THE DAILY BREAD

The Mission of the Apostles



Engaging a Post-Christian Culture

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

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Living Faithfully in a World That Has Forgotten

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INTRODUCTION

Living in Babylon

The ordinary Christian today lives, in a sense, in Babylon, in a culture that no longer shares his faith and increasingly opposes it, and he must figure out how to live faithfully there, in a world that has largely forgotten the God he serves. This is not the abstract problem of how the Church should engage the culture, which is addressed elsewhere, but the immediate, personal problem of how a single Christian man, with a job and a family and a life, actually lives his faith in the midst of a post-Christian world, how he resists its pressures, raises his children in it, uses its media, witnesses within it, and keeps his hope through it. These are the practical questions of daily faithful living in a culture that is no longer Christian, and most believers face them with no clear strategy.

This book is a practical guide to engaging the post-Christian culture as an ordinary Christian living in it. It assumes an understanding of what the post-Christian culture is and of the Church's larger mission to it, and it addresses the personal, day-to-day question of how a man lives faithfully and witnesses effectively in a world that has forgotten the faith. The aim is to equip a man to be, like the sons of Issachar who understood the times, a Christian who knows how to live in his particular cultural moment, neither retreating from the post-Christian world in fear nor being absorbed into it, but engaging it faithfully, witnessing within it, and keeping his hope through it. The world has changed, and a man must learn how to live his faith in the world as it now is.

Of the sons of Issachar, men who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. — 1 Chronicles 12:32

We will begin with the fundamental posture of engagement rather than retreat, being in the world without being of it. We will take up living in a way that is both counter-cultural and attractive. We will address standing firm under the specific pressures the culture exerts. We will consider the crucial challenge of raising children in a post-Christian culture. We will take up the personal discipline of guarding what one consumes from the culture's media. We will see how to be leaven in one's own corner of the culture. And we will arrive at the hope and joy that should mark the Christian's engagement rather than fear.

CHAPTER ONE

Engage, Do Not Retreat

In the World but Not of It

Faced with a hostile culture, the Christian is tempted toward one of two errors, retreat into a defensive Christian enclave or absorption into the surrounding world, and the right path avoids both, engaging the culture while remaining distinct from it, being in the world but not of it. The retreat abandons the mission, while the absorption abandons the faith, and the faithful Christian must find the harder path between them, present and engaged in the culture yet not conformed to it. Understanding this fundamental posture of engagement rather than retreat, being in the world without being of it, lays the foundation for faithful living in a post-Christian culture.

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. — John 17:15

The Temptation to Retreat

One temptation facing the Christian in a hostile culture is to retreat, to withdraw into a defensive Christian enclave, minimizing contact with the surrounding world and huddling in a protected Christian bubble, but this abandons the mission and is not what Christ asks. The hostility and corruption of the post-Christian culture can make retreat attractive, the withdrawal into a Christian enclave where one is protected from the culture's pressures and surrounded only by fellow believers, but this retreat, however safe it feels, abandons the mission to the world that Christ gave his followers. Christ explicitly prayed not that his followers be taken out of the world but that they be kept from evil while remaining in it, which rules out the retreat into a protected enclave as the Christian's path. The Christian is called to remain in the world, engaged with the culture, present as salt and light, not withdrawn into a defensive bubble, and the temptation to retreat, however understandable, must be resisted as an abandonment of the mission. The temptation to retreat into a defensive Christian enclave, withdrawing from the hostile culture into a protected bubble, is understandable but must be resisted, for it abandons the mission Christ gave his followers, who are called to remain in the world as salt and light rather than withdrawing from it, as Christ himself prayed not that they be taken out of the world but kept from evil within it.

