

Paul's Missionary Band as Metaphor

by Dr. Dan Reeves - IMLT Strategic Consultant

Backdrop For The Metaphor

PART ONE OF A SIX PART SERIES

I was there – Berkeley and Berlin during the student riots, the counter cultural scene of Amsterdam and Stockholm in the 70's, in France, knocking on a neighbor's door and meeting a family who said they were not in any way religious and were too busy to talk because they were baptizing their new baby. In the semi-autobiographical film, "The Jerk," Steve Martin begins to tell his story by saying, "I was born a poor, black child." To tell my ministry story, I have to begin, "I was born on a missional team to postmodern Europe."

I received my boot-training in Berkeley in 1967 where, in coffee shops, as part of a student team, I first met with representatives of these nascent postmodern tribes that now populate much of our 21st century world. Soon after, I met them in London, at the School of Economics in 1968, then, repeatedly while I was a member of pioneering ministry teams in Paris, in Stockholm, in Helsinki and Berlin during the last few years of that decade. I engaged them up close at the universities of Orleans and Lyon from 1970-1974.

In 1975, I returned to the U.S. as a missionary and had to shift my approach and thinking from the postmodern encounters I had had in Europe to adapting to and addressing the culture of modernity and modern church structures I found in America. Just as I had to learn French to reach French students at the Sorbonne, and, in Barcelona, had to ignore American time frames to interact with Spanish students in bible explorations at one o'clock in the morning, on returning to America, I had to become fluent in the dialect and ways of modernism.

Our first year back was one of re-entry culture shock. It was hard to transition into and relate to the American modern approach. Then I met Donald McGavran, the founder of Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission. McGavran also worked in non-modern contexts, but in his case it was primarily India and the third world. Many of his theories coincided with what I had experienced at Berkeley in 1967, and as our teams engaged the various neo-barbarian tribes in London, Helsinki, Berlin and Paris. In the quarter of a century that has followed that valuable missiological training, I have worked cross denominationally (culturally) in hundreds of churches diverse in size, tradition, and geography.

However, today I come full circle in my ministry to addressing the issues that are raised for the church in reaching postmoderns in 21st century America. Flashbacks from current encounters trigger surreal sensations. Sometimes I must consciously tell myself that I have not returned for a second term of evangelizing the youth culture in Europe. The playing fields in America have changed from mono-cultural to cross-cultural and there are thousands of new tribes that are spiritually hungry. Unfortunately, they are finding answers elsewhere because the church is often seen as an irrelevant farce, confused, dysfunctional, divided, bogged down in introspection and institutionalism.

In the next few pages, I would like to look at an emerging solution that is rooted in the beginnings of Christianity, one that builds on the ancient foundations of the church, but provides



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both message and metaphor for the future church. This solution is found in re-examining and applying the principles of Paul's missionary band. As we look at Paul's missionary band we see the first example of practical missiology and cross cultural team ministry in the New Testament, and the missionary means of implementing the great Commission. Paul's missionary band provides a helpful and appropriate metaphor for 21st century ministry and the implementation of the Great Commission in our postmodern setting.

I believe we need to develop a whole new skill set for the next generation of church leaders, because in a rapidly changing world where cultural shifts are taking place seamlessly, there is enormous confusion and ignorance about both church and mission in this new setting. We are relying on training and programs designed for a modern setting. We don't realize that in this postmodern world we need to be cross-cultural rather than mono-cultural and more missional than institutional.

The corrective skill sets are modeled in Scripture in Paul's missionary band. This "PMB" approach relied upon practical missiology and relational teamwork to reach the Gentiles, in contrast to the less missional Jerusalem church with its vertical structures and predominantly monocultural perspective. The skills and patterns of the original missionary band are also observed in the various waves of missionary bands throughout history.

I believe it is time to reinforce our ecclesiological foundations by introducing practical missiology and by learning from our biblical and historical origins to become a catalytic force once again. Only by understanding practical missiology, that is how we contextualize ministry, form effective cross cultural teams and address issues as a team in a particular context, can we effectively reach 21st century postmoderns.

Understanding the confusion and dysfunction of doing church in our North American, multicultural, postmodern context.

At the beginning of the 21st century we find ourselves in a turbulent, multicultural, postmodern context in which, as a recent USA TODAY column proclaims, there is "Information everywhere, but not the time to think."¹ In the church scene, there never has been a time where there are so many advocates boldly proclaiming their preferred correctives. Predictably, the backlash is already occurring. Congregational leaders are weary of hearing conflicting signals from outspoken enthusiasts, who are often perceived as contradictory, provincial and/or working at cross-purposes. At the same time, leaders of established denominations are encountering new difficulties in reaching the unchurched, and in meeting the needs of their increasingly diverse constituencies.



