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## Questions of Faith

### How do you build a strong youth community?

All believers are members of the body of Christ, living stones that constitute the various parts with each part being equally valuable. Therefore, it does not matter what age, gender, Spiritual gifts or other differences, all are to be held in mutual accountability and play roles as both served and serving (Hebrews).

#### Know Your Youth

Jesus said to Peter, *"Feed My lambs"* (John 21:15c). This implies that we must really know our youth individually and collectively—their needs, their hopes, sorrow, joys, and fears; understand them as a total person—body, mind, and spirit as God created them. Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says, *"I know My sheep, and am known by My own"* (John 10:14). How can we properly feed Jesus' lambs unless we really know them? And how may we attain this intimate knowledge?

**Where they are**—one way to get to know them is to observe them where they are. Jesus could be found at a well, in a fishing boat, at a party, in homes, in the market place—where people were.

**Listen**—another way to get to know our youth is to listen to them. Jesus knew what was in the heart of people, but we don't. However He points out that *"out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."* Matthew 12:34b. So talk with them and listen. James offers a great piece of advice on communication, *"Therefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath; for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God."* (James 1:19-20).

**Ask**—a third way to get to know our youth is to ask others. Solomon advises us, *"Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety"* (Proverbs 11:14). Seek out other youth leaders, high school teachers and others who work with youth. Reading a good book is another way of asking people.

#### Provide a Role Model

Jesus not only said that He knew His sheep, but He also said that His sheep knew Him. Paul reminds Timothy that he has *"carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance, persecutions, afflictions..."* (II Timothy 3:10-11a). A relationship existed between Paul and Timothy. Paul does not say "Don't do as I do, Do as I tell you." He says, "Do as I do." He echoes Jesus' *"Follow Me."* Paul sends no double message to Timothy.

A model for youth to follow is one of repentance. James admonishes us *"Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another"* (James 5:14). Do we find it difficult or impossible to admit mistakes or sins to youth and then try to cover up by making excuses or pulling rank? You must also model empathetic repentance for others when disciplining them. Jesus advises, *"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the same measure you use, it will be measured back to you"* (Matthew 7:1-2). Paul speaks of himself to Timothy by writing, *"And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man..."* (I Timothy

1:12-13). Educators and Scripture agree that youth learn primarily by following a specific role model.

### **Involve Youth in the Church**

So often we talk about the youth as being the church of tomorrow. However, we should invite and welcome them, as members of the Church and of the congregation, to participate in all the rights and privileges of the church. They are part of the church today. We need to treat them as such.

According to Romans 12, I Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 4, God has given to each one some gift or talent, which is to be used to edify the Church. And to the extent that each member is functioning, the Church is being built up. We need to view our youth—not only as they are—but as God sees and calls them to be. Trusting in God’s Word we look for that talent, help each youth discover it within and in others, develop it, and deploy it in ministry.

### **Challenge Youth**

Ponder the challenges with which Scripture excites youth. John 1 calls them ‘children of God’; II Corinthians 5 calls them ‘ambassadors for Christ’; Romans 12 ‘living sacrifices’; Acts 1 ‘witnesses’; I Peter 5 ‘living stones, a holy priesthood, a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people’; and Matthew 5 ‘salt of the earth and light of the world’. These are powerful illustrations of what God calls and empowers them to be. Are our youth aware of this and challenged by it? Or are they enslaved by the negativism and cynicism of the world? We must challenge our youth with what God lays before them.

### **Train and Equip**

It seems apparent that the teachers in the early church expected their students to grow to a point spiritually and intellectually where they became active participants in the discipline process. What an exciting objective to teach others to teach others! The writer to the Hebrews says, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food”* (Hebrews 5:12). Paul instructs young Timothy, *“You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”* (II Timothy 2:1-2).

How do we train and equip youth? Moses gives a model for us, *“And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit down, in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates”* (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

In Colossians 1:9b-11, Paul’s prayer suggests five aspects of the process of spiritual growth:

1. **Bible Study**—*“that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will”*
2. **Knowledge**—*“in all wisdom and spiritual understanding”*
3. **Wisdom**—*“that you may have a walk worthy of the Lord”*
4. **Transformation**—*“being fruitful in every good work”*

**5. Sanctification**—*“increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy.”*

But aren't the youth too young, too inexperienced for ministry? Paul tells us, *“But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are”* (I Corinthians 1:27-28). God chose young, despised David over his other brothers to be anointed king of Israel in (I Samuel 16). And look at the reaction of the Sanhedrin to the apostles. *“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus”* (Acts 4:13).

A caution is in order here, ponder this: Impression without Expression = Frustration. To motivate youth with the Gospel and then not to provide guidance and an outlet to express joyful service leads to absolute frustration and alienation. We need to have programs that develop, train and equip our youth to serve the Lord and the Church according to their gifts.

### **Encourage**

We need to heed the second portion of Paul's well cited admonition regarding youth and obedience: *“And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4). Paul repeats this in Colossians 3:21: *“Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.”* Sincerity, empathy, concern, respect and the ability to make age appropriate, guided decisions will lead to establishing the proper motivation and relationship.

### **Parents**

Implied 'Encourage' and taught elsewhere in the Bible is the necessity of a Christian home. Children are influenced during their most formative years by their home situation. Parents have been given the divine responsibility for raising up their children—the Church is there to aid this process. Involve parents in all phases of a youth program—planning, training, guidance, modeling, teaching and discipline.

### **Prayer**

*“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways...The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much”* (James 1:5-8; 5:16b).

As an aside, Timothy was probably between 30 and 40 when Paul wrote those words. It was 11 years after Paul's first imprisonment where we first encountered Timothy. He was at least 30 at this time because that was the age a Jew became a man and was eligible to teach and preach. But he was not older than 40 because the Greek word (*neotetos*) translated “youth” described people up to 40 years of age (or 44 in the Roman world).

As a comparatively young man Timothy may have felt reluctant to instruct his relative elders in the Ephesian congregation. Furthermore, most people regarded older people with great respect in his culture. Paul promised that no one in the church would discredit his teaching ministry if he backed it up with a godly lifestyle. The same is true of our youth.