

7 Ways to Teach Youth to Discern Sexual Predators

When I was 17, I briefly attended an unbiblical church. I was drawn in by the size of the youth group and the swirl of activity. There was plenty of discussion about wealth and prosperity, satanic back-masking in rock music, and spiritual gifts. But I don't recall anyone talking about sin, repentance, sanctification, sacrifice, suffering or living for the glory of God.

The youth-ministry leader was 22 and a recent convert. Plenty of rumors swirled around him, but I gave them no credit until he invited me over to his townhouse. When he acted just like the unchurched men I knew and attempted to initiate a sexual relationship, I called him out. Then I turned him in to the senior pastor. As similar situations surfaced with other girls, much chaos and gossip ensued in the weeks that followed. I'd like to say that this all went down well, but it didn't. It turns out that it is very costly to ignore both common sense (a single man only a few years older is leading the youth ministry?!) and Scripture's guidelines about leadership ("He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil") (1 Tim. 3:6).

In the wake of this mess, I left that church and everything else to do with Christianity. I spent the next 12 years running from God, convinced I had seen the entire spectrum of faith, and it was hollow and deceptive. But God, being rich in mercy (sweet, sweet words!), arrested my attention and regenerated my heart and faith on one Easter Sunday on a trip to South Africa. While I doubt I was genuinely regenerated as a teenager (my journals show little fruit), I still ponder that early church experience from time to time and how it dishonored the gospel.

Most recently, I recalled it as I read about a youth director

in a local church who for five years was sexually involved with many girls from the youth group. The church did a poor job in vetting the hiring of this man (his previous employer told them about inappropriate contact with a 14-year-old girl), in considering the doctrine of sin ("the senior pastor said he was shocked to hear that his youth director could be involved in inappropriate behavior"), and in observing and correcting his questionable public interactions with the teen girls (cuddling, personal attention, partying). What's commendable, however, is that the church has undergone a long, public transformation process to correct the problems and create a church that is responsive to victims of sexual abuse.

Nevertheless, over the past few months, I kept coming back to this one thought: We need to instill discernment in young girls so they can more readily identify abusers and predators. This ought to be embedded in our Titus 2 discipleship, our parenting, and our youth-group leadership. Now please hear me out. I am not piling on condemnation for the girls who were involved in this particular case nor their families. They have my sympathy. But as I read their accounts, I kept thinking about them and many other young women I know who have been tripped up by the same smooth lies. It's the trend I want to address.

Predators and abusers offer the same routine each time: You're special, no one else makes me feel this way, don't tell anyone, here's the justification for my questionable behavior, what we have is unique, etc. It never varies because it so consistently works. And you know why? I'm speaking broadly here, but I believe it is generally true: Because the rest of us puff up the minds of girls with princess mythologies, but we don't (often) equip them to recognize that Prince Charming needs to have some character, not just sweet talk.

I can't tell you how many young women I've mentored who couldn't connect those dots. And in fact, how many got defensive when you pointed out the gap between the words and deeds of the smooth dude in question.

Therefore, based on my own experience, this particular church

incident, and the interactions I've had with other women, here are the initial basics of a discipling discussion about discernment that I think we should have with every budding teenager (boys need to know these standards, too):

- If you can only remember one thing, this is it: What is legitimate and godly is done in the light, known by others, and doesn't violate biblical standards. Anything you experience that is done furtively, in the dark, and kept secret is nearly always sinful.
- Which means young women need to know biblical standards for godly living. They also need to know the Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 passages about the qualifications of leaders so that they can recognize those who twist the Word for their own gain.
- They need to know that a man who genuinely loves them will honor this relationship publicly, a love that is shown like a banner over them (Song 2:4).
- They need to know that a godly man and a future husband is an imitator of God who walks in the light, avoiding sexual immorality, taking no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, and who desires to nourish and cherish his wife (all of Ephesians 5). Therefore, one who pursues sexual immorality and encourages them to lie and deceive others is not an imitator of God and needs to be confronted or exposed.
- They need to know the standards of godly speech, so that a man (especially a man in authority!) who texts and talks to them nonstop about sex is automatically suspect in his motives, because this reveals the defiling overflow of his heart (Matt. 15:19).
- They also need to recognize, in humility, that their desire for romance and pursuit is legitimate, but it can become the very thing that trips them up if they aren't willing to acknowledge this is exactly how predators and abusers operate. If they aren't willing to consider that

they are being lied to in any particular situation, then they aren't going to ask the hard questions—of the men or themselves.

- Love is an action. It is measured equally as much in the deeds of those who claim friendship or affection as it is in the proffered words. Make sure they match.

This are just some of my initial thoughts. I'd like to hear your perspectives too. I don't want young women to distrust men, but to be wise and discerning, able to question improper actions but also eager to encourage the godliness of others around them.

Taken from Carolyn McCulley's blog post "Discernment and Sexual Predators," . Used with permission.