

Christ alone ... Redeeming Youth Ministry

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In this article a fresh approach is proposed pertaining the contents and focus of the biblical message being taught in Youth Ministry: a Christocentric message in effective Youth Ministry is proposed as foundation to build on considering the *Sola Scriptura* approach. This is done to address one of the contributing factors to the current crisis in Youth Ministry, namely the use of behavioural modification techniques to transform the youth instead of spiritual transformation. The crisis in Youth Ministry can be described as not being effective in leading young people into mature Christian adulthood. Only through believing the Christocentric message of grace and allowing the sanctification of Holy Spirit in one's life genuine spiritual transformation will take place. This article took a stance against behavioural modification techniques or preaching the Law, which may produce outward moralisation without the inward genuine transformation by Holy Spirit. Instead, it proposed four facets of a Christocentric message to be focused on in effective Youth Ministry: firstly, the grace of God as gift, secondly, the Christian's status in Christ, thirdly, the message of the Kingdom of God, and lastly, the importance of cultivating a personal relationship with God.

Alleenlik Christus ... Die herstel van Jeugbediening. In hierdie artikel word 'n vars benadering aangaande die inhoud en fokus van die Bybelse boodskap wat in Jeugbediening oorgedra word, voorgestel. 'n Christosentriese boodskap, gebou op 'n *Sola Scriptura*-benadering, moet as fondament in effektiewe Jeugbediening dien. Dit word gedoen om die aandag op een van die bydraende faktore tot die huidige krisis in Jeugbediening te vestig, naamlik dat gedragsveranderingstegnieke gebruik word om te poog om geestelike groei by die jeug te bevorder. Só word jongmense egter nie tot geestelike volwassenheid gelei nie. Geestelike transformasie kan slegs plaasvind deur geloof in die Christosentriese boodskap van genade en die werking van Heilige Gees in 'n mens se lewe. Hierdie artikel neem standpunt in teen die moralisasie van jongmense deur gedragsveranderingstegnieke of die verkondiging van die Wet sonder die transformerende werk van die Gees van God. Vier fasette van 'n Christosentriese boodskap om in effektiewe Jeugbediening op te fokus, word voorgestel: eerstens, die genade van God as geskenk, tweedens, die Christen se status in Christus, derdens, die boodskap van die Koninkryk van God, en laastens, die belangrikheid daarvan om aan 'n persoonlike verhouding met God te bou.

Introduction

The article focuses on the problem of the use of behavioural modification techniques in order to try and change the youth's behaviour, instead of genuine spiritual transformation that needs to take place (cf. Barna 2000; King 2006:11; cf. Anderson 2007:173; Prince 2009:157). In the delimitation of this article, it is imperative to note that a fresh approach is proposed pertaining the focus and contents of the biblical message being taught in Youth Ministry. This new course moves into uncharted territory as it proposes a 'Christ alone' content.

This article is written from a practical theological point of departure, using Osmer's model as research guideline. Karl Barth's theory-practice approach is embraced, whilst staying true to the *Sola Scriptura* principle of the reformation theology (cf. North-West University 2014:1).

Traditional Youth Ministry goes through a crisis as it barely leads any youth into mature Christian adulthood. This has been proven by numerous empirical data (Barna 2000; cf. Nel 2001:3; DeVries 2004:21; Shafer 2008:6; Smith & Snell 2009:259; Dean 2010:3, 24). This predicament clearly answers Osmer's descriptive question: 'What is going on?' (Osmer 2008:4; 2009:7). The aim of every ministry should be to lead people into mature Christian adulthood – making disciples of Christ (cf. Mt 28:19). This aim answers the normative question of Osmer: 'What ought to be going on?' (Osmer 2008:4; 2009:7).

The second question that Osmer poses is the interpretive question: 'Why is this going on?' This has a multi-dimensional answer. As was stated in the beginning, this article focuses on one of

these causes, namely the use of behavioural modification techniques in Youth Ministry instead of focusing on the Christocentric message in order to work transformation. Behavioural modification techniques include teaching and preaching, which focuses on moral performance (doing the right things to *look* like a good Christian) instead of focusing on a Christocentric message, which is that Christ has fully paid the price to put man in right standing with him. Behavioural modification techniques include legalistic preaching, the proclaiming of rules and laws of do's and don'ts, and preaching and keeping the Ten Commandments. Furthermore, it includes focusing on the cultivation of the right Christian lifestyle (e.g. wearing WWJD) bracelets, singing the right chants, etc.), whilst neglecting the Gospel of free grace, which is what Youth Ministry should mainly be about (cf. Cole 2012; Anderson 2007:173; Prince 2009:157). More recently, Barrick (2012) confirmed this notion in *The Christian Post* when she stated: 'Ministry leaders are seeing a major problem among youth groups – an emphasis on behavior modification over the Gospel.' Cole agrees (2012) when she makes the following statement:

Based on my experience in youth ministry, if I had to identify the greatest theological problem in the field, it would be the absence of the gospel in teaching on sanctification.

