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Choosing Jesus over Cultural Christianity - Chapter 3 from "Living in Color: Embracing God's Passion for Ethnic Diversity"

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Choosing Jesus over Cultural Christianity

I WAS IN MY FIRST MONTH as a pastor in northern Nevada and was anxious to begin nurturing a Native church in the Indian community. It was at a pow wow (an Indian social dance) where I got my first resistance. As I talked to a woman who knew the history of our church, she commented, "No matter what you do from that church, Christianity will always be seen as the white man's religion."

Because my philosophy of ministry was (and still is) directed primarily toward Native Americans by Native Americans, using Native American cultural forms to witness for Jesus, this woman's observation hurt deep in my soul. Yet I have heard similar statements expressed for many years now. What did she mean?

First, let me discuss a few words. There are many ways to describe the indigenous (or original) peoples of North America. Today the most politically correct term seems to be *First Nations*. As you may remember, we used to be called American Indians and then Native Americans. The dilemma was, as the critics report, between honoring Columbus' mistaken "discovery" of India and Amerigo Vespucci's exploits. Besides, the Latin roots of *native* are the same as for the French term *naïve*, and even if we were back then, we certainly are not now!

While I do not want to offend anyone, I am comfortable using all these terms interchangeably; but most often, when I must use a name (other than my tribe) to describe myself, I say *Indian*. No, actually, I say it like this: "Indun."

I once heard a man for whom I have a great deal of respect, elder Jerry Yellowhawk, a Lakota (Sioux), address a crowd about this subject. He said that in his heart he would always be an Indian. I guess I feel the way Jerry described. I do not believe that more or less dignity comes from using one name over another. Our dignity is God-given, and I was raised to believe that *Indian* is a name to be proud of. Its roots may lie in the Latin phrase *en Deo*, meaning *in God*. I think that describes most of our people pretty well.

In any case, the woman at the pow wow was referring to the fact that for Native Americans to become Christians has often required us to divest ourselves of most of our cultural distinctives, including language, hairstyle, values and devotional practices. It is assumed that there is nothing in Native American culture worth redeeming. This evangelistic philosophy, brought over to the New World from Europe, made the broad assumption that European culture was "Christian" and that Indians needed to conform to Euro-American culture in order for God to accept them. R. Pierce Beaver, former professor of missions at the University of Chicago and director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, summarizes the view of most missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as in the first third of the twentieth century:

Missionaries during this period believed that teaching primitive people about a "better" way of living was part of the Gospel message. Evangelization and civilization could not be separated. You could tell if an Indian was being saved from Hell by the way he or she began to live like the English. The Indians' growth in the Christian faith could be measured by how well they accepted the culture and lifestyle of the missionary.¹

This European-ethnocentric model of evangelism has caused Jesus to be relegated, in the eyes of many indigenous

peoples, to one particular race. How this must grieve the heart of God!

My wife, Edith, and I worked very hard in Nevada under God's leading to build a Native church that reflected Christ in our culture. In many respects we were successful. But although we added many components of Native American culture to our worship services—including drums, talking circle, smoke blessing, sweat lodge and eagle feathers (all symbolic forms used in traditional Native American worship, which we felt had enough biblical backing to be used in the church)—it still did not always “feel” like a Native church. It was only in the last two years of pastoring in Nevada, I believe, that we became a church with which Native Americans readily identified. This transition took years to accomplish, and a relinquishment of power from a group of non-Indians.

After that non-Native group serving in leadership gave up their positions, the Indian people felt the freedom to be a church that reflected Christ in their culture. Soon afterward someone suggested rearranging the chairs in a circle. (Most of our traditions use a circle.) Then the style of governing changed to a more traditionally Native approach, and it grew from there. One day I realized we were no longer a church that did a lot of Native American things, but we were actually a Native church. Those were the years we had the greatest impact in the non-Christian Native community, and true discipleship took place. Why? Because we had finally allowed Jesus to be at home in our people's culture.

“Contextualizing” the Gospel—adapting the message to the culture of the people to whom you are seeking to witness—is not unique to the Native American situation. I have spoken with African-Americans, Asians and Hispanics who recount similar experiences. It is sometimes difficult for the average American, who identifies primarily with his Euro-American or Western European roots, to grasp the differences in the way he thinks, acts and believes from his brothers and sisters more oriented to another worldview.

When one culture is the standard by which everything else is measured, the people absorbed in that culture may not feel the need to consider other perspectives. This has been true

for Euro-Americans for about five hundred years. But things are changing rapidly. Soon Euro-Americans will no longer be the majority ethnic group in the United States. (You might want to glance ahead to the statistics in chapter 7 in the section "What Does the Future Hold?") It behooves us as believers in Jesus to get a jump on the rest of the world in learning how to get along with each other and to appreciate our many differences, in order for Christ's witness to arise more effectively. Isn't action better than reaction?

