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# Contemporary Youth Culture

One has to take a good look at culture when discussing youth ministry. And that look has to be especially directed toward contemporary youth culture. It is contemporary youth culture that is not only most relevant to this writing; it can also be the most intriguing, with all its debate and controversy. Hopefully, this discussion will lead the reader to a better understanding of contemporary culture and a balanced response to that culture. “When their generation’s culture is honored, more young people feel drawn into the church because they feel more accepted than rejected for their unique expression of spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Culture is a study unto itself. Culture can be good or it can be bad. An unspoken belief has permeated Western Christendom that says if it is cultural, it must be OK.

(Tell that to innocent adolescent rape victims in certain Middle East countries who have been murdered by their own family members because of the “shame” they brought upon their family. These murders are ironically and cruelly called honor crimes.<sup>2</sup>) Maybe we should throw up the white flag of surrender and just leave culture alone. But what if culture is wrong? What if the “crowd” is wrong . . . dead wrong? (I, Steve, should make a point here that the crowd is not always wrong. My father always asked, “If everybody jumped off the bridge, would you jump off the bridge too?” My adolescent answer was always a resounding *yes*, as long as there was water below! My response was based upon the point that the crowd was not always wrong. Obviously, if there were nothing but a freeway below, I would be in the wrong and in traction. Some aspects of “the crowd” are not always wrong; these might include hairstyles and clothing styles.) Should we sit idly by, while culture continues toward an immoral or indifferent conclusion? This dilemma is especially true when talking about adolescents.

Adolescents have a tendency to be different, with little regard for what current mainstream culture is doing. Although it could be argued that culture either follows adolescence or adolescence defines culture, a wise exercise would be to better understand teenagers’ reasons behind expressed actions. This would also be wise for the youth worker not only to address these predominant adolescent cultural issues, but also to help adolescents develop the discernment they need to move from being gullible consumers to informed and educated participants.

In any discussion of culture (the moorings, background, ethnicity, traditions, customs, and way of life), the quandary of participation, rejection, or reaction must be addressed. To go with the status quo would not draw nearly as much attention and scrutiny as other responses toward culture. Certainly when it comes to those activities of culture that are amoral, participation could be encouraged. This option encourages involvement and even the enjoyment of cultural activities of young people

and adults alike, whether that be enjoying fast food, attending a professional sporting event, or listening to a symphony. A question one would need to ask is, “Does my participation hinder or impede my ability to communicate my faith in Christ?” In summary, are we losing our message? It is one thing to be an active participator in culture, but it becomes a consequence of eternal value when we lose our message because of our participation. It would be safe to say that when our message of hope is jeopardized, we should avoid participation in our contemporary culture. Of course, there is considerable room here for subjectivity when it comes to when or what we should participate in. So because of this, we need to look at our other options.

Rejection is another option we can choose in response to our culture. For the Christian, plenty of activities or thinking in our culture should be rejected. At times, it may be a quiet refusal to participate. At other times, rejection comes in the form of financial sanctions. And at still other times, rejection comes in the form of overt and corporate refusal of participation. It may take the form of a petition or protest. It might even take the form of civil disobedience or an outright blatant refusal to participate in a cultural event or cultural thinking.

A third response to culture is reaction. Reaction is more of an attitude. It is always negative. It is a knee-jerk response that rejects culture simply because it is culture. Reaction takes place before any kind of explanation can be given. Reaction is given without much thought and is based more on emotional preference. Isolation and arrogance usually accompany this reaction. Reaction does not take into consideration that the person reacting just might have it all wrong, a sort of prejudgment. Organizations, churches, and even schools have been started in reaction against culture. This author would be remiss by not saying that these organizations, churches, and schools have further alienated themselves by their very existence, giving their reactionary message less and less credibility. So instead of influencing their culture, they simply are endorsed by those who have reacted the

same way, and they appear to be extremely narrow minded and exclusive. It can be almost a form of extremism or fringe thinking. They become their own self-centered and same-thinking subculture. There certainly are times when new subcultures are developed for specific purposes and for all the right reasons. It is at this stage where the subculture moves from reaction to participation (with rejection of the specific problematic elements).

It would be difficult to do taxonomy on the distinctive age levels of contemporary young people. They are characteristically somewhere between the ages of twelve and twenty-four in our American society.<sup>3</sup> The scary part is that the beginning age creeps lower and lower, while on the other end of the timeline, some adults never leave their adolescent behavior. They still have not grown up and embraced their adult responsibilities and characteristics. It can be confusing at the least when young people strive for maturity with a lack of proper models to emulate.

### ASPECTS WORTH CONSIDERING IN CONTEMPORARY YOUTH CULTURE

One cannot overlook the impact of the Internet and technology on contemporary youth culture. The wise youth worker overseeing his young people not only knows the state of their hearts but is also state of the art. Young people have mastered technology while many adults still struggle with multitasking. The Internet has given young people access to incredible amounts of information. The Internet and e-mail have removed the element of distance. The Internet has given young people the anonymity and privacy that they value, not to mention a language of code words, passwords, and acrostics (LOL—laughing out loud; LMHO—laughing my head off; etc.) that is only understandable to them.