The Temptation to Blend In

The opposite temptation is to blend in, to be absorbed into the surrounding culture, adopting its values and becoming indistinguishable from it, but this abandons the faith and is equally to be resisted. If retreat abandons the mission, absorption abandons the faith, for the Christian who blends completely into the post-Christian culture, adopting its values, conforming to its assumptions, becoming indistinguishable from the world

around him, has ceased to be a faithful witness and has let the culture form him rather than forming it. This absorption is the more common failure, the quiet conforming by which many Christians gradually become, in values and life, just like the surrounding culture, distinct only by a nominal religious label; and it is as much a failure as retreat, for it abandons the very distinctiveness that makes the Christian a witness. The Christian is called to remain distinct from the culture even while engaged with it, not conformed to its values, and the temptation to blend in must be resisted as an abandonment of the faith. The temptation to blend in, being absorbed into the surrounding culture and becoming indistinguishable from it, is the more common failure and must be equally resisted, for if retreat abandons the mission, absorption abandons the faith, and the Christian who conforms to the culture's values has ceased to be a witness, letting the culture form him rather than remaining the distinct presence Christ calls him to be.

The Harder Middle Path

The right path is the harder middle one, engaging the culture while remaining distinct from it, being fully present and involved in the world yet not conformed to its values, which is what it means to be in the world but not of it. Between retreat and absorption lies the path Christ actually asks, remaining fully in the world, engaged with the culture, present and involved, yet not of the world, not conformed to its values, keeping one's distinctiveness as a Christian even while engaged, being in the world but not of it. This middle path is harder than either extreme, for it requires both genuine engagement with the culture and genuine distinctiveness from it, both presence in the world and difference from it, held together in a tension that neither retreat nor absorption has to maintain. But it is the faithful path, the only one that keeps both the mission and the faith, and the Christian in a post-Christian culture must walk it, engaged yet distinct, in the world yet not of it. The harder middle path, engaging the culture while remaining distinct from it, being fully present in the world yet not conformed to its values, is the faithful path Christ asks, harder than either retreat or absorption because it requires both genuine engagement and genuine distinctiveness held together, but it is the only path that keeps both the mission and the faith, being in the world but not of it.

CHAPTER TWO

Different and Attractive

Living a Visibly Better Life

The Christian's engagement with a post-Christian culture works best when his life is both visibly different from the culture and evidently attractive, a life so good that it draws the culture's attention and raises questions. The believer who is merely different, odd, or harsh repels, while the one who is different in a way that is evidently better, happier, and more whole draws, and this combination of distinctiveness and attractiveness is the heart of personal witness in a post-Christian culture. Understanding how to live a life that is both counter-cultural and attractive equips a man to witness to the culture by the very quality of his life.

Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that… they may see your good deeds and glorify God. — 1 Peter 2:12

Visibly Different

The first requirement is to be visibly different from the surrounding culture, living by different values in a way that can actually be seen, for the Christian who is indistinguishable from the culture offers it nothing and witnesses to nothing. A faithful Christian life in a post-Christian culture will be visibly different, marked by different priorities, different behavior, different values than the surrounding world, and this visible difference is essential to witness, for the Christian who looks and lives exactly like everyone else gives the culture no reason to notice anything and witnesses to nothing. The difference must be visible, actually seen in how a man lives, in his integrity, his treatment of others, his priorities, his refusal of what the culture accepts, his embrace of what it rejects, so that his life stands out as genuinely other. This visible difference, far from being something to hide or minimize, is the beginning of witness, for it is what makes the culture notice and raises the questions that witness answers. Visibly different, living by different values in a way that can actually be seen, is the first requirement of witness in a post-Christian culture, for the Christian who is indistinguishable from the culture offers it nothing and witnesses to nothing, while the one whose life visibly stands out in its integrity, priorities, and values gives the culture reason to notice and raises the questions that witness answers.

