

## **Youth Outreach & Evangelism: Final Paper**

### **Youth Evangelism Among Christian Adolescents**

When we think of youth evangelism, we most often think of adolescents who come from broken homes; young men and women who have chosen various vices of this world—sexual activity, experimentation with and addiction to various drugs. We think of students who are abused and are abusing; who are abandoned, materialistic, aching for attention, seeking recognition and living totally unbridled lives. These are adolescents who do not know of Almighty God and who worship the gods of this culture. In my work with adolescents in our churches and in both our Christian and public schools and our neighborhoods, I have been confronted with the great need there is in getting to know these unchurched or outreach students in an incarnational manner and in living out the love and Gospel of Jesus alongside them so that they may come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

Yet in my over 20 years of youth ministry I have come to see that there is another group of students who are often forgotten or overlooked in the scheme of youth evangelism. These are the children and grandchildren of those who once were our “outreach” students. These are adolescents who are “second generation” Christians. These students are not of the generation who initially chose Jesus Christ and personally know a distinct difference between pre-Christian and post-Christian lives. These are students who were raised in Christian families. They are cultural Christians.

I would compare these are mid-adolescents to First Century residents of Jerusalem. The Church today is like the Jerusalem of the First Century: there are those in the church who still need to hear the Gospel. Often those of us who are in the ministry are so focused on taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth, that we forget that we need to continue to take the Gospel to our Jerusalem. By Jerusalem, I no longer mean the unsaved family in the house next door to me in Colorado Springs, but I mean the Jerusalem that is the center of religion—our churches and other Christian institutions. There are adolescents who have been raised in our churches and are in our Christian organizations who need to see

and hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ just as much as there are adolescents in the house next door to us, in our public schools and in Nepal.

In the same way as there were in the New Testament times, cultural Jews who needed Jesus Christ, there are today cultural Christians who need Him. Like their First Century Jewish predecessors, many of our adolescents today have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior for themselves. For some of them it is because they have rejected the systematic religion of their parents. Others have not come to realize that they cannot get to heaven simply because they are cultural Christians and have been raised in Christian homes. Still others believe that they are going to heaven because they are leaders in their youth groups and go on missions trips and regularly attend FCA or are involved in ministry at their Christian school. In the same way that the Apostle Paul was sent out by Jesus to be the Apostle to the Gentiles and Peter was sent out by Jesus to be the Apostle to the Jews, there are today, some who are rightfully sent out by Jesus to call the non-believers in the American culture to Jesus Christ and others are sent out by Jesus to call non-believers in the Muslim world to Jesus Christ. There are still others are called by Jesus to “stay” and in staying to call good “Christian” kids to Jesus Christ. This does not and should not diminish the need of all of us to be seeking those who have never heard the name of Jesus. There is no denying that going outward from Jerusalem continues to be the focus of the Great Commission and the evangelistic job of the Church. However, some need to stay—not out of fear of going, but out of a calling to stay and to make sure that those at home hear and receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ and then are trained to go out.

One of my greatest concerns in my years working at a Christian high school and in churches with solid Christian families is that of what I’ve come to call “unsaved Christian kids”. This phrase or title is intentionally contradictory and in and of itself describes the conflict that this issue creates in me. I believe that it is a difficult task, but an important one, in the body of Christ today to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to today’s “churched” adolescents. I believe that there are many adolescents in our churches and Christian schools today who are going to hell and need to be reached with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

A number of times in his lectures<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Clark used a Likert scale to track responses to evangelism.

The scale he referred to track views of Christianity and Jesus Christ as a person moves closer to salvation.

Using a scale from 1 to 7, it would look something like this:

<b><u>Responses to Evangelism</u></b>							
Scale position	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Perspective on Christianity	I'm not interested			I don't care either way			I love Jesus
	I hate Christians I hate all things Christian	I don't like Christians	I don't trust Christians	I'm neutral toward Christians	Christians are ok	I like Jesus	I love Jesus

When considering this very limited target audience of American Christian adolescents, I would alter the scale to look like this:

<b><u>Proposed Scale for unsaved Christian kids</u></b>							
Scale position	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
American "Christian" kids who are unsaved	I hate Christians I hate all things Christian	Rejected Jesus because of Christians	Doubting & wavering in their Christian faith	Raised in Christian homes	Raised in Christian families, haven't chosen Jesus for themselves	Christian leader who serve Jesus and feel good about Him, but haven't chosen to follow Him	Volitional, willful belief in Jesus Christ

Many of our Christian students were in categories 4 through 6—from "neutral" to "liking Jesus".

For these students, they have not continued to move on the scale to the point of a "volitional belief in Jesus

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Chapman Clark, "Strategies of Youth Outreach", Youth Evangelism and Outreach student notebook, Lecture Resources, p. 2. © 1998 (revised 2001) Fuller Theological Seminary.