Truth and Reality

While the percentages of minority groups in America are growing rapidly and the face of the nation is changing, almost every system is still dominated by Western European thinking. Consider learning styles. In America most children go to school for thirteen years and receive a diploma. The educational system is based largely on their ability to retain facts. It is largely a knowledge-based attainment. Many graduates go on to college and acquire more knowledge. Soon they declare a major and perhaps gain a bit of experience along with their knowledge, although that usually comes in the final year (if at all) or during the pursuit of a master's degree. If a person really wants to be considered an expert, he or she will go after a doctoral degree as well.

This system works well for most with a European worldview; it works less well for other groups, and not at all in Indian country. In the Native worldview a person who knows mostly theory is considered to know very little; and most of what means something to American Indians cannot be learned in books. What is more important to a group of Native Americans? Honesty, wisdom and experience. In Indian country true knowledge is not so much about facts as it is revelation from God.

I was taught by elders to observe closely when a task was being done and not to ask questions. After a while I was given the opportunity to try it, and I was corrected when I messed up. I was told to pray about these things and meditate on them. Every so often my questions—which were still in my heart

and mind—would be answered. This learning style was very different from my training in college and seminary, where I was certified based on my knowledge of certain facts.

In the Indian world we *experience*; in the Euro-American world we *gather facts* about it. Someone has said that Native Americans would rather participate in a ceremony while Euro-Americans would generally rather read a book about it. Our concepts of time, material wealth and relationships (to name just three) are very different.

Another vast difference in cultural thinking between Euro-American and American Indians is found in our views of reality. The European influence of empiricism teaches Americans to question every fact in order to establish its *reality*—but not necessarily its *truth*. In Native American cultures, and other cultures as well, stories prevail. Euro-American society has labeled these “myths.” But by *myths* they mean that not only are they not *true*, but they are not *real* either. The majority society also tells stories using its cultural symbols, but these are known as “fables.” Although a fable can have a moral, it is still considered not real.

Here is an example. When I share Native American stories at elementary schools and churches, which often involve animals talking, I am interrupted spontaneously by Euro-American students challenging the reality of the stories. I do not blame them; they are just preserving a standard of their culture when they say, “Uh . . . animals can’t talk.” But to this day I have never had an Indian child dispute this dynamic of the stories. In fact, far from engendering skepticism, talking animals are more likely to connote a special sacredness. From a cultural standpoint Indian children are not concerned with whether or not a bear or rabbit or opossum can talk; they are listening attentively to what the animal has to say. In this sense Native youngsters are concerned about what is *true*. The question of what is *real* is not relevant.

Says Robert Antoine:

Myths are not lies or secondhand “unscientific” approaches, but [an] . . . irreplaceable method of grasping truths which otherwise would remain closed to us. “The language of a myth

is the memory of a community," . . . which holds its bonds together because it is a "community of faith."²

The Bible tells of a donkey that talks, storms that listen, fish that swallow prophets and deliver coins. Is it possible that in these particular points of biblical interpretation, the simple Native American child has a perspective that could aid the earnest and listening European scholar?

Every culture has stories; recall Euro-American examples like George Washington and the cherry tree, and the first Thanksgiving. Whether or not the Pilgrims and Indians celebrated at Plymouth together as brothers is not as important to me as the sacred truth that the story delivers, challenging us to embrace each other as people different from one another and yet the same. This is worth the retelling of the story.

Every culture also has its myths, rituals and ceremony, although these are words that, to many Euro-American Protestants, have almost become sacrilegious. Still, Native rituals and ceremonies tend to draw us into an intimate association with past events.

Ultimately, rituals bind the community together, and give it a sense of common identity by giving it a common fellowship and history. For example, it is interesting that American missionaries often celebrate the Fourth of July abroad as a way of reaffirming their American identity. Somehow if they do not do so, they feel less "American."³

Rituals and ceremonies are markers of remembrance for the things that mold us as a people.

When Jesus Enters a Culture

We readily observe numerous differences between people groups. Many of these are cultural and may not, from God's perspective, be right or wrong. We are just different. What is wrong is condemning another culture just because it is not like our own. Do you realize this has happened all over the world?

