Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church

CHAPTER 1: BECOMING CHRISTIAN-ISH

The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) revealed that American young people are fine with religious faith, but it doesn’t concern them very much, and rarely lasts after they graduate high school. Since teens’ spirituality mirrors remarkably that of the adults who love them, lackadaisical faith is not a young people’s issue, but ours. The solution lies not in beefing up youth programs but in modeling the type of mature, passionate faith we want our young people to have.

The NSYR also showed that American churches are turning to a “do-good, feel-good” spirituality that adheres to the American dream of consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism. They have become “almost Christian” in theology and practice, obeying church commands without loving God or neighbor. Young people are being formed into an imposter faith that poses as Christianity but espouses self-fulfillment and self-actualization, not the self-giving love of Jesus.

We have successfully convinced teens that religious participation is important for morality, making nice people, and is a good, well-rounded thing to do, but not necessary for an integrated life. We have been less able to convey faith to young people—a desire for God and a love for others, confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God’s purpose and hope.

A New Game in Town

Three out of four American teenagers claim to be Christians, but only half consider it very important, though they could not say how nor describe the difference it made to them personally. Less than half actually practice their faith as a regular part of their lives. We struggle mightily when it comes to handing faith to young people.

The answer may simply be that most youth ministry is not done by youth
ministers. We have known that youth groups provide moral formation and social ties, but they seem less effective at instilling consequential faith. That is more likely to take root in families, congregations, and mentoring relationships where they can see what faithful lives look like.

It appears that churches are not teaching young people badly. To the contrary, we are doing a great job of teaching what we really believe—that God requires little and that church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people. What if teens are not rejecting true Christianity, but merely accepting the only version of Christianity they have ever experienced?

The NSYR Project

Here are five findings of the NSYR that are most important for the remainder of this book:

*Most American teenager have a positive view of religion but don’t give it much thought.* Almost all say that religion benefits individuals or society, but they just don’t care about it that much. Then tend to view God as a therapist or butler—someone who meets their needs and helps them feel good.

*Most teens mirror their parents’ faith.* Parents matter most when it comes to the religious formation of their children. “Parents get what they are religiously” the study concluded.

*Teens don’t know how to express their faith nor use it to interpret their world.* While teens are incredibly articulate about other subjects, they are incredibly not so about faith, mainly because no one had taught them how to talk about faith or provided opportunities to practice using it.

*A minority of teens (8%) say that faith is making a difference in their lives.* They describe themselves as “highly devoted”, attend services, feel close to God, read Scripture, pray, etc. On the whole, these teens are doing “much better in life.” They do well in school, have positive relationships, and have a positive outlook on life.

*Many teens adhere to an outlook called “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD).* The NSYR coined the term MTD to describe the bland version of Christianity in many churches and warned that MTD is overtaking Christianity as the dominant religion in the US. MTD’s beliefs: (a) A god exists who created and watches over the earth. (b) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair. (c) The goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. (d) God is not involved in life except when I need him to resolve a problem. (e) Good people go to heaven when they die.

The main thrust of this book is to address how the church can better prepare young people steeped in MTD for a life of true and consequential Christian faith. Getting teens to come to church more often is not the answer. A more faithful church is. If teens mirror the faith of the adults in their lives, then nurturing teen faith means investing in the faith of parents and congregations.

**CHAPTER 2: THE TRIUMPH OF THE “CULT OF NICE”**

Most congregations’ central problem is not teen rebellion, but rather their benign “blah-ness” when it comes to Christianity. They equate being a Christian with being nice, doing the right thing, and help-
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ing other people. Apart from being nice, religion does not influence their decisions or behaviors. Religion simply helps them feel better about themselves and provides comfort in hard times.

In addition to this self-fulfillment, MTD is aimed at making dialogue easier with people who may not share their views. It’s watered-down, benign nature eases interpersonal relationships by helping them stick to shared, religionless ideas about God. MTD establishes common ground between friends and eases potential tensions, a crucial relational goal in early adolescence. Belief in the distinctives of the true Christian faith—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—could easily offend a friend and are gladly jettisoned.

