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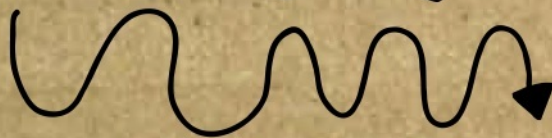
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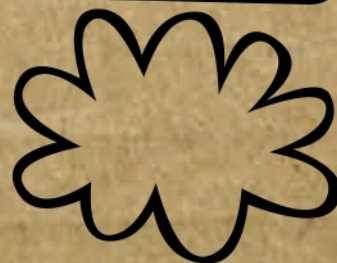
YOUR KIDS

ABOUT

POP CULTURE



~~BY~~ BY THE AXIS TEAM



# How To Talk With Your Kids About Pop Culture

By The Axis Team

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The best editors not only correct grammar and spelling -- they help craft a coherent and compelling story. M.J. is responsible for molding this manuscript into an ebook that makes sense and is easy to read.

Thank you Denise and Matthew John for helping Axis' first ebook come into existence. Thank you for pouring your heart and soul into this manuscript and helping us create something we are proud of!

## Preface:

### A Letter from David

Dear Reader,

My name is David Eaton, and I'm what you could call a culture translator.

I'm also the co-founder of Axis, a worldview ministry to students ages 11 to 22. My good friend, Jeremiah, and I began Axis in 2007 because of what I call "my three."

Chris, Josh, and Andrew were three of my good friends in high school. All of us traveled together on different mission trips, including a trip to San Luis Potosi, Mexico. I have a picture of the four of us standing on the street, Bibles in hand, preaching about Jesus to people in the local market. We were passionate about sharing our faith with others, and trips like this one were a chance for us to bring the Gospel to those in need.

My three friends have all gone on to be successful, intelligent, productive men. Today, Chris has a PhD in anthropology, Josh is a lawyer in Seattle, and Andrew is a teacher in New Jersey.

And all three are now self-proclaimed atheists or agnostics.

It breaks my heart.

Sadly, my three friends are not the only ones from my generation who have abandoned or are abandoning their faith. As studies show, the next generation is unplugging from the church:

- Pew: One in three adults have no religious affiliation.<sup>1</sup>
- CNN: ... most American teens who called themselves Christian were indifferent and inarticulate about their faith ... though three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christian, fewer than half practice their faith, only half deem it important, and most can't talk coherently about their beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

- Barna: Between 40 and 50 percent of graduating high school students, who participated in church or youth group while they were in high school, will fail to stick with their faith in college.<sup>3</sup>

The next generation — which we define as students ages 11 to 22 — is making a mass exodus from the institution of the Church and from the Christian faith. That's why what Axis does is so important, and why we are so passionate about rescuing the next generation.

But we didn't start Axis because of the statistics; we started Axis because this problem is personal. Each of these statistics represents individual people who are struggling to know what is true and real, what matters. Most likely, you know someone — a close friend or family member — who has left the faith. You have your "three." However many people you thought of, whether one or three or ten, the problem is real. Something has to change.

Before we can reverse the trends, we have to know several things: Why is the next generation migrating away from Jesus? And what are they moving toward? In this ebook, we will look at some of the reasons the next generation is leaving the faith, and we will offer insight and some practical tools for parents to use to help rescue their children and the next generation.

But first, let me introduce you to Axis. At the beginning of this letter, I referred to myself as a “culture translator.” Though you're likely not familiar with the term, chances are you will be hearing about it in the next few years. Right now, American University in Paris offers a Masters of Arts in Cultural Translation, and in 2012 the first-ever Cultural Translations Symposium was held at George Washington University. It's a topic people are beginning to talk about.

Cultural translation [4](#) is a growing field of study that combines theories and research methodologies from the fields of anthropology, sociology, geography, philology [5](#), and philosophy of religion. Cultural translators aim to understand the meanings of practices and behaviors of one people

group, and then explain them in ways that people of another culture can understand. In short, cultural translators are experts at explaining the differences between people groups.

Axis is a culture translation agency. But, unlike most culture translators, our focus is not on different countries or races. Instead, we translate between generations. We translate pop culture and deep Christian truths for teenagers, and we translate teen culture for parents and grandparents.

This is how it works: We start by taking the big ideas from Scripture and the most compelling teachings from the most influential Christian thinkers (C.S. Lewis, Tim Keller, Ravi Zacharias, and others), and we translate these big ideas in a way teenagers can understand. And we don't dumb anything down — we translate it. We also expose and translate the philosophies and big ideas found in movies, music, magazines, and other media. Not only do we identify the philosophies found in popular culture, but we use examples from pop culture itself. Our presentations to students are packed with the very pop-culture content that students spend hours with every day.

We also equip you, the parent, to better understand your children and the culture they're immersed in. We know the next generation. We know what they are thinking, what they care about, and how to talk with them about deep truths about God and the world. Our goal is to help you understand your kids and the culture they're living in. That's why we are writing this ebook. It's to use our experience as a bridge between generations and help your family grow strong as you follow Christ together.

So what makes Axis good at building bridges? Well, for starters, we are relatively young. We're able to relate to your kids because we aren't that much older than they are — we're in our twenties and early thirties. Also, we know student culture. We study pop culture. We know the hot songs, the most popular movies, and all the latest trends.

At the same time, Axis learns from a lot of older and wiser people



because we study their books, essays, and sermons. We make it a point to find and synthesize the best resources on raising the next generation. And we surround ourselves with people who are mature in their faith.

It should be noted that we do all this not because we care about the next generation in the abstract — the idea of a generation of young people who follow Jesus — but also because we are parents of young children ourselves. We need this stuff just as much as you do! We know firsthand the pressure of wanting to raise children who follow Jesus.

Indeed, the other day, I sat down with our staff and asked them a simple question: “What is your greatest fear as a parent?” Daniel, who has two kids and one on the way, spoke first: “My greatest fear is that they would walk away from Jesus.” Jeremiah, a father to three young boys, echoed Daniel’s fear: “God has called me, as their daddy, to bring them up to follow Jesus. Ultimately, the choice is theirs, but I, with the help of God, am going to fight and pray for that every day.”

I started off this letter talking about “my three” — my three friends who walked away from God. But Jeremiah has a different “three” — his three kids, who, he hopes more than anything, will grow up to love and follow Jesus.

I don’t know where you are on the journey of parenthood. For me, it just began; my wife and I just had our first child. But I want you to know that I care about your kids. Axis cares about your kids. Our vision is to see the next generation become a generation of disciple-makers who are committed both to the church and to engaging the culture around them. And that is most likely to happen if you have the tools and information you need.

Thank you for downloading this eBook. As you read it, take notes. Let us know if there are things that we can add, or issues we should address, to help and encourage you as a parent. Here is my e-mail address so that you can contact me directly with comments, questions, and suggestions: [davideaton@axis.org](mailto:davideaton@axis.org). Think of this eBook as the beginning of a conversation between you and Axis.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to saving the next generation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David M. Eaton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "D".

David Eaton, CEO of Axis

## Chapter 1: The Epidemic

I want to live the way of the world,  
but I don't want to go to hell!

“I want to live the way of the world, but I don't want to go to hell.” Melanie took a second look at the letter to make sure she was reading it correctly. She read that line again: “I want to live the way of the world, but I don't want to go to hell.” As the car full of Axis team members continued down the road, she decided to read it out loud for the rest of the team.

“Hey guys, listen to this,” she said. “I want to live the way of the world, but I don't want to go to hell.”

“What?” David said as he continued to drive down the interstate. “What are you reading?”

“A girl at the school gave this letter to me. The envelope says, 'Please read I need help!' And inside she has a list of questions about God and her life. Listen to this:

'How did you know when you wanted to be a Christian?

How did you decide you wanted to be a Christian?

What made you decide to become a Christian?

