THE APPLICATION OF CLASSIC CHURCH GROWTH
PRINCIPLES TO THE AMERICAN POSTMODERNIST

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THE APPLICATION OF CLASSIC CHURCH GROWTH PRINCIPLES TO THE AMERICAN POSTMODERNIST

While some may criticize Church Growth scholars of overemphasizing the human component of mission, these scholars uncovered many similarities in the ways peoples (primarily from the less evangelized part of the world) come to Christ. These similarities allowed Church Growth scholars to develop core principles for reaching people in these areas. According to Donald A. McGavran, “A Church Growth principle is a universal truth which, when properly interpreted and applied, contributes significantly to the growth of churches and denominations.”

These principles, even if they are effective in less evangelized parts of the world, might be adapted for the traditionally more evangelized peoples in America who are increasingly becoming less evangelized. Noting this trend, Frank Newport points out that the percentage of Americans who claim to be Christian declined by 14 percent from 1948 to 2008. Craig Van Gelder, who observes the rapid changes in America toward a post-evangelized society, believes that “North America needs to be treated as a mission field in the same way that . . . the West [has] approached much of the rest of the world for


the past several centuries.”³ This paper will consider how classic Church growth principles apply to the postmodernists in America. By studying the growing postmodern unchurched community around them, pastors in America will have a better understanding of what if any changes can be made to obtain a contextually appropriate ministry. The thesis of this paper is that some classic Church Growth principles can help churches reach Americans in the postmodern age.

C. Peter Wagner states, “church growth is complex. There is no way it can be reduced to a simple formula or a canned program.”⁴ Given the complexity of Church Growth, this paper will only highlight some of the principles which seem most relevant to the task of developing growing churches in the postmodern age. This paper will begin with an analysis of these principles including search theology versus harvest theology, the emphasis of numerical growth, reasons for the lack thereof, bridges connecting peoples, focus on peoples, the homogenous unit principle, and the receptivity principle.

The second section will discuss the application of Church Growth principles to Postmodernists. This section will begin with a comparison between modernists and Postmodernists followed by a discussion on the cultural shifts in America. Then, Church growth principles will be applied to the task of developing a missional church. Before making concluding remarks, this paper will discuss ways to effectively share one’s faith with postmodernists and outline a biblical approach to growing a particular church.


An Analysis of Church Growth Principles

Search Theology Versus Harvest Theology

To begin the analysis of church growth principles, it seems appropriate to start with what McGavran calls “search theology” and “harvest theology.”

Whereas search theology focuses on the task of finding non-believers and sharing the Gospel with them, harvest theology is focused on the number of converts who are evangelized through the search process. Even though McGavran supports efforts involved in searching for potential converts, his goal is to shift much of this effort toward people who are receptive so that a maximum harvest in terms of conversion growth can occur.

In response to McGavran’s argument, pastors of local churches in America must ask how this may apply to them if they agree that his position has merit. To begin with, local pastors may find that those who surround their church are completely unreceptive. If this is the case, McGavran would likely encourage the local church to continue engaging in the search process assuming that they had done everything in their power to move beyond the search to the harvest. But this is exactly the point at which those pastors in America, whose churches are becoming increasingly surrounded by the unchurched postmodernists, must consider.

While a harvest may indeed not occur in a major way, McGavran’s emphasis on a theology of the harvest forces churches and their leaders to consider their current practices to make sure that they are not getting in the way of the harvest themselves.

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6 Ibid., 26.
McGavran would never want a church to find comfort in proclamation that never delivers results without at least taking every precaution to attain God-glorifying results.\textsuperscript{7}

Furthermore, he believes that most churches which exhibit stagnation in their growth are stagnating because of their “faulty procedures.”\textsuperscript{8} This focus on results along with the belief the lack of results is most likely due to human error are the core components of “harvest theology” which places emphasis on numerical growth. The following section will examine this emphasis for its biblical and practical merits.

**Emphasis on Numerical Growth**

In *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran reveals the major precept of the Church Growth Theory: “Church growth follows where Christians show faithfulness in finding the lost.”\textsuperscript{9} This emphasis on numerical growth is echoed by James Emory White who says that a church’s faithfulness to the mission of God can be measured by their numerical growth. White believes that “benchmarks should be established to determine whether the mission of reaching the lost people and turning them into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ is being established.”\textsuperscript{10} This business approach to God’s mission which is guided by a determined goal to procure the right numbers may be somewhat misguided. Gailyn Van Rheenen accuses the Church Growth Movement

\textsuperscript{7}Ibid., 27. McGavran states, “Mere search is not what God wants, God wants his lost children found.”

\textsuperscript{8}Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{9}Ibid., 6.

\textsuperscript{10}James Emory White, *Rethinking the Church: A Challenge to Creative Redesign in an Age of Transition*, rev. and exp. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 36.
(CGM) of over-emphasizing the practical, human components of mission while neglecting the will of God for a particular which is guided strictly by the Scriptures.\textsuperscript{11}

The Bible clearly teaches that not all attempts to proclaim the Gospel in a particular community will prove successful. Even Jesus was not welcome in one Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-55). Furthermore, he seemed to foresee that some peoples may not be willing to listen to the gospel message when he told the disciples to “shake the dust off your feet when you leave [an unwelcoming] town, as a testimony against them” (Luke 9:5 NIV). In Pisidian Antioch, Paul and Barnabas followed these directions when the Jewish community of that city refused to accept their message (Acts 13:51).

Thomas White and John M. Yeats deliver another criticism of the over-emphasis on numerical growth. They believe that primacy must be given to the “holiness of the congregation.”\textsuperscript{12} While some Church Growth scholars may react to this by stating that faithful church members engage in evangelism, the issue seems to be over the primary focus of the church. Is the church to focus itself on God and obedience to His will (including the Great Commission and Great Commandment), or is the church suppose to focus directly at increasing its membership?

Charles R. Taber criticizes McGavran and White’s view that numerical growth is the definitive component in determining one’s obedience to the Great Commission:

\begin{quote}
[I]t is cruel and unbiblical to suggest that any church whatever its demographic situation, is failing to do its job if it is not increasing in membership. What about churches, by no means least vital, which serve communities where the only non-
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{12}Thomas White and John M. Yeats, \textit{Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity} (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 63.
Christians are hardened resisters? What about those which are fulfilling a crucial spiritual role in communities which are demographically stagnant or dying? It may take courage to stay in such a place than to move to a ‘successful’ situation.¹³

Taber’s comment strikes right at the heart of the struggle of many American pastors to apply Church Growth principles within their local churches especially when they are unsure of what changes are necessary for growth and whether or not their particular local community will be receptive even if changes are made. A church that is not growing may well have some areas that can be changed so that growth will happen, or they may be facing external pressures that prevent growth.

Thankfully, many church growth scholars, according to Wagner, now concede that any particular church may or may not grow and yet still remain in the will of God.¹⁴ While this may be so, pastors who seek advice through the study of books on the subject of church growth will still encounter statements that insinuate that a faithful church is a growing church. For example, Thom S. Rainer, in 2005, states that “any healthy church should be reaching at least one person with the gospel every two weeks.”¹⁵ Rainer’s statement may only serve to humiliate a faithful servant of God whose task is far harder in a resistant area while at the same time applauding another servant who happens to be in a more receptive area. Even so, every pastor needs to ponder the reasons behind the lack of growth in his particular church to make sure that he is doing everything possible to fulfill the Great Commission. In the next section, reasons for non-growth will be

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¹⁴C. Peter Wagner, Leading Your Church to Growth (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984), 16.

¹⁵Thom S. Rainer, Breakout Churches: Discover How to Make the Leap (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 20.
reviewed critically to help pastors further develop an in-depth understanding of how to grow a church.

**Reasons for the Lack of Numerical Growth**

**Attitude.** In *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, McGavran argues that a church’s growth or the lack thereof is directly related to the attitude toward growth: “A major factor in the slow growth of the church [is] a massive build-up of defensive thinking and rationalizations.”\(^{16}\) Such defeatist mentalities are indeed unbiblical if they arise from a lack of faith. While one may disagree with McGavran on the pervasiveness of negative attitudes and self-defensive positions on church growth, it does seem plausible that some churches and church leaders may need to spend some time in prayer to discern whether or not they are actively pursuing God’s will for them. On the other hand, McGavran does seem to go too far when he argues that negative attitudes toward growth explain the lack thereof because “no theological reasons” can explain the lack of growth.\(^{17}\) After stating this position, McGavran appears to contradict himself when he makes the argument that sin and the lack of love for one’s neighbor (both theological reasons) can cause growth to cease.\(^{18}\)

**Cultural Blindness.** Another contributing factor to non-growth which is recognized by McGavran is cultural blindness. The CGM bases much of its principles on the scientific analysis of many people which delivered certain results which they in turn

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\(^{18}\)Ibid., 8.
use to determine the reasons for a church’s growth or decline. While some may criticize the use of science in spiritual matter, churches may need to reassess their current evangelism and assimilation methods to ensure that they are the most effective way to evangelize within their communities. Through surveys and demographics, Church Growth scholars have challenged church leaders to better understand their target communities as well as make more informed decisions on how to reach them. In keeping with this challenge, churches must also reassess their current practices for cultural relevance while preserving biblical faithfulness.