While we stand amazed at what the Internet has done to define our culture, we are painfully aware of the downside of the Internet. Although it does provide new experiences, infor-

mation, convenience, and ideas, the Internet has generated technological overkill, dot-com greed, an onslaught of e-mail, and a precipitous continuum of sapping our humanity (not to mention insidious pornographers who seem to be one step ahead of cutting-edge technology for the sole purpose of enticing young and old alike).<sup>4</sup> The Internet has permeated every aspect of society with an almost omnipresent likeness and an omniscient attitude.

When discussing youth culture, we cannot ignore media and music. While the Internet has provided the means, media and music have become the end to that means. From boy bands to shock rock, music cannot be overlooked. Not only is it an integral part of contemporary youth culture; it helps articulate what culture is thinking and saying.

At the same time, music is important to teenagers' identity and helps them define important social and subcultural boundaries. The results of one survey of 2,760 fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds in ten southeastern cities showed that they listened to music an average of forty hours per week. One Swedish study found that adolescents who developed an early interest in rock music were more likely to be influenced by their peers and less influenced by their parents than by older adolescents.<sup>5</sup>

So whether we like it or not, we must, at the very least, pay attention to music. Of course we cannot mention music without including media. Contemporary youth culture is media driven. It is where young people get their "sermons," and shapers of the media know they can "preach" whatever message they want to young people. (One need not look too far to see the blatant messages of reckless and irresponsible sexuality in spite of the physiological and emotional consequences.) The media (its outlets and its personalities and "spin doctors")<sup>6</sup> also know that young people will buy into whatever they say, as long as it is packaged right.

Those interested in contemporary youth culture have to look at a particular attitude that is so characteristic of young people today, "whatever." The attitude goes beyond just using the

word. It has become part of the attitudinal landscape. It reflects an “I don’t care” attitude. It reflects an “it doesn’t matter” attitude. It is a word that summarizes quite succinctly what a contemporary youth culture is thinking and unconsciously practicing. The root of this “whatever” attitude can be found in a contemporary youth culture that is somewhat cynical about the demands and responsibilities of its cultural surroundings. It has become a philosophical way of life.

In discussing contemporary youth culture, one must take a look at the redefining of the family. Hopefully, you come from an intact traditional family<sup>7</sup> (unfortunately I, Steve, do not). But as most contemporary youth workers know, the numbers are pretty much split between young people who come from traditional families and those who do not. This issue raises the bar on complexity in ministering to young people from nontraditional families.

Children who experience parental divorce, compared with children in continuously intact two-parent families, exhibit more conduct problems, more symptoms of psychological maladjustment, lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-concepts. Similarly, adults who experienced parental divorce as children, compared with adults raised in continuously intact two-parent families, score lower on a variety of indicators of psychological, interpersonal, and socioeconomic well-being.<sup>8</sup>

This continental drift in the traditional family also increases the need to minister to parents of nontraditional families. These can be single parents (divorced or never married), remarried parent(s), or part of a blended family, but “once the children in each of these scenarios hit adolescence, many parents begin yearning for a learning curve in the raising of their kids. Whatever his or her family structure, a child has the best opportunity to thrive only when the household provides a loving, nurturing, stable, and protective environment.”<sup>9</sup>

## THE TENSIONS AND ALTERNATIVES RELATED TO CONTEMPORARY YOUTH CULTURE

In the late 1940s the term “teenager” was invented and the phrase “juvenile delinquent” was coined. The popular press revealed that America was moving toward a youth society. Even as more attention was focused on teens, many magazines predicted that emphasis on young people was a fad. Eventually interest would shift away from the youth society; as one individual was quoted as saying in 1962, there is “little likelihood of American students ever playing a radical role, much less a revolutionary one in our society.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously, our contemporary youth culture has not paid much attention to that prediction.

The contemporary youth culture has proven itself more than a “one hit wonder” type of fad. Contemporary youth culture reflects an ideology or way of life based on definite philosophical assumptions. The contemporary youth culture has produced tension between the older generations and young people. This tension was reflected during the sixties with the Vietnam War protests, culminating in a tragic climax with the killing of four Kent State University student protestors. (Living in Akron, Ohio, at the time, I, Steve, personally remember a college friend reaching his father and screaming, “Dad, they’re killing us!” The next week I went to the campus and saw the bullet holes in the steel sculptures around the location where the National Guard opened fire.) Then in the summer of 1972 at the National Democratic Convention, there was the ensuing jockeying for political power by many young people who had been previously denied a voice in American politics. That spirit of dissenting continues into this millennium with young people being jailed, injured, or killed when they protest for causes they believe in (consider the protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle and the G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy).

This tension is also reflected in the American home where teenagers have definite ideas and lifestyles, many times con-



flicting with their parents. Family tension is not restricted to non-Christians or to a certain segment of the country. It seems to be prevalent in all of society. This should not be construed as a violent tension, even though there have been isolated cases of this. But it is a tension that has family relationships strained.

