

PENETRATING THE CAMPUS

REACHING KIDS
WHERE THEY ARE

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GETTING THE OVERALL PICTURE

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ONE

OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE CAMPUS

"All I need is another thing to do."

As Gary and I talked over breakfast, I could sense that he had something more on his mind. A sharp youth leader who had served five years at a medium-sized, fast-growing church, Gary expressed frustration. "Something is missing. I have worked with some of the best students around. I have seen God do some tremendous things in my life and in the lives around me. But for the past six months I have been plagued with the question, 'Is what I'm doing really making an impact for Jesus Christ?'"

Youth leaders stay on the job an average of eighteen to twenty-four months. Many go to another church or "grow up and get a real job." They leave youth ministry for various reasons, but usually it's because they lack that burning purpose and direction that won't let them quit.

Purpose helps us know that what we do has value. It tells us, "You're using your life wisely." Direction gives us a sense of moving ahead. In youth ministry we can take many different directions, but all roads lead to Jesus Christ. Our purpose and direction has the focus of challenging young people to allow Jesus Christ to change their lives radically.

Most youth workers profess that their work is a noble calling. Standing in the gap, sacrificing our lives for students is the kind of work Jesus would do. But after we conduct our 300th youth meeting, endure our 20th lock-in, get stood up by the same student six times, and watch our houses get rolled every month just before it

rains, we start to question our calling. We wonder if working in a sporting goods store would really be so bad. "Maybe all those people were right; maybe I do need to get a "real job" after all. Perhaps I should grow up and become part of the real world."

My friend Gary had come to this point. He expressed a longing to do more than serve as a glorified baby-sitter. He wanted to make an impact on the non-believing world for Jesus Christ. Gary discovered that 90 percent of all school-age children get their education in public schools.¹ The vast majority of these students do not know Jesus Christ. Most will never experience His love or hear the gospel unless someone goes to them. When Gary realized this, the lights came on. He knew his calling was to go!

Right now, you may be thinking, "Oh great, all I need is another responsibility to add to the thousand I have already." We agree that many good things can fill our calendars. But just because we're busy doesn't mean we're effective.

To get a clear perspective on our ministry purpose and direction, let's look at Jesus' pattern of ministry as recorded in Matthew 9:35-38:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were *harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd*. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field" (Matthew 9:35-38, italics mine).

In that passage Jesus provides us with three reasons why we must go to the campus today.

JESUS WENT

In Matthew 9:35, we see that "Jesus went to all the towns and villages." Clearly, Jesus moved toward people; He did not expect people to come to Him. He deliberately chose a "go and tell" approach rather than a passive, laid-back "come and see" strategy. Like Jesus, we need that same "go and tell" approach. That way we

will see “crowds” of people everywhere (v. 36). Because Jesus loved people, He went to them. He calls us to do the same.

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If you struggle with going, ask the Lord to do in you what He did with one youth leader. John had seen his youth group grow from six to one hundred students. One day, while meeting with his pastor, John bragged about all of the students he had brought into the youth group. Sensing his pride, the wise pastor said, “I’d like to show you something”. They got into his car, drove to the local high school, and parked near the front entrance. The pastor instructed John to sit quietly and listen. All he could hear was the wind whispering softly through the trees and a few birds chirping in the distance. Suddenly, a ringing bell rudely interrupted the quietness. It was followed by the noise of hundreds of students walking out the front entrance of the school. The two men watched and listened. Some students came out laughing, but one was crying. Others talked with friends, but many walked alone. Lots of them yelled and screamed, and even a few cursed in anger, but others moved along quietly, not saying a word. Some acted arrogantly, while several showed fear. What they all had in common was a noticeable lack of purpose. They walked out the door without a clue about who to follow or where to go. For John, the picture his pastor painted for him that day was worth more than 10,000 words.

If we have not taken the gospel to the campus, we have come up short in fulfilling the mission that Jesus has given us, no matter how many students may come to the youth group. We must go because Jesus went.

