

# The “Elephant in the Room”: The Opportunity for Southern Baptists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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I have a tremendous amount of respect for [Dr. Richard Land](#), Executive Director of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. His recent article in the [Faith and Family Values magazine](#), “The State of the Culture” was yet another attempt to awaken the Christian community to the biblical, moral and cultural drift we are experiencing, especially in the Southern Baptist denomination. I agree with Dr. Land that “the culture has influenced us more than we have influenced the culture. Instead of becoming ‘salt’ and ‘light’ (Matt. 5:13-16), we have been salted and lit by the culture.” I would add to Dr. Land’s claim that most of the culture’s influence is happening long before our students cycle through adolescence, the university, and then to adulthood. Dr. Land offers a sound argument on the cultural drift issues, but, like so many other leaders, avoids what I see as the elephant in the room—namely, our parents, children and students are woefully unprepared due to our current training models. Parents and churches have 6,570 days with our children before they turn 18 years old. Research tells us the depth of our training during this time does not match the intensity of the culture they are entering.

I am bewildered as to why we continue to use the same educational and equipping models when research trends are telling us they are inadequate (I recognize that the statistics vary from church to church. I am generalizing based on national trends). I am not suggesting that the mainstream church and parenting models are broken. I value my family’s worship, pastoral teaching from the pulpit, small group study, fellowship and accountability—not to mention the church programs that assist in spiritual development. And, there are many families who are training their children. Nonetheless, I would argue that within the context of the twenty-first century’s secularized and post-modern culture, most current church training plans for parents and students are incomplete. Things have changed. The ethos of our culture isn’t Christian anymore; and for the most part, our kids are entering a culture opposed to absolute truth, opposed to the tenets of Christianity, opposed to living a life of holiness.

How many more [Josh McDowell](#) and [Barna Group](#) research projects or Richard Land challenges do we need to read until a sense of urgency demands our collective attention? The biblical worldview is drifting and the Christian ethic is being methodically replaced with a secular mindset. The elephant is getting bigger and yet our leaders and parents continue to wander around the obese mammal basically conducting the same training strategies. We simply pound the pulpit more, pen challenging articles, and complain about the culture. We state the obvious but shy away from suggesting substantive changes. God never told the “culture” to train our children, students and converts. The culture is the culture. This is our issue to address. If we want to expand and sustain the Christian ethic and worldview, then we collectively must elevate and maintain a more compelling level of training or discipleship.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although defining what I mean by the term training would take an entire article in and of itself, it is important at least to point to an example of what we should aspire to produce. We find this example in Acts 17. The bottom line is that Paul understood what he believed; he understood what the Epicureans and Stoics believed (non-Christian worldviews); he did not fall prey to empty deceit and philosophy (Colossians. 2:6-8); he reasoned and persuaded intelligently and assertively; he had compassion for the lost and an end goal in mind to help others see the redemptive plan through Jesus Christ.

Fortunately, there are different training paradigms being advanced. These paradigms are not being led by denominational leaders, but by parents. A growing percent of parents are embracing Deuteronomy 6:7-8. They realize that the traditional educational models (secular training), which counter or ignore the traditional parent training and church training models (Sunday School programs; mid-week service), are producing yet another generation of adolescents who are good “church kids”, but who are not thinking Christianly on the issues of the day and whose shallow commitment is evidenced when they leave home and enter the university. The lack of deliberate parental training coupled with only a few hours a week at church has proven to be an inadequate opponent to the estimated 16,000 hours (average amount of hours at school through high school graduation) of secular school training that approximately 96% of the Southern Baptist (and evangelical) children receive in the United States.<sup>2</sup>

Occasionally a pastor or denominational leader steps out and endorses a new training strategy. Pastors like [Hayes Wicker](#) at [First Baptist of Naples](#), [Jack Graham](#) at [Prestonwood Baptist Church](#), [Michael Catt](#) at [Sherwood Baptist Church](#) and Jim Henry, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, are a few pastors who openly support a different training paradigm. Noted youth trainer and evangelist Jay Strack of [Student Leadership University](#) and the distinguished author and teacher Josh McDowell have challenged us to have a more formal biblical education training model. [Dr. Glen Schultz](#), author of *Kingdom Education* and [LifeWay](#) consultant, has traveled the country inspiring thousands to rethink our training methods of parents, children and students. [Al Mohler](#), President of [Southern Seminary](#) has perhaps been the boldest leader in our denomination when he publicly challenged the denomination to think strategically and differently in how we train our children and students, even taking on the Southern Baptist “sacred cow” called the public school. Very few pastors and denominational leaders want to step out on this issue.

