

# CHURCH PLANTING: PAST AND PRESENT IN AMERICA!

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## Introduction

In the book, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America*, Martin E. Marty states, “While the story of native American religion began thousands of years before Europeans ‘discovered’ the New World, American religion as we know it was imported by European discoverers.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, it was the European immigrants’ faith that shaped the religious beliefs of North America in its modern form. As many of the early settlers left Europe, “for some, the dream meant escape from imprisonment, slavery, indebtedness, low status, or poverty. For others, it drew upon the lure of freedom from harassment and persecution, often of a religious character. Still others, tragically, were forced into slavery by their move to the New World. In almost every case, the people made sense of their movements by reference to religious stories and symbols.”<sup>3</sup>

Generally, most of the immigrants were Christians and brought their faith with them. The other two groups within the American migration story were Native Americans who worshipped God through nature and were regarded as savages that needed to be civilized and converted by the Europeans; and the African slaves who were to be converted so that they could be more submissive to their masters and therefore more productive in their labor. The religious divisions that existed in Europe with Protestants and Catholics were also brought to the New World.

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<sup>2</sup>Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 11.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. viii.

Protestants on their part were divided by creeds, movements, and national origins. These divisions were reflected in the colonies like Virginia, New England, Maryland and a host of others.

The overwhelming concern of the initial European immigrants was not evangelism or church planting, but to escape persecutions and create a space where they could live, worship and express their faith as they chose. Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez put it this way, “many of the colonists who crossed the Atlantic and eventually formed the first states of the new United States were people seeking religious freedoms that they were denied in Europe. These colonies were established by people who wanted space to develop their own specific vision of church and society, without the interference of a European government committed to its own state religion.”<sup>4</sup> Although many migrated to the United States for the sake of religious freedom, once established, they developed their own structures, often patterned after their home church and initiated oppressive practices to discriminate other religious organizations that may hold doctrines dissimilar to their orthodoxy. Religious immigrants were joined by other political and economic migrants who were also seeking opportunities in the New World.

### **Genesis of the American Church Culture**

The thesis of the following article is that much of the church planting models currently practiced in North America are deeply rooted in the ecclesiological practices of the Euro-American immigrants’ traditions rather than a careful biblical reflection on how to reach lost people through church planting.

### **Perpetuation of the American Ecclesiological Practice**

The 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries were not particularly peaceful in Europe. Europe was divided into religious and ethnic rivalries, and civil conflicts. With these divisions in Europe at

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<sup>4</sup>Mark Lau Branson & Juan F. Martinez, *Churches Culture & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), 13.

the time coupled with suspicious religious climate between the Catholics and Protestants on one hand, and among different Protestants on the other hand, the new immigrants to the United States were also importing their doctrinal and theological differences. “All of these immigrants valued their own familiar and distinctive theology, social relationships and worship practices. So churches and ethnicities were linked from colonial days, be they English Puritans in New England, Dutch Reformed in New York, English Anglicans in the mid-Atlantic or Swiss-German Mennonites in Pennsylvania. Most colonists arrived in the New World with church life thoroughly embedded in ethnic culture.”<sup>5</sup>

While the desire of most immigrants was to live among their own ethnic enclaves and not assimilate, the economic situation forced them to seek frontier jobs. It was the interaction within frontier that played a significant role in shaping America linguistically and culturally. As churches followed those at the frontier through preachers, evangelists, and lay leaders, new churches were planted but the new churches were not open to all groups. It was mostly along European ethnic and linguistic lines.

To illustrate this fact, the history and development of Baptists in the United States can be useful. Albert W. Wardin, Jr. wrote a book called, “*The Twelve Baptist Tribes in the USA: A Historical and Statistical Analysis*” In the book, Wardin listed different American Baptists as they have drifted apart from each other. The history of the division is traced not only to doctrinal differences, but to issues relating to race and class. Some major tribes include: ecumenical mainline, referring to American Baptist, which was formally Northern Baptist Convention after its separation from the Southern Baptist on the account of slavery.

