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UNORIGINAL SIN

NEGLECTING UNIQUENESS

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*In the life of faith each person discovers all the elements of a
unique and original adventure. We are prevented from following
in one another's footsteps and are called to an incomparable
association with Christ. The Bible makes it clear that every time
there is a story of faith, it is completely original. God's creative
genius is endless. He never, fatigued and unable to maintain the
rigors of creativity, resorts to mass-producing copies.*

—Eugene Peterson

JACOB, MY THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD SON, recently enjoyed an energetic two-hour plane ride with his new friend Matthew. At some point in the get-to-know-you-moments they swapped signatures. Evidently Matthew thought that Jacob's signature was a little boring. So every ten minutes I was interrupted by another napkin crossing the aisle for my review. Each napkin contained five new examples of carefully scripted signatures—Jacob Mancini. "Which one do you like best, Dad?" my son enthusiastically inquired. Changing the slant, restyling his J's, and mimicking the sophistication of a doctor's script, my son was enthralled with finding his right signature—an impressive one. With his mounting frustration, I searched for just the right words to free my son from his overanalysis. "The right signature," I confidently asserted, "is the one that comes most naturally."

Today I visited one of the largest churches in South Carolina: a downtown, red brick, white-columned, Southern Baptist church immersed in

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the distinct accents of Southeastern culture. Tomorrow I will spend a day at the first Protestant church established in the city of Houston, an elegant mainline nestled in the cultural center of the museum district and the world's largest medical center. This weekend I will be in a suburb of Phoenix, working with an Assemblies of God congregation whose pastor preaches to seven thousand while wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Each of these churches has its own signature—a way it does ministry most naturally. Every week I am confronted with brute force that local churches are *unmistakably unique and incomparably different*. God doesn't mass-produce His church.

Infinite Uniqueness

Let's not dismiss the infinite creativity of our ingenious Lord when it comes to the thumbprint of the local church. How much does God delight in creative uniqueness? Consider the snowflake. No two snowflakes that have ever fallen in the history of existence are identical. How is that possible? It is God's handiwork; each complex snow crystal has an almost infinite number of discernible crystal variations. As these extremely sensitive flakes blow about in the wind, the ever-changing conditions lead them to grow in different patterns. The final design is a reflection of these growth conditions.[1]

   Consider what God does when fifteen people come together in His name. How much uniqueness is in those fifteen individuals? How about a church of a hundred people, or a thousand? Is it possible that the uniqueness of these groups far outweighs the uniqueness of a small water crystal blowing in the winter wind? Wouldn't each church, however small, carry a unique collective soul, because each church is a different subset of one-of-a-kind saints? Doesn't each locale present its own growth conditions that affect the pattern and development of God's people? If every snowflake that was ever created in the universe differs, is it so hard to conceive that every one of the more than three hundred thousand churches in North America is unique?

   These questions drive us to the essence of recasting vision. The starting point for vision—for thinking about our church's future—is not deciding where we want to go or exploring what is working for other churches but understanding *how we are unique*.

Uniqueness = Culture

What is the uniqueness I am referring to? It is not simply about worship style or programs offered; it is something more significant yet subtler at the same time. It is something that is often overlooked: a culture that is unique

to a particular church. Culture is the combined effect of the interacting values, thoughts, attitudes, and actions that define the life of your church. By nature, it is a little difficult to define because the term represents a broad, intangible concept. George Barna offers an expanded definition as "the complex intermingling of knowledge, beliefs, values, assumptions, symbols, traditions, habits, relationships, rewards, language, morals, rules, and laws that provide meaning and identity to a group of people."[2]

Robert Lewis and Wayne Cordeiro describe this complex intermingling of culture as "the most important social reality in your church. Though invisible to the untrained eye, its power is undeniable. Culture gives color and flavor to everything your church is and does."[3] Another common definition of culture is the "unspoken rules of how things get done." As each church expresses its life and ministry slightly differently, the outcomes are ultimately influenced by its culture.

