

Passionate Discipleship

Six Foundations

A Canadian Baptist Youth Initiative

Foundation #5

CRITICAL THINKING AND CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT



FOUNDATION #5

Passionate Disciples are Critical Thinkers and Culturally Engaged

In 2006, *Time* magazine named YouTube the invention of the year. As I read about the magic of YouTube, three significant things caught my attention. First, YouTube allowed ordinary people to voice their opinion in the midst of a culture dominated by experts. Second, it allowed ordinary people to expose the clay feet of the experts. And third, YouTube cultivated a creative community where members were able to express themselves authentically, and, in some cases, their authenticity made them more famous than the icons of pop culture.

It is with these three ideas in mind that I'd like to talk about the characteristics of critical thinking and cultural creativity as they relate to passionate discipleship. In today's youth ministry culture, we sometimes cultivate Christian disciples who are "bubble believers." Their passion to be creative has been subdued by the prevailing "play it safe" attitude of today's church-going generation.

I would like to raise four questions that speak to this foundation of passionate discipleship.

How can we help our students think practically and theologically?

In my opinion, one of the failures of our education system today is that students come out of school knowing how to regurgitate data without knowing how to problem-solve or think critically. The church is not exonerated in this failure! With children's programs that teach rote memory scripture memorization and bumper stickers that say "God said it, I believe it, that settles it," Christians are too often content to settle for superficial knowledge rather than dig deeper.

In light of this, it is important for us to help our students learn to think for themselves. Our students do not necessarily need more moral lessons on how to be nice in their school halls. They need an intentional approach to spiritual formation that helps them think critically both inside and outside the church.

One example of this is the young earth vs. old earth debate. Our students often find themselves caught between two different views on this issue. At school, they are taught that the earth is four billion years old. At church, if they have a young-earth proponent for a teacher, they are taught that the earth is 7000 years old. So what's a Christian student to do – especially when some evangelical groups tend to make one view seem more "Christian" than the other? We need to help our students think through issues in a thoughtful, balanced and careful manner, without labelling ideas Christian or non-Christian. Many issues need this kind of scrutiny – environmental concerns, fair trade, sexuality and social drinking are at the top of my list.

Helping our students learn to think critically also helps them in everyday life situations as well. No longer do we need to create a "dos and don'ts list" for our students to get along in the world. No longer will they be won over by the latest commercials, internet schemes or silver-tongued car salespeople. They will be critical thinkers who carefully examine every aspect of their culture...including Christian culture.

My responsibility as a youth pastor is also to help students learn to think theologically. On a practical level this means teaching students how to apply the text of scripture to the text of their lives. When facing big decisions or ethical questions, it is helpful to look at biblical models or examples. As one author puts it, “the challenge of the church is to encourage and empower lay-persons to challenge the Goliaths in their working midst.” (Messer, 1989, p. 67)

I must make an effort to remind my students that to be a Christian is to be a theological thinker. Stone and Duke put it this way, “All Christians are theologians. It’s not that they were born that way or decided one day to go into theology. It’s a simple fact of Christian life: their faith makes them theologians, whether they know it or not, and it calls them to become the best theologians they can be.” (Stone & Duke, 1996, p. 1)

As the church moves forward in this post-modern era, non-believers are not looking for cookie-cutter answers to pre-packaged problems. They are looking for people who have a meaningful faith and firm convictions – people who will be able to offer stories of hope and relevance, and yet be grounded in more than just self-help and spiritual band-aids (e.g. “let go and let God” or “you just have to have more faith and everything will get better”).

As a youth minister, I need to be intentional about training leaders who will engage in deeper theological thinking. Though I might be tempted to offer shallow phrases about the Christian faith, I must challenge students to consider the “work of theology,” which is a “matter of personalized, conversational thinking about shared convictions” in the Christian life. (Stone & Duke, 1996, p. 7)

How can we help our students question, doubt and wrestle with their faith?

During my most recent youth ministry position, it was exciting to see what happened when I moved from talking *to* students to talking *with* them. Rather than acting as the Christian expert who was there to tell them what was right and wrong, I tried to be careful to let them express their opinions and doubts about faith. It was less about winning these students for the “truth war” and more about helping them “speak the truth in love.”

One of the issues we talked about was other religious beliefs. In southern Alberta, one of the predominant religions is Mormonism. In my experience, whenever a Sunday School teacher or youth leader wanted to teach about the Mormon religion, they would bring in a video or guest speaker who talked about how they were once in the Mormon religion but then became a part of the evangelical Christian church. This approach didn’t sit well with me, so I decided to ask someone who was an active member of the Mormon Church to speak. I had a good relationship with my Mormon neighbour, so he and some local Mormon missionaries agreed to come to our Sunday School class and one of our youth small groups to talk about their faith.

The result was amazing! Not because either side won a debate or won converts to their religion. It was amazing because we were able to see these Mormon believers as real people and engage in a healthy dialogue. Both parties were able to talk, ask questions and then reflect on their faith journeys in a context that was safe and gracious.

After these meetings with the Mormons, I set up a visit from a Jehovah’s Witness church member and we were able to have another healthy dialogue about our religious beliefs. After every one of these meetings

I was so pleased with the honest conversation that continued and how it challenged the students to look deeper into what they believed and the “why” behind their faith journeys.

I believe these are practical ways we can help our students wrestle with their faith. It is so easy for us to “bash the enemy” when it comes to issues like abortion, homosexuality or terrorism. But real life theology is best developed in healthy dialogue where issues and positions have human faces and personalities attached to them.

