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LIQUID LEADERSHIP  
FOR A  
THIRD-CULTURE CHURCH

dave gibbons

foreword by j.j. brazil, Pulitzer Prize Winner

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# Liquid

The desire for safety stands against every noble human endeavor.

— Tacitus, Roman philosopher

I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole.

— Malcolm X

**T**he rebellious, disrespectful, disillusioned, and demanding Prodigal Son is the focus of one of the most glorious moments in the Gospels. Yet the real highlight of that passage in Luke 15 is the radically gracious, generous, and forgiving father.

I love that story because it's Eastern in its cultural tone. Normally, an Eastern father would never run toward his son. The typical Eastern son, with head bowed, would be quick to demonstrate obeisance to his father. However, this father is different. This father runs and, in what is considered by many to be the most intimate portrait of love in the Bible,

kisses his son over and over again. Most versions of the Bible don't translate these repeated kisses. The kisses of the father. Kisses that entwine forgiveness, celebration, and blessing.

The world longs for such kisses from the Father.

No one should be in a better position to fulfill this longing than the church. Who can give a better kiss than the church? A kiss without strings attached. A supernatural kiss that can set captives free. A kiss that inspires prodigals to remember real love and to come back home.

I sometimes think how sweet it would be if that were the reaction of every person, every family, every neighbor, every community, even every country, whenever they come into contact with those of us who follow Jesus, who make up the church.

I think it could happen.

I believe that today God is calling us in the church to become a different kind of movement, known for our kisses of compassion rather than our condemnations.

I'm not sure there's ever been a better opportunity for those of us in the church to do so. A historic coming together of many unusual forces are shaping today's global village. Our world is marked by unprecedented degrees of multiculturalism, social advocacy, international collaboration and interdependence, and technology-driven outbreaks of freedom, unity, and community. They provide an intersection, a *kairos* moment, in which the church can shine.

From its first moments, the church has held the promise of being an expression of God's presence on this earth. No other entity has greater potential to bring about real and

sustainable change for good, whether we're talking about individual lives or the world at large.

But something's wrong. In North America, there has been a steady decline in church attendance, church giving, and church participation, a pattern we've already seen unfold in Europe, once the seat of Christianity's global expansion. These are signs of a much larger problem: the erosion of the significance of the church in the public square and in people's personal lives. In the spring of 2006, a national poll in America indicated that only 17 percent of Americans said going to church is essential for a life of faith.

### **Altered States**

Around the world, things are changing fast these days, and in ways that seemed unthinkable only a few years ago. Just ask any of the people who attended a recent World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. This annual gathering draws some of the most influential people in the world, including people from all fields—religion, politics, media, business, you name it. There was plenty of talk about novel business strategies and potential political partnerships. But people who are students of culture couldn't help but notice that new topics and questions are looming large in the most important conversations taking place today. There are conversations about how China is upending the world economy and culture, and about how China is eclipsing the United States in so many ways. There are conversations about how grassroots social change around the globe—which is being fueled by the internet's vast potential for helping people leap barriers

of time, distance, and culture—is far outstripping institutional approaches to crises and problem-solving, whether the institution is political or religious or otherwise.

There are conversations about how the world demands that business not only be good for profits but also be good for the planet and good for people. In business, it used to be that one bottom line—profit—separated the good from the bad. Now there are at least two bottom lines to attend to: profit and cause. This new reality, this new way of doing things, has huge ramifications for the thinking, methods, and game plans of for-profit organizations and business entities of all kinds. Many in the corporate and nonprofit domains are pretty sleep-deprived these days trying to figure out this new world we live in and what it means to be cause-oriented and socially conscious with their gains. This is in large part because they recognize the profitability of cause marketing.

What does all of this have to do with those of us in the church? Well, just as the spheres of commerce and government are being fundamentally reshaped by globalism, so is the domain of the church. Again, it's not new but a wake-up call to return to our roots, our calling as lovers of the marginalized.

