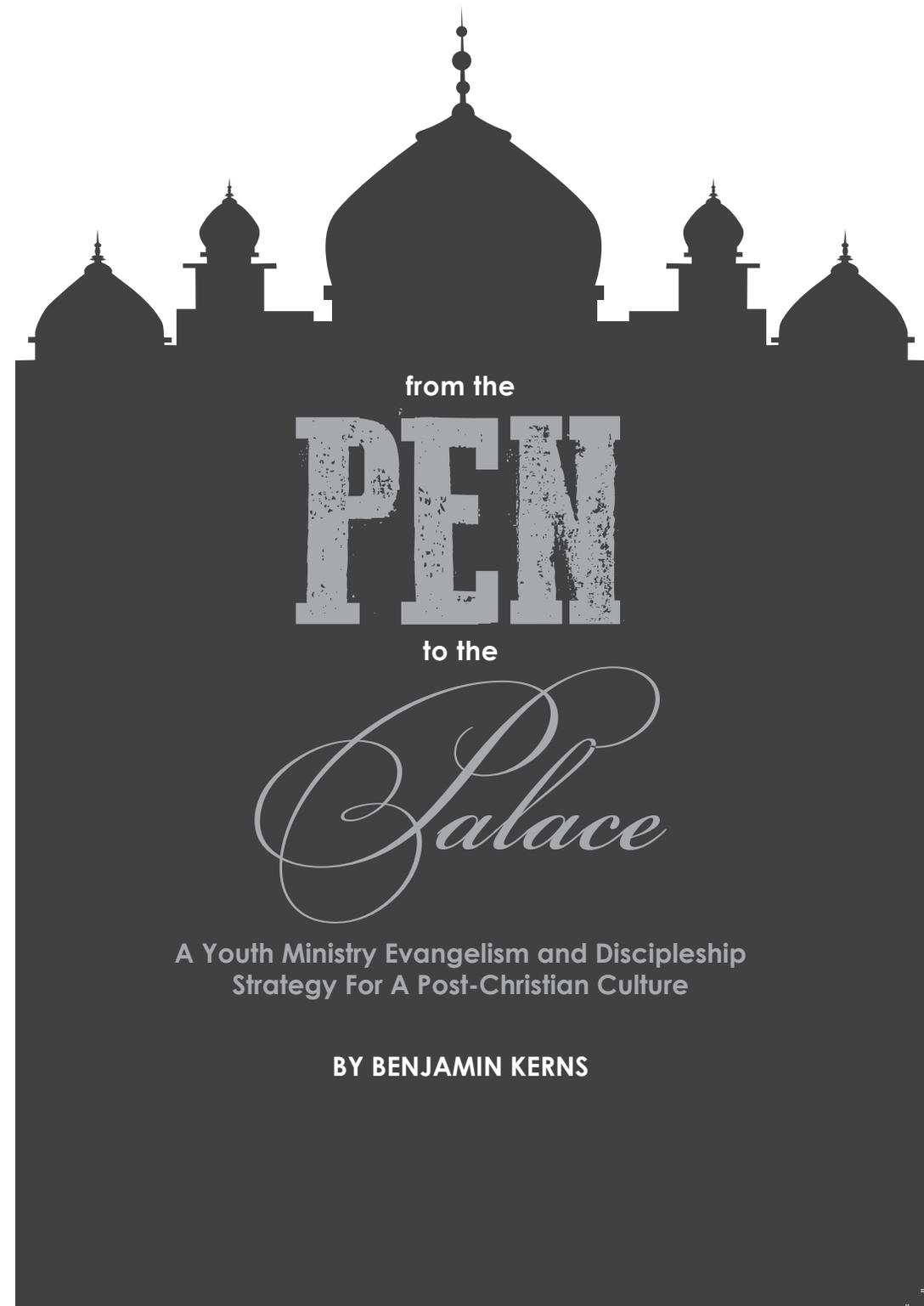


This is a sample of the excellent content you'll find in *From The Pen To The Palace*, by Benjamin Kerns.

From The Pen To The Palace is a fascinating look at the unique challenges youth workers face when it comes to doing evangelism and discipleship in a post-Christian culture. Using the Parable of the Prodigal Son as the backdrop, this book will challenge you to re-think how you seek out the lost in your community, as well as how you disciple those who have come to a relationship with Christ.

