

Cross Current



Real help for real life

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DESIGNS ON GREATNESS

Harley Earl had a unique quality you might call carisma.

For 31 years, he was in charge of new product development at General Motors where he led a team of stylists and designers who revolutionized the industry.

After all, until Earl came along cars were built by engineers with no knack for clean lines and eye-catching designs. But when GM Chairman Alfred Sloan hired Earl to give the corporation fresh vision, the California native steered things in a bold, untested direction.

First he added a whole new division called Styling. The studio he established ensured that — for the first time — a car's appearance was just as important as how well it ran. Then he pioneered the use of clay to turn two-dimensional drawings into miniature, three-dimensional models of his ideas. Those clay models simplified and sped up the design process by letting designers visualize shapes and styles that were too costly and time-consuming to make out of steel.

That allowed the stylists to come up with “dream cars” or “concept cars”. These were stunning, futuristic vehicles built only for auto shows, to capture the public's interest and imagination. Most of the concept cars introduced bold changes and reflected visionary thinking.

Among the first new flourishes was the wraparound windshield. Making its debut on a 1951 concept car, the glass curved dramatically at the ends to meet the windshield posts, giving the car a futuristic look and a big-picture view. By 1953, the wraparound windshield was a major fad of the 1950s.

Though some of Harley Earl's innovations were more flash than substance — things like tailfins and an obsession with chrome — he



In the economy, what is lost is lost.
In the Christ, what is lost can still be saved.

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did revolutionize some of the most important aspects of automotive design. Unlike earlier cars, which were just a jumble of different parts, Earl saw each vehicle as a cohesive whole. He came up with an integrated body and individual parts that harmonized with the overall design of the car so everything fit together perfectly.

And Earl, along with his boss, Alfred Sloan, ensured GM would have a suitable product for every consumer while offering a progression of cars with higher prices and more quality and sophistication: Chevrolets, then Pontiacs, then Oldsmobiles, then Buicks and, finally, Cadillacs.

Though it may seem odd, the church can learn from Harley Earl. First, style matters. It can't be a substitute for sound doctrine and the fundamental mechanics of faith, but there's plenty of room among believers for different styles of worship and work..

Each church has a distinctive design, character and culture, whether it's traditional or contemporary; buttoned up or dressed down; local in scope or a worldwide focus. In John 13:34,35, Jesus commands his followers to love each other. He says the world will know they're his disciples, not by the kind of songs they sing, the Bible translation they use, or the amount of ritual in their worship, but by their love.

But without compromising the Messiah or his message, we must be modern, relevant and connected. We need a wraparound vision that helps us deal with real issues and offers a true alternative to the peer pressure that's so prevalent.

And we need to remember that we are the clay models and concept cars of Christianity — a mere glimpse of the future; what we can become with the strength and creativity of God active in our lives. The way our faith works must capture people's interest and imagination, and we need to model the bold changes and out-of-the-box thinking that comes from a genuine relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Some of the new stylistic changes in the church today will fade like other fads. But, above all else, we must have an integrated Body where we see ourselves as one and all the parts fit harmoniously into the whole; where we have something to offer everyone, no matter where they are, while laying out the prospect of a deepening faith that requires a higher cost but is well worth the price. After all, love, stability and fulfillment never go out of style.