**Spiritual Reasons.** While the application of scientific inquiry may hold some positive influence for churches, the CGM does seem to downplay those aspects of church growth which are of a spiritual nature. This is not to say that they deny the existence of spiritual reasons for non-growth, but they certainly spend little time assessing these matters. McGavran declares, “A denomination does not lack growth because of exceeding sinfulness. In most cases, that simply is not true.”¹⁹ This statement seems to downplay the necessity of maintaining the holiness of God and His people in achieving numerical growth that glorifies God.

While it may be true that some churches can grow without maintaining a proper relationship with God, it does not seem likely that such growth is based on authentic conversions. Discerning the authenticity of a church’s growth is where the CGM’s use of science breaks down. This is not to say that scientific studies do not have usefulness in aiding church growth; rather, it means that churches must also be assessed

spiritually to make sure (to the degree possible) that their growth is from authentic conversions.

**Lack of Prayer.** Because McGavran believes that God desires all churches to grow, he argues for the need to seek God in prayer for that growth to occur. Through prayer, McGavran states, “Unprecedented growth of a magnitude hitherto unknown would take place.”20 Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson find that growing churches were committed to prayer combined with action related to those prayers.21 Few evangelicals deny the importance of prayer especially when it comes to a movement of God resulting in numerical growth. Nevertheless, this does not mean that prayer will automatically lead to numerical growth at any particular church and at any particular time. Now that the reasons for non-growth have been surveyed, discussion will not turn the priority of evangelism within the CGM.

**Primacy of Evangelism**

**Evangelism and Social Responsibility.** In the debate on the primacy of evangelism in relation to social responsibility among Christians, McGavran argues social responsibility is a “fruit” produced in those who have been evangelized.22 Even so, he does recognize that social responsibility must take precedence over evangelism in certain rare situations such as the civil rights movement in the 1960s.23 Wagner agrees that social

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20Ibid., 30.


22McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 22

23Ibid., 23.
responsibility must be a part of the Christian witness, but he aligns himself with McGavran’s position that evangelism must be given priority.\textsuperscript{24} To support his position, Wagner points out that social ministries only help resolve temporal problems while evangelism helps solve the eternal problem that humanity faces should they remain out of fellowship with God.\textsuperscript{25} Alan R. Tippett, in apparent agreement, states that social ministries “are no substitute for the diffusion of the salvation experience and for the incorporation into a fellowship of those who have experienced salvation.”\textsuperscript{26}

Tippett appears to place evangelism and discipleship above social ministries even though he maintains the position that the church does have a biblical responsibility to perform social ministries. His argument for the primacy of evangelism and discipleship seems to be due to his belief that social ministries are the result of the salvation and growth experiences within a particular believer’s life. While Tippett’s assessment may apply to the individual Christian, the church itself is engaged in the ongoing work of evangelism presumably with the help of a maturing membership. Such a membership must certainly practice both evangelism and social ministry if they are to maintain the Christian witness presented by Christ. As Wagner says, social ministries in connection


\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 106.

with evangelism “can open hearts to the gospel.” Tippett seems to agree when he points out that an evangelical witness that is not incarnational is not likely to produce converts.

Ebbie C. Smith goes so far as to say that “churches must engage in social action.” While he is not advocating that churches focus exclusively on social action, he does want churches to seek balance between their responsibilities to evangelize and serve their communities. This balanced approach to church growth can also be seen in the contextual model proposed by Taber. Taber seeks to avoid being trapped by the individualization and privatization of the faith that some argue are connected to the practice of focusing primarily on the verbal proclamation. He also maintains a strong emphasis on evangelism alongside social ministries where both are essential parts of the Christian witness.

Taber’s contextualization model seems to maintain a steadfast commitment to evangelism while also looking to the context for guidance on how best to present the gospel message. He observes that Jesus Himself was fully immersed in the culture He was trying to reach. He observes that Jesus’ message and lifestyle “touched directly the needs of persons: it was sight for the blind, healing for the sick, and freedom for captives, forgiveness for sinners, [and] respect for the despised.” Together, Taber uses these

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30Taber, “Contextualization,” 118-120.

31Ibid., 120-121. Taber also believes that Jesus “address[ed] social, political, and economic issues.” While this may be true, many debate exactly how Jesus interactions with these matters apply in today’s world.
aspects of Jesus’ ministry to develop an incarnational approach to the Christian witness where Christians live out the example of Christ especially among in their own particular context. Living out Christ’s example will include both a verbal and non-verbal witness.

Observing the importance of social services done in connection with evangelism, Hunter develops an evangelistic model that invites non-believers to engage in Christian social ministries as a means of introducing them to the loving God who sent His Son.\textsuperscript{32} This model may have relevance in the postmodern unchurched culture of America especially among those who perceive themselves as not needing the ministries of the church. Evangelistic models that focus on performing social services with the goal of gaining a listening audience to the gospel message among those served may need to consider Hunter’s model among those communities that seem to either not need or not desire social ministries.

If Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer III are correct in saying that “the church is losing influence in culture” especially in “relating to their local community and the younger generation,” a church that focuses more of its attention on social ministries and invites the community to participate may find more and more unchurched people becoming less resistant to the gospel message.\textsuperscript{33} Even so, many worry that such an approach will only end in one’s focus being taken off evangelism altogether. McGavran’s desire to keep the church focused on evangelism can also be observed in his view of the

\textsuperscript{32}George G. Hunter III, \textit{The Contagious Congregation: Frontiers in Evangelism and Church Growth} (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 49.

relationship of discipleship and evangelism. The following section will review McGavran’s position on this matter and offer some analysis.

**Quality and Quantity.** Besides giving evangelism more prominence than social responsibility, McGavran also disagrees with those who feel quality (discipleship) must been given primary emphasis. Those who support this argument believe that producing quality disciples leads to quantity (evangelism). One could say that disciples who are truly mature and completely committed to following Christ would certainly also be evangelistic in keeping with their Lord’s example. Even so, McGavran’s view that quality (discipleship) must not be separated from quantity (evangelism) may indeed be the better way to approach these two biblical purposes for several reasons.34

First, Christ combined the two in preparation of the Disciples. He even sent them out to share the Gospel long before they reached maturity as seen in their denial of Christ shortly before His death (Mark 6:7-12; 14:50). Second, the Lord clearly wanted to spend time with the Disciples to help them learn the deep truths of God, but He also went out with them among the unconverted masses to preach the Gospel. Third, while discipleship must occur after one’s conversion, one should not separate evangelism from it because sharing one’s faith is a part of learning to follow Christ.

In keeping with McGavran’s position that evangelism and discipleship should remain together, Smith argues for what he calls “effective evangelism:”

Effective evangelism means proclaiming by word and deed that Jesus Christ is God and Savior to the end that men and women accept Him, become his disciples (followers), and responsible members of one of his churches. To be effective, evangelism must complete this entire cycle. The goal of effective evangelism is

responsible, reproducing disciples of Jesus in responsible, reproducing congregations.\textsuperscript{35}

Smith’s definition of evangelism allows for evangelism to remain the primary emphasis of the church even while holding the church accountable for its responsibilities to disciple its membership. It also avoids the trap of reducing a church’s evangelistic work to simply a matter of gaining converts and expands its task to retaining converts who in turn produce more converts.

While McGavran and other church growth scholars prioritize evangelism, their goal is to make disciples who are active in their faith and in their church.\textsuperscript{36} As a whole, these scholars are adverse to any proclamation evangelism which aims solely at decision making. Evangelism, according to W. Charles Arn, is typically focused on a momentary decision and thereby defines a church’s success by the number of decisions.\textsuperscript{37} This is biblically faulty because a successful conversion should lead to a lifestyle change.

**The Bridges**

The previous sections revealed the CGM’s goal for numerical growth of the church of disciple-making disciples. To achieve this goal, McGavran pioneered several principles which he believes are essential to grow a church. His book, *The Bridges of God*, was the original exposition of principles and theories associated with the CGM. The title of this work may have been chosen by McGavran because he believes that the task of

\textsuperscript{35} Smith, *Balanced Church Growth*, 38.

