

# ENGAGING TRIBES

*TradeCraft* [chapter 7]

BY CALEB CRIDER

Growing up in a California suburb, our social lines were not drawn according to ethnicity or economics. Our social groups were the stereotypical cliques: the jocks, the preps, the geeks, the punks, the cowboys, and the surfers (after all, this was California). Every clique had its own place on campus at lunch. Each group had its own style, hangouts, and its own language. My life was a John Hughes movie.

Schoolyard cliques fell into broader categories as well. The popular kids were always the jocks and surfers, while the geeks and Christians were lumped into the non-cool category. Yes, we church kids had our own clique. We were lucky if the jocks even knew who we were. The only way a Christian kid was ever going to be considered cool was if he could become a jock.

If you took the term literally, a jock would have been anyone who participated in a sport. Certainly making the team was one step toward entry into the club, but lots of guys on the team still had to sit with the non-cool kids at lunch. Being a jock meant much more than just being an athlete.

A jock wore baseball hats and varsity letter jackets to let everyone know his status. He referred to professional football players by their last names only, and could cite sports statistics that he heard watching ESPN Sports Center© instead of doing his homework. He was a tough guy, the kind who got in fights and could grow a beard. A jock usually had a girlfriend on his arm, a muscle car in his driveway, and no time for geeks and losers. It meant something to be a jock, and he worked hard to belong to the group.

In high school, we called them “cliques.”

Missiologists call them “tribes.”

Perhaps the single most significant observation in missions today is this — people everywhere are tribal. For most of us, the word “tribe” brings to mind a primitive group of hunters and gatherers living in thatched-roof huts. In this sense, a tribe is a clan, a sort of extended family a person is born into.

Humans are social beings. Theologian and professor Stanley Grenz wrote that humankind was created for community.<sup>105</sup> We relate to society by attaching ourselves relationally to certain people. These groups provide us with a sense of identity; they give us a sense of who we are in relation to others. The group provides things like protection and support while asking for the same in return. Humans languish in isolation. Apart from our social circles, we tend to lose our sense of who we are.

In his textbook on cross-cultural communication, missiologist David Hesselgrave pointed out that in times past, the barriers that separated people were mainly physical—great distances, mountains, seas, and the like.<sup>106</sup> Urbanization, however, is changing that.

As of 2008, more than half the world's population lived in urban centers.<sup>107</sup> As humanity has moved into cities, we've largely left the family structures we were born into. Many reasons exist for this change. The city provides opportunity unavailable in rural areas. Educated people rarely return to the small towns they came from to work on the family farm. Tiny downtown apartments just don't have the room for an extended family to all live together, and the cost of living in the city can be quite expensive. Consequently, family is quickly losing its place as the center of our social lives.

City dwellers haven't ceased to be tribal, they've just adapted to their urban reality. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli introduced the idea of the urban tribe in 1985.<sup>108</sup> His research into neo-tribalism showed that while rural social groupings tend to be driven by authoritative systems of power, urban dwellers are socially motivated by peer influence and energy. Rather than being organized around family, modern tribes are voluntary and tend to be based on affinity. People select their social circles, however subconsciously, to replace the clans they were born into but serve the same functions.

Consider the gangs of homeless children in the slums of India. They band together to survive the streets by looking out for one another and sharing what they have. For many young African men, the ranks of regional militias provide the father figures and familial structure they would never otherwise have known. Upwardly mobile adult children of divorced parents form social circles that serve as group therapy. Blue-collar workers who routinely put their lives in the hands of coworkers form a bond that is stronger than blood relations. Around the world, and at every level, humans are increasingly tribal.

## MODERN TRIBES

No matter the context, tribes are the social circles we move in. A tribe is the primary social unit to which a person may belong. A tribe has rules, structure, leadership, and goals. Modern tribes may range in connectedness from tightly- to loosely-knit, and people respond differently to each. Tribes are complex structures.