**What’s Wrong With Nice?**

The Bible has much to say about kindness and compassion, but says nothing at all about being nice. MTD’s superficial pleasantness pales besides Christianity’s teaching on radical hospitality. Too often, a church’s tendency to “be nice to guests” grows out of its desire to be liked and approved, not from a desire to share God’s love with strangers. The fruit of true faith is holiness, not niceness, but holy people tend to make others uncomfortable.

Again, the NSYR tells us that teens practice MTD because *it’s what we’ve taught them in church*. We have received exactly what we have asked of them: assent, not conviction; compliance, not faith. We have lost sight of the missional, sacrificial, inconvenient nature of the Christian faith. We are not here for ourselves. There may be little in a bland faith to which teens object, but there is even less to which they will be devoted. The cult of nice is much safer. God is friendly and predictable, offering little and asking even less. We need to ask ourselves, “Do we practice the kind of faith we want our children to have?”

Some seek to blame teens’ superficial Christianity on youth ministry, not the struggles of the whole congregation. The answer, as the reasoning goes, is new methods that compete with postmodern lifestyles. The NSYR researchers suggest four external factors that may interfere with adolescent faith commitments: (a) *Inadequate supply.* Some congregations provide few resources for nurturing young faith. (b) *Failure to appropriate.* Some youth choose to remain uninvolved, so they do not benefit from what is offered. (c) *Disruptive events.* Some youth may be influenced by divorce, abuse, etc. (d) *Competing influences.* Sports, school, media can overwhelm Christian influences.

**The Exceptions: Highly Devoted Teenagers**

The Study’s highly devoted teens (the 8%) consistently managed to avoid MTD. They regularly practiced their faith and found meaning and self-integration from knowing they belonged to God. These youth readily talked about their faith, portraying God as loving and active in the world. They talked about their faith communities as spiritually and relationally significant. They sensed a God-given purpose for their lives.

These four theological points—a creed to believe, a community to belong to, a call to live out, and a hope to hold onto—were remarkably evident in these devoted teenagers. In the following chapters we will examine how these diverse and faithful teens are able to resist Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

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Highly devoted youth were found to be more compassionate, more interested in racial equality and justice, less likely to lie or cheat, less likely to be moral relativists, and more likely to have parents who love, accept, and understand them. But of all the teens that the NSYR considered—both Christian and not—Mormon young people were tops in religious devotion, overall well-being, and in integration of faith and life.

**Conditioning Faith: Learning from Latter-Day Saints**

We’re not implying that all is well with Mormon youth, but compared to other young people, they’re more knowledgeable of and more committed to their faith, and have more resulting positive social outcomes. For example, Mormons were less likely to drink, smoke, have sex, or engage in other risky behavior. This “good kid” mentality is not just from impressing rules on them. Mormon youth see their way of life modeled in both their families and their congregations. They are significantly more likely than their peers to hold similar religious beliefs as their parents, pray with their parents, attend religious services, and talk about religious matters with their families. They regularly have family devotions and home meetings.

This intense religious socialization comes at great sacrifice, though. More than half of Mormon teens get up at 5am, five days a week, for four years of high school, for “seminary”, a daily religious class taught by an adult. In addition, Mormon males are strongly encouraged to complete a year or two of missionary service before finishing college. All of these demanding activities show them that Mormonism is a way of life, and that it affects every choice they make. So how do Mormon teens apply the earlier mentioned “four theological points” of devoted teens?

**A creed to believe.** Most Mormon teens describe God as very close and personal. These highly devoted teens use father imagery for God. But they also describe God as powerful. Distinctively, they believe that humans take on divine power as they progress toward the “celestial kingdom.”

**A community to belong.** The most important community in Mormon life is the family. Parents view the faith formation of their children as part of their mission. Congregations serve as extended family, and separating church and family is inconceivable. This intimate connection greatly increases the number of adults that teens can turn to for help and support, thereby also increasing religious importance. Mormon teens also report higher participation rates in church—things such as “made a presentation in church” or “took part in the decision making process at church.”

**A call to live out.** For Mormon young people, the purpose of faith formation is mission. They are vastly more likely than peers to share their faith, participate in missions, participate in youth groups, and speak publicly about their faith at a religious meeting. Sharing one’s religious faith is simply a part of Mormon life.