\textsuperscript{36} McGavran, *Ten Steps for Church Growth*, 11.

finding “bridges” to be the primary obstacle to planting new churches.\textsuperscript{38} To understand the meaning of McGavran’s term “bridges,” Smith examines the term and provides this definition: “Bridges of God are . . . avenues of communication and relationship over which the Gospel flows from one person to another and from one group to another.”\textsuperscript{39} To find these “bridges,” the church must look carefully at the peoples that live in their community. While any given community may be homogenous and therefore have similar bridges for the spreading of the Gospel, the forces of globalization are quickly changing the face of communities. As McGavran observes, a “nation is usually a conglomerate of people, sometimes bound together by language, religion and culture and sometimes divided by just these factors.”\textsuperscript{40}

Before a church can properly communicate God’s message in their local context to a particular people group, they must first overcome the tendency to become inwardly focused and “sealed off . . . by [their] own language, . . . culture, . . . education, or wealth, or residence.”\textsuperscript{41} Once a church has made the necessary changes to the cultural aspects of their ministry to increase the effectiveness of their evangelical witness, they need to learn the worldview of their target community so that they can properly discern the strengths and weaknesses of that worldview. For example, a pastor, who desires to reach postmodernists, may observe that one notable strength of postmodernism which


\textsuperscript{39}Smith, \textit{Balanced Church Growth}, 30.


\textsuperscript{41}McGavran and Arn, \textit{How to Grow a Church}, 5.
rejects the modernistic approach to truth via the scientific method, is the increased openness to the spiritual realm. While this causes postmodernists to seek out truths from a plethora of religions, it does allow them to at least engage Christianity without the requirement for evidence that can be derived from the five natural senses.

Another aspect of the postmodern worldview that may be a point of reference for the evangelist may be the quest for significance which may have arisen from the forces of globalization and the breakdown in familial relationships. When one considers the postmodern contention that truth is founded in the autonomous self, one quickly sees that the postmodernist becomes unable to find the ultimate meaning for their life. While they may be willing to develop their spirituality, they ultimately find themselves only generating an experience since they are unable to ascribe to truth to an outside source, transcendent or otherwise. The result of such a stance is a lack of meaning and purpose, both of which can be given to the postmodernist who comes to understand the Word of God and accept Christ. The pastor, who endeavors to understand the postmodern worldview, would likely benefit from McGavran’s contention that the Gospel is communication through relational bridges.

**Focus on People**

Given the CGM’s focus on potential bridges for evangelism within human relationships, Church Growth is largely centered on the unconverted people they want the church to reach. This focus on people can be seen in the mission statement of growing churches like Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, California and Willow

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Creek Community Church in Barrington, Illinois. Saddleback’s mission statement is “to bring people to Jesus and membership in his family, develop them to Christlike maturity, and equip them for their ministry in the church and life mission in the world, in order to magnify God’s name.”\textsuperscript{43} Similarly, Willow Creek’s mission statement is “to turn irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Christ.”\textsuperscript{44}

Lyle E. Schaller applauds the effort of these churches who focus on people instead of the “institution.”\textsuperscript{45} Gary E. Gilley affirms their commitment to evangelism, but he believes a marketing strategy that uses “[f]elt needs as a porthole” to reach non-believers may end up reshaping the Gospel by taking the focus off the need for repentance.\textsuperscript{46} White and Yeats also see a problem occurring when the focus on people extends to allowing them to remain consumers without any development of institutional loyalty to their church. They remark, “[T]he true end to consumer-driven religion is an individual pick-and-choose religion that finds no ties binding one to messy relationships and institutions.”\textsuperscript{47}

Those who support the use of marketing techniques usually mention the importance of being culturally relevant and understanding the concerns and perspectives of the target population. Since marketing is designed to uncover needs and determine

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{43} Rick Warren, \textit{The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message & Mission} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 107.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Willow Creek Community Church, “What does Willow Believe?” [on-line]; accessed 15 June 2010; available from http://www.willowcreek.org/story.aspx?storyid=35; Internet.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Gary E. Gilley, \textit{This Little Church Went to Market: Is the Modern Church Reaching Out or Selling Out?} (Webster, NY: Evangelical, 2005), 25.
\end{itemize}
how to match one’s product with those needs, certain dangers can quickly surface when marketing is used as a guiding method for church growth. David W. Henderson, a critic of marketing strategy being used by churches, expresses a common concern that such techniques reduce the Gospel to a product being sold in a market:

For [one] to ‘sell’ Christianity is to make it something far different and far less than it is. It is not an option; it is a claim. It is not a way to have needs met; it is a way of life. When [one] market[s] the faith by reducing its claims to a set of comforting and nonthreatening benefits that make it easy to come to Christ, one strip[s] it of its substance and warps its intentions. It becomes nothing more than a cut-rate item on the self-help shelf.\(^4\)

Henderson contends that the Gospel is the truth about Christ and not a divine plan to meet the present earthly needs of people. While this does not mean that God has no concerns for human suffering, it does suggest that God’s primary concern is to deliver the salvation message to people. This goal is typically shared by those who preach a felt-needs gospel as a means to develop an audience for the salvation message. This being so, both sides of the felt-needs gospel discussion have the same goal. But questions remain as to whether or not such an approach is biblically faithful.

On the positive side, the felt-needs gospel has proven to be an effective means for drawing people from the unchurched community because the approach itself has been designed through careful study of those they are trying to reach. Such an approach does show a needed concern for all churches to know the people they are trying to reach. On the negative side, using felt needs to draw a crowd for a gospel presentation may distort the Gospel by teaching people that the message centers on meeting their earthly needs.

\(^4\)White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 141.

Furthermore, it may also allow the potential convert to approach God, His word, and the church as a consumer. As consumers, people will maintain their own definition of what is best for them and search what they believe to be the best way to meet their present needs. In short, consumers are driven by the quest for comfort and not the search for truth.

**The Homogenous Unit Principle**

By focusing on people, McGavran developed the homogenous unit principle (HUP) which became a central component to the CGM, but it also may be its most debated proposition. Smith objects to calling this a principle and prefers to call it a strategy because a “strategy, in contrast to a principle, is a means to an end. Strategies can be altered or set aside as situations demand.”

C. René Padilla, who does not advocate the use of the HUP, argues that the biblical focus is on the unity of the gathered church and evangelistic techniques used by Paul did not specifically focus on any particular demographic. Padilla concludes, “No missionary methodology can be built without a solid biblical theology.” While Padilla certainly makes a strong point, the recognition that people encounter the Gospel the first time as sinners and need maturing after conversion certainly provides a biblical explanation for why churches tend to be homogenous. Furthermore, the Jerusalem council did recognize differences between Jewish and Gentile Christians and allowed the latter to practice their faith in a slightly different way (Acts 15).

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51 Ibid.
Defending the HUP, McGavran states that he is not condoning racism or segregation; rather, he simply understands that people feel more comfortable and seem to be more open to the Gospel when they are among people like themselves.⁵² In support of McGavran and Wagner, C. Wayne Zunkel observes that people “in the New Testament and today . . . do the best job of sharing their faith with the people they know best.”⁵³ Church Growth scholars like Zunkel perceive that most people tend to congregate in the churches whose membership shares certain commonalities with them. Even so, McGavran still maintains the importance of remaining true to Scripture, but he also observes that every church has certain cultural components intertwined with their particular Christian practice. These cultural “barriers” must be removed, according to McGavran, if they interfere with a church’s ability to evangelize because they are not the “biblical barriers” outlined in Scripture.⁵⁴

But to what extent must the church remove cultural barriers? Just because people tend to congregate among those with whom they share the most commonalities, does this mean that the church should not strive to include everyone within its community? If one allows the HUP to move from a church planting understanding to a foundational component of ecclesiology, one may cause the church to lose its biblical witness. As Ralph H. Elliot expresses, the church that remains homogenous may remain

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⁵²McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 174


committed to “sinful prejudices,” maintain an unbiblical preference for one group within the community over another and fail to reach out to the poor.\textsuperscript{55}

**The Receptivity Principle**

Another central component of the CGM that arises from their focused study of people groups is the receptivity principle. From his studies, McGavran observes that individuals, peoples, and even whole societies could at given time vary in the degree to which they are receptive to the Gospel.\textsuperscript{56} Among the various causes of receptivity listed by McGavran, establishing new residences and changes in the religious climate seem to have bearing on the task of applying this principle to postmodern culture in America.\textsuperscript{57}

Eddie Gibbs, like many church growth scholars, applies the receptivity principle to church planting methodology: “It is an axiom of church growth thinking that highest priority must be given to presenting the [G]ospel to the receptive rather than wasting effort in futile attempts to convince the resistant.\textsuperscript{58} While McGavran and Gibbs both apply the principle of receptivity to decisions related to where the best place to evangelize is to be found, local pastors in America must remain focused on the people in their immediate sphere irrespective of their receptivity.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{55}Ralph H. Elliot, “Dangers of the Church Growth Movement: Is It Possible to Maintain Our Identity as the Church and Be a ‘Successful’ Institution at the Same Time?” *Christian Century* 98 (1981): 801.

\textsuperscript{56}McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 180.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 185


\textsuperscript{59}McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 188-91.
When applying the principle of receptivity, pastors must be aware of the dangers of “irrelevance and syncretism” according to Lesslie Newbigin. 60 Irrelevance will occur when a church refuses to make changes that allow it to be relevant to the culture of those it is trying to evangelize. Syncretism, on the other hand, will occur when the dedication to sound biblical theology is superseded by the desire to be relevant. Robert Weathers observes that those churches who become culturally relevant without a sound theological foundation can “offer the world nothing that it does not already have in its society void of substance and truth.” 61 In the process of becoming relevant, churches must maintain a steadfast commitment to the Scriptures lest they become syncretistic.