Christ”. Many of them remain intellectually knowledgeable about Christianity and about Jesus Christ and others really like their identity as Christians and like Jesus, but haven’t yet made a willful decision to enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and willfully obey Him. Others, for various reasons, have moved backward on the scale and have become uncomfortable with their faith and with Christianity and are doubting the Truth. Some have become hostile to Christians and even towards Jesus Christ.

The mid to late adolescents that we work with in our Christian high schools, youth groups and parachurch organizations that have been raised in our religious systems who remain at steps 4, 5 and 6 include those who are ambivalent about Christianity to those who are intellectually and emotionally tied to Christianity that need to know that the Gospel of Jesus is more than a good feeling about a cultural religion. There are others of our church students who, though they many times must remain in our systems, have moved down the scale to doubting their faith or rejecting Christians and Jesus who also need the true saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The question of this paper is how do we go about reaching these students? To put it another way, how do we strategically evangelize students who have grown up immersed in a Christian culture? In order to do this, I will first specifically identify who these students are; then I will discuss some cautions in reaching this population; then I will provide some strategies that we’ve discussed in this class and that I’ve found in my work with mid to late adolescents that I think are strategic to bringing them to a volitional saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

### **Types of “Unsaved Christian Students”**

There are two major divisions of mid to late adolescent students who are in our Christian organizations, but have yet to receive the salvation of Jesus Christ and enter into a personal relationship with Him: those who are content and comfortable in cultural American Christianity and those who are disillusioned with Christianity. In this second part of this paper, I will describe these two groups of students

and discuss some of the factors that may have placed them in their current state, then in the next two sections I will discuss how to effectively reach them for Christ.

During my years in youth ministry I have observed that there is a significant number of our American youth have not personally received Jesus Christ as their personal Savior not because they have rejected Him or rejected Christianity, but because they believe that they are already saved. Often we assume that our church kids (the kids who are raised in Christian homes and so on) are saved and are doing just fine with the issue of salvation. As a result, we either turn our focus exclusively to the recruiting and the salvation of those who are outside the church; or we pile the Word of God on them, raising little intellectuals who have a lot of head knowledge but often lack the heart or relational knowledge of Jesus Christ that truly saves. What I'm finding is that many of our kids either seem unaware that they need to be more than cultural Christians or have bought into the idea that the more you act like a Christian, the more likely that it is that you are saved.

As the children in our Christian programs grow up, we assume that at some point they have all "made a decision for Jesus", we assume that all they need to move onto their next level in Christianity and to be prepared to enter the world alone is more information. It is important as our children enter adolescence and as they progress on the tightrope of adolescence, which we continue to intellectually challenge them in their faith. My concern as they transition through adolescence in all of its changes and ups and downs, is that we only focus on their intellect and create more head-knowledge. I see many of our students and kids at church and camp who can intellectually defend their faith as good as any Josh McDowell disciple and who can bounce and jump and love worship. They know all of the books of the Bible and can even give you the key words of the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament, but they don't really know Jesus Christ as their personal savior. When I consider these kids, I am reminded of Jesus' rebuke to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in John.

“You search the Scriptures because you believe they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to Me! Yet you refuse to come to Me so that I can give you this eternal life.”<sup>2</sup>

My concern is that many of our church kids are growing up knowing more about the Bible than generations before and than their unchurched peers, but they really don’t know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. By the time they graduate from our programs, they are stuffed with knowledge, but not the filled with the Holy Spirit.

It’s important to note that I’m not arguing that we should get rid of our strong Bible education. My argument is that our task with these good “Christian” kids is to challenge their faith and to cause them to deeply think about the issues of salvation and practical theology rather than create a false sense of security which suggests that their salvation is in their head knowledge. My proposed solution for these students would be for us to challenge them intellectually, spiritually and physically.

It is true that our Christian high school-ers can handle more and deeper information. However, as they grow into the ability to analyze things and think critically about things, I believe that we should be shifting our education into a mode where we teach them to think critically about spiritual things and about the world that they live in. Instead of teaching them the same thing over again—except in more detail, we need to teach them to look at what they’ve learned and what they are experiencing and what is going on in the world around them and to take all those inputs and seek biblical solutions.

Among those good, yet unsaved, “Christian” students, I have also observed Christian high school students who excel in leadership and service and everything that looks Christian, but lack that personal relationship with Jesus Christ that is essential to salvation in Jesus. This group grieves me the most. I have the privilege of working with many of our school’s student leaders. These are among the best and the brightest in our Christian school. I’ve seen their lives up close and they have seen mine. We have talked about the deep and intimate things about life and living. A number of years ago, something dawned on me:

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<sup>2</sup> John 5:39-40, NLT.

I'm not sure that all these students know Jesus Christ as their personal savior. If they were to die today, I don't know if they would go to heaven.

At the time I was reading through the Gospel of Matthew and had arrived at chapter 7. In this chapter, Jesus is wrapping up the Sermon on the Mount and is at a point where He is describing the evidences of one who believes and follows Him. Jesus had just given the illustration of a tree and its fruit and false prophets when He suddenly makes this statement:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.”