As these same leaders embrace the creative approaches of new tribal coalitions, such as Willow Creek Association and Leadership Network, they are often faced with strong resistance from retrenching members of their traditional wings. In some of America's largest metropolitan areas there are encouraging signs of a new ecumenism in city reaching strategies, but the gains are often offset by unsettled theological suspicions. Finally, institutionalism continues to choke congregational life across our nation at unprecedented levels.

In trying to understand this current confusion and dysfunction, we need to look at three areas of distorted thinking and defective strategies.

Navigating the postmodern transition

It has often been noted, that the church responds and adapts slowly to changing cultural realities and shifts, often lagging up to two decades behind in its recognition of the current thinking patterns of the unchurched. This is no less true as we begin the third millennium. A host of researchers are providing clear descriptions and definitions of postmodern people. Recent books by Leonard Sweet and George Hunter point out, for example, that churches have difficulty in connecting with postmoderns because so many churches have no understanding and, sometimes, even resist seeking understanding of the postmodern transition.

Sweet claims that post moderns have had it with religion. They want no part of obeying propositions and rules of institutionalized creed.ⁱⁱ Relationship and connection is at the heart of postmodern culture and our first challenge is to understand how to connect at a heart-to-heart level. The worst thing we can do is be perceived as self-absorbed consumers. Before anyone can connect or communicate with post moderns, they must become genuine givers and servers.

George Hunter, in his book *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, introduces us to what he calls the New Barbarians and enhances our postmodern portrait with some additional detailing.

A host of New Barbarians substantially populate the Western world once again; indeed, they are all around us...Often, they are thought to lack "class." They may have unshined shoes, or body odor, or grease under their finger nails; in conversation, they might split an infinitive or utter an expletive.ⁱⁱⁱ

Both Sweet and Hunter describe today's barbarians as returning to and embracing pre-enlightenment identities. As these subcultures continue to retribalize they are replacing the individualistic and rational enlightenment identity which stated, "I think, therefore I am," with their mantra "I belong, therefore I am."

However, most of the church's thinking remains predominantly modern, individualistic and rational. Consequently the messages that go out to the "New Barbarians" are often perceived as condescending, culturally chauvinistic and often commercial. Instead of going out, we are pitching them to come in and join our cultural framework. Hunter, in describing how the "Old Barbarians" were won, tells how the Celtic church routinely commissioned teams to effectively enter "enemy territory." Like Paul's missionary band, they took the message to the barbarians rather than clean up the barbarians and bring them to the message. In contrast, the Roman church's strategy was largely ineffective in reaching the barbarian tribes. Like the Romans, according to Hunter, today's churches, are, for the most part, waiting for the barbarians to somehow find us and our institutional setting. Consequently, we are missing out on one of the greatest "apostolic adventures" available to Christians.^{iv}

It is our ethnocentrism, I believe, that often inhibits us from confronting our culture and initiating conversations with our nearby barbarians. Our view of culture must therefore be literally turned upside down. Rather than having the condescending view that our way is best, we need to be burdened to learn how to communicate in indigenous ways following the example of Paul, which was at the heart of the Celtic pattern of bridging cultures. Unfortunately, like the Romans, our tendency towards cultural chauvinism and ethnocentrism produces defective strategies because we want first to civilize them, then to Christianize them.

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What is most needed today is for us to simply take the time to understand postmoderns, who they are, how they think and how best to enter their world in order to bring them to Christ. In doing this, we need to be less monologic and more dyadic. We need to learn how to engage our barbarians in a two-way conversation that involves listening for clues and looking for people who appear receptive.

Clarifying the relationship between the church and the kingdom

The second area where there is confused thinking is in the difference and relationship between the church and the kingdom. In the past five years, I have been privileged to form the Council on Ecclesiology and facilitate personal and group discussions between diverse constituencies within the evangelical church.^v The Council on Ecclesiology brings together members from traditions as diverse as New Apostolic, Reformed, Holiness, Willow Creek, Mosaic, African-American Pentecostal, and young leaders of new emerging Christian tribes, to interact, to pray and to clarify the nature of the church.

One of the themes that emerged in the council is how the different traditions and churches represent a contemporary Israel, with discernable kingdom “tribes.” During our first council of ecclesiology the discussion at one point bogged down considerably. Some of our “tribal” representatives were neither understanding nor embracing the perspectives of other members.

