

## The White Horse Inn The State of Youth Ministry

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A troubling trend is changing the face of Christianity in the West. Christians simply are not reproducing, i.e. they are not producing Christian children. They are not passing on the faith to the next generation. This is part of a process that sociologists call “secularization.”

Brief overview of the problem...

The mainline Protestant denominations are continuing to experience decline. Forty years ago 2/3 American adults were Mainline Protestant, but today it's less than 8% compared with Roman Catholics that make up 22% adults.

According to Pew Research, the number of those who checked the “no religion” box was 7% five years ago but now it's 15%. More than 1/3 of 18-22 year olds said they don't identify with any religion.

Today Evangelical Protestantism is on the decline. The Southern Baptist Convention reports that it's currently losing 70-80% of its youth after their Freshman year in college. 70% of youth group teens stop going to church within two years after their high school graduation. A more recent Southern Baptist report found that 88% of those raised in evangelical homes leave church by age 18. Various studies since have ranged from 60 – 90%.

There are several plausible explanations for this decline, but one glaring problem is the diet young people are getting even in more conservative contexts. According to the Barna Group, 63% of U.S. teens don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God; 58% believe all faiths teach equally valid truths; 51% don't believe Jesus rose from the dead; 68% don't believe in the existence of the Holy Spirit.

Starting in 2000, Christian Smith and his team started surveying over 3000 American teenagers and continued to follow them into their twenties. They discovered that a majority of American teens, including those raised in evangelical Christian homes and churches, are incredibly inarticulate about their faith. The actual religion among them is “Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism.”

Princeton University's Robert Wuthnow warns – “Unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt.”

Emory University study, led by Elizabeth Cory, concluded - “teens want to be challenged. They want their tough questions taken on. We think they want cake, but they actually want steak and potatoes, and we keep giving them cake. The gospel of niceness can’t teach kids how to confront tragedy. It can’t bear the weight of deeper questions: Why are my parents getting a divorce? Why did my best friend commit suicide? Why can’t I get the job I was promised if I was a good kid?”

David Kinneman of the Barna Group concludes that “much of the ministry to teenagers in the country needs an overhaul. Not because churches fail to attract significant numbers of young people, but because so much of those efforts are not creating a sustainable faith beyond high school....”

Can youth ministry be reformed? Or is the answer to just get rid of it all together?

### **Interview with Christian Smith, Notre Dame Sociology Professor and Director of The National Study of Youth and Religion**

Smith and his team surveyed more than 3000 teen/parent pairs representing the entire nation.

Most of the teens had almost nothing to say about what they believe. The actual de facto belief system of a majority of teens is what he coined “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” God orders the world; God wants people to be nice to each other; the purpose in life is to be fulfilled and happy; there is a heaven, and good people go there.

“Catechism” is generally a dirty word – “we don’t want to teach them catechism or anything like that!” People want something more subjective “authentic, personal” approach to faith. Sociologically this is incredibly naïve. A lot of young people are not being given a lot of content to accept or reject.

Our society creates a big structural gap between teenagers and adults so they are increasingly isolated from adults. A lot of adults are scared of teens; they don’t know how to relate to them; they don’t know how to teach them; and they don’t want to look uncool. We either ignore the teens or we soft pedal it with values discussions. In a variety of ways, the parents are more interested in being cool with the teens rather than informing them.

What’s your view of the current state of youth ministry? They operate within a history of youth ministry that started after WW2 – an approach to youth ministry that was to separate the generations with the goal of having fun and maybe teach the Bible somehow. This model is seriously in question now, but there’s no clear solution ...the future direction will likely be more holistic, inter-generational, bring in the parents and the entire pastoral staff in. There is a stepping back and rethinking the entire youth ministry model.

“Sociologically, it’s absolutely inescapable that the most important pastoral influence in a young person’s life is going to be their family. Whether the parents want that responsibility or

not, that's just the way things work sociologically. The most important pastor a teenager is going to have is their mom and their dad....The family is really the center of where all this happens. So parents need to understand that functionally they're serving this role, and it's not going to be just their youth minister or their Sunday School teacher that's going to be able to take up that role. It's only a sociological realism to start thinking in terms of how is a family's entire life together forming young people in this or that direction instead of thinking about living our lives and we go to church on Sunday and hopefully that's going to get the religion in. Youth ministers know that something's not right and something needs to change."

**Interview with Kenda Creasy Dean, Professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary**

She was one of the principal researchers with Christian Smith in the national study. She is also the author of "Almost Christian – What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church" (2010).

