

Ready Writer // Pastor Wayne Hardy

AN HONEST ASSESSMENT OF YOUTH METHODS

Are we juvenilizing American Christianity?

One of my passions in life comes as a result of believing that America needs independent Baptist churches. Really badly. Basically, America needs New Testament Christianity, and my own study of Scripture leads to me to believe that independent Baptist churches—warts and all—come closer to that than any other type of church. Therefore, I have a passion that we not simply regurgitate every argument or methodology that comes along, which leaves me with an aversion to being like everyone else. I don't think being different is in itself a virtue. I've watched that lead to some strange methodology. But, the word "holy" means "other than" and is not an attribute we are free to avoid. As I see signs of many independent Baptist churches becoming less distinguishable from mainstream churches, red flags go up.

The typical mainstream church hardly seems like the answer to America's condition; so, independent Baptist churches becoming like *them* should be a concern, not a goal. Too many independent Baptist churches are allowing evangelicals to do their thinking for them. The last *Baptist Times* issue looked at how many ideas are being labeled as creativity that really aren't. What many young men are trying to convince others is creative innovation really isn't. Their innovation is nothing more than imitation. And what is being imitated comes from a philosophy that is dumbing down American Christianity, while leading independent Baptists to lose some of their distinctions. Creativity can be refreshing and helpful, but people must be honest if their creativity is really imitation. It would be wise to look carefully at what you are imitating in order to get a realistic picture of what it produces.

Nowhere is this more evident than in youth work. I don't know how young Timothy was, but Paul challenged him to not let his youth leave him open to criticism or to excuse spiritual immaturity (I Timothy 4:12). Yet, church youth ministry is where some seem not only to tolerate immaturity but also to employ methods that reinforce keeping that immaturity. Yes, we all know that millennials are renowned for resisting adulthood and putting off maturity as long as possible. And, yes, our mandate is to produce disciples, as opposed to converting the culture. But, if the culture promotes

extending youthful immaturity even longer, shouldn't our goal of making disciples include an aversion to methods that seem to reinforce this phenomenon? Not because we are anti-culture, but because we are pro-Scripture.

The Gain/Loss Principle is not new to avid readers of the *Baptist Times*. Profit is not determined by gain alone. You have to first calculate the loss, then subtract it from the gain to see if there is any profit. Many wisely attempt to understand any potential loss before embarking on some new methodology, while others label this consideration "haggling over the little things." It is often stated like this: "While people are dying and going to Hell, we are majoring on the minors!" Is that an accurate description of someone wanting seriously to consider any true benefits before jumping in? Paul said there were things that, while they might be lawful, they may not be expedient or profitable (I Corinthians 6:12). That means it is every believer's responsibility to do more than just consider the scriptural "lawfulness" of a potential practice or methodology. We are obliged to consider how expedient or profitable it might be, as well.

When someone expresses concern about adopting some new or unproven methodology, the person often becomes an easy target of the undiscerning preacher who simply repeats the tired mantra of "stop majoring on the minors!" Those emotionally-charged, biblically-weak aphorisms make no more contribution to our effectiveness than the men out there making mountains out of molehills. While both are ditches, neither ditch should stop us from our responsibility of using the timeless Book in our hands to see the trends behind the trends (identifying which trait of human nature is at the root of each new cultural expression). Taking time to address these concerns has a way of making us wise enough to steer clear of creating a Frankenstein that gets out of control because we didn't consider expediency along with lawfulness.

Before you write me off as trying to limit everyone's freedom or crying wolf, I would ask you to read Thomas E. Bergler's *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* first. He is far from an independent Baptist, being a professor of an evangelical liberal arts college and senior associate editor for *The Journal of Youth Ministry*. However, his research is thorough as he traces the most

distinctive and dangerous characteristics of today's churches back to youth work of the 1950s. As America came through the Great Depression, World War II, and then dealt with rising Communism's strategic use of youth in their countries, public focus shifted to a protection of our youth at a level previously unexperienced. Out of this concern arose numerous organizations that believed a strong religious foundation was essential to youth's protection and future. The Catholics formed the Catholic Youth Organization. The Methodists created the Methodist Youth Fellowship. The African-American churches used the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference to stir their youth to political activism. The evangelicals birthed Youth for Christ.

That passion to reach teenagers fostered organizations that were free from the boundaries of local church traditions, thus increasing freedom toward new methodologies. They applied popular secular music styles to religious lyrics, toned down the doctrine, increased the emotional appeal, created comfortability with a more casual setting, all while making the whole experience more entertainment-laced. Lest we think these tactics are simply the result of a natural evolution of the last 20 years, Bergler argues it's actually more the result of an intentional strategy to reach a group because they were not where adults were cognitively. He explains that while some were cautioning about adopting elements of the "devil's music," "the most innovative leaders in YFC believed it was easy enough to separate youth culture styles from their ideological content... Unfortunately their success came at some cost. By assuming that teen tastes in music and spirituality were essentially neutral, they allowed youth culture the power to reshape Christian faith. While some of these changes were beneficial, others would create a chronic immaturity among American Christians. The sixties revealed once and for all that adolescent Christianity would shape the future of the churches one way or the other."