**A hope to hold on to.** Few religious communities have as well-developed eschatologies as Mormons. Ultimate salvation or “exaltation” (moving toward godhood) is accomplished in the celestial kingdom as a result of specific actions and rituals. This hope is the unifying goal, and very purpose of life itself.
Non-Mormons will undoubtedly raise an eyebrow at Mormon views on God, community, vocation, and eschatology. This discussion is offered simply as a window into how Mormon teens use faith-supporting variables to attain a consequential faith. Chief among these variables is the role of parents. Since teens mirror their parents faith, and since Mormons are known for close-knit and religious families, it makes sense that it would result in religious devotion among their teens. Finally, teens are more likely to be devoted if their closest friends are such, another hallmark of Mormon communities.

The Christian community, likewise, has access to the tools of creed, community, call, and hope. These are the tools through which God enters us and we enter the world. They are also the tools that will help our teens resist Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.

We spend a lot of time searching for programs, curriculum, and methods that will somehow produce mature teens, as if human effort can produce mature faith. In the end, cultural and theological tools can support, but not produce, consequential faith. Only the presence of the Holy Spirit gives effectiveness to the tools we use.

The Gospel’s Missionary Impulse

Jesus leaves his disciple’s with an astonishing command: “As the Father has sent me, so send I you” (John 20:21). Developing Christian identity in our youth involves following Jesus into the world, not just amassing church activities. A missionary is one who is “sent,” especially across boundaries. In the Incarnation, Jesus crossed every human boundary imaginable. Jesus sends the church in the same manner, across cultural boundaries to be translators of God’s love. The missionary nature of the church rules out the agenda of personal fulfillment of MTD. Sacrificial love, so foreign to the average congregation, must be a central part of the story we proclaim. The gospel’s central message—that God loves us enough to die for us—severs self-serving spiritualities like MTD. Christians should love others to this degree. The missionary impulse calls us to rethink the nature of the church and the relationship we expect young people to have with Christianity.

Christ and Cultural Tools

For highly devoted teens, faith is not just a matter of identity, affiliation, or cognitive belief. It is activated through attitudes, relationships, symbols, stories, and practices. These teens approach faith as a way of life that practices self-giving, not just a system of beliefs.

Claiming a creed. Creeds are articulated beliefs about God. Do teens describe a God who is worth following? In contrast to the butler/therapist view of God that dominates MTD, highly devoted teenagers hold parent imagery of God that keeps both His love and power intact. The God who took on humanity and wants to save us, is the same God who conquers sin and death.

Belonging to a community. A sense of belonging in a congregation is a more accurate predictor of adult religious involvement than regular church attendance. Caring communities that are warm and nurturing provide young people with both spiritual and interpersonal support. This involves available
adults, mutual regard, boundaries, and shard long-term goals. As important as positive peer relationships are in community to reinforce identity, adults who befriend teens are equally important. Highly devoted teens are much more likely to have caring adults to talk to and who give them encouragement. They are also significantly more likely to have talked to a pastor or youth pastor about a personal problem.

**Pursuing a purpose.** Highly devoted teens recognize that their decisions have consequences for others, and that the church has a moral responsibility to look after the well-being of others. They specifically sought ways to respond to Christ’s command to sacrifice on behalf of others. Many talked of discovering God’s direction for their lives, associating future careers with a “calling.” Compared to their peers, these teens did not just think about their future in terms of what the *wanted*. They considered themselves bound to contribute to God’s purpose in the world.

**Having hope.** Whereas MTD teens were obsessed with “feeling happy” in the now, highly devoted Christian teens expressed a confidence and a hope that the world (and their lives) were going somewhere good, because God is actively involved in time and has the future under control. They were far more likely to think about and plan for the future and to express a sense of meaning to life.

