

# How to Change Our Culture

Jim Denison

January 09, 2012

(ABP) -- Do American Christians make a difference in our culture? A recent **Pew Research Center report** suggests that we want to.

The Center's findings indicate that "religiously active Americans are more trusting of others, are more optimistic about their impact on their community, think more highly of their community, are more involved in more organizations of all kinds, and devote more time to the groups to which they are active."

The author of the report notes: "Some analysts have been concerned that those who have active spiritual lives might not be as engaged with the secular world. We see the opposite. Those who are religiously active are more likely to participate in all kinds of groups and more likely to feel good about their communities."

Here's my question: If Christians are so engaged in our culture, why is our culture in the shape it's in? America has the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. Some 90 percent of our 8-to-16-year-olds have viewed pornography online, most while doing their homework. Property theft in America costs us more than \$15 billion a year. In 2010, more than 9.9 million Americans were victimized by identity theft, at a cost of \$5 billion. Last week I experienced this phenomenon personally -- a research service to which I subscribe was hacked, my credit card number was stolen, and thieves used it to buy clothing in London.

There are several ways to explain this disconnect. One is a chicken-and-egg conundrum: Are religious people more likely to be "joiners," or are "joiners" more likely to be religious? Do we connect with our culture to make a difference for the Kingdom, or do we join community groups because we like joining groups?

A second way to interpret our apparent lack of moral influence is to ask: How much worse would our culture be if Christians weren't so community-minded?

A third, more negative, possibility is that American Christians leave their faith at church. We may be involved in our culture, but we bring little to it in the way of biblical thinking. According to the **Pew Forum's 2010 Religion and Public Life Survey**, when "conservative" Christians consider cultural issues, faith is seldom a significant influence.

I'd like to suggest a fourth option: Many of us don't understand how culture changes. James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World* is a provocative, ground-breaking analysis of the ways culture does and doesn't change. Hunter teaches sociology at the

University of Virginia and heads the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture. I consider him the most profound voice on culture change in America today.

According to Hunter, culture does not change by winning elections. For instance, during the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, divorce rates escalated. Gay marriage made significant inroads in America during the presidency of George W. Bush. Neither fact is the fault of the presidents in office, of course, but both illustrate the limited capacity of political leaders to affect culture.

Culture does not change by evangelism and church attendance. More than 80 percent of Americans are identified with some faith community, yet our culture is intensely secular and materialistic. By contrast, the Jewish community has never comprised more than 3.5 percent of our population, yet its contributions to science, literature, art, music, film and architecture have been remarkable. At least 180 Jews have been awarded the Nobel Prize, constituting 36 percent of all American recipients.

Nor does culture change by popularity. For example, while more evangelical books are being sold than ever before, they target the faith community rather than the cultural mainstream. Few are ever reviewed by *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*.

How does culture change? According to Hunter, by "manifesting faithful influence." When Christians live as salt and light in our world, we wield an effect out of proportion to our size. If we seek our highest level of cultural achievement, then exercise that influence as faithful followers of Jesus, our Lord will use our witness in ways that will make a dramatic impact over time.

In this new year, I'm more committed than ever before to loving God and neighbor, and trusting the Kingdom results to the King. Will you join me?

---

**Dr. Denison is a senior columnist for the Associated Baptist Press. This article originally appeared in his Faithlines column and is copyrighted by ABP and used here with its permission.**