Then He said,

“On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.’”<sup>3</sup>

The phrase “I never knew you” really caught my attention. It caused me to reexamine my life as a good Christian kid who grew up to be a good Christian adult, but what really concerned me was whether these good Christian high school student leaders really knew Jesus. Not just head knowledge about Jesus and not just the service of Jesus, but really experientially-relationally knew Jesus.

In Luke 10, the 72 missionaries that Jesus has sent out to go before Him and preach that the Kingdom of Heaven was near, returned to Jesus and were all pumped up about the miraculous things that they had performed on their mission for Him. They said,

“‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name!’ And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.’”<sup>4</sup>

Once again, Jesus announces to His followers that the issue isn't doing amazing things in His name, but the relationship of Him that leads to salvation.

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 7:21-23, ESV.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:17-20, ESV.

It seems to me that many of our church-ed adolescents fall into a trap that says, “I know I’m a Christian...” or “I know I have salvation because I do great things for God”. I think that often we lay that trap for them. That is works salvation and they and we don’t realize it. There is nothing that we do in our good deeds that can ever warrant salvation. These students are much like the others I’ve mentioned in that they need to move beyond the heritage of Christianity and the knowledge of the scriptures to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Yet, it is harder for this group to see that or to acknowledge that because they are the “model Christian teenager”. They have so much to lose if they acknowledge that they aren’t actually saved—and we have much to lose if we point it out. In pointing this out to these students we might lose their leadership, we might lose their friendship and their presence in our youth groups or ministries. We might also have pride to swallow if they take our challenge to their faith and truly accept Jesus Christ as their savior and begin a personal relationship with Him, because we will have to admit that we have allowed students in leadership—even recruited students for leadership—who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We may also face criticism for hounding and harassing our good Christian kids when we should be out saving the lost.

But if our “good Christian kids” are really lost and going to hell, in the long run how much different are they from the drug dealing unchurched kid who has never heard the name of Jesus. One difference is that we are complicit in their eternal death where we can blame someone else for the eternal death of the “heathen”.

The second group of students that I observe among our church-ed kids that still need the Gospel of Jesus Christ, are those who, though they were raised in Christian homes, attended church and Christian school, are now in their high school years doubting or rejecting the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The author of the New Testament book of Jude refers to these types of students when he says “show compassion on those who doubt or are wavering; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear,



hating even the garments stained by the flesh.”<sup>5</sup> I think these verses divide the students that I see in this category into two groups: students who are wavering in their faith and students who have rejected the faith. Regardless if the students are wavering in their faith or have rejected the faith, these students need the Good News of Jesus proclaimed to them.

The Greek word for “wavering” means “to withdraw from, to oppose, to decide, to hesitate, doubt, stagger or waver”.<sup>6</sup> These students are those who have been raised in the Christian faith at home, church and very possibly school, and now, based on what they’ve seen and experienced, doubt their faith or are wavering in their faith in God. Some doubt in the Christian faith or religion they see in their parents and in religious people around them and others of them doubt in God Himself.

Recently a student gave me a quote from Mahatma Gandhi the great passivist leader of India’s struggle against the British Empire. Gandhi once said about Christians, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Incredible! This quote caused a great deal of discussion in one of my Entry Level Bible classes and a great deal of agreement from my students. Interestingly, most of my students in this class were seniors who had grown up at CSCS.

We in the world of Christian education we often say that we are only 1/3 of the equation of raising children. The family and the church are the two primary institutions of God and form the majority of the equation of raising children. However, by the time our mid-adolescents come into high school, have we proactively taught and lived out a Christianity that provokes them to volitionally embrace our the faith or do we promote an aesthetic Christianity that makes them feel good or an intellectual faith that makes them understand and regurgitate Christianity? At worst do we reinforce and display a Christianity that turns them away from Jesus Christ?

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<sup>5</sup> Jude 22 & 23, NLT and ESV.

<sup>6</sup> Strong’s Greek & Hebrew Dictionary: word 1252=diakrino. Database ©1990-93 NavPress Software. Audio: Kirkbride Bible & Technology c 1998.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.quotedb.com/quotes/1905>. accessed on March 20, 2008. QuoteDB. [www.quotedb.com](http://www.quotedb.com).

I recently met with a student who was one of these students who is wavering with his faith. This young man has been diagnosed with clinical depression. A series of events have contributed to his depression and caused him to waver in his faith. As he explained the situation to me, he initially said that he doubted God. But as our conversation progressed, some of his doubts or struggles actually came from the way that he was seeing his parents live out their faith in God. This young man wasn't necessarily questioning God, but how he has seen his parents live out and manipulate their faith in God in a way that he felt was not consistent.

This I believe is a significant issue in the church today. It appears that this generation isn't one who sits by and buys into the words, beliefs and faiths of the adult world without question. They are a generation who analyzes the things they are receiving from their parents, teachers, pastor and politicians and are asking what evidence there is that this is true. I have seen that when they find a dichotomy between what is said or preached and what is done, they often turn away from the message that is being presented.