The National Baptist was started primarily as a convention of Black Baptist churches because they could not join other Baptists due to their racial identity, although black slaves and ex-slaves have been converted to the Christian faith from the earliest Baptist witness in the

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

United States. For example, the first black to join a Baptist Church was in 1652 in Newport, Rhode Island in 1652,<sup>6</sup> yet, as Baptists grew, the blacks were segregated. Another Baptist tribe, “The Conservative Evangelical” (Northern), traces its root to Swedish Baptist General Conference, and it remained ethnic until the second half of the twentieth century.

To their credit, most of the Baptist tribes like The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have outgrown their geo-cultural and ethnicity bases. For instance, The Southern Baptist Convention, which was primarily a southern United States white-dominated church, is today, the largest evangelical Christian body in the United States, with membership of every ethnic and cultural groups in every region of North America. SBC also have more missionaries and church planters both in North America and abroad than any other evangelical church. However, ethnicity is still a crucial factor. Many of their local churches are still planted along ethnic lines; White, Black, Hispanic, Arab, Asians (Japanese, Koreans, Filipino etc).

The root of this ethnic church planting goes back to early European immigrants who on arrival to the United States, formed ethnic enclaves, “and the churches were usually one of the central underpinning of these new communities.”<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the fact that many of the Europeans share the same background, even similar theological persuasions, they formed churches according to their ethnic nationalities like Irish, Ukraine, and Italian among Catholics, and Germans, Sweden, and English among the Baptists.<sup>8</sup>

Branson and Martinez pointed out that just as the United States grew, there were succeeding waves of immigrants in the new cities, towns, and that neighborhoods went through ethnic transitions. Worship facilities were increasingly turned over or sold to the more recent arrived nationality or ethnic group as the previous occupier moved to a new neighborhood.

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<sup>6</sup>Albert W. Wardin, Jr. *The Twelve Baptist Tribes in the USA: A Historical and Statistical Analysis* (Nashville, Tenn.: Baptist History and Heritage Society, 2007), 21.

<sup>7</sup>Branson & Martinez, *Churches Culture & Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities*, 13.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 14

However, “There were occasions, in the interim, in which some new arrivals investigated an unfamiliar church, especially in Puritan, Methodist and Baptist congregations, but this overlap was usually temporary and did not change the culture of the church unless there was a complete handoff of the organization.”<sup>9</sup> Some of the ethnolinguistic and religious communities formed their own denominations which have remained till date.

Even dedicated mission organizations like the Moravians were not planting churches. They made disciples in the most unlikely and remote places in North America, Asia, and South America; and “were the first Protestants to put into practice the idea that evangelizing the lost is the duty of the whole church, not just a missionary society or a few individuals.”<sup>10</sup> According to J.D. Payne, the Moravians had a major limitation. “The major limitation of the Moravians’ missionary work was that, while they focused on making disciples, they did not focus on planting churches but merely connected [new] disciples with already-established churches [in Europe].”<sup>11</sup> The new converts were baptized and organized “into congregations . . . after the model of those at home (country), and these were diligently visited on the part of the missionary directorate, which formed an integral part of the [governing board of the Moravian church].”<sup>12</sup>

In subsequent years, other immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Pacific Islanders, in search of opportunities, or fleeing from oppressive regimes, economic hardship, war or seeking educational attainment started moving in to the United States. The American churches in pursuit of their understanding of the Great commission started evangelizing those they could; but upon the profession of faith by the new immigrants, they were often constituted into ethnic-specific congregations and placed under the leadership of the denominations. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in their book, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and*

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Kenneth B. Mulholland, “Moravians, Puritans, and the Modern Missionary Movement,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June 1999):222.

<sup>11</sup>J. D. Payne , *Discovering Church Planting: An Introduction to the What’s, Why’s, and How’s of Global Church Planting* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009). 256.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 255-256.