*Globalism* applies to the many colossal shifts occurring in the world today because of an intense interdependence that countries, cultures, and people are experiencing with one another. The world is shrinking. By the day, it seems. Distances that once took months to cover now take hours. People and cultures unknown to us, let alone ever personally encountered by us, are an integral part of the fabric of our lives. For example, experts have said that if you take out

the undocumented worker in places like California, that will wreak havoc on our economy. People in politics and business, in education and the arts, people throughout all of our institutions, are finding it difficult to keep up with the way the world is changing, to understand what's happening and why, and to adapt.

I love the church. But the church historically has proven slow to embrace necessary change and to adapt to ethnic, sociological, and cultural shifts. It's like we know we're unhealthy but we don't want to go to the doctor to take care of the problem. And I don't think it has been any different with globalism. I'm concerned that with globalism, the nature and scope of the changes taking place in the world are so sweeping and the pace of change so unrelenting that we're becoming increasingly out of touch with the reality of our sickness.

At the risk of oversimplifying things, globalism truly is what historians call a disruptive force, because it's making for a very different, new world: culturally, economically, socially, technologically, commercially, and politically.

There are difficult, troubling aspects to this reshaping, but also wonderful possibilities. For instance, the collective threats posed worldwide by terrorism, pandemics, rogue military leaders, political and social corruption, environmental complexities, and racism are frightening and daunting. But I also see an unprecedented potential for creative international and cross-cultural collaboration because we are living in a cause-driven culture. It's now hip to be advocates of justice and compassion. In fact, people everywhere are hungering

for authentic spiritual conversations and opportunities to change the world. I look at the spiritual movements taking place in China, India, and Southeast Asia and they leave me breathless. Around the planet, there is an openness not only to doing good but to experiencing Jesus and his teachings, and it's growing exponentially.

The church has an amazing opportunity to become what God is hoping we will become. It'll take the resculpting of our organizations and corporate culture, the incubation of new art forms, new languages and expressions, new symbols, flexible ways of being organized and led, and even a fuller explanation of what we know as the gospel. (See how one MIT graduate is reimagining the gospel. Search on these words: *James Choung Story* at <http://youtube.com>. The type of work James is doing is exactly the work that each generation must do.) We need creative forms, methods, and practices for sharing the truth we love and believe in that will work in the new world and with a new generation. We need fresh counterintuitive ways of leading—in practice and in philosophy.

As I travel around the world and talk to people, I hear many of us in the church expressing similar concerns and longings. We're looking for something that fits what we know to be intrinsically true. We're hungry for it. We sense the urgency of it.

Not one of us in the church has *the* answer, but I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by a group of young, multigenerational, multiethnic leaders and servants who have stumbled onto something that seems to have a lot of promise

in the new world we all find ourselves in. It's something we call third culture. And these leaders that I'm discovering in cities all over the world, including America, are what we call third-culture leaders. It's something we in the group of churches we've launched feel pretty strongly about. We've seen an application of third-culture concepts ignite some beautiful things as we've put them into practice around the world.

A third-culture church and a third-culture leader look at our global milieu and the church's role in that milieu in a revolutionary way.

### **The Third-Culture Mandate**

When we understand the powerful force of globalism—possibly the single most significant macro influence impacting the world today—we'll understand how third-culture churches and third-culture leaders can help sustain and revitalize the church.

When I use the term *third-culture church*, I'm referring to a beautiful yet sobering reality: whether we're in Manhattan or Beijing or Sao Paulo, our credibility and the veracity of our initiatives will be measured by our third-culture lifestyles—hence the need to understand the third-culture mandate in light of the purposes of the church prioritized by Jesus himself when he was queried about the greatest commandment.

Third culture illuminates the dramatic changes in the world today as well as the insular and exclusive nature of the church. Yet by pursuing what a third-culture church and its

leaders might look like in principle and practice, we'll be able to fulfill what Christ envisioned his church to be about.

In what some people have called the First Great Commission, God told Abraham that he and his offspring would be a “blessing to *all* the nations.” That, I believe, is our charter, our call, for our churches to be a true blessing to all the nations. And the nations have never been more ready and eager for the church to offer the supernatural kiss of blessing it can offer.

