

The background features a collage of various demographic and statistical charts and tables. Visible elements include a table with columns for 'Line', '1960-1965 % of Population', '1946-1965 % of Population', and '1936-1945 % of Population'. Another table lists marital statuses: 'Married', 'Divorced/Separated', 'Widowed', and 'Never Married'. A third table lists 'Cultural Background' categories: 'Western European', 'Eastern European', 'African', 'Hispanic', 'Caribbean', 'Asian', 'Pacific Rim', 'Middle East', 'Far Eastern', 'Native North American', and 'Other'. A fourth table lists household types: 'Households with Children at Home', 'Household with 1 Person', 'Household with 2 Persons', 'Household with 3 Persons', 'Household with 4 Persons', and 'Household with 5 or More Persons'. The title 'Future Christian Mission in Pagan Culture' is overlaid in large white text, and the author's name 'Thomas G. Bandy' is in orange below it.

Future Christian Mission in Pagan Culture

Thomas G. Bandy

The closest cultural comparison to North America today is Graeco-Roman society between about AD 41 and AD 235. This focuses on the period of Roman peace, prosperity, and mass migration from the accession of Claudius through the death of Marcus Aurelius . . . a period in which the great Persian threat was defeated, all roads came to lead to Rome, various terrorist uprisings vaulted military commanders to prominence, and Christian mission teams planted churches in key communication centers. It compares this period to contemporary times from the early 90's and the

collapse of the Berlin wall, through the acceleration of the stock market, the rise of the Internet, various terrorist attacks, and the emergence of Christian mission teams deploying passionate amateurs in the urban core. These mission teams will experience the extremes of interest and defensiveness from a highly charged, spiritually diverse environment for decades into the foreseeable future.

Historian Michael Grant comments that the Julian and Flavian dynasties failed, not because they had absolute power, but because excessive work and nagging fear ultimately corrupted their judgment.¹ In the same way, contemporary North American culture is in primary jeopardy, not from corrupt politicians with unchecked powers, but from overwork (grinding routine, mental exhaustion, burnout) and corporate paranoia (fears of terrorists behind every bush and financial crises behind every quarter). The religious response that will capture the attention of masses of people, therefore, is not about reshaping public policy or legal representation (these Rome had in abundance!), but rather about holistically healthy lifestyle and larger spiritual purpose.

In my recent book *Road Runner*, I identified five key cultural issues that shaped Christian mission in ancient times:

- The key role of a few urban centers in subjugating vast regions;
- The slavery of the professional classes (teachers, doctors, business leaders);
- Increasingly rigid class boundaries linking wealth and status with virtue;
- The elevation of sport to replace traditional family and religious ties;
- The emergence of the spiritually yearning, institutionally alienated

I now add four more:

- The exhaustion of the middle class that supplied much of the volunteerism and charitable giving for small towns and municipalities across the empire;

- The emergence of a militaristic mentality independent from and unsupported by pop culture;
- The rise in the mean age of affluent people;
- Mass migration exceeding the absorption power of traditional Roman society.

Together, these eight cultural realities will shape the future of Christian religion in North America for decades to come, offering both obstacles and opportunities to Christian mission.

The obstacles are formidable, and will either doom traditional denominations or force such radical change on them that they will look and function entirely differently. The rural and small town support on which they have relied will shrink dramatically, and without vigorous presence in urban centers and web-based communication they will lose much of their influence. Diminishing volunteer participation and charitable giving, combined with an aging “Me Generation,” will place incredible pressure on church leaders to become overworked “chaplains”... alienating younger generations and making it difficult to recruit and pay clergy. The rising militaristic mentality and crisis in traditional family structures will tempt the church to become even more authoritarian over an ever-diminishing amount of sacred time during the week. Preoccupation with liturgy, polity, public behavior, and corporate identity may well morph traditional Christian institutions to resemble the ancient temples of Jupiter to which the masses flocked after every terrorist attack...and promptly left again for the sports arena.

Yet it is the opportunities for Christian mission that figure most prominently in this cultural context...just as they did long ago.

The spiritually hungry public is prepared to listen to credible mentors bringing welcome relief to people enslaved by capitalism and addiction. If the church can deploy the Pauline tactics of lay empowerment and team deployment (forsaking clergy dependency and hierarchy), there are mission gains to be made.

The dominance of a few urban centers means that Christian missionaries do not need to reach everybody superficially, but only a few

people profoundly. If the church can impact the leaders of urban micro-cultures, it can communicate via highway and internet without the financial burdens of property and salaried middle management.

Lifestyle focus and awareness of holistic health has liberated culture from the dominance of old, modern scientism and rationalism. If the church can concentrate on modeling a way of life, instead of inculcating ideological or dogmatic information, it can create the intimate, trusting partnership that can later delve deeper into theological questions.

The emergence of amateur sport has provided Christian missionaries with safe, unregulated opportunity to connect with any person of any class or station. As government agencies clamp down on other forms of mass mailing, door-to-door solicitation, and non-taxable organization, this remains the one venue that equalizes class-consciousness and opens communication with any demographic.

The same desire to escape reality that attracts intelligent pagans to new forms of Gnosticism, mystery religion, and cult is receptive to a more apocalyptic Christian message that can renew hope for the transformation of this world to the origins of Eden. If the church can broaden its message from mere social reform, to the transformation of the environment (macro and micro), intelligent pagans will listen.

Mass migration will transform North American culture from the smallest village to largest city within the decade. If the church can leave behind “sacred cows” of western European taste, sensibility, and control, in order to use any and every cultural form as an equally valid vehicle for the Gospel, the mayhem of cross-cultural experience can actually increase Christian influence on personal and social life.

The sense of purposeless and futility that dominates contemporary culture is highly receptive to the ancient invitation to “know Christ, experience his sufferings, so that you can participate in the hope of his

resurrection” (Phil. 3:10). This possibility of “internalizing” Christ as the foundation of real hope makes Christology the only subject worth discussing today. **Who the heck is Jesus... and why should he matter to my micro-culture?**

In the future, all the internal squabbles over denominational polity and ethos, and all the power struggles to control salaried personnel, and all the bureaucratic attempts to build rational consensus around dogmatic or ideological principles, will become increasingly irrelevant to all the multiplying “publics” of North America. There will be two kinds of Christian church, but the dividing line will not be determined by heritage or liturgical practice, nor by distinctions between “evangelical” and “mainstream” or “conservative” and “liberal.”

Instead, there will be networks of those churches of any former brand name that choose to be Temples of Jupiter in the pagan world . . . and there will be networks of those churches of any former brand name who choose to be in “mission to the gentiles.” Those who know their history will remember that there was once a third option, namely, a church that tries to preserve its faith and practice unsullied by the world in Jerusalem. The emperors Vespasian and Titus put an end to that option in AD 71, and the powers of today are putting an end to that option in North America as well. The message is clear. Either begin an earnest, respectful, passionate conversation with culture... or perish. □

¹ *The Twelve Caesars*, New York: Charles Scribner, 1975, p. 258.

² *Road Runner*, Nashville: Abingdon Press ebook, and print editions, 2002.



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