

TEACH ONE REACH ONE

**Effective
Teen Ministry**

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Chapter 1 – Teens: Fact and Fiction

Often Christian adults avoid ministering to teens, because they have heard how difficult it can be. Perhaps they have seen news stories about negative teen behavior like illegal drug use or violence. Maybe they believe all teens are disrespectful or have no interest in learning about God. Or you may know Christians who believe teens are no different from adults and should be in adult classes and activities.

So what is the truth about teenagers? What do they really need in an effective teen ministry in order to build a strong faith foundation and grow towards their godly potential? This book will help you to better understand teens and what they need from ministry. You will learn how to help them build those strong faith foundations and grow towards the potential God has given them. Whether you are beginning a new ministry to teens or growing a current teen ministry, you will also find the best practices you need to help you build a healthy ministry to young people.

The Importance of Teen Ministry

So why is ministry to teens so important? The teen years are crucial for spiritual development. These are the years when many young people are baptized. It is a time when some Christian teens begin taking personal responsibility for the health and growth of their faith. It is also a time when many teens make choices that can eventually pull them away from God.

The good news is that about 64% of people who become Christians, do so before the age of eighteen.¹ Teens are interested in understanding the world around them and how they can make a positive difference. Many are interested in learning and growing in different ways, including spiritually. Adolescents are capable of more abstract thinking and can handle more responsibility than children. They are able to begin moving from an adult-directed faith to becoming personally responsible for participating in the spiritual practices necessary to have a stronger faith and reach their godly potential.

The teen years are when the parts of the brain responsible for self-control and decision making are most responsive to coaching by others.² Without this crucial coaching though, their decisions may be rash, unwise and even ungodly. Their hormones often fluctuate wildly, sometimes causing temporary changes in a teen's temperament, health and even personality. Many teens also attempt to function on much less than the eight to ten hours of sleep doctors recommend for their age group,³ leaving them moody, lacking energy and susceptible to temptations.

¹ National Association of Evangelicals, "When Americans Become Christians."

² Griffin, "Adolescent Neurological Development," 5(4): 62

³ National Sleep Foundation, "Teens and Sleep."

Teens crave relationship and guidance – even if they do not always admit it. This makes them vulnerable to peer pressure – both positive and negative. They still care deeply about what their parents think and want to spend more meaningful time with them. Though they may not ask for help, many teens are open to having adult mentors. Most teens realize they need someone who will help them navigate all of the crucial twists and turns of adolescence.

Unfortunately, the teen years are also a time when many young people begin experimenting with sinful behaviors. They can easily become enmeshed in these sins – especially when their peers encourage these risky behaviors. Some teens also begin experiencing serious earthly consequences for their sins. As young people begin receiving responses in school and media to any of their questions and doubts left unanswered by Christians, they can begin to experience damage in their faith foundations. Some of these disillusioned teens will begin experimenting with other alternatives to Christianity, including secularism and atheism.

Teens involved with computers and social media have access to more knowledge than ever before in mere seconds. Unfortunately, this information can be misleading, false and at times in direct opposition to God's word. Social media can seem deceptively connecting, while leaving them with feelings of isolation, envy, greed and even depression and low self-esteem.

It is understandable why many Christians are intimidated at the thought of trying to guide young people through this crucial time in their spiritual lives. There appear to be as many potentially serious problems as there are exciting opportunities to help them grow spiritually. Without godly guidance though, many teens will succumb to the influence of the worldly culture that surrounds them.

Gathering Data for Your Ministry

When attempting to minister to teens, you need to answer some basic questions first. Who are the teens your ministry hopes to teach and serve? How much do you know about them? What do they experience on a typical day? How strong are their spiritual foundations? Do they have the resources to grow spiritually and reach their godly potential? What cultural influences are impacting them? What special secular and spiritual needs do they have?

A great way to get some basic information is to look at statistics. They are not perfect, but they can give you a fairly accurate overview of some important facts about teens in general and the teens in your area. It is important to remember, though, that statistics can be gathered or interpreted with a particular agenda. Be careful to use any statistics as guideposts, not indisputable facts.

What are some of the more reliable places to find helpful statistics about teens? General statistics on teens for an entire country can usually be found on government or international websites. Additional statistics about teens and social issues like drug use, teen pregnancy, homelessness, poverty, and more can often be found on government websites for your country, region, or city. (Note, some areas have a reputation for under-reporting the impact of negative social issues.) While these statistics do not give you information about specific teens, they are helpful for understanding the types of problems many teens in your area face.

If you are looking for statistics on the impact of various factors on the spiritual health of young people, the Barna Group⁴ has an impressive amount of data. Although they have historically gathered their data in the United States, they believe much of what they have discovered is applicable to other cultures. They are working to compile and release data for other countries in the coming years. Even if you find the current data puzzling when applied to your culture, it can alert you to important areas your ministry may need to analyze more carefully.

It is important to remember that statistics can only give you a snapshot of the teens in a particular geographical area. You also need to get more detailed information about the teens in the place where you plan to serve. In many locations, areas as small as a neighborhood or a city block can have unique issues not captured by general statistics. To find that crucial information, surveys are often your best option.⁵

While written surveys can be helpful, at times one on one or small group interviews can give you more details. Interviews give people a way to tell you important information that may be missed by a survey. The people conducting the interviews should be personable and non-threatening. They have to encourage openness, without attempting to influence the answers given by participants. Interviewers have to be open to hearing potential criticism about Christianity, their church, or their ministry – whether or not it is accurate.

Establishing Your Ministry

Once you believe you have enough data, you will need to make some important decisions. Is there a particular teen issue you want to address in your ministry, like a ministry to homeless teens? Do the statistics give you clues about any special felt or spiritual needs of the teens in your area? Is there a particular group of teens in your area that is underserved, like teens who have issues with substance abuse? One ministry cannot effectively minister to every teen and every issue in your area. Analyzing the information you found can help you focus your ministry more clearly or encourage you to begin new ministries to address specific teens and their issues.

⁴ <http://barna.com>

⁵ See Appendix 1: Conducting a Ministry Survey.

If you are beginning a new teen ministry or hoping to increase the number of teens you serve, where can you find teens who may be open to learning more about God? The actual answer is going to vary depending upon your location and the chosen focus of your ministry. At times, the teens already served by your church can introduce you to peers who may be interested. In other situations, hanging out where teens love to gather – playing a sport informally in their neighborhood, for example – can create ministry opportunities. Some ministries find creating a safe space for teens to spend their free time or get help with their felt needs can bring new teens to a ministry.

Felt Needs are needs experienced consciously that may relate to a sense of deprivation in those areas. Felt needs often include material goods (such as food, water, clothing, and shelter), as well as needs for support services (like healthcare or tutoring).

You may have to experiment a bit to find the best outreach method for your area. Using what you learned from statistics and interviews can help make these initial outreach efforts more effective. Often ministry outreach is not successful because we are trying to provide something our local teens do not need or do not think they need, instead of what will actually help them in ways that capture their attention. In a later chapter, we will give more detailed information on finding and engaging teens in your ministry.

Setting Goals for Your Ministry

After you have identified the teens your ministry will initially serve, it is important to set some goals.⁶ These goals should be specific and measurable. Having these goals and reviewing them regularly with everyone in the ministry will help keep you focused. This is particularly important if your ministry is addressing felt and spiritual needs simultaneously. Often these ministries become secular over time, in part because volunteers forget the spiritual needs of those they serve, while trying to meet their overwhelming felt needs.

Specific, measurable goals also help reduce conflict amongst volunteers. Often these conflicts emerge because people have very different ideas of what makes a particular ministry effective. They may also have very different ways of determining the success of a ministry or ministry event. Having written goals means everyone is measuring effectiveness and success in the same manner.

In addition to the specific measurable goals you create for your ministry, your ministry team will want to keep in mind the more general goals of any ministry to teens. These are some of the elements teens need to build a strong spiritual foundation and reach their godly potential. So what are these general goals?

⁶ See Appendix 2: Creating Ministry Goals.

- **Bible Knowledge.** Teens need a personal knowledge of what is in the Bible. They need to know who God is and what He wants from them and for them.
- **Application Principles.** Teens need to understand what God wants them to learn from the stories and scripture passages in the Bible. They need to know what God's commands and principles will look like when put into practice in their daily lives.
- **Christian Life Skills.** Knowing what God wants them to do is very different from knowing how to do what God wants them to do. Many teens need help in Christian life skills like godly conflict resolution, stewardship of their finances, faith sharing and more. Christian life skills training and practice can provide them with the needed skills to do the things God wants them to do.
- **Gift Discovery, Development and Use.** God has given every teen at least one gift to use to serve Him. Often these gifts go undiscovered and undeveloped. Teens are often not ready to serve when God gives them opportunities. They may not realize that God has given them a gift to serve in that situation or they have not developed the gift enough to be helpful. Teens need assistance in discovering and developing their gifts and guided practice in using them to serve God.
- **Servant Leadership Skills.** All Christians are leaders. They may lead a ministry or a ministry activity at some point, but they should all have the servant leadership skills to comfortably share their faith and lead others to Christ.

You have your potential teens identified and your goals. Before you continue, there is one more area we need to discuss about adolescents that will impact your teens, their faith and your ministry – the teen brain.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the challenges teens face that can impact ministry to teens?
2. What are some of the factors that make the teen years an optimum age for a ministry dedicated especially to them?
3. What are some sources for statistics about the teens in your area?
4. List some of the information you can find about the teens in your area. Include general demographic information as well as any statistics you found on potential social issues the teens in your area may face.
5. List at least three special areas of focus a ministry or ministry event for teens in your area could address that would meet the felt needs of teens in your community.
6. List three potential specific goals for your ministry to teens.
7. Explain why each of the general goals given for teen ministry is an important aspect of an effective teen ministry.

Chapter 2 – The Teen Brain and Faith

A teen's brain can impact his or her success in school, relationships, and even faith. Understanding teen brain development can help us understand what leaves teens vulnerable and how we can help them grow in brain functions that will make it easier for them to become who God wants them to be.

The brain is not a muscle, but it works like one in many ways. Teens' brains need healthy food, exercise, and plenty of sleep. They can be damaged by injury, alcohol, or certain drugs. They can be trained and coached to become stronger and more efficient. Teens' brains can also become weak and undependable when they are given no direction or instruction.

The Prefrontal Cortex

One of the key portions of the brain impacting teen behavior and faith development is the prefrontal cortex.

The **Prefrontal Cortex** is the gray matter in the anterior portion of the frontal lobe of the brain.

A well developed prefrontal cortex can aide teens in making godly decisions that will help them become active, productive Christians. Unfortunately, without coaching and training, the prefrontal cortices of many teens are underdeveloped. This can increase the likelihood they will make rash and potentially harmful decisions.

It is important to understand that although the brain controls certain areas of thinking and behavior, the brain does not remove a teen's free choice. Even if the teen has poor self-control for example, he or she can choose to use self-control in a particular situation. It may be more difficult for that teen than one who has a more fully developed prefrontal cortex, but it is still possible. An underdeveloped prefrontal cortex does not give any teen an excuse for making ungodly choices. Adolescents are still responsible for their choices and more fully developing their brain functions. They will need the guidance of Christian adults, however, to do this efficiently.

The prefrontal cortex of the brain is responsible for several crucial functions. It can help teens with planning, task initiation, working memory, self-control, flexibility, organization, time management, meta cognition, focus and perseverance. If you are familiar with the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, you will immediately notice a few similarities. Examining each area controlled by the prefrontal cortex will help those ministering to teens understand why the brain is so critical to the developing spiritual lives of young people.

Planning

The first area controlled by the prefrontal cortex is the ability to plan. There are a lot of verses in the Bible encouraging God's people to plan. Proverbs 15:22 and 21:5 give advice on planning, while Luke 14:28 assumes people make plans – especially when it comes to important things.

Why is planning important to teen faith? Without planning, it is less likely they will make the time to study the Bible, pray or spend time reflecting on God's word. They will have trouble serving others and sharing their faith, because their efforts will be unfocused. They may even be more susceptible to sinning, because they do not have plans for avoiding and escaping temptations.

Planning teaches intentionality. The Christians who have the strongest faith and produce the most fruit are often the most intentional about it. Intentionality is also helpful when avoiding sin or creating healthy spiritual habits. Planning also helps teens decide how they are going to move from the way things are now to where they want them to be – whether it is in personal spiritual growth or ministering to others.

It is important to remember that teens being raised in a chaotic environment will struggle more with planning than teens raised in a more structured, organized environment. To become effective at planning, teens must be taught and encouraged to practice certain skill sets. As they are coached in the various tasks, those aspects of the prefrontal cortex will begin to strengthen.

Your ministry can help coach teens in developing the planning function of the prefrontal cortex. Teach them to ask three key questions when faced with a situation where having a plan may help:

1. What is this situation now?
2. What does God want it to be?
3. What are all of the steps I need to take to move from the current situation to the way God wants things to be?

These basic steps work as well with school assignments as they do with breaking an ungodly habit or planning a way to serve someone. In a secular plan, the focus is usually on what the planner wants to happen. Your Bible students need to get in the habit of making plans from the viewpoint of what God wants to happen. Young people can struggle with understanding the need to follow God's plans for their lives when those plans do not agree with personal desires or popular culture. Yet God's wisdom will be what makes any plan truly successful.

When teaching teens how to create action steps for their plan, encourage them to create steps that require completing small tasks. If the steps are too general, key components may be missed or forgotten and it can take a long time before a step is completed. Smaller

steps make it more likely that nothing will be missed and will allow teens to complete steps more frequently. This will give them the natural positive feedback and encouragement they may need to finish executing the plan.

As you coach young people on planning skill sets, it is important to use the Bible to give examples and reinforce key concepts. By constantly incorporating the Bible in your ministry to teens, you will also teach them how important God is to every aspect of their lives. The Bible stories in the Old Testament books of Joshua through Chronicles give lots of practical examples of both good and poor planning. You can also find a number of scripture passages throughout the Bible to serve as reminders of God's expectations for His people to make godly plans.

The teens served by your ministry also need opportunities for guided practice in creating and executing a plan. Encourage them to take an active role in helping you plan teen events, Bible studies, fellowship meals, and more. As they become more experienced, gradually give them more responsibility. With enough coaching and practice, some teens will be able to plan and execute major ministry events before they become adults. Encouraging teens to participate and lead the planning of the various aspects of your ministry will also give them more confidence as they move into independent ministry opportunities as adults.

Task Initiation

The prefrontal cortex is also the part of the brain that controls task initiation. Even a great plan is useless if one does not implement the action steps in it. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two people in Luke 10, he gave them certain tasks to accomplish. He did not follow them around constantly reminding them what they needed to do each day. Instead, he expected them to initiate those tasks independently.

Teaching teens to initiate tasks independently is often ignored in favor of constant reminders from adults. This encourages teens, however, to continue delaying task initiation until someone forces them to do so. Then, suddenly as an adult, independent task initiation is expected. Many young adults struggle because they never learned this skill set when they were younger.

In faith, task initiation is extremely important. Without it, a teen who wants to become a Christian may never ask to study with someone or be baptized. They may also delay any personal Bible study, prayer, or even attempting to rid their lives of sin.

We usually call a problem with task initiation procrastination. Watch carefully though, because sometimes procrastination does not manifest itself in time wasting activities. Instead, productive procrastination looks acceptable, as something worthwhile is being accomplished. Unfortunately, these tasks are actually a way to avoid beginning more important tasks – especially ones that can impact spiritual growth.

Often when adults try to encourage task initiation in young people, they use consequences or rewards. Both of these are external motivators. Studies show that when an external motivation disappears, so does the desired behavior. Years of research have found that extensive use of external motivation can actually hamper the development of intrinsic motivation and encourage negative behaviors like manipulation, selfishness and performing the desired behavior only if a reward is offered.⁷

Instead, you want to help the teens served by your ministry develop intrinsic motivations to begin important tasks – especially spiritual ones. Fortunately, the development of intrinsic motivation is encouraged by many of the behaviors and attitudes one can often find in the Church or one of its ministries. Encouraging teens to set goals, offering helpful feedback and encouragement, reminding teens of the higher purposes of living a Christian life and that their efforts can make a difference can help them develop an intrinsic motivation for obeying God. Teen Bible lessons that stimulate their curiosity and remind them of God's love for them and His desire for them to spend eternity with Him in Heaven will also encourage teens to motivate themselves rather than wait for an adult to offer them some sort of extrinsic motivator.

The Zeigarnik Effect can be helpful to many teens as well. Zeigarnik found that once we make even the slightest beginning to a complex task, our brains will not let us rest until the task is completed.⁸ It is the same dynamic that causes a song to repeat over and over again in your brain until you finish it. Teaching teens to do one minor thing – like putting a Bible where they will see it when they awaken in the morning – will encourage them to complete that task. In this case, their brain, rather than an adult, will remind them to complete the task and read the Bible.

Teens can avoid beginning tasks – especially spiritual ones – because they seem too difficult. Creating a plan can help make complex tasks seem less intimidating. The teens in your ministry may need you to help them find resources to use when the spiritual things they are trying to do seem too hard. Knowing they have the resources and people available to help if they have difficulties can encourage young people to overcome the fears that are discouraging their task initiation.

There are plenty of stories in the Bible when someone took the initiative to begin a task. For example, in 1 Samuel 14 Jonathan took the initiative to attack the Philistines with only the help of his armor bearer. Notice, though, that Jonathan consulted God before beginning the battle. This is a crucial difference between secular and faith based task initiation. Christian teens need to remember to initiate tasks that God approves – initiating tasks that go against God's will is unwise.

⁷ LoBue, "Motivating Children Without Rewards."

⁸ Psychologist World, "The Zeigarnik Effect Explained."

The best way to encourage task initiation in your Bible students is to give them spiritual challenges to accomplish during the times when they are not with you. Whether it is reading a particular passage of scripture or serving someone in a specific way, they will have an opportunity to initiate that task independently. Then check in to see if they completed the task. Discuss the barriers that prevented them from completing the challenge. Help them develop strategies to encourage themselves to begin future challenges. In many ways, this exercise is a way of teaching them to initiate similar tasks God gives them in scripture.

Working Memory

Another function controlled by the prefrontal cortex is working memory. Working memory helps us remember directions long enough to follow them. Teens need a strong working memory to help them remember the instructions they are given during a service project or other ministry opportunity. It can also help them remember and use the commands and principles of God you teach them until they can transfer them into long term memory.

Working memory is one of the functions of the prefrontal cortex that can be impacted by emotional trauma, injury, developmental delays, health issues and attitudes. If a teen seems to struggle with working memory, you may want to consult his or her parents to identify any underlying issues. Underlying issues will need to be corrected, if possible, in order to improve working memory. If the root cause is unable to be corrected, you can help the teen develop coping strategies (like note taking) to compensate for poor working memory.

In scripture, King Saul is one of many people who appeared to have a problem with working memory. In 1 Samuel 15, Samuel gives Saul instructions from God. Saul ultimately disobeys several of the details in the instructions. When Samuel confronts Saul, he is full of excuses. Yet the root cause of his lack of working memory of the details of God's instructions was actually willful rebellion. Often, a teen's claims of forgetting an instruction from an adult or God is not really an issue with working memory, but rebellion. Taking the time to explore working memory and rebellion with teens can help them avoid this particular cycle of disobeying God.

Self Control

Self control is one of the key functions of the prefrontal cortex for Christians. Self control is crucial for avoiding sin. The Bible lists it as a fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. This does not mean teens who are not yet Christians are incapable of self control, it just may be more difficult without the help of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit received at baptism.

Interestingly, even secular studies have found self control is crucial for success in a variety of areas throughout life.⁹ Self control not only helps teens with impulse control and making decisions based purely on their emotions, but is also key for avoiding sin and developing healthy spiritual practices. Without self control, teens will easily make poor choices instead of the ones God wants them to make.

Self control is also crucial because it is necessary for accepting delayed gratification. The inability to tolerate delayed gratification has pulled many young people away from God or convinced them to delay becoming a Christian indefinitely. They would rather participate in what they see as pleasures now, than resist those often sinful behaviors in order to spend eternity in Heaven.

The easiest way to teach teens to practice self control is to teach them to stop and think before speaking or acting, particularly in a stressful or emotional situation. They need to learn to stop, think about what is really happening, consider their options, and pray to God for His guidance in choosing the best option. Only then should they respond to the situation.

It is also important to help the teens you serve develop plans for increasing their self control in situations that occur frequently. Giving teens set strategies to use in situations where they struggle can immediately improve their self control. Helping them make decisions about the things they will or will not do in common scenarios will also help. Deciding before something happens that they will not react in specific, sinful behaviors, can provide many teens with the extra self control they need in situations where they may have reacted poorly in the past.

It is important to remember that these decisions must be what the teen chooses and values. Forcing or pressuring teens to take some sort of self control pledge rarely works when it does not come from their hearts. In fact, some teens may actually be more prone to participate in the sin as a way of attempting to show their independence from what they believe is control of their behaviors forced upon them by others.

Teens often experience problems with self control because of other factors. Lack of sleep, hormones, hunger, loneliness, anger, and peer pressure can make self control more difficult. Teens need to understand that these factors do not make self control impossible. They should be encouraged to manage these factors as much as possible in order to make obedience to God easier. When they cannot manage one of these factors, they need to learn to distance themselves as much as possible from situations they know will require maximum self control.

⁹ Ferguson, Boden and Horwood, "Self-control and Adult Outcomes."

Obviously, the Bible is full of people who had problems with self control. Using the Bible to teach teens about self control is crucial, because often God gave immediate consequences for disobedience. Samson in particular had issues with self control multiple times in his life.¹⁰ His story is interesting because often the consequences of his lack of self control resulted in immediate earthly consequences. Self control is such an important factor in helping teens avoid sin, you may want to revisit the topic frequently in any Bible lesson where it applies.

Flexibility

Flexibility is also a function of the prefrontal cortex. It may seem problematic at first that the brain is wired to be flexible. Christians need to obey God's commands without changing them. Believing everything in scripture is flexible to our desires can cause serious spiritual issues.

In many ways though, flexibility is essential in our spiritual lives and in ministry. Paul expressed his flexibility in Philippians 4:12-14. He did not have a rigid idea of what life as a Christian should be. His faith was not crushed when he was hungry or in need. He did not reject Christianity when God called him to minister to others in circumstances that led to him being beaten, jailed and even shipwrecked. Paul was careful to obey God's commands as God gave them, but used flexibility to keep his faith strong in every type of circumstance.

The teens served by your ministry need to learn to have flexibility in similar ways. Teens who have experienced trauma, have certain disabilities, and even some personality types will struggle with flexibility. Some may need professional help and strategies to become more flexible.

In ministry, it is tempting at times to be overly flexible. This can lead to an environment where teens do not have any rules or where the schedule is never dependable. It is important to model appropriate, godly flexibility in your ministry. Rules and dependable schedules give young people a feeling of safety. Your ministry should constantly emphasize obeying God's commands without changing them. Yet, your ministry should show flexibility when the unexpected happens or your ministry faces challenges or opportunities.

One of the best ways to help teens practice flexibility is by giving them practice scenarios. This is particularly important for young people who struggle and react in ungodly ways when asked to change. Scenarios allow students to try out various strategies in a situation when they are calm. They can then add successful strategies to their options of ways to react to unexpected change.

The apostle Paul is an interesting study in flexibility. At times he appears to be almost rigid. Before he became a Christian, he was pursuing and jailing those who he thought were

¹⁰ Judges 13-16.

disobeying God. Paul demonstrated crucial flexibility, however, when Jesus confronted him about his choices on the Road to Damascus. Days later, Paul became a Christian and spent the remainder of his life teaching others the Gospel message. There were several other times in his ministry when serving God meant Paul had to be flexible. Teaching your students godly flexibility can make their choices more godly and their personal ministries more effective.

Organization and Time Management

It is no surprise the prefrontal cortex is responsible for organizational and time management skills. Organization is necessary for planning, task initiation and even flexibility. Without strong time management skills, organization often fails. Teens need to learn how to organize their lives. They need to learn to manage their time so there is room for the things God wants them to do. Without organization and time management, spiritual practices and ministry are often lost in the resulting chaos.

One of the most important organizational skill sets for Christian teens to learn and practice is setting priorities. Often crucial spiritual practices are unintentionally given a low priority, because top priority is given to whatever seems most urgent at that moment. This can cause teens to make decisions that seem good, but actually begin to distract them from God. Teaching them to put God first – and what that looks like in their lives – can help them make choices that will keep their faith strong.

Organization also requires logic, wisdom and planning. Is it wiser to do this or that first? How would God want me to do this? What is a way to effectively serve in this situation and share our faith? Being organized ultimately helps students make choices based on God's priorities. It also helps them develop effective spiritual growth habits and ways of serving others and sharing their faith.

Once teens begin organizing their priorities and tasks, they need strong time management skills. How are they going to find the time to do everything they need to do? What will they sacrifice if there is not enough time to accomplish everything? This can create a loop, forcing teens to revisit their priorities and organizational skills. When this loop is not actively taught to teens, often the spiritual things are forgotten as they struggle to complete schoolwork and fulfill extracurricular commitments.

Teens need resources to help them develop organizational skills and improve their time management. Many schools practice forced organization and time management, where students are told exactly how to organize various things and every minute is scheduled for them. It is better if you can teach teens to think in an organized, time conscious way. You can introduce them to various calendars, Bible reading plans, prayer journals and more as aides. The personalities and circumstances of teens are often very different and various organizational tools will work better with some adolescents than others. Giving young people options can help them find the resources that work best for them.

The building of the Tabernacle and the Temple are great biblical examples of organization and time management. In fact, the Bible is full of examples of people obeying God in very organized and efficient ways. The ministry of Jesus is amazing when you consider everything he accomplished in a short amount of time. Analyzing some of these Bible stories can help your students better understand how being organized and managing their schedules can help them live the Christian life.

Metacognition Skills

Metacognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes. Many young people seem to act without thinking. They actually are thinking, but may be unaware of or ignoring the thoughts that would have helped them make wiser, more godly choices.

The command God gave Joshua in Joshua 1:8 is a great verse to teach teens about metacognition. God knew that if Joshua constantly meditated on God's Law, he would be aware of those thoughts when making important choices as he led the Israelites. Encouraging teens to meditate on God's word will also help them.

Since the average teen is unlikely to constantly meditate on scripture like Joshua did, it is important to teach them to be aware of their thought processes and make necessary adjustments. Often this is done more effectively in a mentoring relationship than in a classroom setting. Most teens will need to feel safe in order to be able to share what they believe may be thoughts that would cause others to think less of them. In a one-on-one conversation with a mentor, they are more likely to share the actual thoughts their brains are processing.

When asking teens what they are thinking at any given moment, you will often get a blank stare. It is not because they are not thinking, but because they are not paying attention to their thoughts or no one has ever asked them that question before. You may need to ask more leading questions like, "Do you think that is a good or bad idea? Why?" or "What are some of the options you are considering?"

Remember, metacognition is a growth process. If you immediately criticize everything the teen shares about his or her thoughts, you will not be able to help them grow and mature their metacognition skills. It is very difficult to help teens who refuse to share their thoughts because they are afraid of your reaction.

Obviously, it is important to make young people aware of the thoughts they have that may be leading them to sin. How you approach the topic of their problematic thought patterns is crucial. Teaching them God's truths with love, respect and patience will be more effective than a harsh, critical reaction.

Another part of metacognition is teaching them to reflect on what they were thinking when they made a poor decision. Were they thinking about being hungry or tired right before they snapped at someone? Being aware of those thoughts and getting food or rest, before they act out can make a huge difference. Other types of thoughts may reveal character flaws or other issues that need to be addressed.

Once again, teens may not have immediate answers to this type of metacognition questioning. If they honestly seem unsure, coach them to listen more carefully to their thoughts and write down their thought process as they make a decision. Journaling their day can also make some students more aware of what they are thinking.

Metacognition also involves thinking more deeply in general about things. It is similar to what the Bible calls meditating on scripture. Asking most teens to sit still and just think about one or two Bible verses for a long period of time is somewhat unrealistic. Creating scripture art, skits, or music based on scripture or using scripture journals and other similar practices are active, creative ways many teens will more willingly use to meditate on God's word.

Finally, metacognition should help teens work on reflecting God's image more accurately to others. You will need to help them learn to analyze their current lives in comparison to scripture. They will need to be taught how to weigh various options by comparing each option to what God has said in the Bible. It is important for teens to develop the habit of choosing the option they believe God would want them to choose. These are not easy skills to learn and master. It will take patience and coaching, but spending adequate time with teens on metacognition can strengthen their faith foundations in significant ways.

People like King Saul, Samson, and Peter are great examples in the Bible to use to teach teens about metacognition. Ask them to imagine what those people might have been thinking when they made the choices they did. Sometimes it is easier to guess than others, but the conversation should make teens more aware that their thoughts can impact their choices – whether or not they are aware of those thoughts. The consequences those people experienced can also motivate young people to pay more attention to their thoughts and filter them to make the choices God would want them to make.

Focus

The prefrontal cortex is also responsible for our ability to focus. Focus may not seem important to Christianity, but without focus we can become easily distracted by the things of the world. Those distractions can cause us to fail to live the lives God has called His people to live in any number of ways.

When working with young people on focus, you will need to stress the importance of focusing on the things God has said are important. Many adolescents can focus really well

on their schoolwork, their activities, their phones, or any number of things that are actually distracting them from the things on which God may want them to focus.

The teens to whom you minister will need your help determining the things on which God wants them to focus. They may need to list all of the other things that get their focused attention instead – especially if they claim focusing on godly things is too difficult.

Many teens will also need you to help them develop strategies for improving their focus on the things that are important to God. Those strategies will vary depending upon the task and the problems the teen is having with focusing on that task. Something simple like better time management skills, setting goals and other skill sets controlled by the prefrontal cortex can also help with focus.

If you want great examples of people in scripture who lost focus, King David and the Apostle Peter are two important ones. King David chose to focus on the wrong things after he saw Bathsheba bathing. Peter nearly drowned when he was walking on water and stopped focusing on Jesus. The consequences in these cases are so dramatic; it is easy to have a great discussion of what can happen when we do not focus on the right things.

Perseverance

The last skill set of the prefrontal cortex is perseverance. Perseverance, or the ability to continue doing what you should be doing despite obstacles, is critical for living the Christian life. In Galatians 6:9, Paul acknowledged the need for perseverance: “And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.” Perseverance is also a fruit of the Spirit, indicating its crucial role in the spiritual lives of Christians.

Perseverance is difficult for everyone to some extent. When obstacles get in the way of doing what is right, giving up can seem easier. This is particularly tempting for teens, who may not have enough life experience to realize the benefits of persevering.

Adolescents may also have trouble continuing when obstacles occur, because they do not know how to overcome them. Mentoring can give some teens the tools they need to overcome problems and keep doing what they know God wants them to do. Other teens can benefit from being taught some basic problem solving skills or giving them a list of resources to use when they are not sure what to do. These resources could include Christian adults as well as other more concrete things like specific scriptures, books, or websites.

Teens also need a lot of encouragement – especially when facing obstacles. They need people who not only love them but also believe they can overcome obstacles and live a godly life. Teaching them how to process frustration and disappointment - even failure -

through God's eyes can also help them persevere. Many times, teens just need encouragement to take the next step towards the goal or make the next right choice.

Having Christian adults and even peers as encouragers can make a huge difference in the spiritual life of any teen. In the New Testament, Barnabas is a great example of what encouragement can do for the spiritual health and ministry of others. A careful reading shows the crucial role Barnabas played in the beginning of the Apostle Paul's Christian life and missionary journeys. Without the encouragement of Barnabas, who knows how much even Paul may have struggled?