**Church Growth Principles Applied to Postmodernists**

Whereas the previous section identified some major Church Growth principles, this segment of the paper will apply those principles to the task of growing churches in the postmodern age. To approach this subject, the postmodern culture of America will be considered so that bridges can be discovered and the potential for receptivity can be maximized. While the focus of the section is on postmodern people in general, the goal is to learn how to reach them effectively while maintaining a witness that is consistent with Scripture.


Modernity and Postmodernity

Modernity, according to Lewis A. Drummond, is a worldview that assumes that truth can be derived through logic and “defined . . . on a quite materialistic basis.” He connects this assumption of modernity with the rise of humanism which exalts the individual as the interpreter of truth through one’s experience. The humanist reaction to modernism rejects the objectivity of modernism that was applied to human beings, the Bible, etc. and allows humans to be separated from the surrounding materialistic world which is still viewed objectively. This humanistic view of reality serves as a central component of the postmodern desire “to grow in self-awareness and self-fulfillment, to become self-actualized, [and] to grow to [one’s] full potential.”

By separating self from objective reality, postmodernists see people as mere interpreters of reality whereby each person’s reality is self-defined. Reality that is defined by the individual remains true only for that particular individual and may be redefined by another individual according to his own interpretation. Stanley J. Grenz agrees with this interpretation of postmodernism, and he adds that postmodernists believe “reality will be ‘read’ differently by each knowing self that encounters it. This means that there is no meaning in the world, no transcendent center to reality as a whole.” The end result of

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63 Ibid., 18-19.
this postmodern view of reality is the elimination of God and his replacement by the individual.

The postmodern understanding of self as the determiner of truth may be why they “are sensitive to overstatements that come across more as dogmatism than as someone still in the process of learning and growing.” Given this sensitivity, the church that wishes to be received by the postmodernist may want to engage them in a dialogue whereby the speaker and the audience are both in the process of learning God’s Word. Allowing the Bible to stand by its own merit and interacting with it as a learner may help postmodernists focus on the message of the Bible instead of immediately getting agitated by the minister who may be perceived as exalting himself or even his interpretation of the Scripture.

Shifts in American Culture

The move from modernism to postmodernism in America has occurred alongside a large shift in America toward an increasingly unevangelized nation with more and more people leaving the church or growing up without ever attending church. Given this shift, the church must realize that it needs to adapt its approach. These unchurched people are largely ignorant of Christian teachings so the Church must respond by starting with the basics. Furthermore, the Church may also have to focus more of its efforts on providing an incarnational witness so that the unchurched can see a living demonstration of Christ and the Scriptures. To help the church better understand the changing context in American culture, the following section will examine some cultural factors then highlight

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some preferences that the unchurched have for the church that might succeed in reaching them.

**Preoccupation with this Life.** The first cultural factor to be studied is the temporal focus of postmodernists. George Hunter III observes that Americans are now more focused on this life with very little thought given to their eventual demise.67 This separation of the temporal existence of the individual within the postmodern worldview seems to be a carry-over from the modern worldview. Peter Augustine Lawler argues, “The modern individual aims to create in this world—not through grace but through human work—what God promised in the next.”68 According to Ed Stetzer, Richard Stanley, and Jason Hayes, 40 percent of the unchurched in their twenties say that they never consider their eternal destination while 59 percent of those over thirty say the same.69

Assuming these statistics are valid, current evangelical approaches that focus on eternal life as a means to open a spiritual discussion may have to be redesigned if the audience has little concern about their eternal destiny. An example of this approach is found in the FAITH Evangelism Strategy. In this strategy, the presenter begins by stating that one “cannot have eternal life or heaven without God’s forgiveness.”70 Instead, Mark

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70David Apple and Doug Williams, *FAITH Sunday School Evangelism Strategy: FAITH*
Mittelberg, who serves at Willow Creek Community Church, suggests the gospel message be delivered based on the unchurched cultures preoccupation with this life.\(^{71}\) This approach, however, is criticized by G. A. Pritchard who studies Willow Creek’s practice of focusing on the felt-needs on people. He argues that their strategy results from their faulty “theology that teaches that Christianity will bring fulfillment.”\(^{72}\) Rainer, however, argues that effective evangelism must be aware and seek to meet people’s temporal desire for fulfillment.\(^{73}\) To properly understand the appropriate place of fulfillment in the Christian life, one must remain faithful to biblical theology. When one examines Christ’s teachings in Matthew 10:34 and John 15:19-20, one finds the Jesus promises suffering to the Christian in this life.\(^{74}\) Given this, Pritchard’s contention that preaching that one can find fulfillment of one’s felt needs is faulty theology seems to be well-founded. Agreeing with Pritchard, White and Yeats also express concerns that those preachers who focus on fulfillment tend to ignore other teachings of the Bible that are less positive such as the “Christian’s reward is in heaven.”\(^{75}\)

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\(^{71}\) Mark Mittelberg and Bills Hybels, *Building a Contagious Church: Revolutionizing the Way We View and Do Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 54.


\(^{73}\) Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 219-20. Rainer identifies the desire for fulfillment in relationships or the lack as a major unmet need for many Americans. While he may be correct that evangelicals must be aware of a core motivational issue, one must ask to what extent this factor should guide the presentation of the Gospel. The evangelist’s task is to introduce Christ to people in the midst of their suffering. While one may help relieve another’s suffering even while proclaiming the gospel, one must remember only Christ can truly minister to the deep needs of the human predicament.

\(^{74}\) cf. John 16:33; 2 Cor 1:8; 2 Tim 3:12; Heb 11:35-39; Rev 2:10.

\(^{75}\) White and Yeats, *Franchising McChurch*, 145.
Postmodernists, who are focused intently on this life, may be little concerned about heaven and much less concerned about delaying the fulfillment of their desires to the next life. These increasingly secularized people, according to Hunter, attach their guilt to someone else or seek the services of a professional counselor to alleviate their sense of guilt. In doing so, they become more driven by their doubts than their guilt because there seems to be no solution for doubts in a pluralistic world.\textsuperscript{76} Since pluralists have relativized truth at least when it is personally applied to them, they come to “doubt [as] more noble, more intellectually honest, than belief. To really believe something, in this present context, is seen as bigotry and arrogance.”\textsuperscript{77}

Another shift, observed by Hunter, is the perception of the American church as irrelevant to the lives of people. This belief is driven, he argues, by the personal experiences of many secularized people who “experienced an apparently irrelevant church and generalized to all churches from that experience.”\textsuperscript{78} This perception could also be connected to a growing sense among the unchurched that Christian people tend to be more concerned about being religious than simply “loving God and loving people.”\textsuperscript{79} J. Russell Hale proposes that some unchurched people may be more offended by the presenter of the Gospel than by the Gospel itself.\textsuperscript{80} If this is the case, the Gospel

\textsuperscript{76}Hunter, \textit{How to Reach Secular People}, 46-47.

\textsuperscript{77}Jim Peterson, \textit{Church without Walls} (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992), 180.

\textsuperscript{78}Hunter, \textit{How to Reach Secular People}, 48.

\textsuperscript{79}Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, \textit{Lost and Found}, 43. These authors point out that 77 percent of the unchurched feel this way.

communicator must make sure that his temporal life matches the Christian life expounded by the Gospel.

**The Quest for Community.** Another cultural factor in America that affects the church’s task of evangelization is the growing desire for community due to the breakdown in relationships and the increasing busyness of the population.\(^{81}\) This breakdown of relationships is quite apparent in neighborhoods across America where neighbors often do not even know those who live right beside them. Leonard Sweet observes this tendency to wall oneself in one’s home away from the chaos of the world: “Home is now a hiding place, not a gathering place. Doorbell rings bring anxiety, not anticipation. [People] run from, not to, knocks on the door. People do not welcome unsolicited or uncontrolled intrusions into their postmodern castles, which are havens from, not hospices for, the needs of the world.”\(^{82}\) This change from the home being a place to welcome visitors to a place to avoid interaction altogether has major implications for traditional door-to-door evangelism. This being so, alternative measures may be necessary to gain a hearing for the Gospel among postmodernists.

**Truth Determined by Experience.** Wuthnow discovered that two-thirds of those in their twenties prefer to develop their understanding of God through their personal experiences instead of relying on doctrines of the church.\(^{83}\) This postmodern contention that truth is founded exclusively on personal experience has serious

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\(^{82}\) Leonard Sweet, *Faithquakes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 32.

