

chapter 4

A TALE OF FIVE CHURCHES



*Everyone was talking about it. I don't just mean most people; I mean everyone in this small town in eastern Nebraska\* was buzzing about the big news of the summer. Truth be told, it was the biggest thing to happen in these parts in years. It seemed like the only news Glenmoor, Nebraska, ever received was of one more plant closing the doors and leaving town. There were only twenty thousand people left in a town that had twice that many residents just ten years ago. But now, there was some excitement in the air. There was a sense of anticipation that lined every conversation.*

*About three months ago, the rumors had started to fly. At first, it was hardly believable, and most people dismissed it after a few moments of giddy "what if" conversation. The idea of those people coming here, to their town, seemed implausible. It was fun to dream about, but it surely wouldn't happen.*

*But then, last week, the mayor confirmed it during his speech before the Memorial Day parade. Following a drum roll from the local high school marching band, he made the huge announcement and the entire town cheered loud enough that they were sure to be heard in the next county over. It was confirmed; it was no rumor!*

*And it was even better than expected. Not only would Tom Cruise be here, in their town, staying in their hotels, eating in their restaurants—he would be staying for three months! It had just been announced by Paramount that they were making a movie on location in none other than Glenmoor, Nebraska. And not just any movie—this would be a big-budget blockbuster, starring not only Tom Cruise, but also Rene Russo, Tom Wilkinson, Ali Larter, and others.*

*"Why make a movie in Glenmoor?" some asked.*

*A few quickly replied, "Who cares? Just be grateful and quit asking questions!" Others took more time to answer and said the director wanted to make the movie entirely in Glenmoor to make sure it had that Midwest, small-town feeling. The movie needed to be believable.*

*Regardless of the reason, the thought of what this would mean for the town was astounding. For three months, they would have national attention. There*

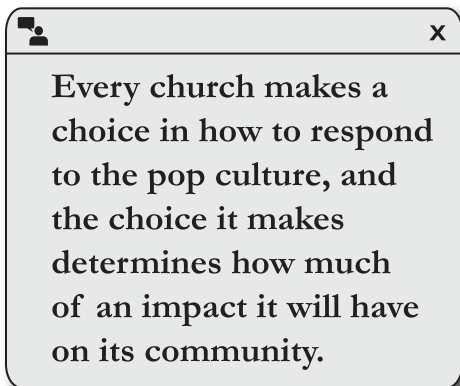
\* This is an allegory, and as such, any similarity to real towns, churches, or pastors is entirely coincidental (although quite possibly divine).

would be hundreds of crew and cast members (the mayor said more than six hundred) living in their community. This might be the very thing they needed to kick-start the economy and get the momentum moving in a positive direction again.

In the coming weeks, more details about the film plot began to emerge. It would be an R-rated movie about a factory worker who loses his job and begins a string of illicit affairs that lead him on a path of self-discovery. Not exactly a family film, but it would take more than that to squelch the excitement in the town.

It wasn't long, however, until some of the churches in town began to weigh in with their response to this news. A few responded quite predictably, while others surprised everyone.

Pop culture has permeated every community in America, and most around the globe, regardless of how big or small, urban or rural,



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crowded or remote. Your town might not have Tom Cruise coming to make a movie, but it has the influence of Angelina Jolie, Rihanna, Justin Timberlake, Tom Clancy, Will Smith, Howard Stern and ten thousand others like them every day over the airwaves, on the big screen, through

a cable, across the web, on billboards, and even directly to your teen's ringtone.

The question is not, "Does pop culture have an influence?" The question is, "What am I going to do with it? How will I respond? What choice will I make?"

Every church makes a choice in how to respond to the pop culture, and the choice it makes determines how much of an impact it will have on its community.