I have lived in a church my whole life and Christian school my whole life — God always pushed on me, but I don't think it's for me. I know if I go the way of the world my parents will be disappointed in me. I don't know what to do with myself or spiritually.

I want to live the way of the world, but I don't want to go to hell.”

“Wow! She sounds confused,” Daniel chimed in from the back seat, “I have to admit, though — there have been times in my life where I've felt

that way.”

From the driver’s seat, David said, “Melanie, Daniel, Bethany — that’s why we are here this week. Even though these kids attend this Christian school, are growing up in Christian homes, and attend Christian churches, they are confused. They have questions. All of the media clips that we show them are full of answers — answers to life’s big questions. These teenagers are confused, and by spending the next two days with them, we can help them see God more clearly.” Silence filled the car as the weight of both the letter and David’s words sank in.

When your job is to travel and speak to school after school, church after church, conference after conference, it’s easy to get into a routine and forget about the reasons you are traveling all over the country. But that day, while those Axis team members listened to the humdrum of the tires against the pavement, the reason became clear. David, Melanie, Daniel, and Bethany were in Louisiana for one purpose: to help teenagers sift through the clutter of popular culture and the many messages that come with it, and see God clearly.

## **What Is Popular Culture?**

To some of you the answer to the question "What is pop culture?" seems obvious. But let's define it here so that we're all on the same page. So, when we say "pop culture," we're referring to popular music, movies, magazines, art, fashion, TV shows, Internet memes and fads, newspapers, books, and radio. It includes the content (songs, movies, and so on) and the attitudes, personalities, and lifestyles of the celebrities who create that content.

We need to talk about pop culture because teenagers spend so much time taking it in and being influenced by it. Popular culture is everywhere, and it is powerful. It's full of ideas for how your children should live their lives. And chances are, in addition to the Christian culture you're raising your children in, pop culture has become the dominant culture that your

children are living in.

But just because pop culture is powerful doesn't mean we need to be afraid of it. It just means that we need to be aware of what the next generation is spending time listening to, watching, and engaging with.

## **Unanswered Questions vs. Unquestioned Answers**

The issue — teenagers walking away from God — is not caused by, as we like to say, unanswered questions. We'll say it again: The issue is not unanswered questions. We don't think people walk away from their faith because they can't get all their questions answered. Even the smartest people in the world don't have all of the answers.

The issue, instead, is unquestioned answers. By "unquestioned answers" we mean the answers to our questions about God, ethics, our purpose in life, etc. that we believe to be true without ever really questioning them. And unquestioned answers come at us from everywhere — from the news, from politics, from investment advisors, from pharmaceutical commercials. For teenagers, one of the most prominent sources of unquestioned answers is popular culture.

If you, as parents, are not answering your teenager's questions, popular culture is more than happy to take your place. For example, if your teenager is asking herself, "What should I do with my life?" pop culture offers a variety of answers, one of the more prominent ones being, "Follow your heart. Do what feels right!"<sup>6</sup>

You've heard this answer before. One of the more influential personalities of our generation used to preach this idea from her television show and still does through her magazine and her webcasts and conferences. We're talking, of course, about Oprah. A recent cover story in O Magazine encouraged readers to "Let Your Intuition Be Your Guide."<sup>7</sup>

During her "A New Earth" webcast with spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle, Oprah said that, "God is a feeling experience, not a believing experience. If God for you is still about a belief, then it's not truly God."<sup>8</sup>

Oprah isn't the only champion of the “follow your heart” philosophy. Disney, a purveyor of popular culture that's more likely than Oprah to have influenced your kids directly, also preaches this message. Movies about Disney princesses have taught multiple generations to follow their hearts. If you do, all of your dreams will come true, or so goes the message. Disney's most recent princess — the red-headed firecracker from the Pixar-animated film *Brave* — is told by her mom, “Our fate lives within us. You only have to be brave enough to see it. You must be brave enough to look inside you.” There's a problem with this idea, of course: What if following your heart conflicts with, say, the law? Or, as an observant mother of a toddler recently tweeted, “What if your heart is telling you not to wear pants?”<sup>9</sup>

“Follow your heart” is a prime example of an unquestioned answer. The girl who wrote the letter we mentioned earlier was wrestling with it. She said of Christianity, “I don't think it is for me.” Her heart was telling her to walk away from God. Should she listen to her heart? Should she let her intuition be her guide?

## **The Presence of Pop Culture**

Pop culture is everywhere. Its influence in teenagers' lives is a big deal. But the issue — teenagers walking away from God — is not caused by unanswered questions. The problem isn't that pop culture raises questions your teens can't handle. Instead, the issue is unquestioned answers.

Of course, this phrase “unquestioned answers” begs its own question: answers to what questions? What are these questions that popular culture provides answers for?

## Chapter 2: Teenagers Have Questions

A person's worldview determines the way they will answer deep questions.

The sanctuary was quiet and beautiful. Exposed oak timbers held up the walls and ceiling, oak pews lined the floor, and the slightly raised stage was covered with wood trim and accents. As we walked in and began to set up for chapel, we could hear the air conditioner turn on. We tested all of the equipment, and everything worked. We sat down and waited for the crowd of Christian middle and high school students to enter the auditorium.

A few minutes later we could hear them coming down the halls. Middle and high school students take any opportunity they can to talk to their friends, and the walk to chapel was no exception. The hum began in the distance and got louder. Soon the air conditioner was drowned out by a sanctuary full of loud students excited about a break from classes.

One of the teachers walked up on stage and grabbed a guitar. As he began to lead the students through a rendition of "How Great Is Our God," most students joined in. Compared to a lot of the schools we've spoken to, they actually sang pretty well. There were only a few pockets of older boys who refused to sing in order to look cool. But the enthusiasm all the students walked in with was gone.

After a few more songs, it was time for us to get on stage and begin the presentation. We showed a random video of a panda bear sneezing, and the students laughed. We read a section of verses from Proverbs about wisdom, and the students listened. And then we played the music video of a popular song sung by two popular recording artists, Eminem and Rihanna, about physical abuse. The guy character in the song talks about

how he's changed, and he promises not to abuse his girlfriend anymore, yet tells the audience that he's lying to her so she won't leave. The girl in the song admits that she can't leave the relationship because she doesn't know where to go, and being with him, even though he abuses her, is better than being alone. As the song moved into the chorus, students around the auditorium — in this conservative Christian school — began to hum the song. By the end of the song, the majority of the student body was singing loudly. All of their enthusiasm from before chapel was back.<sup>10</sup>

After the song was over, we put up the lyrics so the students could read what they had just been singing. As the reality of the lyrics settled in, it became clear: The students had no idea what they had been singing about. The students at this Christian school didn't realize that they had memorized and were singing a song about an abusive, codependent relationship.

As we intimated in Chapter 1, the world is full of questions. Teenagers themselves are full of questions. In this chapter we are going to look at some of the specific questions that teenagers are dealing with and the answers that pop culture offers for those questions. But before we talk about the questions, we want you to know where we are coming from. We're trying to make the point that everyone, and teenagers especially, are asking deep, meaning-of-life questions — maybe not consciously, but those issues are on their minds. We are also making the point that pop culture offers some very powerful answers to most of those deep questions, and that those answers are influencing the way they live their lives. That's what the story at the beginning of this chapter is all about — pop culture offering a vivid answer (codependency) to a very deep question (how do I find fulfillment in life?).

The list of deep questions teenagers struggle with is not a small list. If we tried to answer every specific question a teenager has asked us over the past seven years, this would not be an eBook — it would be an



encyclopedia. But at the same time, there are six major categories of questions that we can address. These six major categories, each of which we represent with a single question, are at the root of most issues teenagers struggle with.