There are as many illustrations of culture as there are groups of people, whether a nation, company, church, club, or high school. For three years, I participated in a local Indian Guides chapter with my two sons. The program, sponsored by the YMCA, builds a small community of fathers and sons around personal achievements in an outdoor context. The culture is nourished by tribe meetings, awards system ceremonies, and special clothing. Each week, we grabbed our patch covered leather vests and headdresses. Every campout, we couldn't wait to watch the medicine man jump over the raging campfire. Everything we did was laced with Indian language, starting with our very names. Because my two boys were Straight Arrow and Red Eagle, I thought it would be cool to be Running Wind. (Eagles and arrows both need wind.) Overspiritualizing my name got me in trouble with some other dads who interpret "wind" a little differently! When you boil down Indian Guides, it is all about stepping into the microculture that multiplies the values, thoughts, attitudes, and actions of Native American culture. The experiences we shared have transformed my skill and appreciation for observing and respecting nature. A walk through the woods is now an expanded experience.

Just like Indian Guides, your church has its own culture. But without such obvious features as headdresses and teepees, your church's culture and how it characterizes its own uniqueness can be difficult to discern. This is especially true for the inside observer because the culture itself is so all encompassing and intangible at the same time. Again, Lewis and Cordeiro speak to this issue: "Church culture is foundational to the life and witness of every church. *Unfortunately too many church leaders fail to recognize or understand the implications of this reality*"[4] (italics mine). In Part Two, we walk through specific steps to discern culture in the

process of articulating vision. But for now, let's remove some of the enigma of culture by considering sources of uniqueness for a church. For the questions posed here I add short illustrations from my consulting experiences:

- ○ *Leaders:* What are the unique strengths of the leader(s) in your church? Think of the unique strengths of biblical leaders—the faith of Abraham, the humility of Moses, the courage of Joshua, and the vision of Nehemiah. For example, when I think of David Saathoff at Bandera Road Community Church in San Antonio, Texas, I think of a leader with an unusual ability to replicate the value of lost people into other leaders' lives.

- ○ *Gifts:* If each person has unique spiritual gifts in your church, what does the collective gift mix look like? When I worked with a church plant in the San Diego area, I was struck by the significant presence of the gift of mercy that permeated the core team.

- ○ *Heritage:* What kind of heritage do your people share? Is it multi-faceted, or do they share many family ties? What does a common ethnicity say about your church's DNA? A traditional Baptist church in the Dallas area with around five hundred members in attendance had more family ties than any church I have encountered. They were also facing significant decline. Are these blood connections a liability or a possibility for a new home-based evangelism strategy?

- ○ *Experiences:* What shared experiences do your people have in common? When I consulted with a church outside of Ft. Lauderdale, the leaders realized for the first time that most of their people came to Christ after the age of forty; this was a result of a season of brokenness in their lives. They began to see themselves as wounded healers, with a special ability to touch one segment of the adult population.

- ○ *Tradition:* How does the denominational background, or lack thereof, have an impact on your uniqueness? At First Presbyterian Church of Houston, the "thoughtfulness" of the confessional heritage seeped its way into every aspect of their vision and began to focus their outreach strategies.

- ○ *Values:* What values drive decision making in your church? What unique convictions do your people share? A megachurch pastor once interrupted a strategy session I was leading for an "urgent" care need that I did not think was that important. Later we

articulated their crown-jewel value as "Each individual matters." It wasn't until then that I began to appreciate how this five-thousand-member church adapts, unlike other megachurches, to live out this core value.

○ *Personality:* If you were to describe what makes your church distinct from every other church, what would you say? I work with two Methodist churches on opposite ends of the spectrum in the same city. First Church of Pasadena emphasizes awe and reverence, while Gateway Community emphasizes authenticity and approachability.

○ *Evangelism:* How do your people talk about the Great Commission? How does your church nuance it? Bannockburn Baptist in Austin decided they were not going to measure the Great Commission one person at a time, but rather one family at a time. Their tagline is "Inspiring Generations."