This tension is also seen in many local churches. Adults yearn for the “good ol’ days,” while young people want their religion to be on the cutting edge. Tension is manufactured when adults want young people to continue the past lifestyle. Both young people and adults feel deeply about the other’s lifestyle. The fact remains that contemporary youth culture is decidedly different from past youth cultures as adults knew it, and it is distinctive from the lifestyle of the older generations in the church today. This tension raises the first major issue in youth work, “What’s a youth worker to do in order to keep both sides of the generational ‘fence’ happy?”

Those who minister to young people have two alternatives. First, they can adapt their principles and techniques to contemporary youth culture, to reach them for Christ, hence becoming relevant.<sup>11</sup> Second, they can hold onto a traditional approach, communicating to teenagers the values of the past, then reinforcing a desired way of behavior, so young people will think and act differently from those around them. We are certainly not against thinking and acting differently (2 Corinthians 5:17 makes it clear that things become different for the believer). What we are against is a coerced, dictated way of life that is void of internal motivation and personal volition but full of external control and personal preferences. Youth for Christ (Campus Life), Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and Word of Life are among the major Christian youth organizations that adapted to contemporary youth culture at their very outset. (Youth for Christ’s motto is “Geared to the times. Anchored to the Rock.”) These organizations continue to do credible adolescent ministry by incorporating relevance into their ministry. They have used some of the current pop culture’s methods with contemporary

youth culture, including language, dress, and music. Leaders of these organizations point out that they are still committed to conservative doctrine while their methodology has constantly changed.

The reality of all this is that young people must live in and among their own contemporary youth culture and no church program can completely isolate them from the influence and pressures of the youth world. The Christian must live in the world and not withdraw from it. Therefore, the minister to young people must understand the youth culture, first to reach into that culture and present a message of hope to young people with regards to their relationship with Christ and, second, to equip each Christian young person to be an active participant with a critical and discerning “eye” in that culture as a witness for Jesus Christ.

### THE YOUNG PEOPLE OF THIS CONTEMPORARY YOUTH CULTURE

This generation is entertainment oriented. It has been reared on television, movies, computers, and music, all of which has cultivated a new standard of valuing people and things in terms of action and “relevance.” It was thought when they were children that their vicarious identification with computers would produce a passive generation. Rather, young people have seen that sex, money, action, and travel can be packaged by the trend-setting media, all for the purpose of providing a new experience to stimulate their senses. Instead of being passive, they want to become part of all they see. Virtual reality has taught them that almost anything is attainable. As a result, young people feel they can do or be anything they desire. But their desires are not tempered. They want it now. Delaying personal gratification simply does not make sense. No longer does the young person want to know what’s happening, but wants to *be* what’s happening. He does not want to be controlled by his environment

but wants to be free to create the setting in which he is to be immersed. The past has little hold upon their lives.

Social psychologist and professor Erik Erickson suggested three reasons that young people are immediate oriented. First, the past grows increasingly distant from the present . . . the past grows progressively more different from the present in fact, and seems more remote and irrelevant psychologically. Second, the future, too, grows more remote and uncertain. Because the future directions of social change are virtually unpredictable, today's young men and women are growing into a world that is more unpredictable than what has been confronted by any previous generation. Third, the present assumes a new significance as the one time in which life is relevant, immediate, and knowable. The past's solutions to life's problems are not necessarily relevant to the here and now. No one can know whether what is decided today will remain valid in tomorrow's world; hence, the present assumes an autonomy unknown in more static societies.<sup>12</sup>

#### POSTMODERN SUSPICION

Since the past has little influence and the future is remote, this contemporary youth generation would not be inclined to explore historic Christianity for answers to their questions. Inasmuch as the Bible is a Book of history (His story), the church and historic Christianity have little appeal to the contemporary youth culture. But youth have gone one step beyond ignoring Christianity; the young person finds himself in active opposition to tradition.

Two fundamental characteristics of this contemporary youth culture are irreverence and suspicion. Young people do not buy into faith simply because we say so. This irreverence and suspicion has its roots in postmodernity. This way of thinking (or philosophical stance) has been the end result of a historical process of epic proportions. The French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard said, "Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmod-

ernism as incredulity toward all metanarratives.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, postmodernism sets itself up as disbelieving all other worldviews.<sup>14</sup> The significance here is that for the Christian, his worldview is seen through the lens of biblical instruction and truth. His worldview goes beyond a weekly ritual. His worldview affects his daily life, both personally and externally. In essence, his worldview is voluntarily intrinsic. It is not coerced or legislated. Tony Jones says in his book *Postmodern Youth Ministry*,

If the 1970s was the decade of “I’m okay, you’re okay,” then we’re entering the era of “My God’s okay, your God’s okay.” You probably already know that students find Christianity’s claim of exclusivity the most difficult to swallow. Instead their natural inclination is that all faiths contain elements of truth and any religion is a perfectly good way to express your spirituality.<sup>15</sup>

From the first-century declaration of Constantine making virtually everyone a Christian, to the present-day society that is becoming more secular by the second, postmodern thinking comes from a mental grid that does not have an underlying Christian background or understanding. Dawson McAllister says, “Postmodern culture is a major shift in Western culture, the type of change that happens every several hundred years or so.”<sup>16</sup> Yet with the relativity of postmodernism, there are some exceptions to everything being acceptable. First, you must never impose your beliefs on the person beside you or at least not be perceived to be imposing your beliefs on others. It is a “live and let live” attitude. Believe what you believe and don’t bother anyone else. If you do try to convince others, you will be accused of preaching. And no one likes to be preached to. This exception has implications on the way we evangelical Christians evangelize. I do not necessarily think it limits our efforts, but it does demand some rethinking and retooling of our methods and verbosity. The other exception is do not mess with “Mother Earth.”