If you have any questions about *From The Pen To The Palace*, please don't hesitate to email (customercare@youthministry360.com) or call (1-888-969-6360).



To Nosipho, a daughter adopted into the Anderson Family, but even more significantly, an adopted princess in the Kingdom of God.

May your life continue to be a witness of the love, grace, and mercy of our God.

“If not us, then who?”

From The Pen To The Palace:

A Youth Ministry Evangelism and Discipleship Strategy For A Post-Christian Culture
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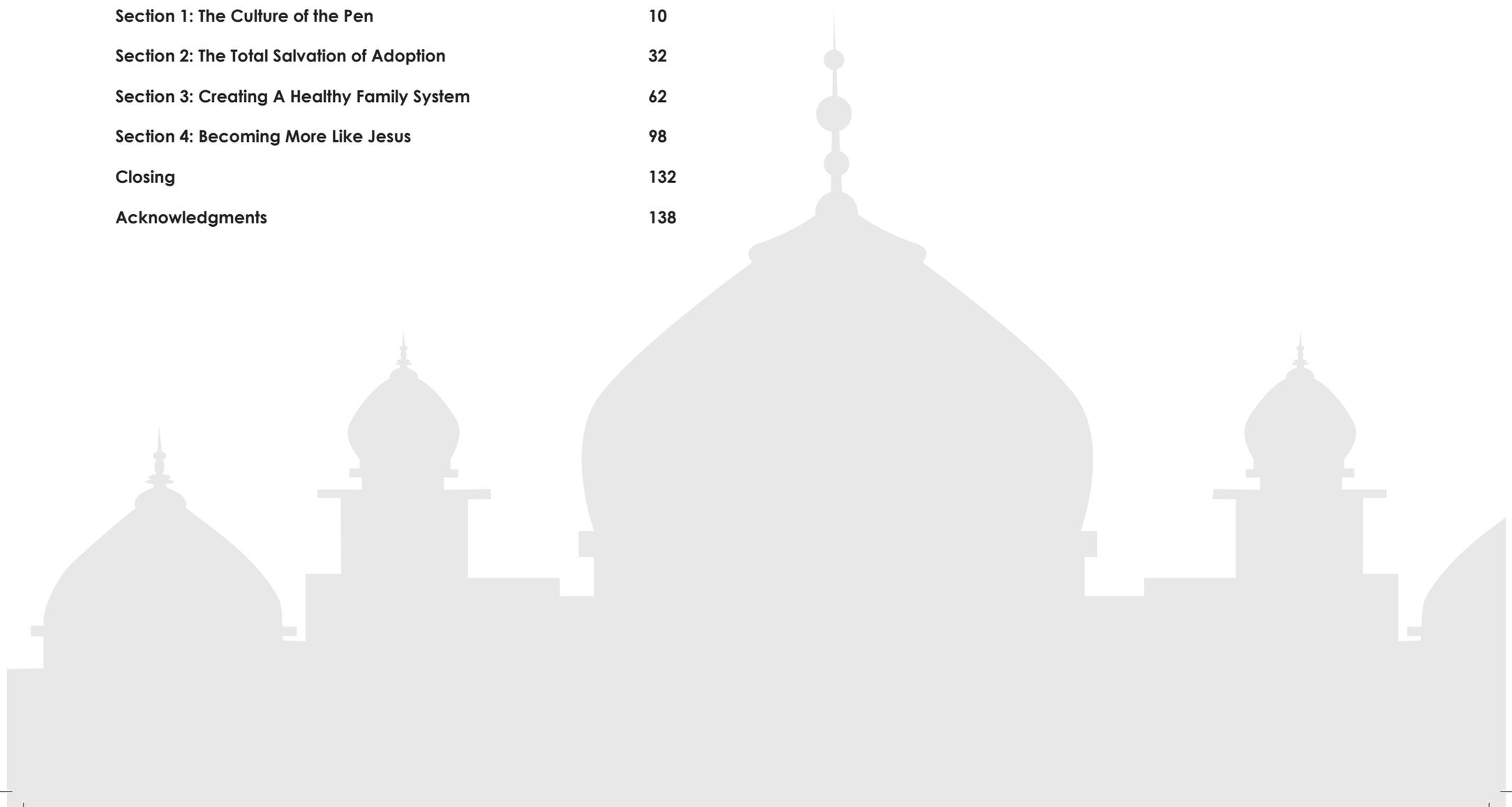
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INTRODUCTION

Something Has Fundamentally Changed

I have had the pleasure to serve local churches as a vocational youth worker for almost 20 years. And in that time I have seen all sorts of changes in both culture and style. But what is happening among the students I am currently working with is something altogether, totally different. The tried and true methods, theology, and the practices that have served me well for so long, are having diminishing returns. While I wasn't looking, there has been a fundamental transformation occurring within the hearts and minds of our students.

