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A More Productive Harvest Through Adolescent Spiritual Formation

Houston Heflin

It's a little strange to think of our children as crops popping up in a field, but agriculture is one of the most frequent metaphors the New Testament uses for what it means to grow spiritually: seeds that land on good soil will grow, a bountiful harvest is possible with God, the weeds sown by the enemy will exist among the wheat, the lilies of the field know not to labor, those who sow in peace will reap a harvest of righteousness, and healthy trees will produce good fruit. Each of these illustrations has its own beautiful application in human life, but collectively they suggest that growth and productivity are part of the Kingdom of God.

Questions for Churches, Families, and Schools

Reflecting on the ways the church educates its young people and adopting the language of the New Testament writers, we might ask some sobering questions: If children are the product of their families, schools and churches, how healthy are the trees that are producing these fruits? What weeds have a chokehold on the adolescents in the church? How have churches tilled the soil of children's lives to prepare that soil for the seeds of God's word? Is it reasonable to expect, by God's power, a harvest of young people fully committed to Christ and devoted to growing spiritually? Are we harvesting the yield promised when seeds land on good soil?

It's time we evaluate our educational results and reconsider how to effectively make adolescent disciples. Admittedly, spiritual formation is hard to measure but, if worshiping with a church family is an indicator of spiritual maturity, there are large numbers of adolescents who are not at the level of maturity necessary to face the decisions and challenges of their age. Recent research studies are exposing a trend among these young adults who grew up going to church: many of them stop going to church once they leave home.¹ As they become high school graduates, they continue the pattern of leaving and become church graduates as well. This is a problem.

But before joining those who prematurely declare the sky is falling on the future of the church, we should celebrate that every year there are fabulous young people leaving home, propelled into maturity by the foundation of their families, schools and home congregations...but these are too rare. The problem isn't that we're not producing healthy fruit—we're just not producing enough of it! There are churches that are helping youth grow up into Christian adulthood but far too many youth fall through the cracks. Far too many youth have learned a tame, nominal Christianity that is easily discarded as they depart from home. Far too many youth grow up in diluted religious cultures that fail to teach what it means to be a committed disciple, but instead focus on attracting young people to religious programming. Like seeds landing on rocky soil we've at times had fast growth and swelling numbers but this shallow faith gets scorched for lack of roots. As a professor of youth ministry poignantly asks, "In our efforts to make Christianity appealing to people in our

1. Wesley Black, "Stopping the Dropouts: Guiding Adolescents Toward a Lasting Faith Following High School Graduation," *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 28–46. Kara Powell, "High School Youth Group Seniors Transitioning to College: Risk Behavior, Social Support, Religiosity, and Attitude Toward Youth Group," *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 47–59.

community, what concessions have we made to spiritual immaturity?"² Maybe our eyes haven't been on the ball of discipleship but focused on something else. Or perhaps, like seeds that fall among thorns, the other things of life that can overtake discipleship as a priority have collectively strangled us.

Meanwhile, Across Town . . .

A simultaneous issue may be contributing to the results we're getting: many families and churches begin to disengage prematurely from relationships with youth, communicating disinterest at best and tacit approval of unearned individuality at worst. The systemic abandonment of youth by adults in our culture has been identified as one of the significant variables leading to negative adolescent characteristics.³ Neglecting youth makes them into self-reliant rather than interdependent selves who are tempted to feel they have no need for God and they have no needs they can't get for themselves. In many cases we've abdicated responsibility, and therefore our influence, to culture. We've allowed others to become the primary instructors of our children. These other willing teachers are motivated by pursuits often counter to the spiritual health of our children. When the church isn't intentionally tilling the soil, planting good seed, watering the crops, and cultivating the conditions for growth, young people won't develop into maturity.

Ideas To Consider

While it would be naïve to suppose there is one simple solution, I'd like to propose an idea that might make progress toward our desired outcomes: let's prepare adolescents differently. Let's train them differently! If on the whole, the types of people we're graduating aren't matching our ideals, we need to question the educational methods that we're using.

