

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CRITICAL MASS

Part XI: The Youth Ministry

by Gary North

And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children, and their children's children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever (Ezek. 37:25).

This promise was transferred to the Church when God divorced Israel in A.D. 70. This transfer had been prophesied by Christ: "Therefore say I unto you, The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt. 21:43). Today, "the land" is not the tiny nation of Israel, located in Palestine. The land is the whole world. The sign of God's favor in the land is that a man will see his grandchildren living under David their prince. Those expositors who pride themselves on the commitment to literalism have a problem: David is dead. He will not be back before the final resurrection. So, this passage must be interpreted figuratively. The David spoken of is the son of David, Jesus Christ.

Success and Inheritance

A visible mark of God's favor is the inheritance. "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov. 13:22). The inheritance should pass only to those who are covenant-keepers. According to this proverb, these righteous heirs should be a man's grandchildren. That is, his grandchildren should be inside the Church as members in good standing.

This indicates that a visible mark of covenantal success in life is the success of one's children in bringing up righteous children. The transfer of covenantal commitment from parent to child is crowned with success: the adult offspring's successful transfer of this same commitment to his or her children. Put another way, the seal of God's covenantal blessing comes when the grandparent can transfer his assets to his children, knowing that they, in turn, will pass an inheritance on to another covenant-keeping generation. "Children's children are the crown of old men; and the glory of children are their fathers" (Prov. 17:6).

This is the fifth point of the biblical covenant model: **succession**. The positive sanction (point four) that God brings to a covenant-keeping man's lifetime of effort is righteous grandchildren who are capable of inheriting his wealth. The negative sanction is either no inheritance to leave or unrighteous grandchildren to inherit whatever legacy remains.

I think of the father of Friedrich Engels. He was a successful manufacturer. He was a faithful pietistic Protestant. He hired his son to run the family's Manchester plant, which the son did successfully for decades, hating every day of it. But the son used his income to finance Karl Marx,

who had squandered his father's inheritance plus another large fortune that one of his followers had left to him. After Marx's death in 1883, Engels inherited Marx's position as the intellectual founder of Communism. Their combined legacies were the deaths of some sixty million Russians, at least that many Chinese, and all those people who died as victims of Communism in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America, 1945-89.

The blessing of God is the transfer of one's legacy to grandchildren who will extend it by building up the kingdom of God in history. The marks of this are the oaths of baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is why the appearance of great-grandchildren is such a comfort. If they are baptized, the great-grandparent can have a great deal of confidence that the grandchildren will not squander the legacy. "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children" (Psa. 103:17).

The Mark of Ecclesiastical Success

Common grace is a marvelous gift. Unbelievers acknowledge that what God says in His written revelation is true. When unbelievers visit a church, what do they look for? A ministry for children. They know what they need: a stable, godly environment for their children. The Church has recognized this for well over a century. This is why the Sunday School was invented: to win the parents through their children.

When God-fearing newcomers look at a church, they also ask themselves: "Does this church have a successful youth ministry?" They are usually more interested in a successful youth ministry than in theologically rigorous preaching. They understand that the mark of successful preaching is **faithful doing** on the part of listeners. If the local church's youth ministry is small and stagnant, then the preaching has failed to motivate the members to get busy with the youth program. The preaching has failed to emphasize point five of the covenant.

A youth ministry may be small but growing. This offers hope. We are not to despise the day of small beginnings (Zech. 4:10). But the quickest test of the success of a church's program is the size of its youth ministry. If it is small, the second test is the speed of growth. If it is both small and several years old, the congregation has a problem. If the youth ministry is shrinking, the congregation has a crisis.

I am speaking here of visible signs. It does no good to have a growing youth ministry if the participants know nothing of the Christian faith. But the mark of very small conservative churches is the same as the mark of formerly large mainline liberal churches: shrinking membership in

their youth ministries. The first type of church stays small; the second gets small.

The "In" Place to Be

When teenagers in a community decide that a particular congregation is "where the action is," that congregation possesses the best single indicator that it has passed the point of positive critical mass. It is now in the expansion phase. The main question is: What is the spiritual content of its youth program? Why has its youth group become the "in" place to be? If the group is marked by a service mentality, then it is growing for the right reasons — so long as it is not a **dating service** mentality. If it is growing because it is the socially respectable place to be rather than the socially relevant place to be, the fad may soon pass. The date-seekers will eventually move on to greener pastures.