**Faith That Bears Fruit: Marks of Christian Maturity**

If we are to meaningfully discuss “highly devoted teens,” how do we assess Christian maturity in young people? A common approach, as used by the *Exemplary Youth Ministry Study of 2004*, is to identify faith attributes. The EYMS identified 44 “assets” (theological beliefs, ministry qualities, and congregational practices) and concluded that mature Christian young people seek out spiritual growth, are keenly aware of God, act out of their faith commitment, make their faith a way of life, live lives of service, reach out to others in need, exercise moral responsibility, speak publicly about their faith, and have a positive, hopeful spirit about life.

Whereas these markers are helpful in pointing to Christian maturity and identity, a truly mature faith bears fruit as it is multiplied in the lives of others. Jesus said, “My father is glorified in this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples” (Jn 15:8).

Likewise, the EYMS described how congregations that house highly devoted teens are different than those colonized by MTD. Such congregations are more likely to have a full-time youth minister, offer a variety of teen programs and opportunities for youth to participate in religious practice and leadership. In addition, these churches portray God as living and active, place a high value on Scripture, clearly explain their church’s mission, emphasize spiritual growth and vocation, and promote outreach.

Young people will not develop meaningful faith by simply being absorbed into a Christian subculture. But as our creed, community, call, and hope are used to shine Christ’s light into dark places, such missional imagination can and will result in consequential Christian faith.

**CHAPTER 5: MISSIONAL IMAGINATIONS—WE ARE NOT HERE FOR OURSELVES**

Today it is not only possible to think about the church apart from the mission of God, it is the norm,
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even for young people who call themselves Christian. Once the church was known for extravagant grace, radical hospitality, and complete devotion to Jesus. Now we are happy if people just get along and we can preserve our institution. The church’s identity is revealed in our faithfulness to the mission of God. A “nonmissional” church is not a church in any sense.

Mission as Incarnation

The point of God’s Incarnation was mission, and it created the pattern for the church’s missional way of life. God now enters the world through people like us. His extravagant love transforms us into bearers of that love for others. The early church took for granted that embodying God’s love was the way through which the Holy Spirit worked in the world. Living as “little Christs,” as Luther put it, made the word mission unnecessary. Church implied mission. It was impossible to think of one without the other.

Mission for Post-Christendom

It is no longer adequate to think of mission in terms of the “where” of geography and locality. We must be with people “how” they are as well as where they are. This means connecting with people’s culture, values, and lifestyle. It means transmitting the gospel across generations as well as cultures. Youth ministry has already begun to make this shift, realizing that Postmodernity and popular culture are the natural habitats of young people. Youth ministers have long seen themselves as missionaries who must learn the language and rituals of the teen world in order to make the gospel accessible to them. The youth ministry literature overwhelmingly suggests incarnational approaches to youth. Just as God came alongside us in the incarnation, we best represent Christ to young people by coming alongside them. For some, this strategy easily becomes pointing to ourselves rather than Jesus or into efforts to get teens to our youth groups to increase numbers.

Mission is Not a Trip

Ask most teens what they mean by mission and they will tell you about their trip to Mexico last summer to build homes in a poor community. Although youth ministry is most ripe for missional leanings, they unwittingly perpetuate weak understandings of mission and witness. Mission is not a trip or youth activity. Mission is the nature and identity of the church. God doesn’t send a few teens out in the church van on mission. He sends the whole church. Young people are participants in God’s mission rather than the target of ours.

To participate in God’s sending of Jesus, youth ministry must reckon with both the coming and sending principles of the Incarnation. Christ makes his home among us, becomes ones of us, but then radically challenges us out of our comfort zones to incarnate his love among others.

Missional Imagination: An Antidote to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

MTD is the paltry leftover of a church that has lost its missional impulse. Missional communities do not exist to perpetuate themselves. They be the church, imitating Christ in their cultural context. But without God’s self-giving love revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our culture of self-fulfillment seeps into congregations and robs our missional zeal.

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CHAPTER 6: PARENTS MATTER MOST—THE ART OF TRANSLATION

Every church has its share of pseudo-Christian youth activities done with good intentions in mind: candy sales, ski trips, martial arts teams, Youth Sundays, etc. These provide opportunities for teenagers to feel good about themselves, for the church to feel good about its teenagers, or to celebrate middle-class values of achievement and self-expression. No wonder young people have trouble distinguishing the teachings of Jesus from American culture—not even congregations can tell them apart.