○ *Recovery:* What sins and sin patterns have your people been delivered from? What patterns of worldliness are they most tempted by? (Consider how the epistles deal with concerns unique to varying locales.) One church has identified its corporate grace as helping people with sexual brokenness.

○ *Motivation:* Is there a deeply motivational rubric behind how your church sees its mission (for example, community, service, prayer, or worship)? When Chuck Swindoll planted Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, they articulated their mission around the big idea of "joy."

The list could go on, but this begins to show the intricacy of any church's originality. Few churches understand their own uniqueness or even think about it systematically.

Lost on the Way to Your Own DNA

This chapter's title, "Unoriginal Sin," refers to the common habit of neglecting what makes a congregation unique and gravitating toward adopting programs and mind-sets that work elsewhere. Leaders today have not clearly discerned the uniqueness of their church. Like a child who playfully delights in the falling snow, oblivious to the intricate beauty of each flake, church leaders are missing out on the special beauty of what is right in front of them. Somehow, they have lost the way to discovering their own DNA.

"Thinkholes"

The most important question is, Why do leaders miss the matchless thumb-print of their identity in the local expression of Christ's body? I see six common hazards that stand out across the landscape of church life. Because all of them affect thinking, I have called them "thinkholes." A thinkhole represents the quicksand-like dynamic where, at certain times and places, vibrant thinking gets sucked beneath the surface to suffocate and disappear from view. Can this strange term represent a common reality? Absolutely. Vacuums of thinking can be found all around us. In American culture, 50 percent of adults will never read a book in their life yet log hours of daily "amusement" ("a" = without and "muse" = thought) through tele-vision.[5] This simple instance illustrates a silent epidemic at work all around us. The reality is that most people don't think; they only rearrange their prejudices. Real thinking can be disruptive to the status quo and requires a great deal of courage.

Along the great race of leadership, thinkholes are the obstacles, barri-ers, and danger zones that keep us from thoughtful self-knowledge. Let's examine six kinds of thinkhole that blanket the church landscape.

MINISTRY TREADMILLS. The first thinkhole is the *ministry treadmill*. The treadmill is set in motion when the busyness of ministry creates a progressively irreversible hurriedness in the leader's life. The sheer imme-diacy of each next event or ministry demand prevents the leader from taking the time required for discerning the culture and defining the DNA of the church.

Most leaders in this environment find it impossible to devote even one day a month for a seven-month process to explore their church's culture. This process is exactly what I recommended to one pastor, who enthusias-tically embraced our approach. Even so, he insisted that the process con-tinue with one exception—that we complete it in ninety days or less. I knew that the best journey would require more time, but I agreed to start in the hope he would change his mind. Twelve months later, having sensed God's work in our midst, the pastor apologized to me in front of his exec-utive leadership team and thanked me for my patience. For this pastor, the process was the most significant marker in his ministry lifetime, but his need for speed almost jeopardized developing the vision of the church.

The need to hit the brakes on the ministry treadmill is highlighted by George Barna in the updated edition of his book *The Power of Vision*. He states that for success in visioning, "the process necessarily *extracts a significant cost* from the vision seekers. *Devotion to the process* of discovering the vision is the most important component of all the

activities associated with God's vision" (italics mine).[6] His word choice is telling; most leaders are not willing to extract the significant cost of time. Today's demands can choke out needed dialogue for tomorrow. When this occurs, our multiplied activity prevents us from living with a clearer identity.

COMPETENCY TRAP. The second thinkhole is the *competency trap*. As ministry leaders experience success over time, that very success can become a liability. The gold medals of yesterday's accomplishments become the iron teeth around the leader's ankle. A subtle presumption develops ("I know how to do this thing") that eclipses active listening and reflective observation—important habits required to discern a church's DNA.

The next time you are in a learning environment, notice who is taking notes and asking questions. It is not uncommon that the most accomplished people in the room are the least receptive to new learning. This is why young leaders often intuit culture so well; they have less of an experience base to pollute their perceptions and assumptions about what works.

