

UN-IDEAL CHRISTIANS

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Introduction

One of the most compelling insights in the first half of Charles H. Kraft's *Anthropology for Christian Witness* is the way in which God is willing and able to work with a culture. Specifically of interest is how God acts in the un-ideal contexts which exist in a people-group to bring them to a more ideal state. "From the very beginning of Scripture, God has shown Himself willing to work with people *within* their cultural frames of reference" (Kraft 1996:1, emphasis in original).

Kraft advocates for a "cross-cultural perspective" (ibid: 74ff). He further develops this idea in relation to two criteria by which we can evaluate cultures. The first is "the human well-being criteria", noting that a "well-functioning culture provides its people with a high degree of physical, psychological, and spiritual security" (ibid: 78). While there exists no culture that is perfect, all cultures are adequate and to that degree worth respecting. This implies that as a Christian witness we should honor persons and their culture as being sufficient in maintaining life (ibid: 77). The second criteria that Kraft offers is that of "God's-intent" (ibid: 78). "God is positively disposed toward people and wants the very best for us" (ibid: 78). That said scripture makes clear that God has a certain agenda in mind for his people. This agenda is spelled out by the redemptive thrust of biblical narrative, as well as in statements such as the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3-17) and traditionally titled "Greatest Commandment" (Matthew 22:37-40).

God's intent for a people is always beyond where a society resides. But God is, thankfully, very patient. He is able to accept and actively engage a people, and persons, in their sub-ideal state. He does not require correct behavior or belief before allowing a people to become his people. The People of God are never far from his grace, because we are never without need of it.

Additionally, God's acceptance of sub-ideal states has been a topic of great interest of mine for the last several years. Paul Hiebert's concepts of bounded versus centered sets are applicable to this discussion (see Hiebert 1994: 107ff). In bounded set thinking someone simply is or is not a Christian based on a identifiable set of criteria. While in a centered set mentality, "Christians would be defined as followers of the Jesus Christ of the Bible, as those who make him the center or Lord of their lives" (ibid: 125). In either case, bounded or centered set, there is a clear difference between Christian and non-Christian. However, in a bounded set the demarcation is to make clear who is in and who is out. In a centered set, it is the orientation that matters. One's relationship with God is geared toward the direction and position in which one is standing relative to the center, Jesus. In a bounded set way of thinking it is only position that matters. Hiebert recommends the centered set approach as more consistently biblical (ibid: 134). It is our relative position to the center, Christ, which matters.

Culturally, this works itself out in similar terms. In bounded set thinking a culture is or is not ideal (by God's standards) or "Christian". This is foolhardy, not to mention arrogant, to assume that a culture could be clearly or fully in line with God. A centered set approach is more intellectually and spiritually honest. A people-group and their culture are either oriented toward or away from God. Likewise, they may be nearer the heart of God or further from it. What seems to matter is direction in which they are moving.

As ambassadors of the Kingdom we should welcome the opportunity of ministering with and to persons and groups whose life is un-ideal comparative to the life in the Kingdom (God's ideal). We should be careful not to employ a culturally biased, or in Kraft's terms "monocultural" (1996: 69ff) or "unmediated realist" (ibid: 17), perspective. The underlying assumption that I hold is that God is far more comfortable with our, and other's, "un-idealness" than we are. We should model our lives after God who "showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still

sinner” (Romans 5:8 NLT). The best place to begin this exploration is to consider how God dealt with an un-ideal people in the story of scripture. Following this excursion, I will share briefly how God has moved in my life and my share of “un-ideals”. I will conclude with two examples of un-ideal states that are prevalent in the ministry context in which I have been called.

The Un-Ideals in Scripture

The story of scripture is replete with examples of God taking persons and people at their un-ideal status and molding them more into his likeness. It seems to be his way. The tendency, especially for Americans, is to pull out examples of God’s redeeming work in the lives of individuals in the Bible. However, this is lacking in two ways. First, it is indicative to our Westernized, Enlightenment-heavy, reading of scripture. The Enlightenment project was quick to assert the supremacy of the rational, autonomous self. This is not how biblical persons, or its writers, understood their world. To read back into scripture with “individualistic eyes” is to recast the narrative in inappropriate ways. Naturally, God did act in the lives of individual saints and believers (and un-believers), but this was almost always in the context of a larger communal action that God was taking. This first problem ties into the second reason that an emphasis on the individual in scripture is incomplete. When focusing exclusively on an individual’s experience of God’s redemption, the community’s life is often overlooked. God is about the business of forming a people. The first instance of this was in the Old Testament and it is to this point in the Story of God that we now turn.

God’s formation of a people can be evidence in the opening chapters of Genesis. God twice tells his people “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (Genesis 1:28 and 9:1). He seems convinced from the beginning that he is concerned for the whole of the human community. When God calls Abram onto the scene he makes a specific covenant

with him, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them ... So shall your descendants be” (Genesis 15:5). But lest we be misled, the people God was covenanting to form with Abram was, from progenitor on, far less than ideal. Abram was a doubter and took matters into his own hands to produce an heir. This was certainly less than ideal and God is quick to let him know as such, but God, in his mercy, commits to blessing Ishmael and making him fruitful (Genesis 18:20).

