

July 2009

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## The Grip of Adolescence

“...they gathered more than 20,000 people to Safeco Field to rally for traditional marriage...Five years later, though, the movement is deflated and in disarray.” --Seattle Times, 7/21/2009

Politically motivated saints who have labored for years to stem the tide of evil masquerading as progressive public policies, are not usually put off by politically motivated criticism. But lashes administered in public forums by family members—local clergy—can sometimes bring division in the body rather than correction.

And, what are those criticisms? Chiefly, that decades-long campaigns to end abortion, preserve traditional marriage, and protect public school children from the reach of homosexual groups, have been abysmal failures. To wit: Americans recently elected a radically pro-abortion president, a pro-homosexual congress, and send their children to public schools where it is taught as normal and acceptable that *Heather has Two Mommies*.

Fresh seminary graduates are the most likely to express frustration with the so-called “Christian-right.” Young church leaders are persuaded that thanks to Dobson, Kennedy, Falwell, Robertson and many like them, the word “evangelical” now brings harshness and intolerance to mind. It is their opinion that the Church should communicate in a more culturally relevant way to a people that think much differently than previous generations. In light of three consecutive weeks of Michael Jackson memorializing (worship), we are inclined to agree that some kind of social intervention is desperately needed.

But if the Dobsons, Falwells and the Christian-right are turning off potential consumers of the Good News, who is to answer for the some 70% of church youth who go off to college and never return to the storehouse? Who IN the Church is failing to equip our own?

John Stonestreet, writing for *Summit Ministries* asks: “How is it that students who are so deeply engrossed in church culture and who have more access to the Bible, Christian literature, youth programs, and other resources than any generation that has lived since the founding of the church, can be so confused about what Christianity actually is and why it matters? How is it that they possess such a truncated, neutered view of the Kingdom? How is it that these students just don't "get it?"<sup>1</sup>

Following, are two-of-four key factors that Stonestreet says hinder church youth:

### The Distraction Factor

The age of information presents two unique challenges to this generation of students. First, they encounter daily an overwhelming amount of information. Of course, information isn't neutral; it contains, argues, or embodies ideas. Students today swim in a deluge of information. Whether or not there is an absence of the true or the genuine, there is often an inability to find it amidst all the noise and distraction.

Second, they experience this information, with the inherent ideas, differently than previous generations. Information today (especially via the internet) comes without

context, without a clear source, and often without narrative. Their lives look more like a random episode of Seinfeld than the start-to-finish Cosby Show. They are not a linear generation.”

"The result? Neal Postman argued a long time ago, without understanding the full impact of the Internet, that the west had become a silly culture.<sup>2</sup> Entertainment had destroyed our ability to think and prioritize. We lack discernment. We care about irrelevant things, and ignore what is actually important.

Unfortunately, the Christian community often responds by heaping "Christian" noise on the rest of the noise. Attempting to be "relevant" to students, we instead contribute to their appetites for distraction. Entertainment has made us silly and Christian entertainment has made our students silly Christians.

### **The Grip of Adolescence**

"There was a time, literally, when there were no teenagers."<sup>3</sup> In virtually every other culture in the history of the world prior to late 20th century Western culture, kids became adults. Not anymore. Now, they become teenagers or, as we call them, adolescents.

Despite its rather recent history, adolescence goes largely unquestioned as a fixed stage of development. It is fully expected that students will lose their minds from ages 13–18. "Kids will be kids," we say. Only, we aren't referring to kids, we are talking about those who buy, vote, and drive automobiles.

Further, the grip of adolescence continues to forcefully expand. On the front end, we now talk about "pre-teens" (with marketing engines quickly spotting the financial potential). On the back end, whereas eighteen was once considered the end of adolescence, it is now the middle. Adolescence now refers to ages 11 to 30.

But, that's not all. Adolescence is now, and this must not be missed, the goal of our culture. Somewhere along the way, we ceased to be a culture where kids aspire to be adults and became a culture where adults aspire to be kids.

Often, our approaches to youth ministry sanctify adolescence. Whereas teenagers have the capacity (and thus, I would argue, the calling), to think deeply and broadly about their culture, confront evil and injustice, and champion the truth, they instead are encouraged in their adolescent narcissism. It's a neutered Gospel, only about them and their needs, lacking vision (Proverbs. 29:18)."

So, is the institutional church in lock-down behind closed doors while the "religious-right" is running willy-nilly in the streets? While some might think so, the Apostle Paul reminds us there are different gifts and different administrations that make up the body of Christ. (1Cor 12:29-30)

Matthew Henry, the renowned Bible commentator writes: "The sum of revealed religion is in the doctrine concerning Christ, his person and office. The false teachers spake of the world according to its maxims and tastes, so as not to offend carnal men." A footnote in the *New King James Open Bible* further exhorts, "We must be able to clearly give out the simple facts of the gospel...We must avoid arguments and stick to the basic issues of man's sin and Christ's blood."

We concur with Matthew Henry and the annotated *Open Bible* that Christians are not in want of clever new methods to reach an adolescent generation. We are in need of a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit and a heartfelt desire for God rather than the approval of men.

*Rick Forcier*

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<sup>1</sup> John Stonestreet, *Why Students Don't 'Get It,' Truth & Consequences*, June 2009

<sup>2</sup> Neal Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (Penguin, 1985).

<sup>3</sup> D. West, *The Death of the Grownup: How America's Arrested Development Threatens Western Civilization* (St. Martin's Press, 2007).