Hippocampus

Before we leave the discussion of the teen brain and spiritual development, we need to briefly examine the hippocampus. This is the part of the brain that is primarily responsible for learning and memory. It can be damaged by both physical and emotional trauma.¹¹ The hippocampus needs to be as healthy as possible for teens to learn and remember the things they will need to know to make it easier to live a Christian life.

Thankfully, the hippocampus grows and becomes healthier with basic healthy habits. Exercise, particularly walking, helps the hippocampus.¹² Good nutrition is key, especially a diet that includes fish, olive oil, fruits, vegetables and whole grains (also known as the Mediterranean Diet).¹³ Reducing stress, meditating or reflective thinking and learning new things also contribute to a healthy hippocampus. Finally, it is best for young people to avoid activities that have a high incidence of concussions. The hippocampus is often damaged by concussions and newer studies are showing concussion damage is cumulative and can last for the entire life of the person.¹⁴

Now that we have a better understanding of the teen brain and how it can impact the faith of teens, you will need to find and engage the teens you wish to reach with your ministry. What are the best ways to identify the teens in your church and community to whom you might minister? What are some things you can do to begin engaging them in learning more about God and who He wants them to be in their lives?

Discussion Questions

1. Name the functions controlled by the prefrontal cortex of the brain. For each function, describe why it is important for a healthy faith.
2. What are some ways Christian adults can help teens more fully develop their prefrontal cortices?
3. What role does the hippocampus section of the brain play in a healthy faith?
4. What can be done to improve the health of the hippocampus

¹¹ Weniger, Lange, Sachsse and Irlle, "Reduced Amygdala and Hippocampus Size," 383-388.

¹² Stangl and Thuret, "Impact of Diet on Adult Hippocampal Neurogenesis," 271-282.

¹³ Fotuhi, "Can You Grow Your Hippocampus?"

¹⁴ Committee on Sports-Related Concussions in Youth, "Sports-Related Concussions in Youth."

Chapter 3 – Finding and Engaging Teens In Your Ministry

Your ministry may be an existing one you are hoping to make more effective. Or you may be creating an entirely new ministry. In either case, you will want your ministry to continue finding and engaging new teens in learning about God and what He wants for their lives. The good news is that most teens are at least somewhat open to learning about God. So what are the most effective ways of reaching teens open to learning about God without over taxing your current resources?

Finding Teens

If your ministry is part of an existing congregation, your first group of prospective teens are those who already attend worship or are related to those who attend, but may not attend themselves. Often teens are hidden from a ministry's view because they do not attend teen ministry functions like Bible classes or other teen programs and events. Yet, they have a connection to your congregation because they attend worship or have relatives who attend worship.

Identifying these teens may be as simple as asking the person who maintains the contact information of attendees and visitors to your congregation. You may also want to reach out to the adults who attend your worship services and ask them for the contact information of their teen relatives in the area, who may or may not attend worship services with them. Teens currently served by your ministry should also be regularly encouraged to invite their friends to anything they attend at your church or within your ministry.

Community teens with no connection to your congregation, who are potential prospects for your ministry to serve, may be a little more difficult to identify. In many communities, teens tend to have specific locations where large numbers of them like to congregate to socialize. This can be a park, a cafe, a sports field or any number of places. Local teens can generally tell you where to find teens socializing in public places.

Your local culture will determine the most effective way to begin interacting with community teens who have no current connection to your ministry. In some places, it may be acceptable to introduce yourself to a group of teens and have conversations to develop connections and invite them to attend your ministry activities. In other locations, you may be restricted to handing out fliers or having a table where teens must approach your ministry volunteers first if they are interested. Your ministry will have to consider the various options and decide what will work best in your area.

Another way ministries can identify teens they might serve is by volunteering in various capacities in their community's secular organizations. Some Christians may also have occupations that give them exposure to a number of teens in your vicinity. It is important to be aware of any laws, statutes or workplace policies that may restrict or forbid discussing anything religious under certain circumstances. Often these restrictions can be

obeyed while still giving your ministry an awareness of local teens you can then contact in other ways.

Some ministries have found the best way to identify teens to whom they can minister is by offering a program or event that meets the felt needs of adolescents in their area. These needs are often things like academic tutoring, language instruction, training in the arts or sports and even safe places for teens to socialize and spend time with caring adults and other teens.

If your ministry is trying to reach teens initially by meeting their felt needs, you may want to use some sort of advertising to inform teens of your ministry program or event. It is crucial to understand where teens in your area get their information. Classic forms of advertising may not be seen by the teens in your area. They may be more likely to find their information on a social media platform or through fliers or word of mouth.

If you are spending financial resources to identify teens whom your ministry can serve, make sure your choices are effective. Ask a wide variety of teens in your area where they get their information about activities, classes and events. You may find you will need to use several different platforms to reach the various groups of teens in your vicinity.

As you become busy ministering to the teens you initially find and engage in your ministry, you may discover you are rarely working to identify additional teens to serve. While it may not be a conscious choice, it can negatively impact your ministry and the teens who are not given invitations to learn about God. Make sure outreach stays one of the primary goals of your ministry. Talk about it regularly with volunteers and the teens you serve. If outreach methods become ineffective, find new ways of reaching adolescents in your area. Your search for new teens to whom you can minister should continue throughout the life of your ministry.

Engaging New Teens

When approaching new teens in an attempt to engage them in your ministry, it is often most effective to try and establish some sort of connection with them. Teens can often feel they have no one in their lives who truly cares about them or believes in their potential - including their parents. Teens crave connection and with so few of them believing they have any meaningful connection to another person in their lives, they may be more open than previous generations to Christian adults who are attempting to engage them in meaningful, supportive, loving ways.

There are various ways of attempting those first connections with young people. If the teen is already familiar with you in some capacity, this can often happen quickly over a cup of coffee in a cafe or during a casual conversation at worship services. Teens who do not know you or other adults in your ministry may be much more cautious about allowing you to make some sort of connection with them. Often they will feel less threatened in an

environment that allows them to blend in with a group of teens they already know from school or their neighborhood. This gives them an opportunity to be somewhat anonymous, while still getting a better understanding of what participating in your ministry might entail.

Connections between ministry volunteers and teens can also be made during ministry events and programs. It is important to keep volunteers focused on the ultimate goal of your ministry. While helping teens with their felt needs is laudable, these young people need to be introduced to God and learn what He wants for them and from them. Ministries that are not intentional about transitioning teens from their programs for felt needs to their spiritual classes and programs, often find their ministries eventually become almost entirely secular.

Each teen may find something different appealing about the Bible classes, small group Bible studies, and other spiritual programs and activities your ministry offers. Some teens will feel more comfortable attending larger group functions in the beginning. Others may feel more comfortable spending time with a Christian mentor away from the church building or meeting place. It is important to get to know individual teens well by having various ministry volunteers work on developing relationships with each one of them. As the relationships between teens and volunteers grow, your ministry will be able to engage each teen in the ways that are most effective for him or her.

Educators have found that students are most engaged in their education when their teachers do some very specific things. The volunteers in your ministry can develop these same behaviors and attitudes whether they are attempting to initially engage a teen in your ministry, are hoping to engage young people in a Bible lesson, or hope to engage adolescents in some other aspect of your ministry.

- **Having a positive attitude.** Often without realizing it, adults doubt whether the methods they are using to engage and teach teens will actually work. This lack of confidence is obvious to students who may also begin to doubt if what you are teaching them will be truly impactful in their lives. It is crucial your volunteers place their complete trust in God and His plans for your ministry. While they may make mistakes or need to improve in certain areas, they should be confident God can use them to make a positive difference in the spiritual lives of young people.
- **Building relationships.** Jesus spent a lot of time building relationships while he was on earth. He spent an incredible amount of time with the Apostles and other disciples preparing them for their ministry after he returned to Heaven. These relationships allowed him to influence these people, because they knew how much he loved them and they learned to have respect for him and his teachings. While you are not perfect like Jesus, building relationships with the teens you serve will have a similar positive impact on your ability to teach and mentor them. It is also important to remember that some teens have no positive, supportive role models in their lives. Adults who volunteer in your ministry need to be aware that occasionally

teens may want or need them to step into the role of a surrogate parent. When this occurs, the adults involved may need additional training to handle this role in effective ways.

- **Making teens part of the process.** Teens often respond best when they believe they have a voice in what happens. They also need to develop an understanding that living a Christian life results in not only eternal rewards, but a richer, fuller life on Earth. When teens believe in God's love, wisdom and truth, it will be easier for them to accept the specifics of what God will require of them.
- **Making things as clear as possible.** It is difficult for teens to obey God if it is not clear to them what God wants them to do. For many teens, this clarity includes a need to understand more clearly why God asks certain things of His people. While there are some mysteries God has kept mankind from fully understanding, much of what we find in scripture can be explained clearly in ways teens can understand and implement.
- **Showing enthusiasm.** This is an area where many Christians adults lose teens. Enthusiasm (or the lack thereof) is often contagious. If the adults in your ministry consider teaching teens about God a duty rather than a privilege, it can give teens the impression that God and Christianity are not really that important. If Bible teachers are not excited about the Bible and the things that are in it, the teens in their classes may not be very enthusiastic about studying the Bible. The adults involved in your ministry should display obvious enthusiasm for participating in everything God has asked them to do.

The type of initial spiritual activity in which a teen participates is not as important as his or her engagement in your ministry and spiritual growth over a period of time. Are teens showing increased interest and participation in spiritual activities? Are they showing signs of the development of a more independent faith by engaging in spiritual practices when on their own? Are they showing an interest in learning more about God and becoming the person He wants them to be?

Overcoming Negative Perceptions

As you attempt to engage teens in your ministry classes, programs and events, you may find some resistance based on their perceptions of Christians or Christianity in general. These perceptions may be based on information they have gathered from other sources or on their personal experiences.

It is important to understand exactly what these negative perceptions might be in order to address them effectively. Many teens are willing to share their misgivings if they believe they will be heard and understood. They realize others may not agree with their perceptions, but are more likely to listen to your responses if they believe they have been truly heard.

Objections teens have to Christians and Christianity usually fall into one or more of several common categories. They often believe Christians are hypocritical, judgmental, old fashioned, out of touch and insensitive. Teens may believe Christianity is overly restrictive, boring and rejects other belief systems unnecessarily. They may also question why God allows certain things to happen in the world or has declared certain behaviors sinful.

If a teen has had a specific negative experience with a particular Christian or group of Christians, you will need to be respectful of the pain the young person has experienced. If the event involved unkind, ungodly or sinful behavior, you may want to consider apologizing on behalf of those who acted in that way. You are not accepting responsibility for their choices. You are, however, acknowledging that it should not have happened. In cases where it is obvious the student misunderstood or misinterpreted the event, taking the time to acknowledge their pain, while enlightening them in loving ways can help. Ignoring or discounting their pain will usually intensify their previous hurt and anger.

Often other objections are actually more accurately described as questions or doubts. They can usually be answered carefully with love, patience and scripture. A knowledge of basic apologetics can also help in discussing objections to Christians and Christianity with teens. Illuminating the differences between God's perfect plan and the way it is sometimes executed by imperfect humans who sin, often helps teens better understand where the problems they have noticed are rooted.

As teens become more engaged with your ministry, they should begin receiving teaching from scripture. These lessons can help them better understand concepts like sin, repentance, forgiveness, restoration and transformation. A more thorough understanding of these topics will often allow them to set aside previously held negative perceptions as they begin growing spiritually.

Unfortunately, new negative perceptions can arise as previously unchurched teens begin having more interactions with people attending your church or your ministry classes, programs and events. As we know, Christians make mistakes and commit sins. At times, these can impact the teens in your ministry. If your ministry is reaching out to teens with customs that are unfamiliar to the adults in your church or ministry, it may be necessary to educate the adults on how best to address customs they may not personally believe are appropriate.

Often outward appearance items like tattoos, piercings, and hair and clothing styles can cause some Christian adults the most distress. They may say things that are inappropriate or hurtful to one or more teens about these items. It is important for your ministry to encourage Christian adults to think carefully about whether or not they should address these topics. If they believe it is necessary to have conversations about certain subjects, it can be helpful to provide training on the most effective ways to have these discussions in a godly, loving, productive manner.

Ministry Volunteers

As you find and engage new teens in your ministry, you may also find you need more Christian adults to serve as volunteers. Many ministries find it a struggle to identify volunteers who have a passion for ministering to teens as well as the spiritual maturity and the gifts and talents their ministry needs.

Recruiting volunteers is often difficult because ministries do not use best practices with their volunteers. This can lead to frustration, retention issues and other problems. Using these best practices can make a huge difference in your ability to recruit and retain the volunteers your ministry needs.

- **Ask potential volunteers to serve in a face to face conversation.** General announcements rarely work well. A potential volunteer needs to know you have confidence in their ability to make a positive difference in ministering to teens. In a conversation, you can also see their facial reactions and address potential concerns or questions in the moment.
- **Use volunteers in their areas of giftedness.** It may be quicker to place volunteers in any open volunteer position, but it is not effective over time. When people serve in areas where they have no gifts from God, it is easy for them to become frustrated and want to stop volunteering. When volunteer placements are aligned with their gifts and passions, they are more effective and people will actually love serving your ministry in those areas. It takes more time on your part, because many Christians have not identified the gifts God gave them to serve Him. Think of yourself as a talent scout. Help your volunteers discover and develop their talents and then place them in those roles in your ministry.
- **Provide quality training and guidelines for volunteers.** Few volunteers will join your ministry with the necessary training to be as effective as they can be. They do not have the time to go back to school to learn what they may need to know. They can, however, attend periodic training sessions. When you provide training for volunteers, make sure you are using their time efficiently and providing training that will actually help them grow. Volunteers also need to know your ministry guidelines for what is expected or prohibited. Knowing their boundaries makes them feel safe and empowered to minister to teens effectively.
- **Show appreciation in ways that matter.** Cute little appreciation gifts are fine, but really have little impact on volunteers. Most would rather have a sincere, handwritten note that is not a carbon copy of the note you sent every other volunteer. They appreciate specific positive feedback about the strengths you believe they are bringing to the ministry or how they have made a positive difference in the lives of individual teens. Volunteers also appreciate being truly heard when they offer ministry insights, constructive criticism or ideas. You do not have to agree with them, but they should feel truly heard and be told how you will handle what they share with you.

- **Offer volunteers some flexibility.** At times people are reluctant to volunteer because of other demands on their time. They want to feel free to take a vacation or to not have the stress of finding a replacement when they are ill. Having a list of people willing to fill other roles with little notice can make volunteer role management easier for you and your volunteers. If possible, have a schedule so these substitutes for other roles know when they may be called to step in and are prepared for what they may be asked to do.

Changing the ways you recruit, train and manage your volunteers can help improve your volunteer recruitment and retention. This will allow you to continue finding and engaging new teens in your ministry with the confidence you will have enough volunteers to minister to them.

Whether the teens to whom you minister are from an unchurched background or are being raised in Christian homes, the ultimate goal is similar. How can you help them develop an independent faith? What does the faith of a teen who is ready to become an active, productive Christian adult resemble? How can we help adolescents move from the adult directed faith of a child to this more independent faith?

Discussion Questions

1. Who are the teens with whom your church or ministry already has some interaction?
2. Are the adults and teens in your church or ministry aware of other teens who may be interested in learning more about your ministry?
3. Where do the teens in your community congregate to socialize?
4. What are some of the ways volunteers in your ministry can meet teens in your area?
5. What are some ways your ministry volunteers can attempt to engage new teens in your ministry's classes, programs or events?
6. What are some of the negative perceptions teens in your area have about Christians or Christianity? How can you best address those perceptions?
7. What are some ways your ministry can encourage teens who are new to your ministry to grow spiritually and become more involved in Bible studies and other spiritual practices?
8. What are some best practices for recruiting, training and managing the volunteers in your ministry?

Chapter 4 – Moving Teens to Independent Faith

A child's faith is often guided by a parent or other influential adults. These adults encourage spiritual practices like prayer and worship. They teach the child stories from the Bible and their beliefs about God, Christianity and more. The child often accepts this direction because of the love and respect he or she has for the adult. In later childhood, some children will begin to question aspects of what they have been taught – especially when it disagrees with what they are being taught at school or in other secular environments.

Some teens and even adults keep this childish faith, without ever reflecting on whether or not their personal beliefs and actions are aligned with it. This faith is often shallow and easily destroyed by the slightest challenge. Often, teens and adults with this immature faith will continue attending worship out of habit or obligation instead of their personal desire to worship and obey God.

For young people to grow to become strong, productive Christians, they need to develop an independent faith. At times this transition is hampered, because the basic questions teens want answered by their Church have gone unanswered. The wording of the questions may vary, but they are often expressed by teens who are struggling to develop an independent faith.

1. What does God want from me and for me and how will accepting it change my life?
2. What is my purpose on earth and in the Church?
3. What is Christian community and why do I need it when it seems so problematic?
4. How can I be truly challenged to be who God wants me to be, yet also encouraged when it seems too difficult?

Helping teens find the answers to these questions can help them move towards developing an independent faith. Most teens will still need adult Christians to provide additional help in a variety of ways for them to be able to complete the process of moving from an adult directed to an independent faith.

Before discussing ways of helping teens develop an independent faith, we need to decide what the indicators of an independent faith may be. The Bible gives us some clues, the first of which is the historical understanding of an independent faith in Judaism.

The account of Jesus traveling with Mary and Joseph to the Temple when he was twelve reflects the practices in the Mishna (The oral tradition of Jewish law that became part of the Talmud. The Mishna was not given to man by God, but was written primarily by rabbis.) that were in effect when Jesus was alive. At the age of twelve, religious instruction became more intense. The modern bar and bat mitzvahs have changed the age to thirteen, but reflect a similar spirit. At this age, the teen is thought to be capable of being personally

responsible for obeying God's commands. Teens are no longer expected to rely on their parents to remind them to pray, reflect on scripture or obey God's commands.

Defining Independent Faith

If you ask Christians what they believe are indications a teen has moved to a more independent faith, the answers may vary slightly. It is difficult, because unlike God, we cannot see into the hearts of teens. The Bible often characterizes spiritual maturity as the process of moving from spiritual milk to spiritual meat.

The analogy of weaning is a good one. We need to consider a teen's actions, words and attitudes. Is he or she showing spiritual growth, or does it seem merely a rote recital of what their parents or other adults have told them? The following list contains the most frequently mentioned attributes Christian parents hope to see as probable indicators their child is moving to a more independent, mature faith.

1. Has been baptized
2. Understands Christianity is about more than just loving or believing in Jesus
3. Reads scripture independently on a regular basis
4. Has an active prayer life
5. Attempts to exhibit godly character and attitudes
6. Develops and uses gifts from God to serve
7. Shares his or her faith with others
8. Resists temptations to sin
9. Repents of sins
10. Realizes her or his personal need for God's grace
11. Shows signs of the fruit of the Spirit
12. Begins to understand and accept God's word through personal Bible study and reflection
13. Has occasional doubts and questions
14. May not have mastered any of the above areas, but is exhibiting signs of meaningful growth

While this list can be helpful, it is important to note that many professed Christians have a very low threshold for what they consider to be spiritual maturity. A Barna Group study found that only one third of young adult Christians and two thirds of older adult Christians believe spiritual maturity includes trying hard to follow God's commands for Christians found in the Bible.¹⁵ You may find adults volunteering in your ministry and the parents of the teens served by it have widely varying ideas of their spiritual goals for teens approaching adulthood.

¹⁵ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 165.

A Biblical Worldview

An additional challenge in assessing spiritual maturity is that there is a difference between Christians who may attend church regularly, but fail to live a Christian lifestyle and Christians who are faithful, productive Christians. While the latter group is not perfect, they are much more likely to obey God's commands consistently, serve others, participate in spiritual practices and share their faith.

The American Culture and Faith institute found that only 10% of Christians actually think and act according to basic biblical principles. While the numbers may vary slightly in other countries, one would assume this issue is worldwide. The beliefs in a godly worldview would be considered by many Christians to be basic tenets of faith. Yet many Christians seem to not know, understand or perhaps agree with these concepts. Their studies found, believing in Christian doctrine in general and filtering your life choices through God's commands and principles are often two very different things.¹⁶

Spiritual Mentors for Teens

Most teens cannot make the transition to an independent faith without teaching and mentoring from Christian adults. Unfortunately, the ways some adults have attempted to help teens mature spiritually has not given them the critical guidance they need. In many ways, adolescents need spiritual mentors who act as coaches to help them move from an adult directed faith to a more independent one.

What are the characteristics of Christian adults who can successfully coach teens through this critical faith transition? Successful spiritual coaches and mentors are:

1. **Intentional.** Impactful spiritual coaches and mentors consider each teen's needs individually. They are intentional about doing what each teen needs to have a stronger faith foundation and develop to their godly potential. What are the spiritual growth goals for this specific teen? What does the coach need to do to help the teen reach those goals?
2. **Motivational.** An effective coach uses healthy ways to encourage the teen to develop the intrinsic motivation to live a Christian life.
3. **Relational.** What are the spiritual needs, current strengths and weaknesses and possible godly potential of the teen? What has the teen revealed about his or her heart? Answering these questions accurately requires the spiritual coach to have a healthy relationship with the teen.
4. **Consistent.** There are times when a coach - even a spiritual one - can help someone make one small adjustment in one session that results in great growth. In general though, it is the coach who is available consistently over a long period of time who has the greatest impact.

¹⁶ Foley. "Study Shows Only 10% of Americans Have a Biblical Worldview."

5. **Communicative.** Frequent, clear communication is crucial in a coaching or mentoring relationship. If a teen does not understand the teaching or advice given, it is not helpful. It is important to communicate in ways that each teen can understand.
6. **Exemplary.** No one is perfect. However, if you do not read the Bible daily, for example, it is going to be difficult to convince the teen you are coaching to do so. Spiritual coaches and mentors should strive to set a godly example for the teens they mentor.
7. **Creative with lessons.** Mentoring is often the most effective way to teach teens in areas where they are struggling spiritually. Adolescents also need Bible lessons, activities, experiences and other ways of learning how God wants them to live their lives. A successful coach or mentor uses a variety of creative methods to teach teens important lessons.
8. **Constructive.** The best coaches give feedback that is constructive and clear. Explaining to a teen why and how they need to change specific behaviors and attitudes is more helpful than general statements that can leave them confused.

There are numerous ways to provide teens with spiritual coaching. Mentoring is often the most impactful. Bible classes, spiritual challenges, questions chosen to encourage deeper, reflective thinking, activities and informal ministry apprenticeships can also provide opportunities to coach teens towards independent faith. The next several chapters of this book will examine the various possible tools for encouraging spiritual growth in teens in more detail.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the four key questions young people hope their Church will answer?
2. What are some of the possible indicators a teen is moving from an adult directed to a more independent faith?
3. Analyze your own faith. Have you developed an independent faith? What aspects of your faith led to your answer?
4. If you currently have a ministry to teens, what signs of independent faith are you seeing in each student? In what areas do they still need to need some coaching?
5. What are the qualities of an effective spiritual coach or mentor?
6. Which qualities of an effective spiritual coach come easily to you? Which are more difficult? What are some things you can do to develop the characteristics of an effective spiritual coach?

Chapter 5 – Teen Bible Lessons

Although it may be tempting to place teens in Bible classes for adults, it really is not the best learning environment for them. Adult classes are often very lecture driven and can cause teens to stop listening. The examples are usually more relevant to older adults and do not necessarily reflect the daily experiences of teens. Teens also need a place where they can feel safe to explore their questions and doubts. Most teens will not feel comfortable doing so in a room full of adults.

The most appropriate lessons for teens are engaging and interactive. The Bible lessons need to expose them to scriptures that may be new to them while also reviewing more familiar stories and passages. Application examples should be relatable to the daily lives of the teens in the Bible class. Bible classes should encourage adolescents to take personal responsibility for maturing their faith by investing time and energy in spiritual practices, serving God and sharing the Gospel message.

Spiritual practices can include Bible study, prayer, self examination, confession, fasting, meditating on scripture, journaling, solitude, silence, service, evangelism, worship and fellowshiping with other Christians

Choosing Curriculum

There are three basic types of teen Bible lessons:

1. **Scripture based.** These lessons can be based on a particular person in the Bible, a specific Bible book or even a passage of scripture.
2. **Topical.** While these lessons also include scripture, the scriptures shared relate to a specific topic of discussion. Topics can vary widely from aspects of Christian character to issues often faced by teens in trying to live a Christian life in a secular world.
3. **Apologetics.** These lessons are designed to specifically address the most common questions and doubts expressed by people in regards to God, the Bible and Christian beliefs and practices. They often include many scriptures and have more detailed explanations of Christian beliefs and practices than typical scripture based or topical Bible lessons.

When planning teen Bible lessons, it is important to remember that many teens have only been exposed to a small percentage of what is in the Bible. Some may be extremely familiar with the more well known stories in scripture, while others may not know any stories. Passages of scripture found outside of the context of a story are even less likely to be familiar to many teens. Part of your goal in planning teen lessons should be to increase the amount of the Bible to which your students have been exposed. You also want to help

them move important Bible stories and passages from short to long term memory, where they will be more useful.

Whether you have chosen to teach scripture based lessons, topical lessons, apologetics or a mixture of all three, it is critical that you make the lessons as practical as possible for your specific students. When considering possible topics for lessons, make sure you are aware of the issues your teens face daily. Just because the average teen in your country or even your area struggles with a certain issue, does not mean your students have the same problems. While it may still be worth a basic lesson on the topic, having an in depth series on some topic of little relevance to your Bible students will leave them bored, frustrated and wondering if the Bible really does apply to their lives.

Do not be afraid to give teens a voice in what they study. If a topic is particularly interesting or worrisome to several of them, it is probably worth spending some time discussing in a Bible class setting. As an adult, you may add other material to help them navigate issues you know they may face in coming years or in the new environments many will encounter once they become adults. In most cases, though, it should be fairly easy to incorporate their suggestions at some point in your curriculum.

Giving students a voice in their curriculum is also a way to encourage them to take steps towards a more independent faith. What do they need to study in scripture to have a stronger faith foundation and live a more godly, productive Christian life? This analysis and self awareness of their personal faith journey can help them take more personal responsibility for their spiritual lives as they enter adulthood.

If you teach Bible classes for teens year after year, you may need to adjust your lessons periodically. While many things are constant during the teen years, some aspects of adolescent life change from year to year or even from week to week. You do not necessarily have to be aware of every cultural influence on your current Bible students. If your examples sound too outdated though, many teens will dismiss anything you share as being inapplicable to their lives.

Assessing Curriculum

There are several additional questions you need to ask about any potential teen Bible curriculum – whether it is purchased or created by members of your congregation.

1. **Does the curriculum allow students to ponder the “big ideas” of faith, while still allowing teachers to correct misunderstandings of basic Bible doctrine?**
Some teens want Bible lessons that challenge their thinking in more philosophical ways. Others want to understand God’s word in light of the secular culture that surrounds them. While those are all perfectly acceptable goals, it is important to make sure they have thoroughly understood the basics in scripture. It is often a lack

of knowledge or a misunderstanding of basic biblical tenets that can cause spiritual problems for teens in their early adult years.

2. **Does the curriculum provide questions that will encourage students to move to higher levels of thinking?** We will cover asking and answering student questions at length in the next chapter. In general, there should be a variety of questions that encourage students to think beyond merely memorizing the facts of a Bible story.
3. **Does the curriculum provide practical, meaningful application examples of the biblical principles in their lessons?** Application examples should apply to your students and the lives they lead. Since the authors of a purchased curriculum do not know your students, this is one area where you may need to change examples to ones your students will understand.
4. **Does the curriculum teach students the steps or processes of living the application principles?** Many teens need to be taught Christian life skills in order to have any idea how to actually do the things God is asking them to do. Otherwise, your Bible students may have the best of intentions, but be unsuccessful because they have no idea how to do things like settle conflicts in godly ways.
5. **Does the curriculum provide meaningful, experiential activities?** Just because they are teens, does not mean your students want to sit quietly for an hour listening to a lecture on the Bible. There are lots of age appropriate activities that will engage them in active learning about scripture.
6. **Does the curriculum encourage students to participate in independent faith activities outside of Bible class?** Teens should be actively encouraged to engage in spiritual practices like scripture reading, prayer, reflection on God's word, serving others, sharing their faith and more during the time periods between Bible classes.
7. **If the curriculum addresses baptism, does it accurately reflect baptism as taught in the Bible and practiced in the early Church?** The Bible requires, and the early Church practiced, baptism at the age of accountability by immersion for the remission of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Any other practices were added by man and should not be taught to teens.
8. **Does the curriculum involve heavy use of videos?** Teens today are not only tech savvy, they are also media experts. Poor or outdated production values distract them and cause them to tune out what may be said during the video.
9. **If the curriculum addresses some aspect of secular culture, is it outdated or inapplicable to your Bible students?** Culture changes rapidly. Often by the time adults become aware of some secular trend or issue, teens have already moved on to something new. Trying to sound relevant, while actually being several months or years behind, does not work well when teaching teens. Teens will often respect you more for admitting you are not totally up to date and asking their help in identifying appropriate examples from their daily lives.

Personal Testimonies

In Bible classes and small group Bible studies for teens, the personal testimonies of Christian adults can be extremely valuable. A personal testimony is often a story someone

tells about how God has impacted his or her life. Testimonies can also be stories about the folly of disobeying God and the earthly consequences the person suffered or the lessons they learned. Some testimonies are about occasions when the person realized God's amazing love, creativity, power or activity in our world today.

You may already be aware of Christians who have personal stories to share that will be helpful to your teens. Many times though, we are unaware of the past and even current experiences of Christians we know. It can be helpful to communicate with others in your ministry or congregation and ask them if they have the specific types of experiences you would like adults to share with the teens to whom you minister.

Many Christian adults believe their experiences are mundane and will bore teens. Others may feel uncomfortable speaking to a group of young people. You will need to help them understand how crucial it is for teens to hear numerous real world examples from the lives of other Christians about how God has impacted their lives and how they live a Christian life daily. The testimonies they can share will help reinforce key biblical concepts you are teaching.

If necessary, you can provide training to help reticent Christians write the stories from their lives you believe will be helpful to your students. Often writing the story down can help people be more coherent and interesting when they later tell the story. Some people may also need training and encouragement in public speaking.

Providing this extra training for adult volunteers may appear to be an unnecessary burden on your ministry. Personal testimonies, however, can make a huge positive difference in how teens understand and execute God's commands and principles in their own lives. If your resources are severely limited, ask Christian adults who are not normally volunteers for your ministry if they would be willing to provide this special training.

Small Group Dynamics in Bible Classes

As you plan and teach Bible lessons to teens, a basic knowledge of small group dynamics can prove helpful. Small group dynamics can impact how your Bible students interact with the teacher and each other. Unhealthy dynamics can hinder learning. In general, teens need to feel safe in order to be able to be truly authentic. They need to be in a class environment that provides this feeling of safety so they feel free to share their questions, ideas, concerns and doubts.

Small group dynamics are impacted by how often new members are introduced to the group. If you are constantly adding new students to your class, that particular Bible study is more for outreach than heart sharing. Even in outreach Bible studies, you will have young people willing to share their hearts with others in the group. Some teens, however, will not feel as comfortable being vulnerable in front of these new teens whom they may have just met. If that seems to create some issues, you can compensate by providing other

opportunities to share their hearts in mentoring relationships or closed small group Bible studies.

