

## THE BENEFIT OF THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT AND A WAY FORWARD

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### ***Abstract***

Although the diversification of the Church Growth Movement has created an environment in which people balk at its definitions and its principles, many fail to realize the benefit of the diversification. The diversification of the Church Growth Movement allows theologians and missiologists to evaluate the impact church growth thought has had on both the culture within the church and the church's ability to reach its surrounding culture. As a result, theologians and missiologists not only can assess and address the current state of churches, but they also can offer a biblical way forward. In doing so, churches can realign with sound scriptural truth as they seek to engage culture through both proclamation and incarnation.

The term "church growth," and, in essence, the Church Growth Movement (CGM), unfortunately, have been shrouded in controversy since Donald McGavran's key works gained prominence in America. While proponents of both church growth and the CGM often seek to minimize the debate, the disagreement is existent nonetheless. The diversification, while often considered with a negative connotation, allows an opportunity for scholars and ministers to reorient church growth principles to biblical church growth discussions.

In essence, the diversification of the CGM benefits the church today by causing it not only to reorient its commitment to the Great Commission, but also to prioritize theological and biblical approaches that faithfully engage

the culture today.<sup>1</sup> In light of the discussions of Great Commission faithfulness in a post-modern culture, this article seeks to offer a biblical approach that will enable faithful engagement with the culture while remaining firmly rooted, without teetering on the precipice of syncretism on one side, or the crag of isolationism on the other side. In order to grasp the panoramic view of the controversy, a brief examination of both the diversification<sup>2</sup> of the CGM and two key disagreements are necessary.

## AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE DIVERSIFICATION

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### OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT

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As McGavran's missiological insights gained popularity in the United States and the CGM gained prominence, a subtle shift concurrently occurred, and "Classical Church Growth" began to morph into divergent trajectories.<sup>3</sup> Within the North American missiological context, church growth's foundation expanded from a principle-based movement to a methodologically based rubric. Gary McIntosh discerns the shift of emphasis, which gave birth to the "Popular Church Growth." He states,

The decline of churches in the 1960s, primarily mainline churches, sparked a renewed interest in research to help turn around struggling churches. Much of this research, though helpful, did not flow directly from the Church Growth school developed by McGavran, but it was often labeled as Church Growth in a popular sense since the research sought to help churches grow.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the surge of the "Popular Church Growth" methodologies cleared a path for the diversification of the CGM. Christopher DiVietro explains that while "scholars recognize diversification," not all agree regarding the "categorization of the various expressions of church growth thought," the demarcation of "dates in tracing diversification," or "the common cause

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<sup>1</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth: How You Can Work with God to Build a Faithful Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 9 and 25.

<sup>2</sup> See Christopher DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement," *Great Commission Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (2016): 56–81. DiVietro seeks "to synthesize various strands running through the history of the Church Growth Movement and isolate contributing factors to diversification through critical interaction with a contemporary of Donald McGavran—Lesslie Newbigin," 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 19. Gary McIntosh and Paul Engle provide a thorough development of the diversification of the classical Church Growth Movement into both a branch of international missiology and a branch of North American missiology. Gary McIntosh and Paul Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 9–25.

<sup>4</sup> McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 19.

undergirding diversification.”<sup>5</sup> In addition, Gary McIntosh and Paul Engle acknowledge that in the 1990s, the CGM experienced “a number of transitions that seemed to undermine the technical understanding of church growth as developed by McGavran,” but they are unwilling to designate a singular source that resulted in a principle-laden movement in nonconformity with classical church growth principles.<sup>6</sup>

While DiVietro, McIntosh, and Engle are loath to label a culprit, their research suggests a multifaceted cause of diversification. The likely epicenter of the shift in CGM thought is the emerging influence of Peter Wagner. Upon McGavran’s death in 1990, Wagner not only became the prominent voice for the CGM, but he also “further developed the use of social sciences and social scientific method, proposing a ‘consecrated pragmatism’ as a means of practically implementing the Great Commission without compromising doctrinal or ethical principles” of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> McIntosh and Engle note that Wagner’s leadership and influence resulted in CGM “specializations and sub-specializations.” No longer were principles relegated to the causes and barriers to church growth, which McGavran emphasized. As noted by McIntosh and Engle, the CGM had been deconstructed into foci such as church planting, prayer, conflict management, and fund raising.<sup>8</sup>

While Wagner’s influence fueled diversification, another culprit behind the diversification of the CGM was the dawning age of the “church health” emphasis through Rick Warren’s *The Purpose Driven Church* and Christian Schwarz’s *Natural Church Development*. Interestingly though, church health discussions carried the same tone as the classic CGM.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the subtle shift, which focused on *health* rather than *growth*, continued to elevate interests in methodologies over principles. A launching pad of success-driven methodology seized the interest of pastors, which resulted in the abandonment

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<sup>5</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement,” 57.

