

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Effectively Communicating The Gospel To Adolescents

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Introduction to Seminary Studies

by

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Introduction

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, 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 communicated 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?

This paper will draw on a variety of sources in an effort to answer these questions. It will start with a look at American church history to see how the home structure has changed over the years and the resulting loss of faith instruction in the house. From there it will transition to 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? Finally, it will look at current student ministry research on adolescents and faith before coming to a conclusion.

Thesis Statement

Our current models for sharing the gospel with adolescents does not adequately take into account the changes over the last century in American culture, the unique challenges of developing adolescent brains, or current research on faith not only in young people, but their

parents. Learning and adjusting ministry models based on that information can increase the effective transmission of the gospel to adolescents.

American Church History

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. While World War I, known at the time as the War to End War, played a role in galvanizing faith, it was primarily a strengthening of our role as a Christian nation against the “godless hordes” of the enemy.

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.¹

Impact of World War II

World War II, on the other hand, actually saw a significant increase in church attendance, membership and giving. By 1960, in fact, church membership rose to a high of 70% of the American population.² At first glance this would seem encouraging from a faith standpoint in spite of the circumstances driving the church growth, however, there was little spiritual depth or impact to faith in the increased membership. The reality was during that season of time in the United States, much of the national identity was found in a history of Christian roots when contrasted with the Nazi's and the Communists. Patriotism was at a high due to the war, and good Americans had Christian ties. More specifically, good Americans had a church.³

Being highly connected to church did not translate to deeper faith. The seeds were planted during this time frame for what would eventually become several generations of Americans completely removed from the church. 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 shared meal is often sacrificed, certainly, but more to the point for the Christianity of the

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

2 Ibid., 181.

3 Ibid, 184.

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

Growing Up Without A Faith Influence

What does all this mean? The impact of several national crisis 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

Changes in Assumptions

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

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 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.

Current Research

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

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.

pathways. Neural pathways used form permanent structures while those left unused die off and are reabsorbed into the body. Ultimately, what this means is that an individual's lifelong patterns of problem solving, thought processes, and ways of interacting with information are developed and solidified during the adolescent period primarily through experiences and opportunities.

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 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.

Adolescent Abstract Thought Processing

A significant part of the adolescent development process is the transition from concrete thinking to abstract thought. During the 1920's Jean Piaget proposed a theory involving different stages of development for children regarding how brains process and understand information. Almost a century later, after much testing, his theory still continues to be accepted. They are⁷:

- Sensorimotor period (years 0-2)
- Preoperational period (years 2-7)
- Concrete operational period (years 7-11)
- Formal operational period (years 11 and up)

For this paper, recognizing the final two stages are significant. The concrete operational 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

⁷ Oestricher, *Understanding*, Location 953.

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. In the early years of puberty, an individual can be witnessed going back and forth between concrete and abstract thought.

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

Where We Are

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.⁸

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 2011.⁹ While on a smaller scale than the National Study of Youth and Religion, the results were striking in their similarity and the combined efforts of the two research studies seem 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.”¹⁰ 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 research¹¹:

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.

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

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

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

11 *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.”¹² 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 seem to 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.

Primary Influences

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

¹² Ibid., 21.

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

Religiously Committed Teens Have In Common

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 While numbers two and three are abstract, the other four are very much measurable and should inform those who want to see more young people devoted to Christ:

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.

Conclusion

¹⁴ Ibid., 117.

¹⁵ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 41.

The focus of student ministry needs to be broad. If the transmission of faith to adolescents is truly a priority, then the culture of the local church at large needs to reflect it.

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, then 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 should create an environment where lasting faith is more likely to be cultivated.

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RESEARCH PAPER: PART 4 GRADING RUBRIC

Element	Criteria	Excellent: Satisfies criteria w/ excellent work	Good: Satisfies criteria	Average: Satisfies most criteria	Poor: Does not satisfy criteria	Points Earned	Comments from Instructor
Introduction & Thesis Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a clear thesis statement. The topic is identified. • The introduction provides a clear overview of the paper's contents. 	18–20 pts.	17 pts.	15–16 pts.	0–14 pts.		
Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are clear transitions between paragraphs and sections. • The treatment of the topic is logically oriented. • Assertions are properly supported by evidence. 	18–20 pts.	17 pts.	15–16 pts.	0–14 pts.		
Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The content is focused and clear, supporting the thesis statement. 	18–20 pts.	17 pts.	15–16 pts.	0–14 pts.		
Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The conclusion offers a good summary of issues treated. • The conclusion “proves” the thesis statement. 	37–40 pts.	34–36 pts.	30–33 pts.	0–29 pts.		
Materials/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The bibliography contains at least 10 current, scholarly sources. • Materials are properly cited and quoted. 	37–40 pts.	34–36 pts.	30–33	0–29 pts.		

Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quotations are relevant to the topic. 			pts.			
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The paper properly uses current Turabian. It has a title page and table of contents. Proper headings, footnotes, and bibliography are used. • The paper reflects a graduate level of vocabulary. • The paper is without spelling and grammar errors. • The paper meets the page length requirement. 	55–60 pts.	50–54 pts.	46–49 pts.	0–45 pts.		
TOTAL EARNED							Out of 200 points