Tribes are where people gain their sense of identity. As social beings, we define ourselves by the company we keep (or, more specifically, the company we want to keep). It means something to be a member of a particular tribe; who we are and who we are not. In his book, *Tribes*, Seth Godin explains that a tribe is any group of people who are connected to one another, a leader, and an idea.<sup>109</sup>

Some examples of tribes: • Massai of Kenya and Tanzania • Navajo of North America • The Wolof of Senegal • High school cliques • Apple Macintosh computer users • Rush Limbaugh listeners • The Catholic Church

A person may belong to one or several social groupings, but any may serve as an individual's public self-identification. All tribes have common characteristics. Just as a fraternity or sorority has a period of initiation for potential members, tribes have rites of passage that clearly define who is "in" and who is "out." A loosely-knit tribe may have low barriers for entry — to be a Mac user, one needs only to purchase a MacBook. Joining the Marines, on the other hand, requires basic training and a four-year commitment. While membership of most tribes is open, some require insider approval for admittance.

Because tribes are social structures, each has its own rules. Norms for acceptable behavior may not be explicitly stated, but are understood by insiders. A tribe may have rules about courting and marriage, gender roles, or politics. Members of some tribes are forbidden from socializing with another tribe. Most tribes even have members who serve to enforce the tribe's rules.

The problem with being an outsider desiring to affect change on the inside is that as an outsider, you don't usually know the rules. Because most tribes don't greet you with an orientation packet, you're in a race to learn the rules before you break them all. There are always consequences for breaking a tribe's rules ranging from embarrassment to excommunication or worse.

Tribe members have an insider language. For isolated or closed tribes, this will be an actual language. Among tribes that are more open, insider-speak is comprised of a common vocabulary that reflects the worldview of the group. For example, many younger groups have adopted sarcasm as their primary means of expression. The uninitiated may mistake a sarcastic vote of approval as authentic. Insiders, on the other hand, understand that what is said isn't always what's meant.

Other examples of tribal languages can be found in the United States among politically conservative radio talk show hosts. Despite the fact that he doesn't actually know every member of his audience, Sean Hannity greets his callers with "You're a Great American!" Rush Limbaugh's diehard fans (called "ditto-heads") wish the host "mega-dittos" as an affirmation of his ideology. The broader conservative audience uses words like conservative, liberal, government, and socialist but defines them differently than those on the other side of the political spectrum who have their own insider-speak.

The implications of insider language to mission are great. If mission is overcoming barriers to the spread of the gospel through incarnation, language is among the most difficult to overcome. In order to translate the gospel across cultures, we must take into account every tribe's unique patterns of communication. The missionary may find that he needs to rely on a specific mode of

communication for each group. Older people may need direct personal interaction while tech-connected younger tribes may prefer highly-abbreviated text messaging. The gospel will not be spread where it is not appropriately communicated.

Tribes also typically wear uniforms. The stereotypes reveal the importance of appearance: the Maasai wear red striped sarongs, hippies wear their hair long, and Rastafarians sport dreadlocks. Country folk wear camouflage, city boys tote messenger bags. Hipsters these days wear vintage plaid flannel over their tattoos, while steampunks show off their self-designed modified retro-future Victorian apparel. Soccer moms shop at Old Navy. Physical appearance is a social cue that helps people express their tribal identity and recognize the affiliations of others. To an outsider, members of a group may all seem to dress alike; but insiders recognize uniforms that advertise status. High-power business people wear nicer suits. Rappers wear jewelry to signify their success. Cowboys can spot high-dollar boots from a mile away. No self-respecting freegan would be caught dead in firsthand clothing. The school yard is divided by knockoff sneakers.

Whether formal or informal, all tribes have some form of leadership. Some tribes are built around a single personality, while others may look to a core group of founders for guidance or inspiration. Others still may have unknown leaders who prefer to remain behind the scenes. Without leadership, tribes tend to stall, fragment, or disintegrate altogether.

Tribal leadership can take many different approaches. Some tribes elect leaders. Others follow whomever they deem to be the greatest among them. Consider the culinary world: Outsiders may care about Cooking Channel reality show hosts, but insiders follow the examples of those who are named “great” by the industry. Michelin Stars, James Beard awards, and successful restaurants mean added influence for a chef.

