

# World' READY?

BY RICK LAWRENCE

**BASED ON OUR EXCLUSIVE NATIONAL RESEARCH,** Christian teenagers are watching and listening to a lot of profane entertainment, but their youth groups aren't doing as much as they could to help them think critically and biblically about what they're taking in. Here are practical, powerful tools that will help you train them to be "in but not of" the world.

In the film *Amadeus* there's a profound scene where Salieri, Austria's royal court composer, hurls a crucifix into his chamber fireplace. He's furious because God has gifted Mozart, the boyish, often crude composer who is Salieri's rival, with a genius for composing beautiful music. Rather than embrace and support Mozart's gift, Salieri vows to "destroy [God's] creation." His envy twists him into an enemy of God bent on revenge.

To be awake in life means to recognize the strategies and patterns of *our* Salieri—Satan. So here's a strategic truth: About two-thirds of all Christians (63 percent) make their first commitment to Christ prior to age 18. That means every ministry to children or teenagers is an enemy target.

What strategies are deployed against us? One is to make faith in Christ irrelevant to the "real lives" of children and teenagers. There's evidence this strategy is working.

Results from the National Study of Youth and Religion have just been released (see my interview with the study's lead researcher, Dr. Christian Smith, on page 106). In the broadest, deepest exploration into teenagers' religious beliefs and behaviors that's ever

been done, the picture that emerges portrays kids' collective relationship with God as shallow at best. While one out of 10-or-so adolescents have a living, vibrant, everyday relationship with God, nine out of 10 see God as a "divine butler or cosmic therapist" who exists only in the background of their lives, waiting to be summoned when they have a problem.

For the vast majority of teenagers, God is irrelevant to their everyday lives. In our exclusive survey of almost 15,000 Christian teenagers, we discovered that almost two-thirds (62 percent) of them watch R-rated films "a lot" or "occasionally," but only a third of them (34 percent) say they often have "real conversations" at church about the films they watch. Also, just over a third of them (36 percent) say their youth leader knows "a lot" about their "real world." (See the full results of the survey in the box titled "The In-But-Not-Of Survey," on pages 91-94.)

When Jesus used fishing, farming, money, or common cultural practices to unveil his good news (bad news to some), he was bridging God's transcendent truths into the everyday world of the people. We must do the same. >>>

## THE IN-BUT-NOT-OF SURVEY

Last summer, **group** Magazine asked almost 15,000 Christian teenagers to complete our exclusive survey on their cultural influences and how their youth groups help them think critically and biblically about them. Here's a sampling of our results.

*How often do you watch, listen to, or play:*

**R-rated movies, videos, or DVDs**

a lot .....	17.4%
occasionally .....	45.0%
seldom .....	29.0%
never .....	8.6%

**Music that features profanity, violence, or sexual references**

a lot .....	21.0%
occasionally .....	37.7%
seldom .....	29.5%
never .....	11.9%

**TV shows that feature profanity, violence, or sexual references**

a lot .....	17.6%
occasionally .....	43.5%
seldom .....	31.7%
never .....	7.2%

**Video games that feature profanity, violence, or sexual references**

a lot .....	9.3%
occasionally .....	16.8%
seldom .....	24.4%
never .....	49.5%

**Books or magazines that feature profanity, violence, or sexual references**

a lot .....	5.5%
occasionally .....	20.8%
seldom .....	40.4%
never .....	33.3%

**Web sites that feature profanity, violence, or sexual images or references**

a lot .....	3.3%
occasionally .....	11.0%
seldom .....	29.2%
never .....	56.5% >>>





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## » Don't Retreat From the Real World

It's time to stop retreating from the "real world" into a Christian subculture that looks more and more like a ghetto. It's time to reassert our identity as people who live in the world but are not of it. It's time to focus on training young people to think critically about their cultural influences. This is "in but not of" youth ministry.

We must first be clear about what we're doing and why. I think Steve Turner's great book *Imagine: A Vision for Christians in the Arts* (InterVarsity) is a crucial primer. In it, Turner dissects what the Bible says about the "in but not of" life.

