

GOOD NEWS FOR YOUTH DRIFTING AWAY FROM THE CHURCH

**By Paul Penno Jr.
August 28, 2010**

There was a panel discussion in a church on “Why So Many Youth Drift Away From the Church.” It was lively; many adults wanted to say something. First, everyone pretty much had to agree there *is* a problem; a large percentage of youth walk out the back door when they come to their late teens. Second, they had done some research in the various “surveys” that church leaders have done; the experts analyze a percentage loss is 45% to 50%. Which means simply and starkly: of all the children who came down in front for the children’s story this Sabbath, we will visibly lose roughly half of them in ten years, unless some blessing comes that hasn’t come yet (how many who still make an appearance but are alienated in heart is another matter!).

Third, various reasons were explored for this appalling loss, and most suggested it had to do with home problems. Too much worldiness there, too much TV, too much materialism (“fun” is shopping in the mall), no “family worship,” no study of Sabbath School lessons, parents disinterested, etc., etc. Maybe sending more children to church schools, church academies, church high schools and colleges, would help. But some of the scientific surveys indicate that spiritual boredom or confusion sets in at these schools! In some such the attrition rate is alarming, especially the more affluent ones.

The panel discussion ended hung up: which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Why does lax home training or unspiritual church school education seem so ineffective in “holding” our youth? Why? No one seemed to connect what Jesus says in His message to “the angel of the church of the Laodiceans” with this heart-rending problem (incidentally I see few tears shed over this loss of our youth). The lack of spiritual guidance in the homes and even in the schools is due (says Jesus) to spiritual lukewarmness first of all in the church itself (“thou knowest not that thou art . . . poor, and blind” in the one essential-understanding and proclaiming the pure gospel of justification by faith. Rev 3:14-21).

The truth about the gospel is anything but boring, but “old covenant” versions of it leave human hearts, young or old, cold. Conclusion: plead with God to give you a “hunger and thirst” for it, a contrite melted heart, so you can communicate true Good News to some child or youth, and thus save one.

The nation is absorbed in hand-wringing over the plight of our children and youth who are watching thousands of bloody murders on the screen, and for whom murder in cold blood is glamorized thereby. They are being desensitized, “natural affection” being driven out of their souls. Not many as yet have thrown bombs and bullets at us, but the satanic hatred seethes in many of their breasts. All they need is some automatics in their hands. What can be done to help? is the anguished cry echoed in newspapers and newsmagazines. Should we

show them more violence? No; but the Bible startles us with the suggestion, Yes. The most ultimate violence that has ever been perpetrated was the murder of the Son of God, and the Bible tells us that these children and youth need to see it. It wasn't merely putting a Man to sleep as bullets and bombs do; it sent Him to the second death. And Jesus says the story must be told: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all unto Me. This He said, signifying what death He should die" (Jn. 12:32, 33). The apostles everywhere proclaimed "Christ crucified," sparing nothing in telling the gruesome details. They gloried in the story, not because it glamorized violence, but because it was the only cure for violence. It was a torture more cruel than what suicide bombers inflict on their victims. But it was not mere human sadism that drove the scribes and Pharisees to demand of Pilate, "Crucify Him!" They were obsessed with a mysterious hatred of God Himself, the roots of which linger in the dark shadows of every human heart. It was not only deicide; it was the dark desire to blot God and His righteousness out of the universe. The murderers of Jesus were Satan-possessed; and they held up a mirror for us all to look and see ourselves—what we would be and what we would do if we had been in their place, but for the grace of God. But how can telling the story of the cross help violence-saturated children and youth? God resurrected Him! And He judged His murderers; and the world has judged them likewise. It's the story of the Murder of all murders because it follows the plot through to its end—which no

ordinary human murder ever can do. "It won't help hardened criminals!" someone objects. Don't be too sure; that old, old story, properly told, is the only hope this dark world has, and youth and children need to hear it—soon.

