Many of us feel stress and get overwhelmed
not because we're taking on too much,
but because we're taking on too little
of what really strengthens us.

—MARCUS BUCKINGHAM

Wherever we turn today, we find people who are afraid and angry. Their lives seem out of control, and their core values are rapidly eroding. In my interactions with people inside the church and outside, the powerful and the powerless, I hear all of them make similar remarks:

"People are talking out of both sides of their mouths. I don't know who to trust anymore!"

"With all the violence, I don't know if I'm safe in my own house."

"I worry about my kids' future."

"Why are we letting all these people into our country?
They're taking our jobs, and some of them may be terrorists."

"Everybody needs a gun. At least *I* need one!"

"Can I ever find a good job, one I really enjoy?"

"Is it worth getting married? It costs so much, and many
marriages don't work out."

"Will I have enough money to retire when it's my time?"

"What if I get really sick? Can I even afford the medicine and
treatment I'll need? Will the healthcare system be there for me?"

"Nobody seems to care about me or what I value any
longer. Either the culture has moved or I have, but something's
really wrong."

"Is the church going to do anything about the weakening
of our country's values?"

IT'S NOT JUST YOU

Some of us might assume that our concerns are only per-
sonal, but a glance at the news reveals that many Americans
are afraid their security is slipping away. Recent surveys by
both Gallup and the Barna Group reveal disturbing shifts in our
culture. In the span of only a few years —the blink of an eye in
cultural history—their surveys found:

• The number of Americans who support same-sex marriage
   has risen from twenty-seven percent to sixty percent in
   about a decade.[1]

• Correspondingly, four out of ten Americans cite worries
   over the loss of religious freedom.

• Based on a set of fifteen beliefs and behaviors, forty-four
   percent of Americans can be described as "post-Christian."

- In frustration, seven out of ten Americans today want political leaders who have clear, bold stances on issues that concern them. Of those who responded, this criterion for leadership is far more important than character or political experience.

- Many women feel isolated and vulnerable. Only seventeen percent of women report they feel "very" supported by their faith community. Consequently, many feel relationally distant from other believers.[2]

How did we get here? Young adults have grown up during a time of rapid cultural changes, but those shifts began long before they were born. Older Americans have witnessed a series of events that have led us to this point. The prosperity of the post-World War II years created a tsunami of change as memories of The Great Depression and the war quickly faded in the rearview mirror. In *New Rules*, Daniel Yankelovich describes how our culture moved from *self-sacrifice* before and during World War II to *self-indulgence* in the decades after the war.[3] People were deprived for a long time, and suddenly, they had the opportunity to have it all! Modern advertising (think of *Mad Men*) made big promises. Before, ads simply described how a product or service worked, but then ads for beer, banks, and cars (and every other imaginable product) began to promise benefits of popularity, financial security, close friendships, peace, freedom, and sexual attraction. Over-promising became completely normal.

With increased income, parents had enough money for their children to go to college. Until that point in our nation's history, the vast majority of young people received, at best, a

high school education and then went to work on family farms or in their communities, remaining geographically close to their parents and grandparents. Suddenly, far more high school graduates had the opportunity to go to college. Moving away from home brought more freedom to experiment with lifestyle choices they wouldn't have dreamed of trying if they lived at home.

The excitement and optimism of the postwar years soon became clouded by the harsh realities of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the close call of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the violence against leaders of the Civil Rights movement. Shockingly, President Kennedy was assassinated, and a few years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were slain. The Vietnam War tore America apart, and Watergate shattered trust in our political leaders. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court ruled in a landmark 1973 case that abortion is legal in America. The 60s and early 70s were traumatic for America, but even during those tumultuous times, we put a man on the moon.

After those difficult years, we experienced a measure of peace and prosperity again. The generation born after the war, the Boomers, became self-absorbed and were dubbed "the me generation." A sexual revolution and the prevalent use of drugs swept America.

In the 80s and 90s, periods of prosperity and economic downturns dominated the news, yet America seemed safer than ever—especially after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.

But then the events of September 11, 2001 shattered our sense of security. For those who lived through that day, the memories are as strong as Pearl Harbor or Kennedy's death was for earlier generations. America entered controversial wars in

the Middle East. At home, gay marriage, which was unthinkable only a decade before, was validated by several states and then the Supreme Court. In recent years the issues have multiplied: immigration, refugees from the war-torn Middle East and turmoil in Latin America, police violence, and mass shootings. We now live with constant news about the dangers of terrorism, certainly abroad, but increasingly in our communities.

For young and old alike, it feels like our nation is coming apart at the seams!

Only in a world where faith is difficult can faith exist.