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 20.

<sup>7</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding the Diversification in the Church Growth Movement,” 60. DiVietro observes that while McGavran “relied on statistical, sociological, and numerical methods only for evangelistic accountability,” Wagner’s “consecrated pragmatism relied on culture, historical, and theological sources.” He further states that Wagner’s methodological premise was to use “popular methods extant within a given culture.” In addition, DiVietro acknowledges the development of alternate church growth thinking streams of thought that developed during this time, 70. See also, McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 21. McIntosh and Engle state, “The conceptual broadening of the term *church growth* to embrace more and more sub-specializations of ministry and more and more ministry organizations has created, to a large extent, a popular misunderstanding and wrongful criticism of the Church Growth Movement.”

<sup>9</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement,” 62.

of “the philosophy of Church Growth.”<sup>10</sup> DiVietro states, “When pastors saw churches growing, they studied the growth itself rather than the fundamental church growth principles driving growth.”<sup>11</sup> Recognizing this trend, many advocates of church growth reduced church growth principles to simple “formulaic expressions dependent on human ingenuity rather than divine initiative,” resulting in a diminished appreciation for the CGM.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the impact of the dilution of the CGM created an environment in which *classic* church growth principles were no longer articulated. Rather, church growth principles morphed to adapt to the culture of success-driven methodologies. As a result, the CGM became the focus of two key disagreements that remain today.

## **TWO KEY DISAGREEMENTS AS A RESULT OF THE**

### **DIVERSIFICATION OF THE CHURCH GROWTH MOVEMENT**

The diversification of the CGM created a quagmire of disagreements ranging from the focus and mission of the church; that is, is the church to be about *growth* or *health*, to the emphasis of spiritual growth over numerical growth and vis-à-vis, which impacted the church especially as it pertains to its ecclesiological identity and mission.<sup>13</sup> The church was intrigued with “doing church” rather than discerning its identity and calling to its surrounding culture.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>11</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement,” 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>13</sup> This question raises legitimate concerns as to the discussion of the mission of the church. See Ed Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth, Church Health, and the Missional Church: An Overview of the Church Growth Movement from, and back to, Its Missional Roots,” *Journal of the American Society for Church Growth* 17, (2006): 15. Stetzer states, “Churches which focused on church health were struggling with how they ought to ‘do church’ in order to be healthy, not by whom and to whom they were sent.” As McIntosh postulates, “Is the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel of salvation to people and persuade them to become followers of Christ and responsible members of his church? Or is the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom and form an eschatological community of faith to be a witness to the world?” See McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 266.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. See also, Craig Van Gelder, “Gospel and Our Culture View,” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 99. Craig Van Gelder suggests that balance between *health* and *growth* can be achieved. He asserts that churches that understand the “biblical indicatives” about ecclesiological identity are “empowered” to faithfully fulfill the “biblical imperatives” given to the church.

Perhaps of all the disagreements, two key disagreements surrounding the CGM and its diversification are the most significant. The disagreements pertain, first, to whether or not “church growth” is primarily methodological or theological in nature, and second, what is the nature of a church’s engagement with culture. These two points of disagreement converge to form a vital discussion that will drive the church’s faithfulness to fulfill the Great Commission in its context.

Through an examination of the diversification of the CGM, critics and supporters of church growth cannot avoid the prominence methodology has gained in church growth discussions to the detriment of its theological roots. On one hand, Stetzer states, “There is a great lack of theological depth in much of the contemporary CGM because much of these are movements of technique, paradigms, and methodologies without genuine biblical and missiological convictions.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, McIntosh argues that an apparent lack of description of theological depth in the CGM does not imply that it is necessarily lacking. He suggests that church growth authors erred in their assumption that the church growth’s biblical foundation was without question; thus one is rarely stated.

Unfortunately, as McIntosh admits, “Time has demonstrated that many people did not, and do not, understand the biblical foundation of church growth.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than being grounded in theological conviction, the church gravitated to and was motivated by culture-driven models of ecclesiology and missiology.<sup>17</sup> However, church growth proponents, such as Howard Snyder, continue to emphasize the necessity of “not losing the dynamic nature of Scripture” when churches seek to engage culture.<sup>18</sup>

The debate over whether or not a church decides to prefer cultural alignment over scriptural alignment is essential because the nature of the discussion concerning methodology and/or theology pivots upon the pendulum of cultural engagement. No one disagrees that the church should engage its community and culture, but the precise foundation upon which it develops a strategy to engage its surrounding culture remains contentious.

