

The Bible for Today's Young People

Mike Seaton¹

The year 2011 marks the four-hundredth anniversary of the translation of the King James or Authorized Bible and the Church in Britain is using this as an opportunity to encourage people to rediscover the Bible in new, exciting ways and to recognize its relevance for twenty-first-century living.

This paper seeks to explore how we should involve young people with God's word. The response is based upon three key questions. What, specifically, do we want to accomplish? What are our goals in involving young people in Scripture? How does this influence the ways we minister with young people?

What specifically do we want to accomplish?

In order to respond to this question we need first to understand the context in which we are living and ministering.

Since 312, when the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, Britain had been considered a Christian country.² However, we are now moving into a post-Christendom epoch. 'Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence'³. The spiritual landscape of Britain is changing.

In what we might call a Christendom context, the Church's work with young people could assume a general knowledge of the Christian faith, a strong Christian influence in culture, and reasonable parental support for its work . . . None of this remains the case in a post-Christendom context, where most young people are substantially ignorant of the Christian faith, where young people are the generation with the lowest percentage of belief in God, and where the churches compete for prime time on Sunday mornings with a wide range of leisure activities, and parents no longer believe that their children 'ought' to go to Sunday school.⁴

Historically the Church has placed great emphasis on the Sunday schools. When Sunday schools were founded in 1780 by Robert Raikes they were strongly critiqued. Some people regarded them as an early form of evangelism; some suggested they were about the indoctrination

of children; whilst others believed them to be about the mass education of working classes which might ultimately threaten the hierarchy of Britain. Sunday school lessons actually consisted of instruction on the Bible and the catechism. They were evangelistic in the sense that through Christian education it was anticipated that children and young people would experience a facilitated encounter with God and become part of the Christian faith.

Many of the Bible study programmes, courses and resources that have been written specifically to provide Christian education to young people are based on this methodology. This model of youth ministry fits with an 'ecclesiocentric' mission emphasis. Fuzz Kitto argues that in such a context the underlying ideology of youth work is that 'young people need to come to church because God is found in church. The world is sinful; coming to church continues to redeem us, and to renew us as the force for grace and the means of grace'.⁵ This means there is an emphasis on doctrine, education, and tradition, as through learning people will find God. It assumes that young people want to be Christians and a part of the Church and that they have a basic understanding of the concepts of God and religious language. There is a belief that young people will come to the Church if there are good youth work programmes, and it is accepted that leadership is on the basis of age, position and educational success. Kito also suggests that the Church has tended to view young people as a problem, opting to offer programmes until young people become adults:

The church culture that grew out of Christendom developed a style of youth ministry that was church based. Primarily it concentrated on teaching the Bible and community customs, and aimed at holding young people in the church through fun, games, activities and group membership . . . It seemed that the aim was to maintain interest in coming to church, or at least church buildings, until they became adults and could become real Christians.⁶

The 2005 English Church Census reported that:

. . . on a 'typical' Sunday around 6.3% of the English population were to be found in church. Of these, 6% were young people aged 11 to 14 years and 5% aged 15 to 19 (365,000 young people altogether). Teenagers are the smallest group in the church. To put it more starkly, Brierley points out that 49% of churches in England had *no* 11 to 14 year olds in their congregation on the day of the survey, and 59% had no 15 to 19 year olds.⁷

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In their book *Gone but not forgotten* Richter and Francis present research supporting different rationales as to why people of all ages no longer regularly attend church. Many are unsurprising: change of personal circumstances, dissatisfaction with the teaching received, too liberal, too conservative, frustrations with the styles of worship, or a change in cultural values. However, one argument of particular significance is that churches often manage to introduce people to faith in Christ, but then fail to travel alongside them as faith develops and grows. The impression given is that becoming a Christian is more about arriving than travelling. Faith involves development and change, a view supported by John Wesley, 'who believed that Christians should grow towards "perfect holiness"'. The spiritual development of Christians should not finish at the point when they are converted or confirmed.⁸

Douglas Hubery said:

What do we mean by discipleship? Do we consider it solely in terms of an intellectual acceptance of religious truths? Are we satisfied to describe it as an emotion evoked by the name of Christ? Is it defined as 'living the good life'? Surely we all believe that discipleship involves the whole of life – reason, emotion and will. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, and with all thy strength – and thy neighbour as thyself', said Jesus.⁹

Therefore Christian discipleship is about living as a follower of Christ.