I hope to be able to show you why and how the world is craving a third-culture spirit from the church and third-culture leaders within the church. We'll also discover together that third-culture thinking and practices can help the church not only have an impact globally but also reexamine how we do church and develop leaders to connect with our twenty-first-century global village—a place that has gone through a hundred years of change in just the past decade.

### **Defining Third Culture**

A working definition of third culture emerges from Genesis 12 and from the second greatest commandment: *Third culture is the mindset and will to love, learn, and serve in any culture, even in the midst of pain and discomfort.* From Genesis to Revelation you can track God's relentless pursuit of blessing humanity in the midst of man's rebellion. As you examine Genesis 1–12 again, you'll discover that the first mention of the Great Commission isn't in the book of Matthew but right here in Genesis 12, where God says that we are “blessed to be a blessing to the nations.” This blessing is revealed in

the conclusion of the Bible in Revelation 5:9–14, where all the nations are gathered singing a new song.

The hard work of this definition is the last phrase—“even in the midst of pain and discomfort.” It is contrary to our nature and culture to embrace pain, but it is the catalyst for helping people to see God. As this book unfolds, you’ll discover that third culture is not just a trend or a new thing but the heart of God. In fact, God is third culture.

Third culture is not only about geography or skin color or language. For third-culture people, home is wherever Jesus is. Third culture is the bearing of pain to love those who are not like you. Third culture affirms one’s ethnic identity. One’s ethnicity is not ignored but celebrated! Third culture doesn’t dull the color of one’s culture. Third culture actually enhances a culture’s uniqueness while at the same time celebrating the synergy of its fusion with other cultures. Third culture artfully flows in and out of multiple cultures like water.

Here’s another way of looking at it. First culture is the dominant homogeneous culture you live in. First culture tends to be more preservation-oriented, but that doesn’t mean people don’t take great risks. (For example, Asian immigrants often give up their status and wealth in their mother countries for the promise of better opportunities for their children in another country.) Second culture is the culture of those who aren’t quite comfortable with the first culture and often react to the first culture’s ways, maybe even rejecting their parents’ home culture. Third culture is being able to live in both first and second culture and even adopt

an entirely different culture. Third culture is about adaptation, the both/and, not the either/or, mindset. It doesn't eradicate color or lines but embraces and affirms who we are, regardless of differences in ethnicity, culture, or mindset. Third culture is the gift of being more cognizant of and more comfortable with the painful fusion and friction inherent in cultural intersections.

Others have also done some profound thinking about diversity, multiculturalism, multiethnicity, multigeneration-ism, and other important topics that need attention. The challenge, I think, is that the solutions offered are often at best cosmetic, such as admonitions to hire more people of color, do pulpit exchanges, or include more music styles on Sunday mornings. Such common cultural initiatives often fall short of true racial reconciliation and lack depth.

### **Scars: Generating Breakthroughs**

Stephen "Cue" Jean-Marie is a rapper with a penchant for quoting Malcolm X. He grew up in the slums of the West Indies. Not long ago, he ended up at Newsong Church's campus in Irvine, California, a place where some would never expect a person like Cue to show up, let alone take a leadership role. But he did show up. And not long after, he took on an extraordinary challenge. Members of the congregation and leaders at Newsong in Irvine wanted him to find the most marginalized community in Los Angeles, the kind of place that some people at Newsong would be uncomfortable to be in. We asked him to find a way for Newsong to make a difference in such a place.

This was no easy task—on so many levels.

First, there's Cue himself. His stature is intimidating. He's a bodybuilder! He's not a seminary-trained church leader. He was weaned on the streets, really. He has scars on his muscular forearms from being branded with hot spoons in his childhood, somebody's sad idea of discipline. He's an unlikely pastor.

Then there's the people. To put it mildly, people in urban Los Angeles and suburban Orange County can be somewhat uncomfortable with one another. Los Angeles is a sprawling ethnically diverse county of ten million people, some of whom live in some of the most impoverished, crime-ridden places in America. Orange County is akin to what you see on suburban prime-time reality shows (well, sort of), a place overflowing with wealth, excessive tastes, corporate executives, racial homogeneity, and a pretty manic pursuit of a lifestyle filled with ease and good fortune. When someone leaves one of these counties and crosses the border of the other, they can be met with an unspoken "good riddance."