## THE SEARCH TO BELONG

In his 2003 book, *The Search to Belong*, Joseph Myers outlined four major levels of belonging that all people seek—public, social, personal, and intimate.<sup>110</sup> These spaces, as Myers calls them, meet key needs in our lives. The public space is an open and broad social affiliation like being a fan of a particular sports team or driving a certain model of car. The social space fills a more specific need for meaningful interaction, such as one might have gotten in times past from talking to neighbors while sitting on the front porch. Myers’ concept of personal space is where the private interaction occurs — things like sharing personal problems or asking for advice. The last space, the intimate, says Myers, is reserved for one or two people with whom we have uninhibited, completely open and honest relationships.

The four spaces are a great way to understand the tribes from a missiological perspective. At one time, all four spaces were filled by family. Today, people choose their communities to meet their needs. Sports teams, clubs, churches, and political parties all serve a social function for their fans and members.

When I was a child, my family moved from Southern California to the San Francisco Bay area. The four-hundred-mile move north was a radical change for us: we left the laid-back, diverse, and warm Los Angeles urban sprawl for San Francisco's uptight, uniform, and colder climate. For as long as I could remember, we had been fans of the Los Angeles Dodgers baseball team. Some of my best memories were of outings to games at the hilltop stadium near downtown Los Angeles.

Now, we had moved to the territory of the Dodgers' arch-rivals — the San Francisco Giants. My dad and I knew that our Dodger blue hats and shirts wouldn't be welcome here, so we made a conscious decision to adjust our loyalties. To mark the occasion, we held a little ceremony. Dad got tickets to the season opener at Candlestick Park, the (then) Giants stadium. We put away our Dodgers' T-shirts for good, went to the game, bought Giants hats, and cheered for the home team. Just like that, we were Giants fans.

Maybe we weren't the best fans. Perhaps we should have stayed true to our team even after the move. We certainly weren't excited about switching teams. But something about attending that game and buying those hats made the San Francisco Bay area home for me. It was as if, simply by wearing the right colors, we had camouflaged ourselves as locals. At school and in the neighborhood, I didn't stand out quite as much as I had before. Our whole family had started to refer to the collective "we" that sports fans do, as in, "We had a great win last night against Atlanta. Hope we can sweep the next three against the Cubs." Becoming Giants fans meant we settled in and identified with our new community.

To say that people "choose" their community is not to say they are happy with the community they have. Sometimes, people become stuck in a social circle that doesn't meet their needs. This is the problem with most existing social structures; they fail to live up to the needs and expectations of their members.

Furthermore, to say that people select their tribes based on affinity doesn't mean they are any less influential than clan-based tribes. Actually, these chosen social circles often have more influence on the individual simply because the act of choosing them reflects on the one doing the choosing. A person doesn't have any say in what family he's born into, but selecting a social group and going to the trouble of joining it means having much more invested in the resulting connections.

## THE FUNCTION OF A TRIBE

Tribes do more than just provide their members with a sense of identity. They help the individual process new information. Every day people are bombarded with information. The tribe serves as a filter through which to process that information. Members may discover something new like information about an upcoming event or insight into a social event. Then they bring that new information to the group, sharing what they've learned (thereby informing everyone else) and

essentially asking, “What do we believe about this?” The underlying question each member is asking is, “What do I believe about this?” The tribe’s response will then determine what the individual does with this newly discovered information.

A good example can be found online. Social media provide users with virtual connections and a constant stream of (mostly trivial) data. Every time someone uploads a link to a particularly clever political cartoon or a video of a cat that has learned to knit, he is basically thinking, “I found this and thought it might be of interest to the tribe.” When the tribe likes the link, the user is encouraged to find more such information. But a negative response (or no response at all) from one’s peers communicates, “This isn’t important to us.”

Many missionaries employ a methodology that relies strictly on a one-to-one proclamation of the gospel. The thinking, of course, is that a decision to follow Christ is personal and individual. However, as tribally-connected people, we are limited in our capacity to process major life decisions on our own. Tribal people do much of their thinking in community.

## NARRATIVE

In the past, information was hard to come by. People relied on newspapers and marketplace gossip for information about the world. With knowledge came power, whoever controlled the flow of information controlled society. When information is scarce, it is valuable. That’s why our grandparents spent hundreds of dollars on twenty-volume sets of encyclopedias for their homes. Finding information was a chore. Not long ago, doing research meant wading through card catalogs and microfiche.