The NSYR is clear on this point: the best way for youth to become more serious about religious faith is for parents to become more serious about theirs. Teen religious formation is then supplemented by congregational faith expression—the second most important variable in adolescent religiosity. The problem is, many adults lack confidence in talking about, much less teaching, their own faith. How to we translate our faith with conviction when we’re not sure we’re convinced ourselves?

Nurturing a Bilingual Faith

Postmodernism requires the church to function as a bilingual community, able to converse in both the traditions of the church and the narrative of the dominant culture. Our faith language reinforces our identity as God’s people, gives us tools to critique the culture’s view of reality, and reminds us that we don’t have to give in to the culture’s demands. At the same time, we need a public language to critique our own faith conversations and to keep us from becoming too insulated from the larger culture.

The modern media and its marketers are immersing teens in the official language of commercialism. Unless the church nurtures its own conversation that reminds young people who they are, who they belong to, why they are here, and where their hope lies, then the culture’s view of reality will be the only one that teens have.

Catechesis as Translation

Catechesis translates Christian tradition into a lived faith that forms the basis of teens’ religious identity. Translating Scripture into the common language of the hearers has long been the most basic of missional practices. Yet, the purpose of instruction is to elicit trust in the person of Jesus, not indoctrinate in religious ideas. Translation requires communities that live out the faith before teens and adults who can connect faith traditions to daily life. Unfortunately, many parents feel inadequate here and either abandon religious instruction altogether or turn the job over to church “experts.”

Adults as Cultural Interpreters: From Teaching to Trusting

From the earliest days of the church, faith instruction involved guides (catechists) who walked beside new Christians to interpret faith traditions and to introduce the novice to a new way of life. As far back as the Shema (Deut 6:4-7), parents are instructed to show their children faith, to teach it, talk about it, embody it with their lives. The emphasis of Christian formation is to be trust born out of love, not mere belief in propositions. Desire awakens faith, not information. In the end, awakening a love for God depends on how much we show them that we love God. Jesus does not ask parents and congregations to be theological experts; he asks us to follow him, to love him, and to let it show.
Four Guidelines for Translating Faith With Young People

*The best translators are people, not programs.* When we do faith formation through programs (simply taking our kid to youth group), their view of the gospel is often stunted and distorted. Catechesis does require instruction and information, but the message of the Incarnation is *love* embodied in people.

*The best translators are bilingual.* Being fluent in the language of the culture does not mean dumbing down the gospel. It means building a hospitable place for the gospel using tools that are familiar. The central act of Christianity is God moving toward us—not the other way around—to make the inaccessible accessible. In addition, teens no longer see themselves as consumers of culture, but as creators of it. By utilizing the arts, media, technology, creative expression and active participation we communicate that their contributions are welcome and appreciated.

*The best translators invoke imagination.* God’s story is full of poetry, stories, and songs to appeal to the imagination and resist the culture’s view of reality. The gospel or “good news” is literally the “good story”, a Word that has the power to capture and transform human imagination. Using metaphors and illustrations is second nature to many youth ministers. This helps teens create a bridge between the language of the culture and the language of the church.

*Translation is dangerous.* If we are successful at translating the gospel to the younger generation, it will threaten the people in charge. We are putting the gospel in the hands of people new to it. What if they get excited? What if they live the gospel as they see fit? What if they ignite the church? Many seek to domesticate youthful passions, out of fear of being overtaken by them. But translation means *sharing Power with* them and they may use this Power for unforeseen purposes.

If we say we want to translate the gospel to youth, this is what we are saying: we are willing to put the very power of the gospel into the hands of teenagers, people who don’t view culture as we do, don’t worship the way we do, don’t hear God the way we do, and do not “do church” the way we do. But what if they truly love God and imitate Christ? What if they embody his self-giving love to the world? What if they get their hands on the gospel? Then where will the church be?

**CHAPTER 7: GOING VIRAL FOR JESUS—THE ART OF TESTIMONY**

Most American teenagers have enormous difficulty putting faith into words. Even among youth who call themselves Christian, language about Jesus seems foreign or even irrelevant. The language of faith has been replaced by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned place in heaven. It’s unclear if the youth we interviewed were unfamiliar with religious language or uncomfortable using it in public. Some youth thought talking about faith at school was illegal.

