

Growth Points

with Gary L. McIntosh, Ph.D.

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Seven Keys to Understanding American Culture

The world is a place of differing languages, values, and beliefs. Together these, and other cultural forces, serve to define particular behaviors that are often associated with specific countries or regions of the world.

For example, a few years ago I was in a meeting with people from Norway. During our conversation, one of the members of the group expressed dismay over the fact that North Americans feel they must win

Impossible Dreams

“Our freedom of **choice** allows us to tackle an ‘impossible’ **dream** that is **bigger** than anything we’ve done before; we want to achieve it **now** but **fail** in our initial attempts; we try again and through some form of **improvisation** succeed, only to wonder what’s new so that we can start all over and make another **choice**.”

—Josh Hammond &
James Morrison

the world for Christ. I suggested that we are simply being obedient to the Great Commission as found in Matthew 28:18-20. In response the person from Norway replied that the Great Commission means we are to win people to Christ in our own country, but not necessarily to take the Gospel to other nations. Our views of what the Great Commission requires us to do were really quite different.

Where did these different understandings come from? For certain such differences of understanding come from our interpretation of the Bible, but there are cultural forces involved too. As North Americans, we are shaped by our cultural forces, forces that are quite different from those that shape people in other countries and regions of the world.

We who have been raised in the United States look at the world through a lens that says “take charge, do something, dream big, make a difference, just do it, and do it now.” These

cultural perspectives drive our understanding of the mission of the Church, as well as the way we actually practice ministry.

Much of our understanding of life as North Americans comes from what is often referred to as a “frontier mentality.” There has been a sort of “moving” frontier since the very founding of the United States. Early pioneers advanced into the frontiers of Kentucky and Tennessee, while John F. Kennedy challenged the entire nation to the New Frontier of outer space in the early 1960s. Today the frontier is cyberspace, and new opportunities for business and ministry development. For North Americans there is always a new frontier.

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Seven Cultural Forces

Americans like change—provided they can control it.

Church ministry does not take place in a vacuum. The local church exists in a particular place, time, and culture. In their insightful book, *The Stuff Americans Are Made Of*, Josh Hammond and James Morrison present seven cultural forces that define North Americans. The following is a brief synopsis of their findings.

Force #1: Insistence on Choice

The Pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock of their own choice, as did almost all of the thousands of immigrants over the years. Today the cultural force of choice continues to drive our habits. We have our choice of numerous restaurants at which to eat, hundreds of stores under one roof at which to shop, and multiple small groups in our churches.

Force #2: Pursuit of Impossible Dreams

Immigrants often came to the United States with big hopes and dreams. Today the cultural force of impossible dreams characterizes our organizations. As leaders tap into the power of dreaming big, large corporations emerge and mega churches are built.

Force #3: Obsession with Big and More

The early pioneers saw the North American continent as a BIG place. Over the years our people have built big stores (super stores), big shopping centers, and big churches.

Force #4: Impatience with Time

Football coaching legend George Allen said it best: “The future is now.” North

Americans live in the present future, where short-term goals are primary, and long-term planning means one to two years at most.

Force #5: Acceptance of Mistakes

North Americans place a higher value on fixing things than getting things done right the first time. Our pragmatic attitude focuses on what will work, and we’re willing to try and try again until we find the right combination of factors that work.

Force #6: Urge to Improvise

Jazz, with its predisposition to improvise, is distinctly North American. Since we didn’t get it right the first time, we are free to improvise until we discover what will work.

Force #7: Fixation with What’s New

North Americans are always looking for the new thing. Fads come and go, television shows rise to the top of the ratings and fall, and new types of churches emerge every few years.

How do these cultural forces shape your church’s ministry?



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