\(^{83}\) Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 133.
implications for evangelism. According to Mark L. Y. Chan, the evangelist, who faithfully declares the Gospel presentation as an absolute truth, “risk[s] being tarred with the brush of narrow-mindedness or even bigotry.” ⁸⁴

These accusations may also be applied to the Christian who argues for the truth of Christianity based on the authority of Scripture. This does not mean that postmodernists have a problem with the Bible; rather, they reject the elevation of one’s interpretation of the Bible to absolute truth. When discussing Scripture, postmodernists demand “the acknowledgment of one’s approach, including its underlying assumptions and its goals and limitations.” ⁸⁵

Preferences of the Unchurched

Given the consensus among many Church Growth scholars that the culture in America is shifting toward postmodernism, many writers have made attempts to identify the preferences of the unchurched to help inform churches how to best reach them. Stetzer, who studied polling data from the North American Mission Board and LifeWay Research from 2006 to 2008, notices that 63 percent of the younger unchurched (ages 20 to 29) and 47 percent of the older unchurched would visit a church that delivered “understandable” messages that are relative to their present lives and 58 percent and 38 percent respectively would come if they believed the church membership was concerned about them. ⁸⁶ Stetzer also finds that 46 percent of the younger unchurched and 27 percent

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⁸⁶Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 56.
of the older unchurched are open to small Bible study groups as a way to explore the teachings of Christianity. Suprisingly, only 31 percent of the younger unchurched and 26 percent of the older unchurched were attracted to church based on the musical style. Similar statistics from Rainer and Rainer III reveal that only 10 percent of those who drop out of church site the worship style as their reason.

The research of these scholars reveals that a sizable amount of unchurched are still attracted to church based on musical preferences while even more unchurched people are drawn to the teaching ministry. This discovery seems to refute Towns’ declaration that “Americans . . . choose a church primarily by its style of worship or its philosophy of ministry” instead of “looking for denominational labels, doctrine or a predetermined name.” Lee Strobel, a Christian who came from an unchurched background, sees worship evangelism as a more effective means for reaching those who are somewhat churched. The unchurched, he argues, “aren’t comfortable in worship settings because they find it difficult to praise a God they don’t believe in.” Even so, it seems that any church that uses worship evangelism must make sure to provide solid biblical teaching.

87 Ibid.
88 Ibid., 56.
89 Rainer and Rainer, Essential Church?, 63.
91 Lee Strobel, Inside the Mind of the Unchurched Harry & Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 163.
Changes Leading Toward Receptivity

Along with studies on the preferences of unchurched people who have visited the church, some scholars are also considering the changes that churches must make in their mission and ministry to be effective at reaching postmodernists. Stetzer observes that churches which are effective at evangelizing postmodernists maintain a strong spiritual dynamic, develop an incarnational witness, practice “experiential” worship, deliver expository sermons that are rooted in stories, use modern technology, emphasize fellowship, and use a leadership model that values “transparency and team.”92 The following sub-sections will study each of these elements and their usefulness in the task of evangelizing postmodernists.

**Strong Spiritual Dynamic.** Stetzer observes that 73 percent of younger unchurched people and 62 percent of older unchurched see themselves as spiritual and have an interest in the divine.93 With the desire to grow their churches, Rishard Cimino and Don Lattin observe that many churches are focusing on “spirituality” as opposed to “religion”:

> Behind this shift is the search for an experiential faith, a religion of the heart, not of the head. It's a religious expression that downplays doctrine and dogma, and revels in direct experience of the divine--whether it's called the 'holy spirit’ or ‘cosmic consciousness’ or the "true self." It is practical and personal, more about stress reduction than salvation, more therapeutic than theological. It's about feeling good, not being good. It's as much about the body as the soul.94

92 Ed Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 137.

93 Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 57.

Through an analysis of polling data, Newport notes that 23 percent of church-going Americans attend church “[f]or spiritual growth and guidance” while only 13 percent do so for fellowship. This suggests that American are more likely to attend church for their own personal benefit given that they seem to place less emphasis on developing relationships within the church.

**An Incarnational Witness.** The second characteristic of a church that is reaching postmodernists is the projection of an incarnational witness by the membership to the community. Mark Mittelberg argues that people need more than a Gospel presentation if they are to be converted. They need it explained to alleviate their doubts. While Mittelberg’s focus seems to be more on the educational component of evangelism, his comments suggest that changes in the prevailing culture will require a renewed approach to evangelism that no longer takes for granted any historical evangelical practices that proved effective.

Given the increasing amount of unchurched people who have had little or no contact with the Gospel, perhaps it is time for the church to call on its membership to develop an incarnational witness that communicates Christ and His message through both word and deed. While the typical evangelical church may already believe in the importance of the incarnational witness, they may need to reconsider whether they are over-emphasizing verbal proclamation at the expense of the living witness. Both are

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96Mittelberg and Hybels, *Building a Contagious Church*, 42.
important not only in the eyes of God, but also in a postmodern unchurched culture which has been programmed to view with suspicion any and all truth claims.

Wagner connects the incarnational witness with the church’s mission: “The mission of the church is to so incarnate itself in the world that the gospel of Christ is effectively communicated by word and deed toward the end that all men and women become faithful disciples of Christ and responsible members of His church.”

Practicing this incarnational witness should lead Christians toward not only Christlike lifestyle choices but also participation in various church ministries and social ministries within their communities and beyond. Lay mobilization, according to Kent R. Hunter, allows people “to take ownership of the ministry in their congregations.”

McGavran strongly supports the establishment of a mobilized laity: “If a church is serious about the Great Commission, the involvement of laity is of utmost importance. The growth of each church is uniquely dependent on its laity.” Hunter, who also connects the mobilization of the laity with the CGM, adds that churches who are effective at reaching potential seekers will not only engage in social ministries, they will also invite the community to serve alongside them for the greater good.

To find their place of service, McGavran encourages Christians to discover their spiritual gifts so that they will know how to best serve their community and reach

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100 Hunter, *The Contagious Congregation*, 30.
the lost.\textsuperscript{101} He also believes that lay mobilization through gift awareness and application is “essential for church growth.”\textsuperscript{102} Wagner states that “mobilization of church members for church growth . . . must begin with whatever process is necessary for every church member to discover his or her spiritual gift.”\textsuperscript{103}

Affirming the need to mobilize the laity, Bosch adds that effective evangelization must come through the laity because those outside the church will tend to trust laymen more since the professional clergy are viewed with suspicion because of the false dichotomy which has evolved (in the secular mindset) between the church and the secular world.\textsuperscript{104} To accomplish the mobilization of the laity, many Church Growth scholars are advocating a change in the pastoral role from that of shepherd to that of “rancher.”

Schaller argues that pastors who remain shepherds usually cannot grow their churches beyond one hundred people while pastors who take on the role of a “rancher” and facilitate the creation of “new groups . . . but does not . . . shepherd each group” are able to grow the church beyond that barrier.\textsuperscript{105} A shepherding pastor is primarily focused on meeting the needs of his congregants, while a “rancher” pastor is a more of visionary

\textsuperscript{101}McGavran, \textit{Ten Steps for Church Growth}, 52.

\textsuperscript{102}McGavran and Arn, \textit{How to Grow a Church}, 35.

\textsuperscript{103}Wagner, \textit{Your Church Can Grow}, 82.

\textsuperscript{104}David J. Bosch, \textit{Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture} (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity1995), 59.

leader who focuses on growing the church, keeping it effective, and distributing the
ministry responsibilities to the membership.  

While many Christians may find little disagreement with efforts to mobilize
the laity, some scholars, particularly among Emerging Church writers, go even further in
their efforts to remove any distinction between the clergy and the laity. Michael Frost and
Alan Hirsch argue that Paul promoted a “radical dissolution of the traditional distinctions
between priests and laity.” Kent R. Hunter, who agrees that laypeople need to engage
in ministry alongside the clergy, takes a more conservative approach by viewing the
clergy as equippers who help church members find their place in ministry and prepares
them as well to do ministry effectively.

Another aspect of an incarnational witness is authenticity. Given that the
younger generation has already been exposed to a plethora of marketing techniques and
gimmicks, they are likely to view with suspicion any endeavor by the church to promote
their message. This younger generation “want[s] their church to be authentic and real.
They want the truth, even if they disagree with it.” When attempting to reach this
generation, it becomes essential that pastor be an incarnational witness of the Gospel that
he preaches and the church members must do so as well.

106 Carl F. George and Warren Bird, How to Break Growth Barriers: Capturing Overlooked
Opportunities for Church Growth (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 88-97. George and Bird describe the
difference between pastors who have a shepherding style of leadership and those that have that of a
“rancher.”

107 Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for

108 Hunter, Foundations for Church Growth, 60.

109 Rainer and Rainer, Essential Church ?, 38.
Experiential Worship. A third element of an effective church which reaches postmodernists is experiential worship. The consensus among many who study the postmodern generation is that their personal experience is their primary reference point for understanding truth. White argues that they are not so much interesting in hearing about the resurrection and the historical proof’s that support its authenticity; rather, they want to know how the resurrection applies to their experience.\textsuperscript{110} This postmodern desire for an experience of the Gospel can be met by a worship service that is geared to creating experiential environment.

