

GROWING KIDS LIKE JESUS

Little do we know about the young boy Jesus, except we know a lot. That lot tells us that the youth grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and man. Leaders have learned after Jesus' leadership techniques. Christian educators have learned to teach following his impeccable teaching skills. We learn kindness, gentleness, commitment and a host of characteristics after Perfection manifested. Should it be strange that we teach children how to grow as Christ grew? Let's look at how the young Jesus grew.

Grading the church. Jesus grew in wisdom: He grew intellectually. He grew in stature: He grew physically. He grew in favor with God: He grew spiritually. He grew in favor with man: He grew socially. So, if we could be so bold as to critique our church's training program in these four criteria for building the whole person, how is our church doing? The wisdom quotient of our church can be evaluated by the people our church attracts. Do our churches rate more than a "C" on the intellectual level when we disdain learning, reading, and any more than an elementary level of an understanding of either the Bible or the world? Even the megachurches, well equipped to provide their people excellence, feed their people such weak recipes of spiritual pabulum. Since the physical aspect is the least conscious level of training, the church gets an "F." This isn't so troublesome since we have been accustomed to children getting their exercise at home and school. But that will come later. Given the results we see in church dropouts at age 18, can we give the church better than a C- for the spiritual development of its youth? The spiritual is the most conscious element of our ministry, but the evidence gives little proof that we are succeeding.

The social aspect of the church gets a "B." Why not an "A?" We are best at providing social systems for fellowship. The church is a family, complete with its feuds. We have developed "Pizza youth," pulling in youth who lack meaningful relationship elsewhere and we provide good influence. But the latter is where the most improvement could be had. It is conceivable that simply through good influence, we could provide a better assurance to our youth even without better teaching and preaching. It would be a pathetic church, but influence does go a long way. So with an average grade of "C-," where are we going?

Wisdom. While God places little premium upon education and high talking, He doesn't discriminate against people from that side of the tracks. Neither does He place a premium on the lack of education. The numbers of American educated believers is not that much less than the number of the lesser educated believers. Often, they have an added strength in their faith in addition to an emotional and spiritual assurance to believe. They see science more accurately by knowing more about it. They understand many of the flaws of so-called scientific attacks on Christianity and how Truth and true science support each other. The rarity of professionals in our pews speak more to our lack of attracting them than it speaks to their lack of faith. The fact that we do not attract them may be an indicator that our ministry, either in the pulpit or in the classroom is appealing more to the emotional level rather than the intellectual level. All too often, when all the decibels of youth camp quieten down and the shouting stops in the service and the teen

faces a temptation at school or at a drive-in, what have we left the youngster with? Those with a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual basis for faith endure longer.

The quality of a sermon or Sunday School lesson varies greatly with the skill or anointing of the speaker, his awareness of the world around him, his knowledge of the Word and the world, his way of thinking, his perspective of preaching or teaching, his or her preparation for that presentation, the intellectual level of the content and other factors. While God requires no education to get to Heaven other than that we are sinners in need of redemption and Christ died for our sins, much more is required to adequately prepare youth to enter a treacherous world. When a youth receives only namby-pamby emotionally charged messages as Lincoln said, as thin as the homeopathic soup made by boiling the shadow of a pigeon which had frozen to death, they go out into the mouth of a roaring lion. Most Evangelical churches fall well short of solid preparation of our young people. Is it near blasphemy when we claim anointing upon our weak and feeble messages?

Stature, physical development. Of the ways Jesus grew, most objection to implying the church is responsible would fall on the physical part. Of course play, walking to school (if any child does any more,) and gym are traditional ways for kids to grow, so why should the church be involved? (Today's schools pay \$75,000 for a bus so kids won't have to walk to school and then build a three million dollar gym for them to get exercise.) I'm sure the Church of Jerusalem did not concern itself with calisthenics. I'm not sure aerobic classes are the answer either. The modern church also has often succumbed to the temptation of replacing teaching the Word with all kinds of activities. That is never the answer to any issue. But kids need exercise to properly develop. But in a world after our kids, where traditional associations, street play, peers, etc. have been seen as mostly detrimental and often destructive, the more activities our children and youth are involved in which are controlled by the church, the less opportunity the devil has to steal their hearts. "Find a need and fill it" has been the slogan of many successful businesses and churches. Today we have a terrific need offering us a great opportunity.