I've worked with another young man for about four years now whose father was a leader in a large Christian denomination. He is a student leader in our school and also attended the church I attend. His father has a violent temper and his mom has struggled with alcoholism. This young man is sensitive and very loyal in his relationships and his outlook on life. His struggle with how to live out his faith based on what the Bible says versus how he sees it in the lives of his parents and teachers was completely rocked in November 2006 when our church's pastor fell. Our pastor was a nationally renowned evangelical leader. He was articulate, and an excellent teacher of the Word. He accurately and simply drew everyday applications from the Bible that were easy to translate into one's life and he was very personable. This student knew our pastor personally. When the scandal broke in early November of 2006, this young man was devastated and slid into a depression and a funk regarding his faith. In the year that has gone by, he has quit going to our church or any other church or seeking relationship with most Christian adults. Both of these young men are examples of our church kids who do not need to *hear* the Good News that Jesus

Christ brings, but to *see* and *experience* the Good News that Jesus Christ brings lived out in the lives of adults around them.

The second category of students I see mentioned in Jude are those who have rejected the faith and have turned to living in sin and need to be shown compassion and even snatched from the flames of their sin and lost condition. The two young men I mentioned earlier in this section are wavering and doubting. These young men and those like them could easily end up in rejecting the true Good News, the biblical Christian lifestyle, and succumb to a lifestyle of sin. I have seen this repeatedly in my years in youth ministry. The second of these young men has heading down this path.

The students I now speak of are students who have rejected the faith of their parents, churches and school and though they may still be forced to attend religious events, are living Godless lifestyles. Some of these continue the pretense of good Christianity, but others are more authentic with their rejection and live more openly. Those who are involved in ministries to church kids need to continually to be proactive in reaching these students.

Frankly, those who have moved down the Likert Scale from liking Jesus as children (position 6) to not liking Christians and who outright rejected the faith and biblical Christianity are easier to identify. Even though they are many times disciplined because of their choices, they need Christian adults to come alongside of them and continue to boldly live and teach the Good News of Jesus. There are also those who are living the double life. They continue to put on some pretense of Christianity, but are living a Godless life on their own time. We often enable them to do this, by ourselves (leaders and parents) living a double lifestyle and also by creating environments where one has to be perfect, or present themselves as being perfect, to be accepted.

In our evangelism strategy to church kids, we need to first examine our lives before God, confess our sins and make the necessary changes in our lives and ways of going about life to be consistent with the standards of Christ. We also need to determine to live authentically in private and in the public eye of our

students and to be as vulnerable with them as is appropriate. When they see that we strive to live our lives right and yet continue to struggle and overcome in our journey of redemption, it will give them hope and in turn cause many of them to be more open with their struggles.

After we have righted ourselves and have come to live authentically, vulnerably and consistently before our students, we need then ask the Holy Spirit to help us discern those who are wavering and doubting in their faith as well as those who need to be “snatched from the fires” of sin. When the Spirit shows us these kids we need to be open to entering into deeper relationships with them. We do this by getting to know them and truly learning to love them for who they are. Then can we effectively speak into their lives, bind up their wounds, strengthen their weak knees and snatch them out of the fire. When our students see that we are living open and honest lives and that we are truly interested in them, they will be more open to our active participation in their lives, and value our opinions on their lifestyles. We need to be as patient and as bold as the Holy Spirit, waiting for His timing, in dealing with sin and doubt.

In referring back to the scale of responses to evangelism through the perspective of what happens to a Christian school kid that I referenced in the introduction, I wonder how our students digress as they travel through our system as a typical student going to a typical evangelical Christian church and in a typical American Christian family. This sobers and scares me. Do our students move backwards on the scale while they are in our school? in our educational system do we do or say things either through our teaching, lifestyles or attitudes that cause our students to move from children who “neutral” or “in love with Jesus” and cause them to become adolescents who “hate all things Christians”. Or do we reinforce in our children that idea of that they can intellectually acknowledge Jesus or even emotionally love Jesus, but not embrace Jesus as their Lord and live out that embrace by willfully making a decision to live out their belief in their attitudes, values and lifestyles.

### Cautions

The issue of bringing the Gospel to “Christian” kids can be very touchy and controversial from a variety of angles. On one hand, there are those who believe that all our church-ed adolescents are saved and don’t want us to rock the boat and question the students and thereby traumatize them. On the other hand, there are those who believe that expressing concern for and focusing on “Christian” students who may not actually be believers is living in denial of a greater cause of reaching the “truly lost” outside our churches and Christian schools. But more important than adult agendas, there is the perception of our students themselves. For this reason, I want to present some cautions before I present some ideas on reaching these students. Once we realize that there are in fact unsaved kids in our schools, I think that we need to make sure that our reactions are genuine and guarded.

First of all, we need to make sure that we don’t use this insight to set out a crusade to rid our Christian schools of unsaved students. I think that this is not good because it will not be of an eternal benefit in anyone’s life nor will it completely work. If my observations are true, then these kids will continue to come to our schools regardless of the tightness of our admissions policies and interview questions—whether they bluff their way into the school or they grew up from within our system. We also need to make sure that we don’t go out on a crusade to “save” all our kids and in doing so, pressure these kids into further rejecting Jesus or into false decisions made to “get us off their backs”. I believe this will also be of an eternal detriment.