And then there's the challenge. How would Cue find a place in Los Angeles that would trust the intentions and methods of an Orange County megachurch? And would the Crenshaw community accept a legit urbanite and a man of the streets who had joined forces with a suburban megachurch? Even if Cue found such a place, what could a congregation in suburban Orange County possibly do that would be meaningful and valuable in a city radically different from Irvine? How could Cue persuade people in Orange County to embrace whatever cause and constituency he discovered?

These barriers were just the beginning. But it's the number and nature of the barriers, and the degree of unlikelihood involved in this mission, that make Cue's effort so remarkable. Looking back at it now, it's something that God himself had to be part of for it to work.

Cue met the challenge by forming a partnership with what is arguably the most troubled school in Los Angeles, a community where the majority of the children come from single-parent homes, where in one recent week seven students were shot to death in suspected gang activity, where the high school recently lost its accreditation.

Besides being committed to helping the high school regain its accreditation, the initiative Cue leads today employs sports, health education, the arts, wellness disciplines, mentoring, and whatever else might help to lift some of the burdens of the young people he deals with, and maybe even alter the trajectory of their lives.

Every day, Cue peers into the eyes of kids who are suffering in the same way he once did. And they see him as someone who doesn't need an explanation, who understands, who knows. The neighborhoods he spends his days in are busting at the seams with fatherless boys ill-equipped to do more than plant the seeds of another fatherless generation and with emotionally crippled girls settling for the crumbs of what passes for affection. Others drive through and around this area, but against some tall odds, Cue and his brothers and sisters in the Newsong community are living out what Mother Teresa gently instructed all of us to do: "If you cannot feed a hundred children, well then, feed one."

Cue and some of his crew of former gang members are sought-after partners by the schools in Crenshaw. Young people are clamoring to be part of their club. Lives are being changed. Now Cue has launched another ministry in Los Angeles called the Row, working with one of the most neglected people groups in Los Angeles: the homeless. Despite the noise of helicopters flying overhead and police cars whizzing by with their sirens going, they do church every Friday night on an open street corner with drug addicts and alcoholics and, believe it or not, suburbanites from Orange County.

How did Cue pull this off? Was it simply the result of his innate leadership skills? Certainly that's part of the explanation. But more intriguing is how Cue even ended up in the Newsong community. What attracted him to a community of ethnicities and cultures that are different from his? And how is it that he, not exactly prototypical leadership material for an American megachurch, came to be loved and empowered by Newsong to take on such a dangerous and meaningful mission?

The answer to all these questions finds its home in Cue's pain. Cue epitomizes a new breed of leader, a leader who leads from what I call the pain principle. This is one of several attributes that mark a third-culture leader and a third-culture church. The pain principle grows out of two axioms: (1) For leaders, pain in life has a way of deconstructing us to our most genuine, humble, authentic selves. It's part of the leader's job description. (2) For most people, regardless of culture, it's easier to connect with a leader's pain and shortcomings and mistakes than her successes and triumphs.

One of the things I'm learning as I encounter people around the world today is that leaders who understand the pain principle are the kind of leaders the world is thirsting for. What's intriguing to me is that this is the kind of leader the church was full of in its earliest days. Paul, Rahab, Ruth, Moses, Joseph, and Jesus himself were all such leaders. The apostle Paul, one of the greatest followers of Jesus, had a story similar to Cue's. He said, "From now on, don't let anyone trouble me with these things. For I bear on my body the scars that show I belong to Jesus" (Gal. 6:17 NLT). Paul is basically saying, "I have the right to speak to you because of these scars, evidence of Christ in me."

### **Fuel the Fringe, Honor the Past**

The church is called to be a third-culture community. Third culture is about the two purposes of life for every Christ-follower: loving God and loving your neighbor.

