

Cracked Culture

The Reshaping of America's Youth

Phil Johnson

Albert Hofmann died in April of this year. He was 102 years old. He was also the inventor and first user of LSD—a drug that impacted the culture of the 1960s, informed the music of the Beatles, and was part of a cultural revolution that echoes on into today (Greenfield, 2008).

The idea that American culture has been transformed is not new. The 1960s were rough, but they are not totally to blame. The 1947 landmark case *Everson v. Board of Education* did not help when it reinterpreted the First Amendment and began a trend of removing Christianity and its values from public sight. And if you factor in the interruption of several wars, the efforts of educational reformers desiring to use public schools for social change, and the invention of television, you have all the ingredients that you need for social upheaval. Recognizing that American culture has changed is not too difficult. Understanding the causes of that transformation and how it continues to impact the thinking and worldview of young people today is what is crucial for educators. This is especially true for educators who are interested in affecting the thinking of students and reversing cultural trends.

Postcards of the Soul

Frank Warren is the author of a series of books entitled *Post Secrets*. I came across these books several years ago and found them alternately fascinating and horrifying as they offered a glimpse into the confusion and lostness that has come to characterize many young people. In an interesting sociological experiment, Warren sent out thousands of blank postcards to people at random. All he asked was that they write their secrets on these cards and mail them back to his post office box in Germantown, Maryland. And they did, by the tens of thousands. His publishing project provided a glimpse inside the hearts, minds, fears, and secrets of young and old alike, drawing back the curtain on our culture. Some of the submissions included statements like, “Finding God is proving difficult,” or “Sometimes I wish I didn’t believe so that I could stop feeling like I’m disappointing Him,” or “I’m having a hard time coming to terms with my mediocrity.” More graphic confessions included admissions of mistakes, unacceptable lifestyles, a desire for revenge, longing for redemption, desperation for acceptance, and confusion over truth (Warren, 2005). In all, these published postcards reveal that in our culture, people who seem to be living one life are in actuality living another; and that cheating, fear, regrets, secrets, and duplicity are a regular part of many American lives.

At the very least these admissions provide an interesting snapshot of our ever-changing culture. At most, they reveal a culture in crisis and the need for influencers and educators to remove their heads from the sand and recognize that there is a lot more going on behind the eyes of their students than many of us realize. It also reveals the continued shift in cultural values and worldviews that impact young people. And while people from all generations have always been in need of healing and the saving power of Christ, things seem to be changing at a rapidity never seen before. However, this should not surprise us as Scripture indicates that in the last days, apostasy will enter our world and especially the church like never before (1 Tim. 4:1-2; 2 Tim. 4:3-4).

Charting the Changes

For more than 20 years, George Barna has been following the shifting beliefs and changing values of Christians in America. Barna’s national surveys track key aspects of people’s worldviews. A worldview is a system for viewing and understanding reality, and everyone has one whether one realizes it or not. A worldview is how you view life based upon your beliefs. These beliefs, in turn, dictate your choices, your actions, and how you live.

Barna’s findings are always interesting and sometimes disturbing. Through the course of his polling and research, he has discovered some interesting developments in what today’s born-again Christians actually believe. According to Barna (2005), here is what 21st century Christians believe:

Regarding Making Moral Choices

- Twenty-five percent make moral and ethical choices on the basis of the Bible.
- Twenty percent base their choices on whatever feels right.
- Fewer than ten percent rely on what their parents taught in terms of values and principles.
- Ten percent do whatever minimizes conflict.
- Bottom line: Three out of four born-again Christians overlook the Bible as their worldview-shaping influence.

Regarding Absolute Moral Truth

Since it appears that only one in four born-again Christians look to God’s Word when making moral decisions, Barna thought it would be interesting to analyze the 25 percent who do consult Scripture and to investigate how they view absolute moral truth. To measure that, The Barna Group asked people if they believed moral truth is relative to various situations or if truth is absolute and unchanging—unaffected by culture, time, or circumstances. Here’s what was found:

- Only half of this remaining 25 percent believe that all moral truth is absolute.
- The rest either believe that moral decisions must be made on the basis of the individual’s perceptions and the specific situation, or they have not really thought about whether truth is relative or absolute.
- Bottom Line: Only 14 percent of born-again adults (one out of every seven born-again adults) rely on the Bible as their moral compass and believe that moral truth is absolute.

Regarding a “Complete” Biblical Worldview

Barna defines a biblical worldview—at the very least—as possessing a proper understanding of the following: the belief that moral decisions are based on God’s Word; that moral truth is absolute; that God rules the universe; that Satan is real; that Jesus lived a sinless life; that a person cannot earn his salvation through works, but that salvation is a free gift; that Christians have a responsibility to share their faith; and that the Bible is accurate in all its teachings. When put to the test, those who identify themselves as born-again Christians revealed the following:

- Only nine percent of born-again adults have a biblical worldview. This means 91 percent do not.
- Only two percent of born-again teenagers have a biblical worldview; 98 percent do not.

