

Sculpting a Strong Inner Core: The Spiritual Needs of Young Adults

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In my first appointment, my lay leader for the four churches I was appointed to said to me, “Rev. Swanson, your most important work will be making sure that our children, youth and young people don’t leave us.” I asked him why he saw that as a priority. His reply was, “I make a living raising hogs, and every hog farmer knows no pigs equals no hogs!” I realized then and even now what this man was trying to say in language he understood: if we don’t invest in the children, the youth, and young adults, then we need not expect mature Christians to populate our churches or transform our world. I will never forget how this man expressed to me his greatest aspiration for his church and the other three was that he wanted them to have a future beyond himself. Three of those churches had cemeteries that had set up funds to insure that every member, and even those that claimed to be members, would have proper resting places. For those churches the most important lesson they tried to teach me was nurture “the young ones.” Do what is necessary to insure the future of this congregation. This doesn’t imply that we didn’t from time to time have a few arguments over priorities that sometimes seemed to contradict this, but these words kept me focused on the need to create a climate conducive to the growth and vitality of young disciples. So I set about trying to find ways to ensure the spiritual health of the young ones and develop their leadership potential.

The Barna Group must have had this man’s spirit and the spirit of those four small churches in mind as they began to sift through the data they gathered and later released in a 2019 report entitled, “The CONNECTED Generation.” This report represented respondents from the ages of 18 to 35 from 25 different countries. David Kinnaman writes in the report, “We must slow down and listen to a generation that is too often talked at and talked about.” And I would add that in my circles they are often misunderstood, misquoted, underrepresented and misused. I believe The Barna Group is sounding a much-needed alarm. And I believe it is Christ-centered in nature.

In the 14th through the 17th chapters of John’s gospel Jesus is fully aware of his impending departure and takes the time to discuss personally with his followers His design for the future of the movement. This group was made up of primarily what we would label today as young adults. Even Jesus was between 30 and 33 years old. If you listen carefully, Jesus outlined two very key points—keeping the community of believers together and helping them become stronger so they could influence the world. Throughout chapter 15 of John’s gospel Jesus uses words like “abide in me and I’ll abide in you,” “abide in my love,” and “bear fruit.”

Jesus' desire for this group was to "abide" in him and with each other. This sounds very much to my Wesleyan ears as a precursor to John Wesley's emphasis on small groups as an instrument to guide us through the third work of grace, sanctification. It is Wesley's emphasis on "spreading scriptural holiness throughout the world." Holiness is that which brings about individual and group (social) change (transformation). It appears to me that for Wesley holiness takes place within a social construct. The individual is transformed as the person interacts with others and the others are transformed as well. This does not imply transformation is isolated from the rest of the world, but that it begins there and "spreads throughout the nations..."

David N. Field writes in an article for *Holiness: The Journal of the Wesley House Cambridge* (vol 1, no. 2 [2015]):

The only place where Wesley uses the phrase 'social holiness' is in his Preface to the 1739 edition of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In a critique of the 'mystic divines' he refers to three fundamental issues. The first is the 'foundation' of the Christian religion; for Wesley this foundation is justification by faith on the basis of Christ's death. The second is the manner of building on the foundation: Holiness, social justice and the mission of the Church. Wesley argues that holiness is to be achieved through active participation with other Christians in the life of the Christian community.

The third problem that Wesley identifies is the 'superstructure' which is being built: that is, religion itself. The religion of the 'mystic divines' is 'solitary religion', which is focused on contemplation and does not include outward works. It is in contrast to this understanding of holiness that Wesley states: 'The Gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness, but social holiness.'

The 18-35 age group that Barna studied lifted up an important factor as to what they are interested in that churches fail to provide for them: radical connectivity. The report states it this way: "The vast majority of the Connected Generation feels the impact of broad, global trends more than they feel loved and supported by others close to them." This need to be in relationship is not being met.

Jesus saw this need in those who followed him centuries back. Perhaps it is a universal need for this age group that spans the globe and time. It is obvious that we (Wesleyans and Pentecostals) as a whole have either lost this capacity or have decided no longer to offer it. It fosters what is needed most to be Christian: the dire need for love, community, and transformation of self and the world.

In our quest to help our people to be more active in the living out of their faith we must also help them to go inward in their relationship with Christ and others. The two are not separate, nor is one more important than the other. It is a balance that we are called to maintain. We cannot foster in others what we do not personally practice. It is amazing that Barna points out this correlation between a strong faith and being connected. Again, turning to David Field in the same article:

John Wesley described the mission of Methodism as: 'To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land.' In Wesley's understanding, Methodism's mission was the formation of holy people whose presence and praxis would reform the Church and society. The gospel that Wesley proclaimed was that God, in love, not only desired to forgive people but also to deliver them from the power of sin and transform them by the Spirit. His goal was that people who responded would become holy people. Hence his emphasis on their integration into classes and societies through which they could grow in holiness. In contemporary Europe the understanding of the mission of the Church as 'spreading scriptural holiness' or as the formation of holy people does not resonate with the majority of Methodists. For Christians and churches grappling with how to interpret, proclaim and live the gospel in an increasingly secularized culture the concept of 'holiness' appears to be esoteric, archaic, irrelevant, and even alienating. This is intensified where 'holiness' has been associated with other-worldliness and legalistic piety.

If Field is right, then we need not to run away from the term "holiness," which also provides us with an anchor and helps us trace our position to our origins. We must begin to interpret for people today that "holiness" is more than a noun. It is also a verb that demands transformation and movement on the part of the believer and pushes the believer to have an impact by one's presence and power in a world that needs to be shaped to see itself through the eyes of Jesus.

Jesus, in John's gospel, pointed his followers to the future. These young people want a future filled with opportunities for them to have meaningful impact. They desperately want to believe that their faith makes a difference in them and the world in which they live. They want to go deep in their faith. In the midst of the challenges that people face today we need to offer them a faith that is not afraid to face those challenges with a vibrant inner-core relationship with Christ, empowered through a realistic presence of The Holy Spirit and lived out in community.

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