

Evangelizing the Lakota:  
Understanding the differences  
in order to see the opportunities.



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## Evangelizing the Lakota

***After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. (Revelation 7:9)***

***He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)***

These are comforting words. For if they are true, (and by the faith I have been given through the Holy Spirit I do believe they are true) then I too must be included in ***“the every nation, tribe, people and language”*** and ***“the whole world.”*** In other words, I too have salvation through the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb. What comforting words.

But wait a minute! If I am included in these words then it must be true that you too are included in these words. And you. And you. And you. And well, the whole world! What comforting words.

But what if “you” don’t know that “you” are included in these words ***every*** and ***whole world?*** Well then these comforting words have no real comfort at all for “you”.

Therefore Paul emphasizes the necessity and urgency of proclaiming the comforting message of salvation through Christ Jesus and Him alone to every “you” in his letter to the Romans:

***How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Romans 10: 14)***

But what if “you” are different <sup>From</sup> than “me”? What if “you” are one of those “you” who come from a different “nation, tribe, people and language”? How does this difference effect the “preaching to them” that Paul talks about in Romans?

This question is the focus of this paper. The different “you” are the Lakota people of the Rosebud and Pine Ridge reservations in south-central and western South Dakota.

It must be stated that the focus of this paper is not how we can make the Word more effective among the Lakota. The Word is effective in and of itself. I don't make it effective or less effective. But it is important to consider the unique cultural differences of the Lakota in order to better apply the self-effective Word. Specifically then, this paper will look at the historical background, economics/ reservation life-style and religion of the Lakota people with a view to their effects in evangelizing the Lakota.

Information about Native American people in general and the Lakota specifically is legion. The number of books written about the "real" Indian culture by self proclaimed experts and anthropologist would take a lifetime to read. I found an article that describes the frustrations one can have in trying to find the truth about the real Indian culture:

### **A Little Story About "Your Family"**

You're standing at the crossroads waiting for a green light, when a total stranger walks up to you and begins telling you all about "Your Family." He speaks of the past and present – where "Your Family" came from, what they think, and how they worship. Curious, you listen for a while. Some of what the stranger says is accurate but, it's so mixed up with fantasy and fallacy, it's obvious the stranger doesn't know "Your Family."

He insists he is right and so, you try to correct the stranger, but the stranger knows more than you do. When you inquire where he attained his information, he proudly exclaims, "At the Library!" You become frustrated and angry with the stranger. The Librarian is called in and verifies the stranger's accurate depiction of "Your Family."

A crowd pushes in and you over hear someone exclaim, "You're angry, and 'Your Family' members never get angry. If you were really a member of 'Your Family' you would shut up and listen to the stranger!" Another voice in the crowd yells out, "He's right! I should know because, I became a member of "Your Family" two years ago after I had a dream."

A volunteer in the crowd steps forward and proclaims, "I read a novel once about 'Your Family' and found it very interesting. Now, I want to educate the rest of the world and tell everyone about "Your Family."

So, the volunteer sat down with the total stranger and the Librarian to learn all he could about "Your Family." Years later, the volunteer struts away armed with "Your Family" books, movies and novels. The volunteer is now an expert, and prepared to teach the "facts" about "Your Family."

And you? Well, you're still standing at the crossroads waiting for the green light.

Author: Unknown

Date: Unknown

Therefore, the information for this paper came mostly from individual Indian people, not outside "experts". Two of the sources are personal friends who have first hand knowledge and experience. First, there is a new friend of mine, Tony Yellow Boy, a full blood Sioux who grew up on the Rosebud by Mission, South Dakota, and the Pine Ridge by Chadron, NE. Tony is not a Christian. In fact he teaches Indian religious culture and traditions to area schools. But he has a valuable insight into the Indian way of life that no one else has.

Secondly there is my friend, Bert Hagen (Beiber) who grew up around the Standing Rock Reservation by Mobridge, South Dakota. Bert has in the past served as a teacher on the reservation in Mobridge. She is at present serving as a teacher at St. Paul Lutheran (WELS) in Tomah, WI.

