"The Cowards Never Started / The Weak Died on the Way / Only the Strong Arrived / They Were the Pioneers"

This is a quote from a Nebraska memorial to those who travelled in the wagon trains along the Oregon and California trails to settle the west.

Yes, there's a part of the human spirit that likes to play it safe, that likes the status quo. But there's also that indomitable piece of the human spirit that longs for adventure, to explore, to see what's around the next turn or over the next rise. That's what those pioneers on those wagon trains exemplified.

There was an old Western TV show in the late 50's and early 60's, called Wagon Train. Each episode would focus on a different location or different people inside or outside a Wagon Train as it made its way west. And when Gene Rodenberry was trying to pitch his new science fiction TV show, Star Trek, he famously described it as "Wagon Train to the stars."

In 1966, as human beings were just beginning to make our first steps into space, the narration would come on the TV set: "Space, the final frontier..." and over that narration, you would see a starship, the Enterprise. And her mission was clear: "To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before." Star Trek, it seems was about that same old impulse to go out and discover what was over the horizon, or what was in the next solar system.

After 2 years the show was canceled. The fans petitioned to have it put back on the air, though the 3rd season was at a different time and did not have much to do with Gene Rodenberry. And then it was finally canceled. And yet, the show's fan base grew after it's cancelation, it grew in syndication. And now Star Trek has spawned 12 feature films and 4 other television series. Why?

Well, it turns out Gene Rodenberry had some hidden agendas. They were elements that made Star Trek more than just about exploration, more than just Wagon Train to the stars. I'd like to talk about several of these themes this morning, and make connections between them and the Christian Gospel.

Theme #1. THE PRIME DIRECTIVE. This is a bedrock law in the Federation of Planets. It says that no one is allowed to interfere with the cultural development of a more primitive culture. The stronger culture will not be able to prey on the weaker culture. There'll be no cultural imperialism.

Concern for the weak is certainly Biblical. Throughout both Testaments are myriad commands to protect the weakest and most defenseless in society--the widows and the orphans. The second prophet Isaiah prophesies about the coming Messiah that he will be strong, but the weak will be safe in his presence: "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he

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1 From an Oregon Trail memorial arch, Kearney, NE
will not quench.”² And St. Paul speaks of the need for those who are strong in their faith not to cause their weaker brothers and sisters to stumble.³

The Prime Directive embodies such values in the Star Trek universe.

Theme #2. ONE PLANET, ONE PEOPLE. Star Trek featured a crew from many nations and from 4 continents. Okay, the cast was all American or Canadian. But their characters were multi-national.

This was extremely intentional. Rodenberry wanted to portray a future where people were proud of their ethnic heritages, but were still one people. The implicit message is that earth has grown past tribes and nations. By the 23rd century. Humanity has learned to live together in peace.

This is a very biblical vision as well. The prophet Isaiah says, "In days to come the mountain of the LORD’S house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."⁴

And in the book of Revelation when John sees the vision of the redeemed, he says, "There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."⁵

In Star Trek, the Earth is one planet, humanity is one people, who have learned through bitter experience to live united together in peace and harmony. And there are 2 other themes that stem from this theme.

Theme #3. RACE. Star Trek portrays one planet one people in the 23rd century. But it was filmed in the late 1960's. The Civil Rights struggle was still going on. And Gene Rodenberry very intentionally placed a black woman on the bridge as the communications officer. The presence of Lt. Uhura as one of the main characters meant that several network affiliates in the deep south would refuse to carry the show. But Rodenberry was refused to change the cast.

Uhura's importance shouldn't be overlooked.

African-American comedian and actress Whoopi Goldberg speaks of her reaction as a child when she first saw Lt. Uhura on TV. She shouted out, "Come here, mum, everybody, come quick, come quick, there's a black lady on television and she ain't no maid!"⁶

² Isaiah 42:7  
³ 1Corinthians 8:9 and following  
⁴ Isaiah 2:2, 4  
⁵ Revelation 7:9  
⁶ BBC Online (http://www.bbc.co.uk/cult/st/interviews/nichols/page4.shtml)
Nichelle Nichols, the actress who portrayed Uhura, was actually unaware that she had this kind of impact. After the first season she told Rodenberry she was leaving the show, wanting to give up acting to go back to her first love, which was singing.