—PETER KREEFT

FOUR RESPONSES

We can identify four distinct responses to the changes in culture: accommodate, oppose, withdraw, or engage.[4] Sometimes we see all four in a single family. Let's examine these.

Some people *accommodate* change.

For these people, tolerance is the highest virtue. They don't want anyone to be superior to anyone else, so they accept every lifestyle and belief as equally valid.

Accommodators look at the shift in attitudes toward gay marriage (or guns, immigration, the use of force by police, or any other important cultural change), and they say, "It's no big deal. Everyone deserves fair treatment. And besides, it's not right to judge anyone! We need to keep in step with the culture. We need to go along to get along."

Some people fiercely *oppose* change.

This second group has the opposite reaction: when threat-ened by change, they see proponents of the other side as enemies who must be defeated, not reasonable people who have a different opinion. Even small shifts in society are seen as potential major losses because: "If you give an inch, they'll take a mile!"

These people oppose change because they are terrified that their way of life is going to be taken away—or worse, it has already been stolen from them. They only listen to friends or commentators who reinforce their fears and enflame their anger. Those who might offer an alternate voice of reason are considered fools and pawns of the opposition.

Some people *withdraw* to protect themselves.

This group assumes, "What's the use? My voice means nothing in the big debates about immigration, gun control, racial conflicts, or same-sex marriage. Those issues (and many others) are far too complex. And anyway, I don't want to get in the line of fire between people who are so angry!"

If someone corners them and demands a stated opinion, they shake their heads and say, "Oh, I don't know. That's beyond me." They believe not having an opinion protects them from getting caught in the fight between opposing forces. Many of them don't watch the news because, they've concluded, "It's too depressing."

These three reactions to cultural drift may seem completely good and right, but they undermine our identity as strong, com-passionate, wise children of our heavenly King. For instance, those who accommodate change lose the sharp edge of truth.

When tolerance is overvalued, behaviors that were called "sin" a generation ago become acceptable topics for sitcoms today. Those who oppose change can lose their sense of grace, love, and mercy for those who disagree with them. And those who withdraw too quickly from intense debates and dialogs lose their God-given opportunities to represent him in a lost and confused world. So we will turn our attention to the fourth way to respond to the complexity and chaos of modern culture:

We can *engage* change with a beautiful blend of truth, grace, and purpose.

Jesus calls us to be "in the world but not of the world" (John 17:13-18) and to be "salt and light" to the people around us (Matt. 5:13-16). With this identity and perspective, we interact with people with truth and grace—not affirming their sins because we're afraid of being labeled judgmental, not harshly condemning them, and not withdrawing from them because interaction requires more than we want to give. Rather, in our engagement with people, we follow the example of Jesus. He moved toward the outcasts and the marginalized, and he touched the lepers and cared for those who were possessed by demons. He wept with those who lost loved ones, and he felt genuine sorrow when others chose a different path. He stood up against injustice, and he boldly faced the religious leaders who despised him for loving the unlovely.

Jesus lived a simple, humble life, but he wasn't threatened by scarcity. He trusted his Father to provide for him in every way. Jesus wasn't consumed by power, prestige, and popularity, so he didn't dissolve into self-pity when those things were taken from him. He had a strong confidence in his Father and his Father's will for him.

Every day, you and I have choices about how we respond to our culture. Most times it would be much easier for me to avoid difficult conversations and just go along with the pressure to accept same-sex marriage as the new normal . . . to look the other way when gun violence destroys another life and another family . . . to give up on the fight against abortion. Choosing to engage requires a lot from me! As I watch the people in our community and our church respond, withdrawal seems to be the most common response of all. I've seen, though, that these three unhelpful responses isolate us, diminish our impact, and hurt God's reputation.

Those who engage with wisdom, courage, and kindness need to set limits on what they're willing to accept. They sometimes have to draw clear lines and go no further. When the *New York Times* interviewed me about the recent cultural shift in our nation and our courts to accept same-sex marriage, they cited the Pew Research Center's findings that only 27 percent of white evangelicals support same-sex marriage and 70 percent oppose it. In other words, among Bible-believing Christians, the shift has been minimal. I explained, "In 2,000 years of Christian history, the church has often been at odds with the culture." This is not an issue that has shades of gray. I continued, "We're prepared to go to prison, or whatever occurs, but the church cannot change.[5] God has given us a clear path, and we need to stay the course.

I believe God wants me—and he wants you—to engage the demanding people and difficult issues in our culture. In my role as a pastor and community leader, I've had a lot of practice, but I still have to remember to look closely at how Jesus related to the helpless and the powerful, those who loved him and those who hated him. He tailored his response to each person, but always with the appropriate measures of gentleness and toughness.