

Address to Nazarene Sociologists – 1997

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Your topic for this meeting presupposes that there is a distinct Nazarene ecclesiastical culture. I'm inclined to agree, because culture goes deeper than words and thoughts. I am suggesting that there is a Nazarene culture, a kind of characteristic, acquired more than learned, style and aesthetic and language and behavioral norms, and a whole complex of scripted ways of "doing" church. The question which has been raised by the theme "Does the Nazarene way facilitate or impede growth?," the answer is "yes." All church cultures which are not currently relevant to the contemporary generation of the surrounding culture generally impede rather than facilitate growth. I want to change the question to: "What is the case for culturally relevant Christianity?" Are there any compelling reasons for retaining cultural forms from the past or from other cultures that no longer fit the culture that the Lord of the Harvest is trying to entrust to us now?

By way of backdrop, we have across the United States today about 380,000 congregations, give or take. These congregations occupy the largest mission field in the western hemisphere with about 120,000,000 functionally secular, undisciplined people, age 14 and older, making this the largest mission field in the western hemisphere and the fourth or fifth largest mission field on earth. In the middle of the largest mission field in this hemisphere, roughly 80% of all of our churches of all denominations are stagnant or declining in the midst of harvest. The other 20 are growing, but 19 out of those 20 are growing primarily by biological growth and/or transfer growth, in the middle of a biblical harvest. Only 1—actually a little less than 1 out of every 100 churches—is growing substantially by conversion growth.

I have come biting, kicking and screaming into the realization that the way churches are culturally shaped, out of their tradition—and malappropriately shaped for the mission field that is now entrusted to them—is at least one reason for that impotence in the midst of an objective opportunity, that 8 out of 10 churches across America are culturally shaped as though they expect next year to be either 1927 or 1957. I would suggest that the date is not coincidental and there's some reasons to consider the culturally relevant congregations. So let's consider 10 of them.

10) Cultural relevance is the rationale for contemporary worship. The reason why some people like to beat the drum for contemporary worship and suggest that, amongst the unwashed pagan receptive secular masses, there's no epidemic salivating interest in 18th century German pipe organ music is not because we're particularly trendy or with it or have some kind of pro-novelty bias but because we take "forms" seriously and we believe the church needs to employ the cultural forms,

including language, that give the gospel a fair chance of getting through to the target population.

9) **All** worship services are “contemporary.” Unfortunately, most worship services are contemporary to some other culture or some previous generation, or both, rather than to the present culture in the present generation. Basically, as I’ve studied churches and tried to make sense of their cultural script, I—this a broad generalization—have repeatedly seen two deep cultural roots. One cultural root, more apparent in some traditions than yours, is the European culture out of which their denominational tradition came and so Lutheran churches tend to be fairly German culturally and Presbyterian churches tend to be fairly Scottish culturally, etc.

The other deep cultural root is the earlier generation in this country, when they were either hammering out their identity and/or experiencing their greatest success, which would explain both your tradition and mine. The problem that we face, bluntly stated, is that the culture, or the cultures and the subcultures of the societies around our churches, as they change, are increasingly different from the European culture out of which we came and the earlier version of this culture in which we clarified our identity and/or achieved our greatest success.

8) Cultural relevance is one way that we extend incarnational Christianity. In missiological language, we want to plant and grow culturally indigenous Christianity. This is of course modeled throughout the scriptures and in the Christian tradition. It’s not a stretch to suggest that Jesus left the culture and the society of the Trinity and completely adapted to first century Galilean, Aramaic-speaking, hillbilly Jewish culture, completely adapting the initial form of the revelation to those people, employing all of their appropriate cultural forms, language, patterns of teaching, etc.

The Apostle Paul picked up on this and determined that that same kind of adaptation needed to take place in all of the cultures on the face of the earth. In the same letter in which he said, “I have decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified,” he also says that the way he learned to communicate this one gospel was by becoming “all things to all peoples” that he might by all means be the instrument of salvation for some.

Remember the big donnybrook called the Jerusalem Council, reflected in Acts 15, where James’ team believed that people had to change culturally in order to become followers of Jesus, in this case, become circumcised, give up pork, obey all of the Jewish Sabbatarian laws, to become Christian? Paul’s team believed that no people could remain who they were culturally and be followers of Christ. Indeed, that would make the revelation more potent amongst the various societies of the earth. Also Peter threw his weight on Paul’s side rather than James’ side and Paul’s team won. Presumably in the Jerusalem Council, that settled the matter and yet we’ve been

struggling with whether or not to require people to change culturally in order to follow Jesus Christ ever since.

