The Community of the First Century

By Jim Park

In this first of the three articles, the social context of the first century church will be studied with the expressed purpose of laying a foundation to how the early church compares and contrasts with our own modern society. The strong link between the communal and missional aspects of discipleship in the New Testament will provide a model to measure and evaluate the disciple making efforts of the church today in the two articles which will follow. This type of contextualization is especially helpful for the current practitioners of church ministry who are seeking to understand and adopt first century models into the twenty-first century.

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

The Urban Community

If we could visit a typical Greco-Roman city of the first century perhaps the first thing we would notice would be the smell. Because of limited water, means of sanitation and the incredible density of humanity and animals, the people in the cities "must have lived in filth beyond our imagining. . . . The crowded streets were churning with mud, open sewers, manure and crowds which created a stench that must have been overpowering for many miles—especially in warm weather . . . no wonder they were so fond of incense" (Stark 1991:153-154).

Compared to modern cities, urban areas in Paul's day were "very small" (Meeks 1983:28). Many cities such as Antioch were originally founded as walled fortresses. Urban centers tended to develop within these limited confines which could easily be walked in an afternoon. Unable to expand economically beyond the walls, the population density of these cities was very high.

Antioch probably housed about 150,000 inhabitants in a two square mile area. This works out to "roughly 75,000 inhabit-

ants per square mile or 117 per acre. As a comparison, in Chicago today there are 21 inhabitants per acre; San Francisco has 23, and New York City overall has 37" (Stark 1991:149). Manhattan has 100 per acre spread out vertically.

Most people lived in tiny cubicles as part of multi-storied tenements. Since entire families were herded together into one room the opportunity for any private moments in New Testament times was "rare" (Meeks 1983:29). Due to the crowded conditions at home, it was natural for most people to seek relief in the public streets about, and at times we found it difficult to make our way. The streets wound so much, first this way, then that, that I soon lost whatever small sense of direction I had (1990:7).

In Paul's day a majority of people lived in the country, a worldwide trend which would not be tipped in favor of city-living until the latter part of the twentieth century. However, it was the city which provided the most fruitful ground for the emerging sect of Christianity to take root and grow into a worldwide movement.

Stark categorically states that "Christianity was an urban movement, and the New Testa-

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and facilities. An imaginary, yet engaging picture of a newcomer to Rome walking down a street in the middle of the afternoon is painted by Robert Banks in his little booklet *Going to church in the first century*:

I must say I found the narrow streets oppressive after being so long on the open road. Some of them were scarcely three meters wide. They were also muddy beyond description and quite insecure underfoot. Since work had already stopped for most, a fair number of people were already ment was set down by urbanites" (1991:147). Paul himself "was a city person" and when he "rhetorically catalogs the places where he has suffered danger, he divides the world into city, wilderness, and sea" (2 Cor 11:26) (Meeks 1983:9).

Although Christianity was nurtured in the small rural communities around the Sea of Galilee,

within a decade of the crucifixion of Jesus, the village culture of Palestine

had been left behind, and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement (Meeks 1983:11).

Even without qualification, every competent historian has known that the Christian movement arose most rapidly in the Greco-Roman cities of Asian Minor, sustained by the very large communities of the Jewish diaspora (Stark 1991:143).

The expansion of the Christian faith was closely associated with both physical and social mobility. "The people of the Roman Empire traveled more extensively and more easily than had anyone before them—or would again until the nineteenth century" (Meeks 1983:17). The roads provided flexibility in movement and became conduits for the importation of a diversity of people into the increasingly cosmopolitan cities.

It was within the city that changes were more readily made than in the rather fixed social boundaries of the small town. "MacMullen emphasizes the conservatism of villages, their 'central characteristic.' 'They and their population hovered so barely above subsistence level that no one dared risk a change'" (MacMullen 1974:27 as quoted in Meeks 1983:15).

Modern research has affirmed that a breakup in a person's social network often leads to a greater freedom for unconventional behavior:

When people lack attachments, they have much greater freedom to deviate from the norms. In modern studies, unconventional behavior is strongly correlated with various measures of population turnover and instability. For example, where larger proportions of the U.S. and Canadian populations are newcomers or have recently moved from one residence to another, rates of participation in unconventional religious activities are high (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) (Stark 1991:144).

Wayne Meeks, in his book *The first urban Christians*, postulates that "such transitions and such dissonance may have been important in circles from which Pauline Christianity drew its members" (1983:21).