Evidently Attractive

But visible difference alone is not enough, for the difference must also be attractive, evidently better and more appealing than the culture's way, drawing people rather than merely repelling them as strange or harsh. A Christian can be visibly different in a way that repels, appearing odd, harsh, joyless, or judgmental, which witnesses to nothing good and drives people away, or he can be different in a way that attracts, his life evidently happier, more whole, more peaceful, more loving than the culture's, drawing

people who sense that he has something they lack. The witness that reaches a post-Christian culture is this attractive difference, the life that is not merely other but evidently better, so good and appealing that it makes the culture's way look impoverished by comparison and draws people toward its source. The Christian must therefore be not merely different but attractively different, his distinctiveness joined to an evident goodness, joy, and wholeness that draws rather than repels. Evidently attractive, with a difference that is not merely strange but better and more appealing than the culture's way, is the necessary complement to visible difference, for the Christian can be different in a way that repels or in a way that draws, and the witness that reaches a post-Christian culture is the attractive difference, the life so evidently good and whole that it makes the culture's way look impoverished and draws people toward its source.

Let Them See Your Life

Finally, the Christian must let his different and attractive life be seen, not hiding it but living it openly before the watching culture, for a witness unseen witnesses to no one, and the attractive difference must be visible to do its work. Scripture counsels keeping one's conduct honorable among the unbelievers so that they may see the good deeds and glorify God, which assumes that the Christian's good life is seen by the watching culture; the witness of a different and attractive life depends on its being visible. The Christian must therefore not hide his faith or his distinctive life but live it openly before the culture, letting his good deeds, his integrity, his joy, his love be seen by those around him, so that his attractive difference can do its work of raising questions and drawing people. This letting one's life be seen, living the different and attractive life openly before the watching culture, is essential to witness, for the life hidden witnesses to no one, while the life seen draws and provokes. Let them see your life, living your different and attractive life openly before the watching culture rather than hiding it, and a man's witness does its work, for Scripture assumes the Christian's good life is seen by those around him, and the attractive difference that witnesses to a post-Christian culture depends on being visible, raising questions and drawing people only when it is actually seen.

CHAPTER THREE

Holding the Line

Standing Firm Under Cultural Pressure

Living faithfully in a post-Christian culture means facing constant pressure to conform, to abandon one's convictions, to go along with what the culture demands, and the

Christian must learn to stand firm under this pressure without either capitulating or becoming needlessly combative. The pressure to conform is relentless and often subtle, and the Christian who does not learn to stand firm will be gradually worn down into conformity, while the one who stands firm wrongly becomes an abrasive culture warrior. Understanding how to hold the line, standing firm under cultural pressure with both conviction and grace, equips a man to remain faithful without being either conformed or combative.

Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. — 1 Corinthians 16:13

The Relentless Pressure

The first thing to recognize is the relentless pressure to conform that the culture exerts, often subtly, through social expectation, ridicule, and the sheer weight of surrounding assumption, which gradually wears down the Christian who does not recognize and resist it. The post-Christian culture exerts constant pressure on the Christian to conform, to abandon his convictions, to go along with what the culture now assumes and demands, and this pressure comes not usually as open persecution but as subtle social expectation, the raised eyebrow, the mild ridicule, the sense of being out of step, the weight of everyone around assuming otherwise. This relentless, subtle pressure gradually wears down the Christian who does not recognize it, slowly conforming his views and behavior to the culture's without his quite noticing, until he has drifted into conformity. Recognizing this relentless pressure to conform, and its subtle operation, is the first step to resisting it and standing firm. The relentless pressure to conform that the culture exerts, often subtly through social expectation, ridicule, and the weight of surrounding assumption, gradually wears down the Christian who does not recognize it, slowly conforming his views and behavior without his noticing, and recognizing this pressure and its subtle operation is the first step to resisting it and standing firm against the drift into conformity.