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<sup>15</sup> Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> McIntosh, *Biblical Church Growth*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Stetzer, “The Evolution of Church Growth,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> See also Howard Snyder, “A Renewal Response” in *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement* ed. Gary McIntosh (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 64. See Elmer Towns, “The Relationship of Church Growth and Systematic Theology,” *JETS* 29, no. 1 (1986): 68–69. Elmer Towns asserts, “The Church Growth movement must recognize the following [principle] to remain on track: the Word of God is the ultimate standard of faith and practice, and no principle of Church Growth that contradicts Scripture, even if it produces numerical growth, is a Biblical Church Growth principle.” However, “where Scripture is silent, scientific research can determine Church Growth principles.” Towns admits that tension exists with this disagreement.

The church will either give precedence to methodology or theology in its attempt to reach the lost.<sup>19</sup> While the disagreements exist, the diversification of the CGM assists missiologists in affirming necessary realities as the church seeks to impact its culture.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE CHURCH**

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### **GROWTH MOVEMENT ON CULTURE ENGAGEMENT**

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Without the diversification of the CGM, the church's relationship to today's culture and its mission to its context would not be as thoroughly investigated as it is today. In order to understand how the CGM and its diversification impacts a church's missional strategy, this article seeks to examine the twofold result of the diversification. The first impact would be upon the church's relation to its culture.

#### **Church and Its Relation to Culture**

DiVietro argues that the impact of the diversification of the CGM resulted in the formation of a church that McGavran despised. The church that formed across the landscape because of the diversification of the CGM embodied the characteristics that McGavran sought to correct in the church.<sup>20</sup> McGavran initially sought to challenge both the isolationism of churches and the mindsets of the mission station approach, which hindered the church's ability to experience conversion growth through group conversions. Thus, McGavran focused on "evangelistic accountability and culturally informed sociological research."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 24. See also Stetzer, "Evolution of Church Growth," 17–35.

<sup>20</sup> See Roland Allen, *Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes which Hinder It* (Grand Rapids: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 23–25. See also, McGavran, *The Bridges of God*, 136. Allen's work influenced McGavran to approach the missionary station approach critically. For McGavran, in order for the church to be biblical, it had to emphasize "sending" out into unreached areas. See also, DiVietro, "Understanding the Diversification of the Church Growth Movement," 69. DiVietro also acknowledges McGavran's critique of the mission station approach. Also, note that when the diversification of the Church Growth Movement is discussed, this writer speaks of *classic church growth*, *popular church growth*, and *the church health movement* collectively.

<sup>21</sup> See DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement," 68. DiVietro provides a helpful chart that compares and contrasts both the Church Growth Movement and the church health movement.

According to DiVietro, the unintended result of the diversification of McGavran's approach caused the church to be isolated from its culture.<sup>22</sup> DiVietro states:

In a sense, the reliance on culturally informed techniques such as marketing, logistics, demographical research, and methodological ingenuity stemmed from a syncretism that overvalued cultural sources of authority. Syncretism led to methodological copycatting that, in time, rendered those very practices obsolete. As cultural sources of authority shifted, failure to shift methodological practices accordingly rendered congregations increasingly isolated.<sup>23</sup>

Stetzer also affirms that the methodological impulses of the CGM not only isolate the church in its own subculture, thus creating a "chasm of cultural understanding," but it also locks the church "into a self-affirming subculture while the larger culture continues to move in other directions."<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the church no longer occupies an effective posture to engage the culture, thus making it difficult for the church to fulfill the *missio Dei* today.

Not only did the expansion of the CGM result in a church that was isolated from its culture, but also the enlargement of the movement to encompass church health principles pushed churches toward irrelevance. DiVietro states, "Though McGavran's initial thinking promoted [centrifugal] mission efforts that sent missionaries out with the Gospel, church growth thought developed [centripetally] into church compounds attracting nonbelievers."<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the church became a subculture of its culture. DiVietro asserts, "Contemporary manifestations of church growth thinking create isolated Christian sub-cultures in a post-Christendom context."<sup>26</sup> In other words, the church health movement's inward focus blinded the church from appropriately perceiving its ministry context.<sup>27</sup>

To be fair, the resulting impact of the diversification of the CGM is not to be credited to McGavran alone. When McGavran formulated his church growth principles, never did he imagine fifty years later the expedient departure that would occur from his original principles and the consequential impact it would have upon the church. McGavran devoted his life not only

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 68–69.

<sup>24</sup> Stetzer, "Evolution of Church Growth," 17–19. See also DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement," 69. He states, "Despite the initial emphasis on contextualization, the diversification of the church growth thinking resulted in churches that were contextually isolated rather than contextually sensitive."

<sup>25</sup> DiVietro, "Understanding Diversification in the Church Growth Movement," 69.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Stetzer, "Evolution of Church Growth," 22.

to understand why some churches grew and others did not, but he also dedicated his life to seeing men and women experience salvation in Christ Jesus. For example, McIntosh recounts a situation in which McGavran expresses his concern for the “Church Growth School of Thought” in a letter to Donald Hoke, the treasurer of the Lausanne committee. McGavran states in the letter,

The church growth school of thought is a theological and biblical movement arising in violent opposition to the neglect of mission by both the right and the left. The right had settled back into carrying on good church and mission work whether the Church grew or not. Institutionalism was firmly in the saddle. . . . The left neglected church multiplying evangelism (mission) because, it said, “The day of church planting is over. . . .” The left proposed a tremendous swing to social action, church mergers, and renewal of existing congregations.

