

Theological ‘Dissonance’ in Youth Ministry

A few years ago my wife was invited along to a youth group to be the guest speaker. The night was intended to reach out to young people and give them a chance to hear about Jesus. This evening had been promoted long and hard and the church had been praying for weeks that it would be a success. The leaders had sweated over the program desperately trying to craft an evening that would reach the local students. After a time of energetic ‘get to know you’ games where only one window was broken, my wife was readying herself for the talk when she heard these fateful words, “Before Julie comes and tells us about Jesus we are going to hand out some cans of shaving cream and see who can make the best shaving cream hairdo!” As you can imagine, the junior highers went berserk. For the next 15 minutes there was a shaving cream frenzy. It went everywhere. A small amount of it even managed to stay on a few people’s heads. After a while the leader told them to sit down so their hair could ‘set’. While this happened they would have the Bible talk. Julie stood there and told them about the most important event in the history of the universe while the students had shaving cream dripping down their faces on this hot, humid night. Julie came home that night with a combination of fury and deep disappointment. She said to me, “I realize that God is omnipotent and can work through any program but this was a shocker. It would have taken a miracle along the lines of parting the Red Sea for anyone to come to Christ tonight.

From her perspective there were no souls added to the Kingdom as a result of this event (although a few decided to wash their hair for the first time in weeks which made a lot of the parents ecstatic).

The night was designed to allow young people to hear about Jesus. This is what the theology of the leader dictated they do. However the practice of the night kept the kids from hearing about Jesus. Another example of a dissonant program.

Dissonance. My Webster’s New World Dictionary tells me that dissonance is “a lack of harmony or agreement” or “an inharmonious sound”. This is a great description of many youth programs today. On one hand we have our theology that tells us what is important and what we should be doing in youth ministry. On the other hand we do things that fly in the face of this theology (i.e. telling kids about Jesus is crucial so let’s have them sit there with shaving cream dripping down their face into their eyes and ears at the same time). It is like trying to hit an archery target with a warped arrow.

On one hand

We are all driven by our theology. We are keen to follow the great commission of Jesus and see young people turn to Christ in repentance and faith. We are also eager to honor God in what we do. In addition to this, we want to run communities of faith characterized by things like holiness and love.

However, on the other ...

While we are driven to reach for lofty heights, our programs often don't reflect this. We want effective connection between non-Christian student and Jesus so we cover their heads with shaving cream. We want communities of love and peace so we hand young people rolled up newspapers and have them smack each other. More on this in a minute.

Some examples of dissonance

There are a quite a few. I'll only briefly raise three.

Dissonant Evangelism

The worst case of dissonance comes when many of us try to do evangelism. We are eager to tell this world about Christ yet we form a program around activities that have nothing to do with him. The shaving cream nightmare is a classic example.

It seems to me that a lot our evangelistic endeavors are like a new driver searching around for the right gear. We know what we want to do but there is grinding and damage and they usually end up stalling in traffic. In my experience the main culprits are the misguided notions of 'relationship building' and 'pre-evangelism'. Now I need to be honest with you- I've never quite understood this. In my experience whenever a new student comes to your program it is because they have been brought by a friend. In other words, a Christian they already have a relationship with. I don't want them to meet a Christian, they already have! Furthermore, I've never really understood what 'pre-evangelism' means or why we should build it into our programs.

Isn't pre-evangelism done out in the field by the students themselves? In other words, they are to be 'salt and light' and 'live such good lives among the pagans that ... they will praise God on the day he visits us' (Matt. 5:13-16; 1 Pet. 2:12). This removes any need for our programs to 'build relationships' or 'raise issues'.

In my reading of the Bible, it seems to me that evangelism occurs very clearly in three ways that can easily be replicated in our youth programs.

1. Evangelists who *go out* and tell non-Christians about Jesus (the Apostles in the Book of Acts; see also Eph. 4:11)
2. Christians 'making the most of every opportunity' and 'giving a reason for the hope that is in them' (Col. 4:5; 1 Pet. 3:15).
3. Non-Christians joining Christians as they meet together to worship God (1 Cor. 14:24)

The image of a hyped up young person who came along to be entertained in order to be evangelized is one that is foreign to the Bible. It should also be foreign to our youth groups.

Evangelism springs out of who we are- faithful, loving, worshipping followers of Jesus Christ. This is the setting that the crown jewel of the gospel must sit. It never comes from wacky, 'pre-evangelistic' activities. In fact, in my experience these activities almost always work against us rather than for us. The wise youth leader must learn to plan an evangelistic night built solely around Christian disciplines and helpful activities. Is this possible? Yes, it is. However, most of us were never taught how.

Dissonant Relationship Builders (i.e. mixers that don't mix, icebreakers that are frozen solid)

Most youth leaders place a high priority on forming good relationships. We have read the scriptures and are keen to build a group that reflects what it means to be followers of Christ. However, we then run activities that do the opposite. Please let me explain.