David Lyon ¹⁰ suggests that the decline in church attendance, along with a fading interest in rites of passage, is evidence of a wider process that is affecting society, that of secularization:

The word is used to allude to diverse aspects of social and religious change including such items as the transfer to secular control of activities formerly undertaken by religious agents and of social functions which religion previously fulfilled. It also alludes to the decay of religious institutions – churches, Sunday schools, uniformed organisations and ancillary organisations.¹¹

The recent move by the Coalition Government to link the new English Baccalaureate to the schools ranking system is dividing opinion and creating a moral dilemma for school management. The qualification is linked to five core subjects of Maths, English, Science, a foreign language and History or Geography. Religious Education is not currently included.

There is an expectation that schools will promote a curriculum leading to better performance in league tables, at the expense of optional subjects such as Religious Education:

We cannot say with accuracy that governments are systematically eliminating Christianity from contemporary culture; although we could with some certainty insist that Christian faith has been driven from public life into a privatized world of personal choice and leisure pursuits. In such a domain, private opinion rather than public truth rules, and Christian tradition and canon become increasingly difficult to maintain.¹²

Changes in education policy and a rise in secularization are just two recent cultural, social and economic trends that influence the lives of young people. Changes in employment working patterns have directly impacted family lifestyles; increasing mobility through improved transport affects the regular contact people have with extended families and friends; divorce, changes in family life and a fragmented society; increased free time, sport and leisure opportunities; and high levels of poverty are all well documented.

In his book *Jesus at Tesco* Philip Clarke states that 'church is presented with new challenges to belief and mission . . . Christianity has been under attack for generations from philosophy, science, humanism, and materialism and, though the influence of these factors has increased, they do not constitute a new threat.'¹³ The main challenge to Christianity, suggests Clarke is:

. . . coming from a different perspective, a changing view of the world – 'post modernism'. This is an amorphous collection of relativist ideas marked mainly by a feeling that ultimate answers and propositional truths are not necessary. There are no benchmarks for decision-making and no 'grand narratives', which give a background for our understanding of the world. You can believe and act as you wish, what is true and right for one person need not be for the next.

Lyon suggests that consumerism, communication and information technologies should therefore be seen as carriers of postmodernity, working in tandem. He explains that debate has occurred about which of these two characteristics has had greater influence on the current social trends. Whilst it is true that 'the growth of communication and information tech-

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nologies (CITs) is one of the most striking and transformative changes of the twentieth century, they do not in themselves transform anything, but they contribute to the establishment of novel contexts of social interaction'.¹⁴ 'Consumer choice has, in turn become the criterion for much more than shopping. Such skills are now required in education, health and of course politics, where the slogan "free to choose" has achieved credal status.'¹⁵ On a personal level it is about a personal identity constructed through consumerism rather than a belief that our identity is God-given. Many of the values and ideas of consumerism are promoted through the new media.

The place of church in the lives of individuals and society has shifted. Things that were once taken for granted we can no longer assume. The Church needs to think differently.

'The Christian gospel tells the story of a missionary God. Relationship is at the centre of the being of the God whom we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We see the God who is three and who is one as he is revealed in mission. We know of a God in no other way than as one who seeks humanity in relationship.'¹⁶ 'Understanding God's heart and passion for reaching people will significantly help us in our approaches to mission with young people. Rather than seeing mission primarily as something we have to do, it is much simpler, and much more authentic, to identify how God is working among a particular group of young people and join in with this.'¹⁷ It may lead to the renewal of our current expressions of church, or lead to new, dynamic and exciting styles. As Bonhoeffer reminds us, 'Every attempt to impose the gospel by force, to run after people and proselytize them, to use our own resources to arrange the salvation of other people, is both futile and dangerous.'¹⁸

The Church's approach to youth ministry has traditionally been educational and pastoral. That was fine when society knew what Christianity was and what the church was for. It is no longer possible to assume that such teaching will occur through our schools. Now it's about enabling a new way of being church to be born: a church about mission, community and worship; a church that is inspiring and energizing. How young people understand and interact with Scripture is a crucial aspect. Scripture enables young people to encounter God, and challenges them to live distinctive and potentially transformative Christian lives among their peers in a post-Christendom, postmodern world.