This same circulation of people not only increased the receptivity but the pluralism within the city. "The movements of peoples had brought many other cults to the city as well" (Meeks 1983:44). Like our own day, New Testament urbanism was teeming with a diversity of people and ideas:

Urban society in the early Roman Empire was scarcely less complicated than our own, in proportion to the scale of knowledge available to an individual and of demands made upon him. Its complexity—its untidiness to the mind—may well have been felt with special acuteness by people who were marginal or transient, either physically or socially or both, as so many of the identifiable members of the Pauline churches seem to have been (1983:104).

With all these religions, the question needs to be raised just how Christianity emerged as a dominant movement within the

Empire? Stark has been a proponent of the marketing thesis in the rise of religions. Although the freedom of movement and religious thought provided an open market for new religions to appear, "Christianity would have remained an obscure religious movement had the many firms making up Roman pluralism been vigorous" (1991:197).

Stark posits that it was the "*excessive* pluralism" (1991:197) within the Empire that strained the personal and corporate resources to stage the lavish feasts which were used to attract and keep adherents. Tertullian ob-

a book against the movement. He wrongfully "alleged that the church deliberately excluded educated people because the religion was attractive only to 'the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children'" (Celsus 1965:158 quoted in Meeks 1983:51).

Paul's letters provide us with small clues of the broad class of people the gospel was attracting. It is clear that at least some of the believers had, "houses, slaves, the ability to travel, and other signs of wealth. Some of the wealthy provided housing, meeting places, and other services for

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served in his *Apology* that: "The Salii cannot have their feast without going into debt; you must get the accountants to tell you what the tenths of Hercules and the sacrificial banquets cost; the choicest cook is appointed for the Apaturia, the Dionysia, the Attic mysteries; the smoke from the banquet of Serapis will call out the firemen" (1989 ed.) (Stark 1991:198).

It was out of this pluralism that Christianity grew, and not just from among the most marginalized classes of people despite the claims of Celsus who was the first pagan to write

individual Christians and whole groups. In effect, they filled the role as patrons" (Meeks 1983:73). Banks concurs that "a significant number of people in the church came from the more respected levels of society" (1994:116). Although the "extreme top and bottom" are missing, "a Pauline congregation generally reflected a fair cross-section of urban society" (Meeks 1983:73).

The observation that early Christianity only flourished among the poor and dispossessed is also countered by the study of modern sociology. "If the early church was like all the

other cult movements for which good data exist, it was not a proletarian movement but was based on the more privileged classes" (Stark 1991:33). Stark argues from empirical study that religious skepticism often exists most strongly among the more privileged classes. Hence the early adopters of most cult movements are often drawn from the upper classes which then provide the financial and political resources necessary for that group to survive.

As the Roman Empire expanded, the power became concentrated in a self-promoting minority. This increasingly pushed those who had wealth and influence to the periphery of the society where the church was emerging. Banks notes:

Disenchantment with the polis not only took place among the politically disadvantaged sections of society but also increased among those, who in earlier days, had found their identity partly within it. To some extent the household community was the beneficiary of this exclusion from the real bodies where civil power resided. What people could not find in the wider community to which they belonged they sought in the smaller community in which they lived (1994:7).

The Intimate Community

The Greek and Roman cultures had a number of voluntary societies which can be compared to and contrasted with the community of believers which emerged in New Testa-

ment times. These societies tended to be "small groups in which intensive face-to-face interactions were encouraged" (Meeks 1983:78). Membership was voluntary, rather than by birth and they shared in the practice of rituals, the eating of a common meal, and other fraternal activities.

Unlike the voluntary associations which tended to be much more homogeneous, rich and poor, free and slave would associate together in the Christian households (Banks 1994:26). "Christian groups were much more inclusive in terms of social stratification" (Meeks 1983:79). Joining the Christian community meant a radical resocialization, where the sect was to become the primary group of its members, supplanting all other loyalties.

The New Testament communities built upon past Jewish forms of community and transformed them. Although the meeting in private houses, the reading of Scriptures, prayers, and exhortations were similar in the Synagogue, the Christian community sought to break down the strong ethnic boundaries, rejected the role of circumcision, and greatly elevated the role of women.

The household communities which were created and nurtured by Paul were unique, interrelated entities which were founded on his understanding of the gospel:

Christ's radical words, 'Who are my brethren?' and 'When two or three are gathered together there am I

in the midst of them,' lie behind Paul's approach to community relations and assemblings. Christ's sacrificial service stands as the model and motive for those who have special responsibilities in the community, including Paul himself. Christ's resurrection power acts as the source of the community's unity and as the dynamic behind the gifts and ministries exercised within the community. Paul's understanding of community is nothing less than the gospel itself! (Banks 1994:190).

