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Evangelism Vision Paper

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Contemporary Evangelism

by

Matthew McNutt

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What have I learned?

“Jesus’ commission to evangelize the world was not a suggestion to be considered but a command to be obeyed.”¹ This sentence is key to understanding the great commission, and is one that many choose to ignore. As a pastor, that perception in congregations – to focus on other tasks as though that would be good enough and leave out evangelism – has always been a frustration for me.

On the other hand, I have been guilty over the years myself of not giving it the priority that I should. I resonated with the quote on page 122; “Launching conversations with lost people is not always comfortable or convenient, but we must do it anyway. We need to realize that if some lost people are ever going to hear the gospel, we will have to tell them.”² As ridiculous as it may seem, I often find it hard to take the time to get to know the lost or reach out to them because I am so busy with my church and training others to reach the lost they work with, go to school with, play sports with or live next to!

This semester has been a good reminder of my own role. It has also challenged me in methods of evangelism that I do not naturally gravitate towards. My comfort zone is sharing the gospel from a stage to large groups, or in one on one conversations with people I have established a relationship with. I am a public speaker and a friendship driven kind of pastor. Intentionally going after opportunities in my neighborhood, service opportunities, and grabbing every opening that comes across my path has not been one of my strong points, but is one I need to continue to grow in.

¹ Early, Dave, and David Wheeler. *Evangelism Is: How to Share Jesus with Passion and Confidence*. Nashville: B&H Academic Publishing Group, 2010. 21.

² Ibid., 122.

My Vision

I have been a youth pastor now for over a decade. I was a volunteer youth worker for many years before taking it on full time, and I see myself as being in youth ministry for the long haul. When it comes to vision and passion, my heart is focused on reaching adolescents. One of the challenges facing churches in general, and youth ministries in particular, is the alarming drop off rate of young people from church after high school. Depending on the studies referenced, the rates vary greatly with some more alarmist than others, but regardless a large number of young people seem to graduate from faith when they graduate from high school. Which begs the question, was faith truly a part of their lives to begin with? Are our churches and families communicating the gospel message effectively to adolescents? Is it possible to improve in how we plant the word in young people, resulting in deep roots of faith that can weather the dramatic changes of adolescence and the college years?

Over the years I have felt that there are three areas that have significant impact on the challenge of reaching young people that do not get the attention they warrant. The first is American church history and how the home structure has changed over the years and the resulting loss of faith instruction in the house. The second is current research on adolescent brain development. For decades it was assumed the brain finished developing in the early teen years; recent research has revealed that it doesn't finish maturing until age 25. How does this impact reasoning, decision making, and faith processing? Are we taking into consideration the unique developmental stage adolescents are going through in our communication styles? The third is current student ministry research on adolescents and faith, and what that tells us about how to reach them. Learning and adjusting ministry models based on that information can increase the effective transmission of the gospel to adolescents.

Faith in America During the Twentieth Century

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Christian faith was a strong part of our American culture. Families were connected to churches. Fathers were the primary provider while mothers made faith instruction and conversation a priority in the home. Bible reading, discussions about God around the meal table, and going to church together were a significant part of passing on a tradition of faith. While the Bible calls husbands to be the head of the home and the leader in areas of faith, the reality in American homes was that mothers handled the bulk of the day to day transmission of faith to children.

War and economics had a dramatic impact on faith in America during the twentieth century. In the thirties, the economic crisis resulting from the 1929 stock market crash was unique in regards to faith in that unlike previous major financial upheavals, the church did not see an increase in membership. A subtle shift in dependence on God to self and government was beginning to manifest. In the past, this type of crisis brought people to the church in search of hope and help. However, with no real increase in congregation size the decreased giving that goes with a financial crisis, many churches were forced to cut programs, reduce mission programs, and in some cases, even lay off pastors or close completely.³

During the second world war, out of necessity due to the sheer volume of men involved in the armed forces, women entered the work force in strength. A cultural shift had begun. Even after the war, women remained in the workforce, out of financial necessity, and then eventually, to further develop the American middle class. Phyllis Tickle wrote in regards to this,

Once the female is occupied outside the home for a full working day, she suffers the same physical and mental exhaustion as does the male. What that translates to is the complete reorientation of the evening hours in the family's life. The solidifying bond of a

³ Askew, Thomas A., and Richard V. Pierard. *The American Church Experience*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. 172-173.

shared meal is often sacrificed, certainly, but more to the point for the Christianity of the Great Emergence, so too are the traditional time of family based religious instruction and formation.