Bible studies that have the same teens attending every meeting are considered closed groups in small group dynamics. These closed groups allow reluctant teens to develop a trust that they are safe sharing their hearts with the others in the Bible study. Some teens will develop this trust quickly, while others may take a year or more to feel safe enough to reveal their hearts to the group. New members can be added to a closed, small group Bible study. Usually, this is done slowly or at set times with group members having some input regarding potential new members.

Effective teen ministries often give young people opportunities to participate in both types of small groups. This allows the ministry to provide meaningful outreach opportunities as well as more personal Bible studies addressing the concerns and issues faced by a segment of the teens they serve.

It is important in any small group environment to set ground rules for how students and teachers can share personal information that is revealed in the group. Students need to know you will have to reveal to any teen's parents information he or she shares that you believe puts them in serious danger. (In some areas, this will be required by law for certain issues. Check local statutes to determine any laws that may apply to your ministry.)

When you believe it is necessary for a parent to know about something their child shared in class, it is often best to offer to go with the teen when he or she tells his or her parents the news. At times, you will also need to give the teen a deadline to have that conversation. It is generally better for the health of family relationships for teens to be the ones who share their problems with their parents. You can be available to provide love and support if it is needed. In some cases, you may need professional assistance in helping a teen discuss sensitive issues with his or her parents. If you decide professional help is necessary, inform the teen and the parents before the meeting that you will bring this additional person.

Any non-critical personal information that is shared in a group needs to stay in the group. It should not be shared with others without permission and should never be used to gossip about people. This rule should apply to both teens and adults in the ministry and be reviewed periodically. Teens usually appreciate these rules, and will often monitor themselves to make sure the boundaries are respected by everyone.

Another small group dynamic that can impact teen Bible classes involves participation. The goal is for as many students as possible to participate in class discussions. Extroverted students often want to answer every question and can dominate any conversation. At times, you may have to kindly interrupt a teen who is talking too long. If this becomes necessary, try to wait until the teen pauses at the end of a thought or sentence before

interrupting. It may also be necessary to ask teens to wait to speak until they are called upon by you. This will allow you to include a variety of students in the discussion.

More quiet or introverted teens may be reluctant to say anything. Pushing quiet students to talk can make them feel more uncomfortable. If quiet students appear to have something to say, you can ask if they want to share something. If they decline, avoid trying to pressure them into speaking. You can always have a private conversation later encouraging them to share their insights in class.

There are other ways group dynamics can impact the effectiveness of your ministry. Daniel Coyle studied the group dynamics of successful teams in business, athletics, the military and more. The dynamics he found they had in common were often lacking in less successful groups.¹⁷ Educators have used some of these same principles in the classroom for years. They should also improve the small and larger group dynamics of your ministry.

Coyle found that when there were meetings or classes in successful groups, people sat in circles. This keeps people from detaching emotionally from the group and increases overall participation. He also found there was lots of eye contact and appropriate touches amongst group members. There were many short, energetic exchanges and few long lectures. When someone spoke, others listened actively, asked informed questions and rarely interrupted those who were speaking. Finally, everyone was treated as a valuable part of the group with respect and kindness.¹⁸

It is important to remember that not every teen served by your ministry is a member of an intact, healthy, Christian family. Those who are not may be desperately seeking a replacement for their own home that may be broken in numerous ways. Many of the small group dynamics shared above will help your ministry develop a feeling of belonging for its members. It may also help to regularly remind the adults who volunteer in your ministry that you want every teen to feel as if she or he is part of your loving ministry family.

Managing small group dynamics when teaching a teen Bible class or small group Bible study enhances learning by creating an environment where every teen is able to share her or his thoughts. It also creates a safe place for teens to share their problems, questions and doubts, instead of keeping them hidden from others.

Maintaining Educational Value in Bible Lessons

When teaching the Bible to teens, it can be tempting to make the classes as full of entertainment as possible. While Bible lessons should not be dry and boring, focusing primarily on the entertainment aspects may mean your lessons lose educational value in the process.

¹⁷ Coyle. *The Culture Code*, 8.

¹⁸ Coyle. *The Culture Code*, 8.

One way to make sure Bible teachers remain focused on the educational content of their Bible lessons is to encourage them to use learning objectives and guiding questions. A learning objective states an important idea or concept the teacher wants students to learn from their Bible lesson. While Bible lessons often have quite a few things that can be learned from them, it is usually best to focus on no more than three to five learning objectives for any one lesson.

Guiding questions are often given to Bible students at the beginning of a lesson. It is a question the teacher hopes students will be able to answer because of what is taught during the lesson. A great way to assess whether or not students have understood the Bible lesson is to ask them the guiding question again at the end of class. If students are still confused, the teacher knows the lesson may need to be taught again using different scriptures, examples, or teaching methods.

Learning Environments

Before we leave our discussion of Bible lessons, it is important to remember the best Bible lessons do not always happen in a classroom in a church building. Your Bible class may indeed be a traditional one. You can also have Bible classes in coffee shops, homes, parks, and museums. You can have a class of twenty students or a class of one. The size and location are not as important as making sure that your lessons are as effective and impactful as they can possibly be. You never know how many opportunities you will have to teach each of your students about God. Treat every Bible lesson as if it were the only chance you will ever have to teach those particular teens what God wants them to know. The difference that perspective will create in how you approach teaching your lesson can change everything for some teens.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the two basic types of teen Bible lessons.
2. What are some of the factors you need to consider when choosing what type of Bible lesson to teach?
3. What are the nine areas you need to evaluate when considering a specific Bible curriculum?
4. Evaluate the current Bible curriculum your ministry uses or is planning to use. What are its strengths and weaknesses?
5. What are some of the small group dynamics that can impact a teen Bible class?
6. If you have an existing ministry to teens, what adjustments do you need to make to your current small group dynamics?
7. What is the best Bible class environment for the teens to whom you minister?

Chapter 6 – Using Questions to Encourage Spiritual Growth

Hearing a Bible lesson is very different from understanding it and knowing how to incorporate it in a Christian life. Questions can help move students to deeper levels of understanding and encourage meaningful spiritual growth. They can also illuminate areas where teens have misunderstandings or have begun developing inaccurate beliefs.

Many teens who have become Christians and regularly participate in spiritual practices still possess a shallow faith. While they may be able to say things that sound spiritually appropriate, asking questions that force them to think more deeply can reveal their beliefs actually deviate greatly from those described in scripture. Numerous Christian educators have found teens often have belief systems more closely aligned with moralistic therapeutic deism than the Christianity of the Bible.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is a belief system that can exist independent of any specific religious belief system, including Christianity. The basic tenets are the belief that there is a god who created and watches over the earth and its people. This god wants people to be good and nice to others. The central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself. God is only involved in the world to solve problems and allows all “good” people to go to Heaven.

Questions are essential tools that ministries can use to help teens understand what God requires of Christians and how those beliefs, attitudes, and actions differ from moralistic therapeutic deism and other popular belief systems.

Functions of Questions

Questions in Bible classes can serve four critical functions:

1. **Assessment.** What do students know and understand about the lesson? What are their current beliefs and understandings of what is in the Bible? These questions can help you evaluate if your students are actually learning what you want them to learn. They can also illuminate any gaps in knowledge or understanding they have which need to be addressed.
2. **Deeper thinking.** Have your students taken time to consider what being a Christian means for them personally? Have they reflected on God’s Words enough to really understand what they mean for their lives? These questions encourage Bible students to think more deeply about how God wants to impact their lives.
3. **Clarification.** Teens often have questions and doubts about various aspects of their faith. They may have misunderstood things or feel confused about them. These questions can help your Bible students voice their questions and doubts. They can help you uncover misunderstandings and confusion.

4. **Preparation.** Teens are often faced with a constant barrage of secular lies and religious false teachings. These critical thinking questions can better prepare them to evaluate any teaching by God's Words. Preparation questions can also help students formulate biblical responses to questions others may ask them about God or their faith.

Bloom's Taxonomy

When we ask questions in Bible classes for children, they often require students to remember the facts of a particular Bible story. In Bible classes for teens, the questions tend to be a bit deeper. Without understanding the various types of questions that can enhance learning though, we often miss helping students reach the depths of understanding they are capable of reaching.

The best way to begin a discussion of some of the types of questions that are important to ask in a teen Bible class is to examine Bloom's taxonomy. Benjamin Bloom was an American educational psychologist who developed several hierarchies designed to help educators create learning goals.¹⁹ For our purposes, we will examine his cognitive hierarchy and how it should impact the types of questions we ask students.

Here are the various levels and the types of questions you can ask to help students begin processing Bible lessons on each level.

1. **Remembering.** These questions are designed to help students remember the basic facts of a Bible story or passage. This is the most basic level of questioning. While knowing the facts of a Bible story is helpful, if processing Bible lessons is only done on this level, it will be difficult to live a Christian life. Examples of memory questions: "How many people were on the Ark with Noah?" "What did Jesus say to Saul on the Road to Damascus?"
2. **Understanding.** Questions for understanding are designed to make sure the student actually understands the Bible story or passage. Often this involves asking students to put the Bible lesson in their own words. Teens raised in Christian homes can often use words like righteousness and faith correctly, while having no actual understanding of their meaning. Understanding questions can evaluate whether they actually have a working comprehension of what they may be saying. Examples of understanding questions: "What does John mean in 1 John 3:7 when he writes about practicing righteousness and being righteous?" "What did it mean when Jesus said he was a shepherd?"
3. **Applying.** These questions are designed to encourage students to think about the commands and principles in scripture that God wants them to apply to the way they live their lives. Although many teen classes contain application sections, teens are often unaware they have been taught the application of a Bible story. Asking

¹⁹ Armstrong, "Bloom's Taxonomy."

applying questions can make them more aware they have indeed been taught how to apply the Bible to their lives. Examples of applying questions: “Why do you think God put the story of Noah in the Bible?” “What do you think God wants us to learn from the story of Ruth?” “What do you think God wants us to do in our lives in light of the story of Saul on the road to Damascus?”

4. **Analyzing.** Analyzing questions help students analyze scripture and the lives of various people in the Bible. These questions can also encourage them to analyze their own lives and compare them to how God has asked Christians to live. Examples of analyzing questions: “How did the various Christians in Acts make use of the Armor of God?” “When you read the list of the fruit of the Spirit, how do you see ways you exhibit those characteristics in your own life?”
5. **Evaluating.** Asking students evaluating questions teaches them how to evaluate anything in light of what they read in the Bible. It is a critical skill set for helping teens move to a more independent faith. On a list of the educational terms used for this level of Bloom's taxonomy, you will find words like appraise, defend, select, debate, support, judge and value.²⁰ It is important to encourage students to support their opinions with examples from scripture. Otherwise, students can leave class thinking their ideas are acceptable to God, when their beliefs may actually be in direct opposition to what God wants from His people. Examples of evaluating questions: “What do you think of the idea that a “good God” wouldn't allow evil in the world?” “What does it look like if we are loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength?”
6. **Creating.** Creating questions are rarely used in Bible classes. They are, however, the types of questions that can encourage teens to engage in ministry. These questions help students put together all of the previous levels of the hierarchy with the gifts and opportunities God gives them to live a Christian life, serve others and share their faith. It does not mean students are encouraged to get creative with how they interpret scripture in ways that change the meaning God intended for that passage. Examples of creating questions: “In what ways has God equipped you to serve others and share your faith?” “How can we solve xyz problem in the world in ways that honor God and serve others while sharing our faith with them?”

Critical Thinking Skills

There is another type of questioning in Bible classes that is designed to help students develop critical thinking skills. Critical thinking skills encourage students to examine information to form a judgement as to whether or not it is in accordance with what God has given us in the Bible. These skills can protect teens from believing false teaching by religious people and lies that are often presented as truth by the secular world.

²⁰ Utica University, “Bloom's Taxonomy of Measurable Verbs.”

There are numerous skill sets within the realm of critical thinking. Let us examine a few skills that can help young people discern whether or not something is indeed true by God's standards.

- **Determining whether or not a source of information can be trusted.** All humans are fallible. Someone does not have to be evil to accidentally teach something that goes against scripture. Teens need to understand that regardless of the person's intentions, they need to examine everything they are told or taught and compare it to the Bible. This is a crucial skill set to teach young people who are confronted by a variety of "experts" all claiming to teach the truth on a variety of topics. They may indeed be saying something valid – even evil people sometimes tell the truth – but your Bible students will not know whether or not something is true unless they compare it to God's truths.
- **Determining the bias of the source of information.** All humans have biases. A person's biases impact how she or he interprets information. Two people can look at the same set of data. If one is an atheist and the other a Christian, they can come to radically different interpretations of the same data. Knowing the background and belief system of the person who is espousing a "truth" will help remind your students of the possible biases impacting the belief that person is supporting. It could still be true, but your students may want to examine what someone with a different basis believes about the topic.
- **Interpreting data.** Many "experts" will use data to support their claims. Unfortunately, statistics can be easily manipulated to give the impression that something is true. When examining data, your Bible students need to learn to ask several crucial questions:
 - **Who conducted the study?** What are their potential biases that could impact their interpretation of any data? Are they trying to sell an idea or a product?
 - **Was the study conducted using industry best practices?** Unfortunately, it is not uncommon to find researchers have not used best practices in the way they gathered data, the filters they used or in the way they interpreted the data. When researchers are sloppy in how they conduct their research, their results are suspect.
 - **Could the data be interpreted in a different way?** An expert with a different background in the same field may come up with a radically different interpretation of the same data. Sometimes there seems to be a consensus of opinion, but even experts can be impacted by peer pressure. It is important to consider if there are viable additional interpretations of the data.
 - **Has anyone conducted a similar study that resulted in radically different data?** There are a lot of reasons this can happen. Perhaps one set of data was obtained without using best practices. Or data may be impacted

by the location of the study. If your students find an opposing study, they need to attempt to find out why the results are so different.

- **Determining the true cause of a result.** Correlation is not necessarily causation. Just because everyone in your class who ate meat this week wore red clothing to class, does not mean eating meat causes people to choose a red outfit to wear. Sometimes it is just a coincidence. At other times, it may be a result of the same root cause that has yet to be identified. Teens need to learn that when two things seem to always go together, it does not necessarily mean one of them causes the other.
- **Understanding there may be more information that will change the interpretation or “truth”.** The Bible is full of examples of this dynamic. Remember how some of the people were confused about Jesus because the prophecy was that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? They only knew Jesus as someone who grew up in Nazareth. Had they know he was born in Bethlehem, they would have had enough information to realize that the prophecy had indeed been fulfilled in Jesus. People will often use a random Bible verse out of context to prove their point. It is important to teach teens to examine all of the scriptures to make sure that verse is being interpreted correctly when placed back in the fullness of scripture.
- **Knowing the possible logical fallacies that can be used.** A logical fallacy is an argument that sounds logical, but is actually based on faulty logic. It is important for your teens to know some of the more common fallacies and how they can be used to make incorrect conclusions appear to be true.²¹
- **Understanding God’s truths are absolute.** When the Bible says something is true, it is true. Secular society often promotes the concept of relative truth and situational ethics. In this world view, there is no absolute truth, including definitions of what is “right” or “wrong”. Rather everything is dependent upon the individual to decide his or her “truth”. The Bible depicts an absolute truth that comes from God. John 14:6, for example, tells us the only way to the Father is through Jesus. This is an absolute truth, whether or not people actually accept it as their “personal truth.” Teens need to understand since God’s truth found in this passage is absolute, there are no multiple paths to God and Heaven – no matter who tries to teach them it is true or how much “evidence” the person may produce. It goes against God’s absolute, unchanging truth and is therefore false.
- **Realizing they may need more information or assistance in determining whether or not something is true.** Critical thinking is difficult. Many adults still have not mastered it. Teens need to understand it does not mean they are not intelligent if they are struggling with determining whether or not something is true. Encourage them to continue reading in scripture, praying for God’s wisdom and asking mature Christian adults for their help.
- **Knowing scripture well enough to immediately reject many false ideas.** Your Bible students need to understand their best defense against Satan’s lies is knowing

²¹ See Appendix 3: Common Logical Fallacies in Spiritual Discussions.

God's truths. Those truths are found in the Bible and studying it regularly can give them enough knowledge to easily and quickly reject many ideas as false.

Critical Thinking Activities

There are several activities you can routinely do with your Bible students to encourage strong critical thinking habits.

- **What does this really mean?** Write the scripture where your Bible students can easily see it. Ask them what key words they think they see in the passage. Have them share what they think the passage means and what God wants us to do based on these verses. Finally, have them share what new questions they may have after reading the passage. This exercise is also a great habit for them to use in their independent Bible study. Be careful to ask for supporting evidence for what they think the passage means. Are there other scriptures they can think of that support their conclusions? Never let students leave class with an incorrect understanding of a passage of scripture. You can not force them to agree with you, but they do need to understand why you believe the scripture does not mean what they think it means.
- **What is this like?** This is another critical thinking activity which can be used with a passage of scripture that is new to your Bible students. Write the passage where your students can easily see it. Ask them to give examples of other scriptures they believe might be connected to this scripture. Have them share how they believe the information in this passage extends what they already knew from those other passages. Does it reinforce those other verses or add a bit of new important information? Finally, ask them what new questions they may have after reading this passage and discussing it. Note: Do not let students leave class without having any incorrect ideas addressed. They may not agree with you, but they need to hear a more mature Christian explain things more accurately.
- **Extra, Extra.** This exercise is good for discovering whether or not your Bible students learned the major points you wanted to teach them during the lesson. At the end of class, ask your students to write a headline for your class today or the Bible story or passage of scripture you studied. If they struggle, it may show they are still struggling with the learning objectives you had for that lesson.
- **Yes, No, Maybe.** This exercise can help you be more aware of which of God's truths, commands or principles may be confusing or upsetting your students in some way. Give each student a "yes" card, a "no" card and a "maybe" card. Explain to your students that as you read the Bible passage, you want them to use their cards to indicate what they are thinking. When you read something they believe is true, they should hold up the "yes" card. If you read something that creates a question in their mind, they are to hold up a "maybe" card. If you read something that bothers them in some way, they should hold up their "no" card. (In some situations, you may want to create an environment where the teens cannot see which cards the other students are showing at any point in time.) You may want to have another adult jot

down the points where students hold up yellow or red cards. These are the parts of the scripture you need to address more carefully with your Bible students.

- **Tip the Scales.** This activity is great for comparing something in popular culture to what God has given us in the Bible. This could be some sort of popular activity, a new term or a statement that is popular. Make this as visual as possible. You may even want to bring in an actual balance scale to use. On one side have students think of every argument, excuse or reason someone could give about why we should agree with the chosen topic from the world's point of view. On the other side, place everything God has said that might apply to the topic. The exercise is teaching them to filter their choices through what God wants them to do. It also helps them understand that if there are a million reasons on the world's side and only one on God's – for example, God has said it is sinful – God always wins.

Asking for Student Responses

How you ask for responses from teens can impact many of the dynamics of your ministry. Often teachers are unaware of the assumptions students can make merely by observing how the teachers engage students in responding to their questions. Teens can develop a negative impression of specific individuals or your ministry as a whole if exchanges between Bible teachers and students are handled poorly. Often these exchanges are poorly handled because of the perceptions adults have of the various teens served by your ministry.

Professional educators are trained to avoid having overly positive or negative perceptions of their students. Known as the Pygmalion effect, teachers were found to interact more positively with students they perceived as good students and more negatively when they believed the student was a poor student. Rosenthal and Jacobsen found that telling teachers random students were poor or excellent students changed teachers' behavior towards those students and eventual student outcomes.²²

For your purposes, you can help your Bible teachers by training them to be aware of their interactions with students in specific areas. They should focus on treating everyone equally, as if they are all capable of having a strong spiritual foundation and becoming faithful, productive Christians. The positive behaviors researchers observed between teachers and the students they believed were capable of success were:

- **Were warmer in interactions.** Teachers were friendlier to these students and had more casual, personal exchanges. They were also more likely to greet these students fondly and answer their questions with kindness rather than impatience.
- **Provided additional resources.** Teachers often gave students they expected to be successful more special books or articles to read. They also suggested other resources the students might find helpful in increasing their knowledge or expertise.

²² Duquesne University, "The Pygmalion Effect."

- **Called on them more often.** Teachers called on students they thought were going to be successful more than other students - whether or not the students indicated they knew the answer. Students are well aware of this dynamic and although they may not be able to verbalize it, use it to determine the value of various students to the teacher.
- **Listened to them more carefully.** When a student perceived to be capable of success asked or answered a question, the teacher was found to listen more intently. This allowed the teacher to notice nuances in what the student said that might give clues to other strengths and weaknesses that needed to be addressed.
- **Gave better feedback.** The feedback these students received from their teachers was not always positive. It was, however, helpful feedback. Often teachers give general, broad statements for feedback like, "You need to work harder." It is difficult for anyone to know exactly what that means in the context of their actions. If, however, a teacher says something like, "If you read Proverbs chapter one, you may understand the concept of wisdom a little better," a student knows exactly what to do to try and improve. It is also critical for teachers to avoid mocking student answers or the students themselves when incorrect responses are given.
- **Assumed the best, not the worst.** This is so important to teens. When something goes wrong, they want adults to at least hear their side of the story before coming to judgment or giving consequences. Teachers tend to give students they perceive as successful the benefit of the doubt, while immediately assuming less successful students are at fault.

Training volunteers to interact with students – especially in question and answer interchanges – in healthy ways can improve the entire dynamic between teens and the adults in your ministry. Having the attitude that all of the teens served by your ministry have the same value in God's eyes and yours will make it easier for adults to act in ways that make students feel loved and capable of being who God wants them to be.

Student-Generated Questions

Before we leave questioning, it is important to discuss the spiritual questions your students may have. Teens need opportunities to ask any questions they have about God, scripture or Christianity. Young people may not feel it is appropriate to ask the questions that are concerning them. Barna found that 35% of young Christian adults claim to have significant intellectual doubts about their faith. Yet about half of Christian young adults still do not feel comfortable asking their most pressing spiritual questions in a church environment.²³

Adults may also be nervous about allowing teens the freedom to ask any and all of their spiritual questions. They are afraid it will create a disruptive classroom environment. Or they fear a student who expresses a doubt will then cause other students to have that

²³ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 190.

same doubt. Finally, many Christians are afraid of appearing foolish by giving incorrect answers, or not having an immediate answer.

Many who have studied doubt and faith believe that it is actually unanswered questions and doubts that can cause teens to reject God.²⁴ Allowing young people to ask all of their questions gives your ministry an opportunity to give teens the answers God would want them to know. Their doubts are not contagious. Their questions are what all of your Bible students will eventually hear from someone during their lifetime.

Your answers do not have to be immediate. Ask for time to research your answer. Explain that you want to make sure your answer is biblical and it will take some time to research. Then use the Bible, apologetics materials and other reliable resources to help you give your students the best answers possible. Credit your sources. Avoid the issues (like logical fallacies) we discussed earlier in the chapter.²⁵ Give your students the answers to their questions in the next class period if possible. If it is one of those rare things where God has not given us an answer, be honest. God's truths can withstand the questions and doubts of your students. Encouraging student questions will help their faith stay strong when others ask them those same questions.

Teaching Teens How to Find Godly Answers

Adolescents today have been trained by educators to find answers to any questions they may have without the assistance of an adult. Kinnaman found this to be so prevalent that young adults are even more likely to consult the internet than their minister about their religious questions. Unfortunately, the training they receive at school does not always teach them how to assess the quality of the information they find in their search for answers. In fact, Kinnaman also found that young people consider the very existence of an answer on the internet as proof of its reliability.²⁶

The internet can indeed provide immediate answers to any number of questions impacting the spiritual lives of teens. Search engines have various criteria for how they rank responses. Sometimes advertising money or manipulating algorithms can catapult an answer or website to the top of the options given. There is no real effort made by the search engines to assess the accuracy of a particular website or resource or to rank answers by their quality and veracity. Even if they begin doing so in the future, it is likely their criteria would be secular and not biblical.

It is critical to encourage young people to assess the accuracy of the answers they find to their questions before accepting them as truth. It can also be helpful to teach them how to find passages in the Bible that will allow them to determine whether or not the information

²⁴ Ibid., 192.

²⁵ See Appendix 3: Common Logical Fallacies in Spiritual Discussions.

²⁶ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 55.

they found matches God's truths. Without developing these filters, teens are susceptible to being swayed by any number of false teachings and beliefs.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain the four critical functions of questions in a Bible class for teens.
2. Describe each level of Bloom's taxonomy and give three new examples of questions you could ask on each level.
3. Explain nine critical thinking skills teens need to be able to decide what is really true.
4. Describe three activities that can help Bible students develop strong critical thinking skills.
5. What questions do the teens to whom you minister have about what they have been taught? How can your ministry encourage Bible students to share all of their questions? What questions have gone unanswered?
6. How will you handle answering student questions in your ministry?

Chapter 7 – Christian Life Skills

The concept of Christian life skills is not new. The Apostle Paul spent intentional time mentoring Timothy, Titus and other younger men to help them develop the skills he used as an evangelist. Many of the New Testament letters not only reinforced God's commands and principles for Christians, but also gave specific examples of someone's behavior to emulate. The writers knew people often need to be taught how to do those things God wants us to do.

Teens may understand the application principle of the Bible lesson you taught them. Unfortunately, if they have never seen someone handle a conflict in a godly way, for example, they may have no real idea of how to do it. Or, if no one has taught them good money management skills, your Bible students may really struggle to be good stewards of their money and generous in their giving to God.

Creating opportunities in your ministry for teaching the teens you serve Christian life skills is critical. For many of them, it can mean the difference between obeying God and not really knowing how to obey God in a particular area. How much Christian life skills training your Bible students need will depend upon the answers to these questions:

- Have your students told you they do not know how to do certain things God has asked Christians to do?
- Is there evidence your students may not be seeing godly examples at home?
- Do your students spend very little time with their parents in which their parents could have taught them the various Christian life skills?
- Have the parents of your Bible students expressed an interest in your assistance teaching their teens Christian life skills?
- Do your students appear to need more guided practice in certain Christian life skills?

Some of your students may just need a review of certain skill sets. Others will need extra practice or perhaps teaching on more advanced aspects of a skill. In certain ministries to teens, you will need to spend a lot of time really focusing on teaching and giving guided practice opportunities for various Christian life skills. In general, it is better to help students know how to obey God well in a few areas, than trying to go through a large number of skills in a short amount of time. If you teach Christian life skills too quickly, your students may not be able to live out all of those commands much better than they can today.

Christian life skills activities can also be a great way to assess your students' knowledge and understanding of scripture. In the course of the activity, you will have opportunities to assess each of your students. It will become obvious who has gaps in their Bible knowledge or understanding and who may struggle with how to obey the commands they do understand. You can use the information from this informal assessment to guide your planning for future Bible lessons and activities.

The list of possible Christian life skills is extensive.²⁷ Your list may vary from that of a ministry to teens in another location. Which skills are being taught (or not) by the parents of teens in a particular area will vary. So may the urgency of teaching and guided practice for particular Christian life skills. An area with a lot of violence, for example, may find an urgent need to help students develop the skills for godly conflict resolution. An area where Christianity is relatively new, may find a greater need for Christian life skill training in prayer or worship. The skills you choose to focus on will reflect the priorities and goals of your ministry plan.

When teaching Christian life skills, it is important to start with what God has to say about the topic. Why does it matter that we learn to do this thing well? Are we breaking any of God's commands if we do not do this well? How you teach this part of the lesson is key for both motivation and helping them understand how important God is to every part of our lives.

Once you have connected students to why learning the skill is important, you need to begin teaching it. For many skills you will need to do a task analysis. What are the steps a person takes to do this skill in the way God would want them to do it? Some Christian life skills are very concrete. If you are working with students on stewardship, for example, teaching them how to make a budget is critical. You can easily find many resources that will break down the task of creating a budget into a number of easy to follow steps.

Other Christian life skills are more abstract. For example, if you wanted to teach a Christian life skill lesson on joy, there is no task analysis. You will need to use scripture and the experiences of other Christians to help students develop strategies to be more joyful. Often the strategies students will need may vary from student to student based on their personalities and other factors. If possible, have several Christian adults share different strategies they use to live out a particular Christian life skill. This will give your students multiple options to try until they discover those that work best for them.

The activities you use for guided practice must be experiential. Having them work through various scenarios will give them practice in the various ways they may be expected to use those skills in their lives. Try to make the scenarios as realistic as possible. Some should apply to their lives as teens and a few scenarios should reflect what they may encounter as adults. For example, if you were teaching stewardship, you may ask them to create a budget based on their current financial situation. For some students, this will not work very well. Giving them a typical starting adult salary and the expenses an adult living independently may encounter can give them more meaningful practice (as well as a reality check!).

²⁷ See Appendix 4: List of Christian Life Skills.

Teaching and giving students guided practice opportunities in Christian life skills may seem to take time away from more obvious Bible study. It is important to remember though, all of the Bible lessons in the world will not help your students if they do not know how to do the things God is asking them to do.

Discussion Questions

1. What are Christian life skills?
2. Why do teens need Christian life skill lessons and guided practice?
3. What are the key components of an effective Christian life skill lesson?
4. What Christian life skills lessons do the teens to whom you minister need most?

Chapter 8 – Servant Leadership

To many, servant leadership is an unusual focus for a ministry serving teens. Most adults assume teens should be following more than they are leading because of their limited knowledge and life experience. There are several important reasons for your ministry to teens to intentionally train teens to be godly servant leaders:

- **Christians should be leading others to Christ.** No matter what term you use for evangelism, it involves encouraging someone to study the Bible and obey God's commands. It takes someone with the heart of a servant and excellent leadership skills to do that effectively. We need to spend time teaching our young people how to share their faith in the most impactful ways possible.
- **Christian teens should be leaders of their own personal ministry.** At this point in time, they may primarily be serving with more experienced Christians. There will be times though that God calls even teens to lead a specific task for Him. Even if it is just convincing a friend to help them serve a fellow student, servant leadership skills are important.
- **Your Bible students may be called by God to be servant leaders for a ministry or a church as adults.** Many of the problems churches and ministries experience today are because leaders have forgotten to have servant hearts and/or have unhealthy leadership skills in general. Preparing young people to be Christian servant leaders can lessen the future impact of negative and/or ungodly leadership.
- **Your Bible students may be called by God to be servant leaders in the world.** What corporation, non-profit, school or government would not benefit from more godly servant leaders? It is also a great way for Christians to be a light to the world.

What skills do teens need to become godly servant leaders? Are they things you can actively teach in Bible classes? Where can you give them meaningful opportunities to practice their servant leadership skills?

There is actually more direction in the Bible about servant leadership than we realize. Of course the ultimate example is the life of Jesus. We can also find clues in the lives of Moses, David and other people in the Bible. We can even find plenty of bad examples in so many of the kings of Israel and Judah. Proverbs, and the qualifications of elders and deacons give us a more complete picture of a servant leader.

When you pull all of these resources together, you will discover that in order to be godly servant leaders, teens need to develop the following characteristics:

- **Servant heart.** Jesus washed his apostles feet.²⁸ He even washed the feet of Judas, who was about to betray him. Washing feet was the job of a servant, not the son of

²⁸ John 13:1-17.

God. Yet Jesus did not hesitate to do this most humble of tasks to serve his disciples. Teens need to develop servant hearts. They must be willing to do the most humble tasks to serve others.

