You don’t have to serve in local church youth ministry for very long before a well-meaning parent – watching her child lose interest in God – pleads for you to “make her child like church.”

She may not say it quite that way, but that is basically what she means. Similarly, I imagine that all of us have looked out upon the multitude of teens, who seem to stand with arms crossed defiantly and heads cocked in ironic detachment, and wondered how to reach them. Like the parent who says, “Make my child like church,” this group challenges us, saying, “Do your best to make us like church.”

And because we care, we do what we can. However, in our efforts to make them “like (have affection for) church,” we may have succeeded in turning it around – and we’ve made the church just like them.

Certainly the church must do all we can to reach teenagers with the gospel. Didn’t Paul say in 1 Corinthians 9:22 that he “became all things to all people so that he might by all means save some?” Paul did this personally. We don’t believe he told the Corinthians this so that they might be made like church.

Are we training students to be like Paul – living transformed and culture-changing lives out among the people? Or are we imitating culture and being conformed to it?

Despite our excellent intentions, it is time that we admit that the North American evangelical community has made some false assumptions, and in an effort to make the culture like the church, we have instead made the church just like the culture.

Some readers might wonder what the big deal is: “So the church is like the culture; so what?” After all, our contemporary missionaries try to adapt the church to the prevailing culture. But it would be a mistake to assume that all cultural milieus are acceptable raw materials from which we can draw in order to make the church relevant.

So in this quest to make the church relevant, how might we have been duped, and what is at stake? It seems that we have been led to believe at least three false assumptions, all of which are related and none of which is without consequence.

False Assumption One: Culture is Neutral

Believing that culture is neutral is not only naïve, it is dangerous. Cultures, after all, are the embodiment and expression of the deepest values and assumptions of a society. That ours is now a largely secular society is obvious. But more insidious
is the fact that the dominant cultural expressions of our society are trivial and shallow.

Consumerism and entertainment are an almost unquestioned backdrop of the average teen’s existence. There is nothing innately wrong with “consuming” or with “entertainment” (or with consuming entertainment) in moderation. But as a way of life, it is antithetical to Christ and His teachings.

Christianity is demanding and sacrificial. But the “consumertainment” culture brings with it the underlying worldview that the consumer is a god with the right to be entertained and at ease at all times. It is counterproductive to appeal to selfishness and consumerism in order to attract lives are driven by how they can earn enough money to purchase the latest entertainment gizmos to fill the boredom created by leisure time.

Our students are trained by our culture to pursue such a way of life, and very early in their lives they discover that after school, they have free time. Various products and institutions compete for this free time and their billions of dollars of disposable income. Conversely, school is never presented as an optional leisure activity, and most parents don’t care if their child likes it or is entertained or not.

Most teens choose between an array of entertaining options to fill this time. As we contend for their attention using popular culture, we can unwittingly communicate that Christianity is just one more leisure activity. None of us is trying to instill such a mindset, and we can point to students who have discovered that Christianity is a way of life and not a hobby. But that is often despite what we do, not necessarily because of it.

The majority of our students do not possess the acuity to be savvy critics, so they are trained unintentionally by us to be consumers of youth group activities, flitting to the latest and greatest in order to fill the space in their lives labeled “not school.”

By using the culture’s tools which are birthed out of the need to fill leisure time, we have made it difficult for them to understand Christianity as a demanding way of life. We attempt to teach them otherwise, but they often learn another lesson we did not intend to teach.

False Assumption Three: We Are Not at War

This is probably the most treacherous of the three, and undergirds the other two. It is quite possible that we have been lulled into forgetting that this world is a battlefield upon which every idea and every cultural expression is a weapon.

The secular establishment has not forgotten this. They fight vigorously to prevent anything religious from being introduced into their causes.
or institutions. Conversely, we sometimes seem to think of this world as a playground. Perhaps we have lost our powers of discernment when it comes to this world we live in. The stakes are high and no Christian is exempt from fighting.

“As they mock Christ to His face, we learn to relax, take a joke, and create a more entertaining worship atmosphere. The only thing worse than being cut to death in the middle of a war is having it happen without realizing it.”¹ To be duped into thinking we are not at war has eternal consequences.

This is especially true of those of us who train students to be soldiers in this war. We should be vigilant about what we allow into our boot camp.

We need to be reawakened to the reality that what we do and how we accomplish it has the potential of leading our students either closer to heaven or closer to hell. No ministry tool is neutral, especially if it has been scavenged from the enemy camp.

As wise fellow laborers have noted, “As this battle moves us all along, killing and maiming, crushing and roaring, much of contemporary Christianity fights with bumper stickers and self-esteem seminars.

“As the enemy smiles and schemes to ravage our children and decapitate our churches, we try to play down our differences with our attackers and use their institutions as models for our own.

So have we been duped? We as individual pastors and leaders of student ministries must answer that for ourselves. What we do in God’s kingdom must be carefully considered at every level. We should never “wing it” when ministering to students. We should know what we are doing and why we are doing it.


For Further Reading:

Dawn, Marva J. Is It a Lost Cause?: Having the Heart of God for the Church’s Children.

Horton, Michael S. Where in the World is the Church? A Christian View of Culture and Your Role in It.

Kenneson, Philip D. & James L. Street. Selling Out the Church: The Dangers of Church Marketing.

Myers, Kenneth A. All God’s Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture.


Wells, David F. No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?

Part two of this article in the Winter 2005 issue will explore what we can do if we discover that we have been duped.

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