When World War II broke out, the average American youngster, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic, was possessed of a reasonable familiarity with Bible stories and a formative grasp of the religious and moral points contained in them ... When the mother as principal storyteller and domestic rabbi ceased, bit by bit, to function in those roles, America's younger generations became more and more untethered from the parables and prophecies, interpretations and principles that supported both the story itself and the consensual illusion that was based on it.

The result, theologically ... is stark. Each one of them [Protestant and Catholic churches], in dealing with Americans under fifty, is dealing in large measure with scriptural innocents ...⁴

What does all this mean? The impact of this over the last century has resulted in a significant number of individuals in the last several generations to grow up with little to no Christian exposure in their lives. Not only have they not attended Christian churches and organizations, they have not been exposed to faith at home. This has been further emphasized by a cultural identity that has moved farther away from its Christian roots.

This is significant in that many models of faith transmission, whether in the form of curriculum or outreach tools, are designed with levels of Biblical literacy assumed that just aren't there for families that are not already regularly involved in a church. If the intent is to reach young people for Christ, it has to be taken into consideration that in all likelihood, they have had little or no exposure to Bible stories, structure, writing methods, or church traditions and cultural expectations.

Adolescent Brain Development

Up until recently, the assumption by professionals had been that the brain finished the bulk of its development in the first three years of life. After that point, there may be minor

⁴ Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008. 114-115.

growth and change, but for the most part it was finished and any adolescent issues could be explained away as bad behavior and/or hormonal. The equipment able to scan brains at a detailed level was not used on healthy brains for fear of unknown possible risks, so consequently, the only detailed information on children's and adolescent brains from actual scans were unhealthy brains – therefore, they were not considered to be impactful on assumptions for normal development.⁵ In recent years, that has all changed.

Having proven the safety of the equipment, as well as the development of new, more powerful brain scanning machines, all of the old assumptions have been tossed out the window.

Medical science and health editor of *The New York Times*, Barbara Strauch writes:

Neuroscientists are finding that the teenage brain, far from being an innocent bystander to hormonal hijinks, is undergoing a dramatic transformation.

The teenage brain, it's now becoming clear, is still very much a work in progress, a giant construction project. Millions of connections are being hooked up; millions more are swept away. Neurochemicals wash over the teenage brain, giving it a new paint job, a new look, a new chance at life. The teenage brain is raw, vulnerable. It's a brain that's still becoming what it will be.⁶

What we now know is that not only is the brain not finished growing and developing at three years of age, it doesn't fully mature until the mid twenties, with the segment to finish developing being the impulse control portion of the brain. In addition, puberty has been revealed to cause massive changes in the brain, with surges of growth and solidifying of lifelong neural pathways.

All this to say, the adolescent brain is in a completely unique stage of development and needs to be recognized as having age specific needs and quirks. It should also shape how we

⁵ Oestricher, Mark. *Understanding Your Young Teen: Practical Wisdom for Parents*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. Location 974.

⁶ Strauch, Barbara. *The Primal Teen: What the New Discoveries About the Teenage Brain Tell Us about Our Kids*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. Location 221.

teach and challenge adolescents as we can help mold how they interact and process matters of faith for the rest of their lives based on the opportunities they have during their adolescent years.