She (Cole 2012) continues to say that youth ministries often focus on emotional exhortation and moral performance, and that a legalistic tone frequently characterises the theology of sanctification in Youth Ministry. These are thus used to portray Christian teens on the *outside*, but in effect their hearts are far from God (cf. Is 29:13). Perhaps the main reason for preaching a law-driven message instead of the Gospel in youth meetings is that youth leaders want to protect students from self-destruction. Although this is done with good intentions, law-driven ministry unfortunately often yields the opposite fruit of its intention – inflaming rebellion rather than producing fruit characteristic of a godly life (cf. Cole 2012).

Perhaps the best way to describe the outflow from a Youth Ministry driven by behavioural modification techniques are (prophetically) found in the words of C.S. Lewis (quoted by Cole 2012) that have been spoken many decades ago:

Guilty people do not act better; forgiven people do. Legalism says God will love us if we are good, while the Gospel tells us God will make us good because He loves us.

In this quote the result of a Youth Ministry saturated with the Gospel as focus point is also highlighted, as Holy Spirit will work sanctification in the hearts of men to do the good works God has prepared for them (Cole 2012; cf. Ezk 36:26–27).

Thus, focusing on bringing the grace message of the Gospel to the youth – with them embracing it – will lead to transformation of *inter alia* the behaviour of the youth through the work of Holy Spirit.

This may lead to the answer of Osmer's pragmatic question: 'How might we respond?' (Osmer 2008:4; 2009:7). Reading,

meditating and teaching the Gospel to the youth is how we should respond. Not only messages in youth meetings, but also messages in Sunday School and Catechism should focus on Christ and what he did instead of the Ten Commandments or on highlighting moral performance. Holy Spirit will miraculously work sanctification in the hearts of the youth, and will continue to do so if the youth are continuously reminded and taught the free message of the Gospel. There are, however, no practical theoretical perspectives of how Holy Spirit works sanctification in the hearts of people – it is a mystery of God.

Traditional Youth Ministry

The crisis in traditional Youth Ministry is not about failing to get the youth to come to Youth Ministry activities. The failure lies in the fact that the ways in which Youth Ministry is done, has not been effective in leading young people into mature Christian adulthood (Barna 2000; cf. Nel 2001:3; DeVries 2004:21; Shafer 2008:6; Smith & Snell 2009:259; Dean 2010:3, 24; Fleming & Cannister 2010:55). It is evident from the research that there are various contributing factors to the current crisis in Youth Ministry.

Furthermore, Prince (2009:157) remarks that young people need a revelation of Jesus' love for them. He continues to argue that it is impossible for young people not to think that Christianity is just another religion full of rules, laws and regulations on what they should and should not do, as the Ten Commandments is often the only thing youths in general know about Christianity (cf. Cole 2012). Prince states that the youth have no idea that Christianity is actually an intimate relationship with a loving God (Prince 2009:158). King (2006:11) argues that genuine spiritual transformation is what is needed in today's Youth Ministry, instead of behavioural modification techniques (cf. Foster 1998:4, 6; Barna 2000; Fleming & Cannister 2010:62). King (2006:11) says: 'Youth ministry must move away from behavioral modification techniques and focus on creating environments for genuine spiritual transformation. We must guide young people into the presence of God' (cf. Nel 2005:20). King (2006:20, 183–185) continues to indicate that presence-centred Youth Ministry is not only about knowing *about* Jesus (i.e. knowing theology), but it is about having a personal love relationship with him – the Living Word (cf. Jn 17:3). Nel (2005) summarises it as follows:

It is calling them [the youth] to realize they cannot live life without and outside of a relationship with the God who created them to live and have life in abundance. (p. 20)

Anderson (2007:173) is outspoken about people who try to moralise others without the transforming working power of Holy Spirit and proclaiming the work that Christ has already done, when he says: 'Moral imperatives without spiritual empowerment only cripple and condemn. To moralize under the guise of Christian ministry is itself a form of spiritual abuse.'

The message of effective Youth Ministry should be Christocentric, focusing on a personal relationship with Christ as well as on what Christ did for humankind and who Christians therefore are in him. If the church is satisfied with huge numbers of youth coming to Youth Ministry events, but in the long run hardly any of them grow into spiritual mature adults, Youth Ministry is missing the mark.