To meet all of this, the church growth school of thought vigorously maintained that without conscious dedication to Jesus Christ men are lost. God wants His lost children found; the complexities of the situation must not divert churches and Christians from mission; the world was never more winnable than it is today.<sup>28</sup>

While McGavran’s convictions were unwavering, the diversification of the CGM, due to the influence of popular church growth theories and the church health movement, not only diluted McGavran’s once clear biblical passion to see the church engage its culture through evangelistic efforts, but it also retarded the church’s ability to engage its culture from a sound theological foundation. As a result, the culture of the church was no longer in a healthy place for cultural engagement.

### **The Culture of the Church**

Interestingly, DiVietro and Stetzer uncover much more in their examination of the diversification of the CGM. Whereas the first result of the diversification of the CGM focused on the church’s relation to culture, a second result of the diversification reveals an unhealthy culture of the church. DiVietro argues that in an age when modernity resembled Christendom, church

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<sup>28</sup> Gary McIntosh, *Donald A. McGavran: A Biography of the Twentieth Century’s Premier Missiologist* (Church Leader Insights, 2015), 239–240. McGavran continues by saying, “Church growth men encourage honest appraisal of each particular situation. They resolve to understand the matrix in which each cluster of congregation is growing, the past growth patterns . . . and the growth potential in each of these small beginning denominations. Church growth men are pro every section of the Body of Christ which is obediently carrying out the Great Commission. Church growth men are against every theory, every theology, every organization, and every ecclesiology which diverts Christians from carrying out the mandate of Christ to disciple the nations.”

growth methods were sufficient. However, because modernity has shifted to a post-Christendom culture, church growth practice is “an inadequate strategy.”<sup>29</sup> As stated earlier, not only does the church become isolated from its culture, but the culture in the church is also no longer healthy enough to embrace the changes experienced in its surrounding context.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, “non-church goes [would have] to cross cultural boundaries when attending church.”<sup>31</sup>

Because of the diversification of the CGM and the application of its principles, a consumeristic culture currently resides within the church. DiVietro agrees, “McGavran’s overreliance on cultural sources of authority combined with the emphasis later church growth advocates placed on effective methods yielded a church more reminiscent of a modern organization than a missionary congregation.” Now, “Christians view themselves as consumers of church activity. . . . Methods become goals, and proper program execution is mistaken for faithful ministry.”<sup>32</sup> Inevitably, a consumeristic mindset will infiltrate and manifest itself in a church that hastily pursues CGM principles, especially the principles that morphed during the diversification of the movement.

Furthermore, the church that pursues the same principles will be amiss theologically. Stetzer’s research affirms this reality. According to Stetzer, each aspect of the diversification of the CGM manifests deficiencies. Each individual nuance of the CGM leaves the church standing on a three-pronged stool with one prong being splintered. According to Stetzer, the CGM, which includes principles from classic and popular strands of church growth, stands strongly upon the pillars of ecclesiology and missiology. However, it lacks a vibrant Christology.<sup>33</sup> Whereas the CGM lacks a strong Christology, the church health movement lacks a robust missiology.<sup>34</sup> In other words, Stetzer’s work allows the church to perceive its theological

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<sup>29</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding the Diversification of the Church Growth Movement,” 69.

<sup>30</sup> DiVietro states, “The sociological research and methodological reliance of the Church Growth Movement were syncretistic in their acceptance of cultural practices and did not submit those practices to Scripture. Logistical and pragmatic considerations are not wrong but must not become more authoritative than Scripture. The late modern world is culturally diverse and intimately connected; seeking contextually appropriate gospel embodiment while avoiding either cultural syncretism or isolationist irrelevance is a biblically faithful approach to multi-cultural evangelism and mission,” 78.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> DiVietro, “Understanding the Diversification in the Church Growth Movement,” 74. See Thomas White and John Mark Yeats, *Franchising McChurch: Feeding Our Obsession with Easy Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), for the impact that consumeristic culture has upon the church.

<sup>33</sup> Stetzer, “Evolution of Church Growth,” 21.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

neglect, which undermines its ability to engage culture with a sure footing biblically.

The diversification of the CGM, while it intended to assist the church as it engaged its culture, unfortunately, not only left the church detached from its culture, but it also left the church with a consumeristic mindset that must be eradicated. Rather than the church settling with its current plight, it can accept the benefit from the diversification of the CGM, which is the ability to recognize the current situation and begin the process of realigning itself with a thorough theological conviction and strategy to engage the post-Christendom context of today.