*Losers in Our Religious Economy* insist that “In 1960, about 75 percent of all foreign-born [in the United States] residents were born in Europe. By 2000, only 15 percent of the foreign-born were from Europe, 26 percent were from Asia, and 51 percent were from Latin America. Amidst all of these changes, however, many failed to notice that the new immigrants’ faiths developed congregations that were remarkably similar to the European immigrants of the past.”<sup>13</sup>

For example, immigrants from Nigeria to the United States between 1980 and 2005 were over 105,000. By 2005, according to Jahu J. Hanciles, “Nigerians accounted for 13 percent of African foreign-born population in the country—more than any other African nationality.”<sup>14</sup> Consequently, there has been an influx of Nigerian churches in major U.S.A. cities. One of these Nigerian churches, The Redeemed Christian Church of God Nigeria (RCCG), aka “Winners Chapel” first started in the United States, in 1992 in Detroit, Michigan. “It started as a fellowship group comprising twelve families led by James Fadele, an engineer employed by Ford Motors. Since then, RCCG parishes have multiplied and spread throughout the United States following the now familiar pattern in which Nigerian immigrants start a fellowship and later request the headquarters to send a pastor from Nigeria.”<sup>15</sup> Hanciles stated that in 2005, there were already 175 RCCG parishes in America with estimated membership in excess of ten thousand. Counting fifty parishes in Canada at the same period comprised RCCG—North America in 2005.<sup>16</sup> Although RCCG emphasizes global vision, their memberships are primarily Nigerians and other African diaspora who were already Christians before migrating to North America.

The same can be said of other African, Asian, Latino or South American immigrant churches. Douglas A Hall in his book, *The Cat & the Toaster: Living System Ministry in Technological Age*, noted what he observed in the city of Chicago. According to Hall, in the

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<sup>13</sup>Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Jersey: Rutgers University, 2008), 240.

<sup>14</sup>Jehu J. Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 355-356.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

mid—1960s, there were few Pentecostal believers who migrated to Boston from Puerto Rico via New York and started what he called, “some little, storefront churches.”

By storefront, he meant churches that are “renting or owning space in a room or room in a commercial building, usually at street level.”<sup>17</sup> However, Hall continued, a few years later, in 1969, when his friend became aware of these churches, they counted eleven Latino churches up and running in Boston. “A year and a half after that there were thirty-three Spanish-speaking in the city. Not only were churches springing up in Puerto Rican communities, but other groups of Latin Americas from many countries began planting networks of churches in similar way. Then churches started to spring up in the growing Haitian community. Then came the Brazilian churches.”<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, whether it is in reference to the evangelization of Native Americans or other immigrant groups that followed the Euro-Americans, the church from the beginning of the modern United States of America as a nation state has adopted the homogeneous principle of church planting even when the concept was not known or used because it was rooted in the nature, tradition, culture and constituent of the American history and migration pattern.

### **Modern Homogeneous Principle**

Homogeneous Principle as it applies to church planting and mission in general today is attributed to Donald McGavran, and the Church Growth Movement. McGavran was a Disciple of Christ missionary to India. He was born in 1897 and died in 1991. While in India he became interested in church growth, principally why some churches grow and others don't. In 1957, he returned to the United States where he established the Institute of Church Growth in Eugene, Oregon. He was joined by Alan Tippett, an anthropologist, and their ideas were published in *The*

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<sup>17</sup>Douglas A Hall, with Judy Hall & Steve Daman. *The Cat & the Toaster: Living System Ministry in Technological Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2010), xiii.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

*Church Growth Bulletin*. In 1965, McGavran became the dean of Fuller Theological Seminary's School of World Mission.

This position provided him a platform to popularize his ideas.<sup>19</sup> He employed social and behavioral sciences in understanding and prescribing his missiological principles. According to Ken Mulholland, McGavran investigated various people movements within society, and used his findings to identify principles for church growth.<sup>20</sup> His main emphasis was “the importance of allowing persons to become Christians without forcing them to cross cultural barriers.” Much of his ideas can be studied in his two earliest books, *The Bridges of God*, published in 1954, and *Understanding Church Growth*, first published in 1970.

Homogeneous in its common usage denotes properties “composed of similar or identical parts or elements, of uniform nature....”<sup>21</sup> But among church growth experts, it conveys the concept of society. McGavran defines ‘homogeneous unit’ as “a section of society in which all the members have some characteristic in common. The homogeneous unit is frequently a segment of society whose common characteristic is a culture or a language.”<sup>22</sup> The bond in the homogeneous unit could be anything like geographical, ethnic, linguistic, social, educational, vocational, economical, or a combination of several of these and other factors. Church Growth scholars argue that on the average, homogeneous churches grow more rapidly than the multi-ethnic ones. That “people like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, that “human beings do build barriers around their own societies.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ken Mulholland, “McGavran, Donald A. (1897-1991)” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. A. Scott Moreau ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 607.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>“Homogeneous” in Collins English Dictionary, ed. by Patrick Hanks (London: Collins, 1980), 702. See also Emetuche, “ISSUES IN PLANTING A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH” in in [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org) “Featured Articles” April, 2009 (A workshop paper presented at the 2008 Mosaix-Portland Conference).