The way in which our students engage the world, their faith, and each other has completely changed. The worldview of their parents and most of their youth workers is rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview. But, our teenagers are no longer rooted in this worldview, and are coming of age in a post-Christian society. This transition has gigantic implications for our students and their faith development, as well as the way we are going to care for them.

This cultural transition came into sharp focus on a recent trip I lead with my students.

At the end of every summer, I take the incoming senior class on a road trip. This road trip is the inaugural event for an entire program we run for our seniors. On this trip, we spend almost a week traveling our state, going on adventures, and building memories and friendships as we dream up a vision for our entire student ministry and the place of leadership these seniors are going to hold.

Of all the events I do in a calendar year, this road trip is my highlight. These are the students that I have been the most invested in. It is the trip where we pass on the mantle of leadership to a new class of students. And every year this trip has been successful in accomplishing these goals.

As this trip was coming to a close, I realized that these goals were not being realized. We had a ton of fun, but there seemed to be a disconnect among students that I had not encountered before on these trips. This group of students was just not gelling or coming together. The divisions among the cliques seemed impenetrable.

As I prayed as to where to go from here, God was gracious to remind me that these students needed an opportunity to share their real lives with one another.

For when we see past the veneer of each other, we realize that we are much more similar than we previously thought. When we see each other, we begin to know each other, and truly partner together in ministry.

Over the years I have done similar experiences with students. Because I had known the bulk of these students for five and six years, I was excited to hear them share their true lives with one another. As we went around the circle that night, the students skipped over the deep personal stories that are often shared in this context. But what came out of their mouths caught me totally off guard. So much so, that I didn't even know how to respond at first.

What shocked me is that what these students had in common was not the normal stories of teenagers gone bad: cutting, porn addictions, dabbling in drugs or alcohol, etc. Their common story—the part of their lives they were willing to share—actually had very little to do with their behaviors. It had everything to do with their being.

It started when one of the more popular girls in our senior class broke down and cried, sharing how totally disconnected she felt. She wasn't really sure who her real friends were and felt isolated and alone. In my mind I thought, "Interesting. I wasn't expecting that."

The next person to share was one of our more devious kids. Instead of sharing about all the messed up behaviors he had been involved in, he broke down and started to cry as well, identifying with the first girl in her loneliness.

Before I knew it, much of the group was crying, bonding as they shared their common stories. But again, none of their stories had anything to do with coming clean about sinfulness, which I had witnessed over and over again in the past in this time of sharing. Instead, nearly every story had some common thread of loneliness, isolation, or anxiety.

My students aren't rebels. And they don't see themselves as broken, per se. More than anything, they are alienated. I wonder if you are experiencing the same with your students?

For my entire ministry career I have looked at students through a behavior modification lens. I wanted students to know and follow Jesus, and the way I could tell was by how their lives and lifestyles matched with our church's expectations of what Christ-followers' lives looked like.

What I have discovered is that our students don't necessarily see their behavior

as sinful. Sin is deviating from a standard. They aren't rebelling because there isn't a standard from which to rebel. They don't necessarily hold an ideal of perfection they are expected to measure up to. They're not engaging in sinful behavior as a way of pushing back on the church or culture.

The behaviors in our students I would call "sin" may very well be seen by them and the world they're living in as part of the backdrop, part of the cultural context of their existence. What defines them is the awful feeling that they are alone, isolated, anxious, and maybe even depressed. What is more awful is that they have no idea that there is a way out of this mire.

So many of the teenagers in our communities—and sadly, in our churches—are lost in the truest sense of the word. They are operating in a post-Christian context. And it is our job as the church, and especially youth workers, to run after them, find them, and bring them back.

