

Seriousness in Children and Teens

By Jim Elliff

It is increasingly obvious that children and young people in many evangelical churches are anything but serious about Christ. There are notable exceptions, but in many churches a cursory look at the behavioral signals put out by the young people reveal a profound disinterest. On the one hand there is a sort of giddiness and silliness by some who believe that church is there only to provide them a place for enjoying friends and impressing the opposite sex. On the other hand, a complete boredom or disdain for worship and the Word is seen in their dull eyes and passive participation. This should grieve us.

A theological misunderstanding is to be blamed for much of this. We have failed to understand that children and young people are not God-lovers until the Spirit changes them. They are dead to God. Our attempts at getting these young people to “pray the prayer” when they were small have not necessarily made them children of God. Their behavior belies the true state of their hearts.



God has said that the only hope for them, therefore, is the regenerating work of the Spirit in the context of the preaching of the Word (James 1:18). However, our inadequate view of depravity and the inability of man has led us to resort instead to a greater confidence in entertainment to reach them and a minimizing of the use of the Word.

If God has ordained that the Word and the Spirit are the only hope for these kids, then we should not avoid the means God has promised to bless. Our Bible studies for young people should be more intense and our prayers more fervent for the Spirit’s intervention. Children and young people ought to be sitting with their parents in worship services in order to avoid the distraction of other friends. As much as it is possible, we should not encourage young children to draw and play during the preaching of the Word since we are training listeners, not idle-minded pew sitters. And parents must show in their own enthusiasm their love and need for the Word. Pastors should seek to preach convictionally and refer often to the need of the children and teens to obey the Scriptures. And churches should weep for their children in corporate prayer. The answer is not in providing more fun things to do for the children. The answer is in the Word and the Spirit!

If a more intense and prayerful approach to our young people does not reach them, or if many refuse to participate because there is not enough entertainment to appeal to their love of pleasure, then we should not be confused. Our children are like all the rest of the world in their attitude about God (Eph. 2:1-3). They run from the light, just as Jesus said (Jn. 3:19-21).

Why must we assume that every great youth group has to be large and fun, when Jesus himself demonstrated that truth alienates and godly fellowship makes the unregenerate uncomfortable? Isn’t John 15:19 just as true of youth groups as it is of the missionaries in Muslim countries? “If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.”

If you are inclined to be angry at someone in leadership of your church because your child does not have fun in church, then first consider if the source of the problem is in the heart of your child. Please don’t make the criteria for judging the success of a church’s efforts at reaching children and teens the fun-value of the meetings. God did not command the church to provide entertainment for your kids. And if you must speak out about it at all, attempt to increase, rather than to decrease the intensity and effectiveness of prayer and Bible study as a means to reach the hearts of the children.

If you chose to do otherwise, you could be working against the Spirit.

Nothing is more appealing, on the other side of this issue, than those young people who are intent upon following God at any cost. The history of revival is filled with stories of such youth and children who demonstrated their faith by their deeds. In some cases, it was the youth who were the first recipients of the grace of God in revival. Somehow I cannot imagine that our excessive emphasis on entertainment for the youth promotes the concept of authentic revival. And, frankly, I am saddened by church leaders who persist in believing otherwise.

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