What can give young people an experience that will capture their heart-devotion to Christ? What can keep them faithful in today's seductive allurements even through the trials in the ultimate mark of the beast crisis? For sure, deception has never been more subtle and enticing than it is today.

"But where sin abound[s], grace [does] much more abound" (Rom 5:20). One thoughtful writer has said, "God has enriched the world in these last days proportionately with the increase of ungodliness if His people will only lay hold of His priceless gift" (*Christ Triumphant*, reading for December 16, 2000). What is that "priceless gift"? An increased "enrichment" of His grace that is greater than the "increased ungodliness" that thoughtful people deplore. Youth will not respond to increased fear-laden propaganda. Spouting hell-fire and brimstone may frighten them temporarily, but they will soon relapse into their usual spiritual complacency. Only a message of "grace" gets enthroned in young people's hearts. Thank God, His Holy Spirit is working to "enrich the world" with a message of much more abounding grace that is more than complementary to the devil's abounding sin of today. Youth are bombarded with Christmas carols but few are encouraged to stop and think about what the angel said to the shepherds at Bethlehem: "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you,

which will bring great joy to all the people” (Lk. 2:10, GNB). Those parents, teachers and pastors who have a heart burden to help youth must ponder that message: fear is not the motivation that will work! The shepherds were “terribly afraid,” says Luke; but the angel said, That fear is not what I want to awaken in your hearts; I want you to appreciate how good the Good News is which I bring you! Children and youth need massive injections of the “news” of that grace. And don’t be afraid that “news” about “grace” will encourage sin; nothing else can motivate anyone to “deny ungodliness and worldly lusts” (Titus 2:11).

The news told of a little girl named Paige in the Northeast who is suffering from incurable leukemia. Her parents are afraid she won’t last until Christmas. Christmas is her happiest thought (she knows nothing better), so the parents got the fire department to create artificial snow for her front yard, covering the bushes, the grass, and Christmas reindeer in place. They brought in a Christmas tree, everything to make the illusion that it was Christmas in July, for her to enjoy before she dies. But it’s a pity that little Paige couldn’t have been at an Adventist school “graduation”, when the majority of the children voted to say that if they had their choice of having either the Christmas week or the church school, and couldn’t have both, they would choose the church school. The children’s hearts were touched by the realities of the gospel. In fact, children’s hearts are more reachable than the hearts of adults. If the heart is reached in childhood, there is good reason to believe the entire

life will be totally dedicated to Christ—no backsliding, no wasted years spent in drug use and immorality, no wild teenage rebellions, then repenting at last by giving the Lord Jesus the last dregs of their ruined lives. But how can the child’s heart be reached?

“Babylon’s” gospel will not suffice, certainly not for our children. Christ must be presented to them, not as a heavenly Santa Claus who satisfies their egocentric desires (even when “spiritual”!), but as a Saviour who is one with them, who took their nature, as One in whom they can sense an identity and thus experience for Him (not for themselves only!) a genuine sympathy. If the truth of the gospel is revealed to them, they will share the Saviour’s heart burden and feel for Him. They will never forget that experience! Children’s hearts can be knit with the heart of Christ, but it doesn’t happen when the egocentric motivation is uppermost. Even an ounce of old covenant legalism can neutralize our so-called “gospel” ministry for children and youth. And then we cry our eyes out wondering why they left the church when we “did so much for them.”

Young people can hardly imagine that they will ever get old, or that they will die. They feel immortal. And they are by nature sinners like everybody else, and feel like their life belongs to them. So they are naturally selfish, like all of us are. But they may be deliriously happy in their selfishness as long as things go their way. Thoughts of self-sacrifice, of giving their lives in God’s service, are unwelcome.