Our approach should be one of quiet wisdom, acknowledging the reality and (thinking very specifically of Christian schools) seeking to create a school environment, classroom environments and relational environments in which our students feel and are safe. Our administrators and our teaching, ministry and counseling staffs need to be ready with the knowledge that not all our students are truly saved and need to be willing to prayerfully, lovingly and relationally work with our students so that they will hear

the Holy Spirit's call and respond. All students should be treated with respect and dignity and given safe opportunities and environments to make choices regarding Jesus Christ

Additionally, we need to remember that our students are mid- to late- adolescents and that their minds are maturing and as part of that process, they should naturally question the beliefs of their parents and teachers. For some that will cause them to question their salvation. We also need to understand that many of our students, like Jesus' disciples, are still in process regarding their faith.

There is a sense that the conversion of our church kids is very much like that of Jesus' disciples. At the beginning of this course we read Richard Peace's book Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve. Peace described how as the disciples progressed in their knowledge of Jesus, they came to understand Him as the Jewish Messiah and the savior of the world.<sup>8</sup> Theirs was not an immediate instantaneous conversion like the Apostle Paul's, but one that took a number of years to develop and come to conclusion. As we process spiritual growth and formation with our Christian adolescents, we would do well to keep this process idea in our minds. It is very possible that many of our teenagers are still in process in their salvation and we need to guide them to their final conclusion by providing environments and relationships in which they can struggle and process with the Jesus they are getting to know better and one day be able to confidently say they understand the His claims and volitionally believe in Him.

Another key to reaching any adolescent in American today is to understand the adolescent situation and the culture in which they live. Today our missionary prep programs emphasis understanding the cultures to which our missionaries in training will be going and learning to present the Truth of the Gospel in a culturally relevant way without distorting the message. The emphasis is many times on "de-westernizing" the Gospel. In our ministry to today's youth and in our efforts to bring the Gospel to them, we need to "de-adult-ize" the Gospel and reframe our presentation of the Gospel and Christian living in a

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<sup>8</sup> Richard V. Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*, p.4.

way that is relevant to their culture without distorting the message. I see lack of cultural relevance as a road block to today's youth listening to the Gospel and to their understanding of the Gospel.

In order to overcome this, we need to be culturally knowledgeable as we go *out* to our unchurched adolescent as well as when we deal with those *in* our churches. In doing so, I believe that our youth pastors, Sunday school teachers, camp workers, non-profit campus club leaders, Christian school teachers and administrators (and even Christian parents) need to become students of today's youth culture. For some this may be a daunting task. But we need to examine the postmodern culture that our students live in and then look at the Gospel again and see where our current teenage culture allows inroads to the Gospel and practical Christian living and take advantage of those cultural inroads. For example, if one characteristic of this generation and culture is the all pervasive presence of the media, then we should ask: how do we use the media and lack of media to speak to and reveal Truth of our students?

As we come to culturally understand our adolescents, we need to not make assumptions about how similar they are to our adolescent years, neither should we condemn them for their differences from our own cultures. Accepting our teenagers where they are and respecting their outlook on life will win the respect of our students and in the end will then give us an audience with them.

We also need to understand the development of the mind, body, emotions, relationships and spirit of today's adolescents. In doing so, we need to examine how and when we teach our subject matter and when and how we present the Gospel to them through the various transitions of adolescence. We need to seize opportunities to present Jesus to them where they are, while they are there. Then we need to move on with them and continue to progressively present Jesus to them in ways that are congruent with their multifaceted growth as adolescents in our postmodern American culture.

Finally, I believe that one of our methods in reaching our church-ed adolescents with the Gospel is that we need to let them choose to reject the Gospel. John Howard Yoder has noted the rejectability of the gospel is ironically what prevents it from becoming mere propaganda. Consequently, the Good News cannot be

fully understood as good news unless the gospel is offered in noncoercive ways<sup>9</sup>. One of the unique parts of the Christian message is that each person needs to deal with the Gospel and claims of Jesus Christ on their own. As we encourage our students to consider Jesus for themselves—independent from their parents or their Christian upbringing, we need to make sure that one of their options is to reject Jesus. In the same way that any unchurched student or member of some remote tribe may chose to reject the saving message of Jesus Christ, so might our church students.

This is a difficult part of any presentation of the Gospel, but especially hard with our students who are raised in Christian homes and churches and schools. We need to make every effort, as I've already presented, to understand our current adolescent culture and to present the Gospel Truth using culturally relevant means; we need to let our students process the Gospel of Jesus Christ and choose Him in their own timing; and we need to incarnationally live out the Gospel of Christ alongside our students. However, when our adolescents arrive at the point where they are ready to make a decision, unfortunately, that decision may be to reject Jesus. This presents a variety of difficulties for us—most of which are more emotionally oriented than anything. We feel like failures as parents, pastors and teachers. And in this, we need to rest in the fact that salvation is ultimately God's deal and that He is more powerful and influential than we are.

