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Experimenting with Jesus

By: Titus Benton

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Say it however you want—most middle schoolers are just experimenting with Jesus. We can call it experience driving the train of belief; we can call it belonging before believing—we can come up with numerous ways to describe it. The bottom line is, most middle schoolers have not arrived at many conclusions about God, the Bible, their own calling, etc. They are searching, discovering, re-discovering and test-driving.

This should come as no surprise to an astute early-adolescent observer. These same students are experimenting with *everything*—groups of friends, taste in music, the design of their Facebook page, sports, hobbies and clubs. They drift and wander, sticking temporarily to one thing before moving on to another. Sometimes this movement is like a pinball, as they dart from interest to interest. Other times it's slower, spanning their entire middle school experience. They're not particularly disloyal or two faced. They are not hypocrites.

They are just experimenting.

Not too long ago, the middle school group I work with took a group of students to Believe, a weekend Junior High conference. The methodology of this event is simple: see it; experience it; believe it. It is a wonderful event every year, but I've been to about 1.2 million youth events, so they all kind of blend together after a while.

Nevertheless, it struck me in a fresh way this year that the process these students were going through (in about a 24-hour period) was a process of experimentation. Nobody *decided* anything that weekend. No one "came forward." But out of the several dozen students we had along, every

single one of them *considered* Jesus. They *tried* worshiping him. They *experimented* with what it would be like to give themselves wholly to God. I suspect that in the months that follow, when a student surrenders to Christ, some of them will remember that weekend.

This act of experimentation struck me profoundly during one of the sessions. The preacher was preaching in the usual junior-high-friendly manner. He told a couple of stories, bordered on some bathroom humor, had the crowd's attention, told a story about Jesus and challenged the crowd with what it meant to live for the Messiah.

All during this time (which couldn't have been more than 20 minutes—how come when I was in middle school, all *my* preachers went longer than 20 minutes?), I was seated behind two of our kids: Brett, who is a good kid with floppy hair, cool clothes and a messed-up family life—typical for our group; and Cynthia, who is also a good kid but not a follower of Jesus yet. They both come around a lot. They're both in small groups. And apparently, they like each other.

I watched as—slowly—they tested the waters of holding hands. Each had their forearms nestled on the armrest. On a crowded airplane, armrests are fought over. When you're in middle school, the shared armrest is sort of like first base. Over the span of the preacher's sermon, this activity went from shared armrest, to finger interlocking, to full-fledged hand holding and back again. It was awkward, and, despite how I feel about PDA among our students, I chuckled at it and didn't make a scene to bring it to an end.

Eventually the sermon ended, and it was time to worship. Brett and Cynthia were on their feet. The band was rocking. All over the arena, hands were raised high in celebration. Much to my astonishment, I watched as Cynthia the non-Christian and floppy-haired Brett slowly raised their hands. Just like when they were holding hands, they were asking some questions:

How does this make me feel?

How does this make me relate to the other person (or God)?

Does this make us closer?

What meaning does this have? How does this help to define our relationship?

Two different experiences—holding hands with a dude and raising her hands in worship to God—achieved the same end result for Cynthia. Two different experiments tested the same theory of companionship for Brett, albeit with drastically different entities.

To my amusement (and to their credit), they discovered a hybrid expression: holding hands while lifting them high in worship. The best of both worlds! It set off a chain reaction down the aisle and soon our whole group was holding hands with one another and singing to God.

They were experimenting. That's what they do. They're in middle school.

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Middle school ministry can be frustrating. From close up, our students look like spastic, hypocritical, mindless animals (insert junior high joke here). But step back. Recognize that they should not—they must not—be held to the same standard as their parents when it comes to living out their faith. As they bounce from one peer group to another, as they alternately embrace God and question him, as they appear mature two seconds before making the biggest mistake of their young lives, stop long enough to recognize what is *really* going on here.

The church is not the variable in the experiment; rather, it is the laboratory in which the experiment is taking place. We serve our students well by providing a safe place for them to question and prod, experiment and discover, belong and believe. Allow your students to seek and knock, even if after they do, they abruptly move on to the next door. Understand that this is the natural order of things. They are not hypocrites; they are just curious. Experimenting is what they do in every phase of life, so their faith is not going to be any different. Forcing them into a hasty decision will not only stunt their spiritual growth but will eventually lead them to a point where they aren't certain why they reached that conclusion in the first place.