A year or so ago I picked up a Christian youth book that promised me several new 'friendship building games'. Building relationships is clearly something we all aim for in youth ministry. Every youth leader wants to see strong relationships built around peace, love, joy etc. We also want non-Christians to be welcomed and cemented into the group. Intrigued, I grabbed this book and opened to the relationship building section. The first game in the list was fairly simple to grasp. The youth group leader was to divide the group into two groups. Each group sends up a volunteer. The volunteers are blindfolded and each given a pillow. The goal was for them to smack each other with the pillow. Ah, nothing new here, young people have been hitting each other with pillows since that first duck had her feathers plucked and shoved into a pillowcase. However, the 'twist in the game' was that each team had a number of people with pillows as well and they were allowed to wallop the opposing team's blindfolded volunteer. Now please hear me, I am all for having a good time. I'm even into a good pillow fight when the situation calls for it. However, this is not a 'friendship building activity'. This is a 'head smacking activity'. Am I the only youth leader in this world who can see that this is dissonance? I have never seen a kid get beaten to a pulp by a team of pillow wielder peers, rip off his blindfold, give them a hug and break out into a version of 'we are the world'.

C'mon people, if we want to build relationships and friendships (a good, godly goal) why can't we come up with activities that do this? This is one of the worst cases of dissonance.

There are a number of other culprits along these lines. We run mixers that don't mix and icebreakers that leave my group cold. Most of them do nothing more than raise a sweat (or allow a few of the newcomers to score some email addresses from potential boy/girlfriends). A good Ice breaker should allow kids to talk to each other, find out about each other, help the new person get to know the names of people in the group, In my history of youth ministry I have never seen an icebreaker melt the ice as effectively as a good small group Bible study or a weekend retreat.

Finally, Advertising Dissonance

I have an odd hobby, instead of building boats in bottles or going mountain climbing, I collect leaflets and handouts from Christian youth groups. In most cases, they are given out to bring non-Christians to invite them to an event designed to preach the gospel. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the activity offered is in huge print- 48 or 72 point font (at least!). The fact that there will be a Christian message or Bible study is in much smaller font- if it is even there at all.

The other day I found a great one to add to my collection. I was in a nameless grocery store in small town USA. I noticed a poster promising a visit by a team of musclemen and almost superhuman strongmen. These guys would rip up phonebooks, snap baseball bats like twigs and blow up hot water bottles. When these guys were around no object was safe. They were there to smash, rip, and wreck anything in their way. As I looked at this poster I had two immediate responses. The first was that I couldn't rip up a phonebook if the fate of the planet rested on it (although I could give the phonebook for Happy, Arizona pop. 23 a good shot). The second was that except for a picture of Conan with a microphone in one hand and an open Bible in the other, there was nothing on the poster that indicated this was a Christian activity. Nothing at all. Sure, it was held at a church hall, but so are a lot of other non-church related activities that aren't nearly so destructive!

Our reading of the word of God tells us to not be ashamed of the powerful gospel. It tells us to do away with deception or trickery in our presentation of the message of Christ (Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:3-6). However, our advertising often shakes with dissonance.

Is this helpful? Is it honest? Does it honor our audience? Methinks not. In fact, I would go so far as to say that in our eagerness to reach out we sometimes dishonor the one in who's name we are doing this.

Solving the dissonance problem

Unfortunately there is no miracle cure that I can offer you. I wish I could offer you a cd of 'dissonant removal for three easy payments of \$39.95'.

What I can do is to share with you what I try to do. It is very simple and profoundly difficult. It is walking a narrow road with a heavy cross and entering into a needle's eye with no eyes and no hands

I want to scour the Scriptures and keep asking them, 'What do Christians do when they gather together?' I also want to ask, 'How did the Early Church reach their world for Christ?' Centuries before the invention of shaving cream they impacted the world for Jesus. How can I do the same?

My answer to these two questions has been the same. Christians devote themselves to listening to God speak through his word, prayer and corporate worship, and they are to strive to be a loving community that shines the love of Christ. They also seek to clearly bring this message to their community. This is usually done as Christians go out to them, not through running a program designed to attract outsiders through whiz bang activities.

What I mustn't do is base my program on marketing techniques or strategies that sit better with a late night TV infomercial. My youth group will pray, study the Scriptures and spur each other on to love and good deeds. When we run an evangelistic event it will reflect who we are and sit harmoniously within the rest of the program. We won't run a prayer night and then try and reach outsiders through a water balloon fight. Now you must understand that this will mean my net is almost certainly cast in a much smaller area. I will have to be content to reach a smaller audience but in a way that is (hopefully) much more effective. I will also cope if a newcomer walks away having seen what we offer and dismissing it out of hand. Not every kid wants to have a relationship with the Savior. Many (most?) left Jesus- some even after he had healed them (see Luke 17:11-19).

I also need to learn to run a program that is serious about what Christians do and is fun at the same time. When many people talk with me they seem to hear me say that a boring program is a good program. No, it isn't. Let's be clear on that. A good program is one that is built solidly around Christian disciplines and is thoroughly enjoyable at the same time.

Finally, I have found it helpful to always be on the lookout for dissonance in my program. My leaders and I will always ask these questions, 'Is what we are trying to achieve clearly seen by all within the program?' 'When someone comes back the next week are they going to be shocked when the Bible is pulled out or we have a prayer time? (in other words, do our evangelistic nights have any semblance of our regular program)?' 'Is our advertising clear and honest (in other words, what is in big print/ small print)?' 'Are young people coming for one reason while we are running it for another (they come for 'fun' we run it for Christ)?'

If I get these things right we're on our way towards sweet harmony.

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