Earth Day continues to build momentum. Environmental issues have taken on religious fervor. The creation has been deified while the Creator has been vilified. I would be the first to say that Christians should be environmentally conscious and responsible, but not to the level of radical religious fundamentalists.

Postmodern thinking simply does not have the Christian influence that older generations have had. The Christian linguistics and traditions are not there. In the United States and in Canada, some significant “pockets” of culture (usually referred as the Bible Belt) are still influenced by a Christian way of thinking. The Southern states would certainly have to be included, with parts of the Midwest. In Canada, it would be parts of the provinces of Alberta and Manitoba, with significant pockets in southern British Columbia and Saskatchewan. But you do not have to go far to find states and provinces that are deep in postmodern thinking. Christian influence has been minimized. A prime U.S. example would be the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, and California. In Canada, prime examples would be many parts of British Columbia, Ontario, Quebec, and some of the east coast provinces.

#### THE ENEMY'S STRATEGY

The winner of this epic struggle will capture the minds or the thinking of an entire generation. Never has John 10:10a been so true, “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.” Once the mind has been “stolen,” killing and destroying of lives, both mortally and spiritually, becomes relatively easy. In the classic book *Strategy*, military author B. H. Liddell Hart explains the significance of strategizing. He lists several principles of warfare strategy. One is to choose the line of least expectation. In other words, try to put yourself in the opponent's shoes, and think what course is least probable that he will foresee. Second is to take a line of least resistance. He explains that a good strategist does not attack where the opponent

is strong. He always attacks where he is weak. And third, do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed. The reasoning here is that the opponent has had enough time to strengthen himself, and it is even more probable that his success in repulsing you will have strengthened him morally.<sup>17</sup> This strategy seems all too familiar when it comes to adolescents and Satan, our Enemy.

From my perspective, the Enemy has always gone after the young, this being an all too familiar strategy of going after the most vulnerable. From there, it is the mind that is targeted and is most difficult to protect. I am sure there is a significant reason why the apostle Paul admonished the church in Philippi,

If you do this [give your worries to God] you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus. And now, brothers, as I close this letter let me say one more thing: Fix your thoughts on what is true and good and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely, and dwell on the fine, good things in others. Think about all you can praise God for and be glad about. (Phil. 4:7–8 TLB)

Whether we like it or not, postmodernism, that irreverent quest for spirituality, is permeating the thought processes of young people. Their thought processes are heavily influenced by the standard fare of the entertainment industry. There is definitely a move away from societal assumptions and more into a subjective and ambiguous way of thinking. The three institutions set up by God—the home, government, and the church—are challenged and sometimes even ignored. Many church young people are caught up in a plethora of feelings, which are reinforced by television, movies, magazines, the Internet, and even public education. Inasmuch as contemporary young people are oblivious to this new way of societal thinking, they are just as

much a part of it as those who propagate postmodern doctrine. The youth worker who attempts to minister to young people will have to give substantial reasoning for the obedience to the commands and demands of historic Christianity. He cannot reach them by simply minimizing their way of thinking for the purpose of favoring Christian norms in thinking. He cannot just undercut the way they think and assume they will now think along Christian norms.

### THE IMPATIENCE WITH INSTITUTIONS

Contemporary young people are very impatient with institutions that seem to perpetuate injustice or inequality or are simply unresponsive to human needs. The institution of the church does not escape. Most of us conjure up an image of an edifice or building when asked to formulate in our minds what the church looks like. Along with an architectural image, we add the rules of behavior, regulations, and rituals that have sometimes lost their meaning over the years. Words like *oppressive*, *irrelevant*, *irrational*, and *archaic* are used by young people as adjectives to describe the church. Young people see the traditional American church as dead and hypocritical. Many times the church is governed by a board of deacons or elders who may be insensitive to human needs or the needs of adolescents. They tend to hold onto the past rather than following New Testament commands.

Far more often than we would like to admit, young people's antipathy with the traditional American church is valid. Many churches are more known for their religious pomp and social circumstance than their involvement in the betterment of their community, whether it is a social commentary or a concerted effort of evangelism. My own adolescent experience included an intrigue with the fact that Jesus Himself went counterculture with the religious thinkers of His day. His way was revolutionary (the Bible I, Steve, purchased as a teenager was called "Blueprint for Revolution"). Jesus seemed extremely

unhappy and disturbed with the religious types of His time. He was a nonconformist in a good way. That nonconformity appeals to adolescents. He was a champion for all that was right, pure, and true. The institution of religion was suspect then, and that way of institutional thinking continues to prevail today.

