

Thoughts on Youth Ministry and Discipling Youth

Anna Aven Howard, June 2007

Soul Care is First Priority

Read Mark or Luke and note the number of times that Jesus goes away to be with his father. He didn't heal every one who came in contact with him... Neither can we rescue every kid out there, or even every kid we come into contact with. If we are not in constant communion with our Savior, then we've lost sight of our priorities, and we will not be any good to the people around us.

Family is first ministry

It just is, nuff said.

We are called to faithfulness, not success

I wrote a column recently for newlivingtranslation.com that is a summary of what I feel is an important understanding of what we as ministers of the gospel are called to. Here it is:

Recently, I was forced to evaluate the work I was doing as a minister of the gospel as it was called into question by those who were not seeing the "results" that they had expected. And I think that all of us from some time to another are sort of challenged or questioned about the "results" that we're getting as ministers of the gospel. For regardless of what your job may be, you and I as followers of Christ are his ambassadors and ministers of his gospel (2 Cor. 5:20).

And far too often it seems that we are called to account in ways that require us to give some sort of empirical account of our effectiveness as "good" Christians. Questions such as "how many people have you witnessed to?" or "how many people have gotten saved?" or perhaps how many are involved in some ministry you work with, and so forth. Yet today as I was reading the beginning of Ezekiel I was reminded that as minister of the gospel, we are not called to "success," but to faithfulness. After all, being faithful to what God has called us to is the real success.

In the first part of Ezekiel chapter two, God tells Ezekiel that he is sending him to a stubborn people who most likely won't listen to him, but that he is to continue proclaiming the message anyway. God gets very specific as to how Ezekiel is to carry out this mission in chapter 3 when he tells him, "Son of man, let all my words sink deep into your own heart first. Listen to them carefully for yourself. Then go to your people in exile and say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says!' Do this whether they listen to you or not" (vv. 10-11).

So then, there are two elements to success, that is, faithfulness from God's perspective. First, we must stay in step with what God is doing by meditating on his words. In the first part of this chapter, Ezekiel eats a scroll with God's message for the people on it, giving us a graphic

representation of first internalizing God's word before proclaiming it. The second element is being faithful to the message, to the gospel, to proclaiming that in the way that God has called us to proclaim it whether or not anyone listens.

Now, this doesn't give us the right to be abrasive or nonchalant in our delivery since we have been entrusted with the very words of God and are enlisted in the ranks of ambassadors of Christ when we chose to take his name and announce to the world that we are Christ-followers.

But, and this is an important but, it frees us from whatever false empirical measures of success may or may not be imposed upon the ministry that we are engaging in. After all, God calls us to be faithful. The results have ever been solely his.

Three objectives to come out of every youth group meeting:

1. Feel safe and welcomed
2. Have a positive encounter with an adult
3. Be taught something about Jesus (This is most important, obviously, but without #1 and #2, they'll never hear/understand #3, or worse, they will hear, but decide it's not true because they didn't experience it in the youth group.)

*See also **Theology of Play**

Teaching

We aren't trying to change behavior before we see heart changes—that only leads to re-enforcing what kids already experience because of their abandonment by adults in general in that they will perform in order to win an adult's approval or attention, but without understanding the “why” of it, the change will be surface level at best. That being said, we can't allow behavior that will bother, hurt, offend other kids that are there in the group. So we can ask them not to say certain things, call people names, use insults etc, but it's in the context of making everyone feel safe and welcome. This needs to actually be stated to the youth you're correcting so that they understand the reason. Trust me, just having an adult actually take time to give them an explanation will be huge for them, and will help your overall cause.

Example: kid A calls kid B “retard” or something... We don't just say, no names, we make sure both kids know that we don't call people names because we want people to feel safe and welcomed, and so we respect each other. That means that not only will you not call kid B names, but Kid B won't call you names either...

We also need to model positive behavior as adult youth leaders and make sure we are showing them what respecting each other looks like.

Teaching isn't something that only happens in the “lesson” portion of any given youth gathering. In fact, you teach far more at every other time you interact with kids than you do in the lesson. They are picking up on everything you do, how you treat others, how you act in and out of church. They'll *only* really pick up and start to understand the Bible study portion if they see it as a part of you life. It goes something like this: you value them, so that attracts them. You

value following Jesus and living out your life as his disciple, allowing yourself to be molded and shaped by the Scriptures, then they will start to want to know about that and listen to that because they see it in you.

Be intentional about studying the Bible when you do study it. It's not something to throw out to back up something you're saying. Actually help kids find the spot in the Bible, look at it and at its context. That way they can start to understand this story of God's heart for humanity straight from the source.

If we're going to use a fishing metaphor for this, our lives are the shiny lure that attract kids to the "hook." You can't get fish to swallow a plain, bare hook, neither can you shove portions of Scripture down kids throat as you randomly encounter them on the street. If they aren't attracted to you because of your love and your life—the way you live out the gospel—you can't teach them what it means to follow Christ.