**The Importance of Conversational Faith**

Families and congregations that encourage practices where teens must put religious convictions into words are more likely to have highly devoted young people. Words and faith seem to go together. Christian teens who referred to their faith frequently and interpreted their lives in religious terms also has a religious vocabulary ready to use.
It might be tempting to say that teens are naturally inarticulate. Yet, they are remarkably talkative about nonreligious subjects—school, friends, media, sports, etc. A more likely explanation of the absence of religious vocabularies in teens is simply the absence of theological conversations in the worlds young people inhabit—media, school, and even families and congregations. *Since youth do not hear a language of faith, they do not speak one.*

When meaningful religious resources are absent, teens turn to popular culture, family tradition, civil religion, and democratic tolerance to describe reality. Unless the church offers an alternate story of God in Jesus Christ, teens will naturally assume that the self-serving caricatures of Christianity they are offered by the media are correct.

**The Necessity of Conversation About Jesus**

If talking about faith is something Christian teens rarely do, Talking about Jesus is something they almost never do, which has crippling effects on Christian identity. Conversational Christianity requires Jesus-talk, not just God-talk in order to reinforce the church’s unique understanding of faith. Conversation is the most important means for maintaining reality. If Jesus does not get talked about, he soon fades from teenagers’ awareness and no longer influences how they put together meaning. Teens who have trouble talking about Jesus also seem to have trouble forming a connection with Him. Teens that don’t have a language for Christ are unlikely to find an identity in Him. Talking about Jesus actually deepens our identity as people who follow Him while simultaneously extending Christ’s call to others. Whether it be reciting a creed, reading Scripture, singing a song, preaching a sermon, giving a testimony, or simply confessing faith—these are all forms of faith formation used since the early church.

**A Case for Conversational Christianity**

Conversational Christianity, like conversational French, requires immersion in a culture where the language is spoken. Learning the community’s language is key to teens’ full participation in the Christian community. Often the activities we assign youth do not prepare them for full participation in Christian life. We play games and call it “fellowship.” We ask teens to set up chairs and call it “service.” We have a Youth Sunday and call it “worship.” None of these activities are inherently misguided, but the fact that most churches can do worship, fellowship, and service very well without youth shows that their participation in the community is not necessary. As teens become more proficient in the church’s language and practices, they become more central to the life and mission of the congregation.

**The Power of Testimony**

If conversational Christianity is necessary for confessing Christian identity to God and others, then families and congregations must tell the story to teens and help them tell it for themselves. Testimony means to give witness, to tell what you have seen. Early Christians could not keep quiet about someone who loved them so much to die for them. They ran from the tomb to proclaim that Christ is risen. Christ now sends us into the world to proclaim our love, both for God and other people. But before teens can learn the art of testimony, they need to become comfortable speaking Christian conversationally. We prepare teens for this through practices in the context of the community. Here are two:

*Spiritual apprenticeship.* The earliest form of Christian discipleship was apprenticeship. Young people...
learn to speak Christian from other experienced Christians. Most teens have few opportunities to observe the grammar, vocabularies, habits, and practices of mature Christians. The overwhelming majority of teens are open to an adult taking them under their wing. In fact, the most highly devoted teens had the highest number of adults available for support. Of course, apprenticeship presupposes that the adults involved are able to articulate their faith, not a guarantee by any means.

**Faith Immersion.** If apprenticeships allow young people to learn the language of discipleship in relationship with mature Christians, immersion experiences offer laboratories where teens can practice these language skills in a protected environment. These experiences are only as good as the guidance before and debriefing after. The most common immersions are camps, retreats, conferences, and mission trips. Ideally, participating in a congregation offers a similar immersion, but most congregations have difficulty separating themselves from the dominant culture. What these experiences offer is concentrated practice in the words and deeds of testimony, and helps them rehearse long-term commitments. Temporary experiences do not replace the long faith journeys accompanied by families and congregations. Unless a language is reinforced daily, we eventually lose it.

