The postmodern mind-set of our young people presents an incredible challenge for their leaders. These youth look beyond truth alone to the outworking of the truth in the lives of the people around them. As a result, not only do we find a challenge for the way we live out our lives, but we also find an even greater challenge for the role we play as leaders. We cannot ignore the underlying culture within our sphere of influence. We find that this culture makes an impact on the faith of our young people.

This generation is ready to make a difference, and yet never has the loss of our youth been greater. In 2007, LifeWay Research released the findings of the first highly credible numbers related to the loss of youth from the church. This study concluded that 70 percent of 23- to 30-year-olds stopped going to church regularly for a minimum of a year between ages 18 and 22. It is apparent to many in Christian education that we have not solved the problem.

Over the past two years, I have had the privilege of interacting with more than 800 high school students about their faith and the reasons so many leave the church. To understand the opportunity buried within the challenge, we must first understand and value the perspective of our youth. I found this very difficult at first because it was so easy to dismiss their reasons for leaving the church as excuses. Yet as I listened, I was confronted with the pervasiveness of the issues our youth cited. This pervasiveness presented me with a new set of challenges that I believe we must face as educators, parents, and pastors if we are going to develop lifelong disciples.

God used the group exercises and individual interviews to break my heart for our youth. I was forced to confront the genuineness of our youth and admit that they have valid reasons for leaving the church. A vast majority of the reasons that students cited for leaving were not tied to individual faith issues but stemmed from the dysfunction within the culture of their Christian community. The dysfunction creates a contradiction between the truth they are being taught and the reality of what they are experiencing, discouraging their hearts.

Our teaching has affected their minds, but the disconnect between their minds and their hearts is abundantly clear. What we are seeing is the logical outcome of hearts burdened by communities that load students with many spiritual expectations, resulting in a sense of failure on the part of youth. Our youth have cited 30 community issues for leaving. Of those issues, 3 concern me greatly: (1) sin avoidance—“all we hear about is avoiding sin, yet I am sinning and no one is helping me deal with the guilt”; (2) being controlled—“my existence is managed by others’ rules and expectations”; and (3) hypocrisy—“most of the students around me are living a dual life.”

Sin avoidance. Clearly we want our youth to avoid the scars of sin. The challenge for us comes in understanding that when they hear our messages to avoid sin, they often perceive them as “sin intolerance.” The more we tell them that they can avoid sin while they find themselves struggling with it, the more they feel like failures and conclude that they must hide their sin from parents and leaders.

Expectations. Often, people think of expectations as positive motivators. We asked 200 students to list the expectations—coming from their church, parents, or school—that they needed to meet in order to consider themselves “good Christians.” They listed 55 expectations, illustrating that they do not believe that the yoke of Jesus is easy, nor His burden light. Instead, they see direct contradictions between some spoken expectations, such as “avoid sinful people” and “share your faith with your non-Christian friends.” And they see contradictions between what they are told is expected of them and what they see in the Bible, such as “no parties” versus times when Jesus and His disciples went to parties.
**Dual life.** As we followed up on hypocrisies, asking youth if it existed among them, they said, “Oh yeah!” The students defined the hypocrisy they witnessed as “leading an intentionally deceptive dual life”—in other words, “knowing what to say and how to act in front of their parents and leaders in order to look good and keep the peace, but when away from these influences, living a totally different life.” They indicated that they work together to get around our rules and restrictions effectively. In these sessions, students repeatedly reported that they believed that 55 percent to 95 percent of the students in their youth group or Christian school were leading an intentionally deceptive dual life.

Together these factors dull their hearts. Sending underclassmen into this culture is a recipe for failure because the majority of students around them are leading a dual life and are often reveling in the victory of besting the unjust, unbiblical, or unrealistic rules and expectations. This victory prevents our students from learning from the negatives attached to these experiences, causing them to return again and again, amassing guilt that they do not understand how to handle and which they will not reveal for fear of consequences. Thus, their hearts grow numb.

The absence of an effective Christian culture—one that encourages and allows our youth to fail and to address guilt—forces our youth to walk in the darkness, a situation that Scripture indicates leads to blindness and confusion. We often hear that we learn more from our failures than our successes. I have found this to be true in my spiritual life as well. Yet often our fear of potential harm and a desire to protect students alter our culture. Our ministries teach grace, but our leadership culture often finds failure and sin unacceptable. We design church and school cultures to protect our youth, but far too often those cultures take on the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of students as we become the ones who convict them of sin with our teaching, guide them by our watchful eyes, and attempt to motivate them through consequences. Yet as I look at how Christ transformed the disciples, I see that He did so by replacing the Law’s focus on external motivation through required sacrifice for failure, with targeting the heart and internal motivation through love and grace for His disciples.

The greatest growth and changes I have seen in the lives of youth have come when they felt convicted by God and understood the love, acceptance, and genuine encouragement they would receive from Him if they voluntarily walked into the light. They did so because there was no fear of consequences; they had been taught that the consequence was the weight on their chest of guilt placed on their hearts by God. They had been taught and had witnessed that through the love, acceptance, and grace of God they would receive freedom from the burden of the guilt and have the power for change. In that mind-set, they walked into the light and sought encouragement and help.

It is vital to remember that soon our students will be on their own, no longer motivated by our potential consequences. Instead, they will need to be internally motivated to live their lives in the light. Our failure to teach in a way that results in internal motivation and to offer such an environment where spiritual growth can occur sets our students up to walk away from the church and handicaps them in their walk with the Lord for years to come. Yes, sin carries its own consequences, but I find no example of a time when Jesus inflicted earthly consequences as a source of motivation for His disciples. Rather, He talked of heavenly rewards and eternal consequences.

Having seen so many numb hearts and broken spirits, and having heard too many tragic stories, I am convinced that we as leaders must reexamine the statement by Jesus about His yoke being easy and His burden light. We must understand that the disciples did not jump up and say they were ready to go heal the sick, feed the poor, and speak of Him, but rather likely responded that they did not know enough, were not good enough, and could not do it. Jesus must have met that response with a tremendous amount of reassurance and encouragement, saying that they could do it and that He was with them—rather than focusing them on their sin, which He would erase on the cross. When the disciples scattered in fear upon the arrest of Jesus and when Peter denied Him three times, did Jesus return with consequences and scorn for the disciples? Did He remove Peter as the rock of the church? Or rather, did Jesus quietly encourage them, meet with them, and then issue these “failed disciples” the Great Commission? This is the type of leader who motivates me. How about you?

**Reference**


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