

A Response to Dr. Joyce Mercer's "Christian Education in a Commitment Challenged Culture"

Given at the Reformed Institute's gathering at Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean, VA

Saturday, April 9th, 2011

James F. Cubie, MDiv, ThM

Director of Youth Ministries, Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

Dr. Mercer has presented us with a very helpful background against which to ask -- and hopefully gain some clarity on -- questions that go to heart of how we imagine life together. The questions raised do not just relate to children and youth, as these groups are traditionally thought of under the rubric "Christian Education", but finally open out into questions about how children, youth, *and* adults live out their faith commitments in the church and the world. At the risk of offering four responses instead of one, I would like to focus on four points in Dr. Mercer's paper that seem to be especially fruitful for further discernment of how commitment and Christian education go together in our time and place. And, in order to give this discernment a little more focus, on my part, I will look at these primarily through the lens of youth ministry with some initial discussion of young adult concerns (since young adults are what youth will very shortly be).

First, I found striking Dr. Mercer's summary of Putnam and Campbell's findings that point to a group called "none's" -- that is, that group which, upon leaving conservative churches, do not then seek out mainline churches. This raised for me the question: How do we do evangelism in light of this? Do we see those who left as a group to be sought out "in the highways and

byways”? Or are we -- at the end of the day -- waiting for them to find the doors of our churches? As I look at this through the lens of observing the success of the “Young, Restless, and Reformed/New Calvinism” movement, in reaching youth and young adults, I am brought to the deceptively simple question: What is the Gospel? This movement has concise, deliverable answers to that question, and is using social media in exciting ways to attract youth and young adults. This network of churches has been very successful in attracting hard to reach age groups (20-30’s), in hard to reach places (Seattle!). As far as I can see, this network is very much in the ascendancy, not only within the Evangelical world, but also with the un-churched age groups it aggressively tries to reach. There are concerns to be raised about the Young, Restless, and Reformed/New Calvinists, the chief of which seems to be the vision of limited atonement that this movement has doubled-down on. The way that atonement is currently discussed in these circles may cause some to leave in years to come, and if that is so, many may seek fellowship elsewhere. Or -- if Putnam and Campbell continue to be right -- maybe they won’t seek something else at all. How will we invite these people to follow Christ with us? We must begin fitting our nets, checking our tackle boxes, and putting our boats in order. The work of theologians like Brunner and Barth on the complex of problems that limited atonement presents, seems to me a good place to begin a retrieval that can help us press home our answer to the question: “What is the Gospel?”

The next point I want to address is Dr. Mercer’s endorsement of Charles Foster’s observation that the church effectively abandoned young people when it took over classroom models (e.g. meeting one hour a week), rather than thinking creatively about the way in which the Christian faith forms the character/lives of those who enter into it. I see this problem especially in the teaching of Confirmation. In the fall of last year, I was in a meeting with leaders of other faith-

traditions, and was speaking with a rabbi about some of the commitment-related difficulties I had run into with Confirmation: he shared a favorite joke to the effect that the only way to get rid of mice in a synagogue is to Bar Mitzvah them. Confirmation, for many youth, is viewed as graduation rather than the first step in taking up citizenship in the church. We generally have 6-12 months of one-hour classes, with very little – if any – work (whether intellectual or spiritual) required during the middle of the week, followed, at the end of the year, by a call for decision. I have only served in churches where Confirmation is taught to 8th and 9th graders, and this has ended up meaning we spend between 3 to 4 years *after* Confirmation, trying to involve them in the life of the church. Isn't six months -- or a year -- of classes too small a window, and too little of a character-forming activity, in which to hope Youth will begin to notice how the Spirit is at work in their lives?

Let me propose something for discussion (with the caveat that I am not necessarily committed to this vision): It would be best to have 2-3 years of a broad range of activities *before* youth go through Confirmation. In other words, I think Confirmation should be moved to senior year, and have as an already-established basis a great deal of time spent integrating youth into the life and work of the church, via, e.g., consistent participation in worship, regular youth retreats, local and national service events, youth groups specially targeted for particular age groups (that is, in Christ there may no longer be Jew or Greek, but there appear to be Middlers and Senior Highs...), and education that consistently emphasizes cognitive *and* character forming practices. Then, during their senior year, as Youth chose universities and colleges, they would be paired up with churches in those towns, and thus encouraged to honor the connectional nature of our church, and can truly celebrate the graduation-character that Confirmation

inevitably has. (I hope this builds the case as strongly as possible, so that real sides can be taken and a good discussion can follow.)

