

Framing a Gospel Centered Youth Ministry – Seven Strategic Questions

I. Introductory Comments

- There are many different traditions, ministry visions, polity models and church sizes and situations represented here.
- Not advocating a particular model or style. If we're successful today we'll get 'underneath' that and address questions we all wrestle with in our own ways.
- I'll use our experience as a frame of reference, not as a suggested approach.

II. What is Gospel Centered Ministry?

Col. 1:3-6: We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, ⁴since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, ⁵because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, ⁶which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth

1. Text and Context

- Paul had probably never met this church. His apostolic care was felt through a local eldership. This is a window into the care of a church. Paul the apostle brought an update by Epaphras – the local overseer travels 1000 miles. Some of you have come 1000 miles or more to this conference in maybe 6 hours door to door.
- Paul is full of joy - It's a good report but with some concerns – errors and heresy.
- His confidence is in the power of the Gospel – it bears its own fruit. (V.5-6). Paul believes in the power of the Gospel to change lives and build the church. Not some magical power, but Gospel truth taught and learned (v.7) over time in the context of a local church.
- Paul's prayer in vv. 9-14 is an expression of his confidence in what God will produce a church centered where Gospel truth is proclaimed.
- If we are proclaiming Gospel truth in our church then our ministry structures should be determined by what promotes and protects the truth we are proclaiming.

2. Gospel Centered Ministry has as its goal to protect and promote the fruit of the Gospel in the lives of God's people.

III. Framing a Gospel Centered Youth Ministry

Question 1: What is a Teen?

ISSUE: How do we define the teen years? What shapes our definition? What are our expectations? In the church? In the family? How do we understand emotional development, intellectual capacity, gender identification, behavioral tendencies?

Where do we get our assumptions about the teenage years?

1. Historical Trends

- G. Stanley Hall (1904) Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education. The seminal treatise on the teenage years as we know them today.¹ Hall is generally understood as the 'father of adolescence'.

2. Cultural Climate

- This is where most youth ministry training is focused. Yet the climate shifts so rapidly that it can be very difficult to know what teens will face or be enticed by even a year from now. (Think technology, fashion, media, world events, etc.).

3. Biblical Worldview

- Teens are 'immature worshippers'.

¹ Hall developed the concept of 'adolescence' along social-darwinism lines. Each person has to recapitulate human evolution. In his theory society becomes the primary shaping influence to help this group arrive at its full evolutionary potential. Prior to Hall 14 year olds were considered young adults. Hall was responsible for the notion that adolescence is a time of universal and inherent stress and chaos in pre-adulthood. All teenagers are slightly emotionally disordered. Out of Hall's theories came the concept of full service high schools – to both train young people and to protect society from unsocialized young people.

Hall's theories did have the affect in helping curb and reform child labor abuses. But most of his underlying assumptions about human nature and development are not supportable by research. Yet his influence is embedded in our understanding of what it means to be a teenager. (Jeff Black, "Counseling Adolescents", Class notes, WTS, Spring 2004.)

Ted Tripp: "Our teenagers go into the world every single day to find things to marvel at. They are on the lookout to be impressed by something. They love to be dazzled by things in their surroundings. But not only our teens, we were all made to be dazzled. We're made to stand back and gape, to wonder and be overwhelmed by the glory and goodness and greatness of God. We're uniquely designed to respond to this awesome glory with worship, adoration, reverence, and being awestruck with God's glory. We're made for worship. What happens when people who are instinctively and compulsively worshipers fail to worship God? We simply worship something else in His place. We get impressed by things, people, and experiences in creation. We get dazzled by idols. But the glory of God is displayed through the things that God has made. People—teens included—are without excuse when they exchange the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:19- 21). They honor, praise, and marvel at created things rather than the Creator. They (and we) worship idols instead of the one true God."²

- Perhaps the best biblical category for the teenage years is 'the simple' – those who stand at the fork in the road of wisdom and foolishness and are drawn to one or the other.
- Over time teens will become mature worshippers. They will become seasoned at worshipping something. They will no longer be simple. The wise person is a seasoned worshipper of God. A Fool as a seasoned worshipper of that which is not God.

CFC APPLICATION: *A biblical Worldview of Personal Development.* We want to let our biblical view of teens be the lens through which we view our historic and cultural view of teens, and therefore how we shape ministry for them.

Question 2: How does God work saving and sanctifying grace in the life of a child?

