

Why We Must Invest in the Timothy Generation

Please don't ignore the mandate to disciple young people.

I don't think of myself as a particularly effective youth speaker. I'm in my 50s. No matter what brand of jeans I wear, high school kids are not going to label me "cool."

But when my buddy Jason, a youth pastor from Pennsylvania, asked me to speak at his summer youth retreat, I took the challenge because (1) I wanted to invest in his life, and (2) I thought it would be fun to swim in Lake Erie.

When it comes to ministering to different age groups, I feel the most intimidated when I speak to teens. This is mostly because they are so honest. You can't fool them. They don't wear church masks like adults. They have an uncanny ability to detect insincerity.

So I tried to relax and be myself, even though I was still self-conscious about my age. On the first night I challenged them to forgive their parents—especially their dads—for being distant, absent, critical, abusive or addicted. I didn't have trendy movie clips or animated graphics to illustrate my points. But in the end many of the teens came to the altar to receive prayer, and Jesus healed wounded hearts.

On the second and third nights they opened their hearts wider. A few invited Jesus into their lives for the first time. Others asked for grace to resist sexual temptation. Many more prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. As they gathered at the altar on the last night to worship the Lord, there was a sense of holy abandonment. Their devotion was more intense.

And I had a deep sense of fulfillment that my feeble investment had made a difference.

If I wore a hat I would take it off to honor all the selfless people who devote their lives to youth ministry. It's not a glamorous job, and the pay usually stinks. Youth ministry budgets are often the first to be cut when church donations are down, and many youth pastors are volunteers because ministering to teenagers isn't viewed as a priority.

I'd like to stand on top of a mountain with a bullhorn and make an announcement: "ATTENTION! EVERY CHURCH IN AMERICA NEEDS TO DOUBLE ITS EFFORTS TO REACH THE YOUNGER GENERATION!"

The apostle Paul, who is our model for ministry, made discipling the next generation his central focus. The book of Acts tells us when he first met his disciple Timothy (Acts 16:1-3) and how Timothy was eventually appointed as an apostolic leader in Ephesus. One-third of the New Testament was either written to Timothy or from Paul and Timothy (see the salutations in 2 Cor. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Philem. 1:1). Another epistle was addressed to Paul's young trainee, Titus. Paul's investment in the next generation is reflected in the actual canon of Scripture, yet we've overlooked this principle.

Paul invested his life in Timothy, and he was so proud of him that he told the Philippians, "I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare" (Phil. 2:20, NASB). Paul added: "But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father" (v. 22).

I rarely see these kinds of Paul/Timothy relationships when I look around at the church today. Our lack of discipleship has created a generational breakdown that is reflected in several disturbing trends:

- Some church leaders are getting old and gray, yet they have no succession plan. They hold on to their positions (for financial security?) and leave no room for younger

leaders to learn from them.

- Many churches throw money at youth ministry, as if expensive sound systems or skate parks automatically win kids to Jesus. But the best financial investment we can make is in a real, live youth worker, not a program or a building. What today's kids need is someone who cares.
- In the typical American church today teens are bored and unchallenged. Leaders who are out of touch with the needs of youth keep church in a time warp, so teens naturally check out. They are not exposed to the power of the Holy Spirit, the adventure of missions or the excitement of winning people to Jesus. It's no wonder that many teens leave their faith behind when they go to college.

The solution? Like Paul, we must go out and find our Timothys. We must invest in them personally. It's not about preaching to them; they want a relationship with us that is genuine. They want spiritual moms and dads who are approachable, accepting, affirming and empowering. If we don't mentor them now, there won't be anyone running alongside us when it's time to pass our baton.

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