We have also found that these six question categories also do a good job defining a worldview. A worldview, in the simplest of terms, is “the way you view the world.” Yes, we broke the rules of definitions by using the word to define itself, but in many ways a worldview is that simple. It’s the set of values and principles from which you make decisions and base your life. Your true worldview will not only determine the way you answer the following questions, but it will also influence the way you answer questions about homosexuality, modesty, freedom, social justice, and abortion. We said “true worldview” because there is a difference between the worldviews we profess and the worldviews by which we actually live. As we like to say at Axis, “your walk talks and your talk talks, but your walk talks louder than your talk talks.” In other words, the way you live proclaims what you truly believe.

So here's the foundation of this chapter: 1) teenagers ask a lot of deep questions; and 2) a person’s worldview determines the way they will answer deep questions. And now we want to take those two foundational points and look at the answers that pop culture offers to the big questions.

But first things first. You are probably wondering what six questions we are referring to. Here are the six foundational questions that teenagers are asking — and, coincidentally, the questions that every worldview must answer:

## **1. Where did I come from?**

The question “Where did I come from?” is the question of origin. Although most teenagers won’t ask us, “What is my origin?” they do ask us hypothetical questions that are similar. Questions like, “What if God didn’t create the world? What if the world came about in a different way?”

What if God used evolution to create the world?”

## **2. What is real?**

This question is as simple as it sounds, but, as with most philosophy questions, it is also very deep. The question of reality is literally asking, “Is the tree I see in front of me real?” Another way we can ask the question of reality is, “Can I trust my senses?” This may seem like a silly question, but from a religious perspective, it is not. There are many religions that teach that everything we sense is an illusion, and that there is a spiritual life-force that makes up everything we see, touch, smell, hear, and taste. Other religions teach that what we see in front of us is all that there is. They teach that reality is solely defined through the senses, and that there is no spiritual world.

## **3. Who am I?**

This may be the most common question teenagers ask — the question of identity. Teenagers want to know who they are. They want to know if their lives have meaning. They want to know if they are worth something. The most obvious examples of teenagers searching for identity include trying to fit in and succumbing to peer pressure.

## **4. How do I know what is right or wrong?**

The question of ethics and morality is another vital question. How do we know what is right or wrong? What is the standard by which we know how to behave? Does the government and its laws determine morality? Does the Bible define right and wrong?

Underage drinking, drug use, and premarital sex all stem from answers to these questions. Relativism also becomes an issue as teenagers try to define morality in post-modern terms. “What’s right for you is right for

you, but not necessarily for me.”

## **5. What is my purpose in life?**

Teenagers will often ask us this question exactly as it's written: “What is my purpose in life? What is my calling? What am I supposed to do with my life?” These are important questions because they will determine the way a teenager lives his or her life.

## **6. What happens when I die?**

All of us, on some level, have wondered about the answer to this question. And if we haven't asked this question exactly, we've asked something similar: “What is Heaven going to be like? What happens if someone who has never heard of Jesus dies? Do all religions lead to the same place? What if this is all there is?” This may be the most important question because how we answer this question will also determine the way we live our lives.

Now that we've listed the big six questions, let's take a look at some of the answers pop culture offers to these major questions.

### **Question #1: Where did I come from?**

One of the most popular comedies on TV right now is called The Big Bang Theory. It's a hilarious show that features quirky graduate students and scientists trying to live “normal” lives. But try as they might, quirky they remain. One character, a mechanical engineer, lives with his mom. Two physicists live as roommates, with a multi-page “roommate agreement” that includes, among other things, mandatory apocalyptic preparedness training. And a few other characters are as equally socially awkward and quirky. But they all manage, somehow, to be endearing.<sup>11</sup>

At the beginning of every episode is the show's theme song. It goes through a Darwinian history of the universe and mankind and ends with the phrase, “And it all started with the Big Bang — BANG!”

Turns out when teenagers watch TV — including one of the most popular shows on TV right now — they're exposed to an answer to the question of their origin — all to the tune of, “... and it all started with the Big Bang — BANG!”

## **Question #2: What is real?**

Have you seen either of the Kung Fu Panda movies? Jack Black, a comedian and actor, is the voice of Po, the title character. The movies follow Po's journey to become a kung fu master. The movies are funny and entertaining — and full of ideas about the nature of reality.<sup>12</sup>

In one scene, a warrior comes up to a very wise kung- fu master turtle and says, “Master, master — I have very bad news.” The turtle turns around and tells him, “There is just news; there is no good or bad.”

In the world of Kung Fu Panda, there is no good or bad, there is just existence. This seems to be a reference to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, where the practitioner acknowledges their circumstances but doesn't judge them. It's part of the practice of letting go of one's desires, which is a central tenet of Buddhism.

Another example comes from reaching back into pop culture history and pulling out the intellectually intense and action-packed trilogy The Matrix. At one point in the first movie, Neo, the eventual savior of humanity, talks with a bald boy dressed in some sort of tan Buddhist monk garb. The boy is bending a floating spoon with his mind. Neo tries to do the same. The boy tells Neo, “Do not try and bend the spoon. That's impossible. Instead, only try and realize the truth.”

“What truth?” Neo asks.

“There is no spoon, ” the boy answers.

“There is no spoon,” Neo repeats.

“Then you’ll see that it is not the spoon that bends, it is only yourself.”<sup>13</sup>

In the reality of the Matrix — when a person is "plugged in" — everything is an illusion. The spoon, a desk, a car — nothing exists in the real sense of the word, only figuratively.

We are not going to flesh this out in this eBook, but the Matrix’s perspective -- that everything is an illusion -- is found in many other religions around the world. Yes, the movie is talking about a fictionalized world, but the movie is representing and promoting a real belief from the real world.

### **Question #3: Who am I?**

For the past several years, Twilight has dominated the publishing and film industries. If you’re not familiar with this series, it's about Edward, a young-looking-but-super-old vampire, and Bella, a high-school-aged girl, who fall in love. The series of four books is based around their attempts to be together.<sup>14</sup>

There are several points in the movies when we hear Edward say things like, “Bella, you are my life now. You’re my only reason for staying alive.” And at one point Bella says, “If this is about my soul, take it! I don’t want it without you.” When the two are apart, Edward becomes suicidal, to the point of exposing himself as a vampire to the world. (FYI -- if he had been able to expose himself to the world, he would have been killed by the leadership council of his own people.) Bella becomes self-destructive too, intentionally putting herself in harmful situations — like riding a motorcycle recklessly fast — so that Edward will have to come back and save her. Twilight shows that Bella is miserable without Edward, but decadently happy with him.

So what’s the message teenage girls are likely to take away from these stories? Put yourself in the shoes of a teenage girl. If she indulges in these stories uncritically, she’ll probably think she needs to find her own Edward

and will be discontent with herself and her life until she does. What impact could this belief have on her sense of worth as a young woman?

#### **Question #4: How do I know what is right or wrong?**

We mentioned the “follow your heart” idea back in Chapter 1, which shows up often in pop culture. But there are also some other answers to the ethics-and-morality question that make frequent cameos. One obvious answer to this question comes up in the recent baseball movie called [42](#).<sup>15</sup>

[42](#) follows the heroic journey of Jackie Robinson, the first black player in professional baseball. In one scene, Jackie is playing in the hometown of teammate Pee Wee Reese. As the game progresses, the camera zooms in on a dad explaining parts of the game to his 12-year-old son. As number 42 comes to the plate, the dad stands up and starts screaming vulgarities at Jackie. We see the 12-year-old son look around confused as he tries to make sense of his dad’s ranting and raving. After a few seconds, the son stands up and starts screaming vulgarities too. It becomes obvious that the boy doesn’t know what or why he is yelling these angry words, but he continues, driven by his dad’s example and the consensus of the crowd. A few moments later, Pee Wee Reese, the white hometown hero of the boy, comes on to the field and puts his arm around number 42, making the point that he accepts Jackie even though his skin is a different color. Again we see the boy confused.