The secret of long-term success in a youth ministry is the same as the secret of long-term success in the overall church ministry: enthusiastic members who are actively inviting outsiders to attend. Enthusiasm is contagious. So is despair. No one wants to remain on board a visibly sinking ship. This is why there is such a phenomenon as negative critical mass: **the exodus effect**. People decide to get out early.

Parents are subject to pressures from their teenagers. If a teenager starts going to another church's youth ministry, the parents may soon follow. If teenagers are happy somewhere else, their enthusiasm is contagious in the family. If the teenagers can offer good spiritual reasons why the other youth group is successful, their parents may be persuaded to transfer membership.

The Marriage Factor

"You marry the person who's most available when you're most vulnerable." I don't remember any of the history that Professor Keith Berwick taught me thirty years ago, but I remember that observation. Every Christian parent is looking ahead to the marriage of his children. Will they be in the company of godly people when their vulnerability peaks? The parent cannot control much in the way of environment after the child goes away to college, but he should do his best in advance to see to it that his children are placed in a Christian environment.

Problem: American Protestants in the Reformed tradition have no theologically safe academic environment. There are a few so-called Calvinist colleges, but the secular textbooks assigned in these colleges reveal just how theologically unsafe these places really are. The Reformed parent knows that if the child leaves home to attend college, and the child marries someone from the campus, the in-law is likely to be a Baptist. Maybe a Church of Christ member. Possibly even a Pentecostal. ("Dear God: Make him at least a charismatic!") The reality is this: those parents who hold rigorous theologies will generally gain sons-in-law and daughters-in-law who hold a much less rigorous theology. The grandchildren will likely attend churches that proclaim a less judicially rigorous gospel.

American Protestant culture is Baptist. The denominational U.S. map published by the Glenmary Research Center in Atlanta reveals this truth in black and white (actually, purple and blue: purple for Baptists, blue for Catholics). Non-Baptists try to resist this with their summer family camps. This single week a year (or every other year) is supposed to offset the public school culture, or the funda-

mentalist day school culture, not to mention the television culture. Lutherans try to resist all this with their schools. They seem to do a better job than most others do. But if you are not a Baptist in this country, you might as well be, culturally speaking, unless you are a liberal Catholic. American culture belongs to others.

So, the reality is this: if still single, your child is probably going to marry a Baptist, or someone who thinks like a Baptist. ("No creed but Jesus; no law but love!") The question is: How grounded in your worldview is your child? Not very, if you have sent your child to a fundamentalist day school or have used a fundamentalist home school curriculum. What you believe is probably not taught, K-12, in the curriculum your child has been forced to ingest. They are fed a Baptist high school curriculum (at best); next, they are sent to a Baptist college (at best); finally, they may attend a secular humanist graduate school. (Except for seminary training, Baptist education ends at the B.A., except when secularized.)

We Must Do More

We immerse our children in a Baptist culture in order to keep them from being immersed in a secular culture. The division of labor is inescapable. So is the reality of the market. Those who produce curriculum materials go where the money is. The money is in watered-down Baptist-American education: Billy Graham's theology and Roger Williams' political theory. It takes an act of will on our part to overcome this in our children before they leave home, let alone after four years of college.

If we fail to begin early enough, we must work very hard later on. We must face reality early: ours has been a pietist-humanist culture since the late eighteenth century. To begin to change it, we must be patient and diligent. We must accurately assess our environment. We must plan ahead in order to keep our inheritance from winding up in the hands of either the pietists or the secularists. Very few Reformed Christians do this. They do not recognize the magnitude of the problem early enough. They have no exclusive curriculum to offset this pressure. At best, they have a Sunday School curriculum that is broadly non-pietistic, but rarely will it address specific real-world problems. That is to say, it is operationally pietistic. So, we must do more. And less. We must offer our children an alternative to humanism, yet protect them institutionally by means of pietism. We cannot bootstrap a home-made alternative: church, school, and culture. Our dependence on the division of labor is mandatory. The Baptists control most Christian markets.

Conclusion

A major factor in selecting a congregation to join should be its youth program. If the congregation's youth program cannot retain the commitment of the heirs of the covenant, then the transfer of the inheritance to grandchildren with weak theologies is very likely, despite the theological rigor of today's sermons. By their fruits ye shall know them. This includes sermons. If the fruit is a tiny youth program, there is something wrong with the congregation's overall worship. The church is not yet successful, as defined by the Bible: inheritance. The congregation has no long-term future. When choosing between two congregations of equal theological commitment, decide in terms of the respective youth programs.

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