Director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University, coordinated the efforts of fifteen scholars in a three year study which sampled more than 1000 members and 900 non-members of small groups with extensive survey materials (1994:367-375; 395-421).

According to Robert Wuthnow’s survey, “exactly 40 percent of the adult population of the United States claims to be involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for those who participate in it” (1994:45). The following profile lists just who is involved in small groups:

Women are more likely to be involved in small groups than are men in all age categories and in all regions of the country. Older people are somewhat more likely to be involved in small groups than are younger people, controlling for gender, education, and region. College graduates are more likely than those with lower levels of education to be involved in small groups, controlling for other factors (1994:375).

According to the survey by Wuthnow, nearly everyone in our society wants to be able to share their deepest feelings, be in an accepting environment and have loyal friends you can count on (1994:53-54). It is not surprising then that “the most distinctive feature of the contemporary small-group movement is its emphasis on support” (1994:261).

Whereas eighty-two percent of those involved in small groups said that the group made them feel like they were not alone, seventy-two percent reported that the group gave them encouragement when they were feeling down (1994:171). On the other hand, the majority of those not involved in small groups said that “they already have support



in more naturally occurring settings” such as an informal circle of friends (1994:183-184).

While the results of this survey are encouraging, society’s core values of freedom of individuality have also affected the small group movement by redefining the meaning of community:

Community is what people say they are seeking when they join small groups. Yet the kind of community they create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual (1994:3).

What some have called “privatized” values or “individualistic” spirituality is institutionalized in the norms of many small groups. We tell ourselves that faith is essentially a matter of personal discovery and that values are not absolute, universal standards, but discretionary matters about which we can have our own opinions. We then carry these views into our groups as well. A written text of some kind may provide a common framework, but the values it embodies are so general that everyone can read something different into it (1994:200).

According to Robert Bellah, this shadow of religious pluralism has been cast over the Ameri-

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It is obvious that because of the powerful force of individualism which has laid at the very foundation of American culture, members of small groups “are often faced with dilemma of wanting a more solid, communal form of religious commitment and at the same time picking up the privatized, relativistic messages that infuse their groups from the wider culture” (1994:57). How this duality between individual beliefs and participation in a community is accommodated is outlined by the following remarks by Wuthnow:

can consciousness since colonial times: “The American pattern of privatizing religion while at the same time allowing it some public functions has proven highly compatible with the religious pluralism that has characterized America from the colonial period and grown more and more pronounced” (1996:225).

In summary, although the current small group phenomenon is providing critical emotional support to over a third of the society, Wuthnow states that the survey data is unclear “whether

the deepening spirituality that people experience in small groups encourages them to move away” from a private and individual view of religion (1994:252).

It is clear that small groups in America have trouble escaping from the strong gravity of individualism which permeates our society. People tend to think and act as individuals, even when they are involved with other people and their practice of the spiritual disciplines of Bible study, prayer, and service affects the lives of small groups.

### **Practicing Discipleship in Small Groups**

If we generally define discipleship as nurturing faith through disciplined Bible study and prayer so that it can be shared in service to others, then how are small groups doing to nurture these personal and corporate practices of discipleship? Wuthnow has found that generally speaking, 76 percent of Bible study members had joined their group in order to become “more disciplined” in their spiritual lives (1994:220). Being disciplined in one’s spiritual life (1994:17) and commitment to the group (1994:51) are both viewed from a very positive point of view.

On the surface it would appear that small groups provide an ideal environment to grow disciples. The commitment level is high and the need for discipline is affirmed. But when the survey actually investigated what was occurring within the groups a

more ambiguous picture emerges. Take for instance the members knowledge of the Bible:

Group members whose spirituality has been deepened by their participation were no more likely than other members to give the correct answer to a factual question that was included in the survey. . . . Thus, we must question what kind of biblical understanding is being fostered in small groups. . . . The weekly Bible study may have lasted for two hours, but only fifteen minutes of the time was devoted to studying the Bible (Wuthnow 1994:243).

It is evident that although groups encourage people to think about spiritual truths “they do little to increase biblical knowledge of their members” (Wuthnow 1994:7). For instance, nearly 41 percent of the participants in small groups felt that Jesus was born in Jerusalem and 19 percent thought that the book of Acts was in the Old Testament (Wuthnow 1994:244).

While a more thorough knowledge of the Bible does not in any way guarantee spiritual growth, it is hard to formulate a plan for discipleship which does not incorporate an intimate relationship with Jesus as nurtured by the Scriptures.