**1. The Bible warns against "the world" and "worldliness."** God deemed the world he created "good." It remains "good." "Worldiness," on the other hand, is defined by Turner as the "rebellious system of thinking that's at war with the kingdom of heaven." Turner writes, "We become worldly not by engaging with the world but by allowing it to shape our thinking. Jesus prayed to God 'not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one' (John 17:15)." It's God's expressed desire that we stay right in the thick of the world while shrewdly, passionately countering its "rebellious system of thinking."

**2. We can't love humans but hate human culture.** This is exactly why kids don't believe the church has much that's useful to say about their culture. Our "love" message seems two-faced. We say we love them, but then say we hate their culture. We're called to engage the culture with renewed minds and an unshakeable commitment to subjugate everything to the heart and mission of God.

Sadly, our kids don't have many examples of this. I remember Diane Sawyer's interview with Mel Gibson just when *The Passion of the Christ* was

released in theaters. It was one of the few times I can remember a public figure showing both his passion for life and his passion for Christ entwined as one.

## The Dichotomous Life We've Role-Modeled

We've trained our kids to look a lot like us—people who see no dissonance in living separate "everyday" and "church" lives, people who's primary focus is often to extract ourselves from culture—instead of being salt and light.

A couple of years ago I recorded a *Dr. Phil* show on parent-teenager conflicts. One segment featured a mother who was upset about her son's rap music, primarily because of its profane lyrics. Dr. Phil read to his audience some bleeped-out lyrics from popular rap songs, then advised the mother (and the parents in the audience and millions of viewers) to collect their kids' objectionable music and destroy it. Then he went to a commercial. I literally leaped out of my chair and talked back to the TV. What ridiculous, short-sighted advice! Though I mostly enjoy what Dr. Phil has to say, I think his response effectively advocates breaking communication with kids instead of gaining the opportunity to train them. Dr. Phil's response is very much like the way kids experience the church's response to their culture.

The church has responded to popular culture in three primary ways, I think.

**1. Denial and Blind Hope**—Many in the church deal with the dissonance a threatening culture creates in them by denying it could be impacting *their* kids and assuming they'll be alright no matter what happens. The truth is that these adults are afraid of the truth and deal with it by denying reality. Our real goal should be to have "unveiled faces" (2 Corinthians 3:18)—that means staring clear-eyed at the truth.

**2. Retreat and Fortify**—Another

» How much does your youth leader (or an adult leader in your youth group) know about your "real world"?

a lot .....	35.9%
some .....	35.6%
a little.....	22.8%
not at all .....	5.7%

How much do you feel seen for who you really are by your youth leader (or an adult leader in your youth group)?

a lot .....	39.5%
occasionally .....	35.7%
seldom .....	20.7%
never .....	4.1%

In your church or youth group, how often do you have what you would consider a "real conversation" about the following?

**The non-Christian music you like**

often .....	22.0%
sometimes .....	43.1%
rarely .....	25.1%
never .....	6.2%
not applicable to me.....	3.5%

**The Christian music you like**

often .....	23.7%
sometimes .....	36.1%
rarely .....	25.9%
never .....	9.7%
not applicable to me.....	4.5%

**The films or videos you've watched**

often .....	33.6%
sometimes .....	43.6%
rarely .....	16.4%
never .....	4.4%
not applicable to me.....	2.0%

**The video games you like to play**

often .....	8.0%
sometimes .....	18.1%
rarely .....	29.3%
never .....	29.7%
not applicable to me.....	15.0%

**The TV shows you like to watch**

often .....	19.8%
sometimes .....	46.8%
rarely .....	23.1%
never .....	7.2%
not applicable to me.....	3.1%

How much has your participation in a church youth group helped you to think critically (learn to see truths and untruths) about the following?

**Films or videos**

a lot .....	16.8%
some .....	38.6%
a little.....	30.9%
not at all .....	10.9%
not applicable to me.....	2.8%