The competency trap is easy to identify in two scenarios. The first is when a leader transitions to a new church. He or she naturally brings along the ministry patterns and programs that previously defined success. But what the leader can't bring along is the other church's culture. Because it is easier to duplicate familiar programs than to incarnate new ones, the leader overlooks the DNA discovery process. The second scenario occurs when an experienced leader is navigating a major transition, such as relocation or bringing on new staff. Often the leader races faster around the familiar pathways of yesterday rather than discovering new pathways of effectiveness. This "dig in your heals" approach turns leaders into talkers instead of listeners. Presumption prevents the breakthrough to self-knowledge that would otherwise open the door to new levels of leadership.

NEEDS-BASED SLIPPERY SLOPE. On the *needs-based slippery slope*, leaders are constantly trying to meet people's needs and expectations within the church. Whether the needs ring of religious consumerism or are legitimate concerns of life and death, the slippery slope works the same. With the leaders' cruise control set to "react," thoughtful leadership becomes unnecessary because there is always a persistent parade of needs to be answered. The vision of the church is reduced to making people happy. The reality is that such a church is probably missing out on fulfilling its unique calling and role in the community by trying to be all

things to all members. Sliding down the needs-based slope is perhaps the most "spiritual" way of avoiding the hard work of self-discovery.

Even Jesus did not meet all of the physical needs in his sphere of influence. Yet in John 17:4 he is able to pray to the Father, "I have brought you glory by completing all of the work you gave me to do." Though Jesus did not meet *every* need, he met all the needs he was created and called to meet. Just like the person of Jesus, the local church as the body of Christ must understand what it is created and called to do. Jesus exercised tremendous *discernment to know* and *courage to go* where God was directing. Local church leaders must go and do likewise, carefully differentiating the voice of God from the squeaky wheels of unmet needs.

It is interesting to note that a church mired in this thinkhole works best when there is a crisis, because the crisis itself imparts an amazing (and often unprecedented) sense of clarity and unity around an obvious need. But this type of clarity is fleeting. Unfortunately, leaders can't see this pattern and slide back into the thinkhole once the crisis is over.

CULTURAL WHIRLPOOLS. The fourth and fifth thinkholes are found in the *cultural whirlpool*. The acceleration of cultural change in North America in the previous century brought revolutions of new information that spin faster and faster. The changes were brought about by quantum advances in technology and communication—from the automobile to FM radio to television to the Internet.[7] Change is not bad in and of itself; change puts the leader at a disadvantage when trying to keep up. Last week I heard a forty-two-year-old pastor gripe in his sermon about not being "up to speed" with his iPod. (Yet just ten years earlier, the same leader planted an innovative church.) Life is no longer perceived through a viewfinder of still pictures that advance with each generation, but through a kaleidoscope that is turning daily. Change happens faster than ever.

The *local* church is obviously and inextricably bound to these shifts in the cultural whirlpool. These realities of change, including the shift from modernity to postmodernity, have been so well covered by many books that I'll decline even a cursory treatment. One illustration, however, is offered in order to connect changes of culture to the challenge of discerning a church's DNA.

Change has created great variation in the fabric of North American culture. Demographers refer to the increasing number of population lifestyle segments in striving to capture these differences. To the classic demographic labeling of the young urban professional (yuppie) in the

mid-1980s, marketers have added more finely tuned listings each year (humorously, of course):

Muppy: middle-aged urban professional

Dinky: dual income, no kids yet

Glams: graying, leisured, affluent, married

Sitcom: single income, two children, oppressive mortgage

Sadfab: single and desperate for a baby

The net effect is that the cultural realities around us become less like a large steel plate and more like hundreds of droplets of mercury, that are hard to pick up and examine.

Fifteen years ago, most people would raise their hand in response to the question, "Can you state with 100 percent confidence the name of the CBS network news anchor?" In most groups who are asked the same question today, few if any raise their hand. Cable and satellite TV have introduced so many viewing options that our country is less unified in its television viewing experience. In fact, a family of four may have a television in each room with four channels playing simultaneously.