**Chapter 8: Hanging Loose—The Art of Detachment**

Detachment means disentangling ourselves from whatever distracts us from Jesus, with the effect of freedom from lesser allegiances so we can consider new possibilities that Christ presents for us. It is a necessary and ongoing practice of discipleship, especially for those of us who live in a culture where every desire can be met by the purchase of amusement and entertainment. Detachment allows us to reconsider God’s action in us and in the world. It brings growth and change as we are thrust into situations where none of our usual cultural tools work.

**Reflexivity**

Some refer to detachment as *reflexivity*, a kind of self-awareness that allows us to view ourselves and others from a new point of view as we watch God work. The intellectual curiosity and creative engagement that allows certain young people to consider themselves, others, and God from alternate points of view has been shown to be the very characteristic that keeps teens from unfortunate identity crises when entering college. Less than 15% of teens were found to have this characteristic. A capacity for critical self-awareness must be intentionally cultivated.

**Religious Experience and the American Teenager**

The NSYR defined religious experience as a commitment to live one’s life for God, an experience of powerful worship, an answered prayer or sense of divine guidance, or experiencing or witnessing a miracle. Four out of five teens reported having such a religious experience. But having a religious experience and choosing to relate to others as someone changed by that experience are two different things. Until we have experienced God’s engulfing presence with us, the relationship between faith and other aspects of life will remain unclear. Critical reflection before, during, and after such experiences is essential. Without reflection, the meaning and power behind religious experiences can be lost. Many Christians have found assistance in reflection through the guidance of contemplative mentors who understand the need to be apart from society and detached from self-interest.
Leaving to Find Ourselves

The inescapability of participatory media has made detachment a more complicated endeavor. While Christians have used prayer and the sacraments to encourage reflexivity, pilgrimage is the practice most commonly associated with detachment. Physically leaving—traveling to a holy site or retreat space—provides opportunities to follow Jesus apart from society for reflection. Youth ministry’s obsession with action for Jesus may keep teens from learning how to be present with Jesus. If we don’t provide reflexive space for teens, we dismiss the importance of detachment in helping them see themselves, the church, and the world from Christ’s point of view instead of ours.

Teaching Toward Transformation: Tools for Faithful Reflexivity

Transformative learning changes not just what the learner knows; it also changes the learner. Knowing more is never the point; knowing God is the point. Teaching toward transformation typically involves four distinct moments.

A disorienting dilemma. Many have noted the importance of conflict and troubling encounters in transformative learning. Dilemmas make our existing ways of responding inadequate. Many youth reported that their first reflexive experience was in encountering suffering or loss. But dilemmas can be as ordinary as changing computers or changing jobs.

Critical self-reflection. The uncertainty of the new situation launches a period of self-reflection to look for new resources to solve the dilemma. Christian tradition has long used prayer and contemplation, as represented in the Ignatian examen, to aid the process of reflexive transformation.

Discourse that puts insights into words. Reflexivity requires more than reflection; it requires a community to confirm new insights. Unless we return from detachment to families and congregations who reinforce our new-found perspectives, the experience of God is likely to dissipate.

Acting on these insights. The goal of transformative learning is a change of both heart and mind, what most Christians call conversion. Transformation is an ongoing process, not a one-shot deal. God, not us, turns young people around as he invites our young people to reconsider their identity in relationship to Himself and others.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism serves an adaptive purpose in American society, which means it is probably here to stay. One interviewee told me that MTD is the way the church survives in America, by equipping people to be happy enough. The success narrative in American culture is alive and well thanks largely to well-meaning adults who have taught teens that the church is valuable as long as they get something out of it. MTD would probably be less insidious if we did not go around calling it Christian. If we recognized it as another faith altogether, we could step outside of it and address it with the church’s missional imagination. No such luck. Having a highly devoted faith must mean giving up our comfortable, generic Christianity and return to the messianic, redemptive mission set before us by the earliest followers of Jesus.

CHAPTER 9: MAKE NO SMALL PLANS—A CASE FOR HOPE
Between Doubt and Hope

Given the current state of affairs, I have found myself giving in to doubt, struggling to see Christ in the church. And yet, the church is where Christ found me and where he continues to call me to serve. So at the end of this project, I have arrived at only two conclusions with confidence: When it comes to lifeless Christianity, teenagers are not the problem; The church is the problem. Second, the church also has the solution.