A significant part of the adolescent development process is the transition from concrete thinking to abstract thought. The concrete thinking period is characterized by literal thought. The child looks at the world very two dimensionally – it's in this stage of thought that a child will wonder how Jesus can fit in their heart. They are approaching a very abstract thought through a concrete, literal lens. With regards to faith, children accept the beliefs of their parents without question. It is a concrete issue in their minds; their mother and/or father said the Bible is true, therefore it is true. With the onset of puberty and the surge of development in their brains, adolescents find themselves transitioning from that period to the formal operational period, primarily characterized by abstract thought. However, this transition does not happen overnight. It is a years long process of learning to think abstractly, to empathize instead of merely sympathize, to wrestle with thoughts of eternity and doubt.

For those sharing faith with adolescents this is an important issue because they are wrestling with ability to think abstractly for the first time in their lives. This change brings a lot of instability to a young person, especially as they find themselves for the first time questioning much of what they had always blindly accepted as truth. Sharing faith with them means allowing room for the discussion of doubts, for questioning, for affirming the struggles the young person is wrestling with. All of these developmental challenges the young person is facing must be taken into consideration as they present unique challenges in the transmission of faith.

Current Adolescent Faith Research

There are two research projects currently happening that are playing a significant role in the discussion of adolescent faith in the student ministry professional community. The first is the National Study of Youth and Religion, led by Dr. Christian Smith and Dr. Lisa Pearce. It began in 2001 and continues to track the faith development of adolescents and their families through in-depth interviews over the years as they continue to age.⁷ The second research project helping to inform where we are currently as a faith community in regards to adolescents is the Sticky Faith research project, conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute and led by Dr. Kara E. Powell and Dr. Chap Clarke. It was initiated in 2005, with results published in 2011.⁸ Both studies share results that are striking in their similarity which seems to reinforce each other's results.

Kenda Creasy Dean summarized the results this way: “American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith – but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we’re responsible.”⁹ This research, and the resulting conversations about it, have stirred strong reactions throughout the Church and in major news outlets. Ultimately, there were five major findings in the National Study of Youth and Religion, which were further reinforced by the Sticky Faith research¹⁰:

1. Most American teenagers have a positive view of religion but otherwise don't give it much thought.
2. Most U.S. teenagers mirror their parents' religious faith.
3. Teenagers lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience of the world.

7 <http://www.youthandreligion.org/research>

8 <http://stickyfaith.org/articles/what-makes-faith-stick-during-college>

9 Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What The Faith Of Our Teenagers Is Telling The American Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 3.

10 *Ibid.*, 17-21.

4. A minority of American teenagers – but a significant minority – say religious faith is important, and that it makes a difference in their lives. These teenagers are doing better in life on a number of scales, compared to their less religious peers.
5. Many teenagers enact and espouse a religious outlook that is distinct from traditional teachers of most world religions – an outlook called Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

Dean defined Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as “a tacit religious outlook that is quite distinct from Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any of the world’s major religions, helps people be nice, feel good, and leaves God in the background.”¹¹ In other words, while many in our country may label themselves Christian, the religion they practice does not reflect what scripture describes. More significantly, this is not just a reflection of young people in America – it is a reflection of how Americans practice faith in general. It would not be too much of a leap in logic to suggest the disappearing of faith conversations in the home during the World War II years has played a part in leading to this poorly informed version of religion, and ultimately, as Early and Wheeler point out, led our nation to being one of the largest mission fields in the world.¹²

One of the significant things to consider when considering the best way to reach adolescents for Christ is the issue of primary influence. Who has the most impact on a young person’s faith development? While youth pastors, aunts, uncles, grandparents, friends and mentors do have influence, far and away the research indicates that the primary influence on a young person’s faith is their parents. More specifically, not what their parents say, but what their parents do – their actions and priorities instill values in their children. Dr. Smith once said, “When it comes to kids’ faith, parents get what they are.”¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Early and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is ...*, 28.

¹³ Powell, Kara E., Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford. *Sticky Faith: Youth Worker Edition*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 117.

