

The Nomadic Church: The Church in Its Simplest Form

The genius of the church is its total adaptability. Structurally, the church is found in its simplest, most stripped-down form in the nomadic church. The tabernacle among the ancient Israelites bears comparison as a center of worship designed by God for a people on the move.

by Malcolm J. Hunter

Of all God's creation, the most fascinating, flexible and indestructible wonder is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is his most precious possession and the highest pinnacle of all God's plans for human society. It is to be nothing less than a new redeemed society of men and women who are able to reveal and reflect his love for all mankind.

The genius of the church, as God planned it, is to be completely adaptable and therefore totally relevant to every society on earth, from the most sophisticated to the simplest, from the inscrutable Eastern cultures to the most extravert Western societies. Earnest European and American missionaries have gone all over the world in a well-intentioned attempt to spread the gospel and the church of the Lord Jesus. Despite some heroic efforts, it has to be admitted that they have made rather a mess of the job, carrying with them so many of their own cultural idiosyncrasies and prejudices. They have imported fads, fashions and philosophies that may be acceptable in their own countries but are quite inappropriate in a far-removed culture.

The problem of understanding how the church can be reborn in another society is not getting any easier, as the majority of Christian church planters still come from Western societies, bringing with them ever more sophisticated baggage from their own particular aberration of what the basic church was meant to be. Even the newly emerging sending countries such as Korea have their particular problems.

An Ever-Widening Gulf

The gulf is continually widening between the wealthy and technologically advanced end of the church, with all its professional staff and the ever-burgeoning budgets, and the other extreme of Christ's body. There, nobody is paid anything, and the only resources likely to be available are the gifts God promised to give to his church.

This huge and growing cultural chasm is nowhere more evident than where Christian missionaries seek to find a model of the church appropriate and therefore attractive to the hundreds of people groups who are nomadic, or still think of themselves as nomads. Peoples who long to lay claim to a particular piece of land operate by a totally different value system than do nomads, who survive by utilizing what is

described as the resource of spatial mobility. The fact that this is so little understood by Western missionaries is an indication of how far removed they are from the worldview and value systems of nomads. Even within the same third world country, the divergence between the thinking of settled farmers and that of pastoral nomads is so great that they rarely trust one another and often end up fighting each other. When that cultural gap is extended to stretch from the huge urban ecclesiastical monstrosities in the wealthy world to the most economically and socially marginalized nomadic societies, it is not surprising that Western missionaries have difficulty bridging the gap.

The Church in Its Simplest Form

In developing an intelligent understanding of how to bridge that gap, a helpful starting point is to return to the basic essentials of what the church is in its simplest, most stripped-down form. We can then begin to think how it might best be adapted to a different culture, and the more distant that culture is, socially and economically, the

more different the church is likely to be.

The church in its simplest form is a society of people who have been redeemed and transformed from within by the power of God. They will have been reconciled to him and to each other, and endowed with a variety of spiritual gifts needed for the normal growth of any church, regardless of education or even biblical erudition. Education and even literacy are secondary. In the pre-literate state of the church, God appears able and willing to give special gifts and revelations until his word is available in an appropriate form, not always in writing. (Conversely, the gifts that are essential for the proper growth and operation of a healthy church can often be buried or deformed by professionalism which is based on academic qualifications. This is not to say that such qualifications are bound to spoil the healthy growth of a church. It is the tendency to place trust in them and not on the gifts which appears to cause the problem. Where there are no academically or theologically qualified people, God

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seems to delight in demonstrating how effectively he can build his church, even in non-literate societies.)

The Worldview of Nomadic Peoples

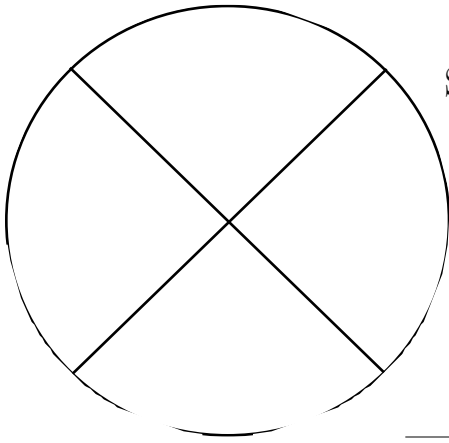
The worldview of nomadic societies, especially those which depend on pastoralism, is usually extremely focused on God. Nomads often have a high view of God, usually seeing him as a monotheistic Sky God who sends the rain on which their survival depends if the people pray to him and act properly according to their customs. Their view of God is usually less animistic than that of rural farmers, for nomads do not usually worship objects on earth such as rocks, trees, or rivers. Most pastoral nomads have ceremonies, or certain individuals whose primary purpose is to pray to the God in the heavens, in order to win his blessings of rain, grass, milk and health for them and their animals. Many have a belief in a good God who sends these blessings, but he is often thought to be remote. So there is usually some bad god (or gods) who needs to be appeased to keep evil away.

If it is appreciated that, almost without exception, nomadic peoples have this strong belief in a powerful, benign God in the heavens, then presentation of Christianity becomes much easier. You can begin with the worldview of that society and look for the keys within that culture that God has built into it to make himself relevant.

