

Reaching Today's AWOL Generation

I love all four Gospels, but Mark is my favorite. I describe it as the Gospel for teenagers—or for anyone with a short attention span. It is the shortest account of Jesus' ministry, and the most fast-paced. It is focused on Jesus' actions, not His sermons, and the word *immediately* appears in it 47 times. If a movie were based on Mark it would be a noisy action flick, complete with screaming demons, instantaneous healings and rioting crowds.

But what I love most about Mark is the back story of its author—who is sometimes referred to as John Mark. He is young when we first see him in Scripture. He was related to Barnabas and closely associated with Peter. (Scholars believe Mark's Gospel is based on what Peter dictated to him). Yet Mark created an embarrassing dilemma for the apostle Paul. We are told that Paul separated from Barnabas in Antioch because Mark deserted the team (see Acts 15:37-40).

We can speculate about what caused this conflict. We don't really know why Mark went AWOL. Did he fear persecution? Did he wimp out because he missed his mother's cooking back in Jerusalem? Or did he go through a period of rebellion? Perhaps. But in the end, the prodigal came home. The epistle of Philemon says Mark began traveling with Paul again (v. 23).

Paul eventually told Timothy: "Pick up Mark and bring him with you, *for he is useful to me for service*" (2 Tim. 4:11b, NASB, emphasis added). "Useful" is putting it mildly! This young guy who experienced failure early in life later wrote a key portion of the Bible!

The lesson is clear: Don't give up on young people. They are totally worth the investment, even if they encounter ups and

downs and zigzags on the journey we call discipleship. Those of us who are in the “older” category must recognize how useful these young Marks are in the plan of God.

I am blessed to have many young Marks in my life these days. They go with me on some of my ministry trips—not to carry my suitcase or to sell my books but to see what it’s like on the front lines. The personal time I spend with them is just as important as any sermon I preach to a crowd. I have come to realize that when I invest in a young Christian, his or her life is marked forever.

Recently a young ministry leader came to me for some counsel. He was frustrated because older people haven’t seemed interested in building a relationship with him or in giving him opportunities to grow spiritually. I asked him for some honest feedback about how leaders relate to the younger generation. I felt his answers needed to be heard by a wider audience. Our conversation went like this:

What do you want most in a mentor?

More than anything I want someone who will listen to me. Whether I’m right or wrong about something, a mentor should take time to listen. I’d love someone to ask me questions about what’s in my heart.

How do you want to be treated by a mentor?

I want to be treated like a son. I know how deeply I love my sons and how I constantly pour love, confidence, wisdom and strength into them. When I correct them, it’s gentle and helpful—even when I discipline them. I want the kind of close, relational Christianity I see in the New Testament. But I

don't want to be treated like a child. I do know some stuff!

What character qualities do you look for in a mentor?

First of all, I want someone who is real. Please relax and stop acting like a preacher. Let's laugh a lot. Let's hang out and have fun. Let's enjoy each other. I also want someone who is eager to teach me! I want to know what it's like for you when you sense the power of God when you pray for people. How do you prepare your messages? Keep me by your side when you're operating in one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Tell me what's happening along the way. Then let me minister with you.

Also, please share your power just like Jesus did. Don't show hostility to other ministers. Realize that your "camp" does not have God in a box, and that there are a lot of things you can learn from other brothers and sisters in Christ. Be willing to learn and grow. Don't fight technology. And please put your wife and family before ministry!

Are you listening to the cry of this emerging generation? Everywhere I go today I remind churches and denominational leaders that we are missing the boat if we aren't investing the bulk of our time discipling a new generation. The church is graying, and many young people have checked out because our approach to ministry has become irrelevant to them.

If we would listen to their hearts, treat them like sons and daughters, invest our time in them and recognize their gifts, they will—like John Mark in the first century—make an amazing

impact on history.

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