#### THE TENSION WITH THE ADULT WORLD

While adults charge youth with being immoral, irresponsible, and irreverent, young people make countercharges against adult hypocrisy. Some of the charges are true. Adolescents look at adults drinking their alcohol while they tell kids not to smoke marijuana. Adults are quick to tell their kids to say no to drugs but are slow in curbing their own uses, or should I say, misuses of prescription medicine to achieve a certain emotional level. (I should note that I personally know of individuals who need prescription drugs in order to achieve an emotional balance. But they are in the minority.) Adults are quick to charge adolescents with being morally bankrupt. Yet if one did an inventory of the purveyors of blatant immoral messages and images or implied or double meaning messages and images, the writers and producers are all adults. Maybe simply stated, we do not have an adolescent problem; we have an adult problem. (Even more simply stated, we have a *cultural* problem that is laced with a tendency for wrongdoing or sin.)

An adult deserves respect, not because he holds a position of authority but because he as an individual has demonstrated his worth as a person and his competence in his position. Perhaps it is more than adult incompetence that has destroyed the teenager's confidence in adults. Perhaps it is adult success in communicating to young people their desires and visions. Adults have long preached excellence and competence to the young people. Now these young people are taking adult advice at its face value and are attempting to fashion an ideal world.

The pursuit of experience is another characteristic of



contemporary young people. The young person seeks experience, first as a thing in itself, and second as a means of learning and growing. Experience entails a heightened attention to the present ongoing movement and far less concern with the past or future. Their experience-oriented life involves a mistrust of belief systems and absolute truth, which young people feel obscures the richness of life. Spontaneity is a highly valued personal trait, as is tolerance. They do what they want to do, when they want to do it, and have tolerance for others to “do their own thing.” The idea is to do whatever you want to do, so long as you don’t interfere with other people. The average young person is irritated at virtually all restrictions because he sees laws as a limitation of the growth and development of people. Young people passionately demand honesty and are impatient with forms having no content. Youth reject the doctrine that truth is to be found by a ritualistic study of the legacy of the past. Contemporary young people feel that knowledge is not something to be learned and stored up for future use but must serve an immediate end and practical purpose.

Even though there is tension between the generations, young people and adults are similar in many ways. Many studies reveal young people have the same moral values as their parents.<sup>18</sup> They just practice them differently, probably because they are aware of the inconsistencies they have observed.

#### RELIGIOUS INTEREST

The present generation shows a definite and remarkable interest in the study of religion.

The unsung story of today’s teenagers may be how religious or spiritual they are. “We’re witnessing a new revival of religion,” says Conrad Cherry, director of the Center for Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University/Purdue University. Prayer circles and faith-based groups like True Love Waits or

Fellowship of Christian Athletes have proliferated in high schools and college campuses like so many WWJD bracelets; Christian rock festivals and CDs rival their secular counterparts, bringing the message out of the pulpit and into the mosh pit and tattoo tent.<sup>19</sup>

This interest is a result of a significant amount of personal probing and searching. They want to know themselves, and the religious side of man is unknown. However, most of the religious interest is noninstitutional and, many times, anti-institutional in nature. This is reflected in the growth of interdenominational agencies among evangelicals and is related to the anti-institutional religious search by young people. Well-meaning adults have given young people biblical answers to their questions and told them that a relationship to God can be found outside the local church. Interdenominational agencies claim their ministry is relevant, whereas the church has failed. Contrary to popular opinion, teenage interest in religion is far more serious than casual. Far from being apathetic, they are interested in issues and decisions about the problems that are vital to them.

The new religious search by young people is increasingly secular in nature; they look to the natural world and to this present age for a context and orientation for human life. There has been a collapse of religious beliefs woven into family, community, and national life. Their religious tenets are derived more from culture than from historic Christianity. Yet in spite of the rejection of formal religion on the part of the young people, there remains at this time in life a strong disposition toward the religious. Perhaps it is because young people are searching for their identity by giving themselves to a cause greater than themselves. Hopefully this is a normal growth pattern of adolescents moving from the egocentricity of adolescence to the more mature stages of adulthood.

Today the religious alternatives include cults.

Cults attract youths experiencing psychological stress, rootlessness, feelings of emptiness and of being disenfranchised, and identity diffusion and confusion. Such youths come from all walks of life and from all classes of society. Cults seem to offer confused and isolated adolescents a moratorium—a period of dropping out, or a “time-out”—as well as a highly structured sense of belonging and a means of escape from being “normless.”<sup>20</sup>

You might say that we are experiencing a recovery of religion outside the structures of traditional Christianity.

### MORAL CHOICES

Young people go on drugs both as an escape and a search.<sup>21</sup> They are escaping from the reality of this world, and sometimes they are searching for a new thrill or a new experience. For most, drugs are an energizer. Peer pressure is a significant influence on the young person who tries drugs. (I call it a fear of what others are thinking. As a result of this fear, young people tend to do activities they normally would not do, and some of these activities include drug use.) Some of the drugs of choice are more recognized names like marijuana and cocaine, but newer and more chic drugs like ecstasy have been almost championed by adolescents. Yet in spite of the popularity of drugs, the physical dangers remain, both short term and long term.<sup>22</sup> Other significant factors associated with drug usage are permissive child-rearing practices and a rebellion against restrictive parental controls or rules. Young people, by and large, are convinced that it is no more harmful to smoke marijuana than it is to drink alcohol.