These two people gave me valuable information about the Indian people because they are Indian. For instance, Tony told me one time, "Never call me a Native American, I am an Indian!"

Also, I had learned years ago (probably from the Dances with Wolves movie) Wau-she-shu is the Lakota word for white people or literally white eyes. But Bert tells me this word is not a positive word. You would never say, "This is my Wau-she-shu friend." More than likely Bert says, you would use the word in a negative way, "Those \*&\$#! Wau-she-shues!"

Another important piece of information that Bert related to me is that the Native American community in the United States is not a single monolithic block. It is made up of as many different cultures as Europe. Methodologies to reach the Native American people need to reflect this cultural diversity. In one of our long talks on evangelizing the Lakota Bert told me, "What works on the Apache reservations will not necessarily work on the Lakota reservations."

The straightforward non-politically correct manner in which these two friends told me about their family was refreshing. I will be forever grateful to them for educating and introducing me to their family, the Lakota people.

Now before we can look at the religion, economics/ reservation life-style and historical background of the Indian people it is important to state one vital truth about the Lakota. This truth can be illustrated by a common 21<sup>st</sup> century American axiom:

### TIME IS MONEY

If you were to make this statement to a traditional Lakota man and a traditional American-European man (Wau-she-shu, white eyes) they both would shake their head in agreement and walk away. But do they really agree with this statement?

The traditional American-European man would agree because "time and money" are both valuable concepts that regulate his way of life. He has been taught to make the most efficient use of his time. Why? In order that he can be in a position to make more money. Why? So that he can have more of his time to do what he wants to do with it. Time and money are things that are to be spent wisely.

To the Lakota, time and money are both worthless ideas. In the Lakota culture, keeping time (here time in the sense of hours in a day, "What time is it?") is stealing something that doesn't belong to you. Time belongs to no one. And putting a value on something based on a worthless commodity is what money is to the Lakota. Time is unimportant and money is unimportant.

So even though these two people seemed to agree, in reality there was no basis for agreement at all. In fact, they disagree completely in principle on the concept of "time is money."

This example reflects a deep-seated truth to keep in mind when looking at the cultural aspects of the Indian people. Indian people do not commonly hold to commonly held "white" values. Keeping this in mind we turn to the first important aspect of the Lakota people: Historical Background.

## **Historical background**

The terms Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota refer to dialects of the Siouxan language and also groups of people. Lakota, for example, is generally spoken in the western part of South Dakota (The Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation are an example). Nakota is spoken in the eastern part of South Dakota, Montana, and Canada. While Dakota is generally spoken in Minnesota. The original homeland during historic times for the Dakota people was in Minnesota. The dialects changed as the Dakota people moved west.

The word "Sioux" is thought by many Indian people to be a degrading term created by the Ojibway meaning "snakes". It is generally not now preferred by Indian people for that reason. However, it has so saturated the historical literature that it is still used in terms like the "Siouxan language family."

The Eastern Dakota were at first woodland people. The later plains culture resulted in part from the wars with the Ojibwas and partly from the Dakota Conflict in 1862 (the largest Indian War in American history with about 500 white casualties. The number of Dakota casualties is not known). This brought about the deportation of the Dakota from Minnesota (See information about the history of New Ulm, Minnesota for more details).

But the biggest change and influence to the history of the Indian people were the many treaties enacted upon them by the United States government. It has been estimated that about 500 treaties were entered into with the United States government by Native Americans. About 270 these were never ratified. About 230 treaties were ratified but then the edicts were broken.

To review the history of the treaties signed and broken over last century of conflict between the Indian people and the white man is generally painful for both sides. Problems that have resulted from these conflicts include but are not limited to chemical dependency, alcoholism, poverty, hopeless despair, and dysfunctional families. The result from these conflicts has been many gross misrepresentations and inaccurate stereotypes of the Indian people throughout history.