The content of what has historically been taught is not even on the radar of the teens that are confessing this faith. She's interested in kids who think they are Christians to see what their faith looks like. It turns out they're "Christian-ish" rather than holding to a particular set of beliefs, practices and affections that are associated with being a follower of Christ.

The evidence suggests that young people espouse the faith that we have. It's a faith that just doesn't matter all that much. It certainly doesn't make you stand out in society. In fact, it makes you fit in well in a consumer society.

The pervasive concept of God in the study was that God was either the cosmic therapist or the divine butler. Either God helps you feel good or God goes and gets the things you want that you can't get for yourself.

What about the teens that are the exception to the rule? What kinds of things characterize them? This was her primary research question.

Characteristics:

1. They had a peculiar God story = they were able to articulate that God story. It was a creed that they tried to live by, because they wanted to conform to this particular way of thinking about who God is and what God does and what God asks of people.
2. A community of faith that mattered to them deeply. They felt like they belonged. They had good relationships with their peers and especially good relationships with adults. Their relationship with the pastor mattered to them. Other adults outside their parents were very important. The relationship with their parents is always the most important relationship, but a lot of times that sense of family was extended to their faith community.
3. They had a sense of vocation/purpose. A sense that God had put them here for a reason, and that was reason was to participate in God's plan for the world in some way.

4. They had markedly higher levels of hope.

Do you think that many of today's parents would feel qualified to teach the faith to their children?

There's no question that parents do not feel qualified to teach faith to their children. Adults do not feel qualified to teach faith in congregations either. A lot of parents themselves were formed in an era where faith felt like it was "crammed down their throats." They've made a vow that they're not going to subject their kids to that kind of religious indoctrination. Instead, I'm going to let them choose for themselves. The interesting thing is that we don't have that confidence when it comes to algebra, but somehow when it comes to faith we thought it would just sort of emerge when the time was right. We now know that strategy has failed. In fact, the things that matter to us must be taught intentionally or they are lost.

People talk about the problem with youth ministry and adolescent faith, but this is something that starts with parents and adults and a generation of people who just never learned the basic tools to communicate about faith.

**Interview with Marva Dawn, Professor at Regent College, Vancouver, BC (author of Talking the Walk)**

There's a real danger in turning Christianity into another form of narcissism. There's more to Christianity than just how it's going to make you happy. We want to know about the Triune God. We want to know why the Triune God is involved in our lives Triunely. We want to know about the crucifixion and why that's important. It's dangerous for young people to have very little doctrinal content, because feelings are not enough to hold us to Christianity.

What do you think about the practice of many churches to segregate the young people and pull them away from the wider body of Christ?

I'm quite worried about the split in generations in churches today. A study done showed that young people learn best being molded by the whole frame of the worship of their elders and those around them. Our faith is actually language more than emotion. We learn how to talk and sing the Christian life by the surrounding atmosphere. It's definitely a problem that young people, who go away to college, find themselves floundering because they have grown up with youth worship and never participated in adult worship.

"There's a real problem if the initial question about youth is how do we keep them from getting bored."

**Interview with Thomas Bergler, Professor of Ministry and Missions at Huntington University, author of "The Juvenilization of American Christianity" (2012)**

He traces the history of youth culture and its effect on various models of youth ministry. He argues that in the 1940s and 1950s youth groups began offering adolescent-friendly versions of church and later a new adulthood emerged that looked a lot like the old adolescence. As a result churches began to cater to them and eventually became them.

Explain the origin of a modern concept of “teenager.” Started around the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when you reached your early teens, you were entering the world of adult work. As society changed there was longer schooling and preparation, and people started talking about a new phase called “adolescence.”

In the 1930s and 1940s the term “teenager” was coined for a specific subset of youth. It wasn’t until the 1940s that a majority of American teens went to high school. They were all getting lumped together in school, and they became targeted as a consumer market. A lot of youth ministries were started at this time. At the same time the phrase “youth culture” was coined. The boomer generation was the first generation where everything at school and at church was being catered to them. Suddenly young people were all involved in a pop culture.

Jesus has been turned into a romantic relationship. We have taken traits that are appropriate for adolescents and deciding that these traits are to be celebrated and become the ideal for all ages. For example “falling in love” is a reasonable analogy for someone working in youth ministry, but not when the person has grown up and they still think of their relationship with Jesus as an adolescent (feelings-based).