Many Jews continue to live their lives apart from Jesus Christ, their Messiah, because they have been persecuted

over many centuries in His name, which has been used in defense even of the Holocaust. Then there are Muslims who may never come to Jesus Christ simply because of the self-righteous vigor that fueled the violence and murder during the Crusades. And for hundreds of years Christians have justified their oppression and near-extinction of American Indians in the name of Jesus. People usually do not purpose to spread an oppressive spirit; they acquire it over time by rationalizing their superiority and justifying lawless acts based on another group's supposed inferiority. It all begins with the notion that something (if not everything) about the other culture is wrong.

Sometimes God breaks through these steel walls of the past, however, and opens up a glorious light so that the Gospel may be seen clearly.

A few years ago a missionary to Bangladesh wanted to visit me. She was interested to note the parallels between my ministry among Native Americans and her own work among Muslims. My first thought was to discourage her from visiting, as I could not even begin to think of how our ministries could find any common ground. The only similarity I could think of was that both groups are nearly impossible to reach for Jesus!

I invited her to come anyway. As we shared our attempts to show Jesus to these two peoples in context, according to their own cultures, I was amazed at the parallels between our ministries. Not only were we both having some success where there had been little in the past, but these peoples were both taking responsibility for their growth in Christ.

The greatest similarity was in the issue of identity in Christ. Neither the Bangladeshi Muslims nor the traditional Native Americans identified themselves as "Christian." These were people who had been truly converted to Jesus Christ and were following Him daily; yet they chose not to use the term we bandy about today for things as trivial as fashion wear. These converts identified themselves as Muslim and Native American followers of Jesus, just as many Jewish believers in Jesus refer to themselves not as Christians but as "Messianic Jews." The Bangladeshis and Native Americans saw no value in attaching the old stigma

to themselves that has brought so much pain to their people. Rather than embrace Christianity, they simply want to follow Jesus.

"I Ain't No Christian"

Early in my pastoral career I met a man who was very traditional in his Indian beliefs and practiced them daily. When we first met he vowed to me that he would never go inside a white man's church as long as he lived. I listened to his reasons (which had to do with Indian boarding schools) and told him I understood. Then I invited him to attend my sweat lodge—a cleansing, Native American-type sauna in which prayers are said. He was shocked that the new preacher "held sweat," but eventually, after I attended a few sweats with him at his home, he did come to my sweat lodge.

This exchange took place over a few years. I continued to pray for him. Finally one day he walked through the doors of the church. What he found was not a "white man's church" but a church of Native American believers following Jesus and using their own Native cultural expressions and symbolism. He began coming more frequently. After nearly five years I was able to introduce him personally to Jesus Christ.

Not long after my friend's conversion, I told a group of ministers gathered for prayer at our church about his decision to follow Jesus. By coincidence, about ten minutes later, my friend showed up at the church. Realizing who he was, one of the pastors jumped out of his chair and shook his hand, welcoming him to the Kingdom of God. He cried jubilantly, "I'm so glad to hear that you're now a Christian!"

My friend stepped back. "I ain't no Christian!" he exclaimed.

The pastors were stunned. They all looked at me as though to say, "Why did you tell us he was a Christian and he isn't?" I kept silent.

Finally one of them spoke up. "Randy told us you had recently begun following Jesus."

"Oh, I see what you mean now," he said. "Yeah, I'm following Jesus Christ—He's Grandfather's Son—but I ain't no Christian. Don't call me that."⁴

He Invades Every Culture

According to a conversation I had with missiologist Ralph Winter, my friend was on solid biblical ground. Nowhere in the New Testament, Dr. Winter pointed out, does anyone ever call himself a Christian. Yes, believers were first called Christians at Antioch, but no one gave himself this title. Neither Paul nor Peter nor James nor anyone else ever identified himself as a Christian.

My point here is not to try to change people from calling themselves Christians. I have referred to myself as a Christian for more than 25 years. But we must realize that, to many people groups, the term *Christian* is not the good news we intend it to mean. Rather, it is the bad news of colonialism, oppression and even genocide. It is bad news because many of those who have named themselves after Christ have acted in very un-Christlike ways; and the cultural baggage that comes with the name *Christian* is sometimes unnecessary, and at other times actually *opposed* to Christ and His purposes.

My intention in this chapter, then, is to begin to evoke doubts about the "Christian-ness" of our own worldviews and cultures, regardless of what those may be. Don't you agree that Jesus invades everyone's comfortable culture like a whirlwind and starts blowing up dirt and rubble everywhere? If we take Him seriously, Christ calls us to examine everything in our culture, whether we consider it good or bad, and to turn it upside-down to see if it is aligned with His new Kingdom culture of righteousness.

It matters not if our culture is Euro-American, Native American, African-American, Asian-American, Latino or something else. When we become Christ's followers, all cultures are suspect, especially our own, and we must reexamine them in the light of God's Word.

Are you willing?