## CONDEMN THE CULTURE

*One of the first to come out with passion and energy against the film was Pastor Bill Jackson from Grace Church. He was outraged at the city officials for their sponsorship of the project. He was disappointed with the city folk for blindly accepting it. And he was angry at the movie industry for continuing to produce smut such as this that was tearing at the very fabric of the society. “It is bad enough that you are making it in Hollywood—but keep it out of my hometown!” he yelled.*

*He began to rally his congregation to voice their concerns. Every time he had an opportunity and a crowd he asked, “Why do we want to bring this filth from Hollywood into our community—one that is known for its family values?” When that idea didn’t seem to be getting traction, he encouraged his congregation to vote with their checkbook. He was able to obtain a list of every vendor in town who was providing hotel rooms, meals, or other services for the film crew, and he published this list for his congregation.*

*“You can do what you want, but my family won’t be giving any of our money to these businesses who are mindlessly aligning themselves with that which is evil!” he preached on the Sunday the list was distributed.*

As a teen, I remember attending the ordination of a young pastor in central Iowa. He sat on the stage all alone while a group of about twenty older (and presumably wiser) pastors peppered him with theological questions, one after another. The day is pretty much a blur in my memory, but I recall one question that was asked by a pastor who was probably nearing eighty years old.

“Which attribute of God is stronger—his holiness or his love?”

I am guessing I remember that question so well because of the ensuing conversation I overheard during the lunch break. It was then another pastor asked, “Bob, why do you ask that question at every single ordination? And, if you are so curious about the question, how come you never push back on the answer?”

“I don’t have any idea what the correct answer is,” Bob replied. “I just want to make sure every young pastor is struggling with the question.”

If this elder pastor who had been studying the Bible for more than sixty years didn’t know the answer, I’m not going to pretend to have a handle on it. But it seems to me that this desire to condemn the culture comes out of an imbalance toward the holiness side.

Joe,

If you saw any news reports about the highly publicized boycotts of Disney or 7-Eleven, or the recent one against Ford motor Company, you may believe every church and every Christian in the world is in support of these causes. That surely is how it comes across in the media. I’m not saying the sponsors of the boycotts don’t have a good reason. Removing pornography from the reach of children at convenience stores, for example, is a good cause. But I do think sometimes the method hasn’t been helpful.

In the short-term, the boycott may hurt a company’s business or result in a change of direction, but I wonder if it hurts the cause of Christians in the end. It seems, Joe, that Kinnaman might be right. We Christians are known more for what we are against than what we are for. We aren’t known by our efforts to end the AIDS crisis or feed the hungry as much as we are for our campaign against Disney. We aren’t known by our efforts to help people in our inner cities get out of poverty as much as we are for our campaign against Ford.

And Joe, I’m really hoping that will change.

-Tim

David Kinnaman says, “We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for.”<sup>1</sup> Isn’t that true much too often? The cable news networks love to pit two religious leaders against each other, and it angers me to watch them argue their points. It never seems to come down to what they believe in, but what they think someone else is doing that is wrong.

Christians have a longstanding history of being against pop culture, which came to the forefront in 1977 with the formation of the American Family Association. Over the past three decades, they have led boycotts against 7-Eleven, American Airlines, Abercrombie and Fitch,\* and even American Girl. They were joined by Jerry Falwell’s *Moral Majority* during the 1980s, which was followed by the very public boycott of Disney by the Southern Baptist Convention that began in 1997 and ended in 2005.

Even more recently with the release of *The Golden Compass* in December 2007, Christians made headlines by standing against this children’s movie for its perceived atheistic message. Over 955 news articles were written about the response of Christians to this movie, with headlines such as “Christian Group Protests *The Golden Compass*” and “Church Warns Fantasy Film Is Anti-Religion” and “Religious Groups Call For Boycott of *The Golden Compass*.”

It seems as if every week I receive an opportunity by e-mail to boycott this, petition that, sign a covenant, or let a business know my Christian beliefs about its product. Honestly, these types of activities make me sick. Those businesses and organizations we want to boycott are being run and led by people—human beings—with families and kids and lives and choices. We may as well say to them, “Go to hell because I don’t give a rip about your eternity. Just stay away from

\* A member of my review team told me this story: “My wife worked at Abercrombie as a corporate trainer when the boycott was launched against the company. The majority of the employees were not followers of Christ and were completely turned off to Jesus because of the boycott. She was picking up the pieces for several years after that.”

me and my family and out of our picket-fence-protected homes.” Our actions are perceived as *holier than thou*, and they put us in the category of “all Christians are the same.”

When did we decide the church should dictate, control, or mandate the direction of our culture? Isn’t culture just a reflection of who we are as a society? Why are we focused on the fruit rather than the root? It would be like smashing all the apples from a tree in anger because they aren’t big enough or tasty enough rather than considering the soil, sunlight, and environmental conditions; getting mad at the food when we should really be talking to the cook; or blaming the kids when we should talk to the parents.

