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How Young Is too Young?

By: Titus Benton

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Most people know that if kids are going to spend their lives following Jesus, they make that commitment before they exit high school. But according to most studies, the vast majority of people who decide to be Christians do so before they leave middle school. Quite a statement, considering the line of work we're in. If you graduate a kid out of middle school, and she has not yet bowed her knee to Christ, the likelihood of her ever doing so decreases dramatically. And that's with kids *in* your ministry. What about the hundreds of adolescents who never darken the doors of a church or hear the gospel? It's scary, when you think about it.

The statistics vary slightly, but the message of each study is the same. According to the Nazarene church growth research, 86% of people who become Christians do so before their 14th birthdays.¹ George Barna's group gives the sub-13 group a less chunky piece of the pie, but it still stands at almost half.² And even then, the proportion of people who make commitments before they are 18 is above two-thirds.

Again, this comes as no shock to those who have worked with students, study youth culture, or grew up in church. More often than not, when someone is standing up front sharing their confession of faith for the first time, their hair is not gray. The question is not whether or not this is common, the question is whether or not it is appropriate.

In the same study cited above, George Barna makes a correlation between the age at which someone accepts Christ and their faith later in life.

"Families, churches and parachurch ministries must recognize that primary window of opportunity for effectively reaching people with the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection is during the pre-teen years. It is during those years that people develop their frames of reference for the remainder of their life - especially theologically and morally. Consistently explaining and modeling truth principles for young people is the most critical factor in their spiritual development."

I'm encouraged when I hear that quote, but then anecdotal evidence comes flooding back to me. Perhaps it will for you, too.

Consider the story of Emily³ who approached me when she was a high school student at a conference. "I got baptized when I was younger, but I don't think I really knew what it meant. I am thinking about getting re-baptized. What do you think?"

Or what about the kids who "get saved" because all their friends do, because their parents bug them about it, because they feel guilty that they cheated on a test or because they want to have snack...er, I mean, communion, during the church service? I've heard all those reasons, and none of them sit particularly well with me. At the same time, I can tell you of five- and six-year-olds who accepted Christ as their Lord and Savior, were baptized in water and have been walking with Jesus ever since, into young adulthood.

What are we to make of the progressively younger point of decision that we see in today's church? How should we counsel young seekers who are contemplating a decision? How can we walk with them after the decision to make sure they understand that new realizations about faith don't cancel the sincerity of the faith before it? Should we be harvesting preteens like crazy or be patient in our approach as they seek God?

Things have not always been this way. It used to be that adults were the ones being converted. We don't see a lot of kids being baptized in early church history. As recently as the early Reformation period, the average age of those baptized (in the Anabaptist tradition, at least) was the mid-30s.⁴ Though data varies, other Protestant traditions reveal similar statistics. The reality is that the age of decision making *is* getting younger. I'm not sure whether that is good or bad. But here's what we're doing about it in our context.

We're seizing the opportunity. We are teaching on baptism, surrender, Lordship, salvation and the gifts of God in our middle school worship services. We're going to point those students to an opportunity to turn their lives over to God. We're going to host a special baptism service so the community can celebrate that together. I'm not sure how it will turn out, but I'm looking forward to what God might do.

We're counseling with no holds barred. If you tell a 10-year-old that if he confesses his sins and goes for a holy swim, he can have all the bad stuff he's ever done, thought or said wiped off his plate, he's going to do a cannonball into the water. I counsel more about Lordship than I do Saviorship. If you're on a sinking boat, everyone is game for a life raft. But what about submitting your life to the person with the paddle as a thank you for the salvific act? I'm unapologetic about it too. That way, when they come to me at fifteen, saying, "I didn't know what I was doing back then," I can say truthfully, "Yes, you did."

We're following up like crazy. We're going to start a "What Now?" class. This is not a new concept, but we want to make sure the newly committed don't get lost in their new pursuits. We want to train them to trust the church, grow in their disciplines and walk the narrow road. We're also going to communicate with parents, to let them know what we're teaching, why we're teaching it and that the door is always open.

In the end, we're in the discipleship business, and sometimes discipleship happens *before* conversion. For kids who grow up in a church, in particular, they are getting evangelized at home, at youth group, in big church and at a bunch of points in between. When they finally ask, "Am I ready to give my life to Jesus?" chances are they've been wondering it for a long time. We need to make sure they aren't in it for the snack, the party, the affirmation of man or any other insufficient reason. But to walk with them through that dialogue is what makes us who we are—shepherds, pastors, mentors and friends.

May God bless you as you struggle with process, guidelines and infrastructure—but may those things never replace the Spirit of God in our midst, calling people to himself. No matter how old they are.

¹ <http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/ages.htm>

² <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/5-barna-update/196-evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids?q=conversion+age>

³ This is in no way a real name. Not that you'd know the girl I'm talking about. But when you get a chance to use a fake name, you just do it. Thanks for understanding.

⁴ <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B369ME.html>