This change in approach to Youth Ministry should, according to King (2006:11), begin with youth workers who should have a personal relationship with Christ who is the Lord of their life (cf. Fleming & Cannister 2010:64; Cole 2012). As Cordeiro (2011:48) emphasises the example of a youth leader: 'A mind will reach a mind, but only a heart will reach a heart.' *Beholding God* should always be our context (Sweney 2011:37–38). Youth Ministry cannot be reduced to capturing or keeping young people in youth gatherings – it should definitely be about more than just that (Dean 2004:2). It is not surprising then that the main cause for decline in church attention membership for the last decade can be ascribed to 'our inability to translate our faith to our children' (DeVries 2004:26; cf. Dean 2010:3).

Christocentric message: Foundation of effective Youth Ministry

In order to erect a new building, a foundation is needed – a cornerstone needs to be laid. The verse 'Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church' (Eph 2:2) inevitably jumps to mind. In 1 Corinthians 3:11, Paul says that Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church. In the same way, the foundation of Youth Ministry can be no one else but Jesus Christ, as Youth Ministry is part of the greater church. Anderson (2006:29) writes that Christ is both the historical cornerstone of the original apostles as well as the contemporary 'living cornerstone' of the church. Thus, the message of effective Youth Ministry in its essence should be nothing else but Christocentric (cf. King 2006:151–152; Seamands 2012:11). Only then will the framework of effective Youth Ministry stand the test of time, as Christ is a precious cornerstone who forms the foundation on which the ministry is safely built (cf. Is 28:16; 1 Pt 2:4–10; 1 Cor 3:11). Without a Christocentric message, Youth Ministry will surely fail. As Abraham Lincoln (1861) prayed in his farewell speech as he departed from Springfield, Illinois, to go to Washington to become president of the United States: 'Unless the great God [...] who will be with me and aid me, I must fail' (cf. Cordeiro 2011:28).

The message of effective Youth Ministry

The message of effective Youth Ministry should flow from an intimate, personal love relationship with the Triune God, *overflowing* in teaching the youth to meditate on a Christocentric message *empowered* by Holy Spirit to work transformation in the hearts of youth.

The above statement is shortly discussed:

- In practice (i.e. where God's previous working meets man's present response) man must pursue God. The Psalmist puts it in the warm language of personal feeling, when he says in Psalm 42:1–2: 'As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.' The word soul (Hebrew: *nephesh*) used here, includes the body, the mind and the spirit of man – as in Hebrew thought soul and body cannot be separated from each other (cf. Farmer 1998:827). God desires a personal love relationship with his children, wanting them to yearn for him with their whole being. It is the heartbeat of the message of the New Testament that we will intimately know him (Jn 17:3; Ritenbaugh 1992; cf. Schultz 1996; Anderson 2004:8; Prince 2009:158; Tozer 2011:11). Nel (2005) explains:

Youth ministry as a discipline within Practical Theology (at least in many parts of the world) is in a sense nothing but a ministry where we attempt to get the conversation going again: listening to the one and only unique God in Christ and talking to Him, calling Him Father. (p. 13)

Youth should be taught to cultivate a personal loving relationship with God. Bible studies on how to cultivate a personal loving relationship with God and testimonies by the youth leader from his or her personal relationship with God, could work effectively in this case.

- The message of effective Youth Ministry is very important. The content of the message should always be Christocentric (cf. Anderson 1997:25; Horton 2013).
- The Christocentric message should be preached in the power of Holy Spirit in every instance, also in Youth Ministry. God's ministry comes alive in the praxis of Spirit – firstly through Christ's ministry and then through those who are empowered by Holy Spirit (Anderson 1997:25–26).

Practical theology is not a neutral knowledge of God, but it is *firstly* a personal knowing of God, conducted by reflecting on God's ministry (Jesus Christ, the *Missio Dei* of God), and *secondly* it is concerned with the action of the church, which arises out of our sharing in the practice of God (Purves 2004:xviii, xxvi; Root & Dean 2011:40). Nel (2001:5) indicates that practical theology generally asserts that the gospel is primarily about the Kingdom of God (the grace message of God's self-revelation and dynamic reign) that has come and is yet to come (cf. Stassen & Gushee 2003:24–26).

It is not the actions of the church that make theology practical. It is God by virtue of what he does that makes theology practical (cf. Purves 2004:xxv–xxvi, 3, 8–9; Anderson 2004:8). Purves (2004:152) writes that pastoral ministry should be converted from pragmatism to an approach of sharing in the work or ministry of God in, through and as Jesus Christ (cf. Col 3:3). The 'ministry' of effective Youth Ministry should be all about connecting with God and having a *God-actualised* approach to ministry, rather than a *self-actualised* approach (cf. Purves 2004:152).