Christians even use the Bible as a hammer against society hopefully to force it to reform. We think those who do not follow Jesus should act like those who do.

In their book *A Matrix of Meanings*, Detweiler and Taylor make a great point:

In the New Testament, only the Gospels were written with the general public in mind. Yet many in the church read pop culture in light of Peter, Paul, and John’s letters. Books of the Bible intended as “in-house” documents, designed to purify God’s people, have been used inappropriately to correct the broader culture. So the warnings against sexual immorality in 1 Corinthians 7 get directed toward audiences Paul never intended.<sup>2</sup>

The authors go on to point out Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 5:12–13, “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside.”

I like how the same passage reads in *The Message*:\* “God decides on the outsiders, but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and, if necessary, clean house.”

Yet time and again, those who call themselves Christians, and many who are pastors or religious leaders, condemn the culture and reinforce the stereotype that all Christians are judgmental and unloving. It is no wonder that people such as Jeff, a twenty-five-year-old who doesn’t go to church, was quoted in *unChristian* saying, “Christians talk about hating sin and loving sinners, but the way they go about things, they might as well call it what it is. They hate the sin and the sinner.”<sup>3</sup>

### SEPARATE FROM THE CULTURE

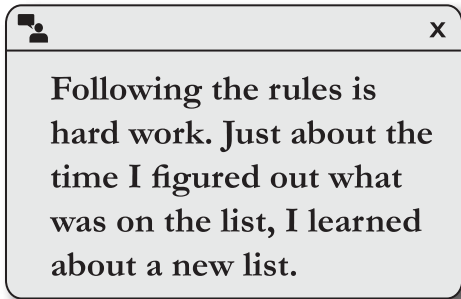
*Meanwhile, across town at Cornerstone Community, Rev. Diebers began a series of messages on biblical separation. He was aware of all the ruckus in town about the movie production and wanted to make sure his congregation was prepared. He had taught them over the years about staying pure and fleeing from immorality, so he was confident that not many were in the habit of watching R-rated movies. But he knew they might be tempted to give in to the pressure to watch this movie upon its completion. Since it had been filmed in a familiar location, he knew the desire would be stronger than ever. So this new series would be a good opportunity to review the principles of being “in the world but not of the world.”*

I was about eight years old when a guest speaker came to our church. He was appropriately named Sketch Erickson, because he was also a sketch artist. As he spoke, he would draw pictures with chalk, and I can still vividly picture one in my mind. The title was, “Don’t Let

\* Some are opposed to quotes from *The Message*. It should be noted that Eugene Peterson’s knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is deep and seasoned, making *The Message* extremely faithful to the original text.

the World Squeeze You Into Its Mold,” and it had a picture of a guy all wrapped up inside a globe.

For years, I tried to live by that motto and follow all the rules. I truly wanted to stay away from anything in the world that would taint my soul. Yes, that is a good thing, but I think I went about it the wrong way because I never had to think for myself about what those



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things were—the lists were readily provided. At various times, the list included any music with drums, singers that held their own microphones or wore flashy jewelry while singing, jeans, denim of any kind, jewelry on men, swim-

ming with the opposite sex (called “mixed bathing” for some reason), hair on guys that was too long, hair on girls that was too short, movie theaters, any video with higher than a PG-rating, drinking, smoking, chewing, pornography, the J. C. Penney catalog lingerie section, guys who wore hats in church, girls who didn’t wear hats in church, dresses that didn’t go below the knee, and on and on and on.

Following the rules is hard work. Just about the time I figured out what was on the list, I learned about a new list. As an adult I worked at one Christian organization where no one was allowed to listen to any music—even personally, with headphones, on your own time—that had not been approved by the leaders. So we would turn in all our CDs and wait to find out what was approved and what had to be shelved.

It is interesting to me that Jesus didn’t make many lists of things not to do; he focused more on lists of character qualities to embody. Some of his harshest criticism was against the religious leaders and their endless lists of dos and don’ts.

Matthew 12 tells the story of Jesus walking through a field with his disciples. The guys were hungry and they were grabbing some grain to munch on to hold them over until the next meal. The Pharisees saw this and went postal. “Your disciples are breaking the Sabbath rules!” they yelled at Jesus.