A DESPERATE CAMPUS CULTURE

Matthew tells us, “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). Matthew used three terms to identify the condition of the people: “harassed,” “helpless,” and “like sheep without a shepherd.” The word harassed means “distressed, growing tired to the point of exhaustion”; picture in your mind a runner who has depleted his resources and has no more to give. Helpless conveys vulnerability. Such a person is thrown face down, like a person who is dead drunk and so inca-

pacitated he can no longer defend himself. He has lost his will to decide for himself. And, "like sheep without a shepherd" indicates a lack of purpose and direction. Sheep put their faces in the grass and nibble wherever the grass takes them, with no purpose except the pleasure of the next moment. Many people are like that. As Jesus looked at the crowds, He recognized that they were exhausted, distressed, and purposeless. Similarly, the campus culture today finds itself harassed, helpless, and purposeless. This expresses itself in three significant and related areas.

EMOTIONALLY

Young people today find themselves forced into an adult environment without the time or the opportunity to grow up emotionally.

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They have to deal with problems that most adults experience difficulty handling, yet they rarely have the emotional maturity to do so. In 1987 Dr. Victor Stursberger of the American Academy of Pediatrics addressed this issue. The statement he made then holds true today:

Short of being in a war, these are the most dangerous times adolescents have ever had to face. There are more choices teens have to make at younger ages and less guidance to make those choices. Now 14-15 year olds need to decide: "Am I going to have sex or not? Am I going to smoke pot or not? Am I going to drink or not?" Two generations ago those decisions were made in college. A generation ago they were made in high school. Now they are being made in junior high.²

Furthermore, in an environment consumed with self, young people have no protective safeguard of love to fall back on when they fail. Every thirteen seconds another set of parents gets divorced.³ Divorce has profoundly negative effects on children. Compared to children from intact homes, children of divorce are far more likely to struggle academically, engage in drug and alcohol use and other high-risk behaviors, commit suicide, experience psychiatric problems, and live in poverty. Thirty years of research now conclusively shows that divorce is harmful to children

in virtually every measure.⁴ The children become the support system for the single parent. Often they become a human weapon that one parent uses to attack the other; they feel forced to take sides. After a fifteen-year-old friend had just told me about his parents deciding to divorce, he prayed, "God, I pray that my parents won't break up so I won't have to choose."

In 2000, an estimated 879,000 children in the U. S. were victims of abuse or neglect, a rate of 12.2 per 1,000 children under 18.⁵ Each day in the United States, more than three children die as a result of child abuse in the home. Approximately three million child abuse reports are made each year. Child abuse is reported — on average — every ten seconds. Nearly one-half of substantiated cases of child neglect and abuse are associated with parental alcohol or drug abuse.⁶

The normal emotional turmoil of adolescence poses difficult problems in itself. But combined with living in the atmosphere just described, the strain can turn the young person into an emotional cripple, unable to handle normal teenage pressures. According to the American Journal of Psychiatry, the teen years are the most common age for depression. About 12 million children under 18 suffer from mental disorders such as autism, depression, and hyperactivity. They feel emotionally empty and therefore see life as an endless series of problems.⁷

SOCIALLY

The emotional distress of students leads them on a search to find a way to fill the emptiness inside. Like other people, students want to experience love. Yet, young people fear that they will not have the opportunity to love or be loved.

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Most young people who come from an emotionally crippled background will have a distorted view of love. To them, love means sexual involvement, and love's ultimate expression is sexual contact. Statistics bear this out. By their 18th birthday, 6 in 10 teenage women and nearly 7 in 10 teenage men have had sexual intercourse.⁸ Nationwide, 6.6 percent of students reported initiating sexual intercourse before age 13.⁹

Most students believe they will find love when they experience sex. Often, howev-

er, they miss out on the love they so deeply desire. In fact, their sexual activity leads them into greater insecurity. Their fear of not being loved intensifies and is eventually realized as the sexual relationship disintegrates. Not only do they lose the love they searched for, but they become alienated from and hurt by the people they thought loved them.