Root and Dean (2011) make a bold and absolutely true statement when they write:

Our own ministries in the world, then, are only truly ministries if they are connected to God's continued Ministry, and theology is only constructive (and helpful) if it is done in the context of God's continued Ministry in the world. (p. 40)

Message: Christocentric

Pastoral theology has but one subject, Jesus Christ. No content other than 'the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints' (Jude 3; cf. Purves 2004:3; Horton 2013). The 'ministry' of Youth Ministry may then be viewed as our connection to the ministry of God (through and as Jesus Christ) to the youth. As Purves (2004:154) puts it: 'Pastoral care has no other content or legitimization than Jesus Christ.'

Christocentric ministry to the youth

In order to answer Osmer's pragmatic question ('How might we respond?'), Christocentric ministry to the youth will be discussed, focusing on:

- Teaching the youth about God's grace as a gift.
- Teaching the youth about Christians' status in Christ.
- Immersing the youth in the message of the Kingdom of God.
- Leading the youth to cultivate a personal relationship with God.

Grace of God as gift

In the Old Testament times, after the Law was given (Ex 20), the Israelites had to obey the Law and bring sacrifices to God. Although God had a covenant relationship with them since Abraham, after the Law was given, sin came into play and the covenant rule changed as sin had to be punished. Thereafter it was: 'If you do, I will' (Ex 24:8; Rm 4:15; Heb 9:20, 22; cf. 8:7; Prince 2009:93). As Langston (2006) puts it:

Within the Hebrew Bible its [the Law] prominence, and especially that of the Ten Commandments, is demonstrated by the consistent judging of Israel on the basis of its adherence to the Law. (p. 186)

The Israelites were under the curse of the Law and their sin needed atonement. It is impossible to get atonement through blood sacrifices and keeping the Law (Dt 28; Ezk 16:27, 38–40; Heb 9:9–10; 10:3–4).

According to the New Testament, God sent Christ to fulfil the Law himself and he became the perfect sacrifice (payment) for all sin, *once and for all* (Heb 10:10–18; cf. 1 Jn 2:2). Lane (1991:265) explains that which have been set aside in this text are the repeated sacrifices and the Law prescribed to them. That which have been confirmed as valid are the structural link between the will of God and the effective sacrifice of Christ. The old order has been absolutely abolished and replaced with the new order of relationship, which is a radically new situation for the community of God's people. The youth need to be taught who they are *in* Christ, that he already dealt with all sin and that they are now in right

standing with him. All they need to do is to accept the gift. Christ became the curse on the cross in order to set people free. He paid the full price for all sin in order to make humankind holy and put them in right standing with God *forever* (cf. Col 1:22; 2:13; Nel 2005:20). Now the understanding is: 'I did, therefore you are'. The covenant of Law is fulfilled and a covenant of grace is established. When humans accept this gift of grace as truth in their hearts, Holy Spirit enter their hearts and they can now have an intimate love relationship with the Triune God and already rule with Christ in this world as kings (Rm 5:17). We live in the dispensation of God's grace – the new covenant where it is all about the message of the Kingdom of God (Mt 4:17; 18:3; cf. Stassen & Gushee 2003:19).

The first pastoral act of the ministry of the grace of God is the announcement that Jesus Christ is Lord and that Jesus, who is God, loves you (Purves 2004:180). The unconditional act of God's grace – the forgiveness of sins – only has the power of real liberation when it is communicated true to what it is. Grace should be announced without any provisos (Prince 2007:25; Purves 2004:181; cf. Horton 2013). It is when we proclaim the true message of grace to young people unconditionally and they accept it as a gift that they will be set free from the power of sin (Rm 6:14; Prince 2007:26, 153). In the beautiful words of John Calvin (1849):

By the word grace, we are to understand both parts of redemption – the remission of sins, by which God imputes righteousness to us, and the sanctification of the Spirit, by whom He forms us anew unto good works. (p. 233)

For Christians, although striving to do right, cannot be overcome by sin for they are enabled by the Spirit of God to conquer it, and they are freed from the rigorous requirements of the Law. Thus, all who are without the grace of God, being bound under the yoke of the law, are under condemnation. As Revelation 12:11 (The Amplified Bible 1987) points out: 'And they have overcome (conquered) him by means of the blood of the Lamb and by the utterance of their testimony.' The words of *their testimony* (*maturia*) refers to the testimony that God has given them eternal life, and this life is in his Son, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 21:24; 1 Jn 5:9–11; Rv 1:2; Louw & Nida 1988:418).