In these times it is also important for us to realize that God is a God of second chances. God in His sovereignty, may have different timing in mind. Paul writes to the Corinthians that some plant and others water and even others reap<sup>10</sup>. As difficult as it may be for us, for our teenagers to leave our influence without making a decision to follow Jesus Christ, we may simply be part of the beginning of their process. On the other hand a more painful realization is that each person much choose for himself and we cannot coerce them into a decision for Jesus Christ.

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<sup>9</sup> John Howard Yoder as quoted in *Live to Tell*, p. 49.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:6-9



### **Ideas on Methodology**

As we progress down this path carefully, there are a number of ways that I believe that we can effectively approach presenting the Gospel to our unsaved “Christian” students. These ideas include giving them opportunities to live out the Christian faith, ministering to them in small group and living a life before them as an incarnational messenger of the Gospel.

One way to challenge our students about their beliefs is to get each of them to come to a personal conclusion about the faith of their fathers. We need to challenge them with questions like, do they personally believe in Jesus Christ? Do they personally have a relationship with Jesus Christ? How do they know that? If mom and dad were to abandon Jesus today, would they still follow Jesus on their own?

I also believe that we need to challenge our mid-adolescent students to live out their faith in practical ways in their communities. Their communities include their homes, churches, their schools, their cities, countries and world. It is their interaction with the world outside their bubbles that will cause them to question what they believe and how they go about living out their beliefs. It will cause them to re-examine the claims of Christ, His teachings and the churches’ teachings about Him. As they interact with these various communities, they will find that their personal faith in Jesus Christ is deepened—or in fact actually lacking and needs to be made real.

Another of the first ways I believe that we can challenge our mid-adolescents regarding the genuineness of their faith and the Gospel is to challenge them to live out their faith in practical ways in their communities. These communities mean their homes, churches, their schools, their cities, countries and world. It is their interaction with the world outside their bubbles that will cause them to question what they believe and how they go about living out their beliefs. It will cause them to re-examine the claims of Christ, His teachings and the churches’ teachings about Him. As they interact with these various communities, they will find that their personal faith in Jesus Christ is deepened—or in fact actually lacking and needs to be made real.

In Brad Kallenberg's book *Live to Tell*, he describes how various people process their salvation and come to a conversion point as a result of their participation in biblical Christianity. One example he gave was of a man who was invited to participate in a church's outreach to the poor. In his service to the poor alongside of his Christian friends, he was, with them, being the hands and feet of Jesus to the poor and the needy. This participation in the Christian way was critical in bringing him to accept Jesus Christ as his savior.<sup>11</sup> I believe that a part of our evangelistic witness to our church kids is that we involved them in actively being part of the ministry and being the hands and feet of Jesus in service to others. I have seen this over my years in ministry to Christian students in churches, camps and at school. Students who get involved in ministry or service and participate in living our Jesus' instructions often find themselves faced with the reality of Jesus Christ and following Him and as a result, accept Him as their savior or have their faith in Him confirmed and made real in their lives.

One of my cultural discoveries in my work with "Christian" students—both saved and unsaved—is that they very quickly tend to turn off public Gospel messages. I coordinate chapels at the Christian school that I work at and several things that I've discovered over the last 5 years is that youth pastors, administrators or any other speaker that I bring in to speak must have a known relationship with students as well as make an immediate connection with the students before they will listen to him or her. If our students know that the speaker has relationship with some of their peers, they are more likely to give him an audience.

I was recently debriefing a chapel in one of my guys-only elective Bible classes and we discussed these issues. The guys in this class were very outspoken against a recent speaker who knew a lot about youth culture, but didn't have personal relationship with the students, then, of all things, ended the chapel with an alter call—to which he got a very poor response. The students were frustrated with me for letting that happen, but were also quick to point out that's why they take classes like the one they were in with me.

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<sup>11</sup> Allen Kallenberg, *Live to Tell*, p. 92-94.

The point of such a class in their eyes was that in a smaller setting where relationship was established between them and an adult, issues such as salvation, one's walk with Christ or lack thereof, sexual purity and so on can and should be dealt with. I agree.

Over the years, my students have led me to the point that I realize that real spiritual impact with any student in this generation comes through small groups of students and individual relationships. In these levels of relationship is a safety that allows to these students to know the adult's heart and let their hearts be known. In my 20+ years of youth ministry in and out of the church and in public and private schools, I have become convinced that it is at this level with any adolescent—churched or unchurched, saved or unsaved—that true spiritual impact can happen.

