

## **Helping Students “Get It”**

**By John Stonestreet**

In my previous article, I argued that a major project for those of us who work with students is to help them “get” Christianity. While a significant number of Christian students reject Christianity during their university years, far more struggle to embrace a faith that is not really authentic or orthodox. There is a “moralistic therapeutic Deism” as Christian Smith put it; a tame faith that is privatized and perhaps personally meaningful but which is not publically true, culturally significant, or fundamentally informative to the rest of their lives.

Rather than trying to make Christianity as attractive and entertaining as possible, we ought instead to be sure that what we are communicating to them is *actually* Christianity. As I noted, this is very challenging in a culture of information overload, where students are bombarded daily with a multitude of messages, most of which, encourage them toward a mentality of adolescence.

Still, there is good news. Adolescently minded cultures like ours inevitably have a leadership vacuum. So, there remains a terrific opportunity for influence for those who produce the leaders, especially if they produce networks of leaders who can think deeply and contribute broadly to a wide variety of cultural institutions.

### **How can we do this?**

#### ***Challenge students, instead of coddle them.***

Frankly, it is my opinion that we aim too low with teenagers. Students do not need more entertainment, whether it is from the television, the Wii, the iPod or the youth group. *We will never effectively prepare students to engage our entertainment-driven culture by replacing it with Christian entertainment.*

It is foolish to expect students to take Christianity and the world seriously if all they have been exposed to at youth group is games, pizza, and mindless mini-therapy lessons that may or may not come from the Scriptures. The church should be the place where we no longer believe (and students no longer experience) the myth of adolescence.

Instead, students need (and want) to be challenged: with the Scriptures, theology, tough questions, and cultural dilemmas. We see this every year at our Summit student leadership conferences—students endure 70+ hours of lecture and instruction on worldviews, apologetics, culture and character. Then they call home and ask for more money, *so they can buy books!*

I think there is something of the *imago dei* in these students that screams in rebellion against the low expectations they face everywhere. For proof, see the movement of teenagers started by Brett and Alex Harris’ recent book *Do Hard Things*.

#### ***Give them a thorough education in worldviews and apologetics.***

Because everyone has a worldview—a basic way in which they see, understand, and interact with the world—education is at its most fundamental level a worldview-shaping enterprise. It is the responsibility of a Christian institution to challenge students with the Christian view of life and the world, while exposing the non-Christian worldviews that others hold and which are behind historical movements and cultural expressions.

First, *students need to know what they believe.* Many see Christianity as merely a private faith rather than as a robust view of reality that offers a tried and true map for life. If students are convinced that the core of the Christian faith is how they can get to heaven and have a happy life, rather than as the Truth about all of life and the world, they do not know what they believe.

Of course, there simply is no substitute here for equipping students to dive deeply into the Scriptures. At the same time, however, it is important to help them dive into the Scriptures *in the right way.* Unfortunately, many students have only seen the Bible handled poorly by other Christians. Often, their only experience with the Scriptures include it being replaced by therapeutic clichés, utilized and

memorized completely out of context, tacked on but not central to a lesson, strangely pieced together with other verses to make a point, proof-texted to supplement a devotional book or song lyric, or largely ignored.

When the Scriptures are handled this way, bits and pieces of the Bible only get co-opted into the student's existent worldview. *They may know the Bible, but they don't think biblically.* Rather, the student remains as the central arbiter of truth and interpretation.

The goal is that the Scriptures would transform the student's mind (i.e. worldview). I fear we may have a generation of students who see the Bible through the lens of their culturally inherited worldview, rather than seeing the culture through the lens of the Bible.

Second, *students need to know what others believe.* There are non-biblical worldviews that are battling for hearts and minds as well as our culture. Historically, Christians from Justin Martyr to Augustine to Pascal to Edwards to C.S. Lewis, not to mention the Apostle Paul, exhibited a strong understanding of the competing worldviews in their culture.

We at Summit Ministries contend that, at minimum, students need to have a handle on at least six major Western worldviews before going to college: secular humanism, Marxism/Leninism, postmodernism, Islam, New Age and Biblical Christianity.

