Should We Do Church Differently? Cultural Factors

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Many commentators on culture agree that the United States is quickly moving into a post-Christendom context. Tim Chester and Steve Timmis observe that in a Christendom context, “the assumption is that Christianity should have privileged status in the cultural and political discourse of the nation… But the reality of Christendom is fading fast, overtaken by secularism and pluralism” (Everyday Church, 19). In other words, Christians are finding themselves more and more on the margins of society. While this is the context in which we find ourselves, the dominant models for church, evangelism, and mission are reflective of a Christendom mindset. Consequently, even the most contemporary reflections of these standard models struggle to make disciples.

In On the Verge, Alan Hirsch and Dave Ferguson posit that even the most progressive forms of church found in North America will likely be acceptable to—at best—40% of the population. This may be a generous number. “The brute fact,” say Hirsch and Ferguson, “is that most of the evangelical church leaders who will read [their book] will be white, suburban, and middle class, and the equally stark reality is that within decades, Anglo-Saxon Americans will be in the minority in the U.S.—yet our churches don’t seem to be responding to this reality” (27). We must begin to raise up leaders to go to the other 60%; those who will likely never be attracted to the church on the corner, no matter the dress code or music style.

This is not to suggest that current forms of church are wrong or completely ineffective. Rather, the current cultural scene should promote expansion of church forms to include more non-funded and organic models for church multiplication. These unorthodox models are embraced when they occur in global contexts outside of North America, but are just now gaining a hearing in the Bible Belt South. House churches, for instance, are promoted and celebrated when they are found in cultures where Christianity is not the dominant faith. Yet, mainstream believers in the United States deem the house church model suspect.

The solution lies, in part, in the established church promoting, blessing, and training all members to live as sent missionaries to their own neighborhoods. Then, these churches need to be okay if their missionaries win people to Jesus and teach them how to be the church in their own setting rather than bringing these new believers back to the “mother” church, even if it is just around the corner. It is high time to challenge the conventional church paradigm by unleashing all disciples to make disciples in biblically faithful and culturally appropriate ways in their own contexts.

So, what should we do?

• Pray for new eyes to see the problem.

• Study the Book of Acts and compare the forms of church present in the first century, pre-Christendom culture with those present in the twenty-first century post-Christendom culture. In which place do we see the rapid expansion of the church?
• Research what churches are doing to be effective at making disciples who make disciples, not merely growing larger.

• Count the cost. Look at the numbers. Assess the return on investment in mainstream church planting models.

• Raise up a generation of leaders in our youth and young adults to be disciple-makers, not merely church staffers.

Let’s face it: Church growth is not keeping pace with population growth (more on this to come). We simply cannot build enough buildings, hire enough staffers, or host enough rallies to bring the Gospel to all of those who need to hear. Jimmy Scroggins and Steve Wright explain the math clearly. We need to examine doing church differently.