Once again, the things that we're doing right should be acknowledged. When churches and families begin incorporating young people into acts of service and mission at a young age, when they give young people a compelling reason to follow Jesus, and when they invest time and financial resources into educating and training youth in discipleship, there are going to be positive results. And many churches and families do these things.

Conversely, there are churches who haven't realized, or perhaps disagree with the maxim that "young people should be the first foreign mission of the church."⁴ In one sense adolescents are like people from another culture. Youth spend hours each day in a subculture with unique language, collective heroes, different music, specific customs and consistent habits that give them community and identity. These are impressionable souls and they're among us at times, but often remain overlooked or dismissed because of their age. Yet they hold within them the capacity for greatness (as disciples) both now and in the few short years when they reach adulthood.

Adolescents Need Adult Relationships

After conducting a national study of youth and religion one research team concluded, "Most teens appreciate their relationships with adults and most of those who lack them wish they had such ties."⁵ This is perhaps the one thing adolescents need more than anything else: relationships with adult Christians who are living out their faith in honest, sincere, transparent ways through various seasons of life experiences.⁶ And they need adults who show them how to grow spiritually by incorporating habits into their often overscheduled lives, habits that place commitment and focus back on our first loves, on God and other

2. Thomas E. Bergler, "Taming the Juvenilization of American Christianity: Developing Youth Ministry Leaders Who Can Help the Church Grow Up," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 9, no. 1 (2010): 7–34.

3. Chap Clark, *Hurt: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 43.

4. Dean Borgman, *When Kumbaya is Not Enough: A Practical Theology of Youth Ministry* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), 29.

5. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 271.

6. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112.

people, rather than the cornucopia of false gods who clamor to be first—like athletic success, academic achievement, all-state recognition, and other extracurricular activities. These are not inherently harmful, but frequently become idols in our hearts. Christian adults can help youth navigate the adolescent years so these things are kept in healthy perspective and don't become pitfalls to faith. Youth need adults who help them accomplish the primary developmental objective of their age: successful maturation into adulthood. If they have few relationships to learn from, how will young people know what it means to become an adult disciple of Jesus?

Adolescents Need the Church

In addition to mentoring relationships with adults, adolescents need the larger church family. Adolescents need the multigenerational church, not just youth ministry, because these relationships contribute to faith maturity.⁷ Youth need the community of faith loving them with the passion and relational investment the church has at her finer moments. They need the church to show them the many characteristics of our holy, loving, jealous God. They need the church to give them an expanded worldview that has compassion for both the neighbor next door and neighbors across the ocean. They need the church to expect holy living from them. They need the church to validate their vital role in the Christian community. These overtures of inclusion and mentoring are at the heart of the church, an institution entrusted with these souls and commanded to teach (Matt 28.20).

The Church Needs Adolescents

It has been suggested that “the Christian formation of youth will be severely retarded without the holistic involvement of the entire congregation”⁸ but the converse is also true: the formation of the congregation will be severely hindered without the consistent inclusion of youth. As adolescents need the church, so also the church needs adolescents. Fresh from their childhood, young people bring the willingness to be faithful and believe the radical claims of Jesus. There are many adults who would benefit from encounters with that kind of faith. Youth have the passion to get up and do something with their faith as the book of James admonishes. Young people ask the questions that former generations have answered in their time but that need to be asked and answered again for a new era. The church needs adolescents because the church needs to be reminded that it is an advancing entity with a mission from God and a command to “Go.”

Adolescents Need Each Other

While the intergenerational connectivity between youth people and adults is vital to the growth of both groups, there are times when adolescents need each other. They unquestionably need relationships with peers who become spiritual friends, sharpening each other and challenging each other to more robust discipleship. They need examples among their peers of what it looks like to live as a committed Jesus-follower at their current age. These peer relationships can function as confirmation that youth are not alone in their often-lonely quest to be salt and light in the world. Adolescent spiritual friendships provide camaraderie and partnership in the gospel for young people who worship, serve, learn and minister together. Providing opportunities for youth to build these friendships is one of the things churches have done well since the proliferation of the church youth group over the past century. But churches cannot stop at providing opportunities for young people to be together. What these young people do when they're together makes all the difference. What adults do when they're with teens makes all the difference. This leads us to practices of spiritual formation.