An experiential worship service can remain centered around God, but it can also help people relate to God in culturally appropriate ways. While the 1980’s saw the rise in the seeker-sensitive service with its emphasis on contemporary worship, some writers, like Robert G. Olsavicky II and Robert Webber, are discovering a new direction for worship among the millennial generation. They observe that this younger generation demands worship that is authentic, participatory, and historically aligned with the Early Church.\textsuperscript{111} Schaller states that “younger generations . . . prefer participatory worship to the presentation style that dominated the scene in many Protestant traditions back in the middle of the twentieth century.”\textsuperscript{112}

According to research done by Percept Group, Inc., 27 percent of Americans prefer participatory church music and 32.2 percent prefer church music that is both

\textsuperscript{110} White, \textit{Rethinking the Church}, 59.


participatory and done by a third party. Churches that desire to lead unchurched Americans in worship may need to integrate participatory music and performed music into their services. Along with the style of music in the worship service, Schaller also believes that growing churches tend to emphasize quality in their teaching, preaching, and worship.

White offers further evidence on the importance of the worship service in the task of reaching the unchurched. After comparing Sunday School membership roles with worship attendance, White suggest that the “front door of the church is no longer a small group network such as the Sunday School but has changed to the worship service.” This preference for the worship service as a primary means to encounter the church and its teachings for the first time may be due to a desire to remain an anonymous spectator that remains uncommitted. In a consumer driven economy where people are constantly marketed, people are use to making their own decisions about what product or service to buy.

Knowledge of the consumerist mentality causes many churches seeking to appeal to the unchurched to develop an image conscious service that appeals to the senses. Developing this type of atmosphere may well draw unchurched people who are use to being entertained, but it may also allow them to remain comfortably anonymous.

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114 Schaller, 21 Bridges to the 21st Century, 62.

115 James Emory White, Opening the Front Door: Worship and Church Growth (Nashville: Convention, 1992), 15.

116 Rainer, The Book of Church Growth, 226.
just like many other forms of entertainment (television, concerts, professional sports, etc.). White and Yeats warn that these churches which use entertainment to continually draw crowds tend to allow entertainment to supplant biblical instruction and thereby produce a faulty Christianity that is heavily reliant on entertainment to remain committed.\footnote{White and Yeats, \textit{Franchising McChurch}, 136-37.}

Gilley cautions that while the Bible does not necessarily stand against entertainment, it does challenge to examine our “motives” for seeking or providing such pursuits.\footnote{Gilley, \textit{This Little Church Went to Market}, 25.} Churches, which choose to engage in a ministry that appeals to the earthly senses, may become ill-prepared to endure the sufferings of Christ that are promised to Christians in this life. Even so, opponents may easily react to White and Yeats by stating that they use entertainment as a way to attract crowds to hear the Gospel. While this may be so, they may still be allowing entertainment to become a permanent fixture in the ecclesiastical praxis. Even so, churches can do their ministry with excellence to honor God through their service; additionally, they can take extra care to make sure their facilities are clean and inviting with ample space for visitors. White adds that the church should also have a relaxed and positive environment.\footnote{White, \textit{Opening the Front Door}, 68. White states, “A relaxed atmosphere of worship suggests a certain level of authenticity, in contrast to the high-pressure manipulation that many baby boomers have rejected from their childhood.”}

In a study of rebounding churches, Stetzer and Dodson found that pastors of growing churches described their worship services as celebrative (96\%) and orderly
(95%) . . . informal (84%), contemporary (69%), and expressive (62%).\textsuperscript{120} Besides acceptable changes to the environment, churches may also develop a worship experience that uses instrumentation that is common to the postmodern culture so long as it is used appropriately. Stetzer and Dodson find that drums, keyboards, pianos, and guitars were twice as likely to be used in a rebounding church as the traditional organ.\textsuperscript{121}

**Narrative Sermons.** A fourth characteristic of a growing church in the postmodern age is the use of storying in the teaching ministry. According to Stetzer, “Emerging generations value the power of story, often preferring the Gospel to Epistles. These younger groups appreciate that Jesus’ life was not just an essay, a doctrine, or a sermon but, a story.”\textsuperscript{122} Alvin I. Reid argues for an integration of human stories with biblical stories “to illustrate and explain the [G]ospel” as an effective way to reach postmodernists because this approach encourages them to relate to biblical truths instead of lambasting them with logical construction which they disdain.\textsuperscript{123}

The narrative approach to the presentation of the Gospel and propositions of the Bible may succeed with the postmodernist because it incorporates the human experience and the relational dynamics between the communicator and the listener with the truth that is presented. As Adam states, “Narrative knowledge connects character and knowledge intimately; in many contexts, the character of the narrator determines the

\textsuperscript{120}Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 82.

\textsuperscript{121}Ibid., 81.

\textsuperscript{122}Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 100.

\textsuperscript{123}Alvin I. Reid, *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are & How to Reach Them* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002), 137-38.
legitimacy of what she is claiming.”

The connection between the unfolding story of the gospel communicator, including both the verbal and the non-verbal component, and the receptor’s assessment of validity of the gospel message that is presented suggests that Christians must make sure that their personal narrative closely follows the path outlined by Christ.

**Modern Technology.** A fifth component for an effective ministry among postmodernists seems to be the use of modern technology. Polling data among the unchurched reveals that 37 percent have used the internet to find “spiritual help,” while 19 percent have spent some time viewing Christian shows. In a 2008 study, The Barna Group finds that 62 percent of Protestant churches have a website and 56 percent of these churches use e-mail to communicate to people en masse. In other research, The Barna Group discovers that 78 percent of Americans use e-mail regularly and 23 percent have “has a personal webpage or home page on a social networking site (such as Facebook or MySpace).”

Giving the widening use of the internet, churches certainly need to consider a website that is appropriate for the postmodern age. Lynne Baab lists several requirements for a church website: the use of authentic pictures of church life as opposed

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125 Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes, *Lost and Found*, 44.


to stock photos, a focus on visual imagery with limited informational clutter, and visitor-friendly information about the church.  

Elmer Towns and Warren Bird observe that churches, which are effective at reaching the younger unchurched, are using modern technology proficiently in their worship services and other activities. While supporting the use of technology, John P. Jewell remarks, “It is not technology that finally makes the difference, but the content that is delivered by means of technology.” When choosing the technologies for a worship service, Quentin J. Schultze suggests that technology that is misapplied can cause a “[l]ack of clarity,” “[d]istraction,” and “[a]wkwardness or difficulty in presentation.” With this in mind, churches should make use of modern technology while at the same time remaining true to their doctrines and only using the technologies which effectively communicate those doctrines to the church.

**Fellowship.** The sixth aspect found in churches that are reaching postmodernists is renewed focus on fellowship. White observes that many people today have an intense longing for community causing them to give a higher priority to “belonging” than to “believing.” Since many churches center their Christian community on believing, White proposes that churches consider building community

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132 White, *Rethinking the Church*, 60.
around participation in the church.\textsuperscript{133} This proposal may be faulty in that authentic Christian community only occurs among believers who collectively agree on the truthfulness of the Gospel. On the other hand, churches can take opportunities to develop relationships with non-believers within their walls by developing missional forms of worship, small group ministries, and local service projects. These activities become missional when they consider the target culture that the church is trying to reach and strategically form in such a way that lost people are encouraged to participate.

Unlike White, Carson objects to the emerging church’s placement of belonging before believing. To create an atmosphere of belonging, the emerging church, according to Carson, emphasizes “Jesus as the personal Word of God” while neglecting the “propositional content” that is even more pervasive.\textsuperscript{134} This objection must be noted by all churches that wish to remain faithful in their biblical responsibility to teach God’s Word in its entirety. On the other hand, churches must also find culturally appropriate ways to communicate His Word.

One culturally relevant way to introduce the Gospel to postmodernists by appealing to their desire for community may be through the use of small groups. Rainer asserts that “there may be no greater evangelistic tool for developing relationships than small groups.”\textsuperscript{135} While the study of the Bible may have been the primary function of these small groups in earlier decades, small groups that reach postmodernists need to

\textsuperscript{133}Ibid, 60.

\textsuperscript{134}D. A. Carson, \textit{Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church: Understanding a Movement and Its Implications} (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 146-50.

\textsuperscript{135}Rainer, \textit{The Book of Church Growth}, 221.
incorporate a sense of fellowship within the small group.\textsuperscript{136} Even so, McGavran argues “that the small-group fellowship must be an evangelistic fellowship.”\textsuperscript{137}

**Leadership.** The seventh aspect of an effective church in the postmodern age involves the pastoral leadership. Wagner proclaims, “*In America, the primary catalytic factor for growth in a local church is the pastor.*”\textsuperscript{138} C. Kirk Hadaway, in a study of churches that overcame a period of stagnation, found that 59 percent had hired a pastor no more than two years before their growth began.\textsuperscript{139} He observes that these leaders avoid a top-down approach and embrace a visionary leadership model that builds excitement among the membership and leads them to effectiveness by reigniting biblical purposes they had previously exclaimed.\textsuperscript{140} To be an effective leader, however, Thom S. Rainer remarks that a pastor must have intimate knowledge of his congregation which can be gained through surveys designed to help the pastor lead his people toward the accomplishment of his vision.\textsuperscript{141} Additional surveys can reveal various aspects of the target community and their particular needs to further aid in the development of a vision.