The music of adolescents is clearly more direct in its sensuality, anger, and chagrin than the music of young people in the immediate past. Music videos leave little to the imagination. Their music boldly depicts the confusion of the contemporary scene. The major emphasis is to lay aside preoccupations with

boundaries, moderation, and the postponements of personal gratification for the sake of free expression and artistic creativity. Another theme is that of a stranger moving through an alien environment, searching for meaningful values and a new world appropriate for the modern spirit. Many who believe the music is an accurate expression of adolescent attitude and emotions do not deny that much of the music itself is suggestive and sexually arousing.

There is a shift in adolescent morality taking place from somewhat traditional values to a more liberal, and sometimes debasing, ethic, based on the behavioral sciences. Moral practices tend to be immediate, gratifying solutions rather than principles of self-control that are basic for all young people. Many young people are openly rejecting traditional morality. "They see sex as mechanical, about body parts, our cultural portrayal of sex," says Deborah Roffman, a leading U.S. human sexuality educator based in Baltimore. The best way to teach kids about sex is to talk about intimacy, to put sex in the context of a relationship. The precocious sexual activities of today's teens are a wake-up call, Roffman says. "They're screaming at us because they need context and values."<sup>23</sup>

Society's perception is that public education is the main source for adolescent information on sexuality. For many years, the focus of sex education has been on the mechanics of sex. Public education seems to have felt the need to explain these mechanics and encouraged their experimentation for the purpose of determining sexual compatibility between two people and for the two to gain sexual experience. Of course we cannot forget the "noble" concern of public education in the encouragement of safe sex practices.

One exaggeration about adolescents is that they are all having sex. This belief arises from the media portrayal and stereotyping of teenagers. Media play a large role in how society views adolescent sexuality. Almost every teenager in television, movies, and print media is characterized as a "typical" teenager who is

always having sex and is not the least concerned about the consequences. In fact, in most situations, the possible consequences are not even mentioned. The adult community views these programs and quickly draws false conclusions about adolescents.

Another reason for this exaggeration about adolescent sexuality is stereotyping. Adults tend to observe a small group of teenagers who may act or be a certain way and apply those attributes to every teen. It is as if promiscuous sexual behavior is a biological part of a teenager's composition and the very fact of being an adolescent predisposes a kid to irresponsible behavior.

This then is today's contemporary young person. He lives in a world created by a clan of influential adults that most adults now repudiate, a world the young person doesn't want to surrender. It is a culture that places him at the center, feeds his desires, and allows him to develop according to an internal pattern, called "individual differences" by psychologists, but titled "selfish egotism" by church leaders. The adolescent world is logged on to relevance, and the password to enter its sanctuary is "now." Inside the youth culture, we see young people searching for a purpose that they have never sought before. Contemporary youth culture has created the kind of young person who has never existed before. The young are searching for self-identity. Identity crisis is a product of the several previous decades that continues into this millennium. It has roots in cultural blending, pervasive relativity, and an irreverent religiosity.

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The question remains to be explored, "Are young people searching for something that doesn't exist?" They are trying to find purpose, but perhaps purpose is not something to be found but something to be developed or discovered. Young people are skeptical of adult authority, attempting to live coequal with adults, while at the same time they don't have the facilities to do

so. We think of adolescents as children in adult bodies. They are neither child nor adult. They are young people, teenagers, adolescents. They are, for the most part, the most spiritually open in their lives to consider faith in Christ.

Are we to fashion a ministry to youth based on cultural sensitivity, attempting to make life meaningful and relevant? Are we to design our programs on an experience-based curriculum, because contemporary youth culture has produced young people who guide their life through experience? Are we to accept postmodernity as the foundation for our philosophy of youth work, because this is “where they are”? Are we to construct a noninstitutional religious program because of the erosion of respect for anything that resembles the institutional hierarchy of the church? Is ethnocentricity our answer to their search for identity? Do we rule out traditional Christianity because young people are irreverent to established traditions? The answer: sometimes yes, sometimes no.

Young people need an objective answer to their needs, and the Word of God is the only source for an ultimate answer. Our ministry should be grounded on the Scripture because it is the Word of God that produces changed lives. Regeneration (1 Peter 1:23) causes contemporary young people to grow (1 Peter 2:2); it keeps young people from sin (Ps. 119:9, 11); and it meets their need (Phil. 4:19). The Bible is an absolute that will satisfy the desires of young people who live in an unsure and unstable world. This book takes the position that both the *message* to communicate to young people and the *methods* used in the youth program should be based on the Scriptures.

Perhaps one of the reasons for the decline of Christian influence among contemporary youth culture is the lack of allegiance Christians give to the church. Christ founded the church: “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18), and it is next to His heart. “Christ . . . loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25b KJV). The New Testament gives priority to the

gathering of believers, and the local assembly was the only basis for ministry in the pages of Scripture.