The Bible

The Bible is sort of conceived in general as a "rulebook" of sorts to kids that aren't around the church. They've had things thrown at them saying "the Bible says..." and it's usually followed by "do this" or "don't do that." Helping the kids understand the Bible as a love story about God's pursuit of people's hearts is a big concept shift for them... It's not a rule book. That doesn't mean that God doesn't have definite moral standards—he does. BUT the purpose of God's standards is not to kill people's fun just because he's God and he can. What God says "Don't do" he says because he wants to save people's lives. He wants them to really live, find true and abundant life—which is only possible through relationship with him. It's not about rules, it's about life!

There will always be a temptation in teaching to talk about what not to do especially as we see kids flirting with sex, drugs and so forth—things we know that could really damage them. But, hear this, it doesn't help to just tell them not to do it. They have to understand and know God's heart for their lives and how he wants them to live—really live—before they'll care about God's standard for anything.

Sex

Never just tell a kid "don't do it" when it comes to sex. Studies show that church kids are just as likely to have sex as anyone else, they just feel guilty about it. Instead, talk about God's intent for sex and cast a vision of the way God intends it to be. Without a vision, people parish, and most people never hear the story behind the moral, so they just end up hearing rules. No one ever fell in love with God because someone presented them with a rule list.

Drugs

Again, don't just say, "don't do it" but talk about how we are created in the image of God, and our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit. Also, drugs can keep us from getting to where God wants us to get, from living into his plan for our lives. Be sure to emphasize the life-giving nature of God's plan so that it doesn't end up sounding like God's a control freak looking for a bunch of automatons or something... sharing from personal experiences about the awesomeness of jumping into God's plan for our lives even when things didn't turn out as we expected are vital here.

Rock and roll (and God's quest for our hearts)

Turn it up and play it loud!!! Music is an art, and intrinsically, there's no such thing as "bad" music. There can be harmful and negative lyrics, but no style in and of itself is bad. Be sure that if a kid likes a certain style—even if you can't stand it—that you don't come down on the style itself. Try checking out the lyrics and seeing what might be attractive to the kid in them even if you don't approve of the content. Art is a primary means of communicating a search for God. So look for the search for God in the music of the kids... you might be surprised where you find it. And instead of condemning something that's near and dear to their heart, you'll have a starting point for conversation.

Remember it doesn't matter how much of the external stuff they seem to change to win your approval, none of it means anything if they haven't had a heart change. God is always after people's hearts. The Old Testament chronicles this in amazing ways as time after time God tries to win the people back to himself. And what they do on the outside, such as sacrifices and such don't do any good if their hearts are not in the right place. So in all our teaching, we're aiming at the kids' hearts. We want them to encounter God in a deep and meaningful way so that they come back for more. A lot of the times, it will seem like they won't get it... But then, do we really "get it"? I think the best any of us can do is to get more than we did before. Look at the disciples in the NT and what God did with them. They were a pretty motley crew...

This same principle applies to movies and TV as well. Be careful about being quick to attack content without understanding what the attraction is. This doesn't mean be shy about holding up God's standards either, just remember the standards God gives us are not because he wants to spoil our fun, but because he wants us to have a rich and satisfying life—life to the full!

REAL Christianity: Sometimes life still sucks...

There's a big danger in that trying to "sell" Christianity, we attempt market it to kids in such a way that makes it sound like if they just get saved, all their problems will be solved and life will be wonderful. This is a horrible lie and it drives kids away on two levels: (1) they won't "buy" it and take off, or (2) they do "buy" it, but later discover it's not true and are driven away and reject Christianity wholesale. If we look at the storm section in Mark, we see that Jesus promises to get them to the other side of the lake. The fact that they encountered a storm didn't mean that he

wasn't keeping his promise. He doesn't promise to protect us from storms, only that he will walk through them with us. And when he promises that we will get to the other side, we'll get to the other side.

“I don't know” is a good answer when you really don't know

Resist the urge to answer kids' questions with platitudes or try to throw a Scripture verse at a problem. If it's a complex problem, telling them “just trust Jesus” or “go look up this verse” isn't a real answer. While Scripture and trusting Jesus are things we need to develop, these develop over a period of time, not all at once. If someone asks you something you don't have an answer to, tell them you don't know, but you'll help them explore the question more.

Don't promise to find them the answer. Some questions don't have good answers, and we need to admit that. For example, why does God let a helpless baby suffer? Either he could have healed it and thus he's mean, or he's powerless, and then what's the point of worshipping him? There's no good answer to this. All we can do is highlight that God never causes evil, bad things happen because our world is broken. And God can heal people, but sometimes he doesn't. We know from the Bible that God is always good, and we have to trust him even when what he does or doesn't do, makes absolutely no sense to us. God is not tame, after all, and he's not a genie who will grant us wishes if we rub him the right way. I've never seen a kid get turned off with that kind of a response. It shows them a God who isn't safe, but is oh so good as the Chronicles of Narnia so wonderfully illustrate.