The historical background is important in the work of evangelizing the Lakota because anything that has happened between the Lakota people and the white culture over the past century directly affects the opportunities available to evangelize the Lakota today. The attitudes of the Lakota towards white people and vice-versa have been established and nurtured over these 100 years of conflict. These attitudes can be summarized in one word: distrust.

It is important to keep this distrust in mind in our efforts to evangelize the Lakota. But it is also important to keep in mind we are not here to mend the distrust that has resulted from the cultural conflicts. We are here to mend a deeper wound: sin. With this problem we do have the answer: Christ died for the Lakota people too. But before we can share this good news we need to have the opportunity.

An opportunity can only present itself from a relationship based on trust. How can trust be built between two cultures where distrust is the foundation of their relationship? Time and a caring manner.

I once asked Tony what advice he could give me in relation to talking with Indian people on the subject of their Savior. He told me, "Don't be a vacuum cleaner salesman. Don't come at them as if you have the answer to all their problems if only they would just listen to you and do what you told them to do." Tony said, "Be like a Mormon missionary. The Mormon missionaries on the reservation live on the reservation. They become part of the community, at least as much a part as a white person can. Become active in the lives of the people. Visit with them. Be concerned about issues that concern them." Tony also reinforced in me the value of learning the Lakota language. He said this would go a long way in building up trust. Even though many of the younger generation of Lakota people don't know the language very well themselves, by learning or at least trying to learn the language shows you are not just another Indian hugger (Someone concerned only about an outward appearance of care for the people).

Bert added some important comments to what Tony told me, "You have to live on the reservation. You have to have your house broken into just like everyone else. You have to shop

where they shop. You have to go to the Pow Wows, to the Rodeos, and to the basketball games. You have to go ice fishing with them. Then after a matter of years, many years you might have the opportunity to talk with someone about Christ.”

What are some practical ways to establish trust in order to proclaim Christ? Some suggestions that I have heard include a free bus service to area towns on distribution day (I have seen Indian people walk miles to town just to get groceries only to have to walk miles back. The “rule “ around the reservation is if you pick up someone walking to town you get half of their commodities [government food distributions]) and after school/ weekend activities center for the young kids (which would include some type of nutritional snack because many Indian kids get their only meals from school and then are left without on the weekends).

In short, trust can only be built by being there. I have a quote hanging above my desk that I read at least once everyday. I’m not sure who said it first but it summarizes how trust and then opportunity can be established.

If the pastor is to lead people to God he must live among them in every sense of the word. He must seek them out where they really live, inwardly and outwardly, as one who is himself at home where they live. It is a dreadful thing, a thing that accuses us in the sight of God, if people no longer come to the minister with their conflicts and their burdens because they can rightfully say: he doesn’t understand us anyhow.

Have mistakes been made in trying to reach the Lakota with the message of Christ? Of Course. My Dad told me once that unless you make some mistakes you’re not trying hard enough. The point then is not to keep on making the same mistakes. This is the value at looking at the historical background of the Lakota people.

### **Religion**

The reservation is a very spiritual place. In general terms Lakota spirituality/ religion centers around certain customs and beliefs, concepts, events, and objects. These include the sweat lodge, pipe, drums, singing, the naming ceremony, prayer, vision questing and guardian spirits, the ceremonial Pow Wow (such as the Sun Dance), the medicine man or woman



(shamans), medicine bags, dream articles and traditional stories regarding the Great Spirit. Ritual and spiritual objects include sage, sweet grass, tobacco, and cedar.

I have included a videotaped interview with Tony Yellow Boy along with this paper in which Tony describes in more detail some of the aspects of the traditional Indian religion. One point that Tony was very adamant about making was that the Indian religion is a way of life. It is not something that you do on Sunday morning. It guides your whole life-style. Indirectly Tony reveals his feelings about Christianity by making his comment. He sees a Christian as someone who goes to church but doesn't live his faith. Unfortunately his notion rings true very often.

The religion of the traditional Lakota person falls into the category of humanistic/pagan work-righteousness. You have completed your life circle if you have been true to your life vision. In other words if you have been a good Indian. The basis for this religion is no different than any man-made religion: confidence in self.