- **Humility.** Godly servant leaders are humble.²⁹ They realize God is the ultimate authority. They do not think more highly of themselves because they have been given a position of leadership. Most importantly, they realize the importance of others. They realize they can learn from those they lead. They realize they are not perfect and welcome wise, godly counsel from others. Humility may be a struggle for teens in a world where they are constantly told younger is better. If they are to be godly, servant leaders though, they will need to be extremely humble. They will need to embrace learning lessons from older and wiser Christians.
- **Encourage and empower others.** Leaders who lead by domination are not as effective as they could be.³⁰ When others are encouraged to do their best and empowered to use their knowledge, wisdom and gifts, they contribute more to any effort. Great leaders regularly encourage their followers and empower them to help in the ways for which they are best prepared.
- **Listen carefully.** Godly servant leaders do not just listen when others speak, they listen carefully. They listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken. They listen for tone and watch for body language. They listen to learn, more than they listen to correct. Teens need to work on active listening skills. Are they learning everything they need to learn from conversations? Or are they missing crucial information, because they are not listening carefully?
- **Have a vision.** It is hard to lead others if you do not know where you are trying to go. Although there may be many goals for anything a teen may be asked to lead, they need to understand their most important goal - their vision - should always be to spend eternity in Heaven and help as many other people get there as possible.³¹ Their vision should always match God's vision as closely as possible.
- **Love.** Love should be the motivation behind everything a godly servant leader says and does.³² It can be difficult for teens to be consistently loving, especially when they are frustrated by those whom they are leading. They will need help learning to stop and choose the loving thing to say and do in any situation they encounter as leaders.
- **Enthusiastic.** Great servant leaders are enthusiastic about their goals. They are excited about the journey to reach those goals. Their enthusiasm is contagious and makes others want to follow them. Enthusiasm will be easier for some teens than others. It is a personality trait which some teens will have more of than others. All of them, however, can learn to focus the enthusiasm they are capable of to lead those people God has asked them to lead in some way.

²⁹ Mark 9:35.

³⁰ 1 Peter 5:3.

³¹ Matthew 28:16-20.

³² 1 Corinthians 13.

- **Honest.** Godly servant leaders are always honest - even when it is difficult.³³ Teens need to learn all of the ways lies can be told, like half truths and omitted truths. They need to be taught how to speak difficult truths in love. They need to understand the difference between “their” truth and “THE” truth which comes from God. They need to understand the difference between opinion and truth. There are a lot of things to teach teens about honesty, but without a thorough understanding of honesty, they will never be effective, godly, servant leaders.
- **Integrity.** Integrity is more than just being honest. It is being who you say you are. In the case of Christians, it is living the lives God has called us to live. It is exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit. It is obeying God’s commands. Teens need to understand that although they will never be perfect, they should always strive to be more godly.
- **Communicate well.** Effective leaders communicate well. Godly servant leaders communicate with love and honesty.³⁴ They speak in ways that build up rather than demean others. They speak clearly and are patient when they are asked to clarify what they have communicated. For teens to have effective communication skills they will need training and practice – especially when it comes to teaching others the Gospel message.
- **Aware and intentional.** Jesus often noticed things the apostles were doing that indicated a need for correction and further instruction. Many others would have missed those clues. While your teens will not be able to see into the hearts of others like Jesus, they can become more aware of what is said or done around them. This intentional awareness can help them notice needs and problems. Some teens will naturally be more observant than others. All of them can be taught to be more observant and what to do with the things they observe.
- **Prays.** Godly servant leaders pray constantly and consistently.³⁵ Teens need to be encouraged to have active prayer lives, both formally and informally. They need to learn the ways prayer can help them, as well as those they are leading and serving.
- **Learn and grow.** Godly servant leaders read their Bibles regularly. They realize they still need to learn and grow in every area, but especially spiritually. They also encourage those around them to read scripture and continue to learn and grow in a variety of ways. Teens need to be encouraged to develop strong Bible study habits. They also need to learn how to encourage others to develop those same habits.³⁶
- **Understanding of God’s role.** Godly servant leaders never try to take the place meant for God.³⁷ They obey God even when they do not like the command. They follow God’s lead even when they do not understand where God is leading them. They never try to impose their will on God. Godly servant leaders know the strength and power are God’s, not theirs. Teens may struggle with many of these concepts.

³³ Proverbs 12:22, 6:16-20

³⁴ 1 Timothy 4:12, Colossians 4:6.

³⁵ 1 Peter 5:7.

³⁶ Romans 15:4, Proverbs 1:5-7, 2 Timothy 3

³⁷ Isaiah 42:10.

They will need lots of patient teaching and mentoring to help them truly understand God's role when they lead others.

Helping students learn and practice servant leadership skills can be easily incorporated into other Bible lessons and ministry activities. Teens should be given opportunities to work with more mature Christians on a variety of projects. Allow time for students to reflect on what they are learning about servant leadership from Bible lessons and experiences.

Over time, some teens may be capable of taking the lead in various aspects of your ministry. Give them as many opportunities as you can for this guided practice. Use reflection activities to help them discover areas where they still need to learn and grow as a servant leader. Encourage them to use their skills to serve others and share their faith independently or with a small group of peers. Help them prepare to be the godly servant leaders they will need to be in the future.

Discussion Questions

1. Name four reasons it is important to incorporate servant leadership training in your ministry to teens.
2. What are the qualities of a good servant leader?
3. What are the Bible lessons and ministry activities you have that would allow an opportunity to teach or give guided practice in servant leadership skills?

Chapter 9 – Using Service and Faith Sharing to Encourage Spiritual Growth

Service and faith sharing opportunities can be great hands on activities to help teens understand and practice things that are essential for living a productive Christian life. Many teens today expect Christians to be engaged in making the world a better place. They want the churches they attend to be actively involved in social justice issues like poverty, homelessness, human trafficking, violence, corruption, orphans, refugees and environmental issues. This dynamic means service and faith sharing opportunities can also be an outreach tool to engage teens from your community in your ministry.

Unfortunately, the way service and faith sharing activities are often structured give students only a superficial experience and little meaningful, lasting spiritual growth occurs as a result. Done well, guided service and faith sharing activities can help young people grow in several key areas:

- **Experiencing life as God wants them to live it.** Daily Christian life should involve serving others, sharing our faith, reflecting God’s love and character and other aspects needed to successfully complete a service and faith sharing guided experience. Participating in such an experience should help students better understand and have the skill sets needed to live the daily lives God wants them to live.
- **Having the heart and character traits God asks of Christians.** Teens need to understand what it looks like to reflect God’s love accurately. They also need to have guided practice in the various character traits a Christian who has a heart for God will try to develop.
- **Knowing and reflecting on God’s word.** A well executed service and faith sharing opportunity will expose teens to quite a bit of scripture. These verses may be new to Bible students or they may be examining familiar passages in a deeper, more practical way. The experience should also encourage teens to read and study the Bible independently.
- **Praying.** Teens can get a better understanding of how rich, full and helpful a meaningful prayer life can be through serving others and sharing their faith. These opportunities provide chances to discuss and model the many types of prayer found in scripture.
- **Learning and practicing Christian Life Skills.** Many service and faith sharing experiences will require teens to practice a number of Christian Life Skills. Students given servant leadership opportunities in the planning and executing of the project will not only practice those skills, but possibly additional Christian Life Skills as well.
- **Discovering, developing and using their gifts from God.** Service and faith sharing experiences are one of the best ways for teens to discover, develop and use the gifts God has given them to serve Him.
- **Learning how to see the many felt and spiritual needs of others.** Often Christians fail to serve others and share their faith because they fail to even notice

the opportunities God is giving them to do those things. Well planned service and faith sharing opportunities can teach teens how to notice the opportunities God may give them to serve others. They can also help them learn how to uncover felt secular needs and ask the questions to find spiritual needs those being served may not even realize they have.

- **Understanding the purposes of Christian community.** Teens – especially those living in more individualistic cultures - often struggle with why belonging to a church is even necessary. They may have observed Christians in their congregation exhibit negative and even sinful behaviors. Guided service and faith sharing opportunities can teach them the benefits of Christian community in practical ways.

Individualistic cultures are cultures that value the needs of the individual more than the needs of the group as a whole.

- **Developing an understanding of their purpose in the Church and in the world.** Teens can be confused about their purpose in life. They may not fully understand what God is calling Christians to do. Guided service and faith sharing opportunities can help them better understand how God wants them to be involved in their Church and in the world. It can help them begin to see how their gifts can be used by God to serve their church family and those in the world who still need to hear the Gospel message.
- **Understanding how God works in the world today.** It is often in those moments when they are serving others and sharing their faith that young people begin to really understand how God works in the world today. Some may also begin to better understand parts of God's plans for their lives. Hopefully, they will also begin to more clearly see God's wisdom in His commands and principles and the necessity for obedience.
- **Learning how to effectively plan and execute serving others and sharing their faith.** God often gives Christians opportunities to serve others and share their faith as individuals or in smaller groups, like a couple of friends or a family. By helping plan and execute these larger group opportunities, teens can learn how to effectively plan and execute the opportunities God may give them to serve others and share their faith without the help and guidance of your ministry leaders.

Sadly, teens rarely grow in these areas when they participate in a ministry led service and faith sharing activity. There are several reasons why teens have difficulty growing in meaningful and lasting ways during these opportunities:

- **Goals are unclear.** It would be difficult to create one service and faith sharing experience that resulted in both effective service and spiritual growth in every area listed above. In fact, some experiences are so brief, you may only work towards one of those possible growth areas. If you do not have well planned goals, chances are

great you will not accomplish much of anything. Successfully encouraging teens to grow spiritually while serving others and sharing their faith requires a lot of intentionality in the planning and execution of the experience. Intentionality almost always starts with clear, specific, measurable goals.³⁸

- **Preparation is poorly planned and executed.** Often teens are prepared to serve others and share their faith, merely by giving them logistical details. Students must be well prepared if you expect them to help others in meaningful, productive ways, while also experiencing lasting spiritual growth themselves.
- **Service and faith sharing opportunities are rare.** If you only give students a handful of opportunities to participate during a year, some may miss every opportunity for various reasons. Those who do participate may not have enough time during a few activities to learn everything they could possibly learn from those experiences – there is just not enough time to teach and give guided practice in a few hours a year. To be effective, there should be numerous, regularly scheduled opportunities provided for teens to serve others and share their faith with the guidance of your ministry.
- **There are not enough Christians of various ages participating with teens in our service and faith sharing opportunities.** Some of the most meaningful and lasting spiritual growth teens experience during a service and faith sharing experience is through their interactions with older Christians serving with them. Multi-generational opportunities are essential for students to grow spiritually. There should be as many older Christians serving with your teens as possible. Adults should have training to make them more effective at engaging teens in the experience and taking advantage of mentoring opportunities that occur.

What are the things you need to do to make service and faith sharing opportunities as effective as they can possibly be?

- **Choosing whom you will serve and how you will serve them.** Do not assume you know how to best serve someone. Ask questions, do research, and consult experts who serve others with similar issues for their advice before choosing a project. It is also important to consider the size of your group, the gifts they possess and the resources you have available to use. If possible, try to find situations where your teens can have meaningful interactions with the people you are serving. When it is not possible, try to find ways you can connect your teens emotionally to the people they are helping. It is also important to remember that “faith sharing” does not always mean teaching people how to become a Christian. At times, your teens may serve people who are already Christians. In those cases, faith sharing will actually be encouraging those people to stay strong in their faith.³⁹

³⁸ See Appendix 2: Creating Ministry Goals.

³⁹ See Appendix 5: Service Project Ideas.

- **Set specific, measurable goals for both the activity and the teens participating in the activity.** How will you know if your teens actually helped the people you are serving? How will you discover if anyone actually shared their faith in a meaningful way? How will you measure any spiritual growth in the teens who participated in serving others and sharing their faith? Your goals should give you as concrete of a way as possible to answer those questions. Often the measurable part means some sort of number is in the goal. All of us understand God is actually in control of much of what happens during these experiences, but having numbers will give you a starting point for your reflection after the activity is completed.
- **Prepare teens adequately before they attempt to serve others and share their faith.** The amount and type of preparation will depend upon the type and length of the activity itself. As you plan how to prepare young people for an opportunity to serve others while sharing their faith, consider providing at least minimal preparation in the following areas:
 - **Bible study.** Is there an example in scripture of someone serving a similar group of people with a similar need? What can we learn from the things they did or did not do? What godly character traits will we need while doing this? What verses can we find that give us a little more information about God's expectations in those areas? What are the pieces of our faith that we may be sharing with those we encounter? What does the Bible teach us about those things?
 - **Prayer.** Some teens may not pray independently at all. Others may limit their prayers to meal times and prayers for themselves, family and friends. Your preparation can include some teaching on other types of prayers. You can suggest possible prayer topics for them to include in their private prayers. You may even want to keep a group prayer journal that begins before the experience, is in use during the project and is part of your reflection process afterwards.
 - **Outside reading.** It is often best if your students have an awareness of the problems the people they are to serve face. Readings outside of the Bible can provide specific information teens may find helpful. These readings can be from Christian books, secular books, articles, web sites and other sources of information. If you are serving another ministry or non profit, they may be able to provide you with suggestions of helpful reading materials.
 - **Organizational training.** Teens should be included in the planning of these experiences as much as possible. Those who appear to be gifted in the areas of planning, organizing, logistics and other pertinent areas should be given additional training and guided practice. With enough training and experience, some teens will eventually be capable of planning and executing major service and faith sharing experiences with minimal adult assistance.
 - **Skills training.** People who are being served can often end up being hurt more than helped by our service. Often this is because we ask teens to serve in ways in which they are not currently capable of serving well. One might

assume anyone can paint, for example, but many a wall has been ruined by teens and adults who do not know how to paint properly. As part of the preparation process have someone skilled in the tasks you will be doing come in and train the teens who will be doing those things. Give them a bit of guided practice if possible before you actually need them to use the skill to serve someone.

- **Gift identification and development.** If at all possible, try to help teens identify the gifts God has given them that would be helpful in the project. Do not forget less obvious gifts like organizational or listening skills. Encourage teens to serve in the areas of their giftedness. Of course, they can and may need to help with other tasks outside of their areas of giftedness. Allowing them to focus primarily on the areas where God has given them gifts, however, allows them to develop and use those talents to serve God.
- **Empathy and communication training.** Teens do not necessarily have enough empathy and communication training to be able to handle the things that might happen during a serving and faith sharing experience. It is important for students to interact with the people whom they are serving. Those interactions need to be positive, as your teens will be representing Christianity to some of the people you may serve. It is important to teach teens questions to ask that will help them build empathetic relationships. They also need to be taught what things may be inappropriate to say for a variety of reasons. If you are anticipating your teens will have opportunities to share their faith, it is crucial you spend a lot of time preparing them to have those conversations as well.
- **Apologetics and critical thinking skills.** Older, more experienced teens may eventually participate in service and faith sharing opportunities that are comparable to those of an adult. This can mean they are more likely to encounter situations where people ask them to explain why they believe the things they do or possibly even have their beliefs challenged by a non-believer. Studying apologetics can help teens be prepared to answer the most common doubts and challenges people can express. Critical thinking skills training can also teach them how to really think about what a person may be saying to them before formulating a response. Taking the extra time to provide this more advanced training for those who are ready, can give critical evangelism skill sets to those who can then use them independently.
- **Personal spiritual growth goals.** Meaningful spiritual growth is more likely to happen when teens have thought about the areas where they need to grow spiritually before they serve others and share their faith. You may want to introduce the idea while working in the other areas where you are preparing students. Encourage teens to do some deeper thinking about where they are spiritually and where God wants them to be. In the areas where they still need to grow, how might the particular experience help them practice those things? Students do not necessarily need to share their

personal spiritual goals with others, but some may find sharing them provides extra support from peers and adults working beside them.

- **Structure the actual service and faith sharing activity for maximum effectiveness.** The best preparation can be ruined if the experience itself is poorly executed. There are some key elements groups need to make the opportunity work well for both those being served and the teens participating.
 - **Remind adults of their goals.** Often adults believe they are only there for handling problems. You may even see the adults on a service and faith sharing experience talking to each more than the people being served or the teens. Remind adults they are not just chaperones. They should be modeling appropriate attitudes and behaviors and mentoring teens whenever they find an opportunity. Encourage them to split from each other and mix with the teens whenever possible. Give them tips for having spiritual conversations with the young people in your group.
 - **Healthy environment.** Lots of rest (sleep if you are staying overnight), hydration and healthy foods are crucial for teens whom you need to be their best to serve others. Too many times, adults allow teens to go without sleep and eat unhealthy foods. Then they cannot understand why the teens are lethargic and moody. A little leeway is fine, but in general you want to encourage them to be as healthy as possible.
 - **Calming area.** There needs to be a space that is somewhat removed from the action. Teens who are upset for some reason, introverted, or have certain special needs may need a few minutes to get away from all of the noise and activity to regroup. Be sure to have adults monitoring the space to provide support and counsel and to make sure the area is not used to avoid working.
 - **Reflection opportunities.** During a service and faith sharing experience, there may or may not be times when you can help teens reflect on what has happened thus far and make any adjustments that may be needed. This can be done as a group or with individuals - particularly about their personal spiritual goals. You may also want to encourage them to be observant so they will be prepared for the reflection time after the opportunity is completed.
- **Spend time after completion of the experience in reflection.** It is important to reflect on the entire process when you have completed a service and faith sharing experience. Some of this reflection time should be shared as a group. Other reflection times might include only leaders or be an adult with a teen. There are several things that need to be reflected upon.
 - **The experience.** What went well? What would you change if you served in a similar way again somewhere? What did individuals believe they learned from the experience? This reflection can be creative or a discussion. It will provide you with information from a number of different perspectives. It will also allow you to correct any misconceptions students may have developed during the experience.

- **Personal spiritual growth.** Depending upon your teens, this could be a group activity or accomplished in personal conversations with individual teens. The conversation should reflect how well the student feels he or she accomplished the spiritual goal or goals that were set before the experience. What next steps does the student plan to take to continue growing spiritually?
- **Leadership.** The team of student and adult leaders should meet separately and analyze feedback from those whom you were serving, participants, parents of participants and leaders. No activity is perfect. Analyzing the issues openly and honestly can help make your next service and faith sharing experience even more effective.

Taking the extra time to plan and execute service and faith sharing opportunities well is crucial if you want students to experience meaningful, lasting spiritual growth. It can mean the difference between a meaningless experience and one that encourages meaningful spiritual growth.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe several of the ways teens can grow through service and faith sharing experiences.
2. What are the four reasons this growth doesn't happen during many of these experiences?
3. What are the things that should be done during the planning, execution and reflection stages of a service and faith sharing experience to maximize the impact on student spiritual growth?
4. What changes do you need to make to any service and faith sharing activities you have planned to make them more effective?

Chapter 10 – Effective Teen Activities

When ministering to teens, there are many possible activities you can do with them. Some are more impactful than others on the spiritual lives of young people. How can you ensure that you are making the best use of your time and other resources in the activities you choose?

To select the most beneficial activity, it is important to consider what you want the activity to accomplish. Do you want the students to learn something specific from the experience? Do you want to give them practical experience of some sort? Are you using the activity to make them think more deeply about something or work on a particular godly attribute? Knowing your goals will help you pick the best possible activity to accomplish them.

It is important to be realistic when assessing whether or not an activity will meet your stated goals. Think through what is most likely to actually happen during that activity. Consider how things could go differently than you have planned. Will the activity still accomplish what you want it to accomplish? If not, is there some way to adapt the activity so your goals are more likely to be accomplished?

Let us suppose you want the teens to whom you minister to interact more comfortably with one other. Your ministry team decides a fun activity for the entire group might encourage the teens to interact with each other more naturally. If you choose to take them to see a movie, however, there are actually very few opportunities for them to have even superficial conversations. If instead, you planned an evening where teens played games and ate a meal together, you may be more likely to achieve your goals.

One of the biggest mistakes people make when planning activities for teens is assuming teens will become closer by merely doing fun things together. While that may be true for teens who find they have a lot in common, those who have different tastes and interests may still be left on the fringes. It is also important to remember that casual conversations probably will not lead to those deep, supportive relationships you want them to have. Those relationships develop as they share their hearts with one another. Often those deeper relationships develop best during Bible classes, small group Bible studies and service and faith sharing opportunities.

Some people believe every activity a ministry does with teens has to have an obvious spiritual component to it, like a formal devotional. Others think teens need a lot of activities that are purely for fun. Both types of activities can be helpful in your ministry. The key is to use them appropriately to meet the goals you may have for that activity time.

Activities can be used during a Bible class or outside of your normal meeting time and/or space. While it is impossible to give specific ideas for your location, these are some of the types of activities many ministries to teens have found to be helpful:

- **Class activities.** There are three basic types of activities you can use in a Bible class setting
 - **Warm up activities.** These activities last five to ten minutes and prepare Bible students for the Bible lesson you are about to teach. Usually, the activity is designed to help them explore the way the secular world views a particular topic or to explore their current understanding or beliefs about the topic.
 - **Application and critical thinking activities.** These activities are designed to encourage teens to think more deeply about the scriptures or topic of your Bible lesson.
 - **Christian life skills activities.** These activities are designed to teach teens the necessary skill sets to live the scriptures from the lesson. Ideally, they should also have time to practice these new skills in a guided practice situation.
- **Service and faith sharing opportunities.** As we learned in the last chapter, these activities can happen in one class period, outside of class for a few hours or for an extended period of several days to a week.
- **Field trips.** Taking teens away from your normal meeting space to see or experience something new can add new dynamics to your ministry. You can take them to places like museums where they can view actual items from Bible cultures. Or there may be experiences in your area that help them learn about or experience something important to their faith development or that will help them in ministering to others. It is important to prepare them before you go by telling them the things you want them to learn during the field trip. Make sure to have a time of reflection after the field trip to encourage students to share their thoughts and feelings about the experience. This reflection time will allow you to correct any misunderstandings as well as remind them of what you wanted them to learn from the experience.
- **Challenge Activities.** These are activities you can use to help students practice a skill or talent. Take them to the chosen location, give them a spiritual challenge and the amount of time they have to complete it. Make sure to review any safety rules or boundaries for the challenge before you release them. Challenges can be individual, like asking them to find a place that makes them feel close to God and spend time in Bible study, prayer and reflection. Or it can be a challenge that two or more teens need to complete as a team. For example, you may place them in groups of two or three and have them notice a way someone needs help and provide that assistance. At the end of the allotted time, bring everyone back together for a time of reflection on what happened during the challenge.
- **Gift discovery and development opportunities.** God has given each of your students one or more gifts to develop and use to serve Him. Often teens do not realize God has given them any gifts and/or have not identified what their gifts might be. We will cover this in depth in the next chapter, but these activities will

often be used with smaller groups of teens who have shown an interest or possible talent in a particular area.

- **Christian community activities.** These activities can involve people in your congregation who do not normally interact with the teens in your ministry, or they can be with teens from another congregation. Teens who are trying to live the lives God has called them to live can feel isolated and alone. They are often making choices very different from others around them. Christian community activities can remind them they are not alone, but part of a much larger family of Christians. They can also provide opportunities to introduce them to people who may become mentors or friends. Often these events are fun social events, but serving together is another great way to encourage teens to interact with other Christians.
- **Small group Bible studies.** These are often held in more casual environments like a coffee shop or someone's home. Because they are smaller, they often address specific concerns or interests of the people involved. The smaller size can also encourage young people to share their hearts more freely than they would in a Bible class containing more teens.
- **Retreats.** Retreats are usually held in an area away from the normal meeting space. They often involve an overnight stay, but you can have retreats that are only for several hours. Retreats need to be carefully planned. There is a lot of time to be filled. You want participants to learn about God, grow spiritually and enjoy the experience. If you allow too much unstructured free time or do not encourage enough sleep, the impact of the retreat may be more negative than positive. When planned well though, retreats can be transformative for some teens.
- **Movie nights.** Movie nights need to be planned very carefully. The movies that are considered acceptable by one family may be rejected as ungodly by another. Movies also do not allow for meaningful social exchanges. Often movies are best used to illustrate a point or begin a discussion on an important topic. It is important that you have planned the questions you want to use to make sure the important points you want covered are not forgotten during the entertainment.
- **Game nights.** These can be fun activities that help teens begin to develop friendships. Make sure you have a wide variety of games or everyone understands which game you will be playing if they attend. It is possible in some cases to follow game nights with discussions about the ways people display their character while playing games or other topical issues. You can also design escape rooms with Bible themes or play Bible games to help them review Bible knowledge.
- **Exercise.** The teen years are a great time to encourage healthy habits. Exercise is a great way to work off stress, anger and other potentially harmful emotions. Some ministries have a devotional before or after the exercise if they meet regularly to do the same sort of activity.
- **Skills nights.** Parents of teens often appreciate help teaching their children manners, how to wear makeup appropriately and other skills for which their children may resist parental coaching. Making the experience a fun group one can

encourage teens who may otherwise reject any training on the topic to participate enthusiastically.

- **Learning about others.** Empathy often begins by learning what life is like for someone else. Many cities have a variety of empathy activities already available. Some ministries or charities will create an empathy experience for your teens upon request. You can also create your own.
- **Capstone projects.** Do you have teens aging out of your ministry in a year? Consider offering them the opportunity to design and execute a capstone project. Modeled after academic programs at many universities, you and the student can design the capstone experience that best meets his or her needs. In general, you want the experience to help teens reflect on everything they have learned over the years and do a project that reflects how they hope to live their life as Christian adults. These projects can involve other teens in your ministry, especially if the project involves serving others or a similar type of larger ministry activity.

Your ministry to teens may have ideas for activities that are different from the ones above. These are only suggestions and your activity may be the type of activity your teens need to grow spiritually. Remember to think through it carefully though, to make sure it will accomplish what you want it to do in the lives of your students.

Discussion Questions

1. Why are goals important when choosing activities to do with teens?
2. Name the various possible types of activities and think of at least one possible example for each that would work in your area.
3. What activities have you been using in your ministry to teens? Are they accomplishing what you had hoped they would?
4. Thinking about the spiritual needs of the teens to whom you minister, plan two or three activities that would help them grow spiritually.

Chapter 11 – Gift Discovery, Development and Use

One of the questions teens hope their church can help them answer is, “What is my purpose in life?” They want to know if they really can serve God in a meaningful way. Teens want to know their church family sees them as someone who is needed and not just someone who is considered a burden or merely tolerated.

The Bible teaches us that each person is given at least one gift by God to use to serve Him.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, many teens are not aware of this. Those who understand a little about God’s gifts may still be unaware of the specific gifts God has given them. Because of this ignorance, they are not developing those gifts and may be unprepared when God provides them with opportunities to use their gifts to serve Him.

To help teens understand God’s gifts, we need to teach them some basic principles:

- **Everyone has been given at least one gift from God.** Teens who are struggling in life may honestly believe God has not given them even one gift. This may be especially true for young people who are not doing well in school. They need to understand they have at least one gift and they need to discover, develop and use it to serve God.
- **There are three basic types of gifts from God.** Any of these gifts can be used to serve God in some way.
 - **Material gifts.** These gifts are the things we often talk about sharing with others. Material gifts can be items like clothing or the money needed to purchase items people or ministries may need.
 - **Spiritual gifts.** These are the gifts mentioned in passages like 1 Corinthians 12. These gifts are given to Christians, who receive the gift of the Holy Spirit at their baptism. This list of gifts can be difficult for teens to fully understand. Many of the gifts are somewhat abstract and Christians disagree as to whether or not all of these gifts are still given today.
 - **Talent and personality trait gifts.** One of the best examples of this type of giftedness can be found in Exodus 31. God gave specific people either new talents or an extra measure of talents they already had so they could build His Tabernacle. We also see this in the Apostle Peter. The personality trait of boldness, that caused him so much trouble at times, was also the character trait God later used as Peter became a bold evangelist.
- **God expects Christians to use their gifts in service to Him. This can involve doing good deeds, serving others and sharing their faith.** Teens need to understand that while their gifts can become a catalyst for a future career, that is not the only way they can be used. God wants His people to do good works to serve others, to reflect God’s love to them and to teach others the Gospel message. It is

⁴⁰ 1 Peter 4:10.

the example set for us in the ministry of Jesus, the ministry of the Apostles and by the first century church.

Teens usually have a fairly good understanding of material gifts. They may need additional teaching and encouragement though, to begin developing a generous heart and lifestyle. Often this can be done as they participate in various service and faith sharing opportunities. You can also present them with spiritual challenges in this area for them to complete outside of class.

The concept of spiritual gifts may still confuse teens even after Bible lessons on the topic. It is important to teach them these passages even if they are not able to totally understand them yet. Reassure them that as they begin serving God with their other gifts, these spiritual gifts may become more evident. Encourage them to reflect periodically on their lives and their service to God and compare it to these passages. Do not be discouraged if they are still struggling with the idea of spiritual gifts when they enter adulthood.

A talent or a personality trait as a gift from God is a more concrete concept teens can understand. What they may not know is which talent or talents God may have given them. They may not be sure how to develop any talents they have identified. Many of them will also be unsure how to use the talents and personality traits God gave them to serve Him.

This is the area that needs the most focused teaching and guidance in any ministry to teens. Even teens who have displayed an obvious talent for something outside of the church environment may not know how to use that talent to serve God. Teens with certain personality traits and more obscure talents may particularly struggle with identifying the gifts God has given them. Instead of using one of the spiritual gift inventories you can find, try giving them a more conversational survey to help them uncover talents and personality traits God can use.⁴¹

It is important to be aware that God can use more obscure talents like organizational skills as often as He can use the ones we normally remember, like art or teaching.⁴² You may have to be a little more creative as you help guide teens with those talents through the talent development stage. Often older Christians with those same talents can provide mentoring in not only how to develop those talents, but also how to use them to serve God.

A gift exploration event can also help teens discover gifts - especially gifts they may not have been exposed to at home or school. Ask Christians with various talents to set up a table with a mini experiential task using their talent. Teens can rotate through the various tables and try activities that may reveal a talent and a passion for a specific gift. The

⁴¹ See Appendix 6: Gifts and Talents Survey for Teens

⁴² See Appendix 7: List of Possible Talents.

Christians sharing their talent should also explain how they developed it and how they have used it to serve God in some way.

When setting up gift exploration events, do not forget occupations and more obscure talents. It is crucial that teens understand how they can participate in vocational ministry as an adult. Vocational ministry is when Christians minister to others as they work in their chosen occupation. We find it modeled in scripture when the Apostle Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla were tent makers while they also spread the Gospel message. Your teens may consider choosing an occupation where they can serve others as part of their job duties or have a vocation where they find independent ways of serving their co-workers and customers.

Every location has different rules and laws that apply to what Christians may and may not share about their faith in a work environment. Even countries that have very strict rules against proselytizing in work environments, still usually allow faith sharing off the work premises. If you can help teens understand the laws in your area and learn from other Christians who have found ways to share their faith in their occupations, it will help vocational ministry grow with the next generation.

Service and faith sharing opportunities are other great environments for teens to discover their gifts. Encourage them to think about the gifts God may have given them as they help prepare and execute the experiences. During the reflection times after you have given teens a service and faith sharing opportunity, use some of the time to discuss their progress on gift discovery and development.

As strange as it may sound, it can also be helpful for teens to discover where they do not have a gift. There are some things all Christians can be expected to do to serve God. For example, all Christians should be sharing the Gospel message with others. It is important for teens to understand though, that although the message is always the same, the methods people use to share their faith may vary. Often their gift offers opportunities to share their faith as they use it to serve others. Trying to share their faith using a gift God has not given them will often leave them frustrated and believing they do not have the ability to share their faith effectively.

Understanding the areas in which they are not gifted is also helpful to the church. Often Christians believe anyone can do anything the church decides needs to be done. In some cases, that may be true. Most of the time though, those things are best done by someone God has gifted to do them. The church needs to spend more time in making sure people discover, develop and use their gifts appropriately. This decreases the number of Christians who are frustrated, do important tasks poorly or quit because they are trying to serve in areas which God never meant for them to serve.

