



Redeeming the Time: Part I

by Melissa Woltmann

Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is. ~ Ephesians 5:16, 17

Youth ministry has changed much over the last several decades. Unfortunately, the changes have not been for the good of the children. In this two part series we are going to take a closer look at youth ministry in the church. In part one we will look at the five major areas of youth ministry in our local churches. Part two will discuss suggestions for you to consider in your ministry to redeem the time you have with your youth.

As a child, I was blessed with a church that had a strong youth and bus ministry that practiced reaching, teaching and preaching. Did we have crazy things going on? YES. Goldfish swallowing (real, not crackers!), parachutists, gigantic ice cream sundaes, puppets, and many other outlandish, attention-getting promotions were used to get the kids to come. A sense of excitement prevailed. Most importantly, however, was the emphasis on the message. Looking back, I see even clearer the goal that was set forth: Reach the kids at any cost for their souls are on the line and we may not have another opportunity. I also see how after the soul was won a practice of discipleship was enacted with an emphasis on reaching more.

But I have noticed a change in some churches since the late 70's. The aspect of reaching, teaching and preaching has been replaced with fun, frolic and storytelling both in practice and materials. The emphasis has switched from salvation, doctrine, and practical application to one of telling stories with character building and morals. There is not anything wrong with teaching character traits in our youth ministries, but a child with strong character traits and morals who has not been taught of God's saving grace and accepted that grace is an unsaved child going to hell. While that is not a popular thought, it is the truth.

Where is the change occurring? Let us examine five main areas that are part of most churches. First is the Sunday school. What do you know about Sunday school? Sunday school was first created by the Wesley's to teach adults and children to read using the Bible. It was practical. As schools became more prevalent, Sunday school was a time to learn about God's Word, His people and to apply the lessons learned to our everyday lives - practical. The Bible stories that were once taught to our children with practical application are now simply stories about people in the Bible with little application of how we can learn from them. It seems more and more is being done to fictionalize Scripture, to make the stories more like myths or fables, than to teach them as true facts of history.

Vacation Bible School (VBS) is the second major area in most churches where big changes have occurred over the years. In times past VBS was a half day or all day event that lasted for a week. It could be done that way because the majority of the workers were stay at home moms and grandpar-

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ents. Games, crafts, snacks, Scripture learning and lessons all could be incorporated with 30 minutes to an hour for each. There also might have been an opening program, a closing program and practice for a parent's program for the end of the week. The majority of VBS' are now 1 ½ hours start to finish. Yet, still we try to incorporate ALL the activities of the all day vacation Bible school. If only 15 minutes each were allotted to games, crafts, snacks, verses, a Bible lesson, opening, closing and practice, the VBS would be 2 hours long – provided everything runs smoothly! We still have not included transition times of 5 minutes minimum. We are finding that the areas that are hurt the most with this schedule is the Bible and Scripture learning times – the two areas that are needed the most.

Junior Church is the third youth ministry that many churches have. (For clarity's sake, let me just say that I am referring to Junior Church's that include 1st through 5th grade.) There are some that believe that children need to be in the morning preaching hour, which is their prerogative. However, I firmly believe that a Junior Church ministry done right is an asset to the church. In days gone by a Junior Church was an evangelistic outreach to children. Again, those done right were a blessing to the church body. Over the years, the Junior Church ministry has received a bad reputation because of the many ministries that were handled incorrectly. Instead of focusing on evangelizing children and training them for "Big Church" and service in their church, many Junior Church ministries have taken one of two different roads.

The first road is to "baby" the children. This may be done in part by adults not believing that children can understand Scripture. Mark 10: 15, *Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein.* Scripture is already on a child's level. We do not need to "bring it down to their level". Instead of expanding their Biblical knowledge and understanding, many are re-hashing Bible stories the children already know, watering down the meaning in the process. Instead of teaching songs with strong Bible doctrine and lessons, such as hymns and choruses, songs such as "Deep and Wide" and "Father Abraham", songs with no lesson whatsoever, are sung again and again. Is there anything wrong with fun and action songs? No. Children do need to get the wiggles out and these songs serve their purpose, but there needs to be a balance which we are not seeing.

The idea of the second road that Junior Church ministries have taken is that of entertainment. The workers try to entertain the children for an hour so that the children will not disturb the main service. The focus is on puppet shows with morality teaching, videos, game times, etc. Can these aspects be used in Junior Church? ABSOLUTELY, use them on occasion and make sure they have a purpose to enhance the lessons being taught. These aspects should not be used as babysitting measures.

Many churches also have Wednesday evening programs. One major problem we are noticing is the infiltration of other versions in the materials. "What does the Bible really say?" Some materials include both KJV and NIV (or other versions) verses for the memory verses. For a child, this is confusing. "Which is right?" "Why?" All of these questions are still being argued by adults. How is a child



expected to understand the text issue when most adults cannot intelligently answer these questions with accurate facts, nor have a full understanding of the significance of the text issue?

The last area, the area where most youth workers focus, is that of the Youth Group, the teens. When the ground work is properly laid in the elementary years, the youth group will be an enormous blessing to the church. There was a time when teens by large numbers were answering the call into full-time service. We do not see that today. Some churches do not see teens called out at all. While it may not be a pleasant thought, and some will consider it giving up, barring a life changing event, children who have not been reached by age 13 will more than likely fall away from the church. If the teens have parents who continue to bring them to church, then the children will likely stay in church until they are 16, when cars and jobs enter the picture. The teens that fall away at 13 and 16 were not reached as children and trained in serving the Lord at an early age. Many youth groups that appear to be thriving, primarily in numbers, do so simply because they provide entertainment. The criteria for what is a good youth group have changed drastically. Many parents choose a church that has teen entertainment to help them keep their teens out of trouble instead of choosing a church that has a youth group that will teach them to live in this sinful world according to God's Word and how to serve the Lord the rest of their lives.

All is not lost. There are churches that had started down the wrong roads but are turning around. There are churches that never left and are still holding firm today. We must not lose the next generation. With life expectancies in the early 80's, we theoretically only have these children for approximately one fourth of their lives IF from cradle to cap and gown. Many children we can reach for only a few years or less. We must redeem the time that we have been given.

For more, go to "Redeeming the Time: Part II"