Engaging the Culture

by David Crabtree

This summer I was manning a display for Gutenberg College at a homeschool convention. The display included a random sampling of the books we read in the Gutenberg curriculum. A man walked up to the display and looked at the books on the table for a few minutes in silence. Then he picked up two books, *The Origin of Species* by Charles Darwin and *A Marx-Engels Reader,* held them in front of my face, and asked if I had read them. I answered that I had read both of them in part, but neither in whole. He asked if we have our students read these books. I said, "Yes, in part." Then he asked the question he had been leading up to, "Knowing what is in these books, how can you, in good conscience, have your students read them?" A brief and fruitless discussion followed. In a word, he argued that believers ought not read anything except the Bible and works written by Christians. To have our children read books written by nonbelievers, then, is the height of immorality. I occasionally have discussions with people in which I do not express my perspective well, and later, sometimes for months, I am plagued with thoughts of what I should have said. This was one of those discussions.

I have heard this concern voiced before, but never with such vehemence. The emotion behind his words was generated by a concern that I share—that is, the spiritual health of our young people. The man was afraid that the arguments of Darwin and Marx would sway students and induce them to abandon the faith. This is, in a sense, laughable, because he picked up the wrong books. It is unlikely that Darwin or Marx would currently have such power over a young person; Darwin has been superseded and Marx is passé. However, in another sense, he is quite right. The ideas of Darwin and Marx were once compelling, and influential ideas of other authors have risen to replace them. More significantly, though, our culture is armed with many far more potent weapons, such as movies, television, and popular music. These are extremely powerful and subtle influences on us all. So I understand the man's concern and, in fact, share it. The question is how best to address that concern. In other words, how do we as parents best protect our children against being seduced by the culture into rejecting the faith?

As the culture around us continues on its course of greater and greater depravity, an increasing number of Christian parents, my interlocutor among them, are deciding to isolate their children so that their children will not become contaminated. To a point, this is very sensible. It is the job of parents to protect their vulnerable children. Think about what parents do to protect their children from physical danger. It would be irresponsible for a parent to allow a child to touch a hot wood stove before the child is aware of the dangers and capable of dealing with them. If a parent wants to protect a one-year-old from the dangers of touching a wood stove, putting a fence around the stove to prevent the child from touching it is appropriate. As the child grows, the parent instructs and trains him to understand the dangers of the stove and how to operate it

safely. Once the child learns these lessons the fence becomes unnecessary. If an older child does not know to keep his hands off a hot stove, he has not learned his lessons well; and probably he has not learned because he does not want to learn, in which case the best lesson might be getting burned. In either case, there comes a time to remove the fence.

So we teach our children to deal with physical dangers by protecting and instructing them, but as our children learn we relax the protection. Surely we must use the same strategy for dealing with cultural dangers. A child must be protected from the dangers of the surrounding culture until he is ready and able to deal with those dangers. However, as a child learns and matures, a parent's protection ought to diminish accordingly. A parent needs to be prudent as to how much a child needs to be protected from the culture at any given time.

We are social beings. As such, we are all influenced enormously by our culture. Much of that influence is completely invisible to us. One of the joys of traveling abroad is seeing some of the quaint differences in custom and lifestyle from one country to the next. Those quaint differences generally stem from deep-rooted values and assumptions about reality, and seeing them makes one more aware of one's own values and assumptions. A traditional Russian store does not allow the customer to touch a product until he has paid for it. While this practice limits opportunities for shoplifting, it comes at the expense of making stores much less inviting. By comparison, the American approach is much more trusting. Customers can pick up products and look closely at them, choosing those they want. This makes stores much more inviting, but the cost is vulnerability to shoplifting. Trust of one's fellow man is a distinctive tendency of American culture, and shopping in stores is one of the ways we pass this value from one generation to the next; anyone who shops in stores is absorbing cultural values. Therefore, while there may be wisdom in turning off the TV, banning movies, and banning radio, the culture will still find a way to influence our children significantly. Just living in this culture necessitates interacting with it, and interacting with it allows it to influence us. No fence can be erected that will truly separate our children from the surrounding culture.