Jesus replied calmly, “Really? Didn’t you ever read what David and his companions did when they were hungry, how they entered the sanctuary and ate fresh bread off the altar, bread that no one but priests were allowed to eat? And didn’t you ever read in God’s law that priests carrying out their temple duties break Sabbath rules all the time and it’s not held against them?”

Good answer, Jesus. But he wasn’t done. “There is far more at stake here than religion. If you had any idea what this scripture meant—‘I prefer a flexible heart to an inflexible ritual’—you wouldn’t be nitpicking like this. The Son of Man is no lackey to the Sabbath; he’s in charge.”<sup>4</sup>

If I had been one of Jesus’ disciples, I would have been hiding behind a row of grain giving my buddies a high-five. What a great answer!

Jesus often communicated that it’s not primarily about what you do or don’t do. It is not about lists. It is about your heart. It is about being right with God.\*

I think the entire Sermon on the Mount could arguably be for the purpose of minimizing our reliance on lists and focusing instead on the condition of our hearts. Jesus said, “You don’t murder? So what? What’s in your heart toward that person?” He said, “You haven’t committed adultery? So what? Your heart can be corrupted by lust even faster than your body.” It was a heart issue.

Many things in the Bible are black and white; they are indisputably wrong, such as having sex with your friend’s wife. However, is an

\* Matthew 23 contains an entire message by Jesus against the rules of the Pharisees.

R-rated movie wrong to see? Is it wrong for a Christian to watch *Desperate Housewives*? Should you listen to a song that contains profanity? I don't know. Maybe for you it is okay. Maybe for me it is sin.\* What's in your heart? Where does that activity take your mind?

Here is what I know. It made Jesus very angry when the religious leaders of his day made rules that were not in the Bible and imposed them on everyone else. Jesus called the religious leaders who obeyed every one of more than six hundred laws “a brood of vipers”<sup>5</sup> because of their unclean hearts. Another way to say this is they had “minds like a snake pit.” I don't know about you, but I'd rather Jesus not know me as having a dirty heart or snake-infested mind.

## EMBRACE THE CULTURE

*Taking the opposite view from either Grace Church or Cornerstone Community was what Bob Franklin did. He was the presiding pastor at Glenmoor Central, an established congregation that was known for its progressive views. Their slogan the entire year, since Pastor Franklin had arrived in town, was “Open Arms,” and it had been rumored that they rarely ever preached out of the Bible. With all the excitement about the famous celebrities coming to town, Bob decided to open the gates wide and do whatever it would take to build a huge crowd during the weeks the cast members were in town.*

*He started by contacting a friend in Los Angeles who knew someone who knew someone else who had a connection to one of the producers of the movie filming in Glenmoor. His assignment to his friend: “Get me anyone you can to speak at my church. I want a different actor every week of the summer if possible!”*

*“I'll check,” his friend replied. “What type of speaker are you looking for? Any particular topic? Does he have to be a Christian?”*

*“None of that matters. Just having an individual from the cast at the church will build a huge crowd. We can figure out later what we'll talk about. If they*

\*I'm not talking about a Gospel of relativism. The Bible is our final authority, but Romans 14 clearly indicates there might be activities that are okay for one Christian and wrong for another.

*aren't comfortable speaking, I can even interview them. We'll find a topic that is comfortable to them."*

There is a mindless embracing of the culture that is worrisome to me. Too many leaders check their brains and their hearts at the door and run after whatever is cool, whatever is trendy, whatever will bring in a bigger crowd.

Don't get me wrong. I am a numbers guy. Numbers represent people and the more numbers (i.e. people) we can get in the front door, the better. Steven Furtick, a pastor in North Carolina, probably said it even better: "If you get the impression that we're all about the numbers, let me clarify. Of course we're all about the numbers. What else would we be all about? The spaghetti supper? To hell with the spaghetti supper. I want to see some changed lives!"<sup>6</sup>

The problem comes with our motivation. Some take the posture that *the end justifies the means* and have no boundaries for what they will do to build a crowd. If it means watering down the message, they will do it. If it means giving out free beer or showing the entire R-rated movie in the service or celebrating the sinful activity that happens within the film—it doesn't matter. If it builds a crowd, then it is fair game.

I think it is crucial that we don't lose the message in the method. At Granger, we are criticized all the time for our methods, but I have never once heard someone (who actually attended a service) say we are soft on the message.