Spiritual development. Getting people to Heaven is still the ultimate mandate. It is the proud achievement of the church. But should it be? Isn't it alarming when 80 to 90% of youth leave the church after high school? If 1% of planes taking off crashed, would the airline industry be considered successful? Of course not, but we have 90% crashing and still boast of the great job we are doing. Untrained teachers, too busy to study, too busy to pray, unconcerned about visiting their students, let alone any attempt to mentor them outside of the classroom, too uninterested to make an effort of reading after successful teachers in their field, too distanced from a vision that they won't attend a training event make them appear as passionate as a 16 year old passing out tacos at the local Taco Bell. Time constraints on pastors produce watered down messages that are big on noise but light on life-changing substance. Worship leaders who throw meaningless songs together ten minutes before the service, or worse, are more concerned about how they look than how the Holy Spirit uses them to bless hungry people. Youth events are concerned more about getting bodies in the door and entertaining them than seeing depraved youth filled with the world's influence, screaming for attention, crying out for help, and heading to Hell. Cheap pizza, Bible drills from 50 years ago, stooping to their level of language and

activities, worship designed more to entertain than convict and bless, and soft-soaping sinful behavior is more destructive than redemptive. Sometimes we are as clueless in our efforts to help youth as they are themselves about life.

A young person is a walking miracle. They are full of life; they have not lost an idealistic view of life, they are hopeful, and they are a receptacle to be filled and will be filled. They are a canvas waiting to be painted upon. They are a bin of parts waiting to be assembled; a giant theater screen waiting to be filled with an awe-inspiring film; a book with blank pages ready to be written upon, a blank CD waiting to be filled with images, notes and files; and a pot waiting for a magnificent stew. It seems the church has replaced the intended products from Heaven's warehouse with a Big Lots quality product.

Social development. We've said that churches do best at the social aspect. On the way to the graveyard where my father and sister lie is a Presbyterian church. When I pass the church I always see the church as the church that has coffee in Sunday School. They did that in the 50's and 60's, which was anathema in those days. Now, a lot of conservative churches do that and many still feel uncomfortable about doing that. I have pastored people who refused to be involved in any dinner at church due to conviction. They failed to understand that until we befriend one another, we can never be a church. Whatever the reason for encouraging social interaction, everything the true church does has one end in view: getting people to Heaven while they are becoming thoroughly disciplined. While every activity doesn't have to be a preaching or teaching event and God loves life in general, there should always be guidelines. If our goal is discipleship, then every element (as in 100%) of a church's activities will be wholesome, absent of music not conducive to their moral development, and void of anything sexual, language unbecoming Christians, environments prone to allow temptations to take root, or anything not edifying Christ. I have heard cursing at church potlucks. That betrays a low spiritual depth of the people and the church. If the Gospel doesn't reach down to our language, our thoughts, and our deeds, it is of no avail. To what good would we receive if on the way to fulfillment, our social activities spoke louder than our messages that the Christian life is sacred on Sunday morning, but anything goes at all other times? Let the church be socially effective, but let's make sure that those activities flow into genuine discipleship and harmony with a holy God.

In theology, the name Christ refers to the eternal being. Jesus refers to the earthly form. Yet that form was an incomprehensible blend of God and man. The interaction of the two forces is called the hypostatic union of Christ—that tension within between God and man. Growing like Jesus? We can never grow to the levels Jesus did. That idea is Hinduistic. There are no little Jesuses walking around. When the Father created Jesus, it was the only mold He ever broke. But we have often become hindrances to the Holy Spirit's efforts at developing our youth and they have greatly suffered. Isn't it time that our efforts become synchronized with His will? It will cost. It demands our full investment. But the results are worth it. How do I know? An omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent God invested His all. If our youth were a good enough risk for Him, it is good enough for you and your church.