Facing the Culture: Why Christian Ministers and Leaders Need to Speak Out

By Rebecca Hagelin

Recently, I had the honor to speak to a group of pastors and family ministry teams about the culture and its impact on Christian families.

Some wondered, "Why focus on popular culture? We know it's bad and even hostile to our beliefs. Why not take it as a given and plow ahead, keeping our focus on the good we are trying to do?"

Ministry to families is critically important - and we will succeed only if we recognize how the cultural lies factor into nearly every problem that families face today. A clear understanding of cultural challenges will help us frame the real world solutions that families need.

A friend of mine recently hosted a summer barbeque with two close friends and their families. The kids all matched up in age—teens and preteens—and soon enough were talking music, movies and TV.   Although they hung out on the lawn, the teens' voices (unknown to them) were audible at times to the adults.

A voice broke through the rest as an older teen turned the conversation to a new music video she'd seen. The video of the popular song, "Telephone," (an innocuous sounding title, right?) featured images of prison sex, lesbianism, and more. Disturbed and embarrassed, her parents stepped in to halt the conversation, but not before it became obvious that several of the other young people also had seen the video, unbeknownst to their parents. More to the point, while the teens thought the singer, Lady Gaga, was "weird," they inhaled her sexual messages without thinking. It was shocking to me that, to these kids, the video was "*not really*" shocking to them.

These are good kids from church-going families. They have attentive parents who try to protect them from exposure to explicit content. But media content is moving with lightning speed towards the hard-core extremes. And this content is being woven through the culture—through all kinds of delivery platforms (TV, mobile phone, music, internet, subscription services).   Perversity is the new norm.

As Christian leaders and ministers, we must address the culture as we help couples build their marriages, heal relationships, and parent more effectively for three reasons:

First, the moms and dads we serve are worried about the pop culture's impact on their marriages and, particularly, on their children. As leaders we need to know the hearts of the people we serve, to understand the burdens they carry. And the

burdens placed on the shoulders of husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, by our toxic culture is indeed heavy. We know that divorce is contagious in our culture, even in Christian communities. Relationships break under the weight of adultery, pornography addictions, and financial irresponsibility. And those problems become worse as our culture magnifies the allure of personal, immediate gratification—a new spouse, the latest technological gadget, edgy sexual fantasies. None of us is immune.

When it comes to our children, families of faith have even more to worry about. While we strive to raise children of character, the culture mocks both our God and our values. Nearly four out of five church-going parents are "very concerned" about the sex and violence in TV, movies, video games and on the Internet—and with good reason. Watching sex on TV makes teens more likely to have sex. And watching violence renders them less caring and compassionate in real life. Like their secular peers, our children and teens will struggle against these influences.

In short, the families we serve wrestle daily with the temptations and challenges of today's culture. Galatians 6:2 exhorts us to, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Their worries must be our worries.

Second, as pastors, ministers, and teachers, we have no choice but to pay attention to the culture: its influence is pervasive. Quite literally, popular media travels with us all day long, from the mobile phone in a teen's pocket, to the TV screen blaring above the gas pump as you fill up the family car, to the music, commercials and videos that play in elevators, lobbies, and offices everywhere. We're immersed in it, even if we never invite it into our homes. There's hardly a family decision that won't be shaped in some way by cultural influences— from what to spend money on, to what we're "entitled to" in our relationships, jobs, sex lives, or lifestyles, to what's "normal" behavior in our schools, workplaces, communities, and the media. The sheer volume of exposure means that we risk becoming desensitized to the cultural rot; we barely blink anymore when celebrities mock our morals, our values, and our faith. Over time, it will have an impact, eroding our fidelity to marriage, God-centered parenting, and to the Bible's teachings.

Families today need powerful prayer, meaningful support, and practical wisdom in order to swim against the cultural tide...Which leads me to the third reason we must focus on culture as we undertake our ministries: parents look to Christian pastors and mentors for guidance, leadership, and solutions.

They want to rise above the culture and they need our help.

Too often, however, clergy and ministry teams are silent about the cultural realities our families face on a daily basis. For example, nearly half (45%) of those parents

who are "very concerned" about media content say their church leaders *never* address popular media or the challenges it creates for family life.

When we fail to speak, we fail the families who turn to us for support. Proverbs 11:14 reminds us that, "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory."

We *must* engage the issues that are uppermost on parents' minds and offer encouragement and sound advice. For starters, we must clearly name the problems inherent in today's popular culture. Degrading and dehumanizing messages are very real—and utterly devastating when they take root in a heart or in a family. But these false messages come disguised, wrapped in glamour, seductively whispering "freedom" even as they ensnare the innocent. In the end, the lies that permeate popular culture feed our sinfulness and lead to broken vows, broken relationships, and broken families.

The good news is that through our work, in Christ, we can offer hope—and real solutions—based on biblical principles and the sound wisdom of trustworthy experts.

Let's encourage each other to be steadfast in the good work that we do. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21). We know that victory is ours! Finally, let us turn faithfully to God, expecting His blessings as we undertake his work: "For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints." (Heb 6:10).

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