“In the name of appealing to young people, we didn’t always pay attention to what the long-term effects might be.”

There’s a bigger trend regarding the new adulthood. The new adulthood looks a lot like the old adolescent journey of unending self-exploration and self-development in which you’re trying to avoid getting stuck in anything and commitments are only to be kept if you feel like keeping them.

**Interview with J.I. Packer, Professor of Systematic Theology at Regent College (author of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century classic “Knowing God”)**

Co-author of “Grounded in the Gospel: Building Believers the Old Fashioned Way.

Christianity is first and foremost a faith, which expresses itself as a life. You can’t teach the life properly except as you teach the faith properly and show how the living is grounded on the believing. To get the believing straight in your mind, you must get the grammar. The faith has a grammar. Jesus said “Go and make disciples,” and the word “disciple” means “learner.” People who learn the basics.

We are far further out of sync with Christian discipling in the first century than we have any idea. We are not close enough to the Bible text or truth to really call ourselves “Bible people.”

The White Horse Inn Podcast/ The State of Youth Ministry/Notes taken by Doug Brown

The basic trouble in the West is that we have exchanged a God-centered view of life for a man-centered, self-centered, and relativistic view of life, truth, wisdom. Christianity immediately gets distorted b/c we treat ourselves as the central focus of interest and we think of God as there on the edge of our life to help when we need Him, to supply what we lack. But we don't think in terms of God Himself and God's glory as the goal of everything, and the life of worship as the true fulfillment of our human nature. Instead we talk of satisfaction and peace and joy understanding all these words in terms of feeling good, and the "feel good version of Christianity" falsifies the real thing at every point.

What happens when the ultimate criteria of everything in the church is fun? Is catechism "fun"? It's not fun in the sense that people use the term today, but it is very satisfying to the mind and heart when you begin to see how, in the Bible, everything fits together with God at the center. To lean God-centeredness in an orderly way delights the soul, and it makes you want to worship the God who is the source of all truth, order and beauty.

What about people who say that this is just filling people with head knowledge instead of heart knowledge? Head knowledge is the highway to heart knowledge. You don't have heart knowledge without head knowledge. Truth enters the heart via the understanding. You learn what God has taught us in Scripture about Himself and His ways and purposes, and the great Story into which He's seeking to bring us as an active part of what He's seeking to work out in the world, and when that knowledge settles in the heart, it makes you want to worship. You praise God for all these wonderful things. If you start at the other end, and say "my heart guides me and I'll treat as important the things that my heart responds to," I promise you will end up with a very distorted view of reality = relativism b/c you are relativizing all the things that God has taught us to yourself and present focus and field of interest, and you are ignoring the things at the moment that don't catch your interest.

### **Interview with Gary Parrot, Professor of Educational Ministries and Worship at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary**

Discussion of early church practice of catechism = communicating the basics of the faith. In the 2d-5<sup>th</sup> century church, anybody who was coming to Christ, especially from outside the faith community, went through a rigorous preparation for baptism: equipping them in the basics of Christian doctrine, living, praying often for several months to 2-3 years.

Unintended consequences of the Sunday School movement ...learn Bible stories disconnected from the Gospel taught as moral lessons; both parents and pastors withdrew from the teaching role.

### **Interview with William Wilemon, Methodist Bishop**

We should think of Christian discipleship as learning another language. In Christianity you have to learn the grammar of the faith. People today don't think they need to be converted to be

Christians. You'll need to learn a whole new set of words that will make you an entirely different person than you would have been had you not met Jesus.

### **Back to Christian Smith**

"The single factor that clearly drove how articulate a young person could be about their faith was whether the adults in their lives had engaged them, had formed them, had given them a vocabulary and a language of faith to use." Christian Smith

Young people could be very articulate on topics where their schools or a program or a teacher had communicated to them that something was important; you need to know this.

The language of faith is like a second language, and it's hard to learn a second language...you have to practice speaking it yourself, you have to hear other adults speak it, you may need to be tested on it. It has to be sustained.

The language of faith, the vocabulary, the ways of reasoning, is not the primary language of our culture. If people are going to learn this, they need a context for learning it. It's not going to happen on TV and in most schools so there are going to have to be families and churches where the second language of faith is learned. Otherwise, they simply will not know it. They will only have the primary language of their culture: American individualism.

We're focused on teens but my suspicion is their parents would not be any more articulate than the teens were. The underlying sociological principle is: when there's a family, a church, a community that is serious about something, the young people will be serious about it too. It's really about institutional formation.