The gospel as taught by Paul and practiced in the community was not merely an individual affair based on personal beliefs. The gospel bound believers to God as well as to one another.

of the gospel, the church, and the community. Therefore, the church was not seen as "merely a human association, a gathering of like-minded individuals for a religious purpose" but a "divinely created affair" (Banks 1994:31). The commonest use of *ekklesia* referred to a town meeting of free male citizens of a Greek city. The term is used for the whole Christian movement (1 Cor 10:32); churches within a region (1 Cor 16:1; Gal 1:2); local churches (1 Thess 1:1; Col 4:16); and "for the smallest cell of the Christian movement, the household assembly" (Meeks 1983:108), (cf. Rom 16:5, 19; Col 4:15).

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Acceptance by Christ necessitated acceptance of those whom he had already welcomed (Rom. 15:7); reconciliation with God entailed reconciliation with others who exhibited the character of gospel preaching (Phil 4:2-3); union in the Spirit involved union with one another, for the Spirit was primarily a shared, not individual experience . . . . To embrace the gospel, then, is to enter into community (Banks 1994:26-27).

Hence the New Testament understood the divine nature

The primary importance of the term *ekklesia* is not to designate a building or purely institutional structures of administrative concerns. "Its chief importance lies in the way it stresses the centrality of meeting for community life: it is through gathering that the community comes into being and is continually recreated" (Banks 1994:46). The primary focus of the gathering was to restore and build a worshipping, wholistic community.

The intimacy of the household "was the basic context within which most if not all the local Pauline groups established themselves" (Meeks 1983:84). Due to its limited physical size "a moderately well-to-do household could hold around thirty people comfortably" (Banks 1994:35). Within this domestic space the Lord gathered a diversity of people from all across the Mediterranean area.

In an attempt to describe this community of believers and seekers, Paul used the metaphors of family (Gal 6:10); adopted children (Gal 4:4-5); heirs (Rom 8:16-17); and members of the household of God (Eph 2:18-

Spirit. Through the Spirit, "those groups enjoyed an unusual degree of intimacy, high levels of interaction among members, and a very strong sense of internal cohesion and of distinction" (Meeks 1983:74).

The local groups of Christians which were spread and multiplied all across the Mediterranean not only enjoyed a high level of cohesion and group identity but were also continually made aware that they belonged to a larger movement. Meeks well summarizes this interrelatedness between the groups:

It is evident, too, that Paul and the other leaders of the mission worked actively to inculcate the notion of a

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19). "*Adelphoi*, 'brethren' is by far and away Paul's favorite way of referring to the members of the communities he is writing" (Banks 1994:50-51).

In addition, the church is pictured as a body, within which the Spirit gives a variety of gifts (1 Cor 12) in order to edify one another (Eph 4:11-13) in love (1 Cor 13). The individual members of the church's relationship with one another, therefore, was internally nurtured through the fruits of the Spirit and externally manifested by the gifts of the

universal brotherhood of the believers in Messiah Jesus. The letters themselves, the messengers who brought them, and the repeated visits to the local assemblies by Paul and his associates all emphasized interrelatedness. It is noteworthy that the places where the household assemblies are mentioned are all in the context of greetings in letter closings or (Philemon) openings. The smallest unit of the movement is addressed precisely in the epistolary context that reminds the readers of the larger fellowship by mentioning names and groups and other places (1983:109).

Paul's concern for the famished Jews in Palestine and the collection for them throughout the Gentile world of Asia Minor (1 Cor 16:1) further bound the groups together through their active communication and support of one another. This interest in the wider boundaries of the community was not restricted to the believers only but also encompassed the wider society. The intimate community of the New Testament was not self-centered but mission oriented. The journey inward was balanced by the journey outward. It is on this mission orientation of the New Testament community that the next section focuses.

The Missionary Community

The new Christian movement which was emerging in the first century was conscious of both the boundaries which separated it from the world and its obligation to engage that world in witness and ministry. The group's internal life did not take place in complete isolation, but was imbued with the purpose of how they were to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Indeed, it has been posited that the rapid spread and strength of Christianity was not only dependent upon pure faith and doctrine but on the network of social interaction both inside and outside of the group. According to Adolf von Harnack, it was this strong social interaction between the people "and not any evangelist, which proved to be

the most effective missionary" (1906:434 as quoted in Meeks 1983:108).

Stark cites a source that lists 25 empirical studies on the effectiveness of social networks and conversion (1991:18). His own work in studying Moonies concluded that "conversion is not about seeking or embracing an ideology; it is about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and family members (1996:16-17). His study of Mormons shows the same tendency.