Craig Groeschel, pastor of LifeChurch.tv (named the most innovative church in America by *Outreach Magazine* in 2007 and 2008<sup>7</sup>), says he thinks the "pendulum has swung too far. Now, in some places, church is so relevant that we almost seem to worship culture more than Christ."<sup>8</sup>

It would sadden me if the result of this book were an abandonment of scripture in favor of being more culturally relevant. Groeschel says that having cool lights, awesome video, a coffee shop, and a sermon series with catchy titles isn't bad, but "when people *do* finally come to church, we should help them experience Christ—not just something that looks like a rock concert, coffee bar, or movie theater." I could not agree more.

### IGNORE THE CULTURE

*Pastor Melissa Ellsworth had been at First Church since the economic boom of the early 1980s. She was old enough and wise enough not to be swayed by the daily headlines. For more than twenty years, she had pastored this small flock, and they counted on her to encourage and inspire them. It was her practice to keep teaching the Word, regardless of what was happening around them. So for the entire year, she just kept working through her series on the book of Ruth. She never mentioned the movie production, not even in a prayer. Several of her parishioners thanked her for helping them find a haven away from the insanity that was outside those walls.*

The catastrophe on 9/11 happened on a Tuesday morning, and within a few days almost every church in America was deciding what to

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do that weekend. At Granger, we were two weeks into a five-week series called "Extreme Success." We were exploring biblical truths that could help you in your daily life at work. We had invested several thou-

sand dollars on a stage set that had a painted backdrop with skyscrapers (thus the "success" analogy) and in front of the skyscrapers were

various dummies dressed in business attire performing stunts (thus the “extreme” analogy).<sup>□</sup> One guy was hanging upside down riding a skateboard. Another was riding a dirt bike.

As soon as 9/11 happened, having bodies hanging upside down in front of skyscrapers took on an entirely new meaning. We made an easy decision—the entire set had to be scrapped. The community wasn’t thinking about how to do better in their jobs. Everyone was thinking about his or her safety and the future of the country. Where was God in all this? What is an Islamic fundamentalist?

Another church in the Chicago area had a very different response. One of our staff members was there visiting a family member and was shocked to discover how they responded.

This church went on as if nothing at all had happened. It was the week of their annual Hispanic Appreciation Sunday, and they saw no need to change that. Although attendance was up because of the tragedy on everyone’s mind, the church went on as though it were a normal Sunday. Not even in their opening or closing prayer did they acknowledge the events of the previous week.

I didn’t talk to the pastor, but I am guessing it was an intentional decision. He probably believed the church should be a haven. I’m sure he thought, “Our people have been watching this on the news 24/7 since Tuesday—I’m going to give them something else to think about.”

What a mistake! What an opportunity lost! On the day when more people in the country were in tune to their spiritual journeys and eternal destinies than ever, this church totally ignored it.

Many churches do this every week of the year. Events are happening in the culture around them, and rather than seize the opportunity to talk about it and help people make sense of the spiritual realities

□ KEYWORD: EXTREME | [PopGoesTheChurch.com](http://PopGoesTheChurch.com)

woven through the fabric of their lives, they ignore it.

A hugely successful book and subsequent movie such as *The DaVinci Code* comes out and soon one out of every three adults has been exposed to it. They have new questions about their faith, about Jesus, and about the trustworthiness of the Bible, and some churches completely ignore it.

A blockbuster movie such as *Spider-Man 3* premieres that is full of spiritual topics. What an opportunity to talk about forgiveness, regret, destiny, and choices. Suddenly, a common language can be used, if only for a short window of time, that will connect to a larger group of people than attend on a typical Sunday. But some churches intentionally ignore the opportunity, not wanting to risk offending the regulars.

And so the world passes by, never hearing how much they matter to God.