ISSUE: Church traditions somewhat define how we understand the saving and sanctifying work of grace in people as they mature into adulthood. How do we understand a child's standing in the covenant family of God? How do we assess profession of faith and fruit of faith? How do we determine the difference between a well-indoctrinated youth and a spiritually reborn youth? This question is also complicated because parents have a 'practical' theology of raising children that may or may not conform to their church's teaching or even the Scriptures themselves.

² Ted Tripp, "Dazzle Your Teen", *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Summer 2005, p. 7

Our understanding of the Gospel must compel us to recognize that it cannot be the function of parenting or youth ministry to make sure every child is converted by the time he or she leaves youth ministry.

CFC APPLICATION: *Youth Ministry is an expression of Family Life Ministry.*

- At Covenant Fellowship Church we see our youth ministry as part of our overall family life ministry. The way we say it is, "the Family Life Ministry of CFC exists to equip our families to *treasure, proclaim* and *grow* in the gospel of Jesus Christ."
- All of our ministry to marriages and families must be integrated around the same biblical understanding of the Gospel and how God saves and sanctifies sinners by grace alone.³ What parents hear in raising toddlers must be able to be traced through to how they parent teens.
- We are focused not on producing successful or morally robust teens, but humble followers of Christ.

Question 3: What is the relationship between the church and the family in the spiritual formation of teens?

ISSUE: Among parents there can often be a strong leaning to transfer the hard and often frustrating work of raising teens to specialized ministries – Christian schools, para-church ministries and activities, and the church youth ministry itself. Pastors can want to address weaknesses in church families through programming directed at perceived problem areas. Parents and Pastors both can have a tendency to address 'the youth' as a need category in the church, not as people who are an essential expression of the community of faith.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION: The church family is too big to impress the nurture and discipline of the Lord on our children in the level of application that the family provides. The nuclear family is too small to hold the mission of the Lord for our children that is contained in the Church. The role of the pastors is to articulate a coherent vision of church and family as both are biblically defined.

³ From *Explore (Family Life and Singles)*, the Covenant Fellowship Church class for prospective members: "At the heart of biblical childrearing is the fact that Christian parenting is essentially evangelism. All of the parents' efforts, prayers, and strategies confront the reality that our children's greatest need is forgiveness of their sins and a life transforming relationship with the Savior. Well-behaved or highly accomplished or abundantly happy children who do not know Christ are without hope in this world. Christian parenting trusts in the covenant promises of God that He is at work bringing our children to Himself by placing them in families where the Gospel is treasured, proclaimed, and applied right before their eyes."

CFC APPLICATION: *Parent-Youth Model of Ministry.* At the core of our pastoral model is the commitment to connect teens and parents together. Our pastoral role is to equip parents to lead and disciple their teens, and to care for the families of the church in the challenges of these years. While we will meet with teens in certain circumstances, we will not develop independent pastoral relationships with teens apart from care for parents as well. We want to make sure that our programming supports the role of the parents and families, while calling both to a robust commitment to the mission of the church.

Question 4: What is the role of outreach in youth ministry?

ISSUE: Do we view youth ministry as a nurturing environment for our teens to preserve the children of the church into the next generation? Do we see the call of youth ministry as a call to evangelize youth in our community? This is a particular expression of the historic fundamental/evangelical tension of the church. There may be no more volatile question that needs to be addressed. Simply put, it is very difficult to do both well together. There are several fault lines that emerge in this question.

- There can be a fault line between the youth ministry and the larger vision of the church. Often the vision of youth ministry taught in seminary leans toward outreach and community impact, while the goals of the eldership lean toward caring for the youth in the church family.
- There can be a fault line between the culture of the church and the culture of the youth coming in through outreach.
- There can be a fault line between youth raised in families of the church and youth coming without parents and families.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION: What shapes the theology of evangelism/mission in the church and how does that apply itself in relation to youth ministry?

OUR APPLICATION: *Community based evangelism.* Our church evangelism strategy is to see the gathered community as the primary locus of evangelism. This applies to those raised in the church and outsiders as well. We equip and encourage for the purpose of personal evangelism, but these activities are means to connect folks to the witness of the church itself.

We've decided not to focus on an outreach approach to youth ministry, but to focus on equipping and encouraging parents in the evangelism of their children. Our youth ministry is designed to build a core of authentic discipleship among teens. As teens connect in their relationships, or new believers bring their teens into the church, our confidence is that the wisdom of a group of maturing teens will be a refuge for those God is reaching through our ministry.

While we do periodic outreaches with the teens target to teens, we seek to include the teens of the church in the established outreach ministries of the church.

Question 5: What is the function of pastoral care for teens?