Stand Firm With Conviction

Against this pressure the Christian must stand firm with conviction, holding to his faith and his convictions despite the pressure to abandon them, having the courage to be out of step with the culture when faithfulness requires it. Scripture calls the Christian to stand firm in the faith and to act like a man, and this standing firm is precisely what the cultural pressure demands, the courage to hold one's convictions despite the social cost, to remain faithful when the culture pushes hard toward conformity, to be willing to be out of step, ridiculed, or disadvantaged for the sake of the truth. This firmness requires conviction, a settled grounding in the truth of one's faith that does not bend to social

pressure, and courage, the willingness to bear the cost of standing out, both of which the Christian must cultivate to resist the relentless pull toward conformity. The man who stands firm with conviction, holding his faith despite the pressure, remains faithful in a culture that would wear him down, while the man who lacks this firmness is gradually conformed. Stand firm with conviction, holding to your faith despite the pressure to abandon it and having the courage to be out of step with the culture when faithfulness requires, and a man remains faithful where the pressure would otherwise wear him down, for standing firm requires both the conviction that does not bend to social pressure and the courage to bear the cost of standing out, both of which the Christian must cultivate.

Firm but Not Combative

Yet standing firm must not become combativeness, for the Christian is called to hold his convictions with grace rather than belligerence, firm in the truth but not an abrasive culture warrior who repels more than he witnesses. There is a way of standing firm that becomes belligerent, turning the Christian into an angry culture warrior who holds his convictions with a combative harshness that repels people and discredits the faith, and this is as much a failure as conformity, for it witnesses to anger rather than to Christ. The Christian must hold his convictions firmly but graciously, standing for the truth without belligerence, firm but not harsh, convinced but not combative, so that his firmness witnesses to conviction and grace together rather than to mere culture-war anger. This combination of firmness and grace, holding one's convictions without becoming combative, is the mark of faithful standing, for the firm but gracious Christian witnesses to the truth attractively, while the combative culture warrior repels. Firm but not combative, holding your convictions with grace rather than belligerence, is the mark of faithful standing, for the Christian is called to stand for the truth without becoming an abrasive culture warrior whose harshness repels and discredits the faith, and the man who is firm but gracious witnesses to conviction and grace together, while the combative one witnesses only to anger.

CHAPTER FOUR

Raising Them in Babylon

Forming Children Against the Culture

Perhaps the most urgent challenge of living in a post-Christian culture is raising children in it, forming them in the faith against the powerful counter-formation of a culture that

will shape them in unbelief if the parents do not shape them in faith. The culture forms children constantly and powerfully, through its schools, screens, and assumptions, and parents who do not deliberately form their children in the faith will find the culture has formed them against it. Understanding how to raise children faithfully in a post-Christian culture, forming them against its counter-formation, is among the most important practical challenges a Christian parent faces.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked… but his delight is in the law of the Lord. — Psalm 1:1-2

The Culture Forms Your Children

The first thing parents must grasp is that the culture is actively forming their children, powerfully and constantly, through its media, education, and pervasive assumptions, so that the children will be formed by the culture in unbelief unless the parents deliberately form them in faith. Children are formed by the culture they grow up in, absorbing its values, assumptions, and vision through its screens, schools, peers, and pervasive influence, and in a post-Christian culture this formation is a formation in unbelief, shaping children toward the culture's secular values and away from the faith. Parents who do not recognize this, who assume their children will absorb the faith naturally or who leave their formation to the culture, will find that the culture has formed their children against the faith, for the culture's counter-formation is relentless and will prevail unless deliberately countered. Recognizing that the culture is actively forming their children in unbelief is the first step for parents to the deliberate counter-formation that faithful parenting in a post-Christian culture requires. The culture forms your children, powerfully and constantly through its media, education, and assumptions, shaping them toward its secular values and away from the faith, and parents must grasp that their children will be formed by the culture in unbelief unless they deliberately form them in faith, for the culture's counter-formation is relentless and will prevail unless it is recognized and countered.