In effective Youth Ministry it is of utmost importance that the grace message of God, the Good News, will be communicated undiluted as a gift from God. Nel (2005:21) says that often the youth are overwhelmed with guilt feelings, thinking that confession brings about forgiveness. He continues by saying that the youth need to be taught that by faith we confess that Christ paid the full price for our sin, and that neither our confession nor our faith is making complete what God did in Christ. The author of this article agrees wholeheartedly with Nel. The aim must be that the youth will accept what Christ has done for them and that it will overflow from this experience, with them testifying about the significant work that Jesus Christ has done in their lives. This will result in

youth who are overcomers in this world. Caution should be taken – specifically concerning Youth Ministry – not to teach the youth to focus on good works or relying on self-efforts in order to be overcomers in this world, but to teach them that it is only possible to overcome if they rely solely on the work of Christ, and testify about it in their lives.

Status in Christ as a position

Part of the message that should be focused on and proclaimed in effective Youth Ministry should be on the Christian's position in Christ – youth leaders and pastors need to focus on teaching the youth who they are in Christ. Colossians 1:27 (The Amplified Bible 1987) describes our position in Christ as 'the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ within and among you, the Hope of [realising the] glory' (cf. Sweney 2011:32).

The position of Christians in Christ will now be discussed, highlighting some of the characteristics of Christians positioned in Christ.

In Christ we are righteous: We are righteous in God through Christ (Jn 16:10; 2 Cor 5:21; cf. Horton 2013). We were filthy with sin, but he washed us as white as snow (cf. Is 1:18; Gl 2:21). Christ took all our sin on him in order for us to have a clean slate before God. In 1 John 1:7 it is stated that the blood of Jesus *cleanses* us of all sin. The Greek verb for *cleanse* is in the present continuous tense. Thus, as we are committing sins, it is being washed away (cf. Strong 1990; Prince 2007:109). Never again will the sin of man drive a wedge between God and man. Christ paid for all *sin once and for all* (Heb 10:10). We are in right standing with God.

In John 16:8–11 the Word says that Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin. It is important to remember that Holy Spirit does not accuse us of every sin that we do, but only convicts us of the sin of not relying on Christ as the One who made us righteous in Christ – the One who once and for all dealt with all our sin on the cross (cf. Heb 10:10–14; 1 Jn 2:1–2; Jn 16:9; Calvin 1847:140–141). Satan is the one who condemns us because of our sin, as he is the accuser of the brethren (cf. Rv 12:10). Very subtly, Satan wants Christians to focus on their sin instead of on the fact that, although they still sin, it has already been dealt with once and for all through Christ on the cross (cf. 1 Pt 3:18).

The youth need to be taught that in Christ they are righteous before God. If Satan succeeds in condemning the youth all the time when they commit sin, they are powerless, as it is only when the youth realise that they are righteous in Christ that they will act powerful. They need to know that they can have peace with God as there is no more sin between them and God – the more their minds are renewed with this grace message of God by the work of Holy Spirit, the more the youth will be transformed into the image of Christ (cf. Col 1:20; Rm 12:1–2).

In Christ we are successful: God's definition of success is totally contrary to the world's definition. In this world, *success* is measured by what you have accumulated, your social

status and your accomplishments – only if you have obtained some or all of these criteria, you are labelled as successful. Horton (2013) explains that from a biblical viewpoint:

... the biblical characters are not examples of their victory, but of God's! The life of David is not a testimony to David's faithfulness, surely, but to God's and for us to read any part of that story as through we could attain the Gospel (righteousness) by the law (obedience) is the age-old error of Cain, the Pharisees, the Galatian Judaizers, the Pelagians, Semi-Pelagians, Arminians, and Higher Life proponents.

The worldly system of success is entirely focused and based on the person. God's definition of success is based on God – someone who embraced Christ is a successful man (cf. Horton 2013). A Christian is not successful because of what he has done, but because of Christ who is in him. From this position of success in Christ the Christian's life will overflow with success in every area. Success is first and foremost a result of *who* you have, and not of *what* you have done (Gn 39:1–2; Prince 2009:3). If Jesus is with us (i.e. Holy Spirit is in us) we will have good results in every area of our lives, as it is not us, but he who is in us that makes us successful (Prince 2009:11). Holy Spirit will lead Christians to success in everything they do (Prince 2009:11).

The youth need to know that in Christ each and every Christian is a winner and is successful. Believing this truth will lead to success in everything they do. The youth need to be taught that it is not mind over matter and repeating of the sentence 'I am successful', like many self-help books want us to believe. Being a success is not relying on oneself – it is to rely on Christ, as it is the position in him that makes people successful before they even did anything.

In Christ we are blessed and called to be a blessing: In Genesis 12:2 God called Abraham and said to him: 'I will bless you [...] and you shall be a blessing.' Christians are new covenant believers in Christ and are called the seed of Abraham (Gn 3:29; cf. Prince 2009:28). Jesus bore not only our sins on the cross, but also our sicknesses, diseases and infirmities ('by His stripes we were healed'; Is 53:4–5). Satan is the one who comes to steal, kill and destroy (Jn 10:10). Christ became poor for us to become rich (Ps 103:3–5; Is 53; Gn 12:2; 2 Cor 8:9). God wants every Christian to realise that he is richly blessed in Christ and that God wants him to be a blessing (Eph 1:6). He is our Father, and a Father wants the best for his children. His unlimited favour is on his children and he is the source of every good and perfect gift in their lives (Ps 5:12; Lk 11:11; Ja 1:17; Prince 2009:28–35).