Suppose you want to communicate to this family of four. It would be much easier if, conceptually speaking, they lived their lives on the same channel. But since mom, dad, sophomore Ted, and his little sister Susi channel surf in their own oceans, it's much harder to share a common vocabulary. The challenge for church leaders is exactly the same. The pastor on Sunday morning no longer speaks to a monolithic culture with shared experiences and anchor points, like the connection to a Ted Koppel or a Dan Rather. Because a crowd of people under the same roof can come from so many cultural milieus, it is increasingly difficult to discern and then lead from a common DNA.

The increasing pace of change in the cultural whirlpool leaves leaders with two temptations that distract them from thinking clearly about their church's identity. The first is *BuzzChurch*. This means to define the DNA around innovation itself. These leaders enjoy the adrenaline rush of having to do continuous cultural exegesis for ministry. The resulting vision is the need to be constantly cutting-edge. In the race to be relevant, it's all too possible to miss the deeper essence that God wants to nurture. The irony is that this cultural whirlpool is actually an addiction to new thinking.

Current conference offerings that come to mind with this temptation are Fellowship Church's annual C3 Conference on creativity and a new Buzz Conference hosted by National Community Church. The ad for the conference asks, "Is your church buzzworthy?" I believe it is critical for

the church to be creative and I love the cultural savvy of "buzzmakers" such as Ed Young Jr. of Fellowship Church and Craig Groeshel of Life Church.tv, but these conferences can attract folks who are creative for creativity's sake, and not for the sake of their church's unique calling.

The second temptation is *StuckChurch*. For every leader who surfs the waves of cultural change, there are a hundred who are stuck in a whirlpool vortex—and they feel they can't keep their head above water. This response is a second kind of thinkhole in the cultural whirlpool. The changes around them outpace their energy and discipline for new learning. Rather than rolling up their sleeves to think about their culture, they just grow too tired for the task. What do they do to justify their position? They simply define their vision in terms of glorifying and propagating the past.

I was facilitating a deacons' meeting for a church in Virginia several years ago. It was clear that the church needed to switch its traditional and contemporary service times. With thousands of younger families moving into the area, our research showed that these folks would be more receptive to a contemporary service at 11:00 A.M. rather than 8:30 A.M. Bob, a man in his seventies, looked at me with quite a scowl for most of the meeting. Toward the end of the night, I chose to engage his nonverbal hostility. He was a traditional service attender, so I probed his resistance to the change. "Bob, are you not awake at 8:30 on Sunday mornings?" I asked. "I'm awake at 6:00 A.M. every day," he quickly asserted. After a few more questions I made my last inquisitive plea: "Bob, if an eight-year-old girl who did not know Jesus, your Savior, might hear the gospel at the 11:00 A.M. service because we moved the traditional service to 8:30 (which you are wide awake for!), would you be for the change?" "No," Bob replied. A dead silence came over the room. Finally, Bob broke it with the sad heart of a man stuck in the past: "I have been attending church at 11:00 A.M. since I was eight years old."

Amazingly, the deacons that night chose StuckChurch by sticking with Bob and not the recommendation of their senior pastor to change the service times. As with thousands of other churches, change is resisted and leaders are pulled under by the whirlpool of cultural change.

THE CONFERENCE MAZE. In the *conference maze,* leaders rely solely on training events to instill direction and vision for their church. Many pastors in the last two decades have built a model of ministry by borrowing one, and in doing so they create a "glass jar" church. This is not surprising when you consider the conference offerings and their glut of photocopied vision prepackaged for import. At the forefront of this maze-craze are Willow Creek Community Church and Saddleback Community Church, followed by dozens of other newer megachurches, including

North Point Church, Fellowship Church, Grainger Community Church. I want to state up front that I am a raving fan of Bill Hybels and Rick Warren as leaders. They have accomplished untold good for the kingdom by helping a generation of leaders reimagine ways of accomplishing the Great Commission. But lurking in the wake of their conference ministry is the growing virus of unoriginal sin. They would be the first to warn you not to copy their models, but they sell their own DNA-saturated curriculum to thousands of churches. Have you ever been to one of these conferences? The resource rooms look like a half-kicked anthill with hundreds of leaders clamoring for books and plug-and-play programs.