As someone ministering to teens, you are also in a position to be a type of talent scout. As you spend time teaching and mentoring teens, try to notice the little flashes of potential talent you may see in each of them. Encourage them to do things that will help them discover if they do indeed have a gift in that area. It is better to encourage a teen to explore a gift and be proven wrong, than to fail to mention a potential gift to a teen who may never discover it otherwise.

It is crucial for teens to understand that merely discovering a gift is not enough. Even incredibly talented people often take lessons or are guided by mentors to hone their skills. Hours of experimenting and practice are usually needed to become truly skilled at any natural talent.

King David is an excellent example of this dynamic at work. God placed David in a family where he would become a shepherd boy. This family job required him to learn slinging in order to protect the sheep. He learned how to nurture the flock. God sent wild animals from whom David had to protect his sheep. David even learned how to play the lyre to amuse himself as he watched the sheep graze for hours.

We do not know to what extent that time of preparation helped David for what was to come in his life. What we do know is that he used slinging to slay Goliath. His lyre playing soothed King Saul and allowed David to live in the Palace and observe the life of a king – what King Saul did well and the mistakes he made – years before he became a king himself.

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The teens served by your ministry need to be encouraged to develop the talents God has given them. Often, they will need to work on talent development with the help of their parents and outside lessons and training. In some cases though, parents may be unable or unwilling to provide their children with opportunities to develop their talents. Your ministry may be able to fill that gap.

Consider pairing students with adult Christian mentors who have similar gifts from God. If you have several teens with similar gifts, consider having a regular session where someone comes in and gives them tips or instruction. You can even pair these mini-sessions with a Bible study on the topic of using our gifts to serve God. One of the best ways to help teens develop their gifts is to pair them with the adult you would normally use to do specific ministry functions for you. For example, you may want to pair an interested teen with the person who works your sound system so the teen can learn through shadowing and helping the adult.

Helping teens discover and develop their talents is vitally important. Even with that assistance though, many young people will still struggle with how to use their gifts to serve

⁴³ 1 Samuel 17.

God. This is especially true if their gift is something they have never seen used in a worship service or Bible class.

Teens need to understand that only a very small fraction of a Christian's time is spent at church. Most of the opportunities God will give them to serve Him will happen outside of the church environment. Often these opportunities will be to serve others and share their faith in some way.

It is important to keep encouraging teens to find ways to use their gifts to serve God, even though their talents are not fully developed yet. Encourage your church to use teens to assist in their areas of giftedness beside a more experienced adult. Encourage leaders to give teens increasing responsibilities and freedom as their gifts become more fully developed. Remind teens they are also all equipped to help with "church chores" like setting or cleaning up for various church functions.

If you can, make students aware of opportunities outside of church for them to use their gifts to serve others and share their faith. Create opportunities for them to use their gifts in any outside activities you plan. Give experienced teens opportunities to plan and execute activities using their gifts. The more you can give them opportunities to begin using their gifts to serve God, the more likely they are to continue doing so for many years to come.

Discussion Questions

1. What are three basic principles about gifts from God that teens need to understand?
2. What are three basic types of gifts God gives to us?
3. What are some ways to help teens discover the gifts God may have given them?
4. What are some ways to help young people develop the gifts God has given them?
5. What are some opportunities in your ministry or geographical area that would give teens an opportunity to begin using their gifts from God?
6. Thinking about the teens to whom you minister, what are the potential gifts you think God may have given each one of them? How can you create opportunities for more gift exploration, development and use by the teens in your ministry?

Chapter 12 – Friendships and Peer Pressure

Brain science has discovered the human brain is wired to crave connection with others.⁴⁴ For many teens, their peer group becomes their most desired and meaningful connection. Parents, however, are still the primary relationship for most teens and their influence is critical. Parents and teens may begin to pay less attention to their relationship as the young person moves towards adulthood, believing the relationship is no longer important to the adolescent. As a result, peers begin to fill not only their natural place in a teen's life, but also the relational space parents should still occupy.

This can give young people a greater influence on each other than is healthy. Often a teen's peers have the same lack of knowledge, wisdom and life experience as the teen. It brings to mind Matthew 15:14, where Jesus teaches on the folly of the blind leading the blind. When both the leader and the follower do not fully understand what God wants from them, both may fall more easily into a number of mistakes, sins and negative consequences.

It is important to understand that although all teens crave connection and friendships, what that means to each teen can vary greatly. Many factors can impact the relationships teens create and value. Where they attend school, their extra curricular activities and jobs can influence their choice of companions and the influence they allow those relationships to have over their lives. A teen's parents can also impact how much adolescents value other relationships and the power they allow peers to have in influencing their choices.

Personality also plays a role in not only how many friends a teen has, but also the depth of those relationships. Teens who are more introverted or quiet may only have a couple of friends. These relationships tend to be deeper as they spend more time with the same few individuals sharing activities, thoughts and emotions with each other.

Extroverts, on the other hand, may seem to have a lot of friends. Yet these friendships may be somewhat shallow or even superficial. It is difficult to spend the time that would be necessary to develop deep friendships with a large number of people. As a result, many extroverts have a seemingly large group of friends, while still having very few people who know them well.

Whether a teen has two friends or two dozen friends, he or she may struggle with the concepts of acceptance and popularity. The teen years can be an awkward time. Many young people are still in the process of discovering for themselves who they are, what interests them and who they want to become. That can be confusing enough, but if they are in the typical teen environment, they also feel pressure to make sure their answers to those questions are similar to the ways everyone else is answering them.

⁴⁴ Platt and Falk, "Wired to Connect."

This can be especially problematic for Christian teens. God calls them to make choices that have always been outside of the cultural norm. By obeying God, they will often make decisions that are very different from others in their peer group. This can even be true in a church environment. Just because a teen attends church, Bible classes, and ministry activities, does not mean he or she is obeying God's commands and principles. Teens can sometimes feel as if they are the only one their age trying to do what God wants them to do.

Just like Elijah found,⁴⁵ though, a teen who is trying to obey God is not really alone. It can just feel that way at times. It is important to have regular Bible lessons and conversations about the concept of popularity. Is that even a goal Christians should have? How can they find other Christians their age who are trying to be the person God wants them to be? Teaching teens how to find godly friends can not only make them feel less lonely, but also give them an extra hedge of protection from negative peer pressure.

Teaching teens how to find godly people to be their friends can be a difficult task. Many already have long established friendships with teens who are now beginning to make different choices than when they were both much younger. It can be a frightening thought to a teen to relinquish these unhealthy friendships and look for new friends who will be more supportive of their godly choices.

A Christian adult may be able to be friends with someone who is making ungodly choices without making similar choices. They may choose to continue the friendship in hopes of influencing the person for God. Adults usually have the maturity to create appropriate opportunities for faith sharing, without being tempted to engage in sinful behaviors. Most teens do not have the maturity, wisdom or life experience to do something similar. While they should be kind and loving towards everyone, they need to avoid close friendships with teens who will pressure them to disobey God.

This can be difficult, because often participating in sinful behaviors can be what makes a teen more popular – or at least appear to be so. Many teens will need the support of Christian adults if they attempt to transition into new friendships or peer groups. It is important to be aware of teens who are attempting to do this and provide them more opportunities to engage with the adults and their peers in your ministry in meaningful ways. This can ease the sense of loneliness and isolation they may feel as they seek more supportive friends. If the negative peer group convinced them to participate in ungodly activities, they may also need help breaking bad habits they developed while socializing with that peer group.

⁴⁵ 1 Kings 19:10-18.

Self Esteem

Self esteem is often a concern when ministering to teens. Peers can impact a teen's self esteem in positive or negative ways. It is fairly intuitive that poor self esteem is unhealthy. Teens with poor self esteem see only their own faults. They may struggle to believe God loves them or can forgive them for the choices they have made. They may also become depressed or suicidal. If you suspect a teen is suffering from depression or is suicidal, his or her parents should be informed immediately. (Note: A teen who threatens suicide, should always be seen as quickly as possible by a professional to assess their risk of actually attempting suicide.)

Over the last couple of decades, many western societies became concerned about what they believed was the low self esteem of the majority of their young people. Efforts were made to give effusive praise and remove any possibility of rejection, failure or criticism. What resulted after a few years of this constant positive reinforcement was another problem that impacted the lives of young people.

Students who were only shown the good in themselves and never criticized or corrected developed self esteem that was too high. They became arrogant and entitled. They were prideful and mean. The underlying message that they were perfect also had troubling spiritual ramifications. Why would someone who is perfect need God's grace? Why would they accept God's commands and boundaries when those restrictions deprived them of something they wanted?

The solution to both extremes is to help teens develop godly self esteem. This is the balanced view of how God sees them. God knows their strengths and weaknesses. He encourages them to grow and improve, giving guidance and consequences when needed. He also sees the potential teens have for doing good deeds, serving others and sharing their faith. He knows the gifts He has given them to develop and use to serve Him. God encourages them and provides them with a family of believers to give teens additional guidance, accountability and encouragement when they need it.

When teens learn to see accurately both their strengths and weaknesses, they are moving towards godly self esteem. This godly self esteem drives them to try to reflect God's image more accurately and make more godly choices. It encourages them to discover, develop and use their gifts to serve others. With godly self esteem, it is easier for teens to grow to be more like the person God wants them to be.

Teens with godly self esteem will find it easier to ignore negative peer pressure and seek friends who will support them in their efforts to be godly. Young people may still need help in identifying the characteristics that make someone a good friend - especially if they have a history of choosing friends who encourage them to make poor choices.

Characteristics of a Friend

There are some general friendship principles you can teach in your Bible lessons and discussions that can remind the teens to whom you minister how to choose good friends:

- **Understand the difference between an acquaintance, a casual friend and a close friend.** Teens need to be kind and loving towards everyone. Even people who make poor choices can be acquaintances. These are not people with whom you spend most of your free time, ask for advice, or tell all of your worries and secrets. Casual friends are the type of people with whom you spend some of your free time. They can be supportive, but you have something that prevents a closer relationship. This can be distance, different interests or beliefs, or other things that make a close friendship difficult. Close friends are those the Bible describes as “like a brother.” These friendships are with people whom you know have your best interests at heart and are supportive of helping you be the person God wants you to be.
- **Find friends who will encourage you to be your best self.** It is not always possible for teens to have an entire friend group that consists of Christians. Teens can still seek secular friends who encourage them to be the best they can be in every area of their lives.
- **Find friends who will support you when times are tough.** A lot of things can happen during the teen years and not all of them are positive. Teens need friends who will support them in the bad times as well as the good ones. Teach teens that friends who disappear when they are facing challenges may not be the supportive people they need as close companions.
- **Find friends who keep private things private.** Often friends are the people to whom we confide the things that are worrying or upsetting us. They may be things that never happen or we do not particularly want everyone to know quite yet. A good friend keeps confidences and asks permission before sharing a private conversation with others.
- **Find friends who will help you obey God, even if they are not Christians themselves.** Teens need friends who support their choices to obey God, even if they are not making the same choices. They should be the type of friends who discourage them from going places or being with people they know may tempt them to do things they have decided not to do.
- **It is okay to feel closer to people with whom you have more things in common, but you should also be open to friendships with people who are not exactly like you.** Often the friendships that help us grow the most are with people who are not exactly like us. They can teach us new things and give us new insights, knowledge and perspectives. Choosing to only be friends with people exactly like us can be easier, but those relationships can also reinforce our ignorance or bad habits.
- **Healthy friendships take time and effort.** You have to spend time with someone to develop a close friendship. There will be disagreements and misunderstandings when you spend a lot of time with people. It often takes time, patience and effort to

work through those issues and continue a friendship. Friendships that do not require any time or effort are actually people who are more likely to be acquaintances or casual friends.

- **Close friendships are great practice for future romantic relationships.** A strong, healthy, godly marriage is also a great friendship. Learning how to choose good friends and how to be a good friend, can help teens develop the skills they will need when they are ready to consider dating and marrying someone.
- **It is important to remember, if there is a close friendship between two teens of opposite genders, it is quite possible one or both of them have romantic feelings for the other.** This can be problematic if one person is hoping the friendship will become romantic and the other person has no interest in a romantic relationship. Teens need to understand that to the person interested in a romantic relationship, spending a lot of time alone together encourages their romantic hopes. They should be sensitive to those dynamics and avoid hurting someone more than necessary when romantic feelings are not reciprocated.
- **Sometimes, it may be necessary to end a close friendship.** While it can be a very painful process, having friends who consistently encourage you to disobey God or are physically or emotionally abusive is unhealthy and even dangerous. It may be necessary to end those friendships. You can still be acquaintances, but the time spent together needs to be drastically reduced.

There are a lot of great passages in the Bible that can help you teach teens about friendship. Proverbs is full of very specific advice about the characteristics of people who are the types of people we should and should not befriend. Of course, David and Jonathan are one of the best examples in the Bible of a great, godly friendship. Their friendship even lasted beyond the death of Jonathan. In a world where King David would have been expected to kill Mephibosheth as a threat to his throne, David instead made him a part of his family. He did this to show his love for Mephibosheth's father and David's best friend, Jonathan.

Conflict Resolution

Teens will also need help understanding how to resolve conflicts they may have with friends and peers in godly ways. While both parties need to participate in the conflict resolution process for it to work well, even one person doing the appropriate things can often de-escalate a tense situation.

Teach teens to attempt the following steps when confronted with a conflict:

1. **Take a time out.** Teach teens to ask for a pause in the discussion. They should stop talking with the other person. Encourage them to walk away for a few minutes if they or the other person needs some time to calm down and get their emotions under control.

2. **Each person should take time to really think about how they feel and why they feel that way.** Is there conflict because there is a true difference of opinion or did someone get caught up in the emotions surrounding the conversation? Is someone causing conflict about something that really does not matter to them, but they are in a bad mood because of lack of sleep or some other unrelated factor? Does this disagreement actually remind the teen of a more serious conflict with someone else and they are adding that conflict to this unconnected disagreement? Sorting out emotions from needs and wants can help each person clarify what is really important to them. Often it can help to consider, "If you were to only accomplish one thing in the resolution of this conflict, what do you hope that would be?"
3. **Each person should calmly tell the other person how they are feeling in a format similar to this, "I feel _____ when you _____, because _____. I would like _____."** They should avoid using ugly words and "you are" or "you always/never" statements during this process.
4. **Each person should repeat what they think the other person meant in their own words.** The other person should clarify if there is a misunderstanding. This process should continue until both sides believe the other person has a clear understanding of their position.
5. **The people in conflict should work together to list as many possible options for solutions as they can.** Often the difficulty with resolving conflicts is we believe there are only two possible solutions – yours and theirs. Or there is only one acceptable compromise position that leaves both parties unhappy. Very often there are additional creative solutions that will make each person satisfied. It is important to emphasize creativity, as this is often where the best solution can be found.
6. **The people in conflict should determine which solution will help both sides achieve their most important goals.** This is where conflict can erupt again if the previous steps were not done well. If so, start the process again until a successful conclusion is reached.

Peer Pressure

When adults discuss teen friendships, their greatest concern is often the pressure from peers to conform to the group. Peer pressure can come from friends, acquaintances and even people teens might consider their enemies. It can be subtle or more aggressive, like bullying. Peer pressure can be positive or negative, but teens are often more susceptible to negative peer pressure. It takes an extremely mature, grounded Christian teen to be able to exert enough positive peer pressure to sway a large group of teens intent on doing something unwise or sinful and convince them to make more godly choices.

While it is important to encourage teens to attempt to have a positive impact on peer behavior, it is perhaps more important for them to learn strategies for avoiding succumbing to negative peer pressure. There are a number of strategies you can teach them that can be helpful:

- **Making decisions about behaviors and attitudes before there is peer pressure.** It is a lot easier to decide you are never going to use drugs or have premarital sex before you are tempted rather than in the moment of temptation. Many teens will find the decision they made earlier exerts its own kind of pressure to ignore peers and do the right thing.
- **Having a list of prepared responses to give when pressured to do something questionable or sinful.** Sometimes teens give into peer pressure because they can not think of anything to say. It seems easier to say nothing and participate, than risk sounding foolish. Having a few sentences they have decided to use in those situations can give them the confidence to decline and walk away.
- **Memorizing key scriptures and using prayer in the moment to remind themselves to make godly choices.** Silently repeating the applicable command and praying for God's help in avoiding the temptation can give some teens the extra strength they need to ignore peer pressure.
- **Removing themselves from the situation.** Addiction specialists give this counsel to recovering addicts. They need to avoid or remove themselves from situations where they know they will eventually give into peer pressure. Teens need to learn the same strategy.
- **Having a core group of friends that agrees to stick together and ignore peer pressure.** For some teens, it is easier to be strong if they know at least one other person is making the same choices. This strategy can backfire though, if one of them eventually gives in and participates.
- **Remembering that they are not alone.** One of the reasons peer pressure works so well is that it isolates those who do not participate in the group's choices. Many teens can not stand that feeling of being the outsider. Teen ministries often bring in young adults to tell of the horrible things that happened when they disobeyed God and gave into peer pressure during their teens. Rarely, however, are teens exposed to young adults they admire who were able to resist peer pressure. No teen is perfect, but many are able to successfully avoid the major temptations of the teen years. Hearing about earthly consequences of sin is helpful, but often the kids trying the hardest to resist peer pressure need to know it is actually possible. They need to know they can obey God and still enjoy life and have friends and positive experiences. Providing those stories can help some teens withstand negative peer pressure for long periods of time.

Friendships can provide teens with crucial support systems during turbulent times. They can help some teens grow and mature. Friendships can also encourage a teen to begin accepting ungodly belief systems and participating in sinful behavior. It is important to help young people successfully navigate friendship issues during the teen years by giving them biblical instruction and godly guidance.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some key friendship principles teens need to understand?
2. What are some of the qualities of a person who will make a good friend?
3. What are the steps to teach teens for handling conflict in godly ways?
4. What are some strategies to teach teens to help them avoid peer pressure?
5. Why is it so important to spend time teaching and guiding teens through friendship issues?
6. What are some friendship areas where the teens served by your ministry need extra teaching or guidance?

Chapter 13 – Dating, Love and Marriage

Lessons on dating, love and marriage are often difficult to plan and teach. They can cover sensitive topics and areas in which the families of the teens served by your ministry may have a wide range of beliefs and rules. God has given us commands that cover aspects of the romantic relationships teens often begin to develop. Much of what young people believe about dating, love and marriage, however, comes more from the culture in which they live rather than from what God wants for them in these areas.

Studies have found many parents give their children only the most basic information about dating, love and marriage. When they finally talk to their children about sex, it is often after their children have already become intimate with someone.⁴⁶ What parents do share can have more to do with the biological aspects of sex than anything God may want young people to know about their relationships. Unfortunately, these same parents may also be extremely reluctant for the church to teach Bible lessons about dating, love and marriage.

This often results in adolescents who learn almost everything they know about dating, love and marriage from movies, shows, books, and equally ignorant peers. It is not surprising that even Christian teens can find themselves entangled in unhealthy relationships or engaging in sinful behaviors.

Your ministry will have to make some difficult decisions about how to teach some of the information covered in this chapter to the teens you serve. You may want to involve parents in the decision making process. Ultimately, you may also find it necessary to educate parents on the critical need their teens have for godly lessons and discussions on these topics. Help parents understand that failing to give their children godly teaching on dating, love and marriage leaves them extremely vulnerable to temptation and negative consequences that can impact the rest of their lives.

Regardless of how you decide to handle some of the more sensitive topics in this area, there are plenty of basic principles teens can be taught in your Bible classes and studies. Some ministries have found splitting teens into gender specific groups can make them more comfortable asking the questions they have. Others have found even smaller groups in a more casual Bible study work best. At times, ministries prefer having the group mixed, so each gender can hear for themselves how the other gender thinks and feels about the topic.

Any environment in which these topics are taught should make teens feel as emotionally safe as possible. Reminding students to refrain from gossiping and setting boundaries for how parents will be contacted if students reveal concerning information is crucial. Young people often do not care as much about peer gossip as they do about how their parents

⁴⁶ Park, "Parents' Sex Talk With Kids: Too Little, Too Late."

may react to their beliefs and choices. Teens are usually more open and honest if they know they will be the one to tell their parents about any information that you believe their parents need to know.

Personal safety is also critical for the teens to whom you minister. Often the poor choices they make can have extremely negative earthly consequences as well as potential heavenly ones. Parents can not help protect their children if they are ignorant of what is happening in their lives. If teens are afraid to talk with their parents about a particular situation, you can offer to have someone from your ministry accompany them to provide extra emotional support. In certain circumstances, parents will need to be informed even if their teens refuse to tell them about concerning issues. Make sure the teens in your ministry know how you will handle the situation if they fail to communicate vital information to their parents.

Defining Love

Once you have established a safe environment for Bible lessons and discussions on dating, love and marriage, the first thing you will need to do is help teens understand what true, godly romantic love looks like in real life. Many have seen movies or read stories where characters were “in love” with each other. Often, however, the love that is depicted is far removed from the love God wants in the romantic relationships of Christians.

The first obstacle many young people encounter when trying to understand romantic love is understanding the difference between attraction, lust and love. They need to know attraction to someone of the opposite sex is natural. It is how God designed us to find a spouse with whom we can spend our lives. Teens need to understand that attraction is merely a spark of interest. It does not mean the person is ultimately someone they should even consider dating.

Attraction can be a sign to do some initial exploring. They should find out more about the person. Attraction is often based on physical appearance, but real romantic relationships need much more than that to survive. Teens need to learn that no matter how good looking someone may be, if they do not have common interests or the person does not have a heart that belongs to God, they should not move forward in that relationship.

During the teen years one of the most difficult things for teens to maneuver is finding the best ways to know if someone they are interested in romantically is also interested in them. Most teens struggle with the more traditional method of asking someone on a date. The lines between a date and an outing as friends is often blurred. One person can think they are just doing something as friends, while the other person believes they are beginning a romantic relationship.

Often adults do not understand the confusion. They believe the physical aspects of a romantic relationship make the delineation clear. Unfortunately, many teens do not follow

the classic model of physicality in friendships and romantic relationships. Many young people are starved for physical affection and may engage in romantic physical contact with people they emotionally consider to be friends. Other teens may be shy about initiating physical contact, yet still believe they are in a romantic relationship.

Which means much of the time teens are totally confused about any interactions they have with the opposite gender. The vast majority of them are terrified of being open with someone about their feelings for them. The fear of rejection and humiliation is too strong. Or they may suspect the other person is not as interested in a romantic relationship as they are. They may hope that by keeping their real feelings quiet, the other person will one day realize that they too want a romantic relationship.

It is tempting to get overly involved in these teen romantic dramas. Adults often want to intervene in too many specifics of the situation rather than teaching general godly principles and helping students understand what those look like in real life situations. The danger of too much involvement by someone who is not privy to both sides of the thoughts and feelings of the relationship is that they can end up manipulating the romance. This can keep teens in unhealthy relationships too long - primarily because the adult giving the advice only knows one side of the story.

When teens begin dating, the next problem becomes lust. All of those great physical and emotional feelings in a new relationship are often unreliable for helping teens make wise, godly relationship decisions. They need to understand while those feelings can lead to love, they are not love. If they pay attention to these feelings that are more closely aligned with lust and ignore the warning signals their brain may give them, they could end up in a dangerous place.

Lust has a place in marriage. The Song of Songs is a testament to the lustful feelings the groom had for his bride. Lust, however, is meant to keep the sexual side of a marriage healthy. For teens who are still single, lust can be problematic. If they are not careful, lust can tempt them to engage in premarital sex, which God considers sinful.

The romantic love they should all be seeking does have elements of attraction and even lust for a future married sexual relationship. Those are just minor parts though. Many people around the world have fallen in love with the spouse they had never even met before their arranged marriage. Why? Because they learned to feel and practice agape love for their spouse.

The original languages of the Bible allowed for more nuances in the word love than some languages have today. In many languages, the word love can stand for the feelings we have for relatives, friends, romantic relationships, lust and a myriad of other things. Agape is the Greek word most often associated with a higher, godly love for someone. While spouses

usually also have an intimate love – eros in Greek – for their mate, agape love is what helps marriages last for a lifetime.

Agape love was originally meant to describe the love God has for mankind – the highest and purest form of love. This agape love is the love Christians should strive to have for everyone – but especially a potential spouse. If agape love is missing in a romantic relationship, the chances of that future marriage surviving are greatly reduced. Teens need to understand both people in a romantic relationship need to be operating from agape love. If one of them is incapable of that type of more unselfish love, they probably are not ready to be in a more serious romantic relationship.

That is where teens – especially teens who are not getting enough appropriate love from their parents – will struggle. They are craving physical touch, words of love, quality time and the other things they did not get enough of from their parents. These unmet needs for parental love can leave teens vulnerable to the temptations of a sexualized romantic relationship. It can convince them the lust they feel for someone is actually love.

When two teens who are not prepared to marry are in a romantic relationship, they often make ungodly choices. The temptations of lust are just too strong to ignore for the number of years left until they are prepared to marry. These teens may engage in behaviors that are inappropriate outside of a marriage. Or, they may marry someone whom they should never have married or before either one of them was mature enough to marry. While these rushed weddings may help young people avoid sexual sins, they often lead to unhappy or unsuccessful marriages.

It is important to convince teens to delay dating until they are old enough to seriously consider marriage. This can minimize sexual temptations. This does not mean they should avoid being around members of the opposite gender. In fact, doing things with mixed gender groups can help them learn more about potential people to date in the future without the accompanying emotional risks of an actual dating relationship.

Friendships allow people to find potential people to date with whom they share common interests. It gives them opportunities to see whether someone has a heart for God. It allows them to see how the person they are interested in treats the other people in their lives. Friendships can also reveal character flaws that may have gone hidden for years in a purely romantic relationship.

Obviously, it is important to avoid cautioning teens about serious romantic relationships to the point where they avoid romantic relationships and commitment during their adult years. Attempt to create a balance where they are looking forward to one day marrying a godly spouse, but are also allowing it to happen in God's timing rather than trying to rush towards relationships they are not mature enough to handle.

People who are healthy spiritually, mentally and emotionally tend to attract people who are also healthy. Help teens focus on becoming healthy individuals and finding people to date who are healthy in similar ways. They should use their teen years for focusing on how to become the person God wants them to be and making friends of both genders who are also maturing spiritually.

Teens also need to spend time learning about the type of person God would want them to marry. They should consider which other characteristics are important to them in a future spouse and which are optional. They should be spending a lot of time in prayer asking God to give them the wisdom to choose the person He would want them to date and possibly marry.

Dating

Some of the teens served by your ministry may already be dating. Young people need to understand dating just to date is a dangerous game to play. They could easily end up falling in love with someone who will be detrimental to them spiritually, emotionally or physically. It can be very difficult to convince teens not dating at all is better than dating anyone who asks, merely to be dating someone. You will need to be patient and share as many real world examples of the folly of that choice before they may begin to understand. You may have to help teens who ignore your advice to recover from the negative consequences of choosing poorly several times before they change their behaviors.

The best environment for having these discussions can be smaller group Bible studies. Have teens list those qualities God would want those they date to possess. Have them add to the list the other things that are important to them. Discuss their answers. While some items are merely personal taste, others may indicate a misunderstanding of the type of person who will make a godly spouse or of the priorities they should have in dating. Give teens lots of examples from scripture and from real life of romantic relationships and the qualities of the various individuals that impacted the relationship in some way.

Unhealthy Romantic Relationships

No romantic relationship is perfect, because both of the people involved are imperfect humans. It is important, however, to make teens aware of the types of problematic behavior in a relationship that can be warning signs of a potentially unhealthy or dangerous situation. Teens already involved in unhealthy relationships can find it difficult to recognize the danger they may be facing. If you see warning signs a teen is engaged in a dangerous relationship, it is important to intervene in the ways your ministry has planned for other dangerous situations in which teens may find themselves.

Your lessons on dating and marriage should equip teens to avoid unhealthy romantic relationships. Caution teens not to expect perfection in others. While it is important to be somewhat physically attracted and compatible, their primary focus should be on the spiritual health of the other individual. Encourage them to avoid what is often called

missionary dating – dating someone who has made it clear they have no interest in God or Christianity. They may indeed one day become a strong Christian, but there is no guarantee. Being married to someone who does not participate in the most important part of your life – your Christianity – can be extremely stressful to a marriage.

Teens also need to learn the warning signs of people who could hurt them physically, mentally or spiritually in a dating relationship. They should know the signs of someone who is a narcissist with an exaggerated sense of importance and consistently selfish behavior. Even people who are not technically narcissistic can be selfish enough to do damage to the emotional, mental or spiritual health of the person they are dating.

Teens need to learn the signs of a person who will pretend to be in an exclusive relationship with them while still seeing other people romantically. Those who are dishonest about other relationships while dating often become adults who have extra-marital affairs. Young people also need to recognize when someone is manipulating them to make sure the other person's needs are always met. Inexperienced teens can see these problem behaviors as actions of someone who is extremely romantic, interesting or edgy, rather than warning signs of an individual who may create an unhealthy dynamic in the relationship.

Perhaps the most dangerous person in a dating relationship is someone who is overly controlling or abusive physically or verbally. To teens, this person can seem to love them so much they are acting out of that love rather than more dangerous motivations. They may believe it is true when the person claims the negative behaviors are for their own good. Teens need to seek adult guidance if they find themselves in a romantic relationship with someone who controls them constantly, isolates them from friends and family, or where they are being cruelly criticized or physically hurt.

Often an abuser will seem very remorseful when the person they are abusing becomes extremely upset. They will swear it will never happen again. Studies have shown that abusers create a pattern of abuse that appears to include repentance or remorse, but the abuse continues and generally worsens over time.⁴⁷ This can lead to severe emotional or physical injury and even death.

Abusers have often been abused themselves or seen a parent being abused consistently. Christian men will often excuse their behavior by misusing scripture to justify their actions. Often, they will claim the abuse is because the woman was not being submissive as the Bible required and is surely sanctioned by God. It is important for both male and female students to understand there is no scripture that condones beating a spouse. In fact, the

⁴⁷ Focht, "The Cycle of Domestic Violence."

New Testament tells men to love their wives the way Christ loved the Church and as they love their own bodies.⁴⁸

Women who continue to date and even marry abusers may do so in part because of their own low self esteem. Or they may be afraid to tell anyone what is happening in the relationship. Many are convinced they can change the abuser over time. It is critical for young people to understand that God can indeed change an abuser's heart, but abusers almost always need intensive help from professionals to change their abusive behaviors.

Adults working in your ministry need to be aware of some of the signs of possible abuse. Often, the first sign of physical abuse is repetitive injuries with weak stories as to their cause. Abusers also tend to severely limit the time the person they are abusing spends with anyone other than them. This can include family, friends and ministry volunteers. If you know both teens in a potentially volatile relationship, it is important to understand that the abuser does not always appear to be an angry person to those outside of the romantic relationship. Do not discount someone's story of abuse merely because the potential abuser does not appear to have anger issues.

If you suspect or know someone who is being abused, there is an important danger assessment tool you can use to understand how much real physical danger they are facing. The DASH risk identification and assessment model was developed for use by professionals, but a lay person can easily administer and understand the implications of the results.⁴⁹

Physical Behaviors in Romantic Relationships

Even Christian teens in healthy romantic relationships can struggle with how to show affection in godly ways. They may begin experimenting with the physical aspects of being in a romantic relationship. Many of these behaviors are in God's plan for marriage, not dating or other relationships outside of marriage. Because parents and ministries are often reluctant to have frank discussions on topics involving physical intimacy, young people are left extremely vulnerable to peer pressure and worldly concepts of what is "healthy" in sexual behaviors.