But there must come a time when that delirious exuberance is spent, and then the misery of feeble old age takes over. And if you haven't learned in your youth how to surrender your own will to God in the same way that Jesus surrendered His own will to His Father, then you find it a very difficult lesson to learn, and you are bitterly unhappy. Solomon says quite wisely, "Remember your Creator while you are still young, before those dismal days and years come when you will say, 'I don't enjoy life.' That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you. . . . Then your arms will tremble, and your legs now strong, will grow weak. . . . Your eyes too dim to see clearly. . . . You will barely be able to hear . . . music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. . . . You will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone" (Pr. 12:1-4, GNB).

If you are young, "rejoice in thy youth, . . . but . . . know that God will bring thee into judgment" (11:9, KJV). Be sober; learn the lesson of the cross; make a conscious choice to let self be crucified with Jesus and pray His prayer, "Not as I will, but as Thou wilt" (Mt. 26:39). And if you are old and you realize you have never truly prayed that prayer, thank God for every moment of consciousness yet granted to you and plead with Him earnestly to teach you that lesson of the cross.

We've all heard the story of the town where there was a cliff overhanging it. People would often fall off over the cliff and fall below and be wounded. So the good townspeople who were "caring" people built a hospital and sent an ambulance to pick up these

hapless people who fell off the cliff. This went on for a long time until somebody thought of a better idea: why not build a fence at the top of the cliff to keep people from falling over?

At prayer meeting there was the faithful "caring" church members praying for young people who used to attend church and Sabbath school who have now given up church and are out in the world. They used to attend Sabbath school and came through the church school and church academy. Some reliable estimates say that nearly 3/4 of such children turn away from the church by the time they are 18. And parents weep their eyes out. And every effort is made to send a spiritual ambulance to bring in these casualties.

But why not build a fence at the top of the cliff? Why not give these children and youth the pure gospel, the genuine Good News? The apostle Paul guarantees that it will work! It's "the power of God unto salvation" he says (Rom 1:16). And what is the Good News? Most of the time when these sad tragedies take place, the root cause for it is legalism. And what is legalism in contrast with the Gospel? Wherever you find the teaching that (#1) salvation is due to man's initiative and man's works, you are in an atmosphere of legalism. And when you find the teaching that (#2) our salvation is initiated by God, and is His work, you are in an atmosphere of the Gospel. #1 leaves the human heart cold, discouraged, in spiritual despair; #2 captures the heart, holds its affections, and motivates to faithfulness to God, because it is the essence of the "atonement," reconciliation to God

through the blood of the Lamb of God. Let's give somebody the Gospel today!

Almost everywhere I go I meet parents who tell me sadly that one or more of their children are no longer in the church. They were raised in the church, went to sabbath school, even church school, Christian academies, etc., but now have drifted out into the world. And these parents invariably tell me they are trusting to that promise in Isaiah 49:25 that says, "I will contend with him that contendeth with thee, and I will save thy children." Precious promise; but is there something we can do to cooperate with the Lord in this wonderful work of reclaiming lost children? The father of the prodigal son was a wonderful man, but still his son rebelled. So we are not assured of 100% success, necessarily. Even Jesus lost one of His 12 disciples, and actually almost lost Peter, and the others forsook Him and fled. But there is a reason why we lose so many people, and the problem can be corrected.

The problem is the same one that ancient Israel had continually: the effects of the old covenant. The old covenant was the promise of the people to do everything just right when they promised in Exodus 19:8, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do." For generations, we have always assured our children, "Yes, the Lord will bless you; He will do this or that for you, provided you do your part!" Thus the basic idea that gets across to them is that the Lord is like a policeman or a CHP officer; He won't bother you if you keep out of trouble. It's up to you to initiate a relationship with the Lord, and to maintain it; and if

you don't, then He backs off and leaves you to yourself. The emphasis is on what *you* do to save yourself, not on what *He* has done and is doing to save you. What is the inevitable result? Dependence on self, and that leads to alienation from Christ. And then—wandering away. Let's hope it's not too late to proclaim the New Covenant to the children who have lost their way, but in the meantime let's give the New Covenant to the children of today! They must know that Christ is their Saviour 100%; nothing but that Good News will reconcile their alienated hearts to Him.