Without question, there are a lot of effective strategies and fruitful ideas being used in the church and in ministry today. Third culture is not simply a strategy but the way we are to live. One may not be naturally third culture, but we are called to move toward this vision. It seems that more than ever the world is open to such leadership. I say this simply because we have experienced it in communities where we seriously pursued a third-culture lifestyle in diverse cultural contexts spanning several continents and saw how people gravitate toward this adaptive, liquid-type leader. Even the next US president is third culture. As of this writing, we don't know whether the next president will be Obama or

McCain, but both have third-culture characteristics from their past and present.

### **Any Church, Any Size, Anywhere**

When my brother and I were teenagers, we were bottomless pits. We could consume massive quantities of food. My poor mom. She found really only one place she could take us that would satisfy us: the Royal Fork, an all-you-can-eat buffet where we ate for three to four hours at a sitting.

I can still picture the luscious spread. For my brother and me, nothing was more glorious than checking out every nook and cranny of that steamy buffet table and then consuming everything in sight. Buffets were our little heaven on earth. Nothing brings people together like good food!

That whole scene reminds me of a story in Luke 14 about another banquet that is jam-packed with prophetic power for us in the new millennium.

Jesus tells the story of a great feast being prepared in the kingdom of God. The host of the banquet has worked feverishly and is enthusiastic about this feast. So he dispatches a servant to visit all of the people who were invited to the banquet to make sure they are coming. One by one, however, they all tell the servant they aren't going to be able to attend. They're busy attending to transactions and urgent matters. They appreciate the invitation but have to take a rain check.

In response, the deeply disappointed host deploys his servant to go throughout the city to invite everyone he sees to the banquet—the homeless, the crippled, the lame, the

poor, anyone he encounters. The servant lobs invitations to all comers, and before long, it's clear the banquet tables are going to be filled after all with all manner of grateful, joyful people, people who are not too busy. Jesus quietly closes with the haunting admonition that not one of the people who were originally invited will taste the greatest buffet of all time.

Like all of Jesus' parables, there's plenty of mystery in this story for us to burrow into. What did he mean by this sad, jarring story? Well, to me, there's a message for us in the church today.

As I travel to different nations, I see God's beautiful sculpting hand creatively at work, as unmistakable as it is unobtrusive. Spectacular spiritual shifts are occurring. But I wonder if the church is sometimes too busy, too distracted, too inwardly focused to sense all that's happening, all that could be, all that will be—with us or without us. Is it possible that we are so consumed with managing churches and ministries and organizations that we're missing out on an international spiritual banquet like we've never seen before? Is it possible that the reality of the new world we're living in gives the church an opportunity we've never had before, a chance for the church to be what we've always dreamed it could be?

I believe the church is the embodiment of Jesus on this earth. Think about that. That means that there is no organization with greater potential to have an impact or to be a more potent force for good than a third-culture church that is unleashed. What other organization has that kind of reason for being?

This all might sound pie-in-the-sky. That's fine. But the God we serve and love has the widest idealistic streak of any of us. A baton is being passed today—in the world and in the church—and any church of any size in any place can accept that baton and run with it. God is raising up in our churches—and outside our churches, frankly—a new generation of prophets with voices and liquid leadership skills tailor-made for our times. And I hope that none of us misses it.

In writing this book, my hope is that we will sacrificially foster and prioritize next-generation thinking, next-generation methods, and next-generation leaders in the church so that the global movement Jesus began will be known first and foremost for sharing love without strings, healing, extravagant radical compassion, and radical reconciliation with the world so lovingly breathed into existence by our creator.

### **Shaping What Could Be**

In addition to prayer and reflection on the state of the world these days, I've drawn from intentional experiential forays into nonprofit and for-profit work to better understand third-culture language and concepts, including my twenty years as a lead pastor developing churches both big and small, homogeneous and multicultural; from learning from some of the incredible leaders of churches and Christian movements and organizations in North America, the Far East, the United Kingdom, and India; from adventures as a board member with World Vision and as founder of Xealot, a nonprofit organization that seeks to help people living in marginalized communities; from involvement with

two global cause-oriented for-profit ventures, one a financial trading house in California and the other a music label in Los Angeles; and from serving as a consultant and counselor for young artists, business leaders, and musicians on several continents.