Even if we could keep out the influence of culture, some day our children will be on their own. After all, the purpose of parenthood is to raise our children to become independent adults. At some point we must set our children free to face the world and make their own choices, even if that means allowing them to make mistakes. So even if we could insulate our children from the culture for twenty years or so, we cannot insulate them forever. It seems prudent to spend those years teaching them about our culture and its dangers in order to prepare them for the time when they will be living life as independent adults. We must help our children understand and engage the culture rather than hide from it.

Those who withdraw into cultural enclaves think they are doing their utmost to ensure that their children become people of faith. They do not realize they are running a grave risk. They fill their children's schedules with church activities, restrict their children's network of friends to other Christians, insist that their children listen only to Christian music, and so forth. Parents do all this in an attempt to surround themselves and their families with like-minded Christians, to create a mini-society within the larger culture similar to, but much less complete than, the Amish and Mennonites. Children raised in these environments do grow up looking different from the larger culture, and in that sense their parents are successful, but one must be careful in specifying what

these parents have accomplished. These environments produce children who are not participants in and do not closely identify with the decadence of the surrounding culture; rather, they identify with the Christian subculture. But while the Christian subculture may not be decadent, it is nevertheless worldly, as any culture of sinful humans will be. To think that being part of a morally upstanding culture is a substitute for, or produces, saving faith is a grave danger and a serious misunderstanding of the nature of Christianity. In fact, living in a morally upstanding culture brings with it a potential obstacle to true faith; that is, it can obscure the distinction between moral behavior and righteousness. In other words, living in a moral culture tends to breed self-righteousness. Self-righteousness is the very antithesis of saving faith. So withdrawal into the Christian subculture may protect our children from some destructive influences, but it tends to foster self-righteousness. If one understands that saving faith is a bowing of the innermost heart to the authority of God, it is difficult to know which course of action avoids the greater evil.

I have no easy answers. Every parent must, before God, work out what he believes to be the proper balance between protection from and engagement with the larger culture and adjust that balance as the child matures. But to think that it is possible to raise a child in complete isolation from the larger culture, such that he never needs to learn to deal with it, is a dangerous fantasy.

I believe there is another, unspoken, reason why Christian parents sometimes lean towards isolating their children from the larger culture. Christians in our time have a deep-seated inferiority complex. We seem to have a nagging fear that if all the facts were presented and examined by the use of reason, the biblical worldview would not be found to accord with truth. That was certainly my fear when I was a young college student. Then I discovered the writings of C. S. Lewis. The most important thing I learned from him is that Christianity is intellectually defensible. He was able to interact intelligently with the ideas of the larger culture and show some of its major premises to be nonsense. I came to realize that Christianity could more than hold its own in a fair discussion, even if I, personally, did not have the intelligence and skill to adequately represent it. This discovery was life changing.

As I began to read the works of the greatest thinkers of our culture (the so-called "Great Books"), I discovered that many of them are a mixture of brilliance and nonsense. The works of Karl Marx provide an excellent example. Marx perceptively observed and described some very important economic dynamics, but his projection as to where history is going and his call to revolution are utter madness. The general pattern is this: the formative thinkers of our culture see some things clearly, but make some absurd extrapolations from those observations.

My reading of these authors stands in stark contrast to what I find in Scripture. The Bible makes penetrating observations about the nature of reality *and* sound extrapolations from those observations. I have become firmly convinced that the biblical worldview is uniquely realistic—capable of allowing a person to live in this complicated and confusing world commonsensically and without the madness that besets those who rebel against the truth. I would like Gutenberg students to gain this same confidence. This is why, with no pangs of conscience, I can have students read works by authors such as Darwin and Marx.