This became a key part of the Protestant principle, of course. Martin Luther translated the scriptures into the common German language, the vernacular of the German people of his generation, and he wrote poems to be sung to the tunes that the German people loved to sing, an indigenous hymnody, including some of the tunes of their drinking songs. Charles Wesley, standing on his shoulders, wrote hundreds and hundreds of hymns to the very tunes the people loved that were sung in the public houses of Britain or original tunes that were of the same genre and style as the people loved, and many people sang their way into faith.

And standing on his shoulders a century later, William Booth began a movement amongst some of the more destitute peoples of Great Britain, largely on the basis of this memorable question, "Why should the devil have all the good tunes?" And there's never been a satisfactory answer to that question since.

What we're talking about is the basic missionary principle of indigenous Christianity. All of us would be in living touch with this, presumably, if we got on a plane and flew to La Paz to start a church and reach a particular tribe of the Ayamara Indians. Presumably we would have the good sense to not force feed English or Fannie Crosby music or Bach or our American style of church architecture. We would have the good sense to work with the third person of the Trinity to raise up a form of Christianity that was indigenous to Aymara people and culture through and through. And what we're discovering is, the missionary principle that requires radical adaptation to the culture on every other mission field in the face of the earth is also necessary in this culture, too, if Christianity is to become contagious and prolific amongst the lost, searching peoples of America once again.

7) Employing culturally relevant forms is desirable because God's revelation takes place through culture. As Eugene Nida and Charles Craft and others have taught us very clearly, each people's culture is the medium of God's best revelation to them. Over and over again, in this mission field and others, we see that the revelation of God is less likely to break through to any people when it is presented in culturally alien or antiquated forms, and it is more likely to break through when it is presented in culturally indigenous forms.

6) When the gospel is presented in their cultural forms, then they are enormously more likely to perceive that Christianity is for people like us, that the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ is for people like us. Generally, when rank pagans visit a church for the first time in their life or the first time in decades . . . I've interviewed well over 100 of them within an hour or so or a day or so after their first visit to a church . . . they ask questions like these two. "Do any people like me go to this

church?" That's the identification question. "Are there people here who I could identify with as role models and who could identify and empathize with me in my struggles?" The second question they ask is, "Is this faith for me? Could this make a difference in my life?" And that the indigeneity question. And they generally pick up on the relevance or non-relevance of Christianity for people like them through the cultural cues.

The cultural cues, which I've defined in simplistic terms by the acronym SLAM, not slam-dunk like in March Madness basketball, but just the word SLAM, being an acronym for the style, the language, the aesthetics and the music of the target population. Each of those refers to several features. Style refers to interpersonal style of clothing, leadership style, other stylistic dimensions of the church and how it does church.

L refers to the language and raises questions like, "Are we communicating in their natural language? Are we communicating, even better, in their dialect? Are we communicating, even best, in their heart language? And are we communicating within the range of their operating, recognition vocabulary?" If we're using words they don't understand, or which have a counter-productive referent in their minds, then it's highly likely that the revelation is not getting through.

A stands for aesthetics, the kind of architecture they can appreciate, the kind of art, folk arts, dance, etc. And the M, music, is actually a branch of the aesthetics but it's so supremely important that we feature that as a distinct category. As Rick Warren is fond of saying, pastor at Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, "Tell me what kind of music you feature in your church. I'll tell you who you'll be able to reach and I'll tell you who you'll never be able to reach."

5) Traditional churches have already come a long way in agreeing that ministry in the people's *language* is necessary to reach them. And all that's happened quietly in the last half of the 20th century. It happened more publicly in the case of the Roman Catholic church, where in one great watershed event, they abandoned Latin as the linguistic form for Christianity everywhere . . . Catholic Christianity everywhere, and in one giant step said, "Let's present Roman Catholic Christianity in all of the tongues of the peoples of the earth." A fantastic step!

In Protestant Christianity, we've not had our equivalent of Vatican Two but I do report to you that as we came into the 1950s, most traditional people in the churches still held out for Elizabethan language in prayers and liturgy and the King James Version of the Bible. Today, in many regions of the country, you have to look a long time to find a church still substantially hooked into that part of the tradition. That battle has been won. The basic battle over language has been won. There are some minor battles yet, like using the kinds of words that people understand and

abandoning the kind of ministerial tones and stained-glass voices that target populations can't relate to, but the basic battle over language has been won.