In addition to Bible study, prayer is an important spiritual discipline. Praying together was one of the things participants in groups liked best. Prayer requests were often solicited and answers to prayer were brought to the group. Instead of relying on an ordained member of the

clergy, prayer is democratized as many members of the group participated and felt a special intimacy with God.

Besides nurturing their faith by Bible study and prayer, members of small groups have participated in service for others. In Wuthnow's research, 75 percent of those participating in small groups had invited a friend to attend the group and 44 percent had been responsible for another person joining the group. In addition, one in nine had been responsible for starting a new group (1994:338). The findings show that small group members

Rather, they are trying to incorporate some sense of spirituality into their lives so that it will shine through naturally (1994:246).

While it is true that "some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others" (Wuthnow 1994:6), groups also can generate a significant amount of internal and external ministry. Active participation in the group generally corresponded to being more active in other volunteer endeavors (1994:391).

In another study Wuthnow found that "people who said they feel it is important to develop

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tend not to participate in traditional areas of evangelism.

Group members do say they are sharing their faith, but they are not drawn to the formal programs of evangelism that many clergy advocate (knocking on neighbors doors, inviting their friends to church, or perhaps eavesdropping to find poor troubled unbelievers to help). They are not trying to learn techniques for talking to the unconverted or even to gain logical arguments to use in defense of their faith.

their own religious beliefs independently of any church were less likely to value caring for the needy than people who took issue with this popular form of religious individualism" (1991:12). That is to say, private spirituality did not readily show itself in public service. On the other hand, "comparisons made possible by other studies also suggest that spirituality begins to move people towards being compassionate only when a threshold of involvement in some kind of

collective religious activity has been reached” (1991:13).

From the above findings it appears that caring for others flows more readily when being a part of a caring community than trying to practice it individually. As was seen in the previous article and substantiated by modern research, a discipling dynamic must include being an integral part of a community which balances the twin principles of nurturing its own members both the ministry and incorporation of others.

### **Summary of the Individuality of Modernity**

The era of Christendom, which would follow the New Testament period, would develop a unity of doctrine and community. These two commodities were forcefully brought into the very heart of the Holy Roman Empire. The Protestant Reformation and modernity were a reaction against this monolithic process. It rightly stressed that every person should be freely able to read and interpret the Bible and the book of nature.

Perhaps an unforeseen result of this liberation from the constraints of the past removed both the individual from the community and beliefs from the normative. In Canada individuals are increasingly looking for spiritual answers outside the walls of the formal church setting. In America the ideal of freedom for the individual has often conflicted with the missionary discipleship done through community.

The fluidity and ubiquity of

small groups have greatly aided in meeting the needs of individuals in a transitional society. Small groups have also been infected with a fair degree of individualism where people are able to seek for personal fulfillment while being in the presence of others.

The spiritual disciplines, although practiced, have at times been superficial in nature. The Bible is not studied so much for content but to provide discussion points for subjective speculations. On the positive side, people who belong in groups greatly value prayer and being part of a community increases participation in ministry.

### **Practical Application to the Local Church**

When a horticulturist tests the soil, it is determined which critical elements need to be added in order to ensure the most robust growth of the plants. Based on the conclusions of this article, pastors and church leaders in modern society can not merely assume that the critical element of community is alive and well in their church or organization.

Therefore it would be well to intentionally infuse the element of dynamic fellowship every time members come together. Committees need to be transformed into communities. On every agenda, whether it be a church board, women’s ministry, or choir, the first order of business is not “doing” the business but being with one another.

Take time to get reacquainted

with one another. Care for one another. Listen to the hearts of your fellow members. Pray for the needs expressed and perhaps the time that has been spent in coming closer together just might help in the processing of the rest of the agenda items.

The church was not born from the discussions of a board room but out of the earnest supplication and reconciliation of the Upper Room. By coming closer to God and closer to one another the Spirit will enflame our hearts with renewed dedication to the Lord, love for one another, and earnest effort to go forth and save a world that is perishing.

Whereas this article discussed the individual member's involvement with their church in North America the last article in this series will study how the post-modern society is influencing the church as a whole. For the last half of the millennium, the church has not only struggled to find its place in society but has been deeply impacted by the further fragmentation of the community.

Interestingly enough, the church has been pushed to the margins of society which is the same position it occupied before the development of Christendom in the fifth century. From this peripheral position, it now is poised to renew its mission to the masses who know Him not.

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