The youth need to believe that their Heavenly Father blessed them and wants them to be a blessing. They need to believe and know that their Heavenly Father has plans to prosper them – not to harm them (Jr 29:11). God as their Father is on their side – he is a Father who wants to give good things to his children (cf. Ja 1:17). The youth need to know above all that God wants to bless them and not harm them.

In Christ we are deeply loved: In the New Covenant, Christians are called sons and daughters of the Most High

God (2 Cor 6:18). A father-child relationship is described between God and Christians: a Father who knows his children, who wants to give them good things and who wants to be kind to them (Lk 11:11), and a Father who loves them dearly (Rm 8:35; 1 Jn 4:10).

As Prince (2009:152) truthfully states: 'When young people catch a revelation of Jesus and just how precious they are in His sight, their lives will be supernaturally transformed.' It is only when young people realise that God really loves them – and not judge and condemn them as it is wrongfully taught many times – that they will be drawn to him.

In Christ we will bear spiritual fruit: It is not banging young people with the Law, condemnation, self-help methodologies, techniques or tactics that will help them overcome the power of sin in their lives (Jn 15:4–5). It is when we proclaim to them the undiluted message of grace and who they are in Christ (resulting in them believing it and proclaiming it themselves) that they are set free from the power of sin over their lives, as God himself will write his commandments on the tables of their hearts (Jer 31:33b–34; Jn 1:17; Col 2:14–15; Heb 8:10–13; Rm 6:14; 1 Cor 1:18–31; cf. Calvin 1849:233; Horton 2013). Young people will serve God as he will draw them through grace in love, and they will bear a multitude of spiritual fruit. Only when the youth realise their position in Christ, will they bear spiritual fruit (Jn 15:4).

In Christ we are destined to reign: In Romans 5:17 the Word of God states that everyone that receives abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. The Greek word *basileuo*, which is used for 'reign', is where the English word *basilica* comes from. It refers to a kingly rule – to reign in life as a king and to possess kingly dominion (Strong 1990:866; Prince 2007:2). Prince (2007:2) further states that to reign in life lies with receiving everything that Jesus has accomplished for us on the cross.

The youth who realise their position as 'kings who are destined to reign in this world through Christ' will have a winner's attitude and a 'can-do' mentality. They will stand for Christ, no matter where they are. 'In Christ' Christians are called to a kingly rule – the King's kids who are greatly blessed, highly favoured and deeply loved (cf. Prince 2009:311).

The message of the Kingdom of God

The New Testament is a book concerned with the Kingdom of God (cf. Kangas 2009:1; Mt 3:2; 4:17; Jn 3:3, 5; Rv 12:10). Putman (2008:54) states that Jesus calls us to rethink our world in the context of the Kingdom of God, and to view the world in a whole new way (cf. Nel 2001:5).

The Kingdom of God is a realm for God to work out his eternal purpose and to accomplish his goal (Kangas 2009:3). Nel's (2001:5) statement is in the same line when he remarks that the Gospel is primarily about the Kingdom of God (the

grace message of God's self-revelation and God's dynamic reign) that has come and is yet to come (cf. Stassen & Gushee 2003:24–26). The Good News is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, the Messiah (Lk 4:43; Ac 8:12).

It is important to God that the Church of Jesus Christ – more specifically the youth, in this case – should not only read the Gospel, but actually be immersed in it. On several occasions in the Bible, God used the metabolism analogy regarding absorbing Scripture into our lives. He instructed both Ezekiel and John to 'eat' his Word (cf. Ezk 3:1–3; Rv 10:9–11). Shafer (2008:13) brilliantly states that if we only read the Word of God, but are not really consuming it, we lose the uptake factor of the Word: 'the point at which the Word's active ingredients start to permeate our spiritual composition'.

The parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1–13 clearly illustrates this truth where the seed symbolises the message of the Kingdom of God, the sower symbolises Jesus or someone proclaiming the truth of the Kingdom of God, and the good soil symbolises the heart of the person who hears the grace message, understands it and keeps it. The Greek word here for 'understand' is *sunieimi* (from the root *hiēmi* [to send]), which means to set together, to bring together, to understand, or to comprehend. The verb is in the present-active tense, meaning that the action is ongoing. It is a repeated process and not only a one-time action (cf. Strong 1990:1132). The well-inclined hearer brings together the seed – which is God's message of the Kingdom of God, that is the grace message of God's self-revelation and God's dynamic reign – with their *faith* (cf. Stassen & Gushee 2003:24–26). We need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus and pursue the Kingdom of God, which is our righteousness in Jesus, his peace and his joy (cf. Prince 2009:33; Rm 14:17). When someone hears the word of the Kingdom of God and also understands and believes it, it results in spiritual fruit in his life: hundredfold, sixtyfold or thirtyfold (Mt 13:1–23; Rm 5:17; Louw & Nida 1988:380; cf. Copeland 2011; Peters 2011:5).

By specifically immersing the youth in grace-permeated Word (not in do's and don'ts, but rather breaking the message of the Kingdom of God in the New Testament), the youth's minds will be renewed through Holy Spirit, which will lead to transformation in their lives and identity as well as the production of the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gl 5:22; Rm 12:2; Mt 13:1–23; Anderson 2001:195; 2007:87; Prince 2009:7; Horton 2013). It is when the word of the Kingdom of God is alive in our youth's hearts that God himself will change and transform them from the inside out (Jr 31:33; Heb 8:10).

Cultivating a personal relationship with God

'Religion, so far as it is genuine, is in essence the response of created personalities to the creating personality, God' (Tozer 2011:12; cf. Purves 2004:30). Sweney (2011:37–38) states that *beholding God* should always be our context. Already in the Old Testament in the Garden of Eden we see God as creating personality – calling Adam his created personality

and wanting a relationship with him. Sweney (2011:37–38) explains how Moses always cultivated a relationship with God that made hearing him speak, possible.

Still today God's heart's longing is to know his children. The interchange of love and thought between God and the soul of the Christian is the throbbing heart of New Testament religion (Tozer 2011:14). Tozer's statement is biblically founded as it is exactly what John 17:3 means when it reads: 'Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (NIV 1992). This verse contains the word 'know' (Greek: *ginosko*). In order to understand eternal life, one must also understand how 'know' is used here. Although it definitely contains elements of intellectual knowledge, understanding, discernment, information and familiarity, this word suggests more than this as the Old Testament regularly uses 'know' (Hebrew: *yada*) to describe sexual knowledge. Sexual knowledge between a husband and wife is the most intimate of knowledge. Husband and wife are no longer two, but one flesh. In John 17:3 the important thing is not the sexual act, but the intimacy of heart and mind that in true love precede the act. Therefore, to *know* God is not merely to have intellectual knowledge of him, but it is having an intimate, personal relationship with him, like the closest relationship between two people (Ritenbaugh 1992; cf. Schultz 1996).

In the same vine, Ross (2013) explains the intimate, personal relationship God desires with his children by giving a powerful illustration of marriage:

If I talked with my wife for a while every morning but then never spoke to her the rest of the day, my marriage would be empty and dysfunctional. The same is true of my relationship with Christ. If my branch is connected to the vine, I will be in a running conversation with Jesus from morning to night.

He (Ross 2013) continues by also reminding us that Scripture uses the most intimate moments shared by a married couple to illustrate the level of intimacy God desires with believers in their relationship with him.

As mentioned before, in practice (i.e. where God's previous working meets man's present response) man must pursue God. Purves (2004:193) agrees with the Bible, saying that Christians are bearers of the presence of God through their union with Christ. Accepting Christ as the *Missio Dei* of God, filled with Holy Spirit, Christians live life as responding human beings in the power of Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16–17; Eph 3:20 21).

Tozer (2011:12) describes the act of the pursuit of God beautifully when he says that the 'impulse to pursue God originates with God, but the outworking of that impulse is our following hard after Him'. All the time we are pursuing him we are already in his hand. As it is said in Psalms 63:8 (The Amplified Bible 1987): 'My whole being follows hard after You and clings closely to You; Your right hand upholds me.'

Tozer (2011:12) remarks that it is sad that the message of justification of faith has fallen into evil company. It has been interpreted by many in such a manner as actually to withhold man from the knowledge of God. The whole transaction of religious conversion (as Tozer puts it) has been made mechanical and spiritless. Anderson (1997:113) also states this dilemma when he says: 'Without authentic experience of Christ [*faith*], our theology can become vain and empty speculation.' Anderson (2004:7) wrote that we divest God of soul and produce a theology without soul when we fasten our minds on abstract concepts of God rather than on personal knowledge of God. Purves (2004:xxvi) takes the same stance when he states that pastoral theology should in general reflect a personal knowledge of God.

Christ may be 'received' without a receiver. Man is 'saved', but he is neither hungry nor thirsty for God (cf. Anderson 1997:113; Tozer 2011:12). People 'accept' Christ – not motivated by love for God, but motivated by fear of going to hell. Tozer (2011:12) sums up this dilemma and shame as follows: 'The modern scientist has lost God amid the wonders of His world; we Christians are in real danger of losing God amid the wonders of His Word.'