## LEVERAGE THE CULTURE

*John Bixby had only been the pastor at River Pointe Church for a couple of years. In his short tenure, he had helped them discover why they exist as a church, walked them delicately through a change to their name that better reflected the mission of the church, and helped them begin to rediscover their purpose to reach out to the community. This process led them to the conclusion to scrap their relocation plans. Instead, they intentionally decided to stay in the neighborhood where they believed they had the greatest chance of making a difference.*

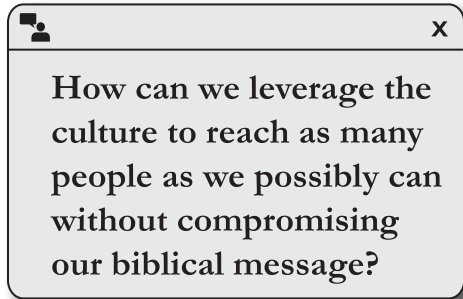
*Soon after the mayor had shared the big news about the filming of a Tom Cruise movie, John called his leadership team together to discuss the potential this could have. After two years of leading and training this group, John sat back and watched his team respond with love and grace—he couldn't have been more proud. One of the elders led the conversation by saying, "There are going to be six hundred people here from Hollywood who need to know how much they matter to God!"*

*The leader of the men's prayer breakfast jumped in and said, "I'm not excited about the theme of the movie—God knows it's already hard enough to keep my kids safe. But that's not the point. The entire community is going to be watching how the church responds. Are we going to point our finger at them with judgment? Or are we going to accept them right where they are?"*

*Marge Hudson, an elderly parishioner who had been at the church since before John was born, said, "Those crew members are going to be hot and hungry—maybe we should do something about that." And with those words, a plan was born. Teams of volunteers from the church began to give out cold bottles of water to the crew each afternoon in what would later be determined the hottest summer on record. Each morning they distributed newspapers—not the local *Glenmoor Daily*. No, they had arranged to get a supply of the *LA Times* each day so the cast members had a little feeling of home.*

*It also became quickly evident there wouldn't be enough hotel rooms in town to accommodate the influx of people, so after a few phone calls River Pointe Church became the official clearinghouse to find homes in the community that had extra bedrooms. They then coached these host families to just love, accept, and listen—and not preach.*

*John then planned a series of messages to help make a positive connection to the culture. He didn't want to use the themes from the movie that was being filmed in Glenmoor, but he found five other movies in which Tom Cruise had starred and used one each week to introduce a biblical theme. He called the series "Cruise Control: Letting God Take the Wheel" (which his fourteen-year-old daughter immediately told him was the cheesiest thing she'd ever heard and would be horrified if she ran into Tom Cruise in the grocery store).*



I didn't attend the pretend meeting at this made-up church, but here are some questions I have to believe they were considering:

How can we leverage the culture to reach as many people as we possibly can without compromising our biblical message? How can we maximize an opportunity we may never have again to share the love of God with six hundred people who will be living in our town for three months? How can we show our community how much they matter to God without them thinking we want anything in return?

How can we use this to help us impact some of our friends and neighbors who have never shown a previous interest in attending church? What are some topics we can address from the Bible that will really help people at their biggest point of need?

In a sense, they were seeing an opportunity to engage the culture. They weren't changing their mission. They had no plan to soften the message or exclude certain parts because unbelievers would find them hard to swallow. They were just seeing an opportunity and choosing to leverage that in order to reach more people.

## **PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Five churches. Five leaders. Five vastly different responses. All of them aware of a major pop culture event having an impact on everyone in their community. Yet, each made a different choice on how to respond.

I'm not sure they all made a conscious choice. For some of them, they responded as naturally as they would if they saw a child fall off a bike. Instinct kicks in. Training pays off. Experience guides. A choice is made.

And it is the same set of choices every church has about how to deal with the ever-pervasive pop culture that surrounds our congregations.

Five choices.

Grace Church (interesting name, huh?) chose to **condemn** the culture. Let the world know what is wrong. Reject those who align themselves with the sin of the culture.

Cornerstone Community chose the route of **separation**. Say nothing to the public, but make sure our congregation knows to avoid the sin and the sinners.

Glenmoor Central looked straight at the culture and gave it a full frontal hug. **Embrace** the culture. No discernment. No filter. The goal was more people. We will figure everything else out later.

First Church just went on doing church as usual. People have enough clutter in their minds and lives. **Ignore** the culture. Let's just stay focused on the Word of God and provide inspirational services.

River Pointe looked for new and creative ways to let people know how much they matter to God. Let's **leverage** this pop culture event so we can reach as many people as we possibly can.

Condemn. Separate. Embrace. Ignore. Leverage.

I hope you will choose to leverage. I think you will after you see how full of hope the culture around you is. More about that in the next chapter.