<sup>22</sup>Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* 3rd, ed., C. Peter Wagner, ed. (Grand Rapids, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 69.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As I have argued elsewhere, “Church planters who embrace the homogeneous unit principle in the United States believe that a gathering of people who share an ethnic background, political beliefs, social standing, and so on, will be more comfortable with one another and, therefore, more successful together in forming a new congregation.”<sup>25</sup> The question remains, why do we employ the homogeneous unit principle in church planting? The primary reason is that it appeals to our fallen cultural sensitivity. We love to congregate with people of the same affinity; we resist integration across racial, ethnic, and class barriers because we cherish personal freedom and individualism.<sup>26</sup>

By adopting the homogeneous unit principle, the American church accepted a sociocultural reality in place of biblical principle. Michael Emerson and Christian Smith make the point that “white evangelicals’ cultural tools and racial isolation curtail their ability to fully assess why people of different races do not get along, the lack of equal opportunity, and the extent to which race matters in America.... [A] highly effective way to ensure the perpetuation of a racialized system is to deny its existence.”<sup>27</sup> Non-European immigrants, in reaction to the racialized culture of the American church, have planted immigrant and ethnic congregations. Many of these, on close inspection, are not more than sub-sociocultural organizations with myopic missionary agenda and which further segregate the people of faith.<sup>28</sup>

One of the consequences of this homogeneous principle is that while immigrant groups are planting churches, and many of those churches may be growing, the reality is that their growth is more of recycling Christians from their ethnic backgrounds and not pushing back darkness through discipling new converts from the field. For instance, Roger Finke and Rodney Stark used the Catholic Church in America to illustrate this point. “Despite the dismantling of

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<sup>25</sup>Damian Emetuche, “Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations” In *Racism: Christian Reflection* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2010), 77.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 89-90.

<sup>28</sup>Damian Emetuche, “Avoiding Racism in Starting New Congregations” In *Racism: Christian Reflection*, 78.

Catholic institutions, a collapse in religious vocations, and eroding membership commitment, the American Catholic Church has continued to gain members. [This is] fueled by steady flow of immigrants, with high fertility rates.”<sup>29</sup>

This growth is related to the immigrants from Latin America who were already Catholics before coming to the United States. Again Finke and Stark stated, “With immigration from Latin America exceeding 380,000 in 2000 and fertility rate for Hispanics approximately 50 percent higher than the national rate, the church should be primed for continual growth.”<sup>30</sup> Non-Christian immigrants are often neglected and are unengaged, and they have learned from the church by preserving their own, and building religious-ethnic enclaves to protect their faith and culture.

What Hanciles said of Europe can also be applied to the United States of America unless the church changes its missiological practice of homogeneous unit principle. Hanciles stated, “If the presence of sizable Muslim communities in many European countries is largely a function of colonialism and past immigration policies, the future of European Islam is strongly tied to demographic factors. Owing to religious values and youthful population, birthrate among Europe’s Muslims is significantly higher than among the native population.”<sup>31</sup> Percentage wise, there are more Asian immigrants to the United States than any other location. Because the American church practices self preservation and is unengaged, the non-Christian new arrivals have maintained their religious faith and identity. Consequently, eastern practices of Hindu, Buddhism, Islam and other related faiths have become common in our major urban centers.

### **Unanswered Questions?**

Some of the questions which the American church has not fully answered are these; why are we not reaching the lost? Why are we not having transformational effect on our cities? Why

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<sup>29</sup>Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-2005: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy*, 267.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West*, 257.

is it that many of our churches are closing? While I may not try to answer all the questions, I would insist that there was a time our churches were growing, the golden age of Christianity in the United States. We have had revivals, the Great Awakenings, and tent revivals. But it was a time when the United States was primarily a destination for European immigrants. The present day church is too fractured, too theologically and missiologically ill-equipped to reach a diverse society. The church has maintained its homogeneous practices without asking serious questions if it is theologically sound and can be justified in the New Testament.

