

I Was a Teenage Prodigal

Although I attended church as a teenager, I was anything but spiritually grounded. By age 16 I was questioning the Bible, God's authority and all my parents' religious traditions. I flirted with becoming a Jew and then considered atheism. I'm sure I gave my mother fits. But thanks to her prayers, my dad's patience and the intervention of a youth pastor, my life was turned around by the time I headed to college two years later.

To this day I can't figure out why Barry St. Clair took an interest in me. He was a busy guy, involved in training youth pastors all over the country. Yet he invited me to his weekly youth Bible study, included me in his social life and allowed me to hang out with him and his wife and kids at his home.

When he found out I wanted to become a Jew, he didn't lecture me—he just kept on building our friendship while intensifying his prayers. When I decided in 1976 to make Jesus the absolute Lord of my life, Barry was the first person I told.

Today Barry is still a close mentor and one of my dearest friends. I call him before I make any major decision, and he e-mails me almost monthly to say that he is praying for my ministry.

The Lord sent Barry into my life more than 30 years ago. I am grateful that a godly man saw some hidden potential in a confused, frizzy-haired 10th-grader from Atlanta. Today when I speak to teenagers or college students, I get a déjà vu feeling when I realize that I sometimes preach like Barry. He

reproduced himself in me because he took the necessary time for something we don't seem to value much these days: personal, one-on-one discipleship.

In this month's issue we are highlighting the fact that the American church is dangerously close to losing the younger generation (see Ron Luce's article on page 36). As we consider solving this crisis, I propose that we make some radical shifts in our strategy:

1. Focus youth ministry on relationships. Today's teens are the most disenfranchised kids in American history. Many are passed from one house to the other every week depending on whether mom or dad has custody. Is it any surprise that these kids would rather play video games than visit a traditional church?

Sermons and concerts may reach them initially, but the only way to press beyond the pain of divorce and rejection is genuine friendship. Youth today need overdoses of love from surrogate parents and peers who can show them real trust and commitment.

2. Get rid of the hype. A lot of us adults have been conditioned to shout and swoon every time the preacher raises his voice or twitches his arm during a sermon. But teenagers are not impressed. They don't fall on the floor just because somebody places a quivering hand on their heads. They are looking for real spiritual substance, not the charismatic fluff we have been conditioned to applaud.

3. Banish legalism. Many teens leave church because they've been fed a diet of toxic religion. For them, Christianity is

just a bunch of rules about what to wear and what not to smoke. Yet they become radical for Jesus when they discover that real faith is about a close, intimate relationship with a God who can heal their hurts and empower them to work miracles.

4. Start youth churches. Statistics show that we aren't reaching teens fast enough today. We are stupid to think we will reach them by doing church the same way we've done it since Grandma bought the first stained-glass window back in 1935. It's time for radical, out-of-the-box solutions.

If teens aren't showing up to sit on your wooden pews, then plant a youth church at the local skate park or coffee bar. Take the church to them. Then, when kids get saved, let them take leadership roles and implement their own strategies to reach other kids—using their music (and chairs that don't look weird).

Today's prodigals need a shoulder to cry on, a loving home to visit and caring mentors like Barry St. Clair to help them find their way back to the Father. Nothing can replace the power of the personal touch. Youth ministry won't be successful without it.