There have been all sorts of articles and books written about post-Christendom. These are some great reads and they're really interesting. But what is so challenging is when these theoretical issues become a reality in the context in which we do ministry. This has definitely happened to me. And I bet it is happening to you.

The students that I work with truly do live in a post-Christian context. What do I mean by post-Christian? Wikipedia defines it this way:

Post-Christianity is the decline of Christianity in contemporary societies. It is the belief that the loss of the Christian monopoly in political affairs—especially in the Global North where Christianity had previously flourished—will eventually decline in favor of secular nationalism. It includes personal worldviews, ideologies, religious movements or societies that are no longer rooted in the language and assumptions of Christianity, at least explicitly, although they had previously been in an environment of ubiquitous Christianity.

That is a lot of big words to simply say that the Judeo-Christian worldview, values, and assumptions are not the foundation of the world in which our students live. And because of this, there is no standard to rebel against. There is no ideal that has been broken and is in need of repair. For those of us who have grown up in the church and are steeped in the Judeo-Christian worldview, understanding the increasing numbers of people who are post-Christian is becoming more and more of a challenge.

My argument is that our students are fundamentally lost. They are, in many cases, generations removed from a Christian worldview and

its assumptions. This means that the language and practices that we have been using for so long are increasingly becoming irrelevant.

Instead of banging our heads against the wall in frustration, or wringing our hands in despair, what if the church embraced the challenge and chose to leave the 99 and run after the one who is truly lost? If we accept this challenge, we will recognize that we are going to a foreign culture with strange customs and values. As we study this culture and we interact with those who live and move in it, maybe God will be gracious enough to reveal some new thin places where the good news of Jesus Christ will find fertile soil in the hearts of those who need Him the most.

A Way Forward

I believe there is a way forward to reach this generation of students who are increasingly post-Christian in their culture and worldview. And I believe the framework is found in one of the great parables of Christ. Many of us find great comfort and encouragement from the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. We love reading about the Father's great love. We can resonate with both the cold-hearted religiosity of the older brother and the rebellious heart and grace experienced by the younger brother. But more and more, our students and those who are cutting their teeth in a post-Christian context do not relate to either of these brothers. There is no religiosity. There is no rebellion.

Imagine a different ending to this parable.

What if the prodigal son never came back? Imagine if the prodigal son stayed in the world of the pigpen, found a wife, and raised a family. His children may very well have heard some of the stories of life in their grandfather's palace, or the amazing kingdom he ruled, but they would only know the echo of the palace.

And what if the prodigal son's son, the grandson of the father, also decided to not try and find his way back to the palace, but also found a wife and began another generation living and working in the pen? What would the prodigal's grandkids know of the distant kingdom ruled by their great-grandfather?

The great-grandchildren of the father would not have a memory or an echo of this distant kingdom. They would have no concept of this other version of life, and really, no framework to understand it. They have no idea of its existence, and therefore, no ways of knowing how to even get to it. And what is most heart breaking is that the mire that these kids live in would be all they know.

The prodigal son would no doubt remember some stories of the father, and his children would have experienced some sort of echo of the palace. But his grandchildren—the second generation removed from the warmth of the father’s palace—would only know the lost landscape of the pen.

The picture of the great-grandchildren of the father, who are two generations removed, only know the culture of the pen, and have no understanding of this distant kingdom, is the startling picture for understanding a Post-Christian context.

This book is a plea for my sisters and brothers who have grown up in the church, in Christendom, in the family of God. Sure we may have had our own prodigal moments. But if you are reading this book it is because you have found your place back into the Father’s arms and are getting after the family business.

Do you recognize that we have distant cousins, living in the pen, who know nothing of our Heavenly Father, of His provision, healing, grace, or love? Going out and telling them is no longer enough. These students are deaf to the commercials of non-invested spokesmen selling them something. No, what they need is for people to run after them, motivated by love, and invite them to come back to the father’s palace and experience for themselves the love of their Heavenly Father by being adopted into the family of God through Jesus Christ.

My prayer is that this book will serve as:

- An admission that the landscape of our context has fundamentally changed.
- A wake-up call to those of us still in the church to not forget about our distant cousins.
- A lexicon of helpful language and metaphors we can use to invite these lost cousins back into the family of God, and help them find their place.
- A guide to creating a ministry context that welcomes, assimilates, and inspires a fresh vision to carry on the family business of establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth as it is in Heaven.