I want now to turn to a point that Dr. Mercer ties closely to her endorsement of Foster: The place of spiritual “practices”, especially as these shape the character of those who undertake them. I am in maximal agreement with Dr. Mercer on this point, and have sought in my own ministry gradually to introduce practices suggested by Mark Yaconelli, in his vision of “Contemplative Youth Ministry”. So far I can share that we’ve successfully introduced the use of journals, as a means of receiving and reflecting on Youth experiences of God, and their growth into the Christian life (along the lines that Paul introduces in Galatians 5.22-24). The question I want to pose to Dr. Mercer is one that I am still wrestling with: What soteriological weight do these practices have? That is: How are they related to the person and work of Christ? It seems to me that there are at least three general lines along which answers can be given to this question:

A. These practices are integral to salvation, and without them one is not participating in Christ’s salvific work, and cannot expect to know him in this life or the next;

B. These practices do not contribute to Christ’s work at all, but are simply a response to his work, and are – all along the line – consistently enabled and completed by God: “Not I, but Christ, within me...”;

C. These practices do not contribute to Christ’s work, but are simply done in gratitude and as a means of deepening one’s walk with God, but neglecting them persistently can mean “falling away” from God.

It seems to me that we have to decide on -- and consistently highlight -- the soteriological freight these practices carry, or other, less-worthy, utilitarian questions will surround and overwhelm them: “What will these do for me if I do them? What kind of experiences should I be

on the look-out for? Will they contribute to my mental and physical health?” The practices that form the significant center of “spiritual theology” (for lack of a better term) have never promised benefits other than to know Christ more fully, and generally are accompanied by significant “dark nights of the soul” (e.g. Mother Theresa). Here, I think, the house divides on how to do Youth Ministry: as we de-center (but never do away with!) the “They won’t come unless it’s fun...” models, and become more committed to introducing practices for deepening our Youth’s walk with God, the seriousness of the Christian life will come into focus for our them; the practices will have short and long term effects on levels of participation; and, should cause us to think again about what “success” in youth ministry looks like.

Finally, Dr. Kenda Dean, in *Almost Christian* (Oxford, 2010) recently summarized and interpreted the results of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), concluded in 2005. The study was meant to test what many have observed in a more anecdotal fashion: That there has been a serious decline in the attendance and commitment of youth in their churches over the past generation. The study found that especially youth from churches in the so-called mainline Protestant denominations (e.g. United Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ), and those who had been raised in the Roman Catholic church, had the hardest time meeting a number of basic criteria that evaluate the health of religious commitment:

1. Attendance at worship.
2. Basic commitment to relating faith to everyday life.
3. Consistent, felt “closeness” to God.
4. Strong commitment to Youth Group as a primary means of entering more deeply into the Christian life.
5. A developed prayer life that expresses itself at least every other day in both individual and family contexts.
6. Consistent use of Scripture as a primary means of growing in, and maintaining, faith.

The primary causes found for difficulty in meeting these criteria, were twofold: 1. The growing conformity of American churches to the culture(s) they inhabit, which stresses the strong, evident benefits of pluralism, but which tends to challenge/weaken faith commitments on the parts of youth and parents; 2. The absence of parents and adults from those Church contexts in which they can be present and share their faith commitments with youth. The outcome of these causes is the onset of a replacement faith, something Dean (who takes over the term from Melissa Denton and Christian Smith) calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”, in which (to simplify) it is more important to do as much “good” as possible, while carefully avoiding any possible offense, in a world that God may have created, but is largely absent from.

It is the second cause -- the absence of parents/adults -- that I think matches well with an insight Dr. Mercer provides us in her paper: “What kind of access do young people have to the core identity-practices of Christian communities, and to opportunities to reflect on those practices with others who guide their participation in the practices?” This is an especially poignant rhetorical question, and it matches up well with an observation that closed the first part of Dr. Mercer’s paper: the group she interviewed shared that “adults ... fell prey to the same patterns of variable participation.” The Youth and Young Adult lens through which I have been interacting with Dr. Mercer’s paper, at this point, opens out into broader questions about how we imagine the lives of families in our churches – how our households together make up the household of God: this is an exceptionally difficult subject to broach, and should not be handled too idealistically that we never get down to the task of finding available opportunities to share the Gospel. It seems to me that this – “family ministry”, broadly conceived – is the most promising place to focus as we think together about what the perseverance of the saints means in our time

and place. But let me leave you with these questions: When I say “family ministry”, what comes to mind? Are the associations good or bad? Does this ministry seem like the best place to start?