According to McIntosh, an evaluation of the CGM also provides relevant questions for the church today. He states, “The basic question is how much can a church adapt contextually to its culture without accommodating to the culture?” In addition, he states, “To what extent should pragmatic decision drive the agenda of the church as it seeks to communicate to people in the various cultures of the world?”<sup>35</sup> To this, this article now turns to explore a preliminary avenue of missiological restoration from missiologist Lesslie Newbigin.

#### **DOES A WAY FORWARD EXIST?**

Lesslie Newbigin, a contemporary of McGavran, offers an initial way to reorient the church so that it can regain its rightful and impactful place in its context. Newbigin, upon his return from the mission field to his home in Europe, realized the Western culture was no longer a culture with Christendom characteristics.<sup>36</sup> Recognizing the dichotomy created between the private and public sphere of life due to the effects of modernity, Newbigin sought to promote a missiology that would encourage the church to span the newly established chasm between the private and public sector of life.<sup>37</sup>

One missiologist that advanced Newbigin’s thought was George Hunsberger. Recognizing that current missiological efforts had become domesticated, Hunsberger argued that the church of the West had to approach its

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<sup>35</sup> McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 266. In addition, the diversification of the Church Growth Movement into different streams of thought creates an opportunity to reevaluate and reestablish the untainted elements and biblical convictions of McGavran. See McIntosh and Engle, *Evaluating the Church Growth Movement*, 8 and 39, for positive elements.

<sup>36</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 125–150.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 132–133. See also George R. Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet,” in *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 6.

context utilizing missiological approaches that missionaries had spent their life implementing in different cultural contexts.<sup>38</sup>

However, Newbigin and Hunsberger faced similar challenges experienced in the diversification of the CGM. Hunsberger asserts that in order to impact its culture, the church must engage the culture as Newbigin suggested. However, Hunsberger warned, a strategy that embodied the culture “without challenge would lead to syncretism; challenge without embodiment would be irrelevant.”<sup>39</sup>

Newbigin’s missiology offerings sought to right the church from its ineffectiveness in a post-Christendom culture. His efforts helped not only to challenge “the church to embody its true missionary character,” but also to expose, as discerned by Hunsberger, the “crisis regarding the identity of the church and the nature of the church’s responsibility in and for the public order of the larger society.”<sup>40</sup> In essence, Newbigin challenged the church to embrace a “mission that represents the reign of God.”<sup>41</sup>

One vital aspect of a mission that represents the reign of God is its evangelistic nature. Hunsberger, relying upon Newbigin, argues that the church must recover its evangelistic fervor “in terms appropriate to an audience of people who live with post-Christian, secular convictions.”<sup>42</sup> Thus, as Hunsberger argues, “The very way in which we conceive evangelism needs an overhaul.”<sup>43</sup> One way in which the overhaul is needed in evangelism is “that evangelism be grounded in a credible demonstration that a life lived by the pattern of commitment to Jesus is imaginable, possible, and relevant in the modern and postmodern age.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, the evangelism that Hunsberger argued for required the life of the witness to embody and substantiate the gospel proclaimed.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet,” 5.

<sup>39</sup> Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet,” 9. Hunsberger argues, “It is important to grasp these features of Newbigin’s missionary approach. . . . The authority of the Bible, its affirmation and critique of every culture, and the church’s attitude toward both of these elements are essential for a serious missiological encountering of the Western culture that is for us in North American churches both our assumed reality and our missionary assignment,” 10.

<sup>40</sup> Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet,” 14–15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet,” 22.

<sup>45</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 143 and 149. Not only did Newbigin desire for men and women to be prepared to think through the relationship their faith had with the public, but he also argued that the result of their life change could influence others to consider the credibility of the message of the gospel.

While Newbigin's influence offers corrective steps to the church to enable it to engage its culture, his assertions set the church adrift towards the precipice of syncretism through an emphasis on ecumenism,<sup>46</sup> a diminishing view of the local church,<sup>47</sup> and viewing the "culture through Christian minds shaped by other cultures."<sup>48</sup> Keith Eitel warns of this.

Eitel, in his article, "*Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?*" argues that a subtle shift occurs when churches seek to develop an ecclesiology based on the context of culture. Eitel argues, in a critique of one of Newbigin's proponents, that churches that adapt theological principles to fit contextual situations cause "believers to reshape God's Word into something relevant to and for [any] context."<sup>49</sup> In other words, each culture will eventually promote its own ecclesiology rather than basing its ecclesiology upon Scripture. Therefore, as Eitel states, "There is no guiding element designed to avoid . . . namely, the development of an infinite number of contextual and often mutually exclusive theologies."<sup>50</sup> While Newbigin's efforts to eradicate the church's inability to engage its culture effectively does clear a path forward, Newbigin's efforts veer off into areas that could undermine biblical precedence for the church.