What are our goals in involving young people in Scripture?

- Helping young people hear God's story
- Helping young people merge God's story with their story
- Transformation of individuals, and communities

'Jesus as the source of the Christian story left no written records about it. In so far as texts played a significant part in early Christianity, they did so because they were already recollections of the sayings and events of Jesus and the apostles.'¹⁹ The story took time to be fully explicated.

Stories are shared between people, they are performative, and they can offer understanding about who we are, as well as addressing the deeper questions of life. 'Christianity is, at core, not an abstract philosophy, but a story; not pure factual reportage, but a recounting of one life in order that other lives might be transformed.'²⁰ Walker²¹ refers to this story around the Christ event as the 'grand narrative'. He explains that there are nine chapters to this narrative:

- Outside time and space there is a God who is good and lives in loving and perfect communion as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- God calls time and space into existence with the creation of the cosmos out of nothing, and like its creator this universe is also very good.
- Creation includes the formation of our world, where human beings are made in the image of God. This gives them power freely to follow God or reject him.
- Humankind, however, wilfully rebels against God. This results in the enmity between people and God and the estrangement of all creation from its source – this is so because human beings, as 'matter made articulate', betray all of creation.
- God takes the initiative to end this estrangement, because his nature is love. First he chooses a human tribe, the Jews, and establishes a special relationship with them in order to demonstrate his desire to restore communion with the human race. Second, after several hundreds of years of favoured treatment, to show that he wishes to extend this special relationship to the whole world, he enters the physical universe through the incarnation of his eternal Son. He is joined to created matter – human nature – in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.
- Jesus achieves God's desire to restore broken communion between himself and creation through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.

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- During his life-time, Jesus Christ calls disciples as the authentic witness to and co-participants of his work. Through them he *institutes* a Church, an *ecclesia* – the people of God. The people of God, in all generations, do not merely follow their founder, but are organically linked to him by divine favour, though not by nature. This is accomplished by the Holy Spirit, who is sent by Jesus from his Father after the resurrection. The Holy Spirit *constitutes* the Church.
- The people of God, under the Spirit's guidance, are the bearers of the good news of God's restoration of the world through Jesus. They are bearers in the double sense that they are guardians of the apostolic 'deposit of faith', and the tellers of the story.
- The good news will not end like the final chapter of a book, because it is a never-ending story which continues beyond time in everlasting communion with God. But it will reach its fulfilment at the end of time, when Christ will return in glory so that 'God may be in all'.

Walker indicates that, unlike many stories that become distorted by cultural change, the grand narrative has stood the test of time within a changing world. The grand narrative is a story with the power to transform lives – whether that is the teller's life or the listeners. In order to do that it needs to be contextualized, but in a way that does not lose the integrity and purpose of the storytellers.

The Church is called to tell the Story, yet the opening section of this paper infers that it is either failing to undertake this task or not articulating it in a style appropriate for a post-modern society – instead it seems intent on relying on historical modes, such as the process of affiliation and education. Reviving the gospel as a narrative is a fundamental necessity of Christian identity. We all need a 'form of life' to live by, but a form in this sense is not an abstract philosophy or a coherent set of principles, it is a way of life, a narrative of belonging. If Christians cannot remember to whom they belong, how can they pass their story on?

*In short 'when working with young people . . . do not try to call them back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.'*²²

How does this influence the way we minister with young people?

For Christians, 'the one short tale we feel to be true' is the gospel. It is our grand narrative, and the one we wish to recommend to today's world

as a story to live by. The revelations of Jesus emphasize this. In this post-Christendom culture, the biblical narrative is no longer the big story by which society and communities operate, but only one of many stories.

We need an intimate knowledge of the culture to share the faith with young people. Translation happens when we look through the eyes of young people's culture at the Bible. We need to determine what is good news for the group we are working with – what brings God's life to people? Sharing the Christian faith with young people is a process. We need to find different starting points for young people to engage with the grand narrative of God and then eventually to explore the whole story.