We All Need Spiritual Habits

Training disciples in spiritual formation practices should be a top priority of our churches and may be the most important curriculum for adolescents. These practices, known also as *soul-training exercises* or *spiritual*

7. Brenda Snailum, “Integrating Intergenerational Ministry Strategies into Existing Youth Ministries: What can a Hybrid Approach be Expected to Accomplish?” *Journal of Youth Ministry* 11, no. 2 (2013): 7–28.

8. Mike King, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2006), 37.

disciplines, have shaped the lives of countless disciples for centuries. Jesus participated in many of these actions and we see the early church devoted to them as well (Acts 2.42–47). Christians do these not because of some magic power within each practice; instead, spiritual habits are one way of cultivating the environment for growth as faith takes root. They create the conditions in which God has historically worked on human hearts. When we consider both the impact of these actions and the life stage of adolescence, it's a wonder we don't focus on these things more often.

Adolescence is a critical season of life for human development and identity formation. Acknowledging the power of God that can change a person, what happens in these years usually impacts everything that follows in life; youthful mistakes, failures and sins can have dire consequences that dictate much of a person's future. Conversely, the successes, blessings and the discipleship practices that become habits during this stage of life can stick with a person for the rest of their lives. What they do at this age matters. In addition, youth are at a point in their lives where they are willing to risk for even a small reward. They're willing to try something new if there might be a chance of success. Finally, young people like rhythms and rituals that give them identity, which is something spiritual practices offer as they form character into Christlikeness. Given the influence of this life stage on later life, the propensity for young people to take risks, and their desire for rituals, it is vital that teens are introduced to the multitude of spiritual practices.

Exposure to Diverse Practices

Many churches are beginning to rediscover the spiritual practices that make time together much more meaningful and more productive. For years Christian disciples have leaned heavily on worship through singing, prayer and Bible teaching as consistent spiritual practices that happen in assemblies. To these wonderful and essential habits we should consider adopting some of the other tools that help us encounter God: Scripture memorization, meditation, breath prayers, silence, solitude, fasting, confession, service and financial giving are just a few examples. Adolescents are capable of doing these things and many others.

We all need to rediscover the repertoire of diverse spiritual practices because they help us grow. They help us see what we might not otherwise notice about God's presence in the world, they help us see opportunities for service, and they help us see ways the kingdom is advancing. Ensuring youth are exposed to the diverse disciplines also increases the possibility that they will connect personally with certain habits that will remain with them beyond their teen years.

Participation Over Time in Community

Having youth participate in the spiritual disciplines, though, is not enough to help them grow. Spiritual formation happens most naturally by investment over time in community. Youth need repetitive, intentional training in the habits of discipleship with consistent opportunities to practice these habits both individually and in community with people of all generations. Like a farmer whose plan is worked out with patience over many seasons, we should realize that time and repetition help people grow.

One way to promote repetition is by infusing the spiritual disciplines into the actions of daily life so they become habits, rituals that become part of one's identity. For example, spiritual practices could be attached to daily activities like brushing teeth, taking a shower, driving a car or eating dinner. Is this not a lesson of the Shema: to remember and meditate on the words of God "when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up" (Deut 6.7)? Within these daily actions we find opportunities to pursue and encounter God, but these opportunities are often overlooked. In addition to the natural opportunities of life together, there are intentional practices that could be adopted by faith communities to help people grow.⁹ Setting aside time and creating contexts for youth and adults to engage in spiritual practices together seems to be a responsible way to invest our time and resources. We might find that it also impacts our long-term yields in committed disciples.

9. Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), 21.

The benefits to incorporating more intergenerational spiritual practices range from more mature adults to more committed youth. It also might lead the church to greater actions of social justice and evangelism in the world as we live for the sake of others. But for the youth, specifically, it will give them something to do, believe and offer—not just sit, watch and receive as they’ve become accustomed to in churches.

May our faithful efforts toward adolescent spiritual formation be like mustard seeds that grow to have a larger impact than we expect. And may the promises of God be evident in our churches as we experience crops thirty, sixty and one hundred times what was sown.

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