

Barna Research Reveals Four “Mega-Themes” in U.S. Culture-Part 1

by Bob Young

A Barna report published in December, 2007 identified four significant “mega-themes” in contemporary U.S. culture: high self-acceptance, new definitions of Christianity, increased challenges and concerns in parenting, and individualized “designer faith” with rootless values. Each of these poses a challenge to biblical Christianity and suggests areas in which the church must take positive action. These will be explored in a series of four articles.

Barna reports that Americans generally have a high opinion of themselves. While many Americans see the need to change and grow, most also see themselves in a positive light. Dissatisfaction comes because growth is difficult and unpredictable. Uncertainty results because changes are accepted on the basis of feelings more than facts. Most Americans are willing to change as long as the result is personal benefit and enjoyment which avoids pain, conflict and sacrifice. Individualism and selfishness have strong holds in the personal lives and values of most adults. The social famine of our society is evident in that adults, especially those under 30, want to connect to a number of other people and possess a nagging sense of loneliness and isolation. Connections are mostly impersonal (think Internet, text messaging and phone calls via mobile devices) and are not as fulfilling as desired.

Let me focus the challenge in several questions. Can the church address the dissatisfaction which results when people with lofty goals and high self-regard come face to face with their inability to reach those goals? Can the church effectively communicate that the lasting goals in life are not physical and financial, but spiritual? Does the church have an answer to the uncertainty that arises from rampant individualism and selfishness which are rooted in feelings? Can the church demonstrate effective and meaningful fellowship and brotherhood in a world thirsting and hungering for meaningful connections? While I believe the answer to these questions is yes, I also know that no impotent, mediocre version of Christianity will suffice.

We say, “It’s not about us; it’s about God.” Do we believe it? The clarion call echoes forth: the church must reach up to God so it can reach out to others. Where is the authentic church that lives out the spiritual reality of Christ’s presence so that life is fulfilling in its challenges and failures, so that we are not at the mercy of our feelings, and so that the ultimate values of life are not rooted in self? Where is the church that connects with others through its continuing connection with God? Will we be that church?

Barna Research Reveals Four Mega-Trends—Part 2

by Bob Young

The research also reported that people are reframing Christianity to suit individual tastes. In comparison to past surveys, slightly fewer adults (and many fewer teens) identify themselves as Christians. The image of the Christian faith has taken a beating due to a combination of factors:

harsh media criticism, "unchristian" behavior by church people, bad personal experiences with churches, and ineffective Christian leadership. The result is that those who choose Christianity are reformulating what "Christian" and the Christian life mean.

For instance, spiritual practices among those who claim to be Christians are shifting dramatically. New practices are in vogue: racial diversity and tolerance within congregations, spiritual diversity in conversations and relationships, valuing interpersonal connections above spiritual education, and accepting divergent forms of spiritual community (e.g., house churches, small groups, and cell groups). Traditional ventures which integrate discipline and regimen in personal faith development are becoming less popular. Repeating the same weekly routines in religious events is increasingly considered stifling and irrelevant. Rigid beliefs, including the idea that there are absolute moral and spiritual truths, are perceived by a large and growing share of young people to be evidence of closed-mindedness. The result is new, individualized forms and structures of the Christian faith that will have consequences on the practices of Christianity for years to come.

What is the church to do in the midst of such startling redefinitions? What people expect from a church is changing significantly; what churches believe, teach, and do is equally in flux. It seems that some churches want to distance themselves from anything Christian, or at least from traditional versions of Christianity.

This is a time for seeking God's will and way. Some of the changes mentioned have solid foundations in Scripture. Few are the congregations that could not be helped by increased understanding, deeper fellowship, wider connections, and appreciation of diversity. Most congregations would do well to consider how assemblies can avoid being stifling and irrelevant; preachers must accept anew the challenge to bring God's word to the world in which we live. At the same time individualism, dislike for discipline, and misunderstandings of the nature of truth must be addressed.

Barna Research Reveals Four Mega-Trends—Part 3

by Bob Young

Most parents want to do a great job of raising their children. However, Barna studies conducted among parents of children under 18 revealed that few parents have a strategy or plan for how they will accomplish that goal. Barna's surveys point out that most parents underestimate the influence they can exert on their children. Consequently, they often neglect activities that would strengthen their relational bond with the children. Many parents, even those who are Christians, overlook the need to foster deeper a connection between their children and God, or to enhance the child's worldview as a critical component of their decision-making skills.

The church must acknowledge that God's word provides guidance for marriages, families, and relationships between parents and children. The church has an incredible opportunity to influence family life in our nation by providing classes which communicate God's will and plan for families. Churches must be cautious lest "church activities" separate children from parents rather than providing shared family activities and strengthened bonds. Further, the church

must not hesitate to assist parents by providing “world-view” and values-based training in Bible classes. The church is the place where Christians expect help in understanding how to help children connect with God.

Barna Research Reveals Four Mega-Trends—Part 4

By Bob Young

As today’s young adults, teenagers and adolescents have become accustomed to radical individualism, they have introduced such thinking and behaviors into the realm of faith realm. Faith is an acceptable attribute and pursuit among most young people. However, their notions of faith do not align with conventional religious perspectives. In fact, the values that young people are prone to embrace, while generally consistent with Christian beliefs, are not based on biblical foundations. For instance, young Americans have adopted values such as goodness, kindness and tolerance, but they remain skeptical of the Bible, church traditions, and rules or behaviors based upon religious teaching.

The challenge before the church is great. How can the church address individualism? How can understandings of faith find footing in the foundations of Scripture? The church has a problem with validity. Our young people, and the non-Christian community around us, will remain skeptical of church, the Bible, our traditions, and our rules until they see the living reality of Christ within us.

Barna concludes, "It is a well-established fact that our society is continually re-inventing itself. The outcome of such innovation and change, however, is largely dependent on the guidance provided by cultural leaders. It is the core function of a leader to help people apply their creative ideas and energy to reinvigorating society in alignment with a positive and preferable vision of the future. Without a shaping influence that produces a common good, we devolve into anarchy.

"Each of us has an obligation to do what is best not just for ourselves but for others in the world, too. Our society is running the risk of becoming so independent and self-absorbed that we will abandon our responsibility to society and to making the world a better place...."