Unfortunately, the Christian response has often been to merely declare sex outside of marriage a sin. While that is true, there are other attitudes and behaviors that need to be addressed. Teens need to begin to understand not only God's laws regarding acceptable sexual behaviors, but also why our sexual purity is so important to Him.

Many teens will also need to understand the possible negative earthly consequences of choosing to ignore God's commands and principles. Ideally, teens will choose to obey God

⁴⁸ Ephesians 5:25-33.

⁴⁹ <https://dashriskchecklist.co.uk>

because their hearts want to obey Him. Unfortunately, many teens are not spiritually mature enough for that to be their primary motivation. They need to understand all of the bad things that can happen when people make ungodly choices.

As you begin to share these possible negative earthly consequences with teens, it is important to remember that young people often believe they will be the exception – the one person who never experiences negative consequences from disobeying God. Try to help them understand that even if they manage to avoid the physical negative consequences, the emotional and spiritual damage will happen to everyone. Even if they later repent and receive God's grace, the emotional and spiritual scars often remain for the rest of their lives.

The difficult decision for Christian teens can be where to draw the line in their physical interactions with someone they are dating. Clearly premarital sex is sinful, but what about other physical intimacy? It is also important to understand what teens in your area actually consider to be sex. In many places, teens no longer view oral sex, for example, as sex. Which means many Christian teens are having sex, while still believing they are not violating God's commands.

It is important to help teens develop a definition of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviors that matches God's definition. This can be a difficult endeavor with some teens. They may argue that God does not list certain specific sexual or sexualized behaviors as being sinful outside of marriage. It can be a challenge to help teens understand there are principles behind God's commands that must also be obeyed.

Often these principles address the heart of a person in addition to their words and actions. Teens may struggle with believing what they are thinking or feeling is important - especially teens who try to hide their true selves behind behaviors that appear appropriate to adults. People in the Bible also struggled with this concept of a person's heart being as important to God as their words and actions. In fact, Jesus felt it necessary to carefully explain this dynamic multiple times during his ministry on earth.

What constitutes godly physical behavior in a romantic relationship is still a controversial topic. There are no direct commands about how much kissing, for example, is too much kissing. Even mature Christians disagree about what should be considered acceptable and what should be discouraged. In general, teens should be cautioned to go slowly in introducing physical signs of affection to a romantic relationship. Once that begins, it seems to continue increasing in intensity. While teens can control their behaviors, they may eventually find themselves in situations that are too tempting for them to resist.

Obviously, the discussions of physical intimacy in a relationship can be somewhat graphic and embarrass many teens, and even the adults teaching them. This is why the topic is often avoided. Preferably teens will have these Bible lessons and discussions before they

are actually in a dating relationship. Encouraging them to create firm boundaries in these areas, will help many of them avoid temptation.

When students have these lessons after they have begun dating, new issues can arise. They may be afraid to ask the questions that worry them the most. Usually, they are, "Will God forgive me if I have already gone too far sexually?" and "Is it possible to 'start over' and be sexually pure going forward?" It is crucial that these questions are answered with truth, but also love and grace. They are coming from teens who are realizing they have sinned and want to be more godly. If these questions are not answered, many will assume they have been permanently rejected by God because of their sins and will leave Christianity with a broken heart and spirit.

Often, it is best to discuss general biblical principles and encourage teens to discuss how certain dating behaviors might or might not meet that standard. For example, "If God has declared premarital sex a sin, what are some other intimate behaviors that may tempt us too much and encourage us to sin?" While their opinions may still differ, it is important to teach them to constantly review God's commands and principles - especially with anyone new they may date or as a relationship becomes more serious.

Teens often do not realize certain decisions and behaviors can also put them at risk for disobeying God. Give them lots of practical tips that will help them avoid situations that make it more difficult for them to make wise choices. For example, discourage them from drinking alcohol on dates and encourage them to avoid being alone in places that give them the privacy to easily go too far physically. You may decide to share other strategies you found helpful while dating.

Often adolescents engage in risky behaviors because they can not think of anything better to do. If they do not know how to have fun with a date in godly ways, it is more likely they will engage in some sort of sexual behavior. If teens have lots of ideas for easy, inexpensive, fun, creative dates, they will have more options for filling the time they spend with the person they are dating. Helping them find new ideas for fun dates in your area can give them an extra tool to avoid sexual intimacy.

Ministries to teens will sometimes bring in a teen who had a baby outside of marriage or contracted a sexually transmitted disease to discourage teens from being sexually intimate. This attempt to give adolescents real world stories from people who have sinned can impact some teens. What is often lacking are the talks from young married couples who acted in godly ways while dating and engaged. Sharing the strategies they used to avoid sinning can be more helpful to teens. These conversations also send a strong message that being obedient to God in dating relationships is indeed possible.

Pornography and Other Sexual Topics

As you begin discussing sexual behavior outside of marriage, topics may arise that are perhaps even more difficult for many Christians to address. Pornography, homosexuality, prostitution and other types of sexual behavior outside of God's plan for marriage may be confusing to many young people. Society is teaching them these things are not only acceptable, but in many cases to be encouraged. Yet, Christians are telling them all of these behaviors are sinful.

These topics will be more important to teens in some locations and cultures than in others. All teens should have at least some exposure to them in a Christian environment. They need to understand what God says specifically about certain behaviors and why Christians consider them sinful, even if not mentioned specifically by name in scripture. It is even more confusing to teens when they encounter in the Bible accounts of well known people of God engaging in ungodly sexual behaviors. Even if these topics are of little concern to them now, they may find themselves in situations as adults where this knowledge and understanding will be extremely helpful.

Although the scope of this book does not give us enough space to discuss every topic in detail, there are some key concepts it is important teens understand:

- **God's plans always include us putting Him first.** Often sexual behaviors outside of what God intended for marriage put the focus on us and our personal physical pleasure. Some of these behaviors can become addictive and a type of idol replacing God entirely. Teens need to learn, while the physical pleasure found in sexual behaviors is meant to be enjoyed in a marital relationship, it was never meant to encourage our selfishness or idolatry.
- **Just because something is fun or feels good, does not mean it is good for us.** God in his wisdom knows these other sexual behaviors are not in our best interest. We may not understand all of His reasons or agree with His commands, but we need to trust Him. God's wisdom is greater than that of any person and teens need to learn to respect and follow that wisdom.
- **Anyone can manipulate you physically and/or mentally in an attempt to convince you that you "want" or "need" to participate in ungodly sexual behaviors.** In many ways, sexual pleasure is a bodily function. If someone manipulates your body or even your mind in certain ways, your body will often respond sexually. Predators who groom young people to participate in ungodly sexual activities know this and are experts at manipulating people into believing all sorts of lies. It is important that teens understand their body responding physically to certain stimuli does not mean they were created by God to need sex outside of the parameters He set for people.
- **Pornography can literally change the brains of those who watch it.** The brain thinks it has participated in the things it sees. That is why violent and sexual content are so dangerous – especially to young minds. New technology has shown that

pornography can change the brain so it becomes not only addicted, but it is desensitized to what would be considered “normal” marital sexual behaviors. This can make marriage relationships feel unsatisfying in comparison. Pornography used to be primarily an issue for males. The increasingly visual digital world to which our teens are exposed has changed the female brain. While initially the female brain responded more to emotion than visual stimuli, many female brains now resemble the male brain in how they respond to visual stimuli. Recent studies found a drastic increase in the number of women who struggle with pornography use and addiction.⁵⁰

- **The sexual choices God wants us to make will often make us different from the world in which we live.** Teens want to be like everyone else. The idea that they will be considered different because of their sexual choices and beliefs is terrifying for many young people. They may participate in ungodly sexual behaviors merely in an effort to seem like everyone else. It is important to constantly remind them that being different is not only acceptable, but it is what God calls us to do.
- **Sex within marriage has a special dimension that makes it richer and fuller than any form of casual sex.** 1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and other passages allude to the specialness of the marital sexual relationship. Obviously, teens cannot fully understand this until they are in a godly marriage. What they can do is trust that God wants them to save all sexual intimacy for their future marriage. Teach them the special blessings that come with waiting until marriage to be sexually intimate.
- **They will not die from a lack of sex. They are not unloveable because they have not had sex. They can choose a wonderful spouse without having had sex with them. Sex is not love.** This is not a complete list, but Satan will make sure teens are exposed to a lot of lies about sex. Choosing to believe the lies instead of God’s truths about sex can cause young people to make unwise, ungodly and sinful choices. Those choices can result in negative consequences that may last the rest of their lives.
- **God’s grace can forgive sexual sins, but part of repentance is doing our best to avoid committing the same sins in the future.** Teens may twist theology in an attempt to continue participating in all sorts of sinful behaviors. They need constant teaching on how God’s forgiveness works, including repentance and the responsibility God places on his people to make godly choices and live righteous lives.

Marriage

As romantic relationships become more serious, teens may begin thinking about marriage. Whether or not your culture encourages early or late marriages, teens need to begin learning as much as they can about marriage. Teaching them about marriage while they are still years away from a potential wedding can seem unnecessary. It is important to remember though, you have no idea where these young people will be at that point in their

⁵⁰ Carey, “Why More and More Women Are Using Pornography.”

lives. Teaching them some basics about crucial issues to address before and during marriage can give them guidance in the future, when they may have none available.

There are a number of topics your ministry may want to cover when teaching teens about marriage. Perhaps the most important is teaching them God's plan for marriage. God wants His people to marry other godly people. His plan is for these marriages to last for a lifetime. Divorce happens, but it is not part of God's original plan.

Your ministry may decide it is important to spend time teaching teens about godly conflict resolution and the topics that are important to discuss before marrying – like money, children, and religion. Teens may also find it helpful to discuss the characteristics of a godly spouse and how one determines whether or not the person you are dating should be the person you marry. If your culture has social issues, like alcoholism that negatively impact marriages in your area, it is important to take the time to also discuss those issues thoroughly with teens.

Singleness

When addressing dating, love and marriage, it is also important to address the concept of singleness. Some of the teens served by your ministry may remain single their entire lives or at least many years beyond when they anticipated marrying. Many people seem to believe those who remain single are somehow defective or have made a religious pledge to remain unmarried. Often young people marry someone totally inappropriate for them merely out of a fear of being alone. Teaching teens how to find value in their years of being single will often help them be calmer about finding a potential spouse.

Once again, this topic must be taught in a balanced way. Some of the teens to whom you minister may remain single for their entire lives. Most will eventually marry. You do not want to act as if you are trying to convince them one option is better than the other. What you want to do is to remind them the God who loves them enough to count the hairs on their head, loves them enough to have a plan for their lives. This plan may or may not include marriage, but in either situation God loves them more than they can even understand. He will help them through the struggles of being single or being married.

Teaching teens about dating, love and marriage can be challenging. Failing to address these issues with the teens to whom you minister though, can make them vulnerable to temptations they are not prepared to handle. The mistakes they make in the areas of sexual sins can cause negative earthly consequences that can impact them for the rest of their lives. You cannot control their choices, but you can make sure they have enough information to make godly ones.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some important concepts to teach teens about dating, love and marriage?
2. What are some of the issues ministries may face when they attempt to teach young people about these topics?
3. What are some key things teens need to be taught about dating?
4. What are some of the sexual issues teens may encounter personally or in their conversations with peers?
5. What are some basic principles teens need to understand about sex?
6. Why is it important to talk with teens about marriage?
7. What do teens need to understand about being single?
8. What are the issues the teens served by your ministry are facing in the areas of dating, love and marriage?

Chapter 14 – Alcohol, Drugs, and Teens

Many Christian teens are taught from an early age to avoid alcohol and drugs. In fact, some will not be tempted to participate in those activities - even if their peers are. For other teens, this can be an area where experimentation can lead to a lifetime of sinful choices, negative earthly consequences and pain. Still other teens will struggle with the topic, wondering why God does not want them to “have fun.”

The amount of time you spend on this topic will depend in part on the attitudes and beliefs of the teens to whom you minister. Do not assume you know how they feel about alcohol and drugs. Do what you can to encourage their honesty. You do not want to waste critical teaching time talking about things that do not tempt your teens, but you also want to make sure they are adequately prepared to handle any current or future temptations in these areas.

Many teens who want to use alcohol and drugs will try and use scriptures to justify their choices. They may point out that God only forbids getting drunk, not drinking alcohol, or that Jesus turned water into wine. Or they may argue that God never mentions recreational drugs or tobacco in the Bible.

Recreational drugs may be prescribed pharmaceuticals, medications that can be purchased without a prescription and/or chemical substances used to alter the user’s mental, physical or emotional state, usually outside of medically recommended parameters.

When planning Bible lessons on these topics, it is important to give accurate information. Your best source for information may be your local or national Department of Health. The World Health Organization also has a lot of helpful information on its website.⁵¹ Usage statistics can help you understand the severity of the problem in your country or area. If you believe your students are minimizing the impact of substance use and abuse in your area, these sources can give you more accurate data. These statistics will not interest your students, but the websites also often have detailed information on how various substances impact the body and mind that can be helpful to you as you plan lessons on the topic.

As with any topic, it is important for teens to understand the possible negative earthly consequences of drinking alcohol or using drugs. The drugs that are used by teens to experience some sort of physical or mental reaction will vary from location to location. They will also change over time. A drug that is popular today may not be used by teens a few years from now.

⁵¹ <https://www.who.int>

Misuse of any substance can have physical and psychological repercussions. The mere usage of things like alcohol and tobacco can immediately begin having a negative impact on the human body. While you may not have the time to go through each particular substance and list all of the possible negative consequences, it is important for students to at least understand the repercussions of using substances in broader categories like inhalants or depressants.

For the most popular substances used by adolescents in your area, it is probably wise to share some of the specific problems caused by using or abusing those substances. For example, drinking any alcohol destroys brain cells and can harm an unborn child. You may want to show photos of the lungs of someone who smokes or the ravaged body of an opioid user. Remember, though, adolescents tend to believe they will always be the exception to negative consequences. When sharing the negative results of substance use and abuse, it is important to remind them that everyone will eventually experience the negative impact of failing to care for their bodies and minds.

Research any information you give students about the possible physical consequences carefully. It is important that the information you share is current. Teens will quickly discount any information that is outdated. Ironically, much of what teens share with each other about various substances is incorrect. Or your Bible students may be aware of the obvious immediate negative impact, but totally ignorant of more serious long term consequences. Teens may already be aware, for example, of the obvious problems like hangovers from drinking too much alcohol. What they may not know is how quickly their reflexes slow or that their inhibitions are lowered, increasing the likelihood they will make choices they would never make when sober.

Becoming addicted to a substance will seem improbable to most teens. They will assume it could never happen to them. Introducing them to people who are addicted may only substantiate their immunity from addiction in their minds. It is crucial, however, that teens understand some of them may have been born addicted without realizing it.

Orphans and adopted children often know little of their birth parents or their mother's pregnancy with them. Teens who suspect they were born to mothers who drank or used drugs while pregnant with them need to understand their bodies may have become dependent on those same substances while they were in the womb. They may have even gone through withdrawal shortly after birth. This exposure may have already caused long term consequences and issues that can last for the rest of their lives⁵². It is wisest if they avoid any experimentation with drugs or alcohol. Adolescents with addicts in their family history are also much more susceptible to addiction themselves.

⁵² U.S. National Library of Medicine, "Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome."

If any of your teens fall into these categories, you need to spend time helping them understand the seriousness of their choices in this area. This may best be done in a mentoring situation or in a small group Bible study with other teens who have similar backgrounds. They may need extra encouragement in order to avoid making choices that will have an immediate seriously negative impact.

It is also important to help teens explore why they are tempted to use mind altering substances. What are the root causes of their desire to use these chemicals? Often, it is an attempt to forget or feel differently about something in their lives. It is critical they understand alcohol and drugs never really fix anything. Their problems will still be there when they finish using. Only now, they may actually be worse because of the consequences of using the substance.

Certain substances alter the mental state of the person using them. Many teens will drink alcohol when they are sad or depressed in an effort to ease their pain. Alcohol is a depressant. It will deepen their sadness, not ease it. Many suicide victims are found to have consumed alcohol or drugs before killing themselves.⁵³ Often young people begin using substances to self medicate an unpleasant mental state. They need to understand that their choices often deepen the unpleasant state rather than ease it.

While it may seem as if you are getting off topic, addressing godly problem solving skills is essential in any lessons you provide teens on drug and alcohol use. Teach them more helpful coping strategies to ease stress. Help them with conflict resolution skills and having difficult conversations. Give them the resources they can use to help them solve the problems that can encourage them to use drugs to escape. If possible, provide them Christian mentors or other adults who are willing to develop relationships with them and give them godly support when they need it. Having better coping skills and a stronger support system can make substance use and abuse less appealing to teens.

When using the Bible to teach teens about alcohol and drugs, do not merely focus on random verses. Look at the stories of people like Noah and Samson who got drunk. What happened when they became drunk? Would those same negative things have happened if they had stayed sober?

While God has declared drunkenness a sin, focusing just on those verses may not be enough for some students. They may claim they are not drunk when their blood alcohol level would indicate otherwise.

Blood Alcohol Level is the concentration of alcohol found in the bloodstream of an individual. It is usually given as a decimal related to the percentage of alcohol found in

⁵³ Pederson, "One-Third of Suicides Involve Heavy Alcohol Consumption."

the blood. Intoxication laws use varying standards for intoxication. The most common for driving a vehicle is .08. This intoxication level can be easily reached after only one or two drinks under certain circumstances.

It also becomes problematic when addressing other questionable substances like street drugs, glue and other inhalants that are sniffed to get high, legal pharmaceuticals that are abused, tobacco, vaping, etc.

Often it is best to focus on God's principles for how he wants us to care for our bodies. There are also scriptures on wisdom that could apply. Are they really able to be wise when their mind and its functions are chemically impaired? For some students, it can help to remind them of the purposes of the Christian life and how unhealthy habits can curtail what God has planned for them to do. For example, what might their alcohol or drug use communicate to a non-Christian? Is it a message that is pointing them to God, or one that communicates God is not sufficient?

This is another area where ministries to teens often bring in speakers who have had experiences with the negative impact of using or abusing substances. Some teens relate better to this personal narrative. This is especially true if the person is otherwise relatable to teens and shares how they never expected those consequences the first time they used their substance of choice.

One of the best ways to help teens avoid substance use is to help them learn how to find godly fun. Young people will sometimes use substances merely as a way to ease their boredom. Teaching them how to have fun without substances can make them seem less necessary. In some areas, your ministry may have to provide some of these engaging activities. Some ministries have found creating some type of teen center with tutoring, activities, athletics, fun classes and other diversions allows them to minister to students more effectively while also lessening substance use and abuse.

Your ministry may find it necessary to provide parents with classes or information on these topics as well as your students. Studies have shown that alcohol or drug use by parents makes it much more likely the teens in that family will also use them. Parents may also be ignorant of the information you are teaching their children about alcohol, drugs, tobacco and other substances. They may be engaged in risky behaviors themselves and minimize what you are teaching in your ministry. Giving them important information may encourage the entire family to make healthier choices.

It is important to have a ministry plan in place for teens who use substances during your ministry activities and events. These policies need to provide legal protection for your ministry and its volunteers. More importantly, they need to address when parents will be informed and the consequences for breaking the rules.

Your plan should also have a list of the ways your ministry is willing to help those teens whom you discover are using or abusing substances - even if it is outside of your ministry time with them. It is important to remember, in many cases teens who use or abuse substances will need medical and psychological help that is beyond the expertise of your volunteers. It is a good idea to develop a list of trusted professionals you can recommend to teens and their parents who are struggling with substance use or abuse.

Teaching Bible students about drugs and alcohol may seem outside of the desired Bible-focused curriculum of your ministry. It is important to remember, though, that your classes may be the only place where the teens to whom you minister will get this information. It may also be the only place where they ever learn what God thinks about using substances that could harm them. Without these lessons, they are more susceptible to the inevitable peer pressure to use drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and other harmful chemicals.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the best sources for information about drugs, alcohol and tobacco in your area?
2. What substances are most likely to impact the teens to whom you minister?
3. What are the possible negative consequences of using the most popular substances in your area?
4. What tools do the teens to whom you minister need to avoid using these substances?
5. How can your ministry help adolescents in your area avoid using these substances?
6. Develop a plan for your ministry that addresses how your ministry will handle situations involving the teens served by your ministry and substance use.

Chapter 15 – Teen Depression, Anxiety and Suicide

Disclaimer: The information in this chapter was not written by medical professionals and should not be used to diagnose or treat teens with potential mental health issues. Rather it is to inform those ministering to teens of resources they may find helpful in ministering to at-risk teens and their families.

There are a variety of issues that can impact the mental health of teens. Mental problems are often first noticed during the teen years. In fact, half of all mental health problems begin by age 14 and 75% by age 24. It is estimated 20% of teens have a more serious mental health issue.⁵⁴ At times, parents may not realize their teen is having mental health issues. Or they may be in denial, choosing to believe it is merely a difficult phase or that their teen is exhibiting normal teen behavior.

The teen years are when mental health issues like anxiety can be perfectly normal. Bodies are growing and changing rapidly, with accompanying hormonal adjustments and stress. This can cause a relatively benign anxiety and even occasional sadness. The key is understanding the difference between mental health issues that are within normal ranges and those that may need additional professional health.

While your ministry is probably not equipped to help teens with their mental health issues, you can encourage parents of at-risk teens to get professional assessment and help for their children. It is not your responsibility to diagnose a mental health issue a teen may have, but rather express concern that their experience may be outside of the norm.

This is obviously a delicate conversation to have with any parent. As a result, many ministries choose to ignore the issue in hopes the parents are aware of their teen's issues and are seeking professional guidance. If the parents of an at-risk teen are unaware of the problem or reluctant to seek help, the teen's mental health can deteriorate, leading to potentially serious consequences.

One way to address mental health issues is to educate all of the teens to whom you minister and their parents on the symptoms of someone who may need professional help. At-risk teens and their peers are often the first to recognize that something is not quite what it should be. They may however, have no idea what to do about their concerns.

According to experts, these are some signs that a teen may need professional help in dealing with their mental health issues:⁵⁵

⁵⁴ National Alliance of Mental Health, "Mental Health By the Numbers."

⁵⁵ National Alliance of Mental Health, "Know the Warning Signs."

- **Drastic changes in mood lasting more than a couple of weeks.** Teens often have a lot of school pressures and drama within their friendships and romantic relationships. It is not abnormal for an otherwise happy teen to be anxious or sad for a couple of weeks - especially when an obvious event has caused the change in demeanor. If there is no obvious cause or the changes in behavior last for an extended period of time, a professional should probably be consulted.
- **Loss of interest in food, schoolwork or leisure activities.** When a teen suddenly loses interest in eating, keeping up with assignments or doing the things that bring him or her joy for an extended period of time, something is wrong. It may be a physical illness, rather than a mental health issue, but a professional should be consulted.
- **Change in sleep patterns.** This can be hormonal or physical instead of an indication of a mental health issue. Any prolonged changes in sleep patterns should be examined carefully by a physician - particularly if those changes are dramatic.
- **Use of alcohol or drugs.** This can be as a result of peer pressure or boredom. At times though, people with mental health issues unknowingly try to self medicate using alcohol or drugs.
- **Changes in energy levels.** If a calm teen suddenly becomes agitated for a period of time or a teen with a normally high energy level becomes lethargic, there may be some sort of physical or mental health issue.
- **Frequent complaints of aches and headaches.** These can also be caused by hormones or even hunching over a desk for too many hours. Regardless, if these are frequent, a doctor should be consulted.
- **Avoiding friends and social situations.** Some teens are naturally quiet or introverted and do not need more than a couple of friends. What is important is to watch for changes – especially drastic ones – in how they are interacting with peers. It may just be teen drama that will eventually resolve itself, or it may be a sign of a mental health issue.
- **Changes in personal hygiene.** It is normal at certain ages for some teens to not care very much about their appearance. If a teen who has been well groomed suddenly stops taking care of basic hygiene, it needs to be investigated.
- **Sexual promiscuity.** Although sinful, some teens will engage in sexual experiences. If a teen is promiscuous with numerous, rapidly changing partners, something may be seriously wrong. It can be a sign the teen has been sexually abused or raped previously. It can also be a sign that the teen is trying to self medicate in some way. In either case, the teen needs professional help.
- **Signs of cutting, burning, intravenous drug use, excessive tattoos and unexplained weight loss.** Often teens trying to cope with mental health issues will try one or more of these behaviors as a way of controlling the thoughts and feelings they are having - or to feel anything at all.
- **Unusual or severe violent or rebellious behavior.** Some teens are violent and rebellious as their norm. Other teens will appear to become violent or rebellious overnight. Any sudden severe violent or rebellious behavior is a sign that something

is wrong. The teen will probably need professional help to understand and correct these destructive attitudes and behaviors.

If a teen shows some of the symptoms above and the following symptoms, they may be suicidal. This can be an emergency situation, so it is crucial to never ignore these symptoms.

- **Talking or writing about suicide – even jokingly.** Mental health professionals tell lay people it is important to report when someone even jokes about suicide. A professional can then accurately assess whether it was indeed a joke or a sign of a more serious issue.
- **Giving away prize possessions.** Assuming it is not just one or two possessions being given in a philanthropic way, this can be a teen's way of saying goodbye. It is also a sign that the suicide attempt is probably eminent.
- **Social media posts that sound as if the teen is saying goodbye or dying soon.** Young people often use social media as a form of trying to let others know they are struggling and need help. Social media posts that sound as if the writer is severely depressed or suicidal should be taken very seriously.

There are a few mental health emergencies in which parents should be called immediately. They should also be encouraged to seek emergency help for their child.

- **If a teen is threatening immediate suicide.** Healthy teens do not threaten suicide unless there are serious mental health issues.
- **If a teen has physically harmed himself or herself.** If you see a teen who is still bleeding from cutting, is high or drunk, or you catch vomiting after eating with no sign of food poisoning or stomach virus, they need medical attention – perhaps immediately. Waiting can be deadly if the injuries are serious enough.
- **If a teen becomes uncontrollably violent.** This violence can be to material things or other people. No matter the circumstances, teens who act out their anger, frustration or pain in violent ways need professional help.

Encouraging Good Mental Health

You may not encounter any teens with mental health issues requiring parental and professional involvement. All teens, however, will experience stress, anxiety, sadness and other negative emotions. Teaching them how to process those emotions in healthy, godly ways is something a ministry to teens should provide.

There are several tools you can teach teens to help them regulate their negative emotions. It can be helpful for many teens if you also provide opportunities for them to practice these things with you and encourage them to do these things independently on a regular basis:

- **Prayer.** Teaching teens to pray their emotions gives them a way of expressing things to God they may be afraid to tell anyone else. Some teens may struggle with the idea of telling God about any negative feelings they may have. The book of Psalms is a great way to teach teens how even people like King David at times expressed their negative emotions to God.
- **Scriptures.** Sometimes reading a book like Psalms can have a calming effect on teens. Others may prefer to memorize key verses that remind them that God is with them and in control.
- **Exercise.** Exercise can help teens work out a lot of negative emotions while also making their bodies healthier. Walking and running have been shown to improve anxiety, stress and even sadness.⁵⁶
- **Healthy habits.** Eating healthy foods, getting plenty of sleep and other healthy habits can make teens less prone to negative emotions and better able to tolerate them when they do occur.
- **Breathing.** Our breathing rate signals to our brain that we are in trouble or relaxed. Unfortunately, when teens get upset, their breaths get shorter, more shallow and quicker. This signals the brain there is danger and the brain starts getting the rest of the body ready to fight or flee. When there is not something like a bear to fight or run from, these reactions caused by the brain can leave teens with all sorts of physical symptoms like stomach aches, nausea and headaches.
- **Hobbies.** Hobbies, especially creative ones like art and music, can be a great way for teens to express their emotions. Other hobbies like knitting or crocheting have a repetitive aspect to them which can also be calming.
- **Avoiding unhealthy things.** Teens can turn to food, sex, alcohol, drugs, and even violence in an attempt to cope with negative emotions. They need to be taught these behaviors will make the situation worse, not better. They also need to find replacement coping strategies that are healthier.
- **Relationships.** Teens need friends and adults in their lives who will listen to them when they are stressed. They need Christian adults who will help them make wise choices and give them godly advice when they need it. They need to know who those safe people are and build relationships with them before they are needed to help them process negative emotions. Then, when they are struggling, the teens will have already established relationships with people they can trust to help them.

Your ministry will probably not have the professionals to help teens process and heal when they are dealing with serious mental health issues. You can, however, teach all of your teens how to process their emotions in healthy ways. Your ministry can also be aware of any teens who may be developing serious mental health issues and help them get the professional interventions they need.

⁵⁶ Anxiety and Depression Society of America, "Exercise for Stress and Anxiety."

Discussion Questions

1. What are the symptoms a teen may have that could indicate a mental health issue?
2. What are some additional symptoms that would indicate a teen may be contemplating suicide?
3. What are some ways your ministry can help teens develop habits that will help them process the many emotions the teen years bring in healthy ways?
4. In what ways do the teens served by your ministry need help in various areas of mental health?

Chapter 16 – Teens and Culture

Although Christians often think of the negative impact culture can have on teens, the word culture actually has a rather benign definition. Culture consists of the arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular social group. Different cultures can be found in regions, countries, ethnic or racial groups, age groups, income levels, social classes, educational backgrounds, genders, religions, secular clubs, congregations, neighborhoods and even families.

Some aspects of culture can be positive. The world is somewhat more beautiful because of the paintings created by the French Impressionists. Other aspects of culture are relatively benign. For instance, it does not really make a difference that Canada celebrates a Thanksgiving holiday on a different day than the United States.

Culture becomes problematic for Christians when aspects of the culture promote ungodly behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, or openly encourage people to disobey God. Debating the various ways Christians can attempt to change negative aspects of culture is outside of the scope of this book. What is important to address here is how various cultures may be impacting the teens you serve in negative ways. How can you help your teens live their lives in such a way that they follow God instead of these cultural norms?

Part of the problem with any discussion of culture is that it is not static. A teen cultural fad or trend today may be totally rejected two weeks from now. And teen culture can vary from country to country and even neighborhood to neighborhood. By the time you can learn all of the different aspects of the cultures impacting your teens in potentially negative ways, they have left behind those fads and trends and become involved in new ones.

It is not that your ministry should not try to be informed. Unfortunately, trying to research culture is difficult and what you believe is impacting the teens to whom you minister may actually have had more of an impact on their older siblings or even parents.

To best understand the cultures impacting the teens to whom you minister, it is helpful to learn some basic aspects of culture and particularly cultures that most often impact teens.

- **Culture is often used to help one group distinguish itself from other groups.** It is interesting to observe that as much as teens desire to be exactly like their peers, they want just as badly to appear different from their parents. Teens also have cultures to help them differentiate between various groups of students in their schools or neighborhoods. Street gangs are an example of an extremely toxic type of these smaller cultures possibly impacting the teens you serve.
- **People outside of a particular culture often make assumptions based on the differences they see between their culture and the other culture.** Often these assumptions are inaccurate because they are based on a very limited experience

with the other group. These assumptions, accurate or not, can lead to prejudices, discrimination, and bigotry.

