

## **Barna Research about U.S. Culture Reveals Four Mega-Challenges before the Church**

**By Bob Young**

*[reposted from my blogs on June 5-8, 2023, updating a Barna research project]*

A 2007 Barna report identified four significant “mega-themes” in contemporary U.S. culture: high self-acceptance and self-satisfaction, emerging redefinitions of Christianity, increased challenges and concerns in parenting and family dynamics, and individualized “designer faith” characterized by rootless values. The research noted that these four dynamics posed fresh challenges to biblical Christianity, challenges which the church must seek to counteract. This series of blog updates the research and suggests continuing challenges and needed adjustments as the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century nears an end.

Here is a quick summary of four challenges facing the church:

- Helping the self-satisfied
- Redefinitions of Christianity
- Strengthening the family
- Strengthening faith foundations

**Challenges for the Church: Helping the Self-Satisfied.** Barna reported that Americans generally have a high opinion of themselves. That tendency has only intensified. In the 2020s, individualism is ubiquitous. Rights and wants take precedence over responsibilities. While some Americans acknowledge the need to grow and change, most see themselves in a positive light. People listen to reports that reinforce their already existing ideas and preferences. Critical thinking is largely absent. A sense of uncertainty exists because personal growth is increasingly difficult in an unpredictable environment. Desired changes are defined by feelings more than facts. For many, change is unlikely unless the result is personal benefit or pleasure which avoids pain, conflict, and sacrifice. Individualism and selfishness have a strong hold in the personal lives and values of most adults. A social famine has come, only accelerated by the pandemic. Contemporary research shows that most adults want more meaningful social connections. A nagging sense of loneliness and isolation permeates much of society. Impersonal connections (Internet, texting, social media, and other platforms) do not fulfill the felt need.

Let me focus the challenge for the church in several questions.

- How can the church address the frustration which results when people with lofty goals and high self-regard come face to face with their inability to reach those goals?
- How 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 rooted in feelings?
- Can the church demonstrate effective and meaningful fellowship and brotherhood in a world thirsting and hungering for meaningful connections?

The challenge inherent in these questions is 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?

**Challenges for the Church: Redefinitions of Christianity.** The research reported that people are reframing Christianity to suit individual desires. Fewer adults (and many fewer teens!) identify themselves as Christians. Cultural perceptions of the Christian faith have taken a beating due to many factors: harsh media criticism, “unchristian” behavior by church people, politicization of Christianity, bad personal experiences with churches, and ineffective Christian leadership. Christians may be perceived as “unchristian.” Many who choose Christianity are reformulating the meaning of the word “Christian” and the nature of the Christian life.

Spiritual practices among those who claim to be Christians are shifting dramatically. New practices are in vogue: tolerance within congregations, spiritual diversity in conversations and relationships, valuing

interpersonal connections above spiritual education and biblical correctness, and accepting divergent forms of spiritual community (micro-churches, cell churches, and small groups). Churches that integrate spiritual discipline with personal faith development are less popular. Repeating the same weekly routines in religious events is 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 amid such startling redefinitions? What people expect from a church is changing significantly. What churches believe, teach, and do is equally in flux. Some churches seek to distance themselves from traditional versions of Christianity. Without doubt, this is a time to renew the search for God's will and way. Some of the changes being suggested have solid foundations in Scripture. Few are the congregations that could not be helped by increased understanding, deeper and wider fellowship, and appreciation of diversity. Most congregations would do well to reshape assemblies to avoid being stifling and irrelevant. Preachers must accept 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.

**Challenges for the Church: Strengthening the Family.** Most parents want to do a great job of raising their children. However, Barna research conducted among parents of children under 18 revealed that few parents have a strategy or plan for how they will accomplish that goal. Most parents underestimate the influence they can exert on their children. Consequently, they often neglect activities that strengthen their relational bond with their children. Many parents, even those who are Christians, fail to foster a deep connection between their children and God, or to help define the child's worldview as a critical component of their decision-making skills.

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 youth activities" separate children from parents rather than providing shared family activities and strengthened bonds. One approach that has helped is when youth ministry is redefined as family ministry. The church must assist parents by providing "world-view" and values-based training (and avoiding "fluff") in youth Bible classes. The church is the place where Christians expect help in understanding how to help children connect with God.

**Challenges for the Church: Strengthening the Foundations of Faith.** As today's teens and young adults have become accustomed to radical individualism, they have introduced that thinking and behavior into the faith realm. Faith is an acceptable attribute and pursuit among most young people. However, often their concepts of faith do not align with biblical 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? In many places, the church fails to speak of faith with a valid voice. 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.

The Barna summary is still helpful today. "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...."