Form Them Deliberately

Against the culture's formation, parents must form their children deliberately in the faith, actively teaching, modeling, and immersing them in the faith strongly enough to counter the culture's powerful influence. The counter to the culture's formation is the parents' deliberate formation, the active and intentional forming of children in the faith through teaching, example, prayer, the rhythms of a faithful home, and immersion in a Christian vision strong enough to counter the culture's pull. This deliberate formation must be strong and intentional, for it is competing against a powerful cultural counter-

formation, and a weak or passive religious upbringing will not hold against the culture's relentless shaping; the parents must form their children in the faith deliberately and strongly, giving them roots deep enough to withstand the culture. Parents who form their children deliberately, immersing them in the faith and giving them a strong Christian formation, can counter the culture's influence, while those who form them weakly or leave it to chance will lose them to the culture. Form them deliberately, actively teaching, modeling, and immersing your children in the faith strongly enough to counter the culture's powerful influence, and parents can raise faithful children in a post-Christian culture, for the deliberate and strong formation of children in the faith is the necessary counter to the culture's relentless counter-formation, and only a deliberate, intentional forming will hold against the culture's pull.

Prepare Them to Stand

Beyond forming children in the faith, parents must prepare them to stand in a hostile culture, equipping them not merely to hold the faith at home but to defend and live it amid the pressures and challenges they will face in the world. It is not enough to form children in the faith within the protected home; they must be prepared to carry that faith into a hostile culture, to face the challenges, pressures, and arguments against it, to stand firm when the culture pushes them to abandon it. This preparation involves equipping children to understand and defend their faith, exposing them in an age-appropriate way to the challenges they will face and helping them answer them, strengthening their convictions so they can stand, and gradually preparing them for the independence in which they will face the culture on their own. Parents who prepare their children to stand, not merely sheltering them but equipping them for the hostile world, give them a faith that can survive outside the home, while those who only shelter them produce a faith that collapses on first contact with the culture. Prepare them to stand, equipping your children not merely to hold the faith at home but to defend and live it amid the pressures and challenges of a hostile culture, and parents give their children a faith that can survive in the world, for it is not enough to form children within the protected home; they must be prepared to carry the faith into the hostile culture and stand firm when it pushes them to abandon it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Guarding the Gates

What You Let Into Your Mind and Home

A practical and much-neglected part of living faithfully in a post-Christian culture is guarding what one lets into one's mind and home from the culture's media, for a man is formed by what he consumes, and the undisciplined intake of the culture's content gradually conforms him to it. The screens and media through which the culture reaches us are powerful formative forces, and the Christian who consumes them undiscerningly is formed by them against his faith, while the one who guards what he takes in protects his formation. Understanding how to guard the gates, disciplining what one lets into one's mind and home from the culture's media, is an essential practical discipline of faithful living in a post-Christian culture.

I will not set before my eyes anything that is worthless. — Psalm 101:3

You Are Formed by What You Consume

The first thing to grasp is that a man is formed by what he consumes, that the media, content, and messages a man takes in gradually shape his mind, values, and vision, so that the undisciplined consumption of the culture's content forms a man in the culture's image. What a man watches, reads, listens to, and takes in through the culture's media is not neutral but formative, gradually shaping his assumptions, desires, and vision in the direction of the content he consumes, so that the man who consumes the culture's content undiscerningly is slowly formed by it, his mind and values conformed to the culture through the steady intake of its messages. This formation by consumption is powerful and largely unconscious, working on a man below the level of awareness through the sheer volume and repetition of the content he takes in, so that a man can be formed against his faith without realizing it simply by what he consumes. Recognizing that one is formed by what one consumes, that the culture's content is formative and not neutral, is the first step to guarding what one lets in. You are formed by what you consume, for the media and content a man takes in gradually shape his mind, values, and vision, and the undisciplined consumption of the culture's content forms a man in the culture's image, working powerfully and largely unconsciously through the volume and repetition of its messages, so that recognizing this formative power is the first step to guarding what one lets into one's mind.