The closer you come in the ministry to the model of the New Testament church, the more you will experience the blessings of God. A church is a group of baptized believers, in whom Christ dwells, under the discipline of the Word of God, organized for evangelism, education, worship, fellowship, and the administration of the ordinances. An interdenominational agency or a Christian youth organization can have a ministry on a significant level. But the farther it departs from the local church, the less likely it has the full blessing or favor of God (more will be said about Christian youth organizations or parachurch organizations in a later chapter).

Experience must be based on the Word of God. Young people are correct in their sensitivity to people and their desire to help their fellow man. Man is the highest created being, made in the image of God, and every human has such great value that God gave His Son for him. We should understand the teenager and his culture, along with the basis of our ministry being the Word of God.

#### WHAT DO OUR YOUNG PEOPLE NEED FROM US?

There is a devilish attack on the institutions of the home, the government, and the church. Those who believe in the inspiration of Scripture must place themselves under its absolute authority and recognize the place of the home, the government, and the church. A Christian teenager should be under authority: (1) to his father and mother, because God placed him in that family, (2) to his local government, because God constituted municipal authority, and (3) to his local church, because a lost world needs disciplined witnesses (disciples) and the Christian young person needs a place to grow.

When a young person accepts Christ, the first thing he must do is to be baptized, then be instructed in “all things that I have

commanded you” (Matt. 28:19–20). Then the young person should get involved in the church’s program of evangelism, worship, and fellowship. Strong New Testament churches produce strong Christians, not vice versa. However, you cannot have a strong church without strong Christians. Contemporary young people need the church more than any other generation has. It is within the church that young people find community, relationships, support, and natural accountability.

Other young people are fed up with the bureaucracy of some churches or politics found in other ecclesiastical groups. True, many churches are bogged down with institutionalism and are more concerned with the *form* of a church than fulfilling the *function* of a church (evangelism, education, worship, and fellowship). These pseudochurches are not the groups that deserve the loyalty of dedicated young people. We need to return to the basic New Testament church practices. Young people need such a church.

Finally, there needs to be an emphasis on leadership. The current emphasis on small groups and dialogue is an extension of the youth culture’s need for relationships and irreverence for traditionalism. Young people feel they have equal stature with adults, so they hesitate to give allegiance to traditional authority persons. The young person is an individual and should be accepted on an equal basis with adults. However, the Scriptures teach that certain men are “called” to be leaders (prophets, pastors, teachers), and these men are given abilities to carry out their God-given tasks. Therefore, a biblical youth ministry will be built on biblical leadership. (See chapter 10 on the youth pastor as a shepherd-leader.)

#### HOW CAN WE MEET THE CHALLENGE?

If you are going to work with young people, expect problems. There is no easy place to serve Christ, and this is especially true in youth work. But with every problem is a challenge. Don’t



view your young people as a headache but as a challenge. Place every gift and capacity in the work, and trust God for results. There are certain ways in which you can meet the challenge of modern youth. These basic principles will leave their imprint over and over again in this book:

1. *By venturing into the real but sometimes hidden world of adolescents.*

You must understand the Bible before you can teach it. And you must understand an adolescent before you can teach him. Adolescence is one of the hardest areas of life to understand. Many people think that they understand the teenage period of life just because they were teenagers once. This is not so. The person who went through adolescence five years ago is five years outdated. Times are changing, and if we are going to minister to young people, we must change, even though the Gospel never changes. You must understand why teenagers feel as they do, how they think, and who they are. Only by understanding adolescents can you help them. The purpose of this book is to take you on a trip through the world of adolescents. Be prepared to study, think, observe, and reflect.

2. *By learning the coordinates of your destination.*

Aims—goals—procedures—methods—philosophy: these are important to help you help young people. Many youth workers want to work with young people, but they have no basic direction. The youth worker who knows where he is going goes someplace. First, you must have a road map. Your road map may be a philosophy for working with young people or basic opinions on how youth work should be carried out. Second, your road map must be accurate. This book will be like a road map, pointing you in the right direction and giving you principles of operation. This book will not be a read-only handbook

of programs. This book is intended to be like a manual of timeless principles. Every church, youth group, and community will have a variety of distinctives, but the principles of working with young people are the same.

### *3. By using current methods and materials.*

Never before in the history of the church have there been so many materials and methods with which to work. You have helps, books, kits, and resources not available to the leaders of a generation ago. Today large churches are not the only ones that have their youth workers on salaries. Generally speaking, volunteers are well trained. Most denominations furnish curriculum and resources for their youth workers. Christian education materials and curricula are on sale in any bookstore. At many youth ministry conventions you will find techniques and programs of long-range strategy for reaching and keeping young people. Also you find at your disposal short-term plans and techniques for capturing the attention of youth. Teacher-training classes and workshops are available. Avail yourself of all these advantages in youth work. These up-to-date materials will not compensate for the working of the Holy Spirit in your young people. However, God does not delight in ignorance. The Spirit works most effectually through organized, well-prepared biblical content that is interesting and meets the needs of young people. Try using some of the latest materials and methods in your youth group. The latest up-to-date method may accomplish an old-fashioned result.