In my journeys, what's becoming clear to me is that the more adaptive we are to the Holy Spirit and to diverse people groups and settings, the more we reflect who Jesus is and impact this new flat world.

Author Thomas Friedman has become a bit of a prophetic voice in this regard in the area of culture, politics, and business. In his seminal book, *The World Is Flat*, he describes some of the forces at work that are creating the groundwork and necessity for a third-culture movement in the church: "Two aspects of culture have struck me as particularly relevant in the flat world. One is how outward your culture is: To what degree is it open to foreign influences and ideas? How well does it 'glocalize' (a term that combines the necessity of both local and global initiatives—it's not a choice)? The other, more intangible, is how inward your culture is."<sup>1</sup> In other words, organizations with cultures that intentionally or unintentionally maintain an inward focus—a culture of exclusivity and a leering of and even suspicion toward differences and change—are in real trouble in this twenty-first-century global village of ours. Conversely, the more an organization's culture naturally glocalizes—the more easily our local cultures can absorb and embrace foreign ideas and best practices and meld those with the best of our traditions and values—the greater the boon we will enjoy in the new world.

This new reality is the sweet spot of third culture.

Now, for all of the challenges before us, there's great news for those of us who are privileged enough to be agents of the good news of God's love. The urgent changes globalism is prompting the church to make, I believe, are what God himself would prescribe for us. I say this simply because of what I see in Scripture that reveals God's impassioned, undeniable desire for the church's role in the world. What begins in Genesis with a call for God's people to be a blessing to all nations ends climactically in Revelation 7, where "all nations and tribes, all races and languages" are gathered together worshipping God. No matter how many times I read that passage, I never cease to feel lifted and emboldened to do whatever I can to help make that scene come to pass.

I don't think we can imagine the degree of the exquisite beauty that that moment described in Revelation will bring. But we get to see a sliver of it when, on rare moments in world events, we witness people laying aside their differences and coming together for good. There's something about that kind of unity and reconciliation that moves us beyond words. Likewise, that portrait in Revelation—a depiction of the climactic reconciliation of God and the chief object of his love, humankind—lies at the core of the message, methodology, and motivation of third culture.

If Friedman's bestselling *The World Is Flat* is an inspiring call to a different mindset about the world for business, culture, and government, then I think there's an urgent call for the church to do likewise.

We have much to learn from the world. A recent example is the opening ceremony of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. It left many people in the world speechless. The scale and pageantry of the event were unprecedented. But beyond the amazing artistry of the event, one could feel that this was a coming out party for China and for Asia. Once known primarily for its illegal copying of products, Asia is increasingly known for its creativity. David Brooks, *New York Times* op-ed columnist, had an insightful take on this ceremony. He writes, “The world can be divided many ways — rich and poor, democratic and authoritarian — but one of the most striking is the divide between the societies with an individualistic mentality and the ones with a collectivist mentality.”<sup>2</sup> Brooks then refers to a study by professor of psychology Richard Nesbitt in which Americans and Asians were shown individual pictures of a chicken, a cow, and hay. When they were asked which of the pictures go together, Americans typically picked the two animals. Asians typically picked the cow and the hay, since cows eat hay. Americans tend to see categories, whereas Asians are more likely to see relationships. That’s why doing business in Asia is about more than signing a contract; it’s about relationships of trust.

Often the Western world focuses on privacy and individual rights, whereas the Asian world focuses more on collective harmony, collective society. Brooks writes, “People in [individualistic] societies tend to overvalue their own skills and overestimate their own importance to any group effort. People in collective societies tend to value harmony and duty. They tend to underestimate their own skills and

are more self-effacing when describing their contributions to group efforts.” In a world in which the healthiest people tend to be in community and those prone to depression and suicide tend to be disconnected, we have much to learn from our “neighbors.” The real value of our growing relationship with nations such as China will probably be more relational and community oriented than economic. We’ll learn to look beyond categories and see relationships. That’s third culture.