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**The Church Growth Movement  
and the Gospel and Our Culture Network:  
An Ongoing Dialog**

**Timothy J. Peck**

When I was recently talking to a church growth professor, our conversation drifted to current critics of the Church Growth Movement (CGM). One critic this professor mentioned was the Gospel and Our Culture Network (GOCN), a network of scholars and practitioners associated with the writings of the late Anglican missiologist Lesslie Newbigin. As a proponent of the CGM, I was surprised at first. My initial reading of Newbigin had not led me to envision his ideas as at odds with CGM ideas and assumptions. Soon thereafter I discovered the GOCN for myself by reading *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Hunsberger 1996), *Missional Church* (Guder 1998), *Confident Witness—Changing World* (Van Gelder 1999), and *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Guder 2000). I also discovered the Gospel and Our Culture website, which is a depository of articles and opinion pieces. As I have read the GOCN materials, I have noted both tensions and similarities with the CGM. In this article I will outline several of these tensions. Then I shall argue there is common ground between the CGM and GOCN, more common ground than is often appreciated by both sides. This common ground ought to become the basis for further dialog between both groups.

*Modernity vs. Postmodernity*

Perhaps the single most significant tension between the CGM and the GOCN is where they are located in the contempo-

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rary intellectual landscape. In many ways the CGM is a child of modernity, with its focus on utilization of the social sciences to help the Church effectively communicate the gospel to Enlightenment thinking unbelievers. McGavran himself notes:

The church growth movement, in consequence, has greatly emphasized accurate research into the effectiveness of church and mission labors. It insists not only that the amount and rate of growth must be accurately charted, but also that the real reasons for growth or lack of growth must be accurately known (McGavran 1988, 61).

Church Growth studies are generally strong on data from social sciences, reflecting an Enlightenment emphasis on science as the legitimizer of reality. This is not to say that CGM thinkers completely capitulated to modernity. Most CGM practitioners and thinkers are theologically conservative and embrace a high view of Scripture. However, this is to admit that the tools of the CGM have often been the tools of modernity. With few exceptions (among them Easum 2000 and Gibbs 2000), this continues to characterize most CGM literature.

In contrast, the GOCN is thoroughly postmodern in its outlook. As a result, the GOCN is distrustful of Enlightenment reliance on science, even social sciences. Instead, the GOCN tends to rely more on philosophy, especially as it relates to epistemology. GOCN proponents have a tendency to view CGM thinkers as unknowingly enmeshed in modernist assumptions.

*Transforming Culture vs. Counter-Culture*

This leads to a second tension between the CGM and GOCN: attitude toward culture. Though both groups are concerned with a genuine missionary encounter between gospel and culture, the CGM has tended to focus on the Church's responsibility to bridge the gap between unbelievers and the Church. To borrow from the taxonomy of H. Richard Niebuhr, CGM proponents have generally embraced a "Christ transforming culture" paradigm (Niebuhr 1951). This ideological commitment has led CGM practitioners to place the locus of responsibility for relevancy in communicating the gospel upon the Church itself. Thus, the Church must take the initiative to translate the gospel in concepts and terms that are readily understandable by the host culture.

In contrast, the GOCN has been distrustful of Niebuhr's taxonomy. GOCN proponents decry the cultural captivity and syncretism they see in Christian churches who adopt Niebuhr's taxonomy (e.g., Hobbs 1999, 94-109 and, as it relates to the CGM, Roxburgh 1999, 241-59). Thus the GOCN tends to reject this "translation" model of gospel and culture (Niebuhr's "Christ transforming culture"), and favor a more "countercultural model" (Bevans 152-53). Though quick to reject their position as equivalent of Niebuhr's "Christ against culture" or "Christ and culture in paradox," GOCN's proposals are strikingly similar to Niebuhr's taxonomy of these positions.

GOCN proponents fear that our efforts to be culturally relevant have inadvertently distorted the gospel, especially as it relates to our Enlightenment assumptions. Autonomous individualism, consumerism, empiricism, and pragmatism have infected our message in our efforts to translate the gospel, claim many GOCN proponents (e.g., Roxburgh 1999, 241-59). The remedy for this, assert GOCN members, is a steady program of disengagement from our culture, a kind of cultural "time out" for the Church to get its bearings in its new postmodern setting before reengaging culture. This disengagement will entail the creation of a countercultural community that lives "parallel" to other cultures, providing an alternative community that reflects the story and symbols of the Christian faith.