- **Even what are accepted as generally negative cultural groups can provide some positive benefits for the people within these cultures.** Crime gangs, for example, would be considered a negative culture by most law abiding people. They do however, provide a type of family and supportive environment for its members. Often it is this perceived positive aspect of that culture that will attract teens to it. For example, teens may be attracted to crime or street gangs because they do not currently have anyone in their lives who seems to care about them. The familial look of a gang appeals to them because they are in hopes they will find people who care about them when they become a member of the gang.
- **A culture can impact almost every area of a teen's life.** A culture may dictate what clothes and vocabulary its members use. They may pressure members overtly or subtly to read (or not read) certain materials or watch certain media. They may have preferred musical types or other forms of entertainment. Culture often influences attitudes and beliefs, which can become particularly problematic for teens who are trying to be Christian.
- **Cultural norms can be spread in a variety of ways.** This is why teens in a country as geographically large as China or the United States often have many of the same cultural norms, even living thousands of kilometers away from other groups of teens in their culture. These cultural norms can be spread from person to person, through social media or by media like movies that are actually produced by a different culture. Cultural norms can also be impacted by school curricula and teachers whom the teens admire and respect.
- **Collectivist and individualistic cultures can both impact teens, but in different ways.** Most teens live within a larger regional or ethnic culture that is either collectivist or individualistic. Collectivist cultures emphasize group goals over individual goals and desires. People growing up in those cultures tend to be taught the needs of the group are more important than what they may personally want or need. These teens can be helped by that mindset if the culture is promoting generally Christian values. It can be exponentially more difficult for them, however, to be counter-cultural if that is what God requires of them. Teens raised in individualistic cultures are more likely to put their needs and desires ahead of the group. This is helpful in that they are often told repeatedly that it is acceptable to be different in some way from their peers. The disadvantage is that this type of culture can encourage selfish behavior and a positive group like a church family can have less of a positive impact. Teens in individualistic cultures may even reject the church entirely as an unnecessary group for helping them worship God and live a Christian life.
- **Cultures may at times incorporate aspects of other cultures.** This can be seen when teens adopt a clothing style from a previous generation of teens or when they admire the music or art work of another culture and become fans of it. Often this cross-cultural aspect is seen in areas where radically different cultures live near

each other. The children and teens may be the first generation that attended school with children from the other culture. This proximity encourages them to adopt things they appreciate in the other culture. The internet is another way teens are exposed to different cultural ideas. Once again, this exposure can foster admiration and even adoption of some aspect they admire of the cultures they encounter online.

- **Culture is often seen as moving in a more liberal or relaxed direction from generation to generation, but there can sometimes be radical adjustments back to cultural norms from several generations in the past.** If you analyze the social norms in your country for example, you may notice several decades when things gradually moved in a more liberal direction followed by a decade of a correction back towards a more conservative era several decades earlier. This is not universally true, but is quite common. As with other aspects of culture, there can be positive and negative impacts of both societal movements on teens attempting to live a Christian life in those decades.
- **Each aspect of a particular culture needs to be assessed independently.** When trying to help teens view culture from God's perspective, it is counterproductive to reject entire cultures entirely – even if the overall impact of the culture is ungodly. It is more productive to encourage teens to analyze each aspect of that culture independently before choosing to reject participating in that culture entirely. They may realize some aspects of the culture they admire are indeed benign or even godly, but may be better enjoyed while they are part of a different, more godly culture overall. For example, teens that admire the familial aspect of a crime gang, can leave behind the sinful behaviors that are part of belonging to the gang culture by finding an even better familial support system in a church family.
- **Participating in specific cultural activities can have a greater impact on individuals over time than they may appear to have immediately.** Teens who belong to a culture that encourages smoking for example, may not experience a lot of negative health consequences when they first begin smoking with the group. Years later, however, the impact of constant smoking can cause them to die an early, painful death.

Trying to convince teens to make godly choices in opposition to their culture is a difficult battle. Even Christian teens who generally make godly choices are not immune to their culture. Why is this temptation to give into cultural pressures so strong during the teen years?

- **Desire to be like everyone else.** As discussed earlier, teen brains are wired for connection. This desire to be connected to peers can cause some teens to make choices they would otherwise avoid in an effort to be like everyone else their age. They believe this will improve the chances that they will continue to have the desired social standing with their peers.

- **Lack of critical thinking skills and life experience.** When someone they admire declares something is right or desirable or true, teens are inclined to believe them. Stronger critical thinking skills or more life experience might expose the flaws in the arguments the person they admire is using to sway them.
- **Short term thinking.** Some aspects of culture appear to have immediate positive benefits. Fashion models often smoked or used cocaine several decades ago because it suppressed their appetites and helped them stay model thin. It was not until later that the long term negative health consequences of those substances became known. Teens also have a tendency to believe the future will provide easy solutions to any problems their current choices may create. They are more concerned about the current perceived benefits than any potential future problems.
- **Lack of a biblical worldview.** If teens do not make all of their decisions by considering what God would want them to do, they are in real danger of accepting cultural norms that are contrary to God's will. Although God might not mention his opinion about a specific aspect of culture in the Bible, His commands and principles can help teens make better choices about whether or not they should adopt cultural norms.

To help teens analyze culture through God's commands and principles, you will have to do more than teach Bible lessons on specific topics. It is important to teach them how to analyze the various aspects of culture and compare them to God's commands and principles. They will need guided practice in making godly choices about the cultural influences that are currently impacting them. Teaching them how to analyze culture as a Christian will give them the skills necessary to navigate any culture in which they find themselves in the future.

To make godly cultural choices with some ease, young people will need to have a heart that seeks God. Serving and obeying God must be their top priority. If popularity or anything else takes the place in their lives meant for God, they are more likely to conform to culture than to obey God when the two are diametrically opposed.

They also need a strong knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Decisions to conform to cultural pressure are often made quickly and in high pressure situations. Students need to have enough knowledge and wisdom to quickly discern whether or not God would want them to participate. When there is any doubt in their minds, teach them to differ until they have the time to analyze the choice more carefully.

To be able to withstand the peer pressure to conform to cultural norms, teens need to have healthy self esteem and be willing to be different from everyone else. At times, even other Christian teens may make different choices than they do. They have to be confident of God's love for them and His purposes for their lives. They also need supportive peers and adults who will comfort and encourage them when being different becomes too difficult and painful.

The Bible is full of examples of people who went against their culture to seek God. Some did so easily, while others struggled. Sharing those stories and what can be learned from them can give teens the analytical skills to compare their own cultural choices to scripture and make wise conclusions.

At times, cultural ideas or trends may leave even Christians adults feeling somewhat spiritually conflicted. Perhaps there is no obvious ungodly or sinful aspect to it. For some reason though, the trend just makes adults uncomfortable. In these cases, it is extremely important that the adults in your ministry carefully analyze this discomfort. Is it merely a difference in tastes of art or music? Do your adult volunteers merely dislike change and are fearful of anything new? Are they confusing political conversations for spiritual ones?

If the adults involved with your ministry are worried about the possible negative impact of an aspect of the cultures in which your teens participate, it is important to carefully share your concern with them. Perhaps the concern has nothing directly to do with God's commands or principles. With their additional life experience though, the adult volunteers in your ministry may know of negative consequences these things may cause as the teens who do them try to join the world of adults. There may be nothing wrong with a nose ring for example, but in your area employers may regularly refuse to hire young adults who wear them. Fair or not, this behavior in an overlapping culture can have negative consequences for the teens who will need to eventually navigate the other culture.

When Culture Endangers Christians

Various cultures may reject Christianity with a wide spectrum of attached consequences for those who are Christians. Cultures that still consider themselves to be primarily Christian may reject certain aspects of God's commands and principles, but Christians rarely find themselves facing serious negative consequences for their beliefs, words or actions.

As a culture becomes more secular, the rejection of God's commands and principles can become more vocal. Christian teens may find they are teased or even ostracized for their beliefs, words or actions. While this danger is not physical, it can still be painful emotionally to teens – especially for those with a strong need to assimilate to their peers.

In some locations, Christians may find themselves facing severe negative consequences. These can impact their social standing and their ability to find employment. Arrest, physical abuse, and even death are becoming increasingly common in areas throughout the world.

An important part of your ministry is to prepare teens to have a faith that is strong enough to withstand persecution. Expose them to the stories of Stephen and other Christian martyrs in the Bible and in other sources. Give them the tools to stay strong in the midst of not just any persecution they may currently experience, but also if persecution worsens in their lifetime.

Culture is something God's people have had to address for thousands of years. The specifics may change, but the solutions remain the same now as they were in biblical times. Helping adolescents make wise, godly choices when faced with cultural pressures or negative consequences for their faith can prepare them for any possible challenges to their faith in the future.

Discussion Questions

1. What is culture?
2. What are some of the different cultures impacting the teens to whom you minister?
3. What aspects of these cultures are concerning to the adult volunteers in your ministry? Why are they concerned about these specific things?
4. Explain the ten basic principles of culture.
5. What are some of the reasons teens are so susceptible to cultural pressures?
6. What are some ways your ministry can prepare students to live counter culturally?

Chapter 17 – Teens and Christian Community

Have you ever wondered why God placed Christians in community groups (congregations) to worship Him and engage in ministry together? If you look carefully throughout the New Testament, you can find some of the benefits of Christian community:

- **For members to support one another.** This support can manifest itself in many different ways. At times, the support Christians give each other is material support, like food or clothes. Support can also be emotional or spiritual. Christians in a healthy congregation regularly support one another.
- **For older, experienced Christians to mentor younger, less experienced Christians.** Paul writes in several of his letters encouragement for older Christians to mentor younger ones. He phrases it in slightly different ways, but the implication is the same. Christians are there to provide wise, godly advice for those who are less experienced.
- **For those gifted in teaching to teach others more about God.** The New Testament letters make it clear that teaching what God wanted people to do happened both inside and outside of the Christian community meetings. We have plenty of examples of both kinds of teaching in the New Testament. It is clear that not only were Christians to continue learning more about God, but many were also sharing what they had already learned with others.
- **For encouragement.** Christians should be spending their lives trying to obey God's commands, serving others and sharing their faith. None of those are particularly easy tasks. It is easy to become discouraged. Sadly, many have become so discouraged, they quit trying to be who God wants them to be. From primary source documents, we know that the meetings of the early church were times when Christians encouraged one another to keep trying to be who God wanted them to be. In fact, many of the New Testament epistles contain general and specific messages of encouragement.
- **For accountability.** Self deception is often part of living a life enmeshed in sin. It can be easy to find ways to justify disobeying God. Christians in community together are supposed to fellowship regularly and know each other well. They are called to hold each other accountable for poor choices and sin. While this should be done in a loving way, accountability to one another and ultimately to God is a constant theme in the epistles.

Churches often fail to demonstrate or discuss these purposes in ways that are visible and understandable to teens. They may only notice the conflicts or unaddressed negative behaviors and sins in the lives of others. In individualistic cultures, this can be especially problematic. Young people may decide the Christian community is more harmful than helpful to them spiritually and choose to leave permanently. In collectivist cultures, teens may continue interacting with their Christian community, but do so only because of societal

pressure. Although they are physically present, they may have disconnected emotionally and spiritually from the group.

Teens perceive the value of Christian community on a spectrum. Those with impressions that are mostly positive usually have meaningful relationships with Christians of various ages in their church family. These Christians have loved, supported, mentored and taught them in meaningful ways.

Teens with a more neutral view of Christian community tend to have less meaningful interactions with individual Christians. They may attend worship services and activities regularly or sporadically. For various reasons, however, they have failed to connect emotionally to individuals there.

Teens with an extremely negative view of Christian community have usually had one or more negative experiences. At times, these experiences have been traumatic. Young people have a very difficult time understanding how someone who claims to be a Christian can act in ungodly, sinful or even horrifically evil ways. In some places, the church has made things even worse by failing to hold adults accountable for ungodly, sinful and even criminal behaviors.

A teen's perceptions of the value of Christian community can be impacted by individual Christians, family members, the overall behavior of what they perceive to be the majority of the members of their congregation or larger church family or by Christians in general. Their understanding of the situations that have impacted their perceptions may or may not be accurate or a valid assessment of what happened. Regardless, they will hold these opinions as true until they are taught a better way to process them.

Helping teens understand God's original design for the church can make things seem even worse to them at first. Knowing that God meant for the Church to function like a body – with all of the parts playing their role effectively – can seem discouraging when compared to the reality of how Christians interact with each other in many churches. It can be helpful for teens to understand these problems do indeed stem from people making poor choices rather than a flaw in God's plan for the church.

Having lessons on forgiveness and grace, emphasizing how much we need both from God and each other can help young people begin to feel hope for their church community. Carefully explaining the ways their Christian community can help them grow and be healthy spiritually can open teens' eyes to their need to be in community with other Christians. Helping them recognize these benefits by pointing them out as you notice them can also heighten their awareness.

Another more recent issue with Christian community stems from technology. Many churches now broadcast their services online. While this can be helpful when someone is

ill, for example, it can be problematic for young people. If they do not understand the value of authentic community, they may believe watching a worship service online allows them to have the positive aspects of worshipping with a congregation, without the more problematic issues real relationships with other Christians can create.

Ultimately, the best way to help teens understand and appreciate the value of their church family is to encourage them to develop multiple meaningful relationships with Christians of various ages in their congregation. They need relationships with peers as well as adults who will play roles similar to real family members in how they interact with and mentor them.

This will require the adults in your church family or ministry to make building relationships with the teens who attend a priority. You may need to provide safety parameters, training and opportunities to encourage intergenerational friendships and mentoring relationships. Some adults will naturally mentor teens. Others will need the help of a more formal program to encourage them to interact with young people in meaningful ways. The ultimate goal is to have every teen served by your ministry to feel loved and appreciated by the people in your church or ministry.

You also need to protect teens from as many avoidable negative experiences in these relationships as possible. People are not perfect and neither are even the best relationships. You do want to protect teens from sexual predators or people who will treat them in demeaning or other unloving ways on a consistent basis. You may need to provide training to teach adults how to be mentors in ways that have a positive impact on the spiritual lives of the teens to whom you minister.⁵⁷ Never assume adult Christians will automatically know how to interact with teens in ways that will help those young people grow spiritually. Taking the time to develop and provide screening and training processes can lessen the chances a teen is impacted negatively by an adult volunteer teacher or mentor.

Your ministry may want to set up a more formal mentoring program. Teens can also find mentors by being paired with adults in a ministry in which they are interested. Many gifted teachers received their first training and mentoring by helping an adult teach a children's Bible class when they were an adolescent. If your congregation holds special events for the men or the women, encourage them to include the teens when it is appropriate. These special events usually provide multiple opportunities for the adults to interact in meaningful ways with any teens who attend.

It will require time and energy from your ministry and the adults in your congregation to create these meaningful connections between teens and their church family. If adults fail to make any meaningful connections with a teen, the young person will often go on to reject

⁵⁷ See Appendix 8: Teen Mentoring Program Basics.

Christianity as unnecessary to their lives. It is not that they are necessarily rejecting God. As they become adults though, there will be increasing demands placed on them. If they see their time spent with Christian community as causing them harm or even as a neutral experience, they will abandon it for something they believe adds value to their lives. As misguided as this philosophy may be, it is often what drives young people to stop attending church and ministry activities.

There are actually a lot of fun ways you can begin fostering meaningful relationships between teens and the other generations in your church family. Church-wide service and faith sharing opportunities are a great way for young and old to work together on something meaningful. Encouraging adults to act as hosts and mentors for small group Bible studies or activities can also introduce teens to adults who are willing to invest time in a relationship with them.

Even the smallest of gestures can make teens feel more connected to their church family. A warm, loving greeting that includes finding out what happened to the teen recently is a great way to show love and concern. Over time, this can become meaningful when the same adults create those interactions regularly. Adults who celebrate the birthdays of teens, who send them notes or attend their activities can reinforce the supportive role of their church family.

Peer friendships within a church family are also important. Many families decide to attend church based on how many friends their child has who attend a particular congregation. Peer relationships cannot be forced. Teens will naturally have more in common with some of their peers than others. Those friendships will usually happen without any adult intervention.

Teen ministries can help bridge the gap for teens who live far apart geographically, have different interests or have personalities that do not mesh well. The key is to help young people shift from focusing on the things they might normally seek from a friendship with a peer, to viewing each other as family members. Most extended families have a lot of variety in interests and personalities. Teens will understand the dynamics of including a family member merely because of the love they have for that person.

As you have Bible lessons on the familial aspect of Christian relationships and provide opportunities for them to develop, you may need to also teach teens important relationship skills like godly conflict resolution. People who are very different often have conflicts because of those differences. Teaching teens godly conflict resolution skills can improve all of their relationships, while also making it easier for them to treat their peers in the congregation with love and respect.

Another way to help teens bond to one another is to encourage them to share their hearts with one another. There was an interesting study done about romantic relationships that

also has implications for peer friendships.⁵⁸ Researchers found asking and answering questions that revealed things we usually only share with our closest friends and family, creates a strong emotional bond with the people to whom we tell those things.

Discussions in Bible classes are a great way to introduce some of deeper faith questions that will encourage teens to reveal their hearts to one another. Remember though, for this to work well, your classes need to be a safe place where teens know they can share without that information becoming gossip. If you can provide that safety and encourage them to answer these questions honestly, you should find your students becoming closer to one another emotionally.

At times your efforts to help teens see the benefits of staying in community with other Christians can be hampered by one or more negative events in your congregation or in Christianity as a whole. For some teens, these events give them the excuse they need to reject Christianity. Often though, they are making this decision based on their emotions or unrealistic expectations.

It is best if you can help teens understand some basic realities of Christian community before these negative events occur. Whenever students experience or witness negative things in Christian community, it is important to review these concepts again:

- **Christians are still people who sin.** As Christians, our standard of behavior should be to model Christ. Unfortunately, unlike Jesus, we are imperfect. Christians make mistakes and they sin. When this happens, it is natural to feel disappointed. It is unrealistic, however, to expect perfection from Christians.
- **We sin, too.** Often teens forget about their own sins when criticizing the sins of the adults in their congregation. Perhaps they believe on some level their inexperience makes their sins understandable, while adults should be held to a higher standard. It is important to remind teens that everyone sins – including them.
- **In God’s eyes, any sin separates a person from Him.** We live in a world that has a rating system for sin. To many people, a fair God would be much angrier with someone who murders than someone who lies. It is crucial to review God’s overall plan with teens regularly. This includes not only that any sin can separate a person from God, but also how we can redeem that relationship when we have sinned.
- **God has put in place a way for us to receive forgiveness from Him and be restored to our Church family.** Discussing forgiveness, grace, repentance, and other related topics can take a lot of time. This is such an important piece of a strong faith foundation though, it should be taught whether or not your teens have experienced something negative at church.

⁵⁸ Ehrenfeld, “36 Questions to Bring You Closer Together.”

Some negative experiences may cause teens to need to go beyond these basic principles. They may want to have church leaders or their parents involved in the process of helping them understand and process what happened. Young people will need help in understanding in age appropriate ways what occurred and how it was handled. This is especially important if they personally witnessed something that in their viewpoint was highly inappropriate, sinful, or even traumatic.

As strange as it may sound, teens can also come to have a negative view of Christian community when they hold a particular Christian in high esteem. As mentioned early, even Christians sin. If a teen holds a Christian in an unrealistically high regard, they are likely to be devastated when they find out that person has sinned in some way. If the sin appears to the teen to be particularly egregious, their disappointment can also be spiritually detrimental – even causing them to reject Christianity entirely.

It is important to teach teens how the Apostles handled this admiration in the early church. They appeared to have to regularly remind people they should be following Christ and not their favorite Apostle or minister. Teens living in celebrity driven cultures may especially struggle to keep God as the primary object of their admiration.

Christian community is often a key factor in the decision making process of teens and young adults who are deciding whether to be an engaged member of a church family. If they understand it well, they are more likely to stay involved with their church family. Allowing them to decide its value to their spiritual health based on the actions of a few people can be the beginning of their rejection of not just their church family, but Christianity entirely. It is crucial your ministry helps teens navigate the idea of Christian community in ways that will encourage them to remain engaged in one for the rest of their lives.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the purposes of Christian community?
2. What are some ways to help teens understand the benefits of Christian community?
3. What are some ways to help teens develop meaningful, mentoring type relationships with the adults in their congregation?
4. What are some ways to help teens develop peer friendships within your ministry?
5. What are some key principles teens need to understand when they see Christians acting in sinful ways or have a negative experience with a Christian?
6. What can be the issue with teens admiring a particular Christian?
7. What issues with Christian community do the teens to whom you are ministering have?

Chapter 18 – Helping Parents of Teens

Parenting a teen can be difficult. The teen years are when young people move from lives that are primarily directed by their parents or guardians to the independently directed life of an adult. In theory, this transition should be gradual and cause minimal stress to parents or teens.

Unfortunately, multiple factors can make adolescence the most turbulent years a child is at home. Many parents are frustrated and even frightened as their teen gets closer to adulthood. They may notice problems in their child's attitudes, beliefs and behaviors they are afraid will get much worse once they are no longer living at home.

Since teens are often more susceptible to peer and societal pressures, they may have begun participating in dangerous or sinful behaviors. Parents who have made parenting errors earlier may also find their teen has virtually no relationship with them and ignores their warnings or advice.

Parents can also become concerned about what they hear or read about that is negatively impacting young people in their area – whether or not their teen is even exposed to those things. If their teen has not become a Christian by the middle teen years, many Christians parents will add this to their growing list of worries and become almost frantic.

Parents of teens often take one of two possible approaches that impact their teen in negative ways. Some parents decide their teen will soon be an independent adult, and make no effort to influence or help them in any way other than providing shelter, food and other basic necessities. Or they believe they have sacrificed enough in their parenting role and their child is now independent enough for the parent to pursue any personal goal without considering the parenting needs of the teen. This hands off approach to parenting a teen usually results in parents who make little if any attempt to influence their teen's heart, attitudes or beliefs.

Other parents become increasingly worried that their time of in-house influence is coming to an end. They desperately want to correct any mistakes and fill in any knowledge or wisdom gaps their teen may still have. Those who are aware of their teen's growing issues can become almost panic stricken. They may constantly correct or harass their child or use guilt or threats in an attempt to elicit the desired behaviors and attitudes.

While there are secular resources available for parenting children, it is difficult to find resources that address parenting the average teen. Finding resources that address parental concerns that are more spiritual than secular can be even more difficult. Your ministry can provide the parents of the teens to whom you minister with the information and support they need during their last few years with their children living at home.

Initially, you may have to help parents understand some truths about parenting teens.

- **A young person's worldview is critical.** What they have taught their child about God has hopefully made this worldview a biblical one. If they have neglected to teach their teen to view everything in life through God's eyes or have not modeled a biblical worldview well for their child, their teen's worldview may be more secular than biblical.
- **Any parenting mistakes they have made will become more obvious during the teen years.** Compounding parenting mistakes over multiple years may have also compounded any negative consequences of those mistakes.
- **Teens have free choice as to whether or not they obey God.** Forcing a teen who does not want to love and obey God to get baptized is just dunking them in water. Whether or not they become a Christian and live a Christian life is ultimately the teen's decision. Parents can help mold their child's heart, but they cannot force it to be godly.
- **While peers and teachers have more influence during the teen years, adolescents still want and need help and approval from their parents.** A teen may never admit he or she cares what his or her parents think about their choices, but they do. They also have times when they want or need advice. They do not want a parent controlling every aspect of their lives, but that does not mean they no longer want or need the help of their parents.
- **Any concerns a parent has about their teen can be addressed and corrected. It is just going to be a lot more difficult.** If a parent has failed to notice and correct an attitude or behavior when their child was younger, there is still hope. The teen brain is still growing and changing in the parts of the brain responsible for making decisions. Unfortunately, bad habits may have been formed since those behaviors went uncorrected previously. As with anything, bad habits are difficult to replace with good ones. It can be done, but the parent and teen will have to work hard to accomplish needed changes.
- **When there is not a healthy relationship between parents and a teen, extreme rules and consequences rarely work well.** Teens are moving towards independence. Suddenly treating them like they were ten years younger will make them angry. There are rare occasions when parents need to take drastic measures to save the life of their teen. These are very rare, however, and work best if the parents and teen have a healthy relationship.
- **It is never too late for parents to improve their relationship with their child.** If parents of a teen realize they have not parented in ways that have created a strong bond between them and their child, it is never too late to make needed corrections. This is usually most effective when the parents apologize to the teen about their previous behavior, tell the teen the negative impact they believe it has had on their relationship and explained the changes they are trying to make to improve their relationship. It may not be easy, but it is critical for parents to try and remain in the lives of their children in order to influence their children and future generations for God.

Often, the parents of teens just need someone to listen and reassure them. At times, they may want you to provide additional resources to help them address a particular issue. They may also want your opinion on cultural topics or teen problems they have read about. Parents see those who minister to teens as experts on everything that impacts adolescents. They believe your exposure to multiple teens over time and any training you may have received makes you qualified to provide the help they need.

It is crucial to be honest about your training and limitations. If you are not a trained physician or mental health professional, for example, it is best you refer parents who need help in those areas to those professionals. It is always appropriate to ask for time to research the best source for answering their questions or addressing their issues. Do not allow yourself to be pressured to give an immediate response in an area in which you do not know enough to give wise advice. It will not be helpful and in some cases could make things much worse.

Ultimately, the parents of the teens to whom you minister and your volunteers need to understand your ministry is a resource for teens and their parents. You can provide certain activities like Bible classes that can reinforce the godly principles and commands parents are teaching at home. At times, you can fill minor gaps parents may have left in their child's faith foundation. Your ministry, however, will not have the ability to totally replace parents in the role they are to have in the spiritual education and molding of their children.

There are several ways you can provide assistance to the parents of teens:

- **Suggesting helpful resources.** If your ministry has found a book, article or website helpful, the parents of the teens served by your ministry may also find them useful. Providing all of the parents with resource ideas, also provides anonymity for parents who may be too embarrassed to admit they need help.
- **Providing workshops for parents.** If your ministry or parents are concerned about specific issues, sometimes the best way to help is to bring in an outside expert to give a workshop. You may also have someone within your ministry who is qualified to address specific topics.
- **Providing support groups.** If you have qualified professionals to lead support groups, they can be helpful for small groups of parents who are struggling with particularly difficult teen parenting issues like drug abuse.
- **Providing mentors.** Teens can benefit from mentoring relationships, but so can some parents of teens. Having a more experienced Christian parent provide mentoring can give struggling parents the additional support they may need to successfully navigate the teen years of their children.
- **Explaining cultural fads and trends.** Often the parents are the last to know about a fad that could be harmful to their teen. Keeping parents informed not only of new

fads and trends, but also giving them the tools to navigate them successfully is a great resource for parents.

- **Teaching how to discern which aspects of popular culture are harmless for their children and which aspects can have an immediate or long term negative impact on their children's faith.** Popular culture can be deceptive. It is often difficult to separate harmless fads from potentially detrimental activities and attitudes. Ungodly beliefs and attitudes can be hidden within aspects of popular culture that seem harmless. Overprotecting teens, by denying them access to everything in the culture around them can cause unnecessary tension and even rebellion. Parents need help analyzing the short and long term impact of the things in their culture in order to make the wisest possible choices.
- **Encouraging strong faith habits in the home.** The teen years are busy. It is easy for Christian parents to assume their children no longer need parents to be a part of their faith journey. As a result, they stop those great habits that can make their child's faith foundation even stronger before they leave home. Finding ways to encourage them to study the Bible and pray together, have meaningful faith conversations, have people into their home and other habits of spiritually vibrant families can help them continue those crucial faith habits.
- **Providing bridge activities.** Offering retreats and other activities can not only strengthen parent child relationships, but also help both teens and parents prepare for the next stage of their lives. Often more experienced parents and their young adult children can share their wisdom and experience to help less experienced parents and teens build bridges in their relationship and towards a godly future.

The teen years are not the end of Christian parenting, but it is a transition period in the parent - child relationship. Helping parents navigate these changes in ways that strengthen the faith of their teen children should be a crucial part of any ministry serving teens.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the two approaches to parenting the parents of teens often take?
2. What are some principles of parenting teens your ministry needs to help parents understand?
3. What are some resources your ministry can provide parents?
4. What are the top concerns of the parents of the teens to whom you minister?
5. How can your ministry help parents address these concerns?

Appendix 1 – Conducting a Ministry Survey

Done well, a Ministry Survey can help you understand how those to whom you are ministering perceive your ministry. It can point out areas needing improvement in a current ministry. A Ministry Survey can help identify areas where teens and their parents in your community need ministry services. Below, you will find the basics of conducting a successful Ministry Survey.

General Principles of Conducting a Ministry Survey

1. **Your Ministry Survey should include as many people as possible.** In general, the more people you can survey, the more accurate your conclusions will be. Remember, there may also be one person who has recognized or analyzed the situation in ways others have missed. Failing to interview this person could leave you without critical insights.
2. **If you are interviewing several sub-groups of people and combining the results, make sure you have a representative/equal number of people in each group interviewed.** Over representing one group of people may skew the results of your survey, making the results less accurate.
3. **Do not survey only the people who you like or who love your ministry.** If you cannot interview everyone, put all of the possible names in a hat and draw the number of names you have time to interview. This random choosing of participants will increase the likelihood you will get a variety of helpful responses.

Before The Interviews

- **Gather the information you already know.** Gathering this information will help you better determine what areas you need to cover in the survey.
 - **Statistics** - What statistical information can you find about the teens, families and social issues in your area?
 - **Current ministry efforts** - What does your ministry currently do to reach and serve the teens in your area?
 - **Community resources available to families in your area.** If your ministry is considering meeting a felt need of the community as an outreach ministry, it is important to know if there are other religious or secular groups in the area already meeting that need.
- **Decide who you will survey.** There are many options for the types of people you could survey. Your ministry only has limited resources and will not be able to effectively survey everyone in your area. It is important to decide to whom you will give the survey.

- **Main segment(s)** - These are the primary people you want to ensure are surveyed. They may include either one or both of the following major groups of people.
 - Church Members
 - Community Members
- **Sub-Groups**- Within the two groups above, you will find several sub-groups. It is important to survey an accurate proportion of each group for your survey results to be accurate.
 - **Parents** - The parents of teens often have a better insight into their children and the problems they face than anyone else - including at times the teens themselves.
 - **Ministry Volunteers** - Ministry volunteers see first hand how well your ministry is currently working. They may also have important feedback on the ways your ministry needs to improve or expand.
 - **Teens** - If you are ministering to teens, it is important to understand what they are thinking and feeling about your ministry and other areas that may impact it. Teens will often respond to adult questions with answers they believe the adult wants to hear. It is crucial you find ways to encourage teens participating in the survey to be totally honest with their responses.
 - **Church Leaders** - Church leaders can impact a ministry, even if they are not directly involved with that ministry. It is important to understand their perspective on your ministry.
 - **Community Leaders** - Community leaders often know things about the issues and problems of an area that others do not know. Asking for their feedback may reveal things you might not have learned otherwise.
- **Decide the time frame in which you would like all surveys to be conducted.** Surveying can continue indefinitely if you are not careful. It is important to allow enough time to obtain an adequate number of responses, but no so long that your ministry becomes stalled while waiting for results.
- **Decide how many people you would like to survey in each category.** Be realistic about how many people you will have time to survey by your deadline.
- **Determine which format(s) of surveys you would like to use.** There are several available options for conducting a Ministry Survey.
 - **One-on-one interviews** - If you have the time to survey people in person and individually, it can result in the most helpful results. One-on-one interviews give people more time to thoroughly explain their thoughts and for the interviewer to ask follow up questions for clarification. It is crucial if using this method to ensure those being interviewed feel comfortable enough to be totally honest.
 - **Small focus groups** - Surveying small focus groups can have many of the same advantages as one-on-one interviews. Assuming each participant

answers all of the questions, means these focus groups will take more time to be completed than it takes to do one solo interview. There is also a chance that peer pressure will encourage participants to adapt their personal answers to match the group's responses.