The only people asking questions seem to be on the fringe of our missiological debate or those residing outside our theological and ecclesiological institutions. For example, Rene Padilla, an Argentine missiologist demands whether the principle of homogeneity can be justified biblically or theologically? According to him, “no amount of exegetical maneuvering can ever bring this approach in line with the explicit teaching of the New Testament.”<sup>32</sup> Padilla notes that in the New Testament: (1) the early church proclaimed the gospel to all people, whether Jew or Gentile, slave, or rich, without partiality. (2) Breaking down of barriers that separate people in the world was regarded as an essential aspect of the gospel, not merely as a result of it. (3) The Church grew across social and cultural barriers and there is no example of a homogenous church in the New Testament. (4) The apostles while rejecting assimilationist racism never contemplated the possibility of forming homogenous unit churches that would then express their unity in terms of inter-congregational relationship or fellowship.<sup>33</sup>

Judging from the New Testament perspectives, the church is a new community, a new race composed of people of all races, tribes and cultures (Eph. 2:11-18, Rev.7:9). Consequently, people of all races, traditions, and cultures, when regenerated in Christ and filled by the Holy Spirit can live, work, and worship together in harmony (Acts 2; 13). John Stott in his

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<sup>32</sup>Rene Padilla, *Mission Between The Times: Essays on The Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 31. See also Emetuche, “ISSUES IN PLANTING A MULTICULTURAL CHURCH” in [www.GlobalMissiology.org](http://www.GlobalMissiology.org) “Featured Articles” April, 2009.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

commentary on the book of Ephesians states, “Through Jesus Christ, who died for sinners and was raised from the death, God is creating something entirely new, not just a new life for individuals for a new society. Paul sees an alienated humanity being reconciled, a fractured humanity being united, even a new humanity being created. It is a magnificent vision.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Individualism: The Elephant in the Room**

However, because of our individualistic culture, we choose church, join church, run church, as if we are choosing restaurants or shopping for clothes. It is often a matter of personal preference. We may leave our neighborhoods and drive a long distance to attend worship because we love the style of music, the preacher, or the programs. We have forgotten that the church of Jesus Christ is a family, the family of God. Using the analogy of the family, we do not choose our parents, siblings, or the place of our birth. Siblings sometimes dislike each other and or have rivalries, but they also know that they have one family. Therefore, they learn to live together, work together and pursue the interest of the family regardless of their feelings. Individuals are shaped and reshaped within the family context as they relate to others. Children learn how to become less conceited and more loving and caring. As the Scripture demanded, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others” (Philippians 2:3-4). The point is that our greatest asset as a culture, “individualism,” is also the root of missiological ineffectiveness in reaching the lost and planting churches that will impact the North American world.

Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford in their book, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape our lives*, discussed this problem of individualism. It is not in reference to the inherent worth, dignity and sacredness of each person, but individualism that “focuses on personal achievement and material successes, believes that the social good automatically follows

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<sup>34</sup>John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 146.

from the individual pursuit of one's own interest."<sup>35</sup> The cultural idea that insists, "I need to be free to be me.' Freedom becomes the rationale for reducing any responsibilities perceived as limitations to my personal autonomy or fulfillment, whether those responsibilities are social, moral, religious, or family duties."<sup>36</sup> To this end, individualism becomes "the god of self," because "at the heart of individualism lies the belief that each individual person constitutes the center of one's universe."<sup>37</sup>

One of the challenges that is associated with this individualism is that "When I claim to be the primary reality of the universe, this requires that I see others either as a tool for maintaining my status or as a competitor for my place at the center."<sup>38</sup> Soong-Chan Rah observed, "The American Church, in taking its cues from Western, white culture, has placed at the center of its theology and ecclesiology the primacy of the individual. The cultural captivity of the church has meant that the church is more likely to reflect the individualism of Western philosophy than the value of community found in Scripture."<sup>39</sup>

This individualistic culture has not only shaped the Western culture from the beginning, but has "consequently shaped the American church, and reduces Christian faith to personal, private and individual faith."<sup>40</sup> Edgar H Schein speaking of organizational culture stated that culture beginnings and impact of founders spring from three sources: 1. beliefs, values, and assumptions of founders; 2. learning experiences of group members, and 3. new beliefs, values, and assumptions brought by new members. Also, the process of culture formation is the process of creating a small group: 1. single person (founder) has idea. 2. Founder brings in one or more

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<sup>35</sup>Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 28.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 29.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 42.

