

September 14, 2008

Cultivating a New Imagination in the Church

In Stephen Ambrose's book Undaunted Courage: Merriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and The Opening of the American West, Ambrose describes a cultural imagination that was as limited as what we see in the church today.

When Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated as president in 1801, nothing moved faster than the speed of a horse. Nothing had ever moved faster, and as far as anyone in 1801 was able to tell, nothing ever would. And except on a racetrack, no horse moved very fast. Road conditions ranged from bad to abominable, and there weren't very many of them. The best road in the country ran from Boston to New York. It took a light stagecoach three days to make the 175 mile journey. The 100 miles from New York to Philadelphia took two days. South of the new capital of Washington DC, there were no roads suitable for a stagecoach; everything moved on horse back. To the west beyond the mountains, there were no roads at all, only trails. To move men or mail from the Mississippi River to the Atlantic Ocean took six weeks or more; anything heavier took two months at least.

People took it for granted that things would always be this way. Henry Adams, writing in the 1890s about 1801, observed that "great as were the material obstacles in the path of the United States, the greatest obstacle of all was in the human mind. Down to the close of the 18th century, no change had occurred in the world which warranted practical men in assuming that great changes were to come." Sound like the church today?

Since the birth of civilization, there had been almost no changes in commerce or transportation. Americans lived in a free and democratic society, the first in the world since ancient Greece, but a society whose technology was barely advanced over that of the Greeks. The Americans of 1801 had more gadgets, better weapons, and a superior knowledge of geography over the ancients, but they could not move goods or themselves or information by land or water any faster than had the Greeks and Romans. Describing the mindset of the time, Henry Adams wrote, "Experience forced on men's minds the conviction that what had ever been must ever be." Sound like the church today?

But, only 60 years later, when Abraham Lincoln became president, Americans could move bulky items in great quantity farther in an hour than Americans of 1801 could do in a day, whether by land (25 mph on railroads) or water (10 mph upstream on a steamboat). This great leap forward in transportation – by a factor of 20 or more – in so short a space of time must be reckoned as the greatest and most unexpected revolution of all – except for another technological revolution, the transmitting of information. In Jefferson's day, it took six weeks to move information from the Mississippi River to Washington DC. In

Lincoln's, information moved over the same route by telegraph all but instantaneously. Time and distance, mountains and rivers meant something entirely different to Thomas Jefferson from what they meant to Abraham Lincoln.

Merriwether Lewis spent countless hours studying with Thomas Jefferson before embarking on his great trip of discovery with William Clark. By the time he finished studying, Lewis knew all there was to know about the Missouri and what lay west of it. The problem was that no citizen from the original thirteen states, had set foot between a point west of St. Louis and the Pacific Ocean. The maps of this land had all been drawn by people who had never been there before! And the best scientists in the world could not begin to fill in that map until someone had actually walked across the land, taking measurements, and reporting back on what it really looked like.

I believe 2008 is a little bit like 1801. In the North American church of today, we think the way the church is now is the way it always has been and the way it always will be. We have lost our missional imagination. We have lost our ability to dream and see new forms and shapes of the church that God might be bringing about, right under our very noses. The biggest obstacle holding us back from a vibrant and vital future in the church is ourselves. It is our lack of imagination that keeps us stuck, repeating what we have always done. Instead of cultivating a new imagination, we run off to conferences where people “sell” us on their tired, worn out programs. We run to Christian bookstores and buy the latest fad, because we assume they must have better ideas than we do. They don’t. Many of the ideas on the Christian market today are awful. They are terrible. But, we buy them anyway, because we can’t think of anything better.

But, what if we are on the verge of a creative breakthrough, like they were in the early 1800s? What if we are on the brink of an inventive wave that is getting ready to sweep the church? What if the seeds of landmark ministries are being planted as we speak?

This is not something that we can plan for, but it is something we can get ready for. We can learn adaptive skills, missional habits, and flexible behaviors, that will help us make some shifts when they begin to emerge.

It was a favorite saying of one of Thomas Jefferson’s 20th century successors, Dwight Eisenhower, that in war, before the battle is joined, plans are everything, but once the shooting begins, plans are worthless. The same can be said about exploration. In battle, what cannot be predicted is the enemy’s reaction; in exploration, what cannot be predicted is what is around the next bend in the river or on the other side of the hill. The planning process is as much guesswork as it is intelligent forecasting .

The North American church of today is in an age of exploration. We can make plans, but when we move down the river, we must be ready to quickly throw them away, when we see what is around the next bend. A missional church is built on the cultivation of imagination of regular, everyday Christians. If we are not yet fanning those flames, it’s time to get started.