After interviewing pastors of churches that have grown after years of stagnation, Stetzer and Mike Dodson observes that these pastors believed “that having a

\textsuperscript{136}Towns and Bird, *Into the Future*, 61-62.

\textsuperscript{137}McGavran and Arn, *How to Grow a Church*, 104.

\textsuperscript{138}Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow*, 61.


\textsuperscript{140}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{141}Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 187.
clear and compelling vision was foundational in the transformation of their churches.”142 Rainer, however, discovers that the presence of a vision statement alone has no effect on church growth.143 This, however, does not mean that vision was not a factor; rather, the vision of an effective church, according to Rainer’s research, comes from an integration of “the passion of the leader, the needs of the community, and the gifts, abilities, talents, and passions of the congregation.” 144

The importance of a vision seems to be supported biblically in Proverbs 29:18 KJV: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” This translation, however, may be faulty for two primary reasons. First, מִרְצָה is probably best interpreted to mean prophetic revelations which today would be the communication of God’s Word. Second, מַלֶּל carries the meaning of casting off restraint.

John Haggai, observing this meaning for מַלֶּל, understands Proverbs 29:18 to say: “When a group is under the direction of a person who has no vision, the result is confusion, disorder, rebellion, uncontrolled license, and—at worst—anarchy.”145 Unfortunately, Haggai neglects to understand that מִרְצָה should be interpreted to mean prophetic revelations. Therefore, a better understanding of Proverbs 29:18 would be that the communication of God’s Word is fundamental to the maturity and mission of God’s people; whereas, the lack thereof will lead to a disorganized chaos where church members fail to mature in the faith and fail to engage in mission.

142 Stetzer and Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, 45.


144 Ibid., 30.

145 John Haggai, *Lead On! Leadership that Endures in a Changing World* (Waco, TX: Word,
George Barna, who affirms the importance of visionary leadership, also finds that churches can stagnate and even decline due to “ineffective organization and operational management.” A church’s organization needs to effectively and efficiently facilitate its accomplishment of its biblical vision. A church that embraces the vision of its pastor will have to align themselves and their structures with that vision. This process, however, will involve change which Barna among others observes to be quite an obstacle for many traditional churches. He suggests that the “determination to remain relevant” even while being biblically faithful is essential for a church to survive the change process.

The visionary pastor, who sets out to meet the needs of the church and the community while remaining true to the Scriptures, must develop a team approach to ministry that includes the membership. According to Rainer, “One of the hindrances to growth in many churches is a pastor’s unwillingness to let go of ministry.” McGavran supports the involvement of the laity within the leadership and list several necessary qualities that these lay leaders must possess for the church to grow. He observes that lay leaders must have a correct soteriology, an active commitment to evangelism, and dedicated to prayer.

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146 George Barna, Turn-Around Churches: How to Overcome Barriers to Growth and Bring New Life to an Established Church (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1993), 35.
147 Ibid., 37.
148 Rainer, The Book of Church Growth, 188.
149 McGavran and Arn How to Grow a Church, 83.
The willingness of the pastor to develop a team approach to ministry also includes how he chooses staff members. Calvin Miller recommends the hiring of staff who complement the pastor because their strengths make up for his weaknesses.\(^\text{150}\) Giving the complexities of a growing church, it seems wise for a pastor to develop a staff that complement his gifts, abilities, and skills.

**Missional Churches**

Perhaps the greatest contribution the CGM makes to the task of mission in the postmodern age is its application of the missionary task to the ministry of the local church within its own community. Observing that many established churches in America find it difficult to make the necessary changes to be missional in their culture, Wagner claims, “*The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.*”\(^\text{151}\) Stetzer agrees and notes that a new church is able to make the necessary changes to become culturally relevant “because it has no emotional investment in the patterns of tradition.”\(^\text{152}\) He observes that older churches in America tend to be culturally rooted in modernity, even while the culture that surrounds them is becoming increasingly postmodern.\(^\text{153}\)

Despite this cultural change which may be catching some traditional churches by surprise, churches must become aware of the changes taking place within their


\(^{151}\) C. Peter Wagner, *Church Planting for a Greater Harvest* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1990), 11.

\(^{152}\) Stetzer, *Planting New Churches in a Postmodern Age*, 28-29.

\(^{153}\) Ibid., 112-113.
community and make appropriate responses to those changes. While planting churches is certainly a biblically correct response, churches must also develop intrinsic missional responses. To become missional, a church must develop evangelism and discipleship strategies that are both biblically faithful and culturally relevant.

Frost and Hirsch make a further distinction regarding missional churches: “The missional church is incarnational, not attractional, in its ecclesiology.”\(^{154}\) In other words, they believe that a missional church does not use its facilities to attract potential believers; rather, they send their membership without to attract potential converts through their living witness. This criticism which is echoed by many Emerging Church Scholars may arise in part from what Gibbs perceives to be a lack of effectiveness among seeker-sensitive approaches in urban areas.\(^{155}\) Sweet, another Emerging Church scholar, states that a missional church “will be a sending church rather than a gathering church.”\(^{156}\) This understanding of “missional” clearly perceives the “big box” church which seeks to attract potential converts to its doors as being somehow less than missional in their approach to seeking coverts. Assuming that the church using an attractional model makes sure their membership remains faithful in personal evangelism, they should most likely still be considered missional so long as they are teaching the Gospel faithfully.


\(^{155}\)Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 189-90; Eddie Gibbs, “The Emerging Church,” The Bible in Transmission (2002), 2 [on-line]; accessed 8 May 2010; available from http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/files/gibbs02.doc; Internet. Gibbs argues that many urban dwellers have “given up on the church.” Churches that use “seeker-sensitive” attractional models as their primary evangelism method may not be effective among a population that is not attracted to the church as an institution. They may, however, be attracted to the individual believer. This is precisely the contention of many Emerging Church writers whose perspective arises from evangelistic efforts in the urban context.

\(^{156}\)Sweet, *Faithquakes*, 28.
Part of the trend toward viewing the church as missional is the increasing recognition that relational evangelism is becoming more prominent than mass evangelism. C. Jeff Woods remarks, “Relationships—not crusades, not programs, not door-to-door visits—are becoming the basis for evangelism.” While relationships have always been a part of almost every kind of evangelism because people are inviting people to hear the Gospel presented in some manner, many scholars are noting the breakdown in the relationship between the Church and the culture at large. By emphasizing relational evangelism without neglecting other potentially effective evangelism techniques, churches that are trying to reach the postmodern may indeed help develop a certain amount of openness to the gospel presentation by the efforts of the individual witness, by the church during a service, by an evangelistic event, etc. As Woods states, “Today it seems [one] must earn the right to share the [G]ood [N]ews with someone.” Gibbs observes that postmodernists, who perceive truth as a construct of the autonomous self, will require a relational witness whereby they can objectively criticize Christianity before they will be willing to assess their position. This being the case, an incarnational witness that is relational and biblically faithful becomes absolutely essential for the evangelism among postmodernists.

**Sharing the Gospel with Postmodernists**

An essential part of an incarnational, relational witness is the verbal communication of the Gospel. Henderson lists three ways to communicate the Gospel to

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158 Ibid.
First, one can invite the postmodernist to consider their present goals and how these goals ultimately have little meaning if one has not dealt with eternal matters. Second, one can ask the postmodernist to consider the rewards for their decision regarding the Gospel. Assuming that Christianity is correct, those who choose the Gospel may suffer in this life but not in the next, but those who do not will wind up suffering not only temporally but also eternally. Third, one can compare the beliefs of the potential convert with beliefs derived from Scripture to discover which has the most merit.

Polling data confirms the importance of a relational witness. In discussing the evangelism approaches that are most welcomed by Americans, David Roach states, “Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) are willing to receive information about a local congregation or faith community from a family member, and 56 percent are willing to receive such information from a friend or neighbor.” While Americans seems open to communication through relationship, they are far less open to traditional door-to-door methods of disseminating information about the church. Roach reports that only 24 percent of Americans are open to this approach. Methods that do not require relationships but also avoid personal contact also seem acceptable. According to Roach, about forty percent of Americans are open to receiving information about the church

\[^{159}\]Gibbs, ChurchNext, 28-29.

\[^{160}\]Henderson, Culture Shift, 64.


\[^{162}\]Ibid.
through ads in the printed media, “outdoor advertising,” and direct mail. These statistics suggest that churches who desire to reach Americans in the postmodern age need to continue to communicate through existing relationships while also taking advantage of non-personal means of communication.