Is it any wonder that the lifestyle and choices of so many people who identify themselves as born-again Christians—especially this current generation of young people—live and behave no differently than unbelievers? While trusting Christ as one’s Savior is the most important decision a person can make, it would seem that without adopting a biblical worldview—a context in which to make biblically based choices—one’s lifestyle and behaviors are not radically affected. It is difficult to live a life where you think like Jesus if you do not know what Jesus says to do. It is really difficult to make biblical decisions if you no longer believe that biblical truth is absolute.

Cultural Forces at Work

So, how did we get here? What has happened in our culture to create the toxic environment that has eroded the values of our country and robbed our young Christian people of their biblical worldviews? I believe that there have been cultural forces at work for decades that have impacted American culture, some of which have already been referred to in this article. But I also believe that there are a number of current issues that are altering today’s youth in new and profound ways. Let us take a look at four specific cultural forces working against today’s youth.

1. The Mainstreaming of Evil

The first of these current issues involves the mainstreaming of evil. How does a nation that is founded on biblical principles and that still possesses a population where the majority are self-identified “Christians” become a culture that is so far removed from its historical past and its values? In his book, *The Marketing of Evil* (2005), David Kupelian asks, “How does crushing a baby’s skull and sucking out his brains become a ‘constitutional right’? How does quoting the Bible become ‘hate speech’?” How is it that evil in our culture has been made to appear acceptable, and all that is good is made to seem wrong? Is there some force behind all of this? Is the current state of

values simply what happens to any group of Christians over time when living in a free society? Or is there more going on? Scripture tells us that Satan is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he can devour (1 Pet. 5:8). With that in mind, it should not surprise us that Satan has a very specific strategy to capture the hearts and minds of a generation.

Kupelian (2005) makes the case that issues such as abortion and gay rights were not the results of neglected groups of people rising up spontaneously and yearning for freedom of their beliefs and choices. Rather, he claims that America was actually “sold on abortion due to a calculated and deceptive public relations plan.” He also believes that the efforts to mainstream gay lifestyles are similarly marketed to America with an ingenious and calculated strategy that has been playing out perfectly through the American media.

Kupelian (2005) also states that “. . . giant corporations voraciously competing for America’s \$150 billion teen market routinely infiltrate young people’s social groups with undercover ‘culture spies’ to find out how better to lead children into ever more debauched forms of “authentic self-expression.” The opening statement in PBS’s stunning 2001 Frontline documentary, “The Merchants of Cool,” provides a portrait of how major corporations—Viacom, Disney, AOL/Time Warner, and others—study American’s children like laboratory rats in order to sell them billions of dollars in merchandise by tempting, degrading, and corrupting them. Rushkoff, the narrator of the documentary, asserts that these big corporations literally send “spies to infiltrate young people’s social settings to gather intelligence on what they can induce these children to buy next.” Those who market evil have very specific strategies. They know exactly how to introduce new trends, lifestyles, attitudes, worldviews, entertainment, and products to vulnerable young people who have been duped into thinking that they are making their own choices and exercising their individual freedoms. In truth, they are exerting less independence than they could possibly imagine (Kupelian, 2005).

2. Biblical Illiteracy

In order for this marketing strategy to work effectively for Christian young people, it requires that the foundation of one’s beliefs become weakened. Therefore, we must give some attention to what has been going on in American church culture over the last few decades. In the past 25 to 30 years, the church growth movement and seeker-sensitive church movement have created a church culture that has provided lots of entertainment, lots of inspiration, lots of acceptance, but little in the way of deeper Bible teaching. I realize that most churches that are more focused on corporate evangelism and outreach also offer small group Bible studies and opportunities to experience God more deeply. But in a world where families are busier than ever, it seems that few have time for these other options and are left with Sunday mornings as their worship and spiritual-growth opportunities. The end result has been the creation of a generation of biblically illiterate young people. You do not have to actively teach non-biblical standards to erode the values of young people; you simply need to omit the teaching of any biblical truth. Our culture will take care of the dirty work. Statistically, young Christians in America know less of God’s Word and yet feel more accepted by God than previous generations (Barna, 2006). If young people do not know God’s Word, then it stands to reason that when it comes to making life decisions, they will not be able to make wise choices that will reinforce where sanctification wants to take them.

3. A Sense of Entitlement

Evil has been marketed to our young people. In addition, the church, in a cultural sense, has provided the environment for biblical illiteracy to flourish. Is it any wonder that our young people feel more entitled than ever before? Young people have little trouble believing that God accepts them on their terms because everyone else in society accepts them. Today’s generation of young people has a sense of entitlement that is distinctly different from other generations. Yes, the Baby Boomers were thought of as a self-centered group, but their self-centeredness was manifested in their journey—their eternal search for meaning and happiness. The current generation is not searching. They have arrived, and they have been told from birth onward that they are fantastic and that they can be anything and accomplish anything they want to. As a result, there are more students than ever who believe that they are “entitled” to more out of this world and in their lives than ever before (Twenge, 2006).