<sup>39</sup>Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church From Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2009), 29-30.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 30.

people and creates core group. They share vision and believe in the risk. 3. Founding group acts in concert, raises money, work space... and 4. Others are brought in and a history is begun.<sup>41</sup> This organizational model represents exactly how many of our churches are planted. An individual is convinced he has to plant a church; he shares his vision and recruits like minded persons, raises funds, and off he goes, and a church is born. But because we have not critically examined our own cultural baggage, and our worldview is unchallenged and unchanged by the Scripture, we continue to plant churches after our own cultural image.

We have neglected the fact that the church is a diverse, peculiar community. While it gathers for worship, celebration, and fellowship, “it is also a people alive to Christ on the pavement of the street (Luke 13:26; 24:13-16). The wider community of neighbors and neighborhood, in all its pain, struggle, joy, and identity, is also the ‘place’ where the church is to have its presence and practice service and love.”<sup>42</sup> As Gornik noted, “The community is not some place that is fled or avoided or condemned; it is the site of Christian incarnation. It is where the church’s faith is lived and seen by others, its life formed in such a way that Christ humiliated and exalted can be seen.”<sup>43</sup>

## **Conclusion**

In the New Testament, it was never an individual preference that dictated mission practices and church planting. Peter was forced by God to attend and minister to the family of Cornelius regardless of their cultural differences. Having been forced to leave the comfort of his stay in Joppa (Acts 10), Peter traveled to Caesarea, the city of Cornelius. He started his sermon with these words: “And he said to them, “You yourselves know how unlawful it is for a Jew to

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<sup>41</sup>Edgar H Schein, “Organizational Culture & Leadership” <http://www.tnellen.com/ted/tc/schein.html>

<sup>42</sup>Mark R. Gornik, *To Live in Peace: Biblical Faith and the Changing Inner City* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 72.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

associate with or to visit anyone of another nation, but God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean” (Acts 10: 28).

In verses 34 and 35 of the same Acts 10, when Peter started his message, his first sentence is instructive, “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” There was no instruction to plant a separate church for the Jews, and another for the Gentiles, but all were united in Christ. As Paul would insist in the book of Ephesus, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” (Ephesians 4: 4-6). Therefore, any church planting principle that is based on socio-cultural reality without definitive underpinning biblical warrant should be discarded, regardless of its appeal to our cherished cultural value.

The Apostle Paul whom we often referred to in regard to church planting principles and strategies never planted a church that is primarily Jewish or Gentile, an issue that made some Jewish converts accuse him of subverting cherished Jewish cultural and religious practices (Acts 13:48-51). It is instructive to note that it was not only the Jews who opposed Paul; when the gospel is contrary to the Gentile culture and religious practices, they too persecuted him and his missionary team. It happened to Paul and Barnabas at Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (Acts 14:1-23). Cultural design of the church became an issue that the church had to debate and decide in Acts 15. Paul could not plant churches in the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. The Scripture said, “And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:6-8). In Galatians 2, the question of personal preference and cultural practice created conflict between Paul and Peter.

Paul recorded the incident in these words,

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews” (Galatians 2:11-14)?

Therefore, in order to reach our world today, especially North America, the cultural gospel of personal preference and individuality must be discarded and the church must return back to the Gospel that is both confrontational and transformational. The Gospel proclamation of the New Testament church created a new community of the faithful in Christ regardless of their racial, socio-cultural, educational and economic standing in their societies. The same should be true in our society today because neither the Gospel nor its power has changed. The result is the same wherever Christ is faithfully proclaimed; a transformed life and culture, a new community of diverse, regenerated people in Christ Jesus.