ISSUE: What is a youth pastor? Who is his congregation? How should teens view themselves in context of the local church? Is the church responsible for creating a fully orbed alternative community for teens? What is the pastoral responsibility over the moral choices of teens? How should parents and teens view their relationship with a youth pastor? Who counsels youth?

In reading through youth ministry literature this seems to be the most widely debated question churches face. This ultimately comes back to ecclesiology and polity issues. Where does youth ministry fit in a church's pastoral leadership structure? Is it a specialized position for youth ministry graduates who are asked to bring creativity and energy to youth programming? Is it a starting position for new pastors, who are being asked to build and feed a defined congregation in the church?

CFC APPLICATION: *Team Ministry Approach to Oversight*. Any approach to overseeing youth ministry is ultimately addressed as a pastor/elder question – what is the most effective way we as an entire church can provide care for teens and their families given present needs and available resources.

Question 6: How is truth most effectively communicated to teens?

ISSUE: As we saw from Paul's letter to the Colossians, it is the Gospel 'learned' (systematically taught and applied) that builds the church. A church where God's word is not taught will not produce disciples of any age. This questions deals with contexts. What is the best context for truth taught and applied? There are any number of contexts, each with its own strengths and weaknesses:

- Preaching/teaching in ministry wide gatherings
- Small Groups and Bible studies
- One on one Discipleship/mentoring
- Distribution of printed or recorded material or web based material
- Equipping of parents to teach their children.

This issue is one of ongoing discussion among Sovereign Grace Ministries pastors. Many churches adopted a combination of teaching meetings for the purpose of instruction and small groups for application and fellowship. But the fruit of the small group model of fellowship among teens has often been spotty.

A church's approach to communicating truth to teens can be flexible, it's commitment to communicating truth cannot.

What we can't allow to cloud the truth declaring responsibility of the church to its youth are:

- An over-emphasis on relevance
- Moral instruction
- Life management strategies
- Dialogue
- Theology/Doctrine devoid of application
- Issue Education
- Error
- Well intention, but gift-less instruction.

CFC APPLICATION: *'Cross Culture' teaching drives "Cross Culture Small Group Application."* At this time our youth ministry model places a focus on our large group teaching context – 'Cross Culture'. This includes parents and youth gathered together to hear instruction for them both, and then an 'Extra Point', where the youth are dismissed for activities and the parents remain for a short additional application of the message to them as parents.

We also have monthly small group meetings *led by pastors*, which involve parents and teens together in application of material from the Cross Culture meetings.

For another approach in a Sovereign Grace Church see the excellent article "Teaching in Two Directions" by Steve Whitacre, youth pastor at Sovereign Grace Church in Fairfax, VA (<http://www.sovgracefairfax.org/>). The article can be downloaded as a PDF by Googling: *Teaching in Two Directions*.

Question 7: How does a church manage the competing goals of continuity and flexibility in its methodology and programming?

ISSUE: Continuity allows for methods and programs to mature and be evaluated over time. It allows pre-teens to anticipate a future experience and families to have stability over multiple children. But we must avoid sacred cows. Youth programs are very susceptible to institutionalization and fossilization. And sometimes change can't be avoided.

Flexibility allows us to tailor methods and programs to current needs of the church, but can create discontinuity. An over emphasis on flexibility can affect the quality of ministry and can lead to the Next Great Thing syndrome.

GOSPEL IMPLICATION: Steve Whitacre: *“Our philosophy of ministry derives from the theological commitment that all ministry in the church has a purpose: discipleship and equipping. In other words, no ministry exists for its own sake. We don’t have a youth ministry because other churches have a youth ministry, or because we need something for kids to do on Saturday night, or even because it is fun. Rather, youth ministry is the ministry of the church applied to parents and teens, for the purpose of God’s glory and the good of his people.”⁴*

CFC APPLICATION: *Values, not perceived needs, drive programs and methods.* We emphasize values, not methods. We evaluate ministry for its fruitfulness and must be willing to make changes for the sake of fruitfulness. Ministries and programs take time to bear fruit and we are willing to give that time to a ministry to see if it is bearing sufficient fruit to warrant maintaining. And the perspective of the folks being served by the ministry is very important, but cannot rule the way the church does ministry. In the end, ministry built on biblical values and theological convictions can allow for both continuity and innovation, as well as provide vision for the folks being served, even if there are things we are unable to do.

- Ex: Youth Camp

⁴ Steve Whitacre, “Philosophy of Ministry – five15”, Sovereign Grace Church, Fairfax, VA, from seminar, “The Pastor and Youth Ministry”, Sovereign Grace Ministries Leaders Conference, April 2009.