*The Church as Central vs. The Church as Marginalized*

A third tension relates to the position of the Church within its host culture. CGM proponents tend to assume that Christian congregations can and should assume central roles within host culture communities. A case in point would be the proliferation of megachurches (many using CGM methodologies) within American cities and suburban communities. The children of the CGM, these megachurches are often community "hubs" in their neighborhoods. Their campuses are places where the community comes to connect, whether it be local political leadership, community groups, AA groups or whatever. Many CGM proponents would point to these megachurches as examples of how a congregation can assume a positive central role in a culture's public square. These models sometimes produce a triumphalist rhetoric by encouraging other congregations to aspire to prominent roles within their cultural contexts.

GOCN proponents view this attitude as an artifact from the

“Constantinian” era in Christian history,. This “Constantinian” era was a time when the Church assumed the role of legitimizing western values. GOCN thinkers are united in their conviction that this “legitimizing role” of the Church damaged the integrity of the gospel, for it turned the Church into the chaplain of western culture. GOCN proponents are glad this Constantinian model is collapsing. They point to the continued marginalization of the Church in western culture as a positive trend, for it disentangles the Church from this “legitimizing role” so it can rediscover the power of the gospel. GOCN proponent Douglas John Hall summarizes this agenda:

To grasp this opportunity, however, we must relinquish our centuries-old ambition to be the official religion, the dominant religion, of the dominant culture. Ideationally, we must disengage ourselves from our society if we are going to reengage our society at the level of truth, justice, and love (Hall 1997, 49).

In the opinion of GOCN proponents, as long as the Church tries to lay claim to a central place in western culture it will be pressed by the culture into this legitimizing role characteristic of the Constantinian age. As long as it does this, it will suffer from syncretism and fail to proclaim an authentic gospel.

*The Mission of the Church vs. The Mission of God*

Another tension between the CGM and GOCN relates to what constitutes “mission.” The CGM has tended to equate “mission” with a congregation’s efforts to evangelize non-Christians and disciple existing Christians. Thus, the Christian community is effectively participating with God’s mission insofar as it is effectively evangelizing people and assimilating them into the discipleship programs of local Christian congregations. This attitude has tended to reduce God’s mission to a congregation’s evangelistic and discipleship programs.

The GOCN views God’s mission and the local church as distinct. Building on many insights from the late South African missiologist David Bosch, GOCN proponents tend to emphasize the *Missio Dei* (Bosch 1999, 389-93). The *Missio Dei* is God’s mission of sending his Son into the world to bring about his redemptive plan. In the words of Bosch, “Mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God...Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as

an instrument for that mission (Bosch 1999, 390)."

Thus, GOCN proponents resist the temptation to equate mission with the Church, instead preferring to see the Church as an instrument of God's mission.

This leads GOCN proponents to view the Church as sometimes in tension with the gospel. This is why recent GOCN writings have called for an ongoing conversion of the Church to the gospel (Guder 2000). Gospel and Our Culture Network proponents point out that the Church tends to neglect its essential missionary character and make the gospel manageable by bringing it under ecclesial control (Guder 2000, 97). Thus the Church must continue encountering the power of the gospel, for conversion is an unending process in the sense of the Church embracing its missional identity and proclaiming an authentic gospel.

#### *Future vs. Past Orientation*

Another tension relates to the temporal orientation of the two movements. CGM proponents tend to be future oriented, focusing on new works, innovative structures and cutting-edge technologies that are effectively evangelizing people who are culturally distant from the Christian faith. Old wineskins must be shed and new ones created, according to many CGM proponents. Thus, new missions, church planting, and alternative methodologies are studied, researched, and then presented as "models" for other congregations to utilize. Many CGM proponents view the past as a hindrance to effective mission, because many local churches are steeped in traditions and practices that hinder rather than promote effective evangelism and discipleship. CGM writings often offer assistance to denominational leaders, pastors and lay leaders in changing local congregations that are paralyzed by local traditions. Much of this literature draws heavily from management studies and sociological research, as CGM proponents aspire to help their constituents mobilize local congregational structures to be effective. Although most CGM proponents are doctrinally conservative and highly value biblical orthodoxy, the past is often viewed as a hindrance rather than a help in mission. As GOCN thinker Alan Roxburgh complains, "CGM literature seems obsessed with the new and the next (Roxburgh 1999, 250-55)."

In contrast, GOCN proponents seem more oriented toward the Church's past and rediscovering the power of tradition. By this, GOCN proponents do *not* mean to elevate local congrega-

tional traditions above biblical truth or theological integrity. GOCN proponents would criticize local traditions that have lost their meaning or become counterproductive to the Church's mission just as readily as CGM advocates would. However, COGN proponents are acutely aware that the western Church of the twenty-first century does not stand alone, but that it is related to the "Great Tradition" of Christian orthodoxy down through the centuries. For the GOCN, the Church's narrative not only includes the biblical story, but also the Christian narrative down through the ages. Thus, there is a hunger for an ongoing connectedness to this Christian story.