Let's ask two serious questions: (a) Does God merely *offer* us His friendship? Or (b) has He *given* it? No difference between the two ideas? Ah, look again:

If (a) is true, then He is standing aloof from you, withholding His actual friendship until *you* take the initiative and *do* something to activate it. Then when you *do* the right thing, forever afterwards you congratulate yourself for what *you have done*. In other words, it's a faith *plus* works trip.

But if (b) is the truth, and you finally realize that God has been your Friend all along and you have been too stubborn and blind to believe it, then forever afterwards your heart is melted in spiritual humility. # (a) inevitably leads to the "rich and increased with goods" condition of the church of Laodicea (Rev 3:14-21); and # (b) leads to ultimate repentance and reconciliation with Christ.

As to which is true, does the Bible give an answer? # (a) is what the Bible calls the "old covenant." And yes, you can quote old covenant

ideas in the Bible! But Galatians 4:24 says they lead to "bondage." The old covenant "version" of the gospel produces the Laodicean spiritual condition. But the new covenant is # (b). The truth is that "God so *loved* the world" (not *offered* to), "that He *gave* His only begotten Son" (not *offered* to do so), "that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish" (Jn. 3:16). Jesus said, "The bread that I will *give* is My flesh, which I will *give* for the life of the world" (not just offer to give, Jn. 6:51). The Samaritans got the point: Jesus was not merely *offering* to be "the Saviour of the world." They said He IS (Jn. 4:42). Paul got the point, for he said that "the living God . . . *is* the Saviour of all men," not merely *offering* to be (1 Tim 4:10). Isaiah saw the reason why this is true: "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us *all*" (Isa 53:6). He has already died the second death "for every man" (Heb 2:9). So, now it's time to humble your heart and believe, appreciate, what He has already done for you. That kind of faith will change your life!

We must see Abraham through his grand final victory. It is true that he had failed miserably in his (and Sarah's) unbelief that let them fall into the Old Covenant. While God had given them the New Covenant promise of having a "child of promise" (Isaac), they had disbelieved and assumed they must "work," themselves, to help fulfill it—hence, Hagar and Ishmael (Paul says they *are* the Old Covenant! See Gal. 4:22-25).

Finally, after decades of heart-bitterness even while they were having daily family worship and doing their Sabbath-keeping, Sarah allowed her

unbelieving heart to be melted in repentance (see Heb. 11:11). Let the gynecologists argue it out: her new and different feelings about God made it possible for her to get pregnant, and "by faith Sarah received strength to conceive." All this time, they were "one flesh" and so Abraham shared the repentance with her.

Isaac came, well named—"laughter." Grew to be a most delightful teen, the joy of their hearts.

Then the bomb, when Abraham was old and weak: the same voice of God that had made the promises now told him to offer the beloved son as a sacrifice on a hill to be known as Calvary (Gen. 22:1, 2). The years of bonding went further than if he'd been told to do this when Isaac was a baby. Sarah couldn't take it. Father roused Isaac, left without telling her goodbye (vs. 3).

That three-day safari was the longest and saddest Abraham had ever taken. But when puzzled Isaac quizzed him, he expressed no Old Covenant despair as we would do probably. Instead: "My son, God will provide Himself a lamb."

A shining tribute to "Christian education": Isaac then joined in the willingness of the sacrifice. He had learned to believe the New Covenant promises.

Note: Abraham didn't actually kill Isaac with his knife—but he made the full commitment to make the sacrifice. "You have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me," said God" (vs. 12). It reflected Christ's cross. Christ didn't go into the literal Lake of Fire, but He made the full commitment, and thus He died the equivalent of our second death. (Let's say "Thank You!")

Now Abraham has finally earned his title, “father of the faithful.”