It is often forgotten that God is a person and in the deep of his mighty nature he thinks, wills, loves, feels, enjoys, suffers and desires as any human being may. He makes himself known to us by communicating with us through our minds, wills and emotions. It is inherent in personality to be able to know other personalities, but full knowledge of one personality by another is impossible in one encounter. It is only after a lot of time spent together and loving mental intercourse that the full possibilities of both people can be explored (Tozer 2011:12). Parents and youth leaders need to demonstrate an intimate relationship with God to the youth. Their passion needs to be directed to a love relationship with Christ. In this relationship he will lovingly lead them in the way they should go (Jr 31:33).

This relationship between God and his children is personal and conscious – not abstract. It does not come through the body of believers – it is known to the individual, and then to the body through the individuals that compose the church of God. It is conscious as it comes within the field of awareness where man can know it as he knows any other fact of experience (Tozer 2011:14). As we are made in God's image, we have within us the capacity to know him (Gn 1:26; Ps 8:5; cf. Putman 2008:13). The moment a Christian is born through the Spirit, his or her whole being senses its kinship to God and leaps up in joyous recognition. That is the spiritual birth without which we cannot see the Kingdom of God (Jn 3:1–7; Rm 8:9). It is, however, not an end but an inception, for then begins the wonderful pursuit of God (cf. Anderson 1997:113; Tozer *ibid*:14). As Anderson (1997:113) put it: 'The Holy Spirit is thus the creative power and presence of Jesus Christ as the "inner Logos".' It is through this communion that we enter into God's self-knowledge, which is, as the Bible states, the knowledge that the Son has of the Father and the Father has

of the Son (cf. Mt 11:27; Anderson 2004:24). Through Holy Spirit we are brought into that inner communion, and thus participate in God's self-revelation through his Son, Jesus Christ. This is the soul of ministry (cf. Anderson 2004:24).

Since creation the call of God to his children echo in the heart of everyone: 'Where are you?' God yearns for a personal love relationship with his children (Gn 3:9). This yearning of God needs to be communicated and demonstrated to the youth by their youth pastors and parents. They need to hear and know that God loves them and that he yearns for an intimate love relationship with them. The youth need to know God's desire to be with and have communion with his children, as it is put in Revelation 3:20 (NIV 1992): 'I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.'

Cordeiro (2011:27) makes an undeniable truthful statement when he writes: 'An irresistible church longs for God's presence more than anything.' The youth will attend youth meetings with heart and soul if they know that they are going to a place where the presence of God is sought more than anything else. Then they will continue to seek the intimacy with the Father, even in their day-to-day living and they will grow up to become spiritual mature Christians.

Cultivating a personal relationship with the Trinity should be the soul of all Christian ministries and it should be no different in Youth Ministry.

Closing thoughts

We find ourselves in a world that is quick and easy – there is never time to do only one thing at a time. Microwave meals and cyber communications are but two examples of speeding up both cooking and relationships, while doing it simultaneously. Maybe without noticing this same tendency of 'quick and easy' has crawled into Youth Ministry.

Another feature of the current times we live in is instant satisfaction. The youth are expected to produce fruit of the Spirit overnight, although they are only infants as Christians. As they do not produce spiritual fruit quickly enough in our instant society, it is slapped on through law-permeated preaching to create young people that seemingly *look* godly, but whose hearts are far from God.

Perhaps the following words of Mark Upton, a former youth worker and current pastor at Hope Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, should be the slogan of every youth minister (cf. Cole 2012): 'If anyone asks you about your ministry, tell them you will let them know in ten years.' He observes wisely (Cole 2012): 'Youth pastors need to view themselves as sowers, planting Gospel seeds for harvest down the road' (cf. 1 Cor 3:6–8).

Like everything in life that is worthwhile growing into mature Christian adulthood takes time.

Conclusion

The article focuses on the importance of bringing the Kingdom of God message, which is inherent Christocentric, to the youth. The grace of God as gift, the position of Christian youth as well as their identity in Christ is highlighted. It stresses the importance of bringing the Good News to the youth: that God sees them as overcomers, cleansed by the blood of the Lamb, and that they are successful in him. Immersing the youth in these truths is essential. Only if the church brings a Christocentric message to the youth, will they be young people who are vibrant and zealous for God and that continue to serve him into their adult years, transformed through the power of Holy Spirit. They will serve and love him with all their hearts, while cultivating a personal relationship with him motivated by love and not fear. Taking God on his Word, allowing Holy Spirit to proceed with sanctification, will lead to the produce of spiritual fruit in the youth.

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