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Indoctrinated or Educated?

Thoughts on teaching Senior High Students

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Today church leaders have been bewildered about how detached high school graduates are from the local church.

What's the causing this detachment?

You and me.

I'm convinced we're a major part of the problem.

From my perspective there are many contributing factors to this epidemic of detachment, but here's one that relates to all of us: How do we define educated?

Educating Kids

We know the information we want to offer. We stand firm on our beliefs and seek to invest in kids, hoping they'll embrace truth as we have. We desire to give our kids an accurate picture of God and Christ-like living. We want them to understand a life of faith, please God in all of their pursuits, and live with authenticity regarding who they say they are as Christians.

Sound about right?

Okay, so...

How do you define "educated"?

How would you define an educated high school senior?

I've noticed that most of the time adults teach adult faith concepts to young kids, they believe they're educating them. We talk about pursuing "a relationship with God"—which is at the core of Christian belief—but have six-year-olds ever consciously and intentionally pursued relationships with anyone? How will they do that with God, an abstract being?

Ask yourself...

- *Is it possible that our students are hearing things other than what we're trying to say?*

- *If so, what's their perception, and how does it affect their view of Christianity and the church?*

Information Versus Education

We have to understand the potentially negative effect of just disseminating information. We often believe that a way to help kids keep their faith when they go away to college is to just give them more information. However, reducing detachment after high school is not so much about giving more information as it is about helping teenagers embrace the knowledge they already have. Piling on more information in bible studies doesn't necessarily educate kids.

Ask yourself...

- *Do I spend more time giving information and putting on programs than I do helping students embrace the information they already have?*

If we answer "yes" to this question, we're not truly educating our kids. We're simply disseminating information and, I believe, contributing to the detachment problem.

Battling University Philosophy

Many college students who've grown up in church aren't excited about the prospect of church now that they're away from home—especially when they're presented one-sided, overly simplistic information. They already feel as though they've heard it all, processed through it all, and want to explore other faith possibilities—or none at all.

Here's the problem: They've been given some information from a Christian perspective—making them feel as though they're "educated"—but they've never really thought through the implications of that information. More importantly, they haven't been forced to think through these concepts outside of the Christian tradition. Consequently they go to college and are significantly challenged.

College professors intentionally expose grey areas, so college is often the first place our kids are forced to think through faith at this level.

Ask yourself...

- *Do I teach solely from a Christian perspective, or do I expose my kids to opposing philosophies and then walk through with them the reasons why a biblical view makes sense?*

Telling our kids about only one spiritual perspective doesn't necessarily mean we've educated our kids; it just means we gave them biased, often overly simplistic information.

Information Minus Thought = Detachment

The educational philosophy embraced in most churches doesn't prepare kids for the intellectual challenges they'll face in college. Plus, most churches don't embrace college students with age-appropriate ministries. This is the time of life when they naturally reevaluate all the assumptions they grew up with. And we lose our kids when we leave it to college professors to guide their thought processes.

When we spoon feed morality to our students, we do them a great disservice. From a college student's perspective, this philosophy of education is trite, unauthentic, and overly simplistic. On the contrary, when they're forced to think about and evaluate important topics in new and exciting ways in classrooms versus our homes and churches, we lose. Every time.

Ask yourself...

- *Once your students graduate from high school, who's shepherding them as they reevaluate every assumption they grew up with?*
- *Should we be the ones causing reevaluation—or should we leave this up to college professors? Why or why not?*
- *Are we teaching our kids morality? Or ideas that are faith stimulating?*
- *Are we challenging thought or just repeating the information provided in Christian books without ever going deeper?*

Questions for Evaluation

There are so many questions we should be asking ourselves for the sake of evaluating our effectiveness—or lack thereof. Here are a few more questions vital for student ministry leaders to ask themselves:

1. Do we welcome and discuss questions, thoughts, and doubts, or do we tend to shut down questions with overly simplistic information?
2. Do our kids feel free to tell us about their questions and doubts? If not, how do we encourage this?

Some Practical Steps

Answering all these questions can take years. If we don't take seriously the prospect of answering these questions, our ignorance will inevitably show itself in the continued and worsening detachment of high school graduates.

So here are some practical steps we can take:

1. Clearly define what it means to educate kids—and beyond giving information.
2. Unveil and be honest about different philosophies of education in your church.
3. Have biweekly meetings with your staff you discuss questions like the ones in this article.
4. List characteristics of an educated high school senior and then structure your ministry around building those characteristics into your students.
5. Figure out a way to walk alongside college students.
6. Share some questions or even doubts you have with students. When our kids see us being honest about these things and yet firmly holding to the truth of Scripture, we're (and they're) heading down the right path.