To be relevant to nomads the church must also extricate itself from the usual sedentary model of a building. This is the greatest obstacle to overcome in countries where Protestant and Catholic missionaries have competed to build the biggest churches. The best commentary on this misguided model comes from a Somali camel herder who said, "When you can put your church on the back of a camel, then I will think that Christianity is meant for us Somalis. I am a Muslim because we can pray anywhere, five times a day, everyday. We only see you Christians praying once a week, inside a special building, when one man stands in front and talks to God while everybody else hangs their heads and looks to be falling asleep." Such is a nomad Muslim's view of Christianity.

The church is also most relevant to nomadic societies where relationships are more important than real estate. Whatever else nomadic people may lack, they are usually socially rich, with strong family and clan ties. Abandoned or abused children are rarely seen and old people are respected and cared for within their families. Unless other influences have been introduced, such as Islamic practices, women can have a relatively high social position, as many nomadic societies are quite egalitarian. The question arises: Whose society is primitive?

This social strength within nomadic societies needs to become the foundation of the church for nomads. Missionaries ought not to press for individual conversions, but to pray for transformed families which can begin to form the new redeemed society within that society. The church for nomads should not introduce unnecessary foreign religious practices, which will only alienate the new believers from their normal communities. It may even be wise to discourage the first individuals who respond to the gospel from calling themselves a church until there is a sufficient number of people, preferably whole families, that will allow the replication of all the normal social functions of the pre-Christian society. It is advisable therefore to determine early what is this minimum number that will be most conducive for healthy church growth and to work and pray towards that goal.



Sedentary missionaries often ask how the gospel is to be presented to peoples on the move. The Old Testament, however, makes it clear that God has no problem communicating with nomads. In fact, the forefathers of the children of Israel were called out of a city to become pastoralist nomads.

Another significant feature of nomadic societies, mentioned above, which affects the growth of the church is the relative social equality commonly prevalent. Nomadic pastoralists seldom show strong allegiance to one particular chief; more often decisions are made by elders of clans or herding groups. They are most often egalitarian and pragmatic in choosing leaders who prove their worth in action. These leadership selection methods need to be taken into account in the church for nomads, allowing gifted individuals to be recognized and to take their place in church leadership, judged on their merits and God's obvious anointing. In practice, this can raise more problems, as polygamy is common in many nomadic societies, and most men of leadership caliber will have more than one wife. In some pastoral nomad groups, where the wives are bought with the cows of the bridegroom's family, divorce is not practiced or possible. This problem is most apparent in areas where missionaries introduced their personal marital traditions and did not allow polygamists to be baptized or take communion.

Nomads in the Bible

The Old Testament makes it clear that God has no problem communicating with nomads. In fact, the first people he chose to be the forefathers of the children of Israel were called out of a city to be nomadic pastoralists. They became the patriarchs of a chosen nation, called to be different from all other peoples and given a global purpose.

The first books in the Bible are much more meaningful to nomadic pastoralists than they are to urban people, and it is fascinating to see the effect the stories of the patriarchs have when told to an audience of nomads. They identify with them and can talk about them for hours, bringing out insights that no settled people perceive.

They appreciate, in particular, God's dealings with Abraham, especially the repeated promise that through his offspring all nations on earth will be blessed "because you have obeyed me." This leads quite naturally to the inclusion of these modern day followers of the nomadic way in that promise of blessing.

Pastoral nomads derive so much more from the stories in Genesis that it is a joy to listen to them discussing narratives such as chapter 24, where Abraham sent his chief servant to find a wife for Isaac. The servant took 10 camels and made the long journey to the town of Nahor where Abraham's family lived. We read that "he had the camels kneel down near the well outside the town; it was toward evening, the time the women go out to draw water. Then he prayed, 'O Lord, God of my master Abra-

ham, give me success today.... See, I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming to draw out water. May it be that when I say to a girl, "Please let down your jar that I may have a drink," and she says, "Drink, and I'll water your camels too"—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master."

The story continues with the "very beautiful" Rebekah coming along and after giving water to the servant offering to draw water for the camels, too, "until they have finished drinking." Only a camel herder would understand what this girl was offering to do. If those camels were really thirsty after their long journey, they could drink up to 50 gallons each. For 10 camels she was about to lift as much as two tons of water. No wonder Abraham's servant was impressed. "When the camels had finished drinking, the man took out a gold nose ring weighing about 5.5 grams and two bracelets weighing about 110 grams" and gave them to her.

God Dwelling Among His People

Many years later, when the children of Israel were many, God gave them some clear instructions before taking them into the Promised Land. One of those commands was that when they

had entered the land they should “go to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his Name.... Then you shall declare before the Lord your God: ‘My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people ...’” (Deut. 26:2, 5). They were not to forget their roots!

Again, before the Israelites went into the Promised Land, God gave them another command concerning his dwelling among them: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them. Make this tabernacle and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you” (Exod. 25:8). God then gave them meticulous details about how to build this tabernacle and how to conduct worship.