- **Written survey followed by personal or small group interviews** - This method will get you written responses quickly, while still allowing someone to follow up in the small group interviews. The interviews will have the same pros and cons as those conducted without the initial survey.
- **Written survey (online or paper)** - While this option may be quicker, it often yields more questions than answers. People will often limit their responses or fail to clarify their answers. The advantage is total anonymity, which in theory could produce more accurate results. The best format is asking participants to quantify their answers and providing space for comments on questions that may need longer explanations for you to thoroughly understand what the participant is thinking.
- **Determine what questions you would like answered during interviews.** (See sample surveys below for ideas.) This may take more time than you realize. You want enough questions to give you all the information you need, but not so many that people will not complete the survey. The questions you ask members of your congregation may also differ slightly from questions you ask members of the community who currently have no affiliation with your ministry. While questions in the various sub-groups may vary slightly, the overall surveys should collect similar data.
- **Decide who will conduct any interviews and how the information shared will be recorded.** The best interviewer is someone who is personable and will not try to influence the answers of participants. Often someone perceived as neutral is the best choice. If you use someone participants know, they should have a reputation for being honest, approachable and a good listener. If participants do not respect or trust the interviewer, the answers you receive will be less accurate.
- **Determine what follow-up participants will receive after their interviews.** There is nothing more frustrating than to be asked to share your opinions and ideas and then hearing nothing after the survey or interview is completed. Participants need to feel as if they are heard, even if you decide not to use their suggestions. There are several methods you can use to follow up with participants in your survey.
 - **Thank you note** - This should include an explanation of what you intend to do with the information you gathered.
 - **Summary of total responses** - Often people who participate in a survey, want to know whether or not others agreed with them. Sending the aggregate results can give them that information. It is important to be aware though that if your ministry makes a decision different than one counseled by a majority of survey participants, releasing these results can cause additional problems for your ministry.

- **Information about steps being made to change or develop your ministry as a result of the information gathered.** This information can be shared in a newsletter, on social media or in a format where most participants will see this information.

During the Interview Process

- **Make telling the truth (as they see it) feel safe for those you are interviewing.** Surveys and interviews will not help your ministry if the answers are not totally honest. It is important to make those participating believe that their honesty is wanted and appreciated. They must also believe there will not be negative repercussions if they say something they believe will upset someone involved.
- **Treat those being interviewed with love and respect—even if you are hurt or upset by what they say.** It is hard not to take comments personally when they are directed at your ministry. It is important to remember though, that this honesty can make your ministry stronger and more effective. If you do not know how your ministry needs improving, your ministry will be less effective and you run the risk of alienating those you were hoping to serve.
- **Avoid making defensive comments in reaction to what is shared.** There is a time and place for those discussions. While an interview is happening is not the ideal time to have this conversation. When you critique the responses of participants, it is very likely they will soon edit their comments or stop talking entirely.
- **If you disagree with something that is said, ask follow-up questions to determine what specific things made them believe the statement they made is true.** Once again, during an interview is not the time to correct what you believe are misunderstandings. What you do need to better understand is what happened to make them come to that conclusion. The answers may alert you to communication or other issues your ministry may have.
- **Show appreciation to everyone who shares his or her time with you.** People are busy. They need to feel you appreciate their efforts to share their thoughts with you.
- **Let participants know what will be done with the information you gather.** Once again, this is critical - especially if you plan to conduct additional surveys in the future. Participants usually understand everyone's ideas will not be used, but they need to know how what they shared will be considered.

After Interviews Are Completed

- **Examine all of the information gathered for patterns, clusters, red flags (problems mentioned by only one or two people, but which may still be valid) and other helpful information.** It can be helpful for one person to collect and analyze all of the data and create a report for everyone to review and discuss. This

report should include every suggestion - even if it was only made by one or two people. At times, the best ideas are found in the thoughts of one person.

- **Place each bit of useful information in a Ministry Plan your ministry creates.** It can be helpful to divide the various comments and ideas into four major categories: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. You can then add any additional information your ministry team believes was omitted. This information can then be used to develop goals for your ministry.
- **Adapt goals and action plans as needed.** If you already have ministry goals and action plans, you may need to adapt them based on the information you learned from the surveys and/or interviews.
- **Follow-up with each participant.** It is crucial to let participants know the decisions you made based on the feedback they gave your ministry. Changes that are made quietly will often be missed by participants and they may believe nothing was done with the information given in the surveys and/or interviews.

Sample Questions to Ask Parents Who Attend Your Congregation

1. How many children do you have and what are their ages?
2. What is the average number of times your children attend the following during a typical four week period of time:
 - a. Sunday morning worship service
 - b. Sunday morning Bible class
 - c. Other weeknight Bible classes
 - d. Ministry events for your children's age groups that occur outside of regular class times
3. What do you believe our ministry is doing well?
4. In what areas do you believe our ministry needs improvement? (Note: Those interviewed should be encouraged to give at least one thing they believe needs improvement. If necessary, remind them your ministry really wants to know what needs to improve.)
5. What else could we add that might help strengthen the faith foundations of your children?
6. What can we do to support you in your Christian parenting?
7. What are the three most concerning problems your children are experiencing outside of Church?
8. How well would you say our Bible curriculum helps your children grow in the following areas:
 - a. Bible knowledge
 - b. Knowing how to apply the Bible to their lives
 - c. Christian life skills
 - d. Gift identification, development and use.
 - e. Servant leadership skills.
9. How would you describe your children's relationships with:

- a. Their peers at Church
 - b. Our volunteers
 - c. Our leaders/staff
 - d. Other adults in our congregation
10. If you could change one thing about our ministry, what would it be?
11. Is there anything else we should know?

Sample Questions to the Community

These questions would be appropriate for a ministry wanting to improve their outreach into the community, by focusing on teen's with special needs.

1. Do you currently attend church somewhere regularly?
2. What experiences have you had with Church participation and your child with special needs?
3. What is the age of your child with special needs?
4. What special needs does your child have when attending:
 - a. Bible classes
 - b. Worship services
 - c. Other teen ministry events
5. Does your child require a dedicated aide to help him or her participate in activities?
6. What concerns are you struggling to address in regard to your child with special needs?
7. How could our Church best help teens with special needs?
8. How could our Church best help the families of teens with special needs?
9. If we begin a ministry serving teens with special needs and their families:
 - a. What should it include?
 - b. What should it avoid?
10. What is the best way for us to find and communicate with families who have a teen with special needs?
11. What is one thing you wish more people knew about your child with special needs?
12. What else do we need to know?

Appendix 2 – Creating Ministry Goals

Effective goals normally contain five characteristics. In secular goal setting, these characteristics are:

1. **Specific** - Effective goals should be as specific as possible.
2. **Measurable** - Effective goals usually include some sort of measurable component, often expressed as a specific number with a unit of measurement.
3. **Achievable** - Effective goals record something that is achievable given the resources and parameters of the goal.
4. **Realistic** - Effective goals are realistic considering the resources that are available and the time frame that is given within the goal.
5. **Time Bound** - Effective goals contain a deadline for achieving the goal.

When creating goals for your ministry to teens, focus on goals that are specific and measurable. As Christians, we know God will decide whether they are achievable or realistic and their timing. The goal should contain a deadline, not to question God's timing, but rather to encourage your ministry to review the goal and progress towards it regularly.

Your ministry should have no more than three or four short-term goals at any one time. You may choose to create a much longer long-term goal list and periodically move items from that list to the list of short-term goals. This should generally occur as a short term goal is reached or removed from the list for some other reason.

Example: Instead of "Our students will become Christians," try "Three students will ask to study baptism outside of class and decide to become Christians this semester". In this instance, ministry volunteers would not pressure students to become Christians during the semester. The deadline is a tool to encourage volunteers to meet again at the end of the semester and discuss how well they are encouraging students' interest in becoming a Christian.

Appendix 3 – Common Logical Fallacies in Spiritual Discussions

In discussions about any number of topics, people often resort to using logical fallacies in an attempt to prove their point. These fallacies appear logical on the surface, but are actually based on poor logic. As a result, the arguments often collapse under the questioning of someone aware of logical fallacies.

Teens may be exposed to logical fallacies used by people trying to undermine God as well as Christians trying to convince teens to obey God. It is not necessary for Christians to use logical fallacies as God is Truth. Teaching teens about logical fallacies can help them avoid false teaching, attempts to convince them to deny God and other things that could weaken or destroy their faith.

It is crucial that your ministry volunteers and especially your teachers work to avoid using logical fallacies in their teaching of the Bible to teens. Often a little research or re-wording a few sentences can remove the most common logical fallacies used by Christians and actually make your Bible lesson stronger as a result.

Below are some of the more commonly used logical fallacies. There are many more you can access online if you wish to explore this topic in more depth.

- **Fact, Inference or Opinion.** While technically not a logical fallacy, it can confuse teens in a similar fashion. Authors and speakers may state or imply something as if it were a fact, when it is actually their opinion. Follow up questions can often expose a fact or inference as an opinion. Inferences and opinions can be correct, but it is important to understand whether or not there are actual facts that support or undermine them.
- **Existence on the internet equates to verifiable truth.** While this also falls under other logical fallacies, it is an important dynamic for many young people. They often get much of their information online. They have come to believe if a statement or source is listed on a search engine it is a reliable source of truth. In reality, anything found online must go through the same filters for truth as information obtained from other sources.
- **Correlation equals causation.** This is the assumption that because two things are often found in correlation to one another that one causes the other. This may or may not actually be true and requires further scrutiny to assess causation. Example: Christianity causes mental illnesses. The logical fallacy would assume there is something about Christianity that causes mental illness because a large number of Christians have a self reported mental illness. There could be any number of reasons for the cause of mental illnesses found among Christians.
- **False dilemma.** This assumes that the extremes of an issue are the only options. It is often used to portray Christianity as extremist. Example: The Bible says lying is sinful. The false dilemma would assume that therefore Christians believe everyone

who tells a lie is going to Hell. This is ignoring the possibility of repentance, forgiveness and other Christian beliefs.

- **Argument from authority.** This fallacy quotes an “expert” who may or may not actually know the truth. This could be anything from a secular scientist, to a famous preacher and even taking Bible scriptures out of context. There is also a possibility that what the “expert” said surrounding the quote actually helped to clarify that the speaker believed the exact opposite of the quote.
- **Red herring.** This logical fallacy is usually used by someone in the course of an argument, often when they appear to be losing. It is a statement thrown out to distract the opponent and change the topic of the argument.
- **Loaded question.** This logical fallacy makes use of a question in which any answer will make the person giving the answer look foolish. It is often asked not because the person actually wants an answer to their question, but because they want their opponent to appear in a negative light. For example, if someone asked, “Where exactly is Heaven?”, any answer would be problematic. Attempting to give an exact location would cause scorn, because there is no way to prove you are correct. Likewise, responding “I don’t know” makes it appear there is not a Heaven because you cannot identify its location.
- **Possibility fallacy.** This fallacy argues that because something could possibly happen, it will probably happen. This can be used for example to make people feel threatened by God in some way. God struck Annanias dead for lying, therefore he will probably strike Bob dead if he is lying, too. God may or may not give everyone the same earthly consequences for disobedience.
- **Ad hominem.** In this logical fallacy, a person discounts what is said based on the person rather than analyzing what was actually said. This often takes the form of disparaging the person. Example: “Well of course the Apostles confirmed the resurrection. They had an ulterior motive.”
- **Bandwagon.** This assumes that if the majority of people believe something to be true, then it must indeed be true. The truth may actually rest with the minority.
- **Either-Or.** In this fallacy, a person presents two unacceptable options as if they are the only possible options. In reality, there may be numerous possible options that are better for one or both parties.
- **Argument from ignorance.** This fallacy is used by someone in a discussion when they begin throwing out ideas and “facts” with no actual knowledge of whether those things have been tested or are true.
- **Circular Logic.** This is when someone continually repeats their original belief as the support for its validity. Example. “That is just wrong.” “Why?” “Because it is just wrong to do that.”
- **Dogmatism.** This person will not listen to any views except their own. Nothing the other person says or does will ever change their mind on the topic.
- **Emotional Appeals.** This often occurs when someone trusts their emotions more than any evidence. It can also be used in an attempt to scare the other person into agreeing with them. Example: “God says it is a sin to lie.” “It just does not feel right

for God to get upset because someone lied to spare another person's feelings. Surely, God is okay with those lies."

- **Fallacy of exclusion.** Often this is used by someone who can think of one or two specific examples of the supposed truth of their argument. Those examples, however, may be the exception instead of the rule. Example: "All Christians are hypocrites. I knew this Christian one time, who was a preacher and I caught him lying."
- **Faulty analogy.** This is an attempt to relate two things that may actually have nothing in common. Example: Christianity is the opiate of the masses.
- **Non sequitur.** This is when the conclusion does not follow the premise. Example: If God were good, he would not let bad things happen.
- **Slippery slope.** This logical fallacy is itself a slippery slope. Sometimes starting down a road does quickly lead to more intense consequences. The fallacy is in assuming every choice will lead to rapid, desperate consequences. Example: If we don't have Sunday School on New Year's Day, the next thing you know, we will never have Sunday School.
- **Lack of evidence.** This is when someone claims you cannot be correct in your position, because there is no definitive, irrefutable proof or evidence. This is often used in religion in disagreements that align with, "You can not prove God exists." and "You can not prove God does not exist." In reality, neither side will be able to produce irrefutable evidence until Christ returns.
- **Straw man.** In this fallacy, one person makes a statement so extreme, no one would agree with it in hopes of destroying the other person's argument. Example: Two people are discussing Christianity. One person says, "Hitler was a Christian." As if the fact that Hitler may have been a Christian, therefore undermines Christianity itself.
- **Repetition.** While technically not a logical fallacy, repetition is a common tactic in propaganda. The theory is that if you repeat your message often enough and loudly enough, many people will begin to believe it is true - regardless of the statement's actual validity.
- **Glittering generality.** This is when people use a broadly defined word such as "love" without defining it in an attempt to win an argument. Example: Two people are discussing something God has called a sin in the Bible and whether or not they should speak to a fellow Christian regarding that sin.. "But God wants us to love our neighbors." While that is indeed true, "love" in this person's argument is used very generally. Love in this case may actually be encouraging the person to repent of their sin, not ignoring the sin.
- **Transfer.** This is another technique often used in propaganda. It is portraying someone or something in a particular way in hopes that image will transfer its meaning upon the person or philosophy. It is often employed when portraying Christians in movies and books with actors and characters who appear judgmental, backward and unattractive. The hope is that those introduced to the image will transfer the negative image to all of Christianity and not just that specific example.

- **Snob appeal.** This is an attempt to convince an opponent that everyone that person admires agrees with the speaker's position. It is often most effective with people who are already in an elite circle or are in hopes of becoming part of one in the future. It is a form of peer pressure that focuses on attaining or maintaining a highly desired social status in their culture.

Appendix 4 – List of Christian Life Skills

There are quite a few of God’s commands and godly principles that require a set of skills in addition to a heart seeking to obey God and reflect His image. Often we have not considered teaching them a necessary part of a ministry curriculum because they were taught regularly by many parents in the home. For some students, however, their parents are not teaching them these skills and they need the Church to provide Christian Life Skills training.

Some of these skills are not normally thought of as actual skills. Joy for example, is often a reflection of a person’s heart and outlook on life. There are, however, practical tips, scriptures and other helpful practical things to teach Bible students on these softer skills.

This list is merely a suggestion of topics where Bible students may find practical teaching helpful in addition to standard Bible lessons on the subject.

- Advocating for change in godly ways
- Anger
- Armor of God
- Asking for godly help
- Avoiding sin
- Avoiding mind altering substances like alcohol
- Becoming a Christian
- Becoming a mentor
- Body fit to serve
- Breaking a negative family cycle
- Church structure
- Compassion
- Conflict resolution
- Counting the cost
- Courage
- Creating a spiritual legacy
- Discernment
- Empathy
- Enemies
- Faith and doubts
- Faith and trust
- Family
- Finishing well
- Flexibility
- Focus
- Forgiveness
- Friends
- Fruit of the Spirit
- Gentleness
- Gifts and talents
- Giving
- God and school
- God’s Plans for us
- Godly self-esteem
- Godly wisdom
- Grace
- Gratitude
- Greed/Envy (Avoiding)
- Growing spiritually
- Handling temptation
- Humility
- Integrity
- Joy
- Kindness
- Laws and authority
- Learning from Others
- Leisure time
- Life of evangelism
- Life of service
- Lifelong Bible learner
- Loving God with all of your heart
- Making godly choices

- Marriage
- Mentors/advisors
- Mercy
- Money
- Movies/TV/Music/Games
- Obedience
- Parenting
- Peer pressure
- People skills
- Perseverance
- Positive and negative speech
- Prayer
- Predators/Satan
- Prejudice
- Priorities
- Purity/Dating
- Reaching your godly potential
- Redemption
- Reflection
- Rejection/Failure
- Repentance
- Resilience
- Responsibility
- Revenge
- Righteousness
- Sacrificing
- Seeing God
- Seeing godly opportunities
- Self-control
- Servant leadership
- Serving
- Sin
- Social justice
- Spiritual disciplines
- Staying connected to God
- Staying connected to the Church
- Task initiation
- Time management
- Trustworthiness
- Uniqueness
- Vanity/Selfishness (Avoiding)
- Vision
- When bad things happen
- When life isn't fair
- Work ethic
- Worship

Appendix 5 – Service Project Ideas

There are hundreds of service projects you can do with one or more teens. The opportunities for serving others will vary by location and can be impacted by the resources you have available. Below you can find a brief description of various service projects. For more details on each project, you can go to Teach One Reach One Ministries' website.⁵⁹ (Although these service projects were originally designed as part of our Bible curriculum for children, they are also appropriate for teens.)

- Create infant care packets for families who are struggling
- Create no sew heating pads for the elderly
- Non perishable food collection and distribution
- Create decorative non-slip socks for elderly or the homebound
- Create personal hygiene kits for foster children, orphans, etc.
- Clean a park, stream or other area outdoors
- Bake communion bread
- Collect coats and other cold weather clothing for people who cannot afford them
- Visit a facility for the elderly and sing for them, play games with them, etc.
- Create packets to amuse children who are hospital patients
- Grow food and donate it to those in need
- Collect, clean, repair and donate play equipment, toys and games to an orphanage or other place that serves children
- Create and perform a puppet show explaining a godly principle or command to young children
- Create and deliver small bags of treats to fire fighters, police officers or other community servants
- Design and create decorative items for hair (like bows and barrettes) and donate them to a shelter serving young girls.
- Create small first aid kits for the homeless or other groups that may need them
- Create memory books for senior citizens who are beginning to experience dementia.
- Build and mount birdhouses - especially outside of windows of the homebound
- Create birthday kits for children who might not otherwise have a birthday celebration
- Clean the facility where your church meets
- Collect used Bibles and donate them to people who need them
- Create worship bags to keep small children quiet during worship services
- Host a tea party or meal for widows or another group of people
- Bake bread or cook a meal and deliver to people who need encouragement
- Prepare emergency supply kits for people who have recently experienced a natural disaster

⁵⁹ <http://teachonereachone.org/activity-ideas/>

- Create decorative onesies for infants
- Create and perform a Bible drama for younger children
- Knit or crochet prayer shawls for the ill
- Sew pillowcases or simple clothing for orphans or others who may need them
- Learn sign language
- Create testimony quilts for the homeless
- Sew walker totes for people using walkers or wheelchairs

Appendix 6 – Gifts and Talents Survey for Teens

1. What classes or training have you had that taught you anything that might be considered a skill?
2. When someone gives you a compliment, what are the two or three things for which they most often praise you?
3. What part time or gig jobs have you had in the past?
4. What are your favorite classes in school?
5. What volunteer activities (in any setting) have you enjoyed the most?
6. What are your hobbies?
7. When you read books or articles, what topics are the most interesting to you?
8. What are some things you do well, but do not necessarily consider a talent?
9. If you could learn to do something new, what would it be?
10. What is something you love doing, but believe you do not really do it well?
11. If someone asks you for help or advice, in what areas do they usually need you?

Appendix 7 – List of Possible Teen Gifts and Talents

God can give many talents. Often adolescents may believe they did not receive a gift from God because their gift is one that may be more subtle or unusual than a more obvious gift like art or teaching. The following is a list of some of the gifts a teen may receive from God that can be used in service to Him. Note that even God given gifts and talents will need development (including training) to be fully realized.

Ability to Focus	Imagination
Accounting	Intelligence
Adaptability	Juggling
Athletic Ability	Listening
Audio Visual	Marketing
Automobile Repair	Math
Analyzing	Medicine
Art	Mercy
Asking Questions	Music
Building	Networking
Computer Coding	Organizing
Cooking	Photography
Counseling	Problem Solving
Crafts	Public Speaking
Decorating	Research
Detail Oriented	Risk Management
Drama	Science
Editing	Self Control
Emotional Intelligence	Service
Encouragement	Social Media
Enthusiasm	Stewardship
Faith Sharing	Teaching
Fashion/Clothing	Time Management
Generosity	Typing
Greeting/Outreach	Video Production
Human Resources/Talent Identification in Others	Wood Working
Humor	Writing

Appendix 8 – Teen Mentoring Program Basics

Whether you want to start a mentoring program where adults mentor teens or a peer teen mentoring program, there are some basic principles you need to know.

- **Screen mentors carefully.** Mentoring should be a positive experience. Mentors should not be a danger to the health, well being or faith foundation of the person they are mentoring.
- **Provide training for mentors.** Training should include what is expected of mentors and how to handle situations that may occur while mentoring.
- **Provide guidelines for mentoring.** Guidelines can help keep the mentoring relationship healthy and beneficial.
- **Encourage natural mentoring relationships as much as possible.** Mentors are most helpful when they have expertise in an area of interest to the mentee. Some mentoring relationships will occur without any help from your ministry. Others will need your help in pairing. Try to pair people who will complement one another and who have interests in common.
- **Touch base with mentors and mentees periodically.** Sometimes mentoring relationships struggle. It is not necessarily anyone's fault, but they may hesitate to let you know they are no longer meeting. By touching base periodically, you can help teens find new mentors when a current mentoring relationship is not working well.
- **Send mentors regular encouragement.** You may want to send them helpful articles on mentoring, communication or teen issues in your area. Mentors should also be thanked and encouraged periodically.
- **Be prepared to provide additional resources and support.** At times, mentors may find their mentees are struggling with a serious issue which they are not equipped to handle. They should feel comfortable coming to you for suggestions of how to help their mentees.
- **Seek periodic feedback from mentors, mentees and parents of mentees.** This feedback can help make your mentoring program even more effective by revealing weaknesses of which you had no knowledge.

Appendix 9 – Teaching Teens Godly Conflict Resolution Skills

When teaching teens how to resolve conflicts in godly ways, it can be helpful to teach them a specific model. This model is most effective when all parties in the conflict agree to follow it. It can still be helpful, even if only one party in the conflict is using the model.

1. Take some time alone to calm down.
2. Think about how you feel and why you feel that way.
3. Calmly tell each other how each of you feels, using the following sentences. “I feel ____ when you ____, because _____. I would like _____.”
4. Do not use ugly words when talking to each other.
5. Each person should repeat what the other person wants and needs in their own words.
6. Each person should state their wants and needs again if they believe they were not re-stated correctly.
7. Work together to list as many possible solutions to the problem as you can.
8. Pick the solution that will help everyone get what they need.

Appendix 10 – Quick Start Guide to Faith Sharing

This “Quick Start Guide to Sharing Your Faith” is designed to make it easier for anyone to share his or her faith with others. While some may want or need a more intense Bible study, others only need to understand the basics before they are willing to commit their lives to Christ. The steps below are based on the sermons found in the book of Acts.

1. **Tell the story of Creation and Adam and Eve’s Fall.** Explain the results of sin entering the world. Help them understand how our sins separate us from God.
2. **Briefly explain the Old Testament as a time of preparation for the coming Messiah.** Point out that during this time, animals were sacrificed as an imperfect substitution for the future perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.
3. **Briefly tell the story of the life of Jesus,** focusing on his identity as God’s Son, his fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, his love for all people, his death on the cross for the sins of those who follow him and his resurrection.
4. **Share why you are a Christian.** This may include examples of how following God helps you in life, ways you have seen God working today, and/or how you see evidence of God through His Creation.
5. **Explain the necessity of believing the scriptures** and what they say we need to do to make our lives right with God, repenting of our sins, confessing we believe that Jesus is Lord, and being immersed in baptism for the remission of our sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Appendix 11 – First Steps In Faith Sharing

Current Beliefs	First Step
Atheist/Agnostic/Practices Religion with no specific gods (Buddhism, etc.)	Need to help establish belief in God.
Believes in different god/gods/energy forces (Hinduism, Sikhism, Taoism, etc.)	Need to introduce the one true God of the Bible.
Believes in God/Jesus but has had bad personal experiences and/or has an extremely negative view of God/Christians.	Need to clarify the true characteristics of God and establish Christians are still sinners following the Word of God imperfectly.
Believes in God/Jesus and has expressed an interest in obeying Him. (May have been raised in the Church or be unchurched.)	Can begin studying the Bible/baptism without any preparation first steps.
Believes he/she is already a Christian, but has not followed the Bible's instructions for becoming a Christian.	Need to treat as Aquila and Priscilla treated Apollos. Praise for having attempted to serve and obey God. Establish necessity of doing everything God requires of us to the best of our ability.
Believes in the Bible and/or additional "Holy Books" (Mormonism, Scientology, Islam, some Catholics and other Christian sects)	Need to establish Bible as primary source for knowledge of what God wants us to do. Additional books must be set aside as uninspired to be truly successful in any further Bible study.
Wants to convert you to a different religion or sect of Christianity or seems to want to debate for the sake of debating.	Should assume they fall into one of the other categories at first. If the person insists on merely debating and not listening with an open mind after studying, you may need to take a break.

Appendix 12 – The Basics of Faith Sharing

- **Take advantage of any opportunity someone gives you to share your faith—even if it is just answering a question.** Often people have a small window of time when they are interested. If you allow the opportunity to pass without sharing something about God, the person may not give you or anyone else another opportunity.
- **Realize you do not have to know all of the answers.** You should be comfortable sharing the basics and answering simple questions. For more complex questions, it is legitimate to respond, “That is a great question. Can you give me time to do a little research and I will get back to you (specific day) with an answer?”.
- **Be prepared to share your faith.** Faith sharing is often a team effort. Sometimes though, circumstances will make you the best or even the only person who can share their faith with the seeker – at least at that time.
- **When someone expresses an interest in learning more about God or becoming a Christian, begin by asking some respectful questions.** (If the person has asked you a question about God or some other related topic, answer their question first before asking your own questions.) You need to determine what their current beliefs are about God. Good possible questions are “Can you tell me a little about your faith journey so far?” “Can you share with me a little about what you already know about God/becoming a Christian?” “Can you tell me about your experiences with church and God?”
- **Once they have shared their current beliefs, determine what first steps may be needed before the person is ready to study a typical study on baptism.** (*See First Steps in Faith Sharing handout for possible options.*) •
- **Complete any necessary first steps before beginning a study on baptism.** Note: This process may take anywhere from a few minutes to a few years.
- **Share your faith/study baptism with the person who has expressed an interest.** You can use the free baptism study with leader guide found on the Teach One Reach One website⁶⁰ or create your own.
- **Continue to study with the person after they are baptized.** New Christians need to continue to study the Bible. They will need your help understanding topics like church structure, their role in the church and how to live a Christian life.

Basic Bible Study Plan

A basic Bible study with someone who has expressed an interest in becoming a Christian should include:

- **Teach them some basic Bible history.** Include the story of God’s perfect Creation and the Garden of Eden.

⁶⁰ <http://teachonereachone.org/baptism-study/>

- **Teach them about Adam and Eve, the first sins and The Fall.** Make sure they understand the implications of The Fall for all of mankind.
- **Talk about the Law of Moses,** especially the need for sacrifices and how they were imperfect (even though the animals sacrificed were supposed to be perfect.)
- **Show them some of the many prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament and how Jesus fulfilled them.** Share with them the story of Jesus.
- **Help them understand sin and its consequences.** This will review some of the information you covered in your basic Bible history. First, make sure the person understands the differences between sins and mistakes. Make sure they understand sins are disobeying God's Laws.
- **Explain the age of accountability** and how the Bible and early Christian history confirm committing one's life to Christ in baptism was always an informed decision by a person old enough to understand what they were doing.
- **Read scriptures about the consequences of remaining in sin** and how baptism removes our sins and cleanses us.
- **Teach them how to actually become a Christian.** Read some of the conversion stories in Acts. The "Five Steps" are an organizational tool to help them see the path they are on and where they might be on that path. Talk about whether or not they have or are ready to hear, believe, repent, confess and be baptized for the remission of their sins.
- **Share personal stories of how God has touched/changed/blessed your life.** These personal stories can be shared at any time during the process of sharing your faith when they seem appropriate. Telling someone specific examples from your own life will help them see how God might change their lives.

Addressing Concerns

Be prepared to address concerns. It is extremely common for the person studying with you to express doubts and concerns right before they make the decision to become a Christian. Do not let this discourage you. Most of the time the concerns are similar to these:

- **What about Grandma?** This is a concern that becoming a Christian or being scripturally baptized is somehow condemning dead and very loved relatives to Hell. Reassure the person that doing what God requires of them does not change anything for the person they loved who is gone. It is important for them to obey God not only for themselves, but so they can share the news with others they love who are still living.
- **Do I have to get my hair wet?** This person expresses all sorts of concerns about the physical process of baptism. It can be anything from their hair getting wet to the water being cold to a fear of drowning. Talk to them about every step of what will happen during the actual baptism. Take them step-by-step through the entire process. Usually, some basic reassurance and praying with them for courage and peace will calm these fears.

- **What if I cannot keep my promise to God?** This is a common doubt people are often afraid to express. They understand the enormous importance of the commitment they are about to make to God. Usually, a discussion of what happens when we sin after becoming a Christian (and that it is expected) will ease this fear.
- **What if I want to “have fun” first?** This person has gotten the mistaken impression that the Christian life is dull and boring. Share with them all of the fun, joy and godly adventures one can have as a Christian. Remind them of the negative earthly consequences of their “fun” behavior. (Note: It is tempting to remind people they could die in their sin if they wait. Be very careful when using fear as a motivator. Repentance means they are willing to turn from the sins they once committed, not that they are frightened temporarily into saying they will repent.)
- **What is the gift of the Holy Spirit and will it be weird?** A young person or someone who has only seen horror movies or heard about people doing strange things in the name of God usually expresses this concern. Reassure them by showing them scriptures about the Holy Spirit and sharing your personal experience with the Holy Spirit. Talk about how you felt immediately following your own baptism.

Please note that these are merely general guidelines to help you as you share your faith with others. Every person is different and you may need to adjust this list to meet their needs. Pray throughout the process for the Holy Spirit to give you the words you need to say and that God is with you as you study the Bible with others.

Try to remember you are a seed planter or perhaps one who waters seeds others have planted earlier. Not every person with whom you share your faith will decide to become a Christian. Remember "God gives the increase"⁶¹ and may be using you to plant or water seeds of faith in someone. Both are equally important to help others find and follow God's Plan for their lives. May God bless you as you share your faith!

⁶¹ 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.

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