#### **Economics/ reservation life**

I asked Bert about the economic situation on the different Sioux Reservations. She answered by sending an article from a magazine called *National Review* (December 31, 2002). John J. Miller who advances the idea that it is time to close the Indian reservations writes the article. Many Indian people probably would not agree with the intent of the article but the article does an excellent job in giving the characteristics of the problems of the economy of the Sioux people. Following are some excerpts from the article.

"If you want to start a business on the reservation, here's what you have to do," says Mark St. Pierre, executive director of the Pine Ridge Chamber of Commerce, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. "First you have to go to the tribal government to see if there's an appropriate piece of land for you. Nothings been set aside for business development, so this is harder than it sounds. If you do identify a piece of land, you apply for a five-year lease, which won't help you with the banks because they prefer 25-year leases. Next, your application goes before the tribal land committee, which often doesn't have a single businessperson on it. This part can get very political, and it matters who's in your family. If the committee approves your application, then it must go before the Bureau of Indian Affairs. This is usually a rubber stamp, expect that it can take months or more than a year before you actually receive it. If the BIA signs off, you're finally done. And what does it give you? A short-term lease on a bare piece of prairie."

What is most interesting about the economic problems on the reservation is the amount of jealousy and in fighting that goes on between the clans. The clans are set up based on family lines. If you want something done on the reservation you need to be related in some way to the clan who is in power at the time. These power struggles change every time a new council is elected (every two years). In the end there is no continuity or opportunity for growth. John Miller relates the results in his article:

The rez itself is a grab bag of mortifying statistics. In the 1990s, the poorest county in America, as determined by the Census Bureau, was wholly contained within its boundaries. Unemployment is currently at 88 percent. About one-third of its households don't have electricity or indoor plumbing. The place is supposedly dry – it's against tribal law even to possess a can of Budweiser – but alcoholism is rampant. The town of Whiteclay, just across the border in Nebraska, isn't really a town at all; it's a glorified liquor stand catering to carloads of thirsty Indians. Traffic accidents are a leading cause of death at Pine Ridge, because of all the drunk driving. The typical Lakota male can expect to live a few months shy of his 57<sup>th</sup> birthday; women get about a decade longer. In the Western Hemisphere, only Haitians fare worse.

What may be most depressing about Pine Ridge, however, is that it's not unique in Indian country. It's the second-biggest reservation in the nation, and many of its problems afflict other tribes as well. To be sure, a handful of reservations seem to succeed, even among those that don't cash in on lucrative casino operations (and most don't). On the whole, however, reservations are rural slums – demographic disaster areas in which the economy shows few signs of life. Through a suffocating combination of government meddling, political incompetence, and cultural suspicion, they have let down the very people they're supposed to serve.

Bert was quick to point out to me that it's too easy for the Indian people to blame all their problems on the white man. Miller makes a point of this in his article.

Some Indians actually believe that they aren't *supposed* to get businesses going at all. "There's a persistent question about whether it's culturally appropriate to start a business, and lots of people ask, 'Isn't that a white-man thing?'" says Monica Drapeaux of the Lakota Fund, a non-profit lender in Kyle, S.D. This resonates with the popular myth – peddled by academics, Hollywood, and many tribal activists – that traditional Indian societies aren't compatible with capitalism. The free market, in this view, is a Western imposition upon the collective, sharing folkways of indigenous North Americans.

This is utter nonsense. While it may be true that Indians did not develop an intricate set of rules governing property rights, they engaged in plenty of commerce, even before the coming of the white man. Ancient archeological sites have borne proof of extensive trading networks that spanned the continent. Meriwether Lewis – of Lewis & Clark fame – described the Chinook as "great hagglers in trade." The fur trading empires of John Jacob Astor and the Hudson Bay Company would not have been possible without substantial Indian participation.