### *4. By merging the Bible and life.*

The Bible was written, among a number of significant reasons, to meet the needs of people, including teenagers. Remember, we work with people, not programs, with lives, not lines. Only when we become “people-centered” in our interest

and application do we truly become basically “Bible-centered.” Some youth leaders become “completely Bible-centered.” They become so “Bible-centered” that the young people are forgotten; the youth are manipulated and treated as objects rather than people. The young people’s worker who does this is neither Bible-centered nor Christ-centered. The youth leader who is Bible-centered and Christ-centered will be youth-centered.

This text is unashamed in acceptance of the Word of God as the final authority for belief and practice. The thrust of this book will be “Get teens into the Bible and the Bible into teens.” Young people seek answers to life, and these are found only in God’s inspired revelation, the Bible. The Word of God will be appealed to as the final authority and directive for working with young people.

Contemporary youth culture can be summed up in one word: fickle. Just when we think we’ve identified particular trends and characteristics, they change. And even if we get some right, adolescents would never admit it (it’s that independence thing). So as adults, we cannot be intellectually arrogant when it comes to this type of pertinent information. It is privileged information, so to speak. It is information that adolescents reluctantly yield, except to those adults they trust. So let’s take what we do know about contemporary youth culture and begin to use it to our advantage . . . a spiritual advantage. The young people of this contemporary youth culture are depending on us, whether they know it or not.

## NOTES

1. Aaron Kipnis, *Angry Young Men* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 202.
2. For a better description of these heinous crimes, I went to [www.hanania.com/](http://www.hanania.com/) columns and clicked the February 14, 2000, article, “‘Honor Killings’ Exposed as Real Crimes in Cinemax Documentary,” written by Arab author Ray Hanania (accessed August 2001).
3. Based upon charts presented in Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn, eds., *Starting Right* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 18.

4. A study by NetValue, an international Internet measuring company in Paris, found that if given the freedom, kids would indeed go to porn sites. The facts they found:
  - 27.5% of teens younger than 17 had visited adult sites in a recent month.
  - 21% of teens accessing porn were 14 or younger.
  - 40% of porn visitors were girls.
  - Once on porn sites, kids spent 65% more time there than on game sites.
 Source: Janet Kornblum, "Challenge Promised over Library Filters," *USA Today*, 19 December 2000.
5. Marjorie Hoga and Miriam Bar-on, "Impact of Music Lyrics and Music Videos on Children and Youth," *Pediatrics* 98, no. 6 (December 1996): part 1, 1219.
6. The term is applied to those who take the least bit of information and turn it into an exaggerated headline, or one who can pull out the most minuscule fact and fabricate an entire story around it. In either case, the "spin doctor's" primary goal is to make something that wasn't actually there or to interpret something so the facts would actually favor their position more than go against it.
7. The traditional family is one that has, intact, its original set of married parents, with their own biological and/or adopted children.
8. Dr. Paul Amato, "Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents' Divorce," *The Future of Children*, 4 No. 1-Spring 1994.
9. Richard E. Behrman and Linda Sandham Quinn, "Children and Divorce: Overview and Analysis," *The Future of Children* 4, no. 1 (spring 1994).
10. Robert J. Bartel, "Campus Tensions and Evangelical Response," *Christianity Today* XIII (6 June 1969): 12.
11. *Relevant* is defined as that which is pertinent, related, applicable, and appropriate.
12. Erik Erikson, *Youth, Change and Challenge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 168.
13. Robert O. Piehl, "Narrative Therapy and the Christian Counselor," *Christian Counseling Today* 9, no. 3 (2001): 25.
14. A worldview answers such questions as: Where am I? Who's in control? What's right or wrong about the world? How do I know right from wrong? What is the remedy? It is the grid we "look" through when we look at life and our world.
15. Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 33.
16. Dawson McAllister, *Saving the Millennial Generation* (Nashville: Nelson, 1999), 16.
17. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), 335-36.
18. For a further look at this subject, see Jim Hancock, *Raising Adults* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 1999), 38.
19. John Leland, "Searching for a Holy Spirit," *Newsweek* (8 May 2000): 60.
20. Hunter Eagon, "Adolescent Attraction to Cults," *Adolescence*, 33, no. 131 (fall 1998): 709.
21.
  - Steroid use among 10th graders increased from 1.7% to 2.2%.
  - Marijuana is still widely used with 16% of 8th graders using it; 32% of 10th graders; and 37% of 12th graders.
  - Alcohol use is remaining stable with 43% of 8th graders, 65% of 10th graders, and 73% of 12th graders trying it.
 Source: "Teen Drug Survey: Heroin, Ecstasy Use Up; Smoking Down," *Chicago Tribune*, December, 2000.
22. Between August 2-7, 2001, eighteen people died because of cocaine or heroin. For the full story, see <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/08/14/houston.drug.deaths>
23. Sandy Naiman, "Never Too Late to Talk to Teens," *The Toronto Sun*, 25 February 2001.