This story powerfully illustrates a common misconception about truth that is offered by pop culture: that truth is defined by consensus. Whether we look back at the 1400s when it was generally accepted that the Earth was flat, or whether it is a scene from the 1800s when slavery was both accepted and a way of life, there have been numerous times when truth has been defined by what the largest amount of people — the consensus — thought truth to be. In the movie, the little boy did not know why he was supposed to hate Jackie; he just knew that he should based on the “boos” and curses around him. He was literally looking to the crowd to determine

his behavior.

Is this the way we should determine truth and morality? Is truth defined by consensus? If the majority of people stand up and claim that African Americans are not humans, does that make it right? Obviously, no!

### **Question #5: What is my purpose in life?**

“So what, we get drunk? / So what, we smoke weed? / We’re just having fun / We don’t care who sees / So what, we go out? / That’s how it’s supposed to be / livin’ young and wild and free.” Wiz Khalifa, Snoop Dogg (who now calls himself Snoop Lion), and Bruno Mars got together for this 2012 song, titled “Young, Wild, & Free.”<sup>16</sup> The message about purpose in life? Have fun. If that means doing drugs and getting drunk, awesome — don’t even worry about who sees you. Life is about doing what you want to do, when you want to do it.

### **Question #6: What happens when I die?**

Lately, Liam Neeson has been known for his roles in the human trafficking thrillers Taken and Taken 2. But he also starred in the 2011 thriller The Grey, in which a plane wrecks in Alaska, and the survivors—Liam Neeson's character, Ottway, among them—are tracked down by a pack of wolves.<sup>17</sup> During the movie he repeatedly quotes a poem that hung above his father’s desk:

“Once more into the fray  
Into the last good fight I'll ever know.  
Live and die on this day.  
Live and die on this day.”

We find out that this poem and Liam Neeson’s character believe there is nothing on the other side of death. It’s absolute. Permanent. At the

beginning of the movie, when the plane first crashes, we are given a glimpse of hope — hope that they might survive the harsh elements and wolves. But hope wanes with each passing day, and the movie ends with Liam Neeson's character embracing the meaninglessness of life, charging “into the fray” and — spoiler alert! — to his death.

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As teenagers navigate the world, they are looking for answers to their big questions. And as we can see, pop culture offers some pretty interesting answers to these questions. In the next chapter we'll discuss how these answers students receive about life will, over time, influence who they become. There's a word for this idea of influence over time. It's called discipleship. So let's talk discipleship and how pop culture is discipling the next generation.



## Chapter 3: What About Discipleship?

Parents are not the only ones discipling their kids.

A row of older brick townhomes lined Independence Avenue. Streetlights created patches of shadows on the sidewalk. Light fog hung in the air. And every few minutes a car would flash its red brake lights as it disappeared around the corner. For downtown Philly, it was pretty quiet.

But then gunshots rang out — BAM–BAM–BAM — killing the silence. And Tyrone.

Tyrone was a good friend of Patrick, one of the Axis Team Leaders. According to Patrick, he has lost a lot of friends during his life, but Tyrone’s death was the hardest for him to take. “His life was cut short. Like a breath or a vapor, it was gone in a moment.”

A few years later, Patrick’s understanding of the brevity of life and his search for meaning led him regularly to a bar near Penn State University, where he would try to wash away his emptiness. One night, God showed up. “I rested my arm against the bar counter, holding a drink in my hand. Under normal circumstances, I would have downed it and had a few more. But on that night, it was my first and only drink. Leaning on that bar top, a question surfaced in my brain, one that would change my life:

“What am I doing here?”

Patrick didn’t finish his drink that night. Instead, he walked out of the bar inspired to live a life that mattered. But as we all know, a decision to change doesn’t mean that everything changes right away. Patrick still had the same bad friends and negative influences surrounding him. So he started to pray for something different, for help.

A few months later he was driving on a back road near Penn State. His

car was a junker, and as he and a friend approached a curve, the car sputtered. Not knowing much about cars, Patrick pulled over, lifted up the hood, and stared at a what appeared to him to be only a mess of wires and metal.

Luckily for Patrick, though, his car broke down right in front of a house belonging to couple named Steve and Pam.

Steve came outside to see if he could help. After getting his car running, Steve stayed in contact with Patrick. Over the next few months, Steve helped Patrick get his car fixed, invited him to church, and began to mentor him. And then, Steve made a radical offer and invited Patrick to live in his house with his family. Steve was a strong believer and loved helping people. Throughout the rest of Patrick's college career, Steve and Pam helped Patrick finish school. They got him plugged into their church, and Patrick joined the choir. When Patrick tells the story, you can see the joy and love he has for Steve, Pam, and their children. "They walked through life with me," Patrick said, "and, in a way, taught me how to live. Steve became a mentor of mine, and he disciplined me. He and his family changed my life. If it weren't for Steve and his family, I don't know where I would be today."

## **What Is Discipleship?**

In the story above, Patrick mentioned that he was "discipled" by Steve. In Chapter 2, we made the claim that the ideas presented to the next generation by pop culture are discipling the next generation. But what is discipleship, and why is it important?

Before we talk about what discipleship is, could be, or should be in our time, let's consider what discipleship looked like in Jesus' time.

## **Discipleship in Jesus' Time**

Jesus was born into a world of discipleship. In first century Israel,

students flocked to rabbis (religious scholars and teachers), wanting desperately to study with them. A typical rabbi would begin his career by teaching the crowds, sharing what he had learned about God's law and how he interpreted it. Young men who were interested in the Scriptures would come listen to the rabbi as he preached from a hillside.

If one of these young men was interested in studying with the rabbi, he would approach the rabbi and ask if he might learn from him. The rabbi would look the boy up and down, considering if he might be a good student, and then the tests would begin. "Recite the scroll of Isaiah for me," the rabbi might say. And the student would begin reciting the book of Isaiah to the rabbi from memory. If he passed, if he didn't stumble too much, the rabbi would nod and ponder and then begin another test. "List the birds named in the Scriptures," he might command. And the student would flip back through his mind and, beginning in Genesis, list the birds mentioned in Scripture. On and on it would go, the rabbi checking to see if this potential student had what it took to be his follower.

If the student passed the test, he would be allowed to study with the rabbi. He could become the rabbi's disciple and glean from the rabbi's wisdom and learn to interpret the law of God the way the rabbi did.

This new disciple would then begin to follow his rabbi — literally. Wherever the rabbi traveled, the disciple would go. Whatever the rabbi did, the disciple would do too. If the rabbi marched through a muddy puddle, the disciple would as well. If the rabbi slept, the disciple would close his eyes. If the rabbi went into the restroom, the disciple would follow, because what if he says something profound in there?

Such was the life of a disciple. He was completely and fully committed to being just like his rabbi. Nothing was better than to become a successful copy — a disciple — of the rabbi he had committed his life to following.

This was the world into which Peter, James, John, Matthew, and the rest of the twelve were born. This is what would have come to mind for Jesus' disciples when he said, "Go make disciples." Jesus wanted people who would follow him, who would know exactly what he had said, who

would relate to the world and other people as he did, who would desire to be just like him.

## **Making Disciples**

John, when writing to believers who were being challenged by false teachings, talked about the importance of obedience — the importance of love for God being combined with an active response. When we know the background of discipleship and the passionate faith Jesus called people to, it is no wonder that John points out the seriousness of being a believer: “Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6).

But John is not the only one to say this. Jesus himself made a similar statement called the Great Commission. “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV). Unfortunately, a lot of Christians have oversimplified the Great Commission and stripped it of its meat.