Times have changed. With the advent of the Internet, we moved from a dearth of information to open access to unlimited amounts of information in a relatively short period of time. For the first time in history, information is constant. We are truly overwhelmed with information from the web, text messages, TV, radio, cell phones, and print.

Every day we’re bombarded with noise. Buy this car! Eat that cereal! Beware of the danger lurking just beneath the surface of your kitchen cutting board! Everywhere we go someone wants our time, money, and loyalty. The American Marketing Association defines an advertisement as: “Any announcement or persuasive message placed in the mass media in paid or donated time or space by an identified individual, company, or organization.” According to that definition, the average person living in a major city is exposed to as many as 5,000 advertisements per day!<sup>111</sup>

What people need now isn’t more information, but filters to sort through the information they already have access to. Good information versus bad; helpful versus hurtful.

Rather than sort through information on our own, people seek influential narrators who filter through the data and offer a complete perspective. The world is then viewed through the

narrative lens of people like news commentators, celebrities, authors, radio hosts, religious leaders, politicians, and story-tellers. Some tribes have local narrators, while others rely on gatekeepers who manage the flow of information into the group.

Television hosts can be especially influential narrators. Every day for 25 years, millions of Americans tuned into the Oprah Winfrey Show, a lifestyle television talk show, to hear Oprah talk about life from her perspective. Through interviews, Oprah brought out the humanity in personal stories that allowed her viewers to make emotional connections. The show discussed everything under the sun, from relationships to household organization to health and well-being to book recommendations. Oprah was a narrator. People across the country depended on her to define what should be important for them and to demonstrate how they should feel about those things.

Narratives most often include major perspectives, meta-themes such as what is wrong with the world, who is the enemy, what would make the world better, and what are preferred solutions. This includes elements that address: How does the world view me, and what are my values and priorities? A narrative is a story that explains a tribe's place in the world.

It's important to understand the narrative of the people to whom you minister. It's the worldview language they speak. Tribes are formed around these narratives. Here you find the questions the gospel directly addresses: What binds the people? What motivates them? Who among them is hurting? What spiritual influences are evident?

## CHURCHES WAITING TO HAPPEN

It might be tempting to see tribes as barriers to the spread of the gospel. After all, if every social group has its own narrative and requires a unique approach to incarnation, we clearly don't have enough missionaries to make a difference. But viewed another way, tribes are very good for mission. These are essentially groups who meet regularly, enjoy fellowship, tell stories, counsel, support, serve one another, and provide members with a sense of identity. These characteristics may sound familiar because they are the same sorts of things we'd expect to see in a local church.<sup>112</sup>

Of course, unless the members of the group know Christ and meet together for His glory, a tribe is not a church, not yet anyway. But among many tribes, the infrastructure is there, already established, but waiting to be jumpstarted to life by the Holy Spirit. Most of the work of church planting is already done for us — tribes are churches waiting to happen!

Because tribes are potential churches, the common missionary behavior of extraction needs to be questioned. Extraction, according to missional thinker Alan Hirsch, is a typical method of discipleship that removes a new believer from his existing social surroundings in order to acculturate him into an established church.<sup>113</sup> For example, a missionary is necessarily an outsider when it comes to tribes of unbelievers. As an outsider, he shares the gospel

indiscriminately, and by God's grace, some are saved. This, of course, is a very good thing. But the next step is vital. Most missionaries gather those who have come to faith into a new group and consider it a new church. The missionary then switches from evangelism mode to discipleship mode and begins to teach the group of new believers how to do church. Before long, this group of people needs to be encouraged to go out and make non-Christian friends. Churches hold seminars and training sessions about how to relate to lost people. The result is a synthetic, manufactured, Christian tribe that mimics the world's tribes. We end up with a Christian clique just as closed and exclusive as the other groups.

In the short run, this approach may be effective because it results in a new gathering of Christians. It makes sense that we would want to remove a new believer from the negative influences of his pagan social environment in order to teach him. But if we were to take a step back and consider the tribes in which people live, we would see that extraction is extremely destructive of the very relational channels along which the gospel would spread.