We do not back down on proclaiming the ills of alcohol or other vices of the world, or leading national boycotts of Disney World, but we remain silent on the greatest vice of our day—the secular training and mentoring of our children’s minds. We continue to hide behind a distorted interpretation of the biblical dictum calling us to be the “salt and light” of the world, which as followers of Christ we actually are. But just as Jesus warned that the salt can lose its saltiness and the light can be hidden, we must first be *trained* to be the salt and the light or risk being trampled under foot or being put under a bowl.

Historically there was a time when the Southern Baptists apparently viewed education and the “salt and light” argument differently. The Southern Baptists invested millions of dollars in building over fifty universities, many of which to this day receive millions of state convention dollars subsidizing the schools’ operations. If we believed then so strongly in “separating” our students from secular universities in order to train them properly, then there is little sense in the modern day anchor argument opposing pre-school through high school models because students need to be the “salt and light” of secular educational centers.

For purposes of clarity, my argument is not centered on the divisive issue of “public school versus Christian School”. I certainly have opinions and there is plenty of empirical data on the impact secular-based training centers are having on our children, culture and church. And, I have opinions on the amount of Christian schools who have chosen to “isolate” their students and who have settled for inferior academic and spiritual development training, thus producing students who either are not confident or ill-prepared to engage the culture. However, I think this argument is secondary and is distracting us from dealing with the primary issue of adopting the biblical model of training parents and children. I have refused to join the movements calling for a mass exit of the public schools. I have also refused to join the majority of Southern Baptists who vehemently argue that our children are biblically mandated to be the “salt and light” of secular education centers. The

<sup>2</sup> Referenced from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

prerequisite for “salt and light” for parents and the church is full obedience to the biblical mandate to train, disciple, equip, and mentor our children to a point of spiritual and intellectual maturity and Christ-likeness so that they can in fact honor the biblical principle of being the salt and light of the world, and most importantly maintain their saltiness and brightness while in the world.

The movement and solution I am joining and endorsing is focused on the comprehensive approach to training the next generation—including how parents are training their children, how churches are training parents to train their children, and how education is viewed within the church for pre-school through high school-aged children and students. Indeed, this inevitably requires parents, pastors, and denominational leaders to examine the biblical worldview training strategy for children/students during the 6,570 days in Sunday school, traditional Monday through Friday weekday schools, and at home. I prefer to word this solution as an “entrance strategy” into a new parent and child worldview training paradigm.

In their book, *Kingdom Ethics*, Glen Stassen and David Gushee define a worldview as a cohesive set of beliefs through which people view the world and thus, consciously or not, set their life-course. Stassen and Gushee state:

“A community’s ethic flows from, and includes, the core worldview convictions through which that community interprets reality and defines the good life. We are claiming that Christian ethics must be self-consciously grounded in well-conceived theological convictions, fundamentally the vision of the reign of God. This is our worldview, our driving meta-narrative; if it is not, we are quite likely grounding our living on some other fundamental worldview and thus straying from our loyalty to Jesus Christ. Worldview helps shape character; and character overflows into action” (Stassen & Gushee, 2003, p. 63).<sup>3</sup>

Based on the premise that a community grounds one’s Christian worldview, it would seem logical to focus on the actual community as a child matures.<sup>4</sup> [Regnerus, Smith and Smith’s study](#) on adolescent religiosity development rests on the similar thesis that individuals live “linked-lives”, and their study concluded that, although parents continue to be the primary influence in shaping their children’s spiritual core values, children’s peer groups and schoolmates have a significant impact on shaping adolescent spiritually-related commitments.<sup>5</sup> The reality is that there are numerous influences in a child’s development; and, in the past the church, the culture and the school were generally moving in the same direction. Now, the school and the culture are moving in opposition to a Christian worldview. They are not neutral. They are in opposition. This is a huge difference!

**My central argument is that the “community” (I prefer calling it “family”)** Stassen and Gushee refer to and the “linked-lives” described by Regnerus (consisting of parents, Christian school teachers, Sunday school teachers, Christian peer groups and classmates, corporate church worship and children and youth ministry programs) **provide a more devoted amount of time and could serve as the training/discipleship model—the opportunity of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.** If their claims are credible, then it is certainly conceivable that we could produce students with the spiritual depth needed to enter our pluralistic society and not fall prey to empty philosophies, but infiltrate the marketplace God has called them to with confidence, purpose and an eternal perspective. We need to invest our resources into a new parent training model (I am not talking about the occasional sermon or Sunday school series) and in a student training model that provides 16,000 hours of biblical worldview training as opposed to the 16,000 hours of secular-based training. Training our students to truly take every thought and idea captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5) and to provide in-depth biblical literacy, doctrine, apologetics and worldview applications will require a true “community”, or family of Christian believers.

