

The Reshaping of the Faith in the U.S.

by Bob Young

In his book, *The Seven Faith Tribes*, George Barna suggests a new paradigm for categorizing faith in America [casual Christians, captive Christians, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, pantheists, and skeptics]. Whether this paradigm will have a long-term impact on how we think about faith remains to be seen, but some of Barna's observations are helpful. This article provides a brief summary.

Barna outlines the nature and impact of recent cultural transitions:

“We have shifted our energy from a desire and willingness to work hard to achieve significant outcomes, to an attitude of entitlement. Nowhere has this had more disastrous results than down at the church house. We expect accumulation and blessings; we expect leisure time. We see church as one way we spend our leisure time, and so we expect refreshment and recreation. We expect the secular market, and the religious market, to meet our needs in customized and personalized ways. This has produced a fragmented market, perhaps nowhere more obvious at the beginning of 2009 than in the U.S. car manufacturers who are being overwhelmed by their effort to see how many different kinds of cars they can manufacture to please increasingly small segments of consumers. Our culture has transitioned from a commitment to the common good based on shared values to an emphasis on personal good and individual values.

“In the midst of such transitions, our religious communities have not kept up. Many have refused to adapt. Rather than facilitate commitments to positive, life-affirming values, service to others, and balanced moral lives, churches and larger ministries have fallen prey to the competitive spirit of the American system. Churches are competing for bodies, dollars and talent, rather than upholding such core values as we have recently identified and studied: truth, unity, service, obedience, purpose, compassion, responsibility, accountability, and community. When the religious communities failed in their role of moral and spiritual leadership, we turned to the political and business sectors for values cues. The bar was significantly lowered—less character, less vision, more individualism. ‘Unity in the midst of diversity’ has been exchanged for ‘extreme individualism in the midst of competition,’ seeing who can have the most creature comforts and the greatest power/supremacy.”

He then shows that this shift has resulted in five major problems in our culture:

- Absence of shared vision for the future
- Value confusion leading to inability to make appropriate decisions
- Elimination of community and sense of common good
- Deterioration of respectful dialogue and fruitful exchange of competing ideas
- Abandonment of moral character and personal decency

These five major cultural problems summarize the challenge that is before the contemporary church that wants to make an impact in our changing society.