

Contextualization Needs Content
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“Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth,
we cannot know it.”

Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*¹

“We must recover, or perhaps simply pay attention to, the unique identity and vision of the
church, an identity and vision shaped by the true story of God’s acts in history.”

Robert E. Webber and Rodney Clapp, *People of the Truth*²

The Faith of Young Adults

My greatest thrill as a Bible College instructor is the privilege of seeing students release a faith that is their parents’ to grasp a faith that becomes their own. Between the moments of release and grasp is a period of weightless uncertainty, thrilling because the student floats free, temporarily disoriented and directionless. We hold our breaths, awaiting gravity’s pull to where the student stands now on her own two feet, firmer in her faith, alongside the faiths of her parents and of the faith community that had carried her.

But sadly, if we can trust the statistics, college-aged students are being pulled away from the faith at least as often as they remain in it. In a recent editorial, Prairie Bible College president Mark Maxwell shared findings from four studies over the past decade that suggest anywhere from 61-88 percent of Christian youth will abandon their faith while attending university.³ A study conducted by Steve Henderson reports the slightly better but nonetheless alarming statistic that “more than 52 percent of incoming freshmen who identify themselves as born-again upon entering a public university will either no longer identify themselves as born-again four years later or, even if they do still claim that identification, will not have attended any religious service in over a year.”⁴ Similarly, a fresh report commissioned by the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada has found that “For every five Catholic and Mainline Protestant kids who attended church at least weekly in the 1980s and ’90s only one still attends at least weekly now as an adult; for those raised in Evangelical traditions it is one in two. And that’s not all. Most who have quit attending altogether also have dropped their Christian affiliation.”⁵

But as distressing as is the exodus of college-aged Christians from the church, so is what’s going on among teenaged Christians within it.

Between 2002-2005, sociologist Christian Smith led a team of researchers to conduct a massive Lilly Foundation study on religion and spirituality among thirteen to seventeen year olds in the US. The results of the National Study of Youth and Religion paint a less-than positive portrait of adolescent Christianity.⁶ Among its findings, the survey found that: 1) although most teens have a positive view of religion, they otherwise don’t give it much thought; 2) most teens

¹ Translated by W.F. Trotter, from <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pascal/pensees.xv.html> (accessed 15 August 2012), saying no. 864. In some versions of the *Pensées*, this is saying no. 739.

² (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 16.

³ “Why Bible College?,” *Servant Magazine* 89 (May 2012), 2.

⁴ “A Question of Price versus Cost,” *Christianity Today* (March 2006), 86. Available at <http://www.christianconsulting.net/statistics/CT3-06.pdf>.

⁵ James Penner, Rachael Harder, Erika Anderson, Bruno Désorcy, and Rick Hiemstra, *Hemorrhaging Faith: Why and When Canadian Young Adults Are Leaving, Staying and Returning to the Church* (EFC Youth and Young Adult Roundtable, 2012), 5. I cite a pre-release version of the document, to be available 1 September 2012 at www.hemorrhagingfaith.com.

⁶ Access survey data and subsequent resources at <http://www.youthandreligion.org/>.

mirror their parents' religious faith; 3) teens lack a theological language with which to express their faith or interpret their experience of the world (although they demonstrate the capacity to be "impressively articulate about other subjects"); 4) a significant minority (c. 8%) of teens can be described as religiously "highly devoted" through profession and practice, claiming religious faith is important and demonstrating it makes a difference to their lives; 5) many teens enact and espouse a religious outlook significantly distinct from the traditional teachings of most world religions – an outlook the survey researchers describe as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*.⁷

Although of course no teen would self-identify as a "Moralistic Therapeutic Deist," the data show them to possess such a religious viewpoint wherein they identify life's central goal as being happy and feeling good about oneself, and wherein they profess belief in a generic God who wants people to be good, nice, and fair to one another, who is not particularly involved in one's life except if needed to resolve a problem, and who allows all "good" people into heaven when they die. As Smith and Denton observe:

This is not a religion of repentance from sin, of keeping the Sabbath, of living as a servant of a sovereign divine, of steadfastly saying one's prayers, of faithfully observing high holy days, of building character through suffering, of basking in God's love and grace, of spending oneself in gratitude and love for the cause of social justice, etcetera. Rather, what appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.⁸

The Faith of the Church

Importantly, the study also reveals that the faith of teens is not terribly different from that of adults. In fact, the faith confessed and practised by Christian teens largely represents the faiths confessed and practised specifically by their parents and, by extension, their faith community: the church. It is therefore disturbing to discover that teens are not *leaving* to find Moralistic Therapeutic Deism *outside* the church; they encounter and embrace it *in the culture and teaching of the church itself*. Kenda Creasy Dean, one of the survey's researchers, pulls no punches:

Even if teenagers participate fully in youth ministry programs, are involved in churches, and manage to dodge disruptive life events and overwhelming counter-influences, youth are unlikely to take hold of a "god" who is too limp to take hold of them. Perhaps young people lack robust Christian identities because churches offer such a stripped-down version of Christianity that it no longer poses a viable alternative to imposter spiritualities like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. If teenagers lack an articulate faith, maybe it is because the faith we show them is too spineless to merit much in the way of conversation. Maybe teenagers' inability to talk about

⁷ I follow the summary offered by Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2010), 17-21. For a fuller discussion of the results, see Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2005), 30-71.