Nearly one million teen girls get pregnant each year. Nearly 4 out of 10 young women get pregnant at least once before they turn 20. Each year the federal government alone spends about \$40 billion to help families that began with a teenage birth.¹⁰

EVERY 24 HOURS . . .

- 17,297 public school students are suspended.*
- 7,883 children are reported abused or neglected.
- 4,248 children are arrested.
- 3,585 babies are born to unmarried mothers.
- 2,861 high school students drop out.
- 2,319 babies are born to mothers who are not high school graduates.
- 2,019 babies are born into poverty.
- 1,329 babies are born to teen mothers.
- 1,310 babies are born without health insurance.
- 825 babies are born at low birth weight (less than 5 lbs., 8 oz.).
- 401 babies are born to mothers who had late or no prenatal care.
- 367 children are arrested for drug abuse.
- 180 children are arrested for violent crimes.
- 157 babies are born at very low birth weight (less than 3 lbs., 4 oz.).
- 77 babies die.
- 34 children and youth under 20 from accidents.
- 9 children or youth under 20 die from firearms.
- 9 children or youth under 20 are homicide victims.
- 5 children or youth under 20 commit suicide.
- 1 young person under 25 dies from HIV infection.¹¹

Today when teenagers become one of these statistics, instead of receiving more love, they often loses the love they thought they had.

Many make the unwise choice to have an abortion. The highest abortion rate among

all women is among 18 to 19 year old women - 56 percent per 1,000 women.¹² While abortion seems to be a way out of the intense social pressures that a teen faces with pregnancy, it results instead in inner turmoil. Eighty-one percent of the teens who have abortions become preoccupied with the death of that child afterwards. Seventy-three percent had flashbacks of the abortion experience, 69% experienced feelings of "craziness" and 54% had nightmares related to the abortion. Thirty-five percent perceived a visitation from the aborted child and 23% had hallucinations related to the abortion.¹³ One nineteen-year-old rape victim who terminated her pregnancy said,

I felt an emptiness that nothing could fill, and quickly discovered that the aftermath of abortion continued a long time after the memory of the rape dimmed. For the next three years I experienced horrible depression and nightmares. I dreamed I was giving birth, but they would take my baby away from me. I'd hear her crying and I'd search but I couldn't find her anywhere. I'd just hear her cries echoing in the distance.¹⁴

Students like this feel socially bankrupt and unable to carry on sustained relationships.

SPIRITUALLY

Adding to their emotional and social distress, teenagers live in an environment that not only offers no real hope, but even adds to their problems. The average high school graduate has spent 18,720 hours in his twelve years on the campus, excluding extracurricular activities. Those years are spent in an atmosphere that teaches a philosophy of life with no absolutes. In the age of science and technology, they think that life is related not to an all-powerful, all-knowing God, but revolves only around themselves.

That philosophy and the resulting classroom atmosphere often robs students in public schools of true education. Students rarely have the opportunity to seek answers that can meet their real-life needs. Most of the time they aren't even given the privilege of considering the possibility that God can fill the emptiness in their hearts.

Because high school students sense no relief from the emptiness of their culture, they do what seems logical—they quit trying. At school they hear, "You came from nothing and you are going to nothing." They conclude quickly that everything in

between means nothing. One bumper sticker summarized the hopelessness students feel: "Life's a Bitch, Then You Die." Not surprisingly, many of today's students have given up. They see no hope.