Be Discerning About Media

The practical response is to be discerning about the media one consumes, choosing deliberately what to take in and what to refuse rather than passively consuming whatever the culture offers, guarding one's mind against formation in the wrong direction. The Christian need not reject all the culture's media, but he must be discerning, choosing deliberately what he consumes, refusing what would form him wrongly, limiting his

intake of what coarsens or corrupts, and seeking out what is good, true, and beautiful, so that his consumption forms him rightly rather than conforming him to the culture. This discernment requires deliberate choice rather than passive consumption, a conscious guarding of what one lets into one's mind, a willingness to refuse and to limit as well as to choose well, which is the opposite of the undiscerning consumption that characterizes the age. The man who is discerning about his media, choosing deliberately and refusing what would harm him, guards his formation, while the man who consumes passively is formed by whatever the culture feeds him. Be discerning about media, choosing deliberately what to consume and what to refuse rather than passively taking in whatever the culture offers, and a man guards his mind against formation in the wrong direction, for the Christian need not reject all media but must be discerning, refusing what would form him wrongly and seeking what is good, true, and beautiful, which requires deliberate choice rather than the passive consumption that characterizes the age.

Guard Your Home

Beyond his own consumption, a man must guard what enters his home, especially for the sake of his children, controlling the media and influences that reach his family through the gates of the household. The home is reached by the culture's media through many gates, the screens and devices that bring the culture's content into the household, and a man responsible for his home must guard these gates, controlling what enters, protecting his children especially from the formative influence of harmful content, setting limits and standards for what the culture is allowed to bring into the home. This guarding of the home's gates is a particular responsibility of the father, who is responsible for the formation of his children and the character of his household, and who must therefore control the media and influences that reach his family, not allowing the culture unrestricted access to the minds of his children. The man who guards his home, controlling what enters through its gates, protects his family's formation, while the man who leaves the gates open allows the culture to form his children freely. Guard your home, controlling the media and influences that reach your family through the gates of the household and protecting your children especially from harmful content, and a man protects his family's formation, for the home is reached by the culture through many gates, and the father responsible for his household must guard these gates, not allowing the culture unrestricted access to the minds of his children but setting limits and standards for what it may bring in.

CHAPTER SIX

Leaven in Your Corner

Changing the Culture Where You Are

While the transformation of the whole culture is a vast work beyond any individual, every Christian can be leaven in his own corner, exerting a quiet transforming influence on the small piece of the culture he actually touches, and this is the ordinary Christian's part in the renewal of the culture. A man cannot change the whole culture, but he can influence his own workplace, neighborhood, and circles, being a small but real force for good where he actually is. Understanding how to be leaven in one's own corner, exerting a transforming influence on the piece of the culture one touches, gives the ordinary Christian a real and achievable part in the renewal of the culture.

The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened. — Matthew 13:33

You Can Influence Your Corner

The first encouragement is that while a man cannot change the whole culture, he can genuinely influence his own corner of it, the workplace, neighborhood, family, and circles he actually touches, exerting a real transforming influence where he is. The vast scale of the culture can make an individual feel powerless, as though nothing he does could matter against so large a thing, but this overlooks the real influence a man has in his own corner, the piece of the culture he actually touches, where his witness, example, and influence genuinely matter. A man cannot change the whole culture, but he can influence his workplace, shape his neighborhood, form his family, affect his circles, being a real force for good in the small piece of the world he actually inhabits, and this corner-sized influence, multiplied across many Christians, is how the culture is actually leavened. Recognizing that he can genuinely influence his own corner, even if not the whole culture, frees a man from the paralysis of feeling powerless and directs him to the real influence he can exert. You can influence your corner, the workplace, neighborhood, family, and circles you actually touch, even if you cannot change the whole culture, and recognizing this frees a man from the paralysis of feeling powerless against the culture's vast scale, directing him to the real transforming influence he can exert in the piece of the world he actually inhabits, which multiplied across many Christians is how the culture is leavened.