Rather than seeing the process of conversion to life in Christ, other tribe members only see their fellow tribesmen whisked away by an outsider who proceeds to indoctrinate them into a foreign religion and culture. Extraction divides, isolates, and confuses. Instead of encouraging the tribe to consider as a group the implications of the gospel for their lives, it forces them to process the good news as individuals— something they're not equipped to do. Because people are tribal, we shouldn't be in such a rush to plug everyone into a church. In doing so, we build forced, awkward groups with little influence on one another. These new Christian relationships begin to negatively replace the natural ones.

What if, instead of seeing existing social structures as barriers to the spread of the good news, we began to see them as direct lines of communication? Instead of considering every person as an individual, we could consider them as representatives of a tribe. In this light, the gospel is boldly proclaimed into a social circle, and entire groups are discipled. The gospel is trusted to permeate the tribe's discussion and haunt its members' interactions with one another. The resulting group can then take charge of communicating the good news within the tribe. They can demonstrate for others what life in Christ truly means for people of their kind.

## SPIRITUAL LIFE SUPPORT

Being slow to extract people from their social circles does have serious implications for their spiritual formation. Surrounded by influences that are less than God-honoring, a new disciple may struggle to break out of his former mindset. It's much more difficult to "take off the old man and put on the new" when everyone around is quite happy with the old man. The possibility exists that a person left in his social environment would have to wait a very long time for Christian community among his own tribe. Discipleship seems much more efficient in an environment we control.



It may take a long time for a tribe to come to faith. In the meantime, we can serve as the spiritual life-support for the individual(s) who believe by encouraging, teaching, and praying until the body comes to life.

The value of discipling someone in place is tremendous. New believers learn to apply their faith to real life, a process that results in indigenous expressions of church. Their theology is done in their own language, and their missionary identity is sealed into their DNA. We end up with a Christianized tribe who is equipped for the task of cultural translation of the gospel. They can relate without having to learn a new language or social rules.

## TRIBES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

What about Jesus? Didn't He extract the disciples from their secular lives when He called on them to drop their nets and follow Him? Well, yes and no. Certainly the gospel is a call to complete and utter abandonment of life as we know it. Following Jesus doesn't necessarily mean that we leave behind the allegiances and identities of our previous life (Matt. 10:37). But it doesn't mean that we must disconnect from the tribes we were in when the gospel found us. The twelve disciples left everything to follow Jesus, but they followed Him in and around their hometowns in full view of their peers.

Throughout the New Testament, tribes are significant in the spread of the gospel. Upon meeting Jesus, Andrew ran to his brother Simon (Peter) saying, "We have found the Messiah!" (John 1:40–42). Likewise, Philip took the news of Jesus to Nathaniel, proclaiming, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (John 1:44–45). In His Revelation, God casts a vision for every "tribe, tongue, and nation" before His throne at the end of time.<sup>114</sup>

Modern translations of the Scriptures don't actually use the word "tribes" to refer to these social groupings. In the Ancient Greek, the word *oikos* is translated "household" but carries the same meaning as "tribe." The Greek concept of household would have meant much more than just the structure, building, or even nuclear family. The household was everyone who pertained to a person's societal group—family, extended family, employees, servants—anyone who shared an interdependent life together.

In his paper, *Oikos Evangelism: The Biblical Pattern*, sociologist Thom Wolf wrote about the importance of the tribe to first-century thinking<sup>115</sup>: "An *oikos* was the fundamental and natural unit of society, and consisted of one's sphere of influence — his family, friends, and associates. And equally important, the early church spread through "*oikoses*" — circles of influence and association."

1. When we read about Zacchaeus in Luke 19, we see Jesus inviting Himself over to dinner at the tax collector's house (a terrific missional strategy), and teaching Zacchaeus's groups of friends. Jesus departs saying, "Today salvation has come to this household" (*oikos*, Luke 19:9).