## A WAY FORWARD

Harold Senkbeil offers a free church solution as to how a church can engage a constantly shifting culture by discerning key aspects of the culture's impact on the church. Senkbeil argues, the impact of the culture's "loss of virtue, flight from reason, and the debacle of individualism" has infiltrated the church and has resulted in a counterfeit mission.<sup>51</sup> Because of the culture's influence, Senkbeil states, "The mission of the Christian takes over the mission of Christ. The sacrificial death and substitutionary atonement of Jesus is eclipsed by the gospel of progress, happiness, and self-improvement."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 145. He specifically says that this ecumenism is not a "federation of denominations," but rather "the bringing together of denominationally separated churches . . . to create a more coherent and credible Christian witness to the human community in that place," 146.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>49</sup> Keith Eitel, "*Scriptura or Cultura: Is There a Sola in There?*" in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55 no. 1, (2012): 67. Eitel quotes Craig Van Gelder, a proponent of Newbigin's principles for engaging a changing Western culture.

<sup>50</sup> Eitel, "*Scriptura or Cultura*," 67.

<sup>51</sup> Harold Senkbeil, "Engaging our Culture Faithfully," in *Concordia Journal* 40 no. 4 (2014): 294–295.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

Simply put, Senkbeil states, “The improved Christian has taken over the spotlight from Jesus Christ crucified.”<sup>53</sup>

Not only has the culture’s influence taken the spotlight away from Jesus, but it also has clouded the church’s theological commitment to truth. Senkbeil states, “We have abandoned teaching truth and focused on self-improvement. We seem to be driven more by polls and approval ratings than we are by the Word of God.”<sup>54</sup> The resulting effect, as Senkbeil asserts, is that “We have embraced the expectations and norms of our culture and begun to remodel the church in the image and likeness of the world—and in that world, expressive individualism takes precedence over everything else.”<sup>55</sup> Accordingly, the church has shifted to such a degree that it is more concerned about its appropriating cultural norms within its foundation than standing upon a foundation that is distinct from culture. As Senkbeil asserts, the church “seems fixated on remodeling itself . . . albeit with a spiritual veneer.”<sup>56</sup>

Recognizing this reality, Senkbeil argues that the influence of the culture upon the church has generated an underlying and problematic sickness within the church—*acedia* (sloth). According to Senkbeil, historically, *acedia* signified a “disappointment with and spiritual disaffection from God’s divinely ordained gifts, be they in the realm of creation or redemption.”<sup>57</sup> Because of *acedia*, “Christians sink into boredom and apathy” with not only the holiness of the God, but also with personal holiness.<sup>58</sup> Senkbeil is not alone in his evaluation of the church.

Malcom Yarnell, in his article, “Global Choices for Twenty-First Century Christians: Bringing Clarity to Missional Theology,” discerns a current movement within missiological ideology to minimize the value the role that the church’s holiness has within its context.<sup>59</sup> Yarnell, who interacts with current minds such as Mark Driscoll and David Bosch, seeks to expose the deficiency of the argument that churches should prioritize their pursuit of relevance over their call to holiness. Yarnell, who points out the weakness of David Bosch’s missiology, asserts that a church’s holiness within its community cannot be undervalued. To belittle the church and its call to be holy in the world “depends upon the downplaying of Scripture’s call to live uniquely in the world, which cannot be downplayed without a concomitant

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<sup>53</sup> Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 296.

<sup>54</sup> Senkbeil, “Engaging Our Culture Faithfully,” 296.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 297.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 304.

<sup>59</sup> Malcom Yarnell, “Global Choices for Twenty-First Century Christians: Bringing Clarity to Missional Theology,” in *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 55 no. 1 (2012): 29.

deflation of the biblical text.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, the church cannot live out Scripture’s clear teaching on its identity, when it seeks to pursue the mastery of being relevant in its context.

A way forward exists for the church when it recovers the value of the corporate life of the church expressed through evangelism, preaching, and ministry. However, to journey through this avenue of recovery necessitates that both the culture of the church and the church’s relation to its culture be addressed.