Often, when we talk about the Great Commission, we seem to think that saying a prayer makes a person a Christian. And perhaps that's the case. But does that make someone a disciple — which is what Jesus really called for in the Great Commission? By oversimplifying the Great Commission to a conversion prayer, have we actually committed a “Great Omission”?<sup>18</sup> Have we omitted the part about “...teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”? YES! We have forgotten that becoming a disciple in Jesus’ time meant a complete restructuring of one’s life around Jesus Christ — or as John said, “to walk as Jesus did.”

If we want to preach from Matthew 28, and we should, we need to stop using it merely as a command for evangelism and realize that it is a command for much more: discipleship.

We’re not the only ones who think something’s missing from the way

we teach about discipleship. Here is a soundbite of a recent sermon by David Platt:

Making disciples is the natural — or maybe better yet supernatural — overflow of being a disciple. Proclaiming the love of Christ is the overflow of sharing in the life of Christ. And I'm convinced many people in our churches are just simply missing the life of Christ, and a lot of it has to do with what we've sold them as the Gospel — i.e. pray this prayer, accept Jesus into your heart, invite Christ into your life. Should it not concern us that there is no such superstitious prayer in the New Testament? Should it not concern us that the Bible never uses the phrases 'accept Jesus into your heart' or 'invite Christ into your life'? It's not the Gospel we see being preached. It's modern evangelism built on sinking sand, and it runs the risk of disillusioning millions of souls.<sup>19</sup>

So if being a follower of Jesus is a lot more than praying a prayer, then what is it? What are the key characteristics of being a disciple of Jesus?

## **Four Characteristics of Discipleship**

At Axis, we have identified four basic characteristics of discipleship based on what we know about discipleship from Jesus' time: Time, Leaders, Values, and Life. We will explain those characteristics in detail a little further into the chapter, but before we do, think about the implications of those four characteristics. If those are four primary characteristics of discipleship, just about anything — whatever we are spending time with, whatever we are following — could be our rabbi.

## **Two Qualifiers**

There are two more things you need to know before we explain our

perspective on discipleship in any more detail.

1) It's our perspective. There's a lot of debate and postulating on what discipleship ought to look like. Many books have been written on the subject, and Axis is using this eBook to describe our perspective on what it looks like to disciple teenagers.

2) We don't think discipleship can be practiced in today's culture exactly as it was in Jesus' time. Let's face it. We have different stresses, priorities, and restrictions on our lives. Plus, we are a more individualized as a culture. But this doesn't make the discipleship any less vital to our lives today. It just means we need to be prepared to apply it a little differently than leaving our homes and following a religious teacher around the countryside. We need to be creative.

## **The Four Questions**

Now we are ready to explore discipleship as it relates to pop culture. By asking ourselves and our teenagers four simple questions, we can figure out who and what we are disciples of.

Question #1: What do I spend the majority of my **time** doing and thinking about?

Disciples in Jesus' day, spent all of their time with their rabbi. Like we mentioned above, if the rabbi went into the bathroom, the disciple followed. So the first characteristic of discipleship is what we spend our time on.

Question #2: What **leaders** do I follow?

This is slightly obvious, but a disciple was a follower — a follower of a rabbi. The rabbi not only taught his disciples theology and doctrine, but he also aimed to live out those principles. Following a rabbi and copying his every move was, in essence, learning how to live life. So the question we have to ask ourselves is: Whom do we follow? Whose teachings, ideas, and lifestyles are we imitating?

Question #3: Where do I get my **values**?

The word “values” is charged with political baggage. Whenever you mention it, people automatically think of the “religious right” and their attitudes toward abortion and gay rights. But we're using the term “values” in a basic sense, to refer to the collection of ideas, practices, and truths that we “value” or deem important. With that in mind, let's ask this question: What do our teenagers value? What do we value? Furthermore, who teaches us and our teenagers what to value?

Question #4: How do I live my **life**?

Another way to ask this question could be, “What are the actual activities that make up my day?” If we were to list out all of the things that we accomplish in a day, what things would be on that list? If we were to take an inventory of everything we think about, do, pursue, read, listen to — if we listed the places we visit, the people we interact with, and the activities that fill up our day — what would be on that list?

But we can't just stop at listing activities — if we do that, we are in danger of becoming a bunch of pietists who think that we have to become monks to be pure disciples of Jesus. Question #4 is about a lot more than simply what we do. It's just as important to consider how we do what we do. God cares about the way we live just as much as the things we accomplish while living.

In a way, Question #4 is the culmination of the first three questions because what we spend time on, the leaders we follow, and what we value will end up determining the way that we actually live out each day of our lives.

Discipleship is important. It's important because Jesus said it was important. It's important because it directly impacts and guides who we become as adults. It's important because you are not the only one discipling your children. And if you aren't the only one discipling your kids, that means your kids are students of other things. We already mentioned that pop culture is more than happy to take them on as disciples, and that may be the main reason parents are losing. Pop culture may just be the primary influence on your teenager's life.



## Chapter 4: Why Parents Lose

Parents are not the only ones discipling their kids!

Parents tell us they're losing. They tell us that their children are walking away from God, and they don't know what to do about it.

Do you remember the stats we gave earlier in the book — the indications that young people are leaving the church and their faith at alarming rates? Here they are again:

Pew: One in three adults have no religious affiliation.<sup>20</sup>

CNN: ... most American teens who called themselves Christian were indifferent and inarticulate about their faith ... though three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christian, fewer than half practice their faith, only half deem it important, and most can't talk coherently about their beliefs.<sup>21</sup>

Barna: Between 40 and 50 percent of graduating high school students, who participated in church or youth group while they were in high school, will fail to stick with their faith in college.<sup>22</sup>

The stats are mind-blowing — but like we said earlier, the problem is not primarily statistical; the problem is personal. We don't have to share these stats with the thousands of parents, teachers, and youth leaders we meet each year. They already know what's happening. They just want to know what they can do to fix it. But before we can fix it, we need to know why the problem exists in the first place — why parents are losing.

Axis believes that parents lose because of the way teenagers are disciplined. That's the reason we dedicated the last chapter to describing discipleship, and that's the reason we exist as an organization. Every presentation we give, every book we write, every newsletter we send out

is, at its core, about discipleship.

Do you remember the four basic characteristics of discipleship that we mentioned in the last chapter? Obviously, the New Testament version of discipleship is quite a bit different from discipleship today, but regardless of the time period and style of discipleship, the end goal of discipleship is to influence the way someone lives and the things someone believes. After all, aren't the four characteristics of discipleship we listed in the previous chapter — Time, Leaders, Values, and Habits — just a fancy way to define influence?

So when we look at why parents are losing, we have to consider who and what is influencing our teenagers. We have to consider who is discipling them.

## **Why Parents Lose #1: Time**

The first reason parents lose is because teenagers spend more time with devices than with their parents. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, teenagers spend almost 11 hours a day with media (this includes multitasking). Here is the breakdown:[23](#)

- TV/Movies: 4:54 per day
- Music: 2:31 per day
- Video Games: 1:29 per day
- Computer: 1:13 per day
- Print (books/newspapers/magazines): 0:38 per day

Notice that none of the stats above includes cell phone use. Cell phones add another 2 hours and 52 minutes consisting of watching TV (0:15), listening to music (0:17), playing video games (0:17), talking (0:33), and texting (1:30). Also, if you add up the stats, you will notice that the grand total of the time teenagers spend with pop culture is around 14 hours a day. Obviously that is impossible since they go to school, play sports, and hang out with friends. The reason the number is so high is because teenagers

spend most of their time multitasking or using more than one type of media at a time. So if we factor in multitasking, teenagers spend 7 hours and 38 minutes engaging with their mobile devices and other technologies. That's still a lot of time — and a lot of influence.