<sup>3</sup> Stassen and Gushee argue that it takes community to shape a person with integrity of character and Christian thinkers in recent years have come to recognize that the cultural moral drift about which we are so concerned is a worldview issue. They argue that developing a Christian worldview and subsequently shaping one’s integrity and character requires a community effort that not only elevates the theological framework but also counters the man-centered worldview espoused in a mainstream pluralistic society.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Regnerus, Christian Smith and Brad Smith. 2004. “Social Context in the Development of Adolescent Religiosity.” *Applied Developmental Science*. 8: 27-38.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Regnerus, Christian Smith, and Melissa Fritsch. 2002. *Religion in the Lives of American Adolescents: A Review of the Literature*. Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion; and <http://www.youthandreligion.org/publications/docs/litreview.pdf>

We all agree that we want to produce disciples of Christ who will obediently and courageously fulfill God's mission for their lives. It is time for us to recognize that this will require a significant adjustment to our current incomplete training models beginning with our parents. In addition to parents and in accord with Gushee and Stassen's "community" thesis, I would propose that all churches, all church members and our denomination as a whole take on the shared responsibility of partnering with our parents to make sure that all our sons and daughters have the opportunity to receive this more in-depth worldview training program. Reproducing our kind and transmitting a biblical worldview to the next generation should be one of the foremost priorities of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century church. Accessibility for all of our children and parents to receive this training regardless of their socio-economic status must be included in the model. If we do not consider aligning a newly adopted training model with a new funding paradigm, then an economically-elitist training system is inevitable. The mindset of every pastor, church member, and denominational leader must be that reproducing our kind is precisely what is meant in the Great Commission (Matthew 28).

It is time for our leaders to join with parents in this movement. It is time to make any change necessary to our current training models regardless of tradition, costs and the pain of implementing changes. There should be no apology and no hesitation from the pulpits across this country when training models are changed in order to mentor and disciple the next generation. There is no doubt in my mind that the evangelical community and the Southern Baptist denomination have the resources and resolve to lead such a movement. What an opportunity we have not only to reproduce our kind, but also to offer a solution to the current moral crisis, decadence of leaders and educational crisis in our country. What an opportunity to serve not only our current church members but to extend parent and student educational alternatives to our communities, the inner cities and the underprivileged. What an opportunity to be genuine salt and light.

Will our children and grandchildren have the Christian faith of their parents? Will the Christian ethic be transmitted to the next generation? Parents, pastors, denominational leaders (our "community") must first earnestly deal with the elephant—poorly disciplined parents and students. Dr. Land claims that we are not following the road signs. I don't disagree. I just think it is time to construct a new road. Actually, the road construction project has already begun. The real question is whether or not the denominational leaders and pastors will join the project and help develop the infrastructure and provide the sweat equity to push a new educational paradigm from the back roads to the highway? Imagine if the Southern Baptists got in front of this movement and began to plow the earth to lay the groundwork for some real radical reformation in the education paradigm!

What an opportunity for the Southern Baptists of this generation to be able to leave a legacy of such transcendent and noble purpose. Our parents, churches, communities, and country need answers to the worldview and educational crisis. Minimally, we should create strategic dialogue sessions addressing the "elephant". Our God is bigger than this elephant. Let it not be said in the archives that will be read some day by future generations that we did not even sit around a table and, as statesmen of the past did, discuss solutions.

To this end I want to encourage you to share your thoughts regarding this topic. My objective is not to offend and discredit our denomination—it's quite the opposite. My purpose is to cause conversation among leaders such as yourself and formulate solutions to these issues. To join the conversation, visit my blog at [larrytaylor.wordpress.com](http://larrytaylor.wordpress.com), write me a letter at **6801 W. Park Blvd., Plano, TX 75093**, or e-mail me at [ltaylor@prestonwood.org](mailto:ltaylor@prestonwood.org). Save the date for the first of what will become an annual Education Symposium sponsored by ETC (Engage the Culture) Ministries on June 16 and 17, 2009 in Nashville, Tennessee (more information on this event is forthcoming; this symposium will be structured dialogue on the issue of "training the next generation").