Leaven Works Quietly

The way a man influences his corner is usually not through dramatic action but through the quiet, pervasive influence of leaven, the slow transforming effect of a faithful presence that gradually works through the whole, as leaven works unseen through the dough. Christ compared the kingdom's influence to leaven, which works quietly and unseen, gradually transforming the whole lump through its pervasive presence, and this is how a Christian typically influences his corner, not through dramatic interventions but through the quiet, steady influence of a faithful presence, gradually affecting the culture around him through his example, his relationships, and his witness over time. This leaven-like influence is often invisible in the moment, working slowly and beneath the surface, but it is real and cumulative, gradually transforming the corner it touches through the pervasive effect of a faithful life. The man who understands that leaven works quietly does not despise the small and unseen influence of his faithful presence, knowing that it is working, like leaven, through the whole. Leaven works quietly, through the slow, pervasive influence of a faithful presence rather than through dramatic action, and a man influences his corner as leaven works through dough, gradually transforming the culture around him through his example, relationships, and witness over time, an influence often invisible in the moment but real and cumulative, so that the man who understands this does not despise the quiet, unseen influence of his faithful life.

Faithful Presence Transforms

Finally, the deepest way a man leavens his corner is through faithful presence, simply being a faithful Christian consistently present in his corner of the culture over time, for the sustained presence of a faithful life exerts a transforming influence that no program could. The most powerful cultural influence an ordinary Christian exerts is not through any particular action but through his faithful presence, his being a genuine Christian consistently present in his workplace, neighborhood, and circles over the years, exerting through that sustained faithful presence a gradual transforming influence on the culture around him. This faithful presence transforms because it offers the culture a living alternative, a sustained witness to a different and better way, gradually affecting those around it through the cumulative influence of a faithful life consistently lived in their midst. The man who is a faithful presence in his corner over time leavens it, not through programs or campaigns but through the gradual transforming influence of his sustained faithful life, which is the ordinary Christian's most powerful cultural influence. Faithful presence transforms, for the deepest way a man leavens his corner is simply by being a faithful Christian consistently present in it over time, exerting through that sustained presence a gradual transforming influence that no program could, offering the culture a living alternative and affecting those around him through the cumulative influence of a

faithful life, which is the ordinary Christian's most powerful means of leavening the culture where he is.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hope, Not Fear

Engaging the Culture With Confidence

The Christian's engagement with a post-Christian culture should finally be marked not by fear but by hope and confidence, for the believer has grounds for hope that the fearful, defensive, culture-warrior posture forgets, and the manner of his engagement matters as much as its substance. Much Christian engagement with the culture is driven by fear, a defensive anxiety that produces either retreat or belligerence, but the faithful engagement is hopeful and confident, rooted in the believer's deeper security. Understanding how to engage the culture with hope rather than fear completes the practical guide by setting the right spirit for the whole endeavor.

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. — 1 John 4:4

Fear Distorts Engagement

The first thing to recognize is that fear distorts a Christian's engagement with the culture, driving him toward either the retreat of the frightened or the belligerence of the anxious culture warrior, so that fear must be overcome for engagement to be faithful. Much Christian engagement with the post-Christian culture is driven by fear, by anxiety about the culture's hostility and the faith's apparent decline, and this fear distorts the engagement, producing either a fearful retreat into a defensive enclave or an anxious belligerence that fights the culture with a harsh, combative spirit. Both the retreat and the belligerence are products of fear, and both distort the Christian's witness, the one abandoning the mission and the other witnessing to anxiety and anger rather than to Christ; fear is a poor foundation for faithful engagement. Recognizing that fear distorts engagement, driving it toward retreat or belligerence, is the first step to overcoming the fear and engaging the culture faithfully, in the right spirit. Fear distorts engagement, driving a Christian toward either the retreat of the frightened or the belligerence of the anxious culture warrior, and recognizing this is the first step to overcoming fear, for both the fearful retreat and the anxious belligerence are products of fear that distort the Christian's witness, and fear is a poor foundation for the faithful engagement that must be rooted in hope rather than anxiety.