I asked dozens of youth pastors “What keeps you in this business? What gives you enough hope to keep working with young people?” The slew of answers were inspiring: an almost irrational sense of calling, an irrational faith and confidence in teenagers, an unexplainable joy, and the privilege of making an eternal difference in the life of even a single teenager. This is what separates hope from doubt—the ability to stand in the known and look expectantly into the unknown.

The Strange Hope in the National Study of Youth and Religion

The best news about MTD is that American young people participate in it without surrendering to it. They don’t buy it as faith; They buy into it, considering it worthy of little more than compliance and hardly worth radical commitment. Youth and parents are correct if they think that MTD will prepare them better for success in American society than Christianity will. Those who want to succeed in American life and “fit in” will find that being theologically bland helps immeasurably. Many churches have overcompensated, setting the bar low for religious commitment of any kind. Yet a missional imagination inspired by the cross requires us to set our hopes on Jesus Christ, to think big, to realize that we are not here for ourselves, that we have been sent as ambassadors of Christ’s self-giving love.

What Have We Learned?

In these pages, we have identified two resources to help us address MTD with consequential faith: highly devoted teenagers and highly devoted congregations, both of which are linked directly to highly devoted parents. Some congregations, like those identified in the Exemplary Youth Ministry study, do encourage teens to live their lives for God. What can we learn from communities whose young people demonstrate consequential faith?

It can be done. If Mormons can foster such faith in teens, so can we. We determine the degree to which our congregations choose to imitate Christ and participate in the divine ethic of self-giving rather than self-fulfillment.

Religious formation is not an accident. Teens reporting a high degree of devotion did not get that way on their own. Their faith is a legacy of parents and congregations that have invested time, energy, and love in them and where the religious faith of adults inspires the faith of their children.

The tools associated with consequential faith are available in every Christian community. These tools—a creed, a community, a call, and a hope—may be more obvious in congregations that highlight God’s personal and powerful nature. But these tools don’t insure consequential faith. Only the Holy Spirit empowers the church to resist self-focused spiritualities with the self-giving love of Jesus Christ.

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Consequential faith has risks. Congregations are far more reluctant to ask for a faith commitment worth dying for from teens than teens are willing to respond to such a call. Churches also differ in the kinds of faith commitments they are willing to tolerate in young people. We must be willing to focus on who Christ is calling them to become as he sends them into the world on his behalf.

We are called to participate in the purpose of a sending God. The arts of translation, testimony, and detachment are just a few of the ways Christians participate in God’s missional creativity. The most important thing the church can do to cultivate a missional worldview in young people is to develop one as a church, reclaiming our call to follow Christ into the world as envoys of his self-giving love.

In considering the NSYR study, Kenda Dean is relentless in her assertion that the spirituality of our teens is merely a reflection of the spirituality of adults, particularly parents. This speaks bucket-loads about how we should be doing youth ministry from more of a family systems approach.

The NSYR study is to be credited for giving name to the religion-of-our-age, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It’s so tempting to just see these folks as nice Christian people. We need to be prepared to ask our teens specific questions about sin, Jesus, the crucifixion, and resurrection to help them flesh out what it really means to be a Christian.

Kenda has a wonderful writing style. It is rich, deeply theological, and almost poetic at times. I think this summary does a good job of presenting her main ideas, but it certainly misses the theological richness of Dean’s point of view. In particular, I didn’t not include the many statistics she presents to summarize the NSYR, nor the many individual teens and congregations she presents as examples of living the principles of consequential faith. If you want to see flesh-and-blood examples of combating MTD, pick up the book.

There are two indices in the back that, alone, are worth the price of the book. One presents a ten-point summary of the full NSYR study; the other lists all 44 “congregational assets” from the Exemplary Youth Ministry study—characteristics of churches that produce teenagers with vibrant faith. If you have not seen this information before or can’t find it online, I strongly suggest you get the book for this information alone!

Blessings to you as you seek to develop consequential faith in your teens!