Later on in the story, we see God working on a whole people-group. The Israelites have been in Egypt in captivity and God calls Moses to lead them out and into the Promised Land. Moses is surely an example of God’s redemptive work on an individual level, but God’s communal work is even more dynamic. He calls and leads this bewildering group of people out of Egypt, through the Red Sea, and to Mt. Sinai all the while putting up with complaints about food, water, and leadership. In Exodus 32 we witness God’s people at one of their most un-ideal moments. While Moses and God, up on the mountain, are communing and organizing for the new community, the Israelites are down below creating and worshiping a golden calf. We, the reader, watch as God is trying to share his number one ideal with the people he has called to himself. The very first commandment that God gives his people, “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3) is the very first one they break. And even yet, God does not give up on this people.

The plot marches on, and we again encounter a less than ideal people in the form of the early disciple community. The church, even in its infancy, was a shining example of the dullness of prejudice. In Acts 15 we find a community deeply divided over the Jewish custom of circumcision. Some in the fellowship thought it necessary for Gentile converts to be circumcised in keeping with the Law of Moses. In the end, the leaders decided to welcome the Gentile believers without mandating circumcision. But it is obvious that it was an intense debate and the outcome was likely anything but certain. God’s ideal was that all should be welcome in his new family, cultural practices

notwithstanding. Even the conclusion of the council at Jerusalem can be read as un-ideals in action (though admittedly it could be read in different ways). The leaders of the young church go through the debate and come out with an affirmative answer for the Gentiles – with caveats. While circumcision is not required, the Gentiles are instructed to still “abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood” (Acts 15:20), this seems reasonable enough. However the reason for such abstinence is because, “for in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every Sabbath in the synagogues” (Acts 15:21). They are still relying on Jewish cultural structures for Gentile believers. Perhaps, this was an act of sensitivity on the part of the church leaders; promoting harmony and mutual respect within the cross-cultural church. Or perhaps this was an example of God’s people taking two steps forward and one back. Whatever the case, it is clear that throughout the biblical narrative God is about the business of redeeming a people, of working with their un-ideals to move them toward his Kingdom.

My Life of Un-Ideals

My story is has a similar redemptive arch. The most vivid example of God’s willingness to start with my un-ideal life was in High School. I grew up in a church-going family and from a very early age a relationship with Jesus was a living reality in my life. Through Vacation Bible School, Church Camp, and the influence of many wonderful Youth Ministers I came to know Christ as the center of my life. However, somehow I also picked up a legalistic spirit. I took my Christian faith and converted it into arrogance and pride. I felt that I was better than my non-Christian peers! Perhaps, I even toyed with the delusion that I was better than the elder believers in our church; I was young and had zeal and energy, they were old and complacent. I am certain that this

belief was neither taught nor fully conscious. It is only after pain and repentance that I can look back on this period of my life and see how un-ideal my faith truly was.

What amazes me most is not that God redeemed me and corrected my errant ways. This is obvious and I am thankful. Rather, it is astounding that even in my “un-idealness” God used me. He did not wait idly by while I figured out where and why I was awry. He clearly worked in and through my life during this period. He was accepting of me just as I was, even as I was ignorant of how I looked so very different from him. My pride and haughtiness was a hindrance to my maturity, but not to God’s initiative. I am reminded of this fact whenever I speak with friends from this time in my life. It pains me to realize how un-Christ-like I treated (even if only in my mind) them. It amazes me when they mention how God used me in their lives.

It took a crisis of faith to shake me out of my self-assuredness. In my freshman year of college I experienced a break-up with a long-time girlfriend and a season of depression. These two events, in addition to being “on my own” for the first time, was more than I could bear. I spiraled into doubt, uncertainty, and despair. I did not know what or who to believe. It was in this crisis, the discontinuity of life, that God was able to meet me and remake me. It was during this time that I came to conceive of grace. It had always been something of an enigma to me. I understood what it was supposed to be, but did not seem to experience it personally. In as much as I judged others, I was even harder on myself. My faith was built around performance and merit. It took many searching nights and painful, soul-searching walks to work through the walls I had constructed. Fortunately, God was patient. I came to realize that he loved me, even me, and there was nothing I could do to earn it. God’s ideal finally came through.

Un-ideals and The Church Today

In conclusion, it is important to consider, briefly, God's activity in the world today. As many have pointed out, our Western culture is in crisis. Likewise, the church in the West is sick and in desperate need of missional renewal. As the church comes to terms with this reality, it will find much in the culture that is less than God's ideal. It must maintain a cross-cultural perspective in dealing with this reality.

One of the major issues facing the church today is the breakdown of the family, especially the marriage. As a minister among young adults, many of which are young believers, I am struck by the cultural differences in this area. Though it is still generally assumed that marriage means a man and woman and that children are best raised by both, in certain sub-cultures in our society this belief is questioned, if not held in contempt.

I would contend that it is God's ideal for a man and a woman to join in marriage and to, then, have children and raise them together. However, this is not the cultural (or perhaps, sub-cultural) ideal of all of the people with which I minister. What is the appropriate Christian and culturally appropriate means to address subjects such as pre-marital co-habitation and homosexuality? While I do not have easy answers to such a question, voicing it is an important first step. Outright condemnation, while satisfying in its clarity, is deeply alienating for those convinced, even if only marginally convinced, of the "ok-ness" of their lifestyle. "Affirming congregations" make this situation all the more challenging. Walter Wink and others have written well-reasoned arguments for the validity of the homosexual relationship as biblically appropriate. How do we navigate these waters when the extended Christian community is of clearly two-minds (or more) about the matter? I could not, in good conscience, bless a homosexual union or ordain a gay or lesbian pastor, but I would like to affirm them as persons, created in the image of God and loved. How can we do this, even if we disagree in our theology or praxis? How can we move toward God's ideal while still respecting persons who cannot see it?

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