⁸ Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163-64.

religion is not because the church inspires a faith too deep for words, but because the God-story that we tell is too vapid to merit more than a superficial vocabulary.⁹

David Sawler concurs, observing that cheap Christianity produces cheap Christians: “people who are attenders, who call themselves Christians but have never come to repentance. They have not actually decided to follow Jesus.”¹⁰ How cheap is contemporary Christianity? Ronald J. Sider laments:

To say there is a crisis of disobedience in the evangelical world today is to dangerously understate the problem. Born-again Christians divorce at about the same rate as everyone else. Self-centered materialism is seducing evangelicals and rapidly destroying our earlier, slightly more generous giving...Born-again Christians justify and engage in sexual promiscuity (both premarital sex and adultery) at astonishing rates. Racism and perhaps physical abuse of wives seem to be worse in evangelical circles than elsewhere. This is scandalous behavior for people who claim to be born-again by the Holy Spirit and to enjoy the very presence of the risen Lord in their lives.¹¹

Christian philosopher Norman Wirzba suggests that although (because?) contemporary culture widely professes generic belief in God, the church has lost authentic contact with God. Instead, the church turns “to religious beliefs or pious sentiments that are forced, hollow, or merely ornamental.”¹² Thus although on one level Christians are happy to confess that “Jesus is God” and that they have a “personal relationship with Jesus,” the confessions are often made with very limited commitment to the biblical, historical, and theological accounts and ideas that give these statements any substance. And “Without such accounts and ideas, Christian feeling and Christian behavior start to fade to generalized warm fuzziness and social conventions.”¹³ As Webber and Clapp put it: “We have failed to understand our story and the identity that derives from it as something distinct from the wider culture...The world has not made the church safe and predictable; the church has.”¹⁴ The modern, western church, in other words, has in many ways lost its content.

Contextualization Needs Content

Here is the point of this essay in a book on contextualizing the Gospel: Without content – without an accurate understanding of and commitment to the biblical Gospel, to the God it reveals, to the demands it makes on Christian belief and behaviour – how, effectively, do we “contextualize”? More to the point: *What* do we contextualize?

The authors of the EFC study aptly named their document “Hemorrhaging Faith” to reflect the trauma that so many young adults are leaving the church. But the title could equally describe the church’s apparent loss of much authentic faith itself, and the two are likely related.

⁹ *Almost Christian*, 36.

¹⁰ *Before They Say Goodbye: Thoughts on How to Keep This Generation* (Winnipeg: Word Alive Press, 2011), 130.

¹¹ *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 27-28.

¹² *Living the Sabbath: Discovering the Rhythms of Rest and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2006), 75.

¹³ William Placher, “Why Creeds Matter,” *Christian Century* (September 20, 2003), 23, cited in Dean, *Almost Christian*, 70.

¹⁴ *People of the Truth*, 87.

David Kinnaman identifies shallow faith as a core reason so many young Christians disengage from the church,¹⁵ and David Sawler observes that, through social and mainstream media, youth today receive cogent and articulate rebuttals to Christianity on a scale previously not faced by any generation.¹⁶ Unless the church articulates an equally cogent faith it should be little wonder so many leave the church when leaving home for college.

Reclaiming Jesus' Commission

I do not offer this essay in any way to stifle obeying Jesus' commission to contextualize his Gospel "among all peoples" (Matthew 28:19). Such work is being and needs continually to be done. One encouragement from the NSYR study is the sense of need among highly devoted Christian teens to contribute to God's purpose in the world.¹⁷ Other studies, however, keep us sober. Kinnaman reports on the views of surveyed teenaged evangelists that "the faith they were trying to spread was, in fact, more akin to moralistic therapeutic deism than to historic Christianity."¹⁸ Zeal without knowledge won't do.

Jesus' commission concludes Matthew's Gospel with the command "to teach" (Matthew 28:20) – significant, because Matthew portrays Jesus' activity above all as "teaching" (4:23; 5:2; 7:29; 9:35; 11:1; 13:34; 21:23; 26:55). Jesus teaches most extensively in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), which he concludes with the story of the wise and foolish builders (7:24-27; paralleled in Luke 6:47-49). Here we make an essential observation. Despite what we may have sung in Sunday School, the "wise man" who builds his house upon the rock *does not* build "on the Lord Jesus Christ", a superficial "personal relationship with Jesus". In both Matthew and Luke, the wise builder builds by putting into practice *Jesus' teaching*. Authentic relationship with Jesus involves *something*: what Jesus says *matters*. Faith needs content.

Conclusion

Contextualization needs content. As a Bible College instructor, I am privileged to work in a ministry that helps young adults stand firm in their faith,¹⁹ but the church is hemorrhaging faith in more ways than losing young adults from attendance. That, it seems, is the symptom of a more pervasive problem that is intergenerational – and deteriorating. We need to contextualize the Gospel. But contextualization contextualizes *something*. This essay is my plea that we attend to that *something* – and urgently – so that we retain something worthwhile contextualizing, and retain the people to contextualize it.

¹⁵ David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church, and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 115-16.

¹⁶ *Goodbye Generation: A Conversation About Why Youth and Young Adults Leave the Church* (Hamilton, ON: Ponder Publishing, 2008), 88.

¹⁷ See Dean, *Almost Christian*, 75-76.

¹⁸ *You Lost Me*, 115.

¹⁹ According to Henderson, those studying at faith-based institutions report significant increases in overall religious commitment: "Price versus Cost," 96.