There are two obvious objectives to these instructions which are most meaningful to nomads. The first was that this tabernacle was a tent, meant to be moved constantly. Even the heavy furniture inside was provided with gold rings at all four corners through which gold-covered carrying poles could be passed. These poles were not to be removed even when the tabernacle was stationary, reminding the children of Israel that they were not to settle down.

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The second objective of the elaborate instructions was to show the Israelites that God wanted to dwell among them. As God said to Moses, “For the generations to come this burnt offering is to be made regularly at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting before the Lord. There I will meet with you and speak to you; there also I will meet with the Israelites, and the place will be consecrated by my glory.... Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God” (Exod. 29:42-46). In Leviticus there are several references to God’s view of the tabernacle which appeal to nomads, for example, “I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people” (Lev. 26:11). Among many references to God’s dwelling place in the Psalms is this: “In Judah God is known; his name is great in Israel. His tent is in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion” (Ps. 76:1-2).

Even as Israel faced the fearful shame of exile and the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, God gave them this promise: “My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the Lord make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever” (Ezek. 37:27-28). At the end of the Old Testament comes one more reference to God’s desire to live not just among the Israelites, but among all peoples: “‘Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion. For I am coming, and I will live among you,’ declares the Lord. ‘Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people. I will live among you and you will know that the Lord Almighty has sent me to you.... Be still before the Lord, all mankind, because he has roused himself from his holy dwelling’” (Zech. 2:10-13).

Passages of this sort appeal to nomads. They are not interested in a religion which can only function inside a permanent building: a Christianity set in concrete. It seems that every time a missionary or a national church puts up another permanent building meant to minister to nomads it is a negative communication of the gospel to them. “This Christianity cannot be for us,” they think; “it is for the farming people.”

The New Testament Perspective

The theme of God’s desire to live among his peoples is even more prevalent in the New Testament. God lives among his people in a dwelling not made by hands, referring especially to the Holy Spirit. We may start with John 1:14, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” In John 14:16 Jesus assures the disciples, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” In the same chapter, verse 23, Jesus continues this teaching: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” What greater promise could there be for people who do not care about buildings?

Paul is even more specific in his letters to the Corinthians. “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16). “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you ...?” (1 Cor. 6:19).

To the Ephesians Paul writes about the living church, “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household,

built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (Eph. 2:19-22). What more attractive expression of the church could there be for nomadic people who are so often seen as outcasts?

To complete the picture of the church, another passage in the New Testament has particular appeal for nomads. In the penultimate chapter of the Bible, it is about the future Holy City, New Jerusalem. "I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain ...' (Rev. 21:3-4). What comfort this brings to people for whom death and suffering, with little hope of modern medical care, are so much part of their experience on earth.

There is another interesting study in the Old Testament pertaining to the discussion of what type of place of worship God planned for his people on the move. It is a comparison between the tabernacle and the temple as shown in tabular form in the following columns.

Tabernacle

Temple

Whose Idea?

Entirely God's initiative and design. "Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them" (Exod. 25:8). The heavy furniture inside the tabernacle had rings and poles, ready to be carried.

David's idea. Solomon's project. "I intend ... to build a temple for the Name of the Lord my God" (1 Kings 5:5). He wrote this to the alien King Hiram, who sold him the timber needed.

Built By

Made by Spirit-filled craftsmen from the freewill gifts of the people (Exod. 31:1-3, 35:20-36:3). More than enough: "they had to stop giving" (Exod. 36:3-7).

Built with forced labor, 30,000 in Lebanon, 70,000 carriers, and 80,000 stone cutters in the hills (1 Kings 5:13-16).

The Finished Job

Everything was done "just as the Lord had commanded"; repeated 7 times in Exod. 39-40. "In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel during all their travels (Exod. 40:36-38).

"The temple that King Solomon built for the Lord ... 'As for this temple you are building, if you follow my decrees ... I will fulfill ... the promise I gave to your father David. And I will live among the Israelites and will not abandon my people Israel'" (1 Kings 6:2, 12-13). Solomon took seven years to build the temple, 13 years to build his own palace, which was over four times as big as the temple.

God's Approval/Acceptance

"Moses and Aaron then went into the Tent of Meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people" (Lev. 9:23). "When all the people saw it, they shouted with joy and fell face down" (Lev. 9:24).

God accepts the temple, warning that if the people worship other gods, "then I will cut off Israel from the land I have given them and reject this temple" (1 Kings 9:3-9).

Long-Term Result

No enemy nation ever coveted or attacked the tabernacle in all its 500 years. It was just a tent!

The temple led to many attacks as every surrounding army was attracted by its wealth of gold.

Dr. Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean recently left Ethiopia, where they began their missionary work in 1963. They have served with SIM in East and West Africa and as consultants for ministry to nomadic peoples in Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Niger, Benin, and Burkina Faso. In the last two years, Malcolm has made survey visits to Nepal, Tibet, Northern Pakistan, and Western China. Plans are in the making to visit Mongolia. The Hunters will continue to seek the Lord as to how best to serve his purposes for the unreached nomadic peoples of the world.