While Americans are open to non-personal means of communication, their negative views of the church as an institution will probably cause them to be less likely to attend church through these forms of communication. Surveys of unchurched Americans done by LifeWay Research in 2007 reveal, “Seventy-two percent said they think the church ‘is full of hypocrites, people who criticize others for doing the same things they do themselves,’ and 86 percent believe they ‘can have a good relationship with God without being involved in church.’” These findings suggest that unchurched Americans, even those who prefer Christianity, will tend to pursue their spirituality as individuals. Even so, 78 percent of the unchurched as a whole and 89 percent of those that are between 18 and 29 years old still remain open to a relational witness from a friend. These statistics suggests that the attractional methods employed in seeker-sensitive churches may not be successful in reaching the unchurched community unless attention is given to personal and relational evangelism.

163Ibid.


165Ibid.
The Drive for Success and Church Growth

So far, this paper has discussed at length how to grow a church among postmodernists. This study, however, would not be complete without a section that discusses the proper motive for seeking such growth. In the task of developing a missional church, the church and its leadership must never allow numerical growth to become the standard by which it judges its effectiveness. In apparent disagreement, McGavran declares, “Lack of Growth must be recognized as a disease and treated. [One] must not believe, if [one’s] church is not growing, that this is normal and God is pleased.”

While some will likely disagree with McGavran’s statement, they may agree with Wagner that pastors and church members should desire growth and actively work to make growth happen. Even so, Larry L. McSwain, among others, argues for successful church growth to be identified as church growth that occurs on the basis of conversion growth as opposed to growth that occurs from the exchange of members from one church to another. Unfortunately, many of the larger churches, according to Mark Chaves, may be drawing their membership from small churches thus negatively impacting the church’s local witness.

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166 McGavran and Arn, How to Grow a Church, 12.
169 Mark Chaves, “Supersized: Analyzing the Trend Toward Larger Churches,” Christian Century 24 (2006): 22. Chaves does not provide a source for this claim. Even so, the implications for his claim could be potentially devastating the church’s local presence. Additionally, big churches that use attractional methods that are vastly superior to any employed by small churches may indeed run the risk of drawing some members from surrounding churches given the consumerist mentality of many Americans.
In the Great Commission, Jesus’ main directive is to make disciples (μαθητεύσατε is the main verb of Matt 28:19). Based on this passage, McGavran applies the command of Christ to make disciples to the Church. By accepting McGavran’s connection between the Great Commission and the Church, the individual church, its pastoral leadership, and its membership infer that the will of God is for them to make disciples. By not doing so, they are by default outside of God’s will. This faulty application of the Great Commission may cause churches and their members to believe they are outside of God’s will simply because they see no visible signs of growth. When one accepts McGavran’s connection between doing the will of God outlined in the Great Commission and numerical church growth at a specific church, one is left with no other alternative than numerical growth for a healthy obedient church. Churches and pastors who take this position allow numerical results to become an indicator of success. With this in mind, one must ask if whether or not the Great Commission teaches that each church should attain numerical growth.

Among evangelicals, most scholars agree that each church has a responsibility to make disciples. While this may be true, each church can participate in making disciples by planting churches and engaging in mission work (local and global) that does not lead to their own numerical growth and yet still remain faithful to the Great Commission. Additionally, since the Great Commission does not place a time limit or a numerical limit on the number of the making of disciples, it seems correct to not place any demands for specific numerical results in a given time period. As Patrick Franklin states, “Christian mission depends on the initiative and efficacious action of God, its success or failure

\[170\] McGavran, Ten Steps for Church Growth, 38.
cannot be deduced according to human standards. Concretely, this means that success cannot be assessed by the numerical growth of the Church.\footnote{171} Another reason for not expecting each church to make a specific amount of disciples is Christ’s application of the Great Commission to the Church as a whole. Each church should obey the Great Commission even while the fruits of their labor may benefit another church or even the church that follows them in the next generation.

If one accepts that each church has a responsibility to participate in the Great Commission without being assessed individually based on their numerical results, then one needs to redefine success for the biblically faithful church, its leadership, and its membership. In 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 NIV, Paul states, “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.” In this statement, Paul credits the growth that results from his efforts to God. Success for Paul, it seems, is simply doing the will of God while leaving the results to God. Paul also does not attach the growth which results from his efforts to himself. While he desires growth in the church and worked diligently to see it come about, he does not attach that growth to the value of his ministry.

Paul certainly would agree with many Church Growth scholars who advocate that God’s desire is to grow His church. On the other hand, he does not seem to support the contention that that growth or the lack thereof is a definitive indicator of the faithfulness of the Church or its pastoral staff. This being the case, what is the correct biblical indicator to assess a church’s faithfulness to God in the task of making disciples?

In 1 Peter 4:1-3, Peter teaches that Christians are to live for the will of God (cf. Mark 3:35; John 9:31; Heb 10:36; 1 John 2:17). In Galatians 3:11, Paul adds, “The righteous will live by faith.” Both Peter and Paul seem to be indicating that a successful relationship with God requires obedience to God’s will that arises from a faithful response to His Word. Church Growth scholars are likely to offer little disagreement with this understanding of success. The problem, however, may come through their application of the Great Commission to the individual church and their evaluation of that church based on its numerical growth.

The CGM’s emphasis on numerical growth can be quite seductive in the prevailing cultural context which desires success and fulfillment. Problems may occur when churches evaluate pastoral candidates before and after hiring them based on the numerical growth of the church they lead. Whereas Scripture leads churches to find leaders who have demonstrated a Godly character and a steadfast commitment to the will of God, the euphoria of success may make numerical results from a pastor’s previous ministry the deciding factor in the hiring process. This certainly seems unbiblical when the Bible teaches that results are from God independent of the character of the pastor. A Church that hires its leadership based on numerical success could easily hire a minister whose character does not conform to biblical standards. For evidence of churches that evaluate a minister based their numerical success, one need look no further than the job

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172 The hiring of staff based on the numerical results of their previous ministry also overlooks the contextual realities of a pastor’s previous ministry. For example, a bi-vocational minister in an area that is largely a church with a slowly dwindling population will not likely have the same numerical growth results that a pastor of a church located in the middle of a sprawling, suburban, middle-class area where a new house is built every day. In this case, the faithfulness of these pastors to God’s calling for them should be the deciding factor instead of their numerical results for pure academic reasons. Unfortunately, most pastor search committees lack the expertise to evaluate such matters.
posting for pastoral vacancies. For example, Heritage Bible Chapel (Princeton, MA) is looking for a pastor who has “[p]revious pastoral experience in a growing Church.” While this church and most others want a pastor with Godly character, what happens when God desires them to hire a pastor who has been working in a highly resistant and unreceptive area. Surely the Godly character of such a pastor would at least equal the pastor who has experienced numerical success and the approval that comes with it.

While some churches place unbiblical emphasis on numerical results when hiring a pastor, some pastors also may place the same expectations on their particular ministry. This focus of numerical success does not seem to agree with Paul’s perspective of his ministry in 2 Corinthians 3:6-7. This being the case, pastors must allow the Bible to define success and not the culture that surrounds them within and without the church.

**Conclusion**

The goal of reaching people for Christ must never be done for a church or a pastor’s desire for success. If churches grow in the postmodern age through authentic conversion, then it must be the will of God, and He alone must receive the glory. With a love of God and a love for people, the church that seeks to reach postmodernists must become a missional church that develops, maintains, and sustains an active, relational witness. While this witness may take advantage of methods that attract potential converts to the church’s worship service, it must also send its membership out into the community to share their faith verbally and nonverbally through personal and relational evangelism.

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The membership must also practice a biblically faithful lifestyle so that they can gain an audience for the Gospel among postmodernists.

While many scholars have observed a postmodern preference for truth that is self-defined, a missional church that reaches postmodernists must remain steadfastly committed to the propositional truths of Scripture. The church must avoid the trap of teaching an unbiblical self-fulfillment gospel and must continue to teach the Gospel of Christ which proclaims suffering in this life. While postmodernists may be focused on this life, they are still willing to encounter truth through their personal experience and, therefore, may be open to teaching on eternal life if this message comes from a friend who maintains an obedient lifestyle.

This relational bridge between the Christian and the potential convert may also benefit from the increasing desire among postmodernists for community. Given this desire, an effective church may need to develop various types of small groups with various purposes as potential places for the unchurched to develop a relationship with Christians. A church must also train these Christians to maintain an incarnational witness that remains faithful to Scripture and practices personal evangelism especially among family and friends.

This incarnational witness may prove more successful for growing a church than the attractional model used in the last several decades. Even so, churches must be aware of the preferences of postmodernists as they seek to lead Christians in worship and potentially attract their postmodern friends to the worship service. These churches can develop an experiential worship service that has participatory and third-party music
intertwined. The sermons can also become more experiential through the use of biblical stories and illustrations.

While reaching postmodernists should certainly be a concern of churches and pastors in America, it is important that these churches and pastors maintain a biblical view of success. They must not attempt to grow their churches just to fulfill a personal desire for success. Rather, they must love people and love God with all their heart and seek to obey the will of God by faithfully witnessing to non-believers and praying that God will grant them salvation. If and when their efforts to reach the postmodern generation prove successful, they must give the glory to God and acknowledge that He alone grants salvation according to His will.
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