When [Mormon] missionaries make cold calls, knock on the doors of strangers, this eventually leads to a conversion once out of a thousand calls. However, when missionaries make their first contact with a person in the home of a Mormon friend or a relative of that person, this results in conversion 50 percent of the time (Stark and Bainbridge 1985 as quoted in Stark 1996:18).

Therefore, Stark concludes that *"social movements recruit primarily on the basis of interpersonal attachments that exist, or form, between the convert and members of the group"* (1991:138, emphasis his).

We have already seen that the multitude of household-centered groups which formed in the wake of Christian evangelism certainly had enough glue to bring this diverse community together. But was there anything in the society which provided the opportunity for the Christians to witness and incorporate new members? Stark posits that early Christi-

anity was successful because it was powered by a new morality based on the teaching of Jesus to feed the hungry, be hospitable to the stranger, look after the sick and visit those in prison (Matt 25:35-40).

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity of-

to Christianity would have had a powerful example and motivation to take care of the sick, both inside and outside of the group.

In the fourth century, the emperor Julian attempted to counteract the Christian charitable work by encouraging the pagan priests to match their benevolence. He wrote: "The impious Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well, everyone can see that our people lack aid from us" (Stark 1991:84). But for all his urging, "there was little or no response

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fered a new basis for social solidarity . . . and to cities faced with epidemics, fires, earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services (1991:161).

From our previous mention of the filth and human density of the cities in early Christianity, it is not difficult to conclude that epidemics were widespread and mortality was high. Nor is it hard to infer from the New Testament that the care for the sick, such as leprosy, was a low or non-existent priority for the culture as a whole. From the example and teaching of Jesus, the adherents

because there were no doctrinal bases or traditional practices for them to build upon" (Stark 1991:88).

The role of doctrine as it relates to concrete action will be revisited when both individualism and pluralism of the modern and post-modern eras are discussed. However, before Christendom emerged in the fourth century which led to wholesale nominalism, Christians were willing to endure very high costs, even martyrdom, in order to be faithful to their common faith and teaching.

Far from weakening the group, mortal pressure from the outside tended to screen out the free riders and those only nominally committed to the group—those potential members whose commitment and participation would otherwise be low. In short, the perceived value of both the Christian community and doctrine were so high that sacrifice was the norm instead of the exception in the New Testament Church.

Summary of the Community in the First Century

In this article we have attempted to understand the context of the New Testament Church as it relates to community and mission. As Meeks observes, too often in the past, "studies of Pauline theology, which are legion, have all but universally neglected the social context and functions of doctrine" (1983:164).

Within the social context of the New Testament we found that church was comprised primarily of "small groups scattered in cities" which were both "intimate and exclusive" and actively engaged "with the larger urban society" (Meeks 1983:190). These cities were relatively small, filthy, and tightly congested, linked by a network of roads which circulated a diversity of people and ideas. Private moments were rare.

Within this urban context, the Christian Church was built through communities which were more intimate and missional than their secular and Jewish counterparts. In addition, the early Christian groups were linked together doctrinally through the teachings of Jesus and practically by the care given to its members and the broader society. In particular, its teaching to care for the stranger and heal the sick provided a strong impetus for both the survival of its own members and the incorporation of others.

Although the same pluralism that existed back then is apparent today, people did not think of themselves as individual units of society. The early church was able to make disciples because of the members' own high degree of motivation to follow the Lord's example in ministering to others under the power of the Holy Spirit. This divinely inspired motivation was focused to meet the deep needs of society and form a new community.

This strong link between the communal and missional aspects of discipleship in the New Testament provides a model to measure and evaluate the disciple-making efforts of the Church in history. The next article will trace the effects of the Enlightenment on the rise of individuality in modern society and how it has affected the commission to make disciples in North America.

Within the changing social context of modernity it will be seen that both the understanding and practice of discipleship has been profoundly affected. Individualism has radically reshaped the meaning and practice

100

of community as it relates to discipleship. The next article in the series will show that natural social networks which caused the church to readily form communities of believers in the first century rarely exist in modern society today.

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Dissertation Abstracts

Andrews University, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

Title: The Stairway to Heaven: A Critique of the Evangelical Gospel Presentation in North America

Name of researcher: Paul Brent Dybdahl

Adviser: Nancy J. Vyhmeister, Ed.D.

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This study focuses on the so-called "plan of salvation" or "gospel presentation" that evangelical Christians in the United States present to seekers who want to know how to be saved. There are currently three dominant presentations that are widely employed and emulated. The authors of each are well-known: D. James Kennedy, Bill Bright, and Billy Graham.

The major portion of my study involves a two-stage critique of these dominant evangelical gospel presentations: first, from the perspective provided by communication theory, and second, by comparing the presentations of Kennedy, Bright, and Graham with conversion accounts