What the Lakota must overcome now, however, is a culture that doesn't know work. "Kids grow up round here not even thinking about where they'll start their first job – their

parents and grandparents haven't held regular jobs and it doesn't even occur to them they should think about it," says Drapeaux. The most basic elements of employment – showing up on time, dressing appropriately, scheduling time off in advance – are alien concepts to many Lakota, simply because job scarcity has left huge numbers of them inexperienced at something other South Dakotans, with their 4 percent unemployment rate, take for granted. Chronic alcoholism compounds the problem. "If somebody came here and wanted to open a factory with 50 workers, we wouldn't be able to supply enough people," says Elsie Meeks, a Lakota who lives in Pine Ridge and specializes in reservation development nationwide.

Miller only hits some of the socio-economic difficulties found on the reservation. Others include rampant AIDS, incest, child abuse and abandonment, increasing gang activity, drugs, the occult and strong prejudice on both sides.

### Conclusion

Are the challenges in evangelizing the Lakota complex and seemingly overwhelming? Yes! Is it much more comfortable to reach out to people who are more like us in the suburbs of metropolis America? Yes! Do the Indian people receive the same amount of focus as other minority cultures? No! So what are we to do with the Lakota? I'm reminded of the calling of the disciple Matthew.

***As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup> While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup> When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" <sup>12</sup> On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. <sup>13</sup> But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (Matthew 9:9-13)***

I cannot imagine a people more in need of the Gospel message than the Lakota.

Some people increase the complexity of the problems by asking: how can we culturalize the Gospel message and yet not subordinate it to the culture?

One wrong opinion is that the Gospel seems to condemn anything but Western (white) culture. This is just not true. The Gospel came into the Western culture and changed it too. Proof of this is that the Western culture of today still fights against the pure Gospel message by trying to Americanize it. One only has to review the history of Christianity in America and see

the examples of the conflicts the Gospel brought to Western culture. Events such as the Great Awakenings, the many different revivals and the emergence of people like Joseph Smith, Ann Hutchinson, Aimee Semple McPherson show this conflict.

The other wrong opinion is that we need to harmonize the Gospel to the people of different cultures. You can see this on the reservation. Every different denomination (most of them with a dance ring erected behind the building) is present in one form or another on the reservation. These different denominations show the perfect definition of syncretism. The result of this mixing of biblical principles and Indian cultural traditions is a hollow Gospel message that only makes the Indian people more confused.

The correct answer is that every human culture has been and is changed by the Gospel. Change is the nature of the Gospel isn't it?

The one thing that must not change however is the Word. The answer to the complex problems on the reservations is simple: **We need to get more of the Word to more of the people more of the time.** Only the Word has the power to overcome all the differences, all the complex human barriers and all the hurdles that Satan puts in the way.

So in the end keeping the differences of the Lakota people in mind is important. It's important in finding opportunities. But most important to keep in mind is that only through the Word can the "you", that is the Lakota people, hear the comforting words that they are included in ***"the every nation, tribe, people and language"*** and ***"the whole world."***

**I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. (Romans 1:16)**

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Economics and reservation lifestyle information:

Article by John J. Miller from the National Review (December 31, 2002)

[www.nationalreview.com](http://www.nationalreview.com)

## **The WELS through the Generations among the Lakota of the Standing Rock Reservation**

Through this project I hope to gain a better understanding of the influence of the WELS among the Lakota people here at the Standing Rock Reservation by Mobridge, S. D. I chose people from three different religious backgrounds to help me see the "history" of the WELS among the Lakota of the Standing Rock Reservation. These people are:

- Tony Yellow Boy – Tony offers the traditional view of not only the Lakota religion but also the "white-man" religion of his generation. Tony was one of the last children of the BIA forced boarding schools.
- Irene – Irene presents the perspective of someone who was Indian but had no understanding of her culture (Like many of her generation). She also tells about the value of being WELS and the value for her children.
- Bert – Bert is Irene's daughter and is the cousin of Tony's wife. Bert really brings it all together. She tells what it means to be both WELS and Indian. Her generation is the one who are trying to rediscover their Indian roots.

The summary of this project is my Evangelism paper. I have included this paper in this project pact.

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