The dramatic irony is that what happens at the conference is the exact opposite of what propelled the host church to be effective in the first place. Each of these leaders endured a process of self-understanding and original thinking that helped in articulating a stunningly unique model of ministry. But after discovering their Church Unique, these leaders no longer taught the same way they learned. Rather than helping churches with *process,* they sell them a *product.* Why don't the mavens of conferencing offer another kind of learning experience? Maybe it has to do with the fact that such a process requires a lot of relationship, creativity, and energy, whereas a product requires only a credit card.

Where does the conference maze lead us? I was talking to a pastor of a six-hundred-member Bible church in the San Francisco Bay Area. He confessed that after the last conference they went to his staff was more confused than ever. The conference maze brought only confusion, not clarity. When I walk into a church, it usually takes five minutes to identify the last conference the staff attended. I recently visited a four-thousand-member Baptist church and knew they had been to a Saddleback conference when I saw the banners hanging in the foyer. Last week, at one of the largest evangelical Lutheran churches in the country, I knew they had recently attended a conference at North Point when I picked up a new brochure in their foyer.

The success of these megamodels creates a great temptation for others to copy them. In that moment, leaders walk into a thinkhole. I am not against studying best practices; I'm just against *not thinking* in the process! Unfortunately, the quantity of conference offerings has only increased the complexity of the maze (along with the promise of better cheese should you navigate your way through it).

DENOMINATIONAL RUT. The final thinkhole is the *denominational rut.* Denominations by and large still continue to resource congregations with little appreciation for local uniqueness. Their structures have not adapted to the cultural whirlpools mentioned earlier. Despite good motivation, they get stuck maintaining the structures of yesteryear, unable to outfit the

strongest churches in the pack. Therefore a church can't look to its denom-
inational leadership for help in discerning what makes it an original. It is
sad to me that denominations have not been able to adapt. If they could,
I would urge them to come alongside their best churches to help them
express a unique DNA within their unique denominational heritage.

A powerful observation by Lyle Schaller solidifies the point raised in
the opening epigraph of the Introduction: "The differences between con-
gregations are becoming greater with the passage of time. The safe
assumption today is that no two are alike. Each congregation has its own
culture. . . . *The local community setting has moved ahead of the denomi-
national heritage as a factor in creating the distinctive congregational
culture*"[8] (italics mine). If denominational leaders aren't savvy to these
"contours of locality," what help can they give their local church?

If you have influence in your denomination, or are a denomination
leader, I urge you to reread Lyle's quote. Retooling is not easy, and our
times beg bold denominational leaders to take action.

What thinkholes are dotting the landscape in your church? Which
dynamics tend to pull you away from discovering your Church Unique?
Use the summary chart in Table 1.1 to review and discuss them with your
team of leaders. Remember that God's journey for you today reflects an
incomparable association with Jesus Christ that is completely original.

Table 1.1. "Thinkholes" Summary

Thinkholes	How We Neglect Uniqueness	The "Think-ing" Problem	Thinkhole Practices
Ministry treadmill	Busyness eliminates time for reflection	No time to think	Add more programs
Competency trap	Presumption decreases appetite for learning	No need to think	Work harder
Needs-based slippery slope	Consumerism removes the need for discernment	Needs are all we think about	Make people happy
Cultural whirlpool: BuzzChurch	Innovation short-circuits self-awareness	Addicted to new thinking	Be cutting-edge
Cultural whirlpool: StuckChurch	Change outpaces the discipline for learning	Too tired to think	Glorify the past
The conference maze	Success increases the temptation to copycat	Let's borrow their thinking	Model best practice
Denominational rut	Resources disregard local uniqueness	No one helps us think	Protect theology