

What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church

Week of July 29, 2013

That a youth ministry "teaches the Bible" does not necessarily mean it teaches the gospel. Many mistake the gospel with moralism---being a good person, reading your Bible, or opening the door for the elderly in order to earn God's favor. But the gospel is altogether different.

This is a problem across the youth ministry landscape. It's not because teenagers and youth leaders have misunderstood the church's teaching of historical-confessional, gospel-infused Christianity. It's a problem in youth ministry wherever the American church has not preached Christ crucified and has catered to a pragmatic, entertainment-driven, and numbers-oriented model of church growth.

According to sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, most American teenagers believe in something dubbed "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD). Within this MTD "religion," God is a cosmic therapist and divine butler, ready to help out when needed. He exists but really isn't a part of our lives. We are supposed to be "good people," but each person must find what's right for him or her. Good people will go to heaven, and we shouldn't be stifled by organized religion where somebody tells us what we should do or what we should believe.

MTD isn't a religion like Islam or Buddhism, but rather a melting-pot belief among American teenagers. Historic distinctions between denominations like Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists are not as important to teens because they see their Christian faith as just one aspect of their lives like anything else---be it sports, friends, school, or family. Its preacher is American entitlement and its sermon is a me-centered message about a distant, therapeutic god who wants teens to be good and happy.

Alternative to Entertainment

I sat in a Waffle House one early morning, talking with a dad who had caught his son looking at pornography. His family had just transferred from a nearby church that spent through the roof creating the most spectacular show in church---complete with fog machines, strobe lights, and professional musicians writing Christian lyrics to Lady Gaga songs. In between the dueling DJs, this family was starved for the Bread of Life. But despite their burnout over endless entertainment, they didn't know an alternative.

"I just think you need more games," the dad told me across a very syrupy waffle. "If you had more games and funny skits, then my son would have been at church, not looking at porn." I was shocked! Here was a man who had left a church over too much entertainment and now wanted it back. I realized that MTD wasn't just a problem in the culture of American teenagers, but in the culture of the American church. The larger influence of a success-over-faithfulness model of American Christianity is having devastating effects on youth ministry.

Kenda Creasy Dean, in *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, argues that American teenagers have bought into MTD, not because they have misunderstood what the church has taught them, but precisely because it is what the church has taught them. She writes:

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has little to do with God or a sense of divine mission in the world. It offers comfort, bolsters self-esteem, helps solve problems, and lubricates interpersonal relationships by encouraging people to do good, feel good, and keep God at arm's length.

When this self-help theology is combined with a sola-boot-strapia sermon from TBN, we start having teens singing, "God Is Watching Us from a Distance" while---at the same time---wondering why Jesus isn't fixing their parents' marriage or their problems with cutting...

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