When hopelessness prevails over a period of time, students try to escape. Ninety-two percent of our young people have taken a drink of alcohol at least once. The average age when youth first try alcohol is 11 years of age for boys and 13 years of age for girls.¹⁵ Many students are so desperate to escape that they will try anything, including sniffing Scotchgard™ and other inhalants. It has been estimated that over three million teenagers are out-and-out alcoholics. Several million more have a serious drinking problem that they cannot manage on their own.¹⁶

The severity of hopelessness causes some to choose a permanent escape. Suicide among young people has nearly tripled since the 1950's. Today it is the third leading cause of death among teens, behind accidents and homicide.¹⁷ The suicide rate among children ages 10-14 was 1.2/100,000. The suicide rate among adolescents aged 15-19 was 8.2/100,000. Among young people 20-24 years of age the suicide rate was 12.7/100,000.¹⁸

Today we have the most reckless society of youth ever. Violence causes 8 out of 10 deaths among adolescents and has passed disease as the leading cause of mortality among young people. Violence (homicide and suicide) accounts for 40% of adolescent deaths. Homicide is the second leading killer and suicide is the third leading cause of death for youth, ages 15 to 24, in the United States.¹⁹ For 10 – 14-year-olds, firearm-related violence is the third leading cause of death. Firearm-related homicide is the second leading cause of death among young Americans 15 to 19 years of age.²⁰ Campus shootings have become commonplace.

Obviously, students want a reason to live! But only Jesus gives a reason to live. He is the only one who holds the answer for "the harassed, the helpless, the sheep without a shepherd."

THE LABORERS ARE FEW

Jesus recognized that the harvest was "plentiful," that the people were ripe to experience love, fulfillment, peace, and hope from God. They were searching for some-

thing worth living for, and even more important, something worth dying for.

In the same way, young people today are searching. Personally, I have never seen a time when so many students are so open to the gospel of Christ. One day a young girl I had met on campus handed me a note. It read:

Lately my life has been crazy. Everything seems to be going wrong. . . . Still I wish I had someone I could talk to. That's mostly why I was hoping we could still find a way to get together.

This young girl's family never went to church, and her parents had each been through at least one divorce after they divorced. She had never heard that God loved her and that she could have a relationship with Him. Three weeks after she handed me the note, she accepted Christ through another student involved in our ministry.

Students are searching frantically, desperately. They want to know if they can trust anyone, if anyone cares, if anyone is real.

Students want to know if love and commitment are just words or something they can truly experience.

One of the primary reasons young people have premarital sex is because they long for love or anything that resembles it. They also wonder if God really exists and if He can love them just the way they are.

But if students keep coming up empty handed, it's because very few people make themselves available to share the unconditional love of God with them. We have spent a combined total of more than thirty years on the campus, yet we have encountered very few youth workers in that time. In a ten-year period only five other youth workers visited our campus. Two of those were Mormon missionaries.

It is frequently said that a high school student will have only a 15 percent chance of accepting Christ later in life if he hasn't done so before graduation. In light of that, Jesus' statement in John 20:21 makes great sense: "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."

God wants to use you to bring the love of Christ to the campus. Will you go?

TAKING ACTION

The "Open Your Eyes" Strategy

1. In your work with young people, when have you been frustrated by your inability to make the kind of impact you want to make? Identify one or two specific frustrations.

2. As you read through Matthew 9:35-38 thoughtfully, describe why you think Jesus "went" through all the towns and villages.

3. From what you learned in this chapter, why is it important for you to go? Give at least three reasons.

4. Give a specific description of how students you know feel harassed, helpless, and like sheep without a shepherd in each of the areas listed below. Ask the Lord to help you identify with what they feel.

Emotionally:

Socially:

Spiritually:

5. Imagine that Jesus came to visit your local campus. Why would He tell you "the harvest is plentiful" there?

6. Why would Jesus say "the laborers are few" in talking about your campus?

7. When Jesus says, "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field," how do you think that statement applies to your local situation?

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PENETRATING THE CAMPUS

8. From what you have discovered in this chapter, what is the one compelling reason that will motivate you to go to the campus?

9. After praying about this question every day for a week, answer the question, "Will I go?" Record your response below.

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