Helping our students wrestle with their faith is not just a matter of talking about other religions. We need to be intentional about providing a safe place where students can express their doubts and questions. Today’s younger generation is no longer willing to accept the answer “because I told you so.” They are quick to detect frauds or question double standards. Dialogue, rather than argumentative debate, is the preferred posture. Conversation, not confrontation, wins the day.

How can we help our students become authentic and passionate?

From Peter’s bold sermon in Acts 2:14ff where he couldn’t help but stand up and talk boldly about his faith, to today’s examples of South Americans who courageously stand up for God’s justice in the midst of corruption, we have a rich history of what it means to live out faith in a passionate, “turn the world upside-down” manner.

And yet in many North American youth ministries, we’ve managed to turn our youth groups into “holy huddles” where students are protected and learn cookie-cutter answers to questions that are only asked inside the evangelical Christian bubble. Our Christian bookstores are lined with titles like *Become a Better You* and *The House that Cleans Itself*, and we wonder why our students are happy to settle for the suburban Christian life of ease instead of the messy and mysterious life of following Jesus.

One of the ways we can help students cultivate a life of authenticity and passion is by challenging them to walk by faith and not by fear. Our ’80s and ’90s North American church culture – with apologetics books like *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* and seeker-sensitive “feel good” evangelicalism – trained us well in making us feel safe. But this comfortable culture has not allowed us to step up and step out in faith. We are meeting our church budgets and we are paying our church staff, but our impact and engagement with the real world around is sometimes minimal.

As we disciple this next generation of believers, our challenge is to unleash an authentic and passionate faith in young people as they follow Christ. This is not a matter of continuing Friday night youth group gatherings and Sunday night bowling marathons. This is a matter of inviting students to a life of passionate discipleship – where lives are transformed by the message of the gospel and the power of the living Christ, where disciples take up their cross and walk with others through the muck and mire of life, faith, failure and heartache.

It’s attempting to live out the Sermon on the Mount. Losing your life and finding it. Being humble and receiving a peek into the Kingdom of God. Giving outrageously, not controlled by possessions or position. Living biblically – not as the authors of *The Year of Living Biblically* did, based on the law of the Old Testament, but by building our lives on the way Jesus taught in the Beatitudes.

Shane Claiborne captures a glimpse of this in his book *The Irresistible Revolution* (2006). Oh that we would stop, pray and reflect on how to live this way in the midst of our youth groups and church

communities. Then we might be able to catch a fuller flavour of what it means for God's kingdom to come and for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Lord, help us!

Henri Nouwen talks about this way of faith without fear:

"Do not be afraid, have no fear," is the voice we most need to hear...Why is there no reason to fear any longer? Jesus himself answers this question succinctly when he approaches his frightened disciples walking on the lake: "It is I. Do not be afraid" (John 6:21). The house of love is the house of Christ, the place where we can think, speak, and act in the way of God – not in the way of a fear-filled world. From this house the voice of love keeps calling out: "Do not be afraid...come and follow me...see where I live...go out and preach the good news...the Kingdom of God is close at hand...there are many rooms in my Father's house. Come...take for your heritage the Kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world....Jesus offers us this house right in the midst of our anxious world. (Nouwen, 1990, pp. 21-22)

How can we help our students run towards culture rather than run away from it?

As we live in faith, not fear, we will no longer retreat into the Christian subculture. We will cultivate disciples that engage with the real world rather than expect students to attend Christian school, listen to only Christian music, read Christian novels and go to Christian-owned eating establishments.

With all of the changes and challenges of our culture, this is an exciting but not easy time to be raising up younger disciples in the faith. Gone are the days of the neat and tidy Christian youth group. Students bring a huge range of experiences with them and the demands are diverse, but the adventure is there for the taking. So hold on tight and be prepared for an experience that will turn your squeaky-clean Christian world upside-down.

We're looking for real life examples of this! Please send your stories and photos to:
communications@cbmin.org

Critical Thinking Questions:

1. As you begin this section, take time to listen and reflect on the words to Derek Webb's song "A New Law." You can watch the video on YouTube: (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr4DBnB7aNQ>). You can find the lyrics at http://www.lyricsmania.com/a_new_law_lyrics_derek_webb.html.
2. How have you helped your students learn to think for themselves rather than simply spoon fed them Christian morality and content?
3. Are your students wrestling with their faith? Does your youth ministry or church environment provide a place for young believers to doubt and ask the hard questions?

4. Who are the students in your youth group who live with the most authenticity and passion? Who are the people in your church who live with the most authenticity and passion? What makes them this way? Perhaps you can have them share their life story at one of your gatherings.
5. When a student graduates from your youth ministry, what do you want them to “look” like – or better yet, “live” like? Try to make your answer less of a checklist and more like a human being.

Recommended Resources

Claiborne, S. (2006) *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an ordinary radical*. Zondervan: Grand Rapids.

Jacobs, A.J. (2008). *The Year of Living Biblically: One man's humble quest to follow the Bible as literally as possible*. Simon & Schuster: New York.

Messer, D. E. (1989). *Contemporary Images in Christian Ministry*, Abingdon Press: Nashville..

Nouwen,H. (1990). *Lifesigns: Intimacy, fecundity, and ecstasy in Christian perspective*, Doubleday: New York.

Stone H.W.& Duke,J.O. (1996). *How to Think Theologically*, Fortress: Minneapolis.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cr4DBnB7aNQ>

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