

Young people have a far greater capacity for spiritual and social maturity than we tend to give them credit for, and parents have been given the responsibility to see that this capacity is realised. The church today does not expect what it ought to from children and their parents, and this can be attributed, at least in part, to a flawed concept of youth ministry.

It was in connection with my own employment as a fresh out-of-college youth minister that I first began to question whether or not my work was Biblically sanctioned.

Before the mid-1800s time was arranged according to significant events. Prior to the 19th Century, birthdays were neither mentioned nor celebrated. Age wasn't even included in the 1850 census - it simply wasn't considered to be important. It wasn't uncommon to graduate from a university at age 17, or age 28, or any age in between. Students matured at their own rates. The one room schoolhouse was the norm. In social gatherings, children mingled with people much older than themselves.

Horace Mann changed this first in the classroom by fastening students to a fixed learning pace. Consistent with the onset of evolutionary thinking, progress had become synonymous with the passage of time. For the first time ever, students were segregated by age.

At the turn of the 20th Century, Granville Stanley Hall was championing his Recapitulation theory. Using social applications of Darwin's work in biology, Hall suggested that individuals evolve through the same stages through which human history has evolved. The child repeats the race, he wrote, This is a great biological law. Hall associated infants and toddlers with pre-savage periods of human history; he consequently counselled parents and teachers to leave their young children to Nature and encourage play, which fosters motor development. A crisis - transition period led to the pre-adolescent years of 8 to 12, which were likened to the early pygmies and other savages; these children could be drilled and disciplined in school.

He claimed that another period of crisis came at adolescence, which he deemed the most critical period in one's life. Hall viewed adolescence to be the most important of his dubious stages - so important, he believed, that teens ought to be separated from those older and younger than them. Moreover, like most evolutionists, Hall also taught that each generation is, or should be, superior to the previous one, and therefore needs to break free from those which precede it.

In practical terms, this thinking has come to mean that rebellion is youth's destiny. Hall, and many social psychologists after him, viewed this rebellion as a positive thing. In short, G. Stanley Hall invented adolescence.

Even in the church, we have established a pattern of perpetual regress that is tearing down the last vestiges of maturity that our fathers laboured to achieve. Evangelical churches are honouring divisions that have existed in our culture for less than a century - divisions which have no basis in either Scripture or common sense. These divisions breed immaturity because they hinder young people from associating with, and learning from, their elders.

Rather than admonishing our young people with Paul's mandate, **Flee youthful lusts** (2 Timothy 2:22), we provide a forum for youthful lusts to be pursued. We have compromised standards in the name of relevance.

We must therefore reject the appalling notion of the model youth minister as a recently graduated extrovert who looks and acts just like a high schooler himself. Responsible youth ministry in the church involves teaching and exhorting parents to raise their children Biblically (Deuteronomy 6:7; Ephesians 6:4).

In 1 Samuel 2, we read of the high priest, Eli and the detestable practices of his sons who had been raised in the Temple. Eli fell far short of his responsibility for the oversight and discipline of his

sons. Because Eli was an unfaithful father, God judged him accordingly. He also provided a poor example for Samuel, whose sons also turned out badly (1 Samuel 8:1 ♦ 3).

Sadly, many parents today shun their parental responsibilities just as Eli did. This is evident by the thriving day care industry and over crowded public schools. Evangelicals condemn this break up of the traditional family, but have ironically advanced programmes that further erode family values in the church.

Scripture clearly places the responsibility for child rearing on fathers: **And you fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord** (Ephesians 6:1 ♦ 4). Many parents believe that they are **doing their job** by seeing their children off to a youth meeting. Most do little or nothing more. Fathers are responsible for directly overseeing their children in spiritual matters.

Effective youth ministry is the father's task; he has the responsibility to establish a godly atmosphere in the home. Fathers must be leaders in worship, prayer, reading and studying the Bible and in fellowship with other saints.

Fathers, through abdication, are bringing their children up in practical atheism.

What can be done?

First, the elders should provide other fathers with examples of godly child rearing in their own households (1 Timothy 3:4 ♦ 5; Titus 1:6).

Second, fathers should be taught their household responsibilities and how they might be practically met. Fathers are shepherds in the home to lead their families in worship, doctrinal instruction, prayer and Bible reading.

Third, Biblical standards of fatherhood must be established and protected. Our cultural revolt against maturity tempts us to lower our standards in child rearing. We may think we are doing well so long as we do better than the pagan world around us, but God never patterns His norms after human culture.

Standards are maintained in the church by looking at God's Word, not by looking at the world. The saints must have the courage to practice, encourage, admonish and rebuke wherever Biblical standards of fatherhood are not met. Without a restoration of proper fatherly authority, any effort towards Reformation will be fruitless.

Therefore, we must discourage peer association at times when family association should be central. Do not allow a pew full of high school buddies in church. Family should sit together. Always give important family events priority over youth functions.

Youth should attend adult Bible studies and prayer meetings, especially those that their parents attend. After all, many of them sit through hours of vigorous instruction daily at school; the Scriptures are as relevant to young people as they are to adults. In time they will grow comfortable with not being the centre of attention.

Organise social events around families. For example: invite households to birthday parties instead of just adults or youth. Girls should attend baby and bridal showers, boys should attend men's breakfasts.

Avoid triteness. Youth ministries are notorious for triteness in Gospel messages, skits and games. If it edifies readers of all ages, then it does not compromise in truth. Throw away titles like: **Billy's Witness in Gym Class and collect **Pilgrims Progress** and **Robinson Crusoe**. Similarly try to avoid children's songs about Pharaoh's army doing **the dead mans float** and **Noah's Arky Arky** should be avoided. Nobody is too young for Psalms and good hymns.**

It is important that the children's dependence upon the youth minister should be transferred back to the parents. A good intermediate step towards this end is to develop parent/child Bible studies. Children must associate instruction with parental authority.

The youth minister should begin deferring to parents whenever possible. As a youth minister I adopted a policy of refusing to counsel kids on matters that hadn't first been discussed with their own parents.

Deferring to the parents puts healthy pressure on them to attend to their responsibilities and this teaches youth to honour their father and mother. It is parental counsel that children must seek (Proverbs 1:8).

Utilitarian standards must not be set above Scripture. Success in the youth ministry must not be sought to the compromise of what God has revealed. A Covenantal blessing of godly children is guaranteed first to parents, not to youth ministers (Proverbs 22:6; Acts 2:39).

Ministering to children of unbelievers need not be as difficult as it seems. These children should be drawn to associate with Christian families, rather than Christian youth ministries. Invite them over to dinner, then they can participate as a guest in the family's regular worship. Bring them to Sunday worship, pray for more opportunities to minister to the guest's entire family. I have known entire households to come to Christ in this manner as faithful children begin to honour and submit to their ungodly fathers and mothers as God called them to (Ephesians 6:1 - 3).

It should be evident that we are not advocating the abolition of youth ministry. To the contrary, we desire that youth ministry grow and flourish the way God intended it to. That means that youth ministry must return to the home where it belongs.

Godly families are a gift from the Lord.

Children are a heritage from the Lord happy is the man who has his quiver full of them. Psalm 127:3 - 7

The above is abridged from: **Critique of Modern Youth Ministry** by Christopher Schlect, published by Canon Press, PO Box 8741, Moscow, Idaho 83843, USA.