Bergler also recounts how evangelicals using Youth for Christ and Young Life "aggressively adapted their practices to teenage tastes," including "long hair, rock music, and rebellion of the youth counterculture as a new

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conservative Protestant way to follow Jesus.” The results? “In the name of evangelizing teenagers, the leaders of parachurch youth ministries experimented freely with ways of being Christian that would create an even more immature evangelical church.” No one accuses him of being a raving fundamentalist lunatic when his research reveals that small groups were a result of youth group’s attempts to avoid the idea of “indoctrination.”

“Small groups do help people learn about their faith.” Let’s call that the gain. “But sometimes this way of learning encourages people to think that their opinions are every bit as important as what the Bible or the church teaches. The discussion format may sometimes reinforce the idea that all theological beliefs are a matter of personal preference.” I suppose that might be considered a loss. Has it been profitable, then? He links other methodologies to long-term impact, as well, such as adult youth leaders adapting to the appearance of the youth, the use of popular film clips, the casual environment, and many others.

Bergler’s argument is so well documented that you have to respect his suggestion for youth pastors to ask themselves, “In what ways would the rest of the church be improved and in what ways would it be impoverished if it looked exactly like my youth ministry?” Why doesn’t the author sound foolish when he thinks the next logical statement is, “They need to learn that cultural forms are not neutral”? Or this, “When Youth for Christ leaders discussed the merits of aggressive use of adolescent music styles, they recognized that they were potentially changing how people experienced their faith. But in the end, they decided the powerful appeal to youth justified the potential costs.” What about those costs? This evangelical’s whole premise is this: “Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages. It begins with the praiseworthy goal

of adapting the faith to appeal to the young. But it sometime ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith.”

Let’s be honest here. If an independent Baptist preacher stood up at one of our national meetings and proposed that some of these methodologies were responsible for these “immature versions of the faith” so prevalent today, he would be ripped

“Is it possible to reach youth (the gain) without creating immature faith (the loss)?”

for majoring on the minors, and young pastors everywhere would tweet him off as a legalist. Guess how the evangelicals responded? They awarded Bergler the Christianity Today Book Award, Award of Merit for being so insightful and thorough in his research.

I have no patience for “stuck-in-the-past” pastors who get up in the pulpit and foam at the mouth about everything they are personally against. They do independent Baptists no favors. But we need to wake up and recognize that there is a philosophy being promoted in every independent Baptist circle (more in some than others) that is using tired, worn-out catch-phrases to libel those who get in the way of their pragmatic success by suggesting we apply the Gain/Loss Principle before blindly moving forward. Bergler has a lesson for independent Baptists. *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* teaches us that the wisest thinkers might be the ones who’ve learned that all that glitters is not gold. Is it possible to reach youth (the gain) without creating immature faith (the loss)? America needs a group somewhere willing to wrestle with that balance, and I believe that group should be independent Baptists. Our viability does not depend upon our innovation. It depends upon our ability to honestly consider how to produce much gain without having to regret our contribution to the losses, like those Bergler documents.

I find it almost humorous that my desire to study the expediency (not the lawfulness) of video screens draws cries of “majoring on the minors” from close independent Baptist brothers, while men like Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves To Death*), Nicholas Carr (*The Shallows*), and David Sax (*The Revenge of Analog*) become my allies because they are more diligent about considering the loss side of the equation. We live in interesting times, don’t we? 

KEEPING YOUNG PEOPLE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

Special Article // Bro. Lynn Schuyler

Some in Christian circles think that times have changed and that we need to rethink our approach when dealing with our teens. They point to the droves of young people who are walking away from the church rather than carrying on the torch. I believe that this type of reasoning is the problem rather than the solution. For years, I have had a motto, which I stole from somebody, that goes like this: “The way you win them is the way you have to keep them.” The ministries wringing their hands because of the mass exodus of young people can more than likely look back at what got them where they are today. For the most part, they thought the tried-and-true ways to grab a young person’s heart needed to be replaced with trendier ideas. They thought they were being relevant while abandoning what made them relevant—God’s Word, His Spirit, and personal holiness. I don’t think that we need to look for a new way to win the hearts and minds of young people. What we need is to go back to what worked. May I encourage the youth pastors out there on the front line? Stay the course. Be what God wants you to be, and in time you will find God doing some amazing things through you that affect the young people around you. Allow me to encourage you to make sure that you have these three spiritual qualities in your life.

Be Passionate

If you aren’t sold out, they won’t be. This isn’t a personality thing; it is a spirituality thing. I’m not talking about a volume thing, but rather an integrity thing. We have all been told that a teen can spot a fake quicker than anyone because teens are so adept at being fake. Be real. There is a following among Christianity that promotes the word “authentic.” I’m not against that word, but what they mean by authentic I would call unfiltered. Teens don’t need to know of every struggle you have in your life, but they must sense in you a sincere desire to serve and please God. If that is true of you, it won’t happen overnight. It will happen over time. You will find teens following your example. The type of leader God used to reach you was the same kind who reached me. They pointed me to God not just by what they said but by what they showed. That type of leader will reach your young people. Be true to God’s Word personally and in your ministry. Be passionate. Be real.

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