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Responsible Ones: Young People, Faith, and Letting Go

Abstract

"More thoughts on the Pew Research Center's findings on the decline of youth in the church: "We need to remember that the life and existence of the church doesn't depend on us. The church is not something we have to anxiously preserve; the church is created and sustained by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to BE the church, to live as the new humanity in and for the world."

Posting about young people and the church from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/the-responsible-ones-young-people-faith-and-letting-go/>

Keywords

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The Responsible Ones: Young People, Faith, and Letting Go

 [all in allthings.org/the-responsible-ones-young-people-faith-and-letting-go/](https://allthings.org/the-responsible-ones-young-people-faith-and-letting-go/)

Jason Lief

I used to coach high school baseball. Every summer I'd have 14 and 15-year-old kids excitedly try to learn how to pitch. They'd get on the mound, grab the ball, grip it as hard as they possibly could, and hurl it toward home plate. Most of the time the ball ended up sailing over the catcher's head all the way to back stop. After two or three throws like this I would stop them, and say, "Try holding the ball like you're holding a girls hand." Blank stares. So I'd try, "Grip the ball like you're holding an egg." Magically, when they loosened their grip just a little bit they had much better control.

As my colleague, Donald Roth, described in a [prior post](#) the recent data from the Pew Research on religion and young people continues to show a decline in religious belief. Undoubtedly, this will stir up much anxiety. Like an overly anxious 14 year-old trying to learn how to pitch, there will be some in the Christian community who will latch on to this information and panic. Some will search for the silver bullet—the set of techniques or practices that will keep our kids "in the faith." Like Lord Business from the Lego Movie some will call out the "micro-managers"—orchestrating, planning, and ultimately cementing our kids into a particular cultural form of Christianity. But maybe we don't have to panic. What if we responded to this news like a kid learning to throw a baseball? What if we all relaxed, took a deep breath and loosened our grip?

Don't get me wrong—I'm not saying we just let young people do whatever they want. Of course we need to teach them about the faith by immersing them in the liturgical practices of communal worship. Yes, it is our job as parents—and the covenant community—to cultivate a life of faith and discipleship with our kids. But this doesn't mean we get to overreact by focusing on the wrong things in our anxiety and fear. We need to remember that the life and existence of the church doesn't depend on us. The church is not something we have to anxiously preserve; the church is created and sustained by God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to BE the church, to live as the new humanity in and for the world.

The Christian community gets it wrong when we think the point is to get people to come to church. That's the wrong focus with the wrong direction. The life of the church is not an inwardly turned, sectarian, "us vs. the world" mentality; the life of the church is an outward movement. We are called to go to the world, to enter into the lives of young people in grace and love. Our tendency, however, is to insist that young people meet our expectations. We want their faith to look like ours so we create litmus tests that determine whether young people are still in the fold. We reward young people who diligently come to Sunday school or youth group and meet our moral and doctrinal expectations. Culturally, young people are conditioned to constantly meet the expectations of the adult world. It's no wonder many of them are cynical, and it's no wonder that many of them throw off the religious trappings of a faith that isn't theirs to begin with.

Biblically, there's a word for the type of loosening I'm talking about: love. Paul talks about it in his letter to the Corinthians. He opens the letter by talking about the foolishness of the cross for Jew and Gentile alike. "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength." Paul tells the Corinthian people that their identity is not determined by whether they follow Apollos or Paul; their identity is not determined by the cultural categories that used to determine their place in the world. Paul tells them that in Christ's death we are all deconstructed, only to be knit back together in

the power of his resurrection with a new identity as a part of the new humanity of the resurrected Christ. What is the mark of this new identity? Is it morality? Doctrine? Denominational or confessional loyalty? No—it's love. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

Love makes space for the other; it doesn't impose expectations as a condition for a relationship. Love is an opening up, an outward movement that prepares to receive the other as a gift. Love glories in diversity and difference; it recognizes that true relationships are possible only when we get over our expectations of how we think the world should be. Which brings me to this question: Are we ready and willing to love young people, not because they meet our expectations, but only because they are human beings made in the image of God? Are we willing to acknowledge that their faith and love for God might not look like ours? Are we willing to meet them on their terms, to take seriously their experiences and their questions?

I know that some will misconstrue this for a soft, permissive, love, but that's not what I'm talking about. The love that I'm talking about has the courage to take responsibility for the other, to enter into the lives of young people and help them courageously embrace their humanity in the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ. This type of love is tough; it's willing to put up with rejection, with discouragement, and even with young people turning their backs on the community of faith in which they were raised. The easy thing to do is to retreat, to wash our hands and build up our walls. This is not what it means to be the church, and it's not what it means to love young people with the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

I end with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letter "After Ten Years" which he wrote as a critique of the Christian community. In the face of suffering and evil it was not his fellow Christians who stood firm, but his family members who supposedly didn't have faith. They were the ones who took responsibility for the suffering of their neighbors by taking action. He writes,

In flight from public discussion and examination, this or that person may well attain the sanctuary of private virtuousness. But he must close his eyes and mouth to the injustice around him. He can remain undefiled by the consequences of responsible action only by deceiving himself. In everything he does, that which he fails to do will leave him no peace. He will either perish from that restlessness or turn into a hypocritical, self-righteous, small-minded human being. Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when in faith and in relationship to God alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call. Where are the responsible ones?¹

This is the same question Christ asks of his church on behalf those young people making their way in the world: Where are the responsible ones?

Dig Deeper

Read more from Jason Lief in his new book, [Poetic Youth Ministry: Learning to Love Young People by Letting Them Go](#). Read an excerpt of his book [here](#).

Footnotes

1. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. [Paper and Letters in Prison](#), 40. ↩