Of course, it's not the devices alone that are the problem. To claim that would be like blaming a recliner for someone being overweight. It's not the recliner's fault; it's the fact that we sit on it and watch TV all day, of course. Cell phones, TVs, and computers are not the sole reason students are walking away from the church and their faith. Teenagers walk away from God, in part, because of the ideas and messages from pop culture that they interact with via these devices they spend so much time with. This exposure to pop culture is teaching them who to follow, what to value, and how to live their lives.

Technology does share some of the blame, though. Let's go back to the recliner example. A recliner's purpose is to make you very comfortable in front of the television. Some recliners even have small coolers built into their arm rests for sodas or beer. Obviously you could fill that cooler with something healthy like orange juice or bottles of water, but who wants to watch a Duck Dynasty marathon and only drink orange juice? No one! If you're going to watch Duck Dynasty, you need a gallon of sweet tea from Chick-fil-A (and maybe some KFC fried chicken?) — everyone knows that! It's easy to sit in front of the TV for hours under these conditions. But if you were sitting on a hard wooden chair, you probably wouldn't last nearly as long.

Let's take the recliner example a step further: Have you ever been in a furniture store and noticed the marketing that surrounds recliners? There aren't posters of people sitting around watching football enjoying orange juice and celery sticks. Instead, there's usually a huge widescreen HD television, a platter of wings, a bowl of queso, and a cooler full of beer or soda. That is the culture that surrounds recliners.

So is it the recliner's fault that you stay sedentary and eat junk food?

Not completely. A recliner can't make you eat pizza. But what does a recliner stand for? What is the culture that accompanies owning a recliner? What practices do recliners encourage? When you start to ask those questions, you realize that the medium can be just as important as the message.

Let's go back to pop culture. Smartphones have one main purpose: to keep us more connected with the digital world. It wasn't very long ago that you had to use a computer to check email. Now your smartphone can send you notifications when a new message hits your inbox. Or what about Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the vast collection of social media networks? Each of those networks has been formatted specifically for your hand-held device. Now you can stay connected with your social media networks every hour of every day in virtually every location. So the medium — smartphones — connects us to the message — pop culture. And the medium (smartphones) is important because it connects us to pop culture in a way we have never been connected before — instantly and constantly.

Here's the application and the way smartphones relate to the recliner example. The device (or medium) can only keep you connected to pop culture if you give it the attention it "needs" (i.e., if you push the correct buttons, open the correct app, or keep it charged). It can't force you to check Facebook, just like a recliner can't force you to eat pizza. So what is the culture that surrounds a smartphone? The answer: instant and continuous connection to pop-culture, which requires a lot of your time and attention.

We plan to talk about this in more detail in a future book, but for now just know that mobile devices and other forms technology matter because they are the means by which we, and our teenagers, consume pop culture. The medium is just as important as the message.

And to rehash why we are talking about devices and technology in this chapter, it's because teenagers are spending more time with their devices than with their parents. And how we spend our time is a primary indicator

of who or what is discipling us.

## **Why Parents Lose #2: Leaders**

The second characteristic of discipleship is all about sex. Okay, maybe not. But sex does a great job of explaining the second reason parents lose.

Did you have “the talk” with your teenager? Did you explain sexuality and why it’s important to wait to have sex until marriage? How did that go? Was it awkward? And the most important question, how often have you had “the talk” with your teenager?

For a lot of parents, “the talk” is a one-time event. Some parents take their child out for a special dinner, give them a promise ring, and explain “the birds and the bees.” Some parents ask their kids to read a book and tell them they can ask any questions they want (as if that’s really going to happen). And some parents sit through “True Love Waits” with their teen, pray with them, and then tell them something similar to what David’s (Axis CEO) mom told him: “I love you. I’m proud of you. And I don’t want you to have sex until you’re married.” But regardless of how parents give “the talk” to their teenager, it’s usually a one-and-done conversation. Something that a parent talks about once and then never brings up again.

In contrast, pop culture talks about sex a lot! Take a few minutes and listen to just a few of the songs on the Billboard Hot 100 — a chart that ranks the most popular songs in the United States. Count how many songs discuss sexuality in one way or another. Now go to Fandango and look at the top 10 box office hits for this week. How many movies are rated PG-13 or R because of sexuality, sensuality, or nudity?

Or just spend a few minutes on Twitter. Twitter is a place for people who want to spread their ideas in 140 characters or less to a group of “followers.” It’s a place for famous and not-so-famous people to share their thoughts and ideas with their fans. Previously, we talked about discipleship in terms of a student following a rabbi. But today, the word “follow” has been tweaked by Twitter. “Following” now means staying in

touch with their favorite artists, musicians, comedians, and celebrities. This is the world teenagers live in. So what are the messages being proffered by these “leaders” with lots of followers?

Let’s start with Lady Gaga’s Twitter profile which reads:

“When POP sucks the tits of ART.”<sup>24</sup>

Recently, Gaga tweeted: “We could be caught, we’re both convicted criminals of thought. -Sex Dreams.” Almost 35 million people saw this post — 20,154 of whom “retweeted” it, and almost 11,000 of whom “favorited” this post.

Like a rabbi, Lady Gaga is teaching her followers about life and specifically about sexuality. Not only is this Tweet inane, but it takes a rather debonair view of the sanctity of sex, which, by the way, is something Gaga does regularly through her music and social media presence.

Even more recently, Gaga tweeted a link to her new online community, “Little Monsters,” a place where she says you can “share your passion and creativity in a community full of art, acceptance, monsters, and Gaga.” Not only does this campaign encourage teenagers to be “monsters,” but it champions one of Gaga’s core values: “acceptance.” Specifically, Gaga embraces all forms of sexual identity and exploration. Combine the tweet above with her campaign “Little Monsters,” and you will begin to see the way she is influencing, or discipling, the next generation toward a specific worldview about sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

To be fair, Lady Gaga is not asking her followers to be monsters in the way we traditionally think about the term. She is not asking them to destroy the playground at McDonalds or scream uncontrollably in the grocery store because their moms won’t let them buy candy. Lady Gaga’s brand and personality appeals to young people who feel rejected by society. They feel different. In many ways, they feel like Frankenstein’s “monster.” Lady Gaga is offering a place for people who feel different to

be different without judgment.

Back to the point of this section: Parents lose because their teenagers spend more time “following” Lady Gaga and celebrity culture than they do following them. They lose because they have one important conversation about sex instead of being involved in the ongoing dialogue about sex. Parents lose because teenagers don’t “follow” them.

### **Why Parents Lose #3: Values**

In the past, certain Christian leaders and movements have focused on defending “Christian values.” What they meant by that was ending abortion, voting Republican, fighting gay marriage, and making pornography illegal. But “Christian values” should be about a lot more than a few hot political topics. Christian values are about a worldview — about seeing the world the way God sees it and valuing what God values. We are not saying that politics is a waste of time or that ending abortion, voting Republican, fighting gay marriage, and making pornography illegal are bad things — that’s not the point we want to argue for or against. We are saying that this is, perhaps, a limited view of “Christian values,” and we mean to expand our definition of values beyond political connotations.

A great place to start would be with Jesus himself. What were Jesus’ “values”? Jesus was known for eating with sinners (Mark 2)<sup>26</sup>, teaching Kingdom principles (Matthew 5)<sup>27</sup>, sacrificing his life (Romans 5)<sup>28</sup>, and accepting little children (Matthew 19).<sup>29</sup> (Jesus was known for a lot of other things too, but we don’t have the space to go through all of Jesus’ qualities in this eBook.) Would Jesus be horrified by abortion? Of course! Especially because he loves little children. But Jesus also loves sinners. Are we teaching our teenagers to love sinners with as much energy as we are fighting abortion?

Teenagers need a much more holistic and complete view of Christian values. They need to be taught about Jesus’ life and learn to value what Jesus valued. But they aren’t learning a complete picture of what to value

from their parents.

Parents lose because teenagers are learning what to value from popular culture, among other things. And what are the values that pop culture is teaching?

