

## **Time Magazine Meets George Barna**

**By Don Williams**

In its cover article, Time (August 8, 2005) headlines a Special Report: "Being 13." The subtitles read: "Inside that mystifying age, when kids are shaped by the push to achieve and the pull of pop culture: Their search for God; The Rise of Cyberbullies; In Their Own Words."

Inside, Time identifies 13 as "the age of childhood leaning forward and adulthood holding back, when the world gets suddenly closer, the colors more vivid, the rules subject to never ending argument." Time continues, "Thirteen-year-olds have more power than discipline, more weapons that shields. They demand more respect from their parents and show them less." They are taking fewer orders and making more decisions. "They have absorbed the family's values because the years of Total Parental Control are coming to an end." While teens of the Millennium were optimistic, the war on terrorism leaves its mark. "Almost half, or 46%, believe that by the time they are their parents' age the U.S. will be a worse place to live." But there is reason to hope. "Today's 13-year olds are less likely to smoke, drink, do drugs, get pregnant, commit a crime or drop out of school than those of their parent's generation in the 1970's." While they are growing up in a culture that sexualizes children and immerses them in adult images, 60% say that people should postpone sex until marriage. "Even as kids are exposed to more adult messages, they seem to be acting on them less."

To understand today's teen culture, we must understand the Internet. "Technology has transformed the lives of teens, including the ways they pick on one another." Cyberbullies, especially among girls, now attack online. "Online bullying follows a gender pattern that's the opposite of what happens off-line... On playgrounds and in school hallways, boys are the primary perpetrators and victims; online, girls rule." And where are parents? One school counselor reports, "Parents are totally clueless that some of this even exists."

But what is really key here is Time's report on teen spirituality. Protestant churches are catching up with how crucial this age group is. "Nearly two-thirds of 13-year-olds polled online...said faith was somewhat or very important in their lives. Almost half said the Bible was the literal word of God." Mary Lynn Dell, adolescent psychiatrist and Episcopal priest, sees adolescents at this age able to understand abstract concepts with an expanding sense of empathy. "In religious terms, this gives them the ability to discern between institutional religion and an internal relationship with God." This means that 13 year-olds are able to take God home with them from church. Hip churches employ youth pastors in their 20's. They offer alternatives as teens grow away from their parents. "The question is, Where are they going to move to? In the youth pastors, they see people who drive jeeps and love Jesus." The question is, how deep does the adolescent church go? "For many 13-year-olds, God is less an eternal truth than a friend helping them get through a really tough year."

Time's report on 13-year-olds meets George Barna, the Christian George Gallup, in his book: Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions (Regal, 2003). It's simple. Barna has had a revolution in his thinking by discovering that children form their worldview, their belief system and their morals in the early stages of life. Up to entering adolescence (at age 13) they are the most susceptible to conversion. Rather than simply getting the church's left-overs in staff and facilities, they should be THE target of our evangelism and nurture. If we put our emphasis here, we would change the church and the culture within a generation. Time wakes us up and Barna

shakes us up. The upshot is that the church is targeting the wrong audience. While adults absorb our resources, they must be redirected to children and youth. Here is where the harvest is white, ready for the picking.

The simple way to discover our operative values is to find out how we spend our resources. We build and furnish our buildings. We hire staff and maintain programs. And where is this all directed? At adults, the least likely to have a worldview change, a moral reformation and a spiritual revolution. Why? Because all of this was basically formed in childhood. Apart from an occasional radical conversion or encounter with God, life for adults, including spiritual life, will go on as usual. So how are churches doing, forming children and early teens as grounded Christians, ready to grow up into serious followers of Jesus? Not well, is Barna's answer.

For Barna, this is great myth of modern ministry: "Adults are where the Kingdom action is." (p. 12) But after researching when people come to Christ and how they develop, he concludes: "ministry to children is the single most strategic ministry in God's kingdom [and will have]...the greatest possible impact." (p. 14) Moreover, it is not the church but the family that is central in this. The years from 5 to 12 are the most critical in all of our lives: "it is during these crucial years that lifelong habits, values, beliefs and attitudes are formed." (p. 18) So, if we are to evangelize this generation, change the church and the culture, then our target is clear: the nation's children.

Barna goes on, as does Time (focusing on 13 year olds), to analyze these kids. Their world is not our world. For example, "More than 4 out of 5 children under 13 years of age use a computer at school on a regular basis." (p. 19) "Almost 1 out of every 10 teenagers had sexual intercourse prior to his or her thirteenth birthday and that number is steadily rising." (p. 20) "1 out of every 10 eighth graders smokes daily (the proportion rises to 1 out of 4 by age 17); 1 out of 5 used drugs of some type in the past year..." (pp. 20-21) "Kids ages 2 to 7 average nearly 25 hours per week of mass media intake; the figure balloons to almost 48 hours each among those ages 8 to 13." But now the favorite medium of all is the Internet for 54 percent of kids under 8 and 73 percent of kids 8 to 12 years old. (p. 23)

What are the dominant social concerns kids face today? Protecting their personal rights, guns at school, drunk driving, self-esteem, quality of education, and drug abuse. But they still have all our basic needs to be trusted, to be loved, to feel safe and to find purpose in life. (p. 24) Barna concludes, "The gifts of childhood that have become or are rapidly becoming extinct include innocence, civility, patience, joy and trust." (p. 26)

While Barna calls the church to radically reevaluate its priorities, he sees this in a strong Biblical context. We are in a spiritual battle against the kingdom of Satan for the souls of our kids. They need not only to be converted, but to embrace God's grand purpose for their lives and build a Biblical worldview. When Barna clearly defines "evangelical" he concludes, "Just 4 percent of all 13-year-olds are classified as evangelicals. This leaves a majority of self-professed Christians as being neither evangelical nor born again. In total, 59 percent of all 13-year-olds are 'notational Christians' – people who say they are Christians but are not committed followers of Christ in any discernible way." (pp. 33-34) Barna concludes, "...only 3 percent of the nation's 13-year-olds have a biblical worldview, which serves as the foundation for their decision making." They would rather base their decisions on their feelings (37%) or what people expect (26%) rather than the Bible (8%). In fact, these children largely mirror the religious beliefs of their parents.

Since this is not a review of Barna's book, we stop the analysis here. But the wakeup call is clear. We must radically re-evaluate the use of resources in relationship to this data if we are to assure a strong evangelical church for the next generation and effectively penetrate the present culture.

Among the many questions Barna raises are the training of our leadership, how we equip parents to raise their children in a clear evangelical faith (doctrinally, morally, socially, spiritually) with a Biblical worldview, the impact of the media and the Internet on their values and sense of self, and the kind of community they are being incorporated into in the life of local congregations. As Barna says, “If you want to have a lasting influence upon the world, you must invest in people’s lives; and if you want to maximize that investment, then you must invest in those people while they are young.” (p.42) Do we have the conviction to redirect leadership, training, and finances for this? If not we will simply join the dying congregations of aging adults scattered all around us.