The Grounds for Hope

Against fear, the Christian has solid grounds for hope, the assurance that God is greater than the culture, that he is at work in it, and that the faith will not finally be defeated, which should ground a confident rather than a fearful engagement. The believer's hope rests on real grounds, that the One who is in him is greater than the one who is in the world, that God is at work even in the post-Christian culture, drawing souls and advancing his purposes, that the culture's own emptiness is opening it to seek again, and that Christ has promised his Church will not be defeated. These grounds for hope are solid, and they should ground the Christian's engagement in confidence rather than fear, for the believer engages the culture not as one fighting a losing battle in anxiety but as one confident in a God who is greater than the culture and whose purposes cannot be defeated. The Christian who grasps these grounds for hope engages the culture with confidence, freed from the fear that distorts engagement, knowing that God is greater and will prevail. The grounds for hope, the assurance that God is greater than the culture, at work in it, and certain to prevail, should ground the Christian's engagement in confidence rather than fear, for the believer engages not as one fighting a losing battle in anxiety but as one confident in a God who is greater than the world and whose purposes cannot be defeated, and these solid grounds for hope free him from the fear that distorts faithful engagement.

Engage With Joy

Finally, the Christian should engage the culture with joy, for the hopeful, confident believer can engage even a hostile culture with a joy that is itself a witness, more attractive and more powerful than any fearful or belligerent engagement. The believer rooted in hope rather than fear can engage the culture with joy, with the confidence and peace of one who knows that God is greater and will prevail, and this joyful engagement is itself a powerful witness, far more attractive than the fearful retreat or the belligerent culture war, for the joyful Christian draws where the anxious or angry one repels. Joy in the face of a hostile culture witnesses to a hope and a security the culture cannot account for, drawing people and commending the faith more powerfully than any argument, and it is the natural fruit of an engagement rooted in hope rather than fear. The Christian should therefore engage the culture not grimly or anxiously but with joy, the joy of one secure in a God who is greater than the world, letting his joyful confidence be itself a witness to the hope that is in him. Engage with joy, for the hopeful, confident believer can engage even a hostile culture with a joy that is itself a powerful witness, more attractive than any fearful or belligerent engagement, drawing people where anxiety and anger repel, and witnessing to a hope and security the culture cannot account for, so that the

Christian engages the culture not grimly but with the joy of one secure in a God who is greater than the world.

CONCLUSION

Faithful in a Foreign Land

The ordinary Christian today lives in a kind of Babylon, a culture that has forgotten his faith, and this book has been about living faithfully there. We have seen that the right posture is engagement rather than retreat or absorption, being in the world but not of it; that the Christian witnesses by living a life both different and attractive; that he must stand firm under cultural pressure with conviction but not combativeness; that he must form his children deliberately against the culture's counter-formation; that he must guard what he and his family consume from the culture's media; that he can be leaven in his own corner through faithful presence; and that he should engage the culture with hope and joy rather than fear.

None of it is easy, for living faithfully in a culture that has forgotten the faith is a genuine challenge, requiring wisdom, conviction, and perseverance. But it is possible, and it is the calling of every Christian in our time, who must learn, like the exiles in Babylon and the sons of Issachar who understood their times, how to live faithfully in the world as it now is.

So be faithful in this foreign land. Engage the culture without retreating from it or being absorbed into it; live a life both visibly different and evidently attractive; stand firm under the pressure to conform, with conviction and grace; form your children deliberately and prepare them to stand; guard what you and your family let into your minds and home; be leaven in your own corner through your faithful presence; and engage it all with hope and joy rather than fear, confident that the One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. Do this, and you will live faithfully in a post-Christian culture, witnessing to a world that has forgotten the faith, and perhaps, through the quiet leaven of many faithful lives, helping it to remember, trusting all the while that God is greater than the culture and that his purposes will finally prevail.

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