A Cultural Shift

I'll never forget it as long as I live. I packed up her new pink backpack, tied her shoes, and strapped her into the car seat to take her to school. It was the first day of kindergarten and Hailey, my oldest daughter, was ready to go. I, on the other hand, was a total mess.

As we paraded to school in a long line of cars, I thought about all the things I should've taught her before kindergarten, things like what to do if some boy tries to kiss her at recess or how to pay the lunch lady for milk. When my wife and I escorted Hailey into the classroom, a realization reverberated in my head like a sounding gong. It was so loud I covered my ears: *I have just sent my baby into the world to learn to be like the world.*

In one split second I thought of all the influences that entered my daughter's life in that moment. There was her teacher, someone I didn't know, who would guide her learning every day. Then there were 22 classmates who would be with Hailey eight hours a day. With them came religions, morals, ethics, and values consistent with their families and their cultures. In that one classroom, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, atheism, and secular humanism were present and accounted for and valued more highly than Christianity. My

prayer life deepened dramatically that day as a dad trying to raise a Christ-follower in a world full of lies.

Meet Me at Starbucks

If you and I were to sit down for a cup of coffee and engage in the kind of conversation that goes beyond small talk to what matters, you would find a level of sadness in my heart. Not hopelessness or the absence of joy, but a real sadness for the cause of Christ in Western civilization and a strong belief that we would do well as church leaders to discern the direction of the culture and anticipate its future ramifications.

King David recognized the necessity of understanding the times to plot a strategic course. As David built an army to represent his newly established kingdom, he added to the army "men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do" (1 Chronicles 12:32, NIV). These men helped David establish a culture in Israel that honored God. We too can become men and women who understand the times and know what the church should do to establish a culture that honors God. What is the truth about our times?

Families—The United States has the highest divorce rate among Western countries.[1] Although this rate has remained stable for the last decade, the marriage rate continues to fall.[2] According to the U.S. Census Bureau, of the 73.7 million children younger than 18 in the United States, 67.8 percent live with married parents, 2.9 percent live with two unmarried parents, 25.8 percent live with one parent, and 3.5 percent live with no parent present.[3]

Violence—The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports that an estimated 905,000 children were victims of abuse and maltreatment in 2006.[4] An estimated 1,530 child fatalities resulting from abuse or neglect occurred that year.[5] By the time the average child graduates from elementary school, he or she will have watched more than 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 other violent acts on television (the numbers are even higher when homes have cable television).[6]

Teenage Turmoil—Every year in the U.S. almost 750,000 young women ages 15 to 19 get pregnant—an estimated one-third of these pregnancies end in abortion.[7] A 2005 survey of high school students found that 10.8 percent

of girls and 4.2 percent of boys, grades 9 to 12, were forced to have sexual intercourse at some time in their lives.[8] In 2004 teen suicides increased at the highest rate in 15 years.[9] By the time teenagers are high school seniors, 38 percent of them have experimented with illegal drugs.[10]

These cold, hard facts reveal the terrifying destruction of the biblical family model in our culture. Why has this moral decline taken place? At its most foundational point, the answer lurks in the belief that everyone has the right to define truth for her- or himself, negating any moral absolute. People make decisions in the moment based on how they feel, not on a standard of truth greater than themselves. The value of individual rights in the family now outweighs the authority God gives to parents. Our culture pays a high price because of this worldview. Children expect the freedom to set their personal boundaries as teenagers, and parents feel as if they have no right to discipline their children. Often, fathers view their lives as their own, not calculating the domino effect of poor choices on their wives and children. Although the culture and the religious community talk about a pro-family and youth-loving society, practices often don't support these claims. Most of the structures of daily life actually pull families apart.

This worldview directly opposes the biblical mandate of the church and Christian life. As a result, the church faces the enormous task of teaching Christ-followers to embrace a relational worldview and leave behind the ingrained individualistic worldview. The difficulty of this task and the current failure of the church in accomplishing this work present a bleak cultural status quo. The tragedy, unless something changes, is that today's children will live a warped, individualistic, self-serving form of Christianity. They'll make decisions based on feelings rather than truth. They'll embrace all philosophies and religions as equally true. They'll teach their children to do the same. And eventually, as life goes by, the influence of Christianity in our culture will grow dim and silent.

What Would It Be Like?

What would it be like? is a question I often ask myself. Not, what would it be like to be a millionaire or a pro athlete? Not, what would it be like to have a perfect life, a perfect job, or a perfect family? My question is more contemplative and calculated than those.

In my mind the over-arching question is "What would it be like if the church of Jesus Christ actually influenced the culture in a biblical way?" Thinking about potential answers to this question yields literally dozens of other questions. What would be different? Would there be less crime and more community? Would there be less divorce and more commitment? Would the moral standard continue to slip, or would it turn in a different direction?

Two questions, though, constantly bang on the doorway of my mind. If the church impacted the culture biblically, would the family be disintegrating? If the church equipped the family spiritually, would the next generation become the greatest generation of Christ-followers ever?

Maybe you are a church planter, a pastor, a children's pastor, a youth pastor, or a discipleship specialist. Maybe you teach third-grade Sunday school, giving hours to help the next generation learn to follow Jesus. Maybe you are on top of the mountain, ready to conquer the world spiritually. Maybe you are in the desert, defeated by the status quo. Maybe you are like me: full of questions.

Are you weary of having the greatest programs in the world while the people and the families around you self-destruct? Maybe you're concerned about the next generation, struggling tirelessly to keep them on the straight and narrow. You wonder how the prevailing culture and the truth of the Bible can actually coexist. I think it's time for a shift.

The great hope for our culture and the families and people living in it is, of course, Jesus Christ. As pastors, ministers, and Christian leaders, we believe this at our core. Sadly, though, we've forgotten one thing. Jesus never said, "Bring your kids to the church so the professionals can lead them spiritually." Rather, the plan from the beginning has been for the church and family to work together for the spiritual formation of the next generation. This book offers a strategy to make the shift that will equip the generations to follow Jesus. Innovative? No way. It's a timeless biblical strategy, revisited because the status quo is unacceptable. What would it be like if every Christian church intentionally and effectively equipped the generations…one home at a time? It would be an undeniable legacy causing a massive cultural shift from the tolerant, humanistic, godless, and compartmentalized present to a radically different, God-honoring future. I think we can do it—but we better do it now.

"He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so the next generation would know

them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children. Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands" (Psalm 78:5-7, NIV).

NOTES

1. Andrew J. Cherlin "American Marriage in the Early Twenty-First Century;" Marriage and Child Well-being, Vol. 15, No. 2, Fall 2005.

2. "Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths;" National Vital Statistics Reports, Volume 56, No. 12; National Center for Health Statistics, June 2007.

3. "Families and Living Arrangements: 2007;" 2007 Current Population Survey; U. S. Census Bureau.

4. "Child Maltreatment 2006"; Chapter 3: Children; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

5. "Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities"; Child Welfare Information Gateway; The National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System.

6. Bushman, B.J. & Huesmann, L.R., "Effects of Televised Violence on Aggression" in Handbook of Children and the Media; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001.

7. "U.S. Teenage Pregnancy Statistics"; Guttmacher Institute; updated 2006.

8. "Sexual Violence"; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Spring 2008.

9. "Suicide Trends Among Youth and Young Adults Aged 10-24 Years"; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2007.

10. "Trends in the Prevalence of Marijuana, Cocaine, and Other Illegal Drug Use"; Youth Risk Behavior Survey; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2007.