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Youth and faith: good news, bad news

December 20, 2007 | Karen Swallow Prior

Recently MTV and The Associated Press released the findings of a joint, in-depth survey on happiness among Americans aged 13 to 24. The pollsters happily reported strong links between religion and happiness. Headlines across the nation proclaimed the news, “Religion leads to more happiness for young people.”

And indeed, this is good news.

Apparently to the pollsters’ surprise, religious belief is the single-most significant factor in young people’s happiness. The majority of those surveyed, 65 percent say that religion is at least somewhat important in their lives. Furthermore, while only 60 percent of those for whom religion is unimportant consider themselves happy, 80 percent of those for whom “religion or spirituality” is “the most important thing in their lives” report being happy.

The bad news is that more young people (two thirds) say that technology — such as cell phones and the Internet — makes people happier than the number who say that religion is “very important” in their lives (44 percent). Only about 10 percent identify religion as “the single most important thing in their lives,” less than the 14 percent who say religion plays no role in their lives.

Another widely-publicized finding of the survey is that 68 percent of young people agree with the statement, “I follow my own religious and spiritual beliefs, but I think that other religious beliefs could be true as well,” and only 31 percent agree with the statement, “I strongly believe that my religious beliefs are true and universal, and that other beliefs are not right.” Although one might take issue with the wording of these leading survey questions, it is sobering that more than two-thirds of youth describe their religious beliefs as something they “follow,” while less than one third describe their beliefs as “true.” The media has widely touted this finding as a victory for “tolerance.” But the church should have another word for it: “troubling.”

Of course, none of this is “news,” nor is it surprising. Diminishing belief in absolute truth (i.e., something is either true or it is not, as opposed to its being “true for me, but not for you”) has characterized our culture for some time. And, sadly, the church has not been immune to this cultural influence.

In fact, young people are merely following the example set by their elders. A Barna survey conducted shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks revealed “radically altered” views of truth among Americans: most disturbing is the finding that those who identified themselves as born-again Christians were among those least likely to believe in absolute truth — just 32 percent.

Thus, it appears we have a nation of believers who profess faith in Christ but at the same time reject His proclamation that “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father

except through me” (John 14:6). Yet, just as surely as there are many causes for this cultural shift, there is one answer: the Word of God.

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