2. After Levi left everything and followed Jesus, the tax collector held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and invited his tax collector friends (Luke 5:27–32).
3. An angel instructed Cornelius to seek out Peter in order to hear a message “by which he would be saved, and his entire household” (oikos, Acts 11:14).
4. In Philippi, God opened Lydia’s heart to the gospel and, according to the Scriptures “she was baptized, with her household” (oikos, Acts 16:15).
5. Also in Philippi, Paul declared to the Philippian Jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.” Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all that were in his oikos, and the result was that “he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God” (Acts 16:31).
6. Later in Acts, we read that Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth “believed in the Lord, together with all his household” (Acts 18:8). Paul demonstrates the importance of oikos to his ministry when he writes about baptizing Crispus and the household of Stephanas in 1 Corinthians 1:14–16.

The word oikos is mentioned so often in the Scriptures that we can see a pattern; not only individuals repenting and following Jesus, but entire households. It’s not entirely clear how this happened. Perhaps the leader of each oikos held such influence that the rest of the members naturally followed suit and converted. Or maybe it was the power of seeing one of theirs respond so radically to Christ. The fact that Paul was willing to baptize the various members of each oikos makes it clear that the belief of the tribe was simultaneous and genuine.

### AN OUTSIDER’S INFLUENCE

The question arises: Are we, as missionaries at home or abroad, supposed to try to join a tribe in order to influence it, create a new one altogether, or can we remain outsiders, preach the gospel, and expect to see tribes come to faith? The answer depends on the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Some missionaries are compelled by the urgency of the mission to conform to a culture only insofar as it allows them to proclaim the gospel. Others are inspired to immerse themselves completely in a group in order to proclaim and demonstrate the Kingdom of God.

To be clear, all Christians are outsiders. Having been sent by the most High God, we go as “ambassadors”<sup>116</sup> of Christ, citizens of the “household of God”<sup>117</sup> to live among people who are “alienated and hostile” to Him.<sup>118</sup> Even the Christian who ministers among the same social group for years can never have complete fellowship with unbelievers.<sup>119</sup> For this reason, the missionary always considers himself to be observing, joining, and influencing from the outside.

Our model, of course, is Christ himself, who “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, being found in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.”<sup>120</sup> The Incarnation of the Son is the highest example of mission — the deliberate crossing of cultural boundaries in order to translate the gospel into the context of others. Incarnation means putting oneself in the shoes of another in order that the gospel might be communicated.<sup>121</sup>

As previously discussed in the chapter on “Identifying Persons of Peace,” Jesus sent 72 of His followers on a short-term mission trip instructing them to find their place on His mission by “speaking peace.” The idea was that if the missionary is welcomed in, that’s where he should stay and concentrate his efforts. This is a good guide for joining a tribe, and exactly the strategy Paul seemed to have employed as he “became all things to all people” so that some may be saved.<sup>122</sup>

Joining a tribe can be very difficult and take a long time. It requires you to be a student of culture and to deliberately expose yourself to those things that influence the tribe. In order to embed yourself in an *oikos*, you must leave your preferences and comforts, and, to a certain extent, leave behind much of your cultural identity. It means deliberately changing your lifestyle in order to identify with others. To join a tribe, you must read the books, watch the films, and wear the clothes that shape the tribe.

Usually, despite your best efforts to join a tribe, you will never truly be considered a full member of a tribe. At best, you can hope to be considered an “acceptable outsider.”<sup>123</sup> The reason for this is simple: as new creatures, we are set apart by Christ in us.<sup>124</sup> Add to this the fact that almost everyone already has some social network — group(s) of friends they have known since grade school who have a profound influence on their lives. Most people aren’t out looking for friends, especially among people who are clearly from outside their tribes. Knowing that you will, to a certain degree, always be an outsider should shape your approach to mission.

Because people are tribal, missionaries tend to focus on “group-building” approaches to ministry. Many missionaries want to form new groups around themselves. “If, despite all the effort, we still can’t join a tribe,” the missionary seems to think, “we might as well start new ones.” So many missionary efforts begin with the socially unattached.<sup>125</sup> When a person transplants to another place, the first thing he does is try to find/build a tribe. It is human nature to be part of community; however, our experience is that not everyone has an *oikos*. Foreigners, outsiders, and new arrivals to a city can be quite disconnected as a result of being without an *oikos*.