That weekend she was asked if she had a few minutes to meet her biggest fan. She walked into the room and was face to face with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was full of praise for her and for her role. Nichols thanked King, but told him she was leaving the show. She said his face got very serious. In her words,

"He (started) telling me why I could not (resign). He said I had the first non-stereotypical role, I had a role with honor, dignity and intelligence. He said, 'You simply cannot abdicate, this is an important role. This is why we are marching. We never thought we'd see this on TV.'"

Nichols was at a loss for words. It was the first time the importance of being an African-American woman on television had occurred to her. She returned to Star Trek creator Gene Rodenberry the next Monday morning and rescinded her resignation.

(She said,) "He sat there and looked at me and said, 'God bless Dr. Martin Luther King. Somebody does understand me.'"7

Most 1960's TV shows would be unable to deal with racial issues. But since Star Trek was set in the 23rd century, they had more freedom to do so. Science fiction often deals with contemporary problems while placing them in futuristic settings.

Sadly, our society and our church have had to struggle with racial issues. But we are making progress. We're coming closer to living according to St. Paul's reminder, "There is no longer Jew or Greek... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."8

Theme #4. THE COLD WAR. Just as the inner circle of officers included an African woman, in the second season a young Russian was introduced as the ship's navigator: Ensign Chekov. Again, this was the 1960's, at the height of the Cold War. This is yet another sign that the people of the Earth had gotten past their former differences.

But the Cold War dynamic was just too juicy to ignore completely, and so new enemies were invented--warlike alien races--the Klingons, and the Romulans. This gave Star Trek numerous opportunities to deal with 1960s geopolitical themes in disguise.

Later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the End of the Cold War makes its way into the Star Trek universe. In the 6th movie, in there is eventual peace between the Klingons and the Federation. And in the second series, The Next Generation, there's even a Klingon officer amongst the inner circle of the new Enterprise's crew. Apparently peace is possible even bewtween the worst of our enemies. Which brings us to...

8 Galatians 3:28
Theme #5. HOPE THE FUTURE. In the 1950s, Science Fiction films were often pessimistic about the future. And they still are. Think of the movies that have been released since the original Star Trek series. Post-apocalyptic worlds are commonplace—Mad Max and The Road Warrior, Soylent Green, The Terminator, the various incarnations of The Planet of the Apes, Blade Runner, Maze Runner, The Hunger Games, Divergent, and every Zombie movie out there. Utopian worlds are rare, Dystopian worlds are plentiful.

And yet, the world of Star Trek is consistently hopeful. It's not utopian, everything is not perfect. But things are better than they have been. And there's an expectation that they will be even better in the future. And I believe that this is the chief reason for Star Trek's continuing popularity after 48 years. It offers a rare commodity, a vision of hope.

We offer that same commodity: hope. Christian hope—one of the great 3 theological virtues: faith, hope, and love. It's not a hope that comes just from us. It is a hope because of what God has done for us.

Human beings are paradoxical creature. We are animals. And yet we have a spiritual side. We are formed of the dust of the earth. And yet we are carriers of God's Holy Spirit. We are fallen, and yet redeemed. So we have to be careful.

At times, it seems the entire world is sliding downhill into some abyss. At such times it is easy to get pessimistic. And there's much in our human nature that makes a strong case for pessimism.

And yet, we are God's creations. We are created in God's image. And we live in God's world. And God is not the god of entropy and decay and death. God is the God of new possibilities, new life, new hope.

Can we fix everything and make the world perfect? No, I don't believe we can.

Can we choose to be barbarians, can we choose to make this world a darker and more vicious place? Yes we certainly can, and we see much of that in the news and in our history.

Yet, we can also choose to live into our identity as God's people. We can make the choice to walk in his ways, caring for the weak, loving all of his children. Every day, we have that choice.

Will our actions bring about a perfect, utopian society? I doubt it. Can we make things just a little better? Yes, I believe we can. And ultimately, we can trust the living God, who promises to bring all things to perfection.

We can live in hope for the future, because of those promises.
We can trust in the living God.
We can pray for God's kingdom to come, on earth as it is in heaven.

And we can boldly go where we haven't gone before.