I've done this in a few cases and found it to be tremendously beneficial. In the mid to late '90's I was invited into friendship with a group of teenaged guys who lived in our neighborhood. As the relationship with this group developed I was able to speak into their lives where they were and to provide some stable moral adult influence into a couple of family situations that were completely chaotic and with no Christian background at all. My initial connection was with their leader or main personality—a student named John. Yet as I “ran” with this group and drove them around and we ate together at our house or lifted weights together or even drove them on dates, I was able to develop friendships with them and to speak into their lives as a group. At the request of a couple of guys in the group, we ended up having a Bible study at our house for a few months before the group all moved to different parts of the country. I've been in contact with various members of this group since then. Several of them are doing well for themselves in life and are leading productive stable lives; others I have heard are not doing as well and have pursued the life patterns of their parents, but they all openly welcome me when we run into each other and are quick to talk about their lives.

In a more recent situation, I was invited into a group specifically to lead them in a Bible study. This was somewhat different because some of the rules were different—these friends invited me into the group

to guide them spiritually. The interest levels of the group varied as before, but, once again, positive values were reinforced and for some from unstable families they were able to see a relatively stable Christian adult in action. These students just graduated last spring. I have not had as many chances to personally follow up with them (except through Facebook), but I have an open door to address spiritual and moral issues in their lives. Some I know are prospering in the Lord and developing a deeper relationship with Him and are discipling others.

I believe that it is in these smaller settings that I have met unsaved “Christian” students and have developed my theology of evangelism to “Christian” students. In this last year, whether in my guys-only classes or in my leadership training classes, I have had direct group and personal contact with at least 5 young men and women who don’t know Jesus Christ as their savior. I’ve been able to talk to some and for others to pray and worry about them. I know that my colleague who teaches the girls-only electives encounters similar numbers as well on a yearly basis.

Yet, regardless of apparent benefits from ministering to or evangelizing cluster groups, there seems to be an obvious need for one-on-one relationship with adults in a mid-adolescent’s life. In both of the group ministry situations above, it was an individual relationship that led to the cluster relationships and out of all the guys in those clusters that I was able to have the most impact on, it was those with whom I had the closest relationship. I believe the need for individual relationships with students is paramount.

Finally, I want to take some time at looking at the messenger—youth pastors, teachers and parents in a students’ life as one of the key strategies or methods in reaching these unsaved “Christian” students. In our evangelism class’ last lecture, I was really struck by Clark’s discussion on the messenger of evangelism<sup>12</sup>. Heavily relying on Chafer’s book *True Evangelism: Winning Souls Through Prayer*<sup>13</sup>, Clark pointed out and commented on three things that Chafer mentioned about the messenger of the Gospel of

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<sup>12</sup> [Lecture 9, point VIII: The Messenger](#)

<sup>13</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *True Evangelism: Winning Souls Through Prayer*.

Jesus Christ. These ideas were: suffering with Christ, cleansing the priest and a partnership with God in prayer. These three things speak very strongly to me as one to whom God has recently fanned into the flame a heart for the unsaved Christian kids at in our high school. I think it would be appropriate to also end my paper on a discussion of the messenger of the Gospel. I will also use Chafer's three categories, but in a different order and with some addition thoughts from our reading, lectures and my experiences. I conclude this paper with this, because I believe that it is the messenger and the relationship between the student and the messenger that is key to bringing the Gospel in a close and personal way to the unsaved "Christian" adolescent.

The messenger of the Gospel is to enter into the lives of our unsaved students as an incarnational witness. In our evangelism to these "Christian" kids, I believe that our role is alongside the parents and is to challenge their students in their faith. We need to question them while we teach and talk with them and we need to provide them with experiences that cause them to ask questions. The purpose of the questioning is to test them and cause them to examine their faith as Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians to do, to see if they are in the faith<sup>14</sup>. We should provide our homes, youth groups, Christian camps and Christian schools as environments where they can safely question what they believe and dialogue about their beliefs with a variety of mature Christian adults. The intended result of this processing would be that they become secure in their faith in Jesus Christ so that it will withstand the cultural winds of college and the earthquakes that come as part of living life on this planet.

Often the Gospel is not easy to preach to any of the student groups that I have previously mentioned. For this reason, approaching our students with an understanding that salvation is a process as well as an understanding the adolescent situation and the culture in which they live is a very important starting point. However, it is the relationships that are built between the youth work or teacher and the students that are of paramount importance. By living incarnationally among our students we are able to

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 13:5.

build relationships with our students that enable them to feel safe with us. In that safety, we have to demonstrate that we love them and care for them unconditionally. It is in this relational environment—whether in a small group setting or in a one-on-one setting, that we can strategically and prayerfully approach out students with their need for salvation. It is also in this setting that our students feel free to wrestle with that question and come to conclusions to accept or reject Jesus.

Understanding their culture and the adolescent situation is the beginning of this. However, head knowledge is useless if not put into practice. We need to live among our students. We need to seek opportunities to be in their environment and culture as much as possible. We need to look for chances to see them live their “normal” lives and to interact with them. We can do this by seeking contact time with them. In seeking contact time with our students, we are simply looking for opportunities to make individual contact with our students. This could be showing interest in their extra curricular activities by attending their games or programs or by noticing game scores of athletes or who the participants of the talent show were and recognizing them privately or publicly as is appropriate. It also means that we appropriately let them see us live our lives as we struggle and as we overcome on this road of live. Our students need to see us walking in this life as real human beings. As we become authentic and vulnerable with our students, they then are willing to risk authenticity and vulnerability with us. This allows us to enter into their lives and be Jesus Christ to them.