Jesus Himself created something of an *oikos* in recruiting a ragtag band of fishermen, tax collectors, and separatists. Forming groups isn’t always a bad thing, but creating new tribes can have its downsides. Creating new tribes can be destructive of the existing social network and threaten to extract people from their existing circles. Missionary strategy must recognize that people are likely already grouped. They’ve been friends since elementary school, neighbors,

business partners, extended families, and people with common interests. These connections are far too valuable to lose simply to make the missionary's job easier.

Another option is to indirectly lead a tribe through "shadow-pastoring." This means positioning yourself to constantly influence by teaching individual tribe members this is what the Bible says, and then encouraging them to ask one another, "How does that look in our tribal context?" The idea is that the missionary never holds any sort of authority over the group and may never even meet with the group as a whole. Instead, he deliberately remains in the background, teaching, challenging, warning, and encouraging the group toward Christ.

### WHEN OIKOS CHURCH HAPPENS

We had been in Spain just over a year when we started studying the Bible with a small group of Spanish friends (believers and non-believers) who had invited us into their tribe. About six months later, we were meeting as a house church. I remember our first meeting as though it were yesterday. My wife and I were nervous although we had entertained these friends in our home dozens of times.

Having grown up in church, I knew how boring and irrelevant church could be. Concerned about reminding them of the negative experiences many Spaniards have in the Catholic Church, we were determined to keep things simple. I planned a short, gospel presentation and a prayer. My wife, who was only just learning to play the guitar, prepared to lead the group in a worship song or two.

Our friends arrived and for the first thirty minutes or so, everything was normal. We talked about politics, religion, current events, and sports. Then, it was time to begin our worship service. I cleared my throat and opened my Bible. The conversation stopped, the room became uncomfortably quiet.

I rushed through the sermon I'd carefully prepared and translated into Spanish. Looking back, I'm pretty sure I said, "Christ died for our fish" instead of "Christ died for our sin." Our friends respectfully listened, but we could tell that things had changed. An awkward silence resulted in an air of formality like when a friend tries to sell Amway at a party.

Then my wife and I sang. Of course, we had intended for the entire group to sing together — we'd even printed out the lyrics for everyone. But this was clearly a show we were putting on for our friends. We didn't so much sing with them as at them. My wife played clumsily (but beautifully!). I did my best to channel my inner baritone. It's hard to hide your tone-deafness when you are six people in the living room of a tiny Spanish apartment. It was excruciating.

When the last chorus had been sung, I quickly prayed. Everyone instinctively echoed my "amen," and proceeded to clap for us. They applauded like parents at an elementary school play.

Despite our best efforts to keep things simple, we'd ruined the environment of casual, yet meaningful discussion we'd always enjoyed with our friends. As informal as our "service" had been, it was still far too formal for it to make sense to the tribe. We had foisted a foreign expression of worship upon our friends, and they didn't know what to do with it.

We were faced with a decision: either continue to perform this sort of church service for the group until they learned to worship through it, or walk them through the passages of Scripture that speak about the ekklesia and let them decide how that translated into the culture of their tribe. It was about that time when we stumbled upon 1 Corinthians 14:26: "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."

This verse was very good news to our fledgling church. It meant that we could continue doing what the tribe had been doing for years — gathering regularly to encourage one another and process new information — but now with Christ as our motivation. The next time we got together for worship, everyone came prepared with something to edify the church. Some brought a verse or passage of Scripture while others brought a topic of discussion or a question for us to ponder. One made a list of things our group could pray about. A couple of the men came ready to teach, the women had picked out some songs to sing. Everyone brought something, and the result was a well-balanced time of worship in which we all participated according to our gifting.

## HOW TO IDENTIFY TRIBES

The identification of tribes among a people or city requires both observation and personal interaction. In order to organize those observations, it is helpful to use Myers' four spaces of belonging—public, social, personal, and intimate—as an organizing framework.<sup>126</sup> The less personal levels of belonging, the public and the social, are more easily identified through observation. The personal and intimate levels, however, can only be identified through interviews and conversation.