Further elaborating, Dr. Smith said, “Most teenagers and their parents may not realize it, but a lot of research in the sociology of religion suggests that the most important social influence in shaping young people’s religious lives is the religious life modeled and taught to them by their parents.”¹⁴

The National Study of Youth and Religion did reveal some fascinating things the 8% of American youth who are classified as devoted had in common. These teens were found to have a solid faith, able to articulate it, and saw it last after high school into the college years. Through extensive interviews they were found to have the following six things in common.¹⁵

1. Attends religious services weekly or more.
2. Faith is very or extremely important in everyday life.
3. Feels very or extremely close to God.
4. Currently involved in a religious youth group.
5. Prays a few times a week or more.
6. Reads scripture once or twice a week or more.

While the issue of instilling long lasting faith in young people may seem daunting at first, in many ways, these common denominators in devoted teens is not an overwhelming list. Obviously, of the four more measurable points, they are symptoms of a deeper faith, but they are not so intimidating to begin modeling to young people.

Future Ministry and Calling

Reaching the lost is critical. “Effective evangelism leads people step by step to the event of trusting Christ as their Savior.¹⁶ With study after study showing the majority of Christians come to know the Lord by the age of 21, it gives an urgency to my calling as a youth pastor that I

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 41.

¹⁶ Early and Wheeler, *Evangelism Is ...*, 79.

have to constantly remind myself of. If the transmission of faith to adolescents is truly a priority, than the culture of the local church at large needs to reflect it; as a pastor, I play a role in that. The following are ways in which I am actively trying to change the culture in my church to create an environment where young people come to know the Lord and grow a lasting faith.

A religiously devoted teen will attend weekly religious services as well as be involved in a youth group. If the adults in a church believe that is important, than regardless of whether or not they themselves have children, the church as a whole should be known for prioritizing weekly attendance at the intergenerational worship service and involvement in age specific groups such as adult Sunday School, small group, and/or a midweek meeting.

A religiously devoted teen will pray and read scripture regularly. Parents in particular need to be regularly seen modeling the priority of prayer and scripture reading – but the church culture needs to reflect that priority as well so as to pass on that value to parents.

In choosing resources and curriculums for adolescents, as well as the primary worship hour, the lack of Biblical literacy in our culture must be taken into consideration. Those teaching cannot assume their audience is familiar with even the most well known Biblical stories or words and phrases used in the Bible that may have different meanings today, e.g., being “stoned”.

As concrete thinkers, young children are at a perfect age developmentally to be learning the core stories of the Bible and memorizing critical scriptures. The adults in the congregation have also reached a point developmentally where they are able to process abstract ideas and concepts more readily. Not only that, adults are better able to recognize those with the authority or resources to best answer their questions or help them come to a conclusion. Adolescents, on the other hand, rely more on relationships already built to turn to for information, regardless of

qualifications. In addition, they are wrestling with learning how to process abstract concepts, while at the same time going through tremendous amounts of physical and social change.

Because of that, intentionally building an environment where adolescents are welcomed, viewed as part of the church body who are valued in spite of age-based quirks. Instilling in that environment a practice of treating adolescents with grace and tremendous amounts of patience as they take the necessary time to wrestle through newly discovered doubts, the pursuit of individuality, and the exploding world of abstract thought and ideas. Helping them to walk through those abstract concepts without rushing them, devaluing them or humiliating them gives them the opportunity to pursue faith. Working to ensure that the weekly intergenerational worship service is relevant not only to adults, but adolescents as well, communicates to them that it is valuable. Prioritizing giving adolescents the opportunity to make meaningful and valued contributions to church life as a whole. All of these are pieces to recognizing the unique challenges present in the adolescent stage, and more importantly, create connections throughout the church so that when they graduate from high school they do not feel as though they have graduated from church – their connection is far deeper than just a student ministry.

There is no one, clear cut answer to instilling a lasting faith in adolescents. However, allowing historical implications, knowledge of brain developmental stages, and the deep impact of parents and adults in general mold and inform the efforts made to reach young people in my opinion should create an environment where lasting faith is more likely to be cultivated, and as such carries significant weight in my thoughts about future ministry and my calling as a youth pastor.

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