Theology of Play and Importance of Relationships

Playtime is important. It is the celebration time for a community, and what we are attempting to build when we do youth ministry is a community of youth and adults who are committed to following Jesus together. Teens party because that is the outlet for communal celebration for the adolescent community, and if you look at an culture/community, there are parties and celebrations. In Scripture, we see Jesus at a wedding, performing his first major miracle (in John), and there are frequent communal meals and gatherings mentioned where opportunity for discussion and teaching presents itself.

Play is also important in that it is an essential element in any relationship, and what we are trying to foster with our youth is community. Obviously it's community centered around Jesus and helping kids understand what it means to have a relationship with Jesus, but a key to helping them understand a relationship with Jesus is first by helping them understand relationships. Many of them don't know what a good parent is supposed to look like, father or mother, so trying to relate to God as parent is difficult. Most have never seen a good marriage, so Jesus as bridegroom and the church as bride is not a helpful metaphor if they don't understand what marriage can be and is supposed to be. And probably none of them have ever interacted with sheep, so that metaphor needs to be carefully unpacked and explained in order for them to understand the relationship between shepherd and sheep.

An ounce of Preparation...

There's no substitute for preparation. This isn't just lesson prep, or advance event planning either. Preparation extends to making sure the youth room is neat, orderly and clean before youth group starts. Think of this like the broken glass theory of crime: if the youth room isn't neat and orderly, it tells the kids that youth group isn't important because no one took the time to get ready for it. Then you have a bunch of kids who aren't valuing youth time, the group is harder to pull together, and infinitely harder to focus on the discussion topic/activity for the evening. Similarly, if the leader is not prepared to lead the discussion/talk, then it is often apparent to the youth even though the leader never admits it verbally.

Perfectionism and the Holy Spirit.

So, where does the Holy Spirit fit into all of this? The answer is everywhere! We can literally do nothing without him, but that doesn't mean that with him we get to do nothing because he's really doing everything. I know most people "know" this on one level, but far too often the Holy Spirit is used as an excuse for not preparing: "Oh, we're just going to let the Spirit lead us tonight." Let the Spirit lead by all means. Let him lead in your preparation, in your planning, and definitely let him change things up the night of if he wants to, but be ready. It's sort of like the old sailboat metaphor: you can't turn a boat that isn't moving. So start moving with the leading of the Holy Spirit, and then he'll be able to turn your rudder.

And finally... some thoughts on conversion

I've struggled for several years now with the concept of conversion. Somehow in evangelical America we've gotten the idea that if you'll just understand the basics of Christianity—we're sinners, we can't do anything to rescue ourselves from sin, so God sent Jesus to die for us, if we "accept" him as our Lord and Savior, then everything will be good and our ticket will be punched for heaven—then you'll be a Christian.

The problem with this is I don't find this idea in the Bible. Yes, those concepts are there, but as Donald Miller so wonderfully pointed out in *Searching for God Knows What*, those concepts are spread out over a lot of text, and really don't do anyone any good outside of their relational context. Think about it in terms of falling in love: what steps did you take to fall in love? Can you make an exact list that you can guarantee will work for someone else? I'm talking about the process of falling in love, not what it takes to keep loving in a marriage. I think we'd agree that the process of falling in love looks different for everyone, and that we can't make a list of hard and fast steps, even though most of us can easily recognize what it looks like when it's happening.

My main problem with the evangelical concept of conversion is that it really isn't in the Bible, where you just do this believe these four or five things, and you're saved. Granted, Romans 10:9 everyone's favorite conversion verse, the end of the famed "Romans road" says "if you confess

with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” I’m not arguing with that. It seems we try to break out into steps what it takes for a person to get to this point and make it so clear and easy that we only present them with facts. No one ever fell in love with facts.

Finally, I’d like to examine the idea that the great commission says make disciples, not converts. Discipling is a long-term project, has little or no instant gratification, unlike getting someone to “pray the prayer” and “accept Jesus in to their heart.” I’ve got those in quotes because I’m hard-pressed to find the “sinner’s prayer” in the Bible. You know, that cute little formula you pray with people after they come up for an altar call, or you’ve stunned them with the four spiritual laws in the food court of your local mall... I’m not saying these things have done no good; I just don’t believe they are very effective. God can use all sorts of things to help people make decisions to follow him, but as some have pointed out, the church in the west is shrinking, not growing, while we’ve been employing those sorts of tactics.

And I think it’s because we’ve separated the facts about the gospel from the love story of the gospel. And that just doesn’t work.