### 1. Public space tribes tend to be expressed openly

Membership to these tribes usually has a low barrier to entry, and provides only a superficial, yet important, level of social connectivity. Harley-Davidson owners may have similar experiences, but riding the same make of motorcycle doesn't mean they actually know one another.

Nevertheless, enthusiasts tend to identify themselves primarily in terms of being Harley riders.

Look for how people identify themselves as fans, supporters, or members:

- sports teams (New York Giants, Atlanta Braves, Manchester United Soccer Club)
- product users (Apple Mac Computer users, Jeep Wrangler owners, Ralph Lauren wearers)
- political parties/cause activists (Free Tibet, The Republican National Convention, Sierra Club, PETA)

Most of these affinities can be detected through observation. Further insight may be gained by asking open-ended, probing questions, “Why does this person desire to express his connection to this tribe publicly?”

## **2. Social space connections tend to have more specific meaning for a person’s tribal identity**

Members connect out of a sense of who they want to be and how they want their peers to regard them.

Watch for how individuals identify with and through:

- city/neighborhood of residence (housing addition, district, or location)
- subcultural affinity (style of dress, consumer habits, media influence)
- career path/universities attended (job titles, fields, areas of study)
- social clubs/activities (fraternities, committees, associations)

These tribal connections require some level of interpretation. For example, an individual may pay particular attention to the way she dresses in order to hide rather than reveal her membership to certain tribes. Listen for references to this level of connections mentioned in conversation.

## **3. The relationship in the personal space is the modern-day equivalent to the social tribe**

Here people process new information, develop their worldview, and seek to be community for one another.

More often than not, these groups are the primary level of social interaction over the course of the week.

- A small group of close friends (8–16 people)
- Peers at work
- Extended family
- Regular contacts through Facebook, Twitter

How do peers within the tribe respond to these individuals? Do they lead or follow? Do they influence, bringing in ideas from outside the tribe, or do they tend to defend and maintain the tribe’s status quo?

## **4. The intimate space is filled by only one or two people and can be very difficult to identify**

These “oikoses” are “households” in a stricter sense:

- spouses
- partners
- best friends

This level of belonging may have the greatest impact on a person's major life decisions. Watch for who a person goes to when faced with life-changing events and experiences. Note that the depreciation of marriage as an institution and the common practice of serial short-term romantic commitments make it more and more likely that an individual's spouse/partner does not, in fact, fill this space for an individual.

## HOW TO JOIN A TRIBE

### 1. Study the influences

Expose yourself to whatever influences the tribe. This sort of intentional, deliberate, prayerful exposure is research through immersion. Read the books, watch the films, and rely on local sources of news and information. The goal is to begin to understand why the tribe thinks like it does.

Don't go alone, and have your guard up. It would be foolish to assume that you are somehow impervious to the effects of the influences you're studying. Those things that influence the tribe are full of lies and half-truths. Beware of the harmful, and oftentimes subliminal, effects of things like music, film, and story. Nevertheless, go boldly into the tribes, as you are sent by the Most High God!

### 2. Adopt the rhythm

In order to live out the gospel in word and deed among a particular group of people, you must do all you can to live as they live. You do this by adopting their life "rhythms." Rhythms are the routines, the ebb and flow of life through the calendar year. This includes:

- Diet and mealtimes
- Sleeping schedule
- Work hours, rest hours
- Vacation
- Holidays, festivals, celebrations
- Pace of living, busyness
- Social postures, signs of respect
- Economic identification

Note that there is a clear distinction between rhythm and lifestyle. The lifestyle of non-believers is, by definition, not Christ-centered or God-honoring. To live for whatever they live for or to worship whatever they worship would be to compromise your faith. Instead, reject all ungodliness while intentionally adopting the customs of the tribe in order that tribe members might see in you an example of how their lives might look in Christ.

### 3. Learn the Narrative

By immersing yourself in the culture and rhythm of a tribe you can begin to piece together the patchwork of the tribe's narrative. Influential themes will be woven together with rites and rituals to form the overarching story that shapes the outlook of the tribe. Here, you'll find bridges and barriers to the communication of the gospel. Within the narrative, you'll see where the tribe might be seeking for reconciliation with the Creator. It is here that you can begin to understand just how the gospel is good news to this tribe.