There now needs to be a focus on faith sharing through story, lifestyle, justice, compassion and proclamation where young people are offered a future, meaning, identity and belonging. Young people are searching spiritually and need their focus to be living their Christian lives in the world, rather than in Christian ghettos. Youth work is relational. 'The difference between secular youth work and youth ministry is that the latter do not regards relationships as an end in themselves but as a means by which young people may experience the presence of Christ.'²³

The Bible plays a central and utterly vital role in Christian ministry with young people:

God's Word provides our only trustworthy guide to reality, for it is God's revelation in words of His own accurate knowledge of the meaning and purpose of our lives and how we can live them 'in Christ'. For anyone to live and mature as a Christian, they must learn to see life from God's viewpoint and respond to everything in life on that basis. Youth must come to terms with God's word as His revelation of reality and learn to act on it.

The assumption that 'telling' passes on knowledge in useful form is a delusion that has long plagued Evangelicals. Convinced that Scripture is God's Word containing information that we need and that has a vital meaning for us, we have been quick to emphasise communication of biblical content. But we have not been as quick to check and see if we communicate it in useful form – if our reading and teaching of the Bible has had God's intended impact on our lives.²⁴

Probably nowhere in youth ministry has our intellectual-spiritual orientation been more in evidence than in our interaction with Scripture. And probably nowhere in youth ministry do we need to involve youth as whole persons with the biblical word, which speaks out decisively about their

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whole lives 'Somewhere we need to bring young people into that kind of contact with God's Word that carries them beyond understanding it to a place where the divine perception permeates personality, reshapes values, and is expressed in decision' (ibid).

Scripture has not been inspired by God for 'simple intellectualization'. Rather, God's word bursts upon us with the demand that we submit ourselves to it, permitting God to reshape our personalities through his revelation. And the test of our commitment, as well as the process through which growth in Christ takes place, is decision. Decision takes the Bible and our faith beyond the realm of 'belief about' and to the realm of positive, obedient response – into the realm of action.

It is important to view Scripture in a reality framework rather than simply in a truth framework. The Bible's teachings are not merely to be believed but are to be acted on. It is important to understand that our present educational systems are designed for the communication of cheap truth. It focuses on the transmission of information that can be accepted (believed) without any necessary change in behaviour, without personal decision. 'But the Bible communicates a costly truth – the kind of truth that not only has the potential implications for life, but also in fact demands decision. Thus, the Scripture says, "Don't I beg you, not only hear the message but put it into practice; otherwise you are merely deluding yourselves" (James. 1:22).'²⁵

'Teaching the Bible' or 'getting people to study the Bible' then demands that we pay attention not only to accurate transmission of biblical information and concepts, but also to what must happen within learners when they confront a reality that demands response and change. And we must never forget that the Bible, understood as God's revelation of reality, contains costly, not cheap truth. As such a revelation, God's word must be taught for decision, not for 'acceptance'.

If we continue to teach the Bible in old ways, youth may well accept its teachings as true but file that truth away as irrelevant to life. If we use old structures in teaching the Bible as a reality structure demands decision and action, young people may well reject its viewpoint as being in conflict with their own unexamined but dearly held views.²⁶

If we teach the Bible in contexts where youth is confronted with God's revelation of reality (and thus are faced with the necessity of decision and action) and where they are free to explore, express, and change their values, then and only then can we expect transformed lives. Youth ministry, then,

must confront young people with God's word as a reality demanding their decision and must permit them to explore this reality in open, supportive relationships with others. When young people's lives are transformed then they have the potential to transform the communities of which they are a part.

The local church as an association of persons does not automatically or necessarily function as a transforming community. As in many types of associations, the influence of the church group on the believer may in fact produce only conformity – a situation in which the lowest level of acceptance of biblical values may produce a high degree of conformity in public statement. Simply having a group we call our 'church youth group' or 'youth fellowship' is no guarantee that the purposes God has in mind for the church will be fulfilled.

In his book *Youth Work and the Mission of God*, Pete Ward suggests that to contextualize the gospel for other cultures we need to use principles similar to those of modern Bible translators. Initially we need to be fully acquainted with the Bible as a whole, in its original language, understanding the context in which it was written. We then need to get to know the culture of the people with whom we wish to share the message. This means living with them so that we can understand the structure, grammar, vocabulary and language. We also need to gain an understanding of the ritual and symbolic language of the community. Finally we need to offer a contextualized translation using dynamic equivalents, which allows an accurate presentation of the text but in a way that makes sense to the culture of the people.