It is likely that this past orientation is in large part due to the postmodern death of metanarrative in western culture. Post-modernity's rejection of an overarching story to make sense out of our local stories has created a sense of rootlessness in western culture. Connecting one's own story to an overarching story (such as the Christian story) is a way of discovering roots, of finding meaning on the shoulders of people who have gone before us.

#### *Transferable vs. Non-Transferable Structures*

Finally, the CGM tends to view structures and methods as transferable from one local setting to another. Perhaps this has been most visible among megachurches who have grown large using CGM techniques. Many of these megachurches offer seminars for church leaders to help other congregations grow. The basic premise behind these seminars is that a large congregation's effectiveness is due to their utilization of principles that can be reproduced by other congregations in other settings. Though many of these seminars are quick to warn against slavish imitation, these seminars do presuppose that the principles are transferable.

In contrast, the GOCN tends to view local church effectiveness as highly contextual. Thus, what one congregation does in its witness to the gospel in its setting is unlikely to be transferable to another setting. Because GOCN proponents reject the view that western culture is monolithic, they view western culture as multiform and diverse. Thus, there is a general distrust about trying to replicate structures, strategies, or even principles from one local setting to another.

As is evident, the differences between the CGM and the GOCN are vast and should not be minimized. However, despite

these differences, I think that there are several core similarities between these movements than can serve as a common ground for ongoing dialog.

#### *Similar Origins*

The beginnings of the CGM and the GOCN are strikingly similar. The CGM traces its genesis to missiologist Donald McGavran. Having returned from cross-cultural work in India, McGavran began to investigate using missiological insights to bolster evangelistic effectiveness in the American church (McGavran 1988, 54-57). McGavran's ideas provided the foundational framework for all CGM practitioners since.

The roots of GOCN go back to a similar narrative. Lesslie Newbigin had been a career Anglican missionary in India. Upon retirement, he was shocked when he returned to his native England. During his absence western culture had changed dramatically. During his later years Newbigin began to investigate what a genuine missionary encounter might look like between the gospel of Jesus Christ and western culture (Stafford 1996). Perhaps his *Foolishness to the Greeks* best reflects this theme. The GOCN has built upon Newbigin's seminal answers to continue the conversation (Guder 1998, 3) The focus of the GOCN is on an authentic missionary encounter between the gospel and western culture today.

#### *Similar Questions*

In addition to having similar origins, both the CGM and GOCN are asking the same question: How can the western church faithfully bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in its current setting? Both are concerned with the relationship between gospel and culture. Although answering these questions in different ways, the fact that they are asking similar questions strikes me as encouraging as CGM and GOCN proponents seek to dialog.

#### *Similar Answers*

Another parallel between the CGM and GOCN relates to the Bible and doctrine. In general, CGM proponents are more theologically conservative and concerned about biblical orthodoxy. Within mainline denominations, CGM proponents tend to be the more conservative members. Most CGM proponents would agree that a congregation must be theologically rooted in the



Bible to experience authentic church growth. Many of the megachurches that have arisen from CGM methods are also biblically and theologically conservative.

A similar trend is noticeable in the GOCN. With its emphasis on “the Great Tradition” of the Christian story, GOCN proponents demonstrate a similar concern for Christian orthodoxy. This is the orthodoxy witnessed to in scripture and encapsulated in many of the ecumenical creeds of the Church. Thus, some GOCN highly prize expository preaching in the local church. Rather than “dumbing down” doctrine, GOCN proponents emphasize the importance of the grand biblical themes of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

#### *A Collegial Dialog*

As this dialog continues, it is my hope that the CGM and GOCN begin to view themselves as colleagues of a sort, engaging in an on-going conversation for the health of the Church and the sake of the gospel. Perhaps the COGN can help CGM proponents bridge the gap from modernity to postmodernity. Perhaps COGN scholars can also help CGM proponents identify areas where western idolatries have infiltrated their assumptions. However, I also believe CGM can help COGN proponents think through the transition from theory to praxis. As movements, clearly the CGM is older, while the GOCN is a relative newcomer. Perhaps the GOCN can learn from the victories and mistakes of the CGM.

It would have been wonderful for Donald McGavran and Lesslie Newbigin to have met and talked about these issues together. However, since this is no longer possible, I find it intriguing to wonder what the two movements associated with these two great thinkers could produce for the rest of the Christian community by engaging in a more purposeful and charitable dialog for the sake of the gospel.

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