4) However, traditional churches have not yet discovered that culture is "the silent language." That's the title of what is probably the most important book written in cultural anthropology in the 20th century, certainly the most important for Christian leaders, written by Edward T. Hall, perhaps 30 years ago, entitled *The Silent Language*. Edward T. Hall made the compelling case for the following: that meanings are communicated or blocked—that is the communication of meaning—is either facilitated or blocked by all cultural forms, and not just language.

But there's one immense difference between language and the other features of our culture. We *learned* our languages consciously but we *acquired* the other dimensions of our culture more or less *unconsciously* in our socialization when we were very young. And so while we communicate to people through language rather consciously, what is communicated to them through other factors of culture is communicated rather unconsciously.

So that, for instance, if somebody doesn't understand the sermon, they can tell you what it was they didn't understand, what words confused them, etc. But if they can't understand the kind of communication that is supposed to be taking place through, say, the anthem, that happens more subconsciously. About all they can say is something like, "Well, I didn't get it" or "it didn't fit me" or "it turned me off." There's a rider to this. In regard to cultural forms, language, style, the aesthetics, music, etc., most of the churches that I visit and study, traditional churches, have never ever, in their entire history, ever rethought how they do church. They simply perpetuate what they've already been scripted to do at a rather unconscious level.

Back in 1983, when Deal and Kennedy wrote that still marvelous book, *Corporate Cultures*, they defined the culture that drives and shapes an organization as follows. They define it as "the way we do things around here," and they say that the renewal of any organization is partly dependent upon rethinking how we do things around here and why. I simply report to you that most traditional churches have never blocked out even an hour of their entire history to rethink that. So traditional churches have not yet discovered that culture is the silent language, and they've not rethought the way we do church.

3) Furthermore, traditional churches do not yet perceive how deeply culture shapes personality and the ways people view life. They've not yet perceived that culture is—get this—"the software of the mind." That metaphor for culture takes the place of the one we never had before. It has been championed by a northern European scholar named Geert Hofstede, especially in his fine book, *Culture and Organizations: The Software of the Mind*. And it as a metaphor speaks to us immediately. All of you who

have worked with computers, for instance, know that if you want to transfer data from one computer to another computer, it's highly desirable to do it in a way that is consonant with the software in the receiving computer. If it's the same software, everything transmits. If it's similar software, some data transmits and some doesn't. When you're trying to send data to a very different software, virtually all of it is lost in the attempt to get it across without some translating mechanism intervening. It's a terrific metaphor and it even helps us understand, as successive generations of the same software sometimes have difficulty transmitting data to each other, why there's a generation gap in our culture and how two different generations of people of the same cultural orientation can profoundly misunderstand each other.

2) Because traditional churches have not yet understood culture, consequently the leaders and people of traditional churches resist making the changes to become culturally relevant. Most church leaders have not yet distinguished between the gospel and the forms with which we received it. They've not yet sorted out the difference between the gospel treasure and the earthen vessels in which our tradition has carried it for a while. They've not yet seen that in order to get it across to a different culture or subculture or generation, you've got to unwrap some of it from the clothing in which we received it and rewrap it in a way that they can see it for what it is.

In summary, notice my sequence here. We've come a long way in that we've adopted more contemporary language, but we've not yet discovered that culture is the silent language, we've not ever rethought in traditional churches the way we do church, we've not yet seen that culture is the software of the mind, and we resist making changes in the cultural forms in which we offer the gospel. And this leads to one outcome:

1) Most culturally traditional churches cannot engage pre-Christian populations meaningfully nor—and this is the scandal—nor can they retain even a bare majority of their own young people into adult discipleship. At least 8 out of 10 traditional churches lose a majority of their own young people that are raised into their ranks, but this contains some closet good news, in three points:

One, some churches who are not interested in changing to reach outsiders can be persuaded to change in order to retain their own kids.

Two, our youth are washed by the same cultural sea changes as secular, pre-Christian people are. Therefore, the changes that would help us engage and keep our own young people are substantially the same changes that could make us contagious amongst pre-Christian people.

And, third, right now, for as long as we still have them, our young people are our allies and they could take the leadership in helping us reshape our churches to become prolific amongst pre-Christian people again.