## THE CULTURE OF THE CHURCH

Throughout history, the adaptation of cultural norms within the church has often been critiqued. For example, Søren Kierkegaard was an ardent critique of the culture of Christianity that sought to pattern itself according to Christendom. Malcolm Yarnell relies heavily upon Kierkegaard’s attack on the church during the nineteenth century to reveal the “folly” of “cultural compromise” that dictate the mindset of Christ followers.<sup>61</sup>

According to Kierkegaard, the culture of Christendom, which infiltrated the church, left the church “attempting to serve God, by not following Christ.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the culture of the church in Kierkegaard’s day preached a message of Christianity that veiled the Christianity of the New Testament. Kierkegaard perceived within the church that a Christianity that appealed to the fallen nature of man was being declared biblical Christianity, and a Christianity that offends the heart can be certain not to be the Christianity of the New Testament.<sup>63</sup>

In other words, Kierkegaard discerned that cultural Christianity required no cost to follow Christ. Kierkegaard states, “What Christianity wants is the following of Christ. What man does not want is suffering . . . the Christian sort, suffering at the hands of men. So he dispenses with ‘following.’”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Kierkegaard concludes, “The result of the Christianity of ‘Christendom’ is that everything, absolutely everything, has remained as it was, only everything has

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. Yarnell provides both a sound critique and the consequence of pursuing relevance at all cost. Yarnell suggests that Scripture does not need to be made relevant because in its sufficiency, it is already relevant by the very nature of it being God’s Word to man in every culture and context.

<sup>61</sup> Yarnell, “Bringing Clarity to Missional Theology,” 34.

<sup>62</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom: 1854–1855* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1956), 121.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 151. Kierkegaard states, “Behold, here lies the difficulty. The difficulty by no means consists in making it clear that the official Christianity is not the Christianity of the New Testament, but in the fact that the Christianity of the New Testament and what the New Testament understands by being a Christian is the last thing of all to be pleasing to a man.”

<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 123.

assumed the name of ‘Christian’—and so . . . we live a life of paganism.”<sup>65</sup> In Kierkegaard’s day, the church was inundated with a culturally approved Christianity that caused it to drift from biblical Christianity. Although controversial at times, Kierkegaard correctly understood the culture of the church in his day and its need for a serious revival back to the foundation of Scripture. Yet, Kierkegaard is not the sole historical critic of the culture of the church.

John Wycliffe, declared as the morning star of the Reformation, was also critical of the environment of the church in the fourteenth century, especially pertaining to the priest and his office. Often accused of attempting to undermine and abolish the priesthood, Wycliffe sought to transform the priestly (pastoral) office by focusing on the holiness of the priest and the wholesomeness of his teaching.<sup>66</sup>

According to Wycliffe, the priests no longer “lived according to the principle of Christ,” nor were they concerned about the divine responsibility that accompanied their office.<sup>67</sup> Rather, they sought to heap and hoard for themselves riches gained through the practice of simony. “For Wycliffe, simony not only polluted the church, but also its effects contaminated the health of society, thus creating a hazardous communal environment.”<sup>68</sup> However, Wycliffe called upon the priest to return holiness. “Wycliffe hoped not only for a transformation of the clerical class, but also aimed to reinstitute right doctrine in order that right practice would be returned to the Church.”<sup>69</sup> For Wycliffe, “Right doctrine and right practice would only occur through a recovery of holiness in the pastor’s life, resulting in the ‘wholesomeness’ of his teaching.”<sup>70</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and Wycliffe serve as a reminder that the church today needs to be challenged to evaluate not only the degree to which culture has compromised its ability to engage culture biblically and effectively, but also the degree to which culture has compromised its message. Perhaps, without the diversification of the CGM, pastors, theologians, and churches would not have considered the impact that culture would have had upon the church and the way in which this impact would isolate it from the culture it seeks to reach. A way forward for the church, in light of the diversification

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<sup>65</sup> Kierkegaard, *Attack upon Christendom*, 164.

<sup>66</sup> See John Wycliffe, *On the Pastoral Office (De Officio Pastoralis)*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, in *Advocates of Reform*, ed. Matthew Spinka, Library of Christian Classics [LCC] (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), 32. See also John Wycliffe, *On the Truth of Holy Scripture*, trans. Ian Christopher Ivey, ed. E. Ann Matter, TEAMS Commentary Series (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications of Western Michigan University, 2001), 196. See also, Russell Bryan, “John Wycliffe: An Anti-clericalist?” a paper presented to Dr. Malcom Yarnell for the requirements of CHAHT 7344, December 1, 2016, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Wycliffe, *On the Pastoral Office*, 33.

<sup>68</sup> Bryan, “John Wycliffe: An Anti-clericalist?” 16.

<sup>69</sup> Bryan, “John Wycliffe: An Anti-clericalist?” See also Wycliffe, *On the Truth of Holy Scriptures*, 196.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. See also Wycliffe, *On the Pastoral Office*, 32.

of the CGM, is for it to evaluate its culture according to Scripture. Once the culture is right, it will then be in a place to engage a culture that questions the value and authenticity of the message of Christ.

## THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO ITS CULTURE

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The diversification of the CGM exposed the church's unhealthy dependence on tools, techniques, and strategies, leaving it isolated and irrelevant to its culture. Learning from the effects that the diversification of the CGM had on numerous churches, one consistent path forward for the church, as it seeks to relate to the culture, requires the church to stand upon both the verbal proclamation of Scripture and an incarnational missiology if it is to engage and impact culture effectively.