Ed Delph, who represents the New Apostolic Churches, summarized the situation this way. “What I hear many of you saying is that you see yourselves as Israel, rather than as Dan. You want all of the tribes to conform to your view of the church. In actual fact, we are all individual tribes who are interdependent upon one another. Each of us has a valid perspective that needs to be stirred into our overall understandings of the church and the kingdom. None of us are Israel.”

In my view, too many cross-tribal teams have avoided substantive discussions of this kind in recent years, for fear of it leading to divisions. Now that the barbarians are surrounding us we can no longer justify an avoidance pattern. With so many city-reaching strategies bogging down over unresolved theological suspicions, we are obligated to invest the time to collectively reinforce our ecclesiological foundations. These issues will take the illumination and intervention of God’s Spirit, and much continued interaction before they can be adequately resolved.

However, one thing is certain. As the patterns of post-modernity become more pervasive, all of us will need to be clear on our God given roles as dual citizens. We need not only to know who we are in the context of our beliefs, but also we need to understand our role in the kingdom.

In the first role of citizen, every pastor and Christian leader needs to belong to a particular biblical tribe, (church, creed, denomination) be a member in good standing, make a contribution that matches giftedness, understand the tribal ways and speak the unique language, “tribalese.” In the second role of citizen, these same leaders must be able to interact effectively among other biblical tribes, and be just as fluent in the second language of “kingdomese.” Churches can no longer defend entrenchment, but need to invest in kingdom issues by encouraging their pastors and people to invest a certain portion of their time in kingdom activities.

Overcoming institutionalism and simplifying structures

Many of us who work in front line congregational revitalization could become discouraged when we look at the scoreboard of the institutional church. After more than 25 years of seeking to

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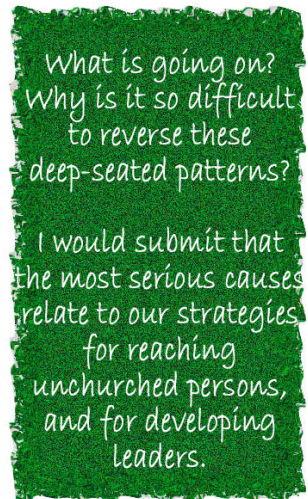
overcome the entropic forces that prevent congregations from experiencing fruitfulness, we can point to a small percentage of exceptional leaders who have broken out of the pervasive pattern. For a variety of reasons the majority of leadership teams are not able to breakthrough the strong gravitational force that grips them.

In a recent workshop on team ministry designed for congregational consultants, Gary McIntosh and I asked the participants to give us words they hear from congregational leaders that describe this epidemic, entropic condition. Here is the list of synonyms we recorded:

Plateaued	Culturally irrelevant
Declining	Institutionalized
Stagnant	Broken
Dead	Wounded
Traditional	Dysfunctional
Stuck	Christendom

What is going on? Why is it so difficult to reverse these deep-seated patterns? I would submit to you that the most serious causes relate to our strategies for reaching unchurched persons, for caring for new believers, and for developing leaders. Traditionally we have described this process as people flow.^{vi} During the last several years I have come to the conclusion that our defective structures are perhaps even more important than people flow and leadership development. Putting it simply, our structures are strangling our churches. Congregational life is literally being squeezed and squelched by an overly complex and cumbersome governmental apparatus.

It is time to find a simpler, more life-giving means of reproducing ministry. Rather than perceive the trends as sources of despair and gloom, I choose to view them, along with Lyle Schaller, as signs of hope that can be used as contextual foundations for designing ministry in an emerging postmodern world.^{vii}



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I will attempt to show during this coaching seminar, how the PMB metaphor can help:

- eliminate institutionalism
- avoid burnout among staff and lay leaders
- drop the casualty rate among missional teams from 95% to 0
- ignore the bell curve statistics, create sustainability in growth patterns and perpetuate congregational life
- double or triple the amount of real front line ministry for the same cost (the stewardship issue)

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- i Elizabeth , Thursday, October 19, 2000,
- ii Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* (Broadman and Holman, Nashville, 2000), 112-113.
- iii George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach The West Again*, (Abingdon, Nashville, 2000), 96.
- iv Hunter, 21, 121.
- v Additional information on the Council on Ecclesiology can be located at www.Ecclesiology.org.
- vi See Dan Reeves and Ron Jenson, *Always Advancing, Here's Life*, (San Bernardino, 1984).
- Carl George also builds on this model in his meta-church framework. See for example, *Prepare Your Church for the*