ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Youth Ministry–Preparing Teens for Adulthood: A Re-evaluation

The Youth Ministry model American churches have followed since World War II has not been a terribly effective one. It has not enhanced parent-teen relationships and has actually fostered a superficial, shallow Christianity among many young adults. Consciously or unconsciously, when children reach age 12 or so, parents "hand them off" to the youth leader, in effect saying, "I'm done; now you take over." Often this model stresses fun, huge events (e.g., ski trips, retreats, wild antics, and occasional mission trips), but has little focus on the Bible, mentoring or a disciplined walk with God. The end result is often "another church" in which there is little if any contact with older adults and little or no involvement in the church worship service. Therefore, teen ministry often functions alongside the regular church almost as a parachurch ministry. Hence, when teens leave for college, they have few roots and virtually no foundation on which to build their lives.

For those of us involved in Youth Ministry, what are we to do? Is there a more effective model to follow? First of all, the Church must go back to its roots. The church and parents do not compete; they complete. The best starting point for an effective Youth Ministry is Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Here Moses addresses how this second generation of Israel liberated from Egypt would transfer their faith to their children and the generations to come. This familiar passage establishes two core values for parenting and effective Youth Ministry: (1) In the battle for the hearts of our teens, one essential truth trumps everything else—"the LORD our God is one" (6:4). This truth is the only one that really matters, and belief in God is the basis for our trust in Him for everything in life. In both parenting and Youth Ministry, the single-minded focus must be on God, His character and His nature. (2) "Love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your strength" (6:5). The entire Bible is built on this commandment, for it connects love for God with obedience to God.

Reggie Joiner of Orange Ministries summarizes Moses' point and applies it to both parenting and Youth Ministry: "From this point on you should transition from a people who simply obey rules to a people who pursue a love relationship with their Creator God. And remember: There is a generation behind you watching your response to your God." Parents and Youth Ministry leaders who love God, who trust God, will be trusted by the next generation because that generation will see an authentic, life-changing faith. As Joiner argues, "The more they [both] remember this is really all about God, the easier it is for them to focus their priorities on what matters most." Finally, Moses gives instruction on what Israel was to do with these two core values—teach them both formally and informally to the children. In verses 7-9, he exhorts that these values are to be a part of every facet of life. They are not to be compartmentalized;

rather, they are to be integrated into the totality of life. Applicationally for us today, this means both parents and the church are to be maximally involved in training up the next generation.

Built on this foundation, an effective Youth Ministry model should be based on two convictions:

1. Mentoring of teens is the best overall model to follow for youth ministry. Mentoring involves more than merely the youth minister per se. Mentoring involves a significant core of volunteers who will build into the lives of teens. It also involves parents-as-mentors and those who can mentor parents as well. For this to be blessed of God, there is a need for sustained and persistent prayer.

2. The Youth Ministry staff person(s) needs to serve and minister not only to the teens but also to the parents. Ideally, a suggested ratio of time for this staff member: $1/3^{rd}$ with the youth; $1/3^{rd}$ with the volunteer staff; and $1/3^{rd}$ with the parents. In other words, the youth minister will need a dual focus to this ministry—to the parents and to the teens.

The goals below seek to implement these convictions:

• To prepare/equip teens for life.
• To enhance and strengthen teens' love relationship with Jesus Christ.
• To enhance and strengthen the parent-teen relationship.
• To enable teens to construct a Christian worldview that views everything through the grid of God's Word.
• To integrate teens into the life of the church.
• To foster an outreach-based youth ministry that builds a strategy to bring other teens to Christ.

Regardless of the nature of the family, parents (even single parents) must be a part of the ministry to teens. Joiner has it right when he suggests that "The key to all this begins when parents love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength. Moses knew a secret about obedience—it starts when you really believe that God can be trusted. He knew that if the generation of parents and leaders he was speaking to would choose to love God with all their hearts and souls, it would show up in their lifestyle. As a result, those who trust God would be trusted by the next generation, and the legacy would continue." May God give us the grace as both parents and church leaders to love God and thus obey God; thereby modeling for the next generation what faith really looks like 24/7. We can no longer afford to segment Youth Ministry from the rest of the church's program. We can no longer create a "second church" among our teens. They must be integrated into the whole of church life and see genuine, biblical Christianity lived out as an authentic, life-transforming faith. Rooted in and

consistent with the admonitions of Moses 3,500 years ago, that is the dynamic power of effective youth ministry.

Regarding the matter of a Christian worldview, what should be the focus? A worldview is a frame of reference for all thought and action. As a Christian, that frame of reference is God's Word, the complete verbal revelation of God. It should answer seven questions:

1. What is prime reality—the really real? Is it God, many gods, or only the material world?
2. What is the nature of external reality, i.e., the physical world we inhabit?
3. What is a human being? A random accident? Why is human life valuable?
4. What happens to a person at death? Is death all there is or is there life after death? What is it?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all? How can we know truth? Is there truth to know?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong? This is the question of ethics, the standards by which we live our lives.
7. What is the meaning of history? Is it linear or cyclical? Is history even important?

In addition, the Christian worldview should provide answers to these questions. As teens go to college, how they answer these questions will mark the maturity of their faith. If they cannot provide meaningful and reasonable answers to these questions, they have no foundation on which to build their lives.

1. How can there be only one true religion?
2. Why does a good God allow so much suffering/evil?
3. Why does Christianity seem to seek the restriction of my personal freedom?
4. Why has Christianity produced so much injustice and suffering in the world?
5. How can a loving God send people to Hell?
6. Why does Christianity seem to be the enemy of reason and science?
7. Why should I take the Bible literally?
8. Where did the Bible come from?
9. Why does the Bible seem to contain so many errors and contradictions?
10. Since we do not have the original books of the Bible, how do we know it is trustworthy?
11. Who decided the beliefs that make up Christianity?
12. How do we know that Jesus rose from the dead?

How we prepare our teens for adulthood and for college is becoming the touchtone of youth ministry today. May God give our churches, our youth leaders and our parents the fortitude and the commitment to meet this challenge.

See Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange: Imagine the Impact When Church and Family Collide* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009).