Freddy is a perfect example of this trend. At the age of 19, he landed a big recording contract with a major record label. He was on his way to pop stardom, just like he had always dreamed. Shortly after he was signed and had moved to Los Angeles, several record companies merged, and Freddy was unceremoniously dropped from his label—his big dream was crushed. He was so unable to deal with the reality of the situation and the fact that some dreams may not come true that he took to his bed; eventually he had to seek professional mental health help and needed the assistance of medication to deal with reality.

Now Freddy is a semi-permanent fixture on a popular Dallas radio station as the morning DJs have adopted his cause to help make his dream of a music career come true and allow him to achieve what he feels he is entitled to. (Americans do love their underdogs!) In his bio, Freddy says that as the DJs of the radio station began to work on his behalf, he finally was able to believe in himself again. And apparently, according to our society, that is the ultimate goal—to believe in yourself and to reach all the goals you feel entitled to achieve. In an interesting twist, Freddy is now recording his new album right in the Dallas radio station, previewing each new song and allowing the listening audience to choose which songs eventually get on the final album. The audience even gets to have input into the album’s artwork. So now everyone is “entitled” to be a part of Freddy’s hopeful success. The last time I checked, however, his first single released on iTunes has had only 54 comments/reviews. A very small response to his musical efforts on such a huge platform and media push, so the dream may still not come true.

Now, I am not against dreaming, working hard, or achieving success. The problem that I have is that this current generation has been taught to love themselves, to believe in themselves, and to follow the standards of their hearts in some sort of self-centered vacuum that seems to have little bearing on the needs of others, the realities of this world, and the desires of a Holy God. When a culture becomes this self-focused and this self-congratulatory, it stands to reason that a shift in cultural values will follow.

4. Brain Plasticity

A final issue that complicates our culture for the current generation is the matter of brain plasticity. Author and medical doctor Norman Doidge (2007) reveals that while researchers and educators have long known that the brain is capable of learning new things at any stage of life, they are now discovering that the brain is more adaptable and capable of more unexpected and profound changes than previously thought. The plastic qualities of our brain can reshape nearly anything from what people accept as normal behavior to what people are sexually attracted to (Doidge). This gives a whole new wrinkle to the impact of the androgynous fashion industry and the metrosexualization of men on what young brains are being reshaped to find attractive.

According to Doidge (2007),

Acquired tastes are by definition learned, unlike tastes, which are inborn. Acquired tastes are initially experienced with indifference or dislike but later become pleasant. Sexual taste is obviously influenced by culture and experience and is often acquired and then wired into the brain.

This is why the push of our culture to mainstream alternative lifestyles is so dangerous to young people who are trying to find themselves and make decisions. The brain’s ability to modify what it finds acceptable and what it finds attractive indicates that Christian young people must follow the biblical command to “. . . be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the *renewing* of your mind . . .” [emphasis added] (Rom. 12:2).

Repairing the Crack: The Art of Growing

What can be done? Should we legislate more laws? Work more tirelessly to enact “family values” legislation in America? Many Christian activist groups have worked tirelessly to “regain the culture of America for Christ.” And while I applaud their devotion and efforts, one will notice that things do not seem to be getting better. We campaign to elect presidents and congressmen who are Christians, hoping that we can legislate morality to a lost nation. But the first antidote for a cracked culture in a broken world is a renewed mind and a renewed understanding of what it takes to truly experience growth as a Christian. This is a grassroots issue that dictates if you want to change a culture, you need to change the individuals in that culture. Change occurs for the believer when true spiritual growth occurs. A prerequisite to this is changing the way one thinks about choices. If you accept 1 Corinthians 6:20, then you have to accept the fact that as a redeemed person who has been “bought with a price,” your life is no longer your own. Your life belongs to the One who died to pay the price for your soul. That sense of surrender and recognition of which you belong to makes the whole process of growth a little easier.

According to Henry Cloud and John Townsend (2001), believers are wired to grow. Whether young people can articulate it or not, they are wired to desire growth. But our culture does not cultivate this desire. Educators have an opportunity to help young people navigate the stages of genuine growth from salvation to spiritual maturity.

What is required for true spiritual growth? It begins with the attitudes of humility, gentleness, and patience. It continues with an understanding that one of God’s primary purposes for believers is growth, that is, to see Christians transformed into a state where they reflect His character. It is important that anyone wishing to experience growth realizes that it involves continuity among what we say, what we believe, and how we behave. Every time we, as

Christians, do not reflect the person of Jesus, we are telling the world that as believers we are not one body and one spirit, and that there is not one Lord over all (Eph. 4:1-6). Each time we follow and reflect the world's values, we are telling our culture that God is not who He says He is. Spiritual growth is crucial to developing students and future leaders who will be able to stand against the culture and transcend its impact.

My encouragement to those who desire to influence this current generation of young people is to teach them to recognize the supremacy of God, accept their state of dependency upon Him, and embrace the transcendent, absolute truth of God's World. The Christian is called to be distinctly different. Not angry. Not isolationists, but winsome and charmingly different, different in a way that draws the world to us, rather than the other way around. Impacting a culture starts at the bottom with individual change, individual responsibility, and individual choices to think and live like Jesus.

Dr. Phil Johnson is the founder of Global Next Research Group and Leadership Institute; he is also the founder of his own speaking and writing ministry.

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