Third, *Christians must know why they believe what they believe.* Too many Christians cannot answer, and are even afraid of, the challenging questions about God, Jesus, the Bible, morality or truth. Unfortunately, too many adults dread the moment that a student asks them a tough faith question they cannot answer. This avoidance, of course, does not remove the question. It merely delays the question until the student is in an environment where the question will be entertained (like college!). We ought to see these questions as opportunities for the student, and ourselves, to dive even deeper into this faith we claim is true. Plus, God is big enough for the question.

### ***Show them that Christianity is not just about what we are against, but what we are for.***

Proverbs says that without vision, the people "cast off restraint." One of the main reasons that students are casualties of immoral choices is that they lack a big vision for their lives. While they may know what they are *not* supposed to do, they fail to understand the life of meaning, purpose, and impact to which Christ calls them. Christian students often get the impression that we are merely saved from, and not "to."

The picture of redemption in Scripture is far broader than this, however. We often forget how many words used in the Scripture for redemption are "re" words: renew, regenerate, reconcile, redeem, re-creation, etc. The implication is that salvation is a return to the real life God intended for us before the fall. Christ not only came to save us from death, He came to save us to life—an abundant life at that!

This life is not merely our "spiritual" lives either. Rather, the Scriptures offer us the true Big Story of the world: from creation to new creation.

### ***Confront them with, rather than isolate them from, the major cultural battles of our day.***

Challenging students to love God fully by thinking deeply, discerningly and truthfully about His word *and* His world is foundational to what a truly Christian education is. Any other educational means and methods that do not include this as a goal cannot, in my opinion, really be considered Christian education (even if there is a plethora of rules, Bible references and verses to memorize).

According to the way the Scriptures describe the grand narrative of God's redemptive plan for creation, Christianity is neither a religion of ascetic withdrawal nor a dualistic philosophy that denigrates certain human activity as less than spiritual. Rather, followers of Christ are called to dive deeply—and hopefully *headfirst*—into the significant historical and cultural issues of the human situation. As G.K. Chesterton once said, "If Christianity should happen to be true—that is to say if its God is the real God of the universe—then defending it may mean talking about anything and everything."

This is what ought to be meant when the language of worldview is used in education. Historically, Christians have sought to understand, and respond to cultural crises. They understood that these crises were the site of the battle of worldviews. Unfortunately, many Christians today are unaware of, disinterested in, or avoiding issues like embryo-destructive research, euthanasia, emerging technologies,

the arts, film, fashion, legislation, human trafficking, politics and international relations. In Gethsemane on the evening before His death, Christ prayed these astounding words for His followers: “Father, do not take them from the world, but protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). Our prayer, and preparation, for our children should be no different.

One final word about the *spirit* from which we approach the next generation: a few months back, I received a thoughtful and appropriate criticism to a talk I often give which I call “Why Students Walk Away From Their Faith (and what we can do about it ...).” The letter asked if I was coming at this issue from a position of fear—fear of the world and the enemy—and very appropriately suggested that Christians should not be fearful.

I must say that I fully concur with this point. The fear of God casts out all other fear. As the late Richard John Neuhaus wrote: “We have not the right to despair for despair is sin. And, we have not the reason to despair for Christ has risen.” I hope I am not approaching this issue from fear, though I can certainly see how it could be seen that way.

I hope I am approaching this issue from a perspective of realism, for students really are walking away from or checking out of the faith with which they were raised, and we should confront this reality as biblically and resourcefully as possible. This is not something we can ignore. As the historian Will Durant aptly noted: “From barbarism to civilization requires a century. From civilization to barbarism takes but a day.”

I can say in all truthfulness that as I write this, I really do have hope. Fundamentally, I have hope in Christ—He has risen. The day He died was actually the day that death died, and nothing can ever undo that reality. I also have hope in the Church, despite my critical words about it. I am part of this institution which Christ established and announced that against it the gates of Hell could not stand. (My reading of Church History has done more than anything else to secure my belief in those words).

Finally, I have hope because annually I work with many students—both here and abroad—who do, or are fighting to, “get it.” They want their lives to matter for Christ, they want to take the Gospel into all the world (including every corner of culture), and they want to think well about and in this world. They will be better than my generation has been. They will love God better, serve others better, care more deeply, and think more clearly. They want to read *good* books, and they want to live for something bigger than themselves.

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