As we build relationships with our students we are able to speak truth into their lives through our actions and words. It is through these relationships that I have seen students come to understand what a true relationship with Jesus Christ is and accept Him as their Savior or move into an active relationship with Him as the Lord of their lives. It is my observation that school teachers who are Christians have an incredible opportunity to “be Jesus” to their students on a daily basis and through this contact with their students sometimes have an impact that those adults who see them once or twice a week in youth group or at a campus club or a few times a year at camp don’t. All of them are incredibly used by God to impact

students and bring them to Christ, but the school teacher sees their students on a daily basis and the students see the teacher being a Christian on a daily basis. This constant interaction can be incredibly impactful if carefully and intentionally used.

In regards to how this incarnational messenger of the Gospel should live, we, the messengers, are to live before them a life of integrity. Clark and Chafer refer to this as the “cleansing of the priests”<sup>15</sup>. One of the biggest issues of disenchantment of our Christian youth and discussion with my students has been the issue of hypocrisy. We need to live integral lives or lives of integrity!

We as parents must live out our lives of faith at home more thoroughly than we do at work and make sure our claims are consistent with our actions. We as ministers to students (and ministers in general) must reinforce this consistency in our lives and preaching. As educators we have a unique privilege of interacting with students every single day of the week. We collectively as teachers and staff and co-curricular coaches and sponsors see our mid-adolescents 8 to 10 hours a day. As Christian educators, we have not only a huge privilege, but a massive responsibility. I believe that the Apostle James wasn’t only writing to pastors and preachers when he wrote “not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness”<sup>16</sup>, but also to we educators who are Christians. With our diverse and extensive contact time with these students, we have the opportunity to visually, verbally and experientially reinforce the Gospel of Jesus Christ to our students and the ability to help them process their faith and receive Jesus as their own Savior and Lord. On the other hand, we can visually, verbally and experientially reinforce the gospel of a hypocritical, inauthentic, irrelevant religion of past generations that not only is irrelevant to their lives, but in many cases manipulative and harmful to them, their spirits and their life interests.

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<sup>15</sup> Lecture 9, point VIII: The Messenger, B. Cleansing the Priest.

<sup>16</sup> James 3.1

When Clark mentioned “suffering with Christ”<sup>17</sup> as one of his points, my first thought was Philippians 3:10 & 11 that mentions “the fellowship of His suffering” as one of the aspects of “knowing Christ”. I appreciated Clark’s take on American Christian’s view of suffering as sometimes being “persecuted for being a jerk” as we share the Gospel. He also mentioned the “suffering that is part of the human condition” which I believe is part of our living incarnationally and authentically is to appropriately enter into suffering with our students—whether it be our own suffering or our students’ suffering. However, the part of suffering with Christ that captured me the most is Jesus’ brokenness for the lost.

Jesus wept for Jerusalem. How often do we cry for the lost because we understand their plight—their destination as well as the results of the Christ-less journey they may follow? During Clark’s lecture, the thought struck me: Have I’ve been moved to concern for our unsaved “Christian” kids? How much have I wept the students who’s storied I’ve related in my paper or for others? This bothers me: have I seen these young men or the guys in my “entry level class” as targets of ministry or as souls who are headed for hell? As much as we need programmatic solutions, I need Jesus’ heart for these lost ones! Regardless of how American Christianity or even more specifically Christian education or yes, even our school, has driven them from Christ, am I willing to be moved—will I allow myself to be moved to tears as Jesus was over Jerusalem?

I began my paper comparing our unsaved Christian kids to those in First Century Jerusalem, seems this comes full circle. Jesus prayed for First Century Jerusalem and wept over her and her people knowing how they’d reject Him. Am I simply intellectually spurred to thought regarding our modern day Jerusalem-ites and their eternal plight or am I moved to respond to the prompting of the Spirit to pray and weep over our Christian kids who are unsaved? The question also moves me to Clark and Chafer’s last point about the messenger of the Gospel and of all of our evangelistic methodology: the messenger must partner with God in prayer. This is a fitting conclusion to a paper laying out the need, cautions and

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<sup>17</sup> [Lecture 9, point VIII: The Messenger, A. Suffering with Christ.](#)



methodology of reaching unsaved “Christian” adolescents. Given the delicacy and the discretion that is needed in identifying these students and in ministering among them, more than ever we need heart of the Father and the guidance the Holy Spirit as we move among our students, live with integrity and know when to speak and when to simply live.

As the Spirit identifies these unsaved Christian kids to me through my observations or their revelations, what do I do with this information? Do I create a statistic and write papers on it or do I weep and pray for these kids? Do I consistently take my list of students to the Throne of Grace and intercede for them? And finally, do I ask for opportunities to let them see the Gospel lived out in my life and in the lives of my teaching colleagues at school and my youth pastor colleagues in their churches and their parents at home?

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