Have you heard of 50 Shades of Grey? It is pornography in book form. Not only does it describe sexual acts quite vividly, but it also takes it a step further by exploring sadomasochism — in detail. And if you are of the opinion that 50 Shades of Grey isn't that big of a deal, consider the fact that they are making a movie out of it.<sup>30</sup>

Sadly, it's not just this New York Times best-selling series of books that explores sadomasochism. Some of the most popular songs in America explore this topic as well. At the time of this writing, Pitbull and Christiana Aguilera have a song at #10 on the Billboard charts titled "Feel This Moment." A few of the lyrics include:

Now baby we can parley,  
Or baby we can part-ay  
She read books, especially about red rooms and tie ups  
I got her hooked,  
'Cause she seen me in a suit with the red tie tied up  
Meet and greet, nice to meet ya, but time is money  
Only difference is I own it,  
Now let's stop time and enjoy this moment<sup>31</sup>

According to SongFacts.com, a database of song facts that focuses on "the story behind the song," "Pitbull makes reference to E.L. James' best-selling erotic novel 50 Shades Of Grey when he raps: 'She read books, especially about red rooms and tie ups.' The book is notable for its explicit sex scenes featuring elements of bondage and female submission." Pitbull and Christian Aguilera are teaching the next generation and the people who "follow" them to value a dangerous and perverted form of sexuality, namely sadomasochism.<sup>32</sup>



Remember, this section is about “Values,” and we are looking to determine what pop culture teaches us to value. In these books and songs, pop culture is teaching us to not only value sex, but to pursue a very inappropriate and dangerous form of sex that includes physical abuse and bondage. A form of sex that goes well beyond a man and a woman becoming one flesh and that explores techniques that are too inappropriate to even mention in an eBook. That is what 50 Shades of Grey and "Feel This Moment" are teaching your teenagers to value.

But a perverted form of sexuality is not the only thing pop culture teaches us to value. It also teaches us to value money: “I want to be a billionaire so f\*\*\*\*\* bad” go the lyrics of one recent pop hit.<sup>33</sup> Pop culture teaches us to value celebrity influence (i.e. Entertainment Tonight, the Oscars, People Magazine, etc.) And pop culture teaches us to value partying: “Red solo cup you’re more than just plastic / you’re more than amazing, you’re more than fantastic / And believe me that I’m not the least bit sarcastic / when I look at you and say: ‘Red solo cup, you’re not just a cup...you’re my friend...I love you red solo cup’...Let’s have a party.”<sup>34</sup>

So as we look at all of these examples it becomes obvious that pop-culture is teaching teenagers about values. As George Lucas once said, “Film It is teaching them about what is important. It is teaching them about what gives their lives meaning. And lastly, pop-culture is teaching them how to live their lives.

## **Why Parents Lose #4: Life**

When you consider the fact that teenagers spend over seven hours each day consuming media, during which they are following Lady Gaga and Pitbull and learning from them what to value, you can see why we are making the argument that your children are being taught how to live — being disciplined, in other words — by pop culture. This is one of the main reasons parents lose. Their children are learning how to live life from

people whose main goal is to sell records or movie tickets and be shocking in order to get airplay and make money.

Teenagers are learning about sex from Lady Gaga and E.L. James, about what it means to have a good time from Snoop Lion (formerly Snoop Dogg), and about the afterlife from Cloud Atlas. They are not sitting under their parents' teaching, learning from their parent's experience and wisdom. They are following their favorite bands on Twitter, interacting with their peers on Facebook, and asking Google about the meaning of life. (FYI— at the time of this writing, Google currently displays 598 million answers to the “meaning of life” in 0.25 seconds.)

## **What We Didn't Say**

Nowhere in this chapter did we say parents are not trying. You wouldn't be reading this eBook if you didn't care about your teenagers and the next generation. Our point is not to blame parents as if pop culture's influence over and discipleship of their teenagers is all their fault. Our point is that the world has changed. Whereas parents used to be the primary influence on a child's life, nowadays pop culture is the primary influence on a child's life. And that is the core reason parents lose.

As you consider who your kids 1) spend their time with, 2) follow, 3) learn what to value from, and 4) acquire their habits from, you'll realize that maybe pop culture is doing most of the discipling of your children.

## Chapter 5: How Parents Win

What if discipleship and leaving a legacy are one in the same?

The sun shines through the windows and onto the floor. An antique lamp sits on an old brown table near a green couch. The lamp wasn't originally a lamp. It was a statue that an old man had discovered at a garage sale and had decided to convert into a beautiful lamp.

A thirteen-month-old uses the couch to pull himself up, and he smiles at his mommy and daddy. His daddy is sitting on the floor with his arms out ready to catch him. His mommy has the video camera out and is sitting behind his daddy recording everything. As the boy starts to wobble forward, mom and dad encourage him: "You can do it!" "Come on." "Daddy will catch you."

The little boy moves his chunky legs and stretches out his hands as far as they can go. He tries to hold on to the couch with one arm and use the other to reach his daddy's hands. But his dad is just out of reach. The thirteen-month-old lunges forward and takes a step before falling into his daddy's arms. This game continues for an hour as his dad moves a little farther away each time.

On the last attempt of the day, the little boy puts together five steps in a row. The parents cheer. They praise him. They dance around the room with him. They call their extended family and talk about his first steps. They watch the video they've recorded over and over and over again. They're ecstatic. The toddler senses his parents' pride.

All because he took a few steps on his own.

A year later, that same boy is at the top of the stairs. Fear, coupled with a sense of adventure, shows on his face. Although he can walk and even run without falling, stairs are still a little difficult. But his daddy walks up

next to him and reaches out his hand. The little boy grabs his daddy's finger, holds on tight, and begins to walk down the stairs.

A few years later, that boy is at an intersection. Cars are driving by quickly, and again the boy feels fear and adventure. He reaches up and grabs his daddy's hand. They cross the street.

Thirteen years later, that same boy pulls into the driveway in his green 1998 Jeep Cherokee Sport. It's late. He just finished watching a movie at the theater with his girlfriend. He jumps out of his Jeep, grabs his backpack, and shuts the door. He pulls his keys out of his pocket to unlock the door, but it's unlocked. He walks into the house quietly, supposing that everyone is asleep. But not everyone is asleep.

The light of an antique lamp, the lamp that wasn't originally a lamp, illuminates a small part of the living room. His mom is sitting on the couch reading a book. Like her son, she's thirteen years older, with some gray hairs and a few more wrinkles. But the same proud smile illuminates her face as her son walks in the door.

For an hour or so, they talk about his day. She asks him about his date, the movie he saw, if he got his homework done, how school was, and if he enjoyed soccer practice. He tells his mom just about everything — not in a weird sort of way — but simply because his mom has always fostered a relationship built on conversation with him.

Eight years later, that same boy — a man now — walks around to the passenger-side door and opens it for his mom. They have just pulled up to his favorite coffee shop, and he's excited to share the place with his mom, especially since she still likes to pick up the tab. They sit for a few hours and talk about life. He tells her about his marriage, what it's like to be a dad, how work is going. She smiles and listens, just like she's done for twenty-six years.

After coffee, they drive back to his house. As they walk in the front

door, an antique lamp — a lamp that wasn't originally a lamp — illuminates the foyer. A two-year-old boy runs around the corner and yells, “Nina!” As she picks up her grandson, her face breaks out into a smile. Meanwhile, a little one-year-old wobbles around the corner repeating “Na na na” as he tries to say her name. She picks him up too and holds the two boys.

For a quick moment, she closes her eyes and bows her head. It’s subtle, nearly imperceptible. She’s so happy that tears fill her eyes as she embraces her two beautiful grandsons.

## **The Discipleship Bridge**

Chances are, if you’re reading this book, you have teens in your life, or you're about to, or you just did. And chances are, you remember the day your son or daughter took his or her first steps.