The Christian faith must be expressed within culture for it to come alive for people. It is the Holy Spirit that grants us understanding. We should not assume that what we receive in our culture will be the same in another person's.

The church is called to proclaim the gospel and teach the Christian tradition to each generation of young people, but it must approach the gospel with the questions which arise out of young people's experience. As they discover Christ for themselves, young people will form their own opinions of the way in which the gospel is brought to them, and they will have insights which are essential to the Church's growth.²⁷

Christian faith cannot be learnt. Churches need to direct their ministry with young people to the growing of disciples with a balanced approach to

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theology and within a Christian community that values, understands and affirms.

Lawrence Richards offers five processes for faith development these are:

1. Belonging to a faith community Young people need to feel that they are a part of an authentic faith community that models the messages they are given, helping them to give and receive love – essential in developing faith.
2. Participating in a faith community Young people need experiences to serve as well as to be served, this is how their faith will become living and life influencing.
3. Modelling on people in the faith community The people in leadership roles have an influence over the lives of young people. If they are recognised as being genuine young people will identify with them and emulate them.
4. Instruction of the Word of God The bible needs to be an integral part of everyday living. It is important to understand the context when it was written, to explore the multiple messages it may convey and to be able to apply it to everyday living.
5. Opportunities for responsible choices Young people need opportunity to practise their faith in a safe and supportive environment, to question and challenge without fear of rejection or rebuke.

‘Translating the Bible with young people is an incarnational ministry. It demands immersion in the culture. Preaching the gospel faithfully and dynamically demands similar involvement in given life situations, in all their fullness and complexity, so that the truth of God can penetrate all the bright spots and dark corners of personal and corporate lives.’²⁸

NOTES

- 1 Mike Seaton is the Director of Children and Youth in the Connexional Team.
- 2 Jo and Nigel Pimlott, *Youth work after Christendom*, Paternoster, 2008, p. 4.
- 3 Stuart Murray, *Post-Christendom*, Paternoster, 2004, p. 19.
- 4 Tim Sudworth with G. Cray and C. Russell, *Mission shaped youth – rethinking young people and church*, Church House Publishing, 2007: pp. 8–9.
- 5
- 6 F. Kitto, *The Church and Youth Ministry*, Lynx Communications, 1995, pp. 21–23.
- 7 Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, Sally Nash with Christopher Cocksworth, *The Faith of Generation Y*, Church House Publishing, 2010.
- 8 Philip Richter and Leslie Francis, *Gone but not forgotten*, DLT, 1998, p. 53.
- 9 Douglas S Hubery, *Youth Club Evangelism*, Methodist Youth Department, p. 6.
- 10 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, 2000, Polity Press.
- 11 Richardson and Bowden, *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1983, p. 534.
- 12 Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*, SPCK, 1996, p. 3.
- 13 Philip Clarke, *Jesus at Tesco*, Cliff College Publishing, 1997, p. 8.
- 14 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, Polity Press, 2000, p. 13.
- 15 D. Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland*, Polity Press, 2000, p. 12.
- 16 Pete Ward, *Youth Work and the Mission of God*, SPCK, 1997, pp. 25–26.
- 17 Jo and Nigel Pimlott, *Youth work after Christendom*, Paternoster, 2008, p. 65.
- 18 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, London: SCM Press, 1959, p. 129.
- 19 Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*, SPCK, 1996, p. 22.
- 20 Robert Johnston, *Reel Spirituality*, Baker Academic, 2000, p. 78.
- 21 Andrew Walker, *Telling the Story*, SPCK, 1996, pp. 13–14.
- 22 A youth worker, quoted in Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*.
- 23 Pete Ward, *Youth Work and the Mission of God*, SPCK, 1997, p. 93.
- 24 Lawrence Richards, *Youth Ministry*, Zondervan, 1985, p. 159.
- 25 Lawrence Richards, *Youth Ministry*, Zondervan, 1985, p. 163.
- 26 Lawrence Richards, *Youth Ministry*, Zondervan, 1985, p. 167.
- 27 *Youth Apart*, National Society & Church House Publishing, 1996, p. 25.
- 28 D. Borgman, *When Kumbaya is not enough*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1997, p. 33.