Alvin Reid, in his article, "How to Share Jesus without Freaking Out," argues that to be effective in reaching today's culture requires "less of trying to prove Christianity, intellectually, and more of showing the change Christ makes." He states, "Most unchurched people I meet aren't asking whether you can prove Christianity—they are asking whether you can live it."<sup>71</sup> Simply stated, culture is seeking to observe the impact of the power of Jesus in the lives of those who profess him. To impact culture, the church will have to embrace an incarnational strategy. Reid is not alone in his assertion.

Edward Dayton and David Frasier also argue for a visible demonstration of the effect of the gospel upon the life of those who repent and respond in faith to Christ. Dayton and Frasier state, "The gospel must be lived as well as verbalized. Those who follow the One who submitted to the cruel death of the cross have their own cross to carry."<sup>72</sup> In addition, they state, "The evangel is not simply the message Jesus proclaimed. It is also the reality that Jesus lived the kingdom that he brought. The evangelist must live the evangel if it is to have any credibility or authenticity."<sup>73</sup> For Dayton and Frasier, living a life that embodies the gospel is paramount to effective evangelism within shifting cultures.

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<sup>71</sup> Alvin Reid, "How to Share Jesus without Freaking Out," in *Facts and Trends* 63 no. 2 (2017): 17. Reid understands that what culture seeks today is not only a message faithfully proclaimed, but also the evidence of the transformative essence that is promised upon the reception of the message.

<sup>72</sup> Edward Dayton and David Frasier, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization*, ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 51.

<sup>73</sup> Dayton and Frasier, *Planning Strategies for World Evangelization*, 51. See also Eitel, "Scriptura or Cultura," 66. Eitel states, "For Scripture's prophetic voice to be heard, the directional priority should flow from God's Word to humanity with an increasingly closer approximation to God's truth. Its signature effect is an increasingly apparent life-evident walk by the believer in a manner worthy of his calling." See also, Orlando Costas, *Christ Outside the Gate: Mission Beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 5. However, Costas understands the importance of embodying Christ, and he carries a tone of liberation theology and emphasis upon a social gospel, 16.

The biblical example of Paul's life also embodies the essence of the incarnational approach. In 2 Corinthians 4:7–12, Paul states that though death is at work in him, it results in life for the Corinthians. According to Steven Smith, Paul would be the physical, present embodiment of the sufferings of Christ on behalf of the Corinthians, not so they would have faith in Paul, but that through Paul, his life and ministry, would be captivated by the power of Christ.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps William Edwards grasps Paul's embodiment of the death of Jesus the clearest. Edwards states, "as Paul embodies the life and death of Christ, [he] continually provides an interpretation that centers others on Christ, making it clear that his letters are to be read not as the story of Paul and his ministry, but the story of Christ's death and resurrection as exhibited in Paul and his ministry."<sup>75</sup> Because of Paul, the Corinthian believers were no longer excused to reject the authenticity of message of the gospel and its impact upon their own life. They, too, were called to live out what Christ had accomplished in them.

## CONCLUSION

The CGM has experienced both victories and defeat. As cultures shifted and modernity passed, the CGM flaws became visible, especially in its diversification. Rather than focusing on the flaws, this article attempted to reveal a few benefits of the diversification of the CGM. Not only are the *classic* church growth principles able to be viewed in an uncontaminated light, but also the dangers of the *popular* church growth theories, and even the church health theories, are exposed. Without the dangers being exposed, many more churches in the future can unintentionally succumb to the same pitfalls these theories have caused.

As a result of the diversification of the CGM, churches today can purposefully seek to engage their shifting culture by learning from the misplaced focus in the past. Rather than relying heavily upon culture, the church can attach itself to the mast of Scripture, so that when the winds of culture shift, it can adjust without abandoning its support and foundation. Doing so propels not only a theological priority to undergird the missional strategy of the

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<sup>74</sup> Steven W. Smith, *Dying to Preach: Embracing the CROSS in the PULPIT* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2009), 81–83. See also Russell Bryan, "An Examination of the Suffering of Paul in 2 Corinthians and Its Contribution to the Ongoing Discussion of Pastoral Leadership," submitted to Dr. Steve Lee to fulfill the requirements of CHVIT 7406 (November 21, 2016), 27.

<sup>75</sup> William Edwards, "Participants in What We Proclaim: Recovering Paul's Narrative of Pastoral Ministry," in *Themelios* 39, no. 3 (2014): 463. Edwards also argues that the experiences Paul presents in verses 8–10 are "not occasional moments, but a consistent pattern that frames his conception of ministry," 462. Taken from Bryan, "An Examination of the Suffering of Paul," 24.

church, but it will also enable the church to embody the gospel effectively. Therefore, wherever the Lord may send her, she will effectively demonstrate the power of the gospel through both proclamation and incarnation.

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