You'll notice that in the story that began this chapter, the parents are teaching their son how to walk — they are not, however, walking for their son. It would be weird for the twenty-six-year-old son to hold his mom’s hand when they cross the street together or when he walks down stairs. Something would be wrong if he still needed his dad's help to walk across the living room.

Why? Because parents teach their kids how to walk so that their children can get around on their own. It would be unhealthy to never teach them how to walk on their own.

This principle — teaching kids how to walk — is the way we approach pop culture with teenagers. At Axis, we find truth in the old adage: “Prepare your child for the path, not the path for your child.”

Preparing your child for the path is really about leaving a legacy. It’s about passing down wisdom and real, holistic Christian values to your kids. It’s about discipling them to be more like Jesus so that when they are out of your house and have their own families, they are able to live by that wisdom and then, eventually, pass down the same wisdom and Christian

values to their families.

The goal in discipleship is to teach your kids how to think, not what to think. Teach your kids how to live, how to be wise, and how to be discerning. Prepare your child for the path, not the path for your child. Parents need to pass down the legacy of “walking” to their children.

Most parents know this, but they don’t always know how to do it. In fact, parents ask us all the time, “How can I win with my kids?” “How can I get them to talk to me about this stuff?” “How can I engage with them about deep issues or pop culture?” One parent told us recently, “I need someone to help me connect with my kids.”

It seems like most parents need a bridge — something to fill the gap between them and help them and their children get back together. Discipleship is the bridge. Discipleship can bring parents and their kids together. We are not saying that the end goal of discipleship is to bring parents and kids together. We are saying that a by-product of biblical discipleship is a better relationship between parents and their kids. And here’s why biblical discipleship can bring families together: because, according to the Bible, parents are responsible for discipling the next generation.

In Deuteronomy we read:

These are the commands, decrees, and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children, and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live by keeping all his decrees and commands that I give you, and so that you may enjoy long life. Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.<sup>35</sup>

We are including these verses in this eBook because this passage of Scripture describes, in detail, what discipleship between parents and their children looks like. In this passage, we see parents passing down a legacy to their children — not a legacy defined by a herd of cattle or flock of sheep, but a legacy of wisdom and of learning to walk with God throughout the remainder of their lives. This legacy of wisdom is discipleship, and at Axis, we describe this legacy of discipleship like a bridge.

Picture two islands. One side is Teenage Island filled with technology and pop culture. On the other side is Parent Island, filled with wisdom and experience. Between the two islands is a walking bridge called discipleship. The bridge allows parents to go to the “isle of teens” — to connect with teens in meaningful ways. This bridge also allows teens to go to the “isle of oldies.” The bridge is built on biblical wisdom, which is a right understanding of God and the world. And according to Deuteronomy, the purpose of the bridge is for parents to help their teens cross the bridge — to help their children fear the “Lord your God” and walk into mature adulthood and relationship with God.

So how do parents win? To win, you need to follow the example laid out in the story that began this chapter and prepare your kids for the path. You need to build a strong relationship with your kids based on communication. You need to ask your teens easy questions and hard

questions. You need to be involved in the conversation about pop culture. You need to teach your teenagers how to think.

If we only tell teenagers what to think and don't help them learn how to think, we are setting them up for disaster. You can't be with your children all the time — it's physically and practically impossible. That means that you need to prepare your child for the path, not the path for your child.

If you teach your children the wisdom of the Bible via the bridge called “discipleship,” your children will flourish. That's how parents win. That's how we keep teenagers from walking away from God.

Now, is the discipleship bridge a guarantee? Of course not. Students will still walk away from God; everyone, including our teenagers, has his or her own choices to make. But if we do our part as parents — discipling our children, teaching them wisdom, and preparing them for whatever they may encounter — there's a good chance that we could save the next generation, and end up changing our culture along the way.



## Conclusion

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Romans 12).<sup>36</sup>

Pop culture is powerful. It can influence people on a deep level. Teenagers spend a lot of time with their mobile devices and the pop culture content those devices deliver. Pop culture is not only providing teenagers with a new group of leaders to follow, but those leaders are teaching a set of values. Because of the amount of time, the leaders, the values, and habits teenagers are absorbing from pop culture, they are being encouraged to form a worldview that, for the most part, is contrary to biblical wisdom. Considering the way that pop culture influences teens over time, it's not far-fetched to say that pop culture is discipling our kids.

You need to teach your children how to live. You need to model and teach your children biblical wisdom. Ultimately, you need to prepare your children for the path and not the path for your children.

If we parents disciple our kids, there’s a good chance we could save the next generation and end up changing our culture along the way.

## Appendix

*We asked some amazing parents to give us advice about raising kids. Here's the best of what we heard back. If you have advice you'd like to tell our readers, send it to [davideaton@axis.org](mailto:davideaton@axis.org).*

### **Foresight**

“The best advice we received: 'You can spend time in teaching and discipline at age 2 or in regret at 22 – it's your choice.'

Be okay with their failures and don't take it so personally as a parent. We want our children to be a reflection of Christ, not us. We wish we had understood that in our own lives and then we would have reflected that to them.” -*South Carolina*

“1) Write your daughter a letter for birthdays and special events. Pour out your heart and dreams for her. Save them and give them to her when she turns 18.

2) Potty training doesn't work until you've mastered it yourself.” -*Ohio*

### **Involvement**

“Dads are a springboard for launching great kids into greater adults. Pray, love, and expect great things!” -*Texas*

“DON'T BACK AWAY – kids need their parent's presence and engagement far more than they need their money or enablement.” -  
*Colorado*

“Do: Be involved in your kids' school and extracurricular activities; be a coach for their team, attend all events they are in. Be their biggest cheerleader!

Eat dinner together.

Go to church together.

Teach them to serve the poor and help the needy – as a family.

Limit TV and social media time.

Encourage them with words and actions.

Don't: Give them a car, a phone, or a computer. Make them save and earn, and then assist them.” -*Texas*

“What worked: Find out what your teenager’s love language is. If he doesn't know or you can't figure it out, love him with all the love languages.

What didn't work: Too much talking, nagging.

Another thing that worked: Time is on the parents' side. Consequences don't have to be meted out immediately, when you're angry or frustrated. They can wait.” -*New Mexico*

## **Consequences**

“I know I raised my voice too much which caused the kids to raise theirs! A friend speaks softly in discipline, and they listen and obey better.” -*New Mexico*

“Correct the heart attitude before it translates into action!” -*Colorado*

“My precious Nick was a biter – so finally his mom bit him back and that was the end of that.

Love 'em to death – I have the best family in the world!” -*Ohio*

## **Discipline**

“1) Being consistent – works!

2) Trying to be friends with your kids – doesn't work.” -*Colorado*

“We had to learn the 'grace factor' so the whole family wouldn't be grounded on major events! Don't make a threat or statement of discipline or punishment unless you are willing to carry it out. Train children to do chores. Don't be a nag. Set up a system for them to see their chore for the day (we used magnet clothespins on fridge with chore cards). If they fail to do it – they should know the consequences in advance. Factor in some grace; let them earn a freedom, a 'get out of jail/grounding free card.’” -  
*Texas*

## **Parents**

“Put God and family first. The rest will fall into place.

Prepare the child for the path – not the path for the child.

Don't let your entire life revolve around your kids. Someday they will be gone, then what?” -*Iowa*

“Agreement between parents is imperative. 'Mom said I could' is a wedge that's really hard to overcome.” -*New Mexico*

“Best advice – Learn your spouse well – love him/her and put that love in action. That will be the best investment for your children.

Worst advice – All children should not be treated the same. All children are different – as parents, learn their personality and strengths and weaknesses and grow them up knowing their “bent' and personality.” -  
*Texas*

## **Endnotes:**

*Click footnote number to continue reading.*

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