

## TEENS & VALUES: KEEPING THE FAITH IN A PLURALISTIC SOCIETY

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Tom, a high school junior, is active in his church youth group. He sings in the youth choir. He faithfully attends church and has even participated in a short-term missions trip. Tom calls himself a Christian and will even tell you that he received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at the age of eight. At school, Tom is a leader of a group which advocates being drug free. Yet, Tom and his girlfriend are sexually active. Within himself, Tom rationalizes his actions by arguing that he loves his girlfriend and that he is faithful to her. He notes that they practice "safe sex."

Susan is also active in her youth group and is an honor student. Her mother and father divorced when she was six, and her mother was left alone to raise three children. Susan is a "pleaser." To her, the greatest evil is disapproval. When Susan's group of friends at school began to pressure her into attending their parties, she went along. When her boyfriend pressured her for sex, Susan gave in. When her mother pressured her to participate in a local beauty pageant, Susan nearly starved herself in order to look good in a bathing suit. At church, Susan knows all the right answers. She likes to please her teachers and her youth group leaders. Whenever she is called upon to do something, she readily accepts. Everyone likes Susan. But Susan does not like herself. She does not even know who she is, and God seems far away and uninterested.

There are many Toms and Susans in Pentecostal churches. They are not valueless. In fact, they are strongly committed to their opinions about moral issues such as abortion, the death penalty, and drug abuse. But neither are they persons whose lives reveal a consistent Christian testimony. Their concepts of right and wrong, while deeply felt, seem to lack any consistent pattern of development. They may enthusiastically defend one biblical teaching and at the same time rationalize away a major commandment of the Scriptures. It is as if they

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have drawn their values from systems of belief which are opposed to each other. How do the Toms and Susans of our churches develop and hold together such contradictory views of morality?

Inconsistencies in the values of teenagers may well be related to the absence of consistent relationships with adults. According to the noted adolescent and child psychologist, David Elkind, "there is no place for teenagers in American society today — not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large (3)." By "place" Elkind means a relational zone which would allow for a measured and controlled introduction into adulthood. Teenagers need a place in society, one which provides the time, protection, and guidance needed to form a personal identity. This "place" is not something they can create for themselves. It must be created for them by significant adults.

Youth need the love, protection, and authority of adults in order to formulate an identity. Although they are no longer children, teenagers still need an umbrella of protection against the tremendous stresses found in contemporary society. Within this umbrella, teenagers can have the freedom to construct a personal identity which Elkind defines as "an abiding sense of self that brings together and gives meaning to the teenager's past while at the same time giving him or her guidance and direction for the future" (5). As teens construct their personal identity they need a clearly defined value system against which to test the values of others and their own.

However, many adults today are so busy coping with their own issues that they have too little time or resources to adequately protect and nurture adolescents. Often the significant adults in the lives of teens don't know their own values. Our society at large adds to the confusion by stressing individual and subjective choices in all of life's issues. Our society as a whole lacks an inner core of beliefs and values. Pluralism has become our highest good. Without a secure and consistent network of adult relationships, it is virtually impossible for today's teenagers to firmly establish their sense of personal identity.

Many young people today simply become all grown up way too soon. The absence of a measured and controlled introduction into adulthood results in a premature adulthood in which the young person is forced to construct a patchwork

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identity out of the options they find available. They act like adults, they look like adults, they attempt to cope with adult pressures, yet they have not had the opportunity to construct a core identity. They patch together an identity from various sources: contemporary media, peers, teachers, and sometimes the church. This "patchwork identity" has little internal consistency.

Even teenagers who are active in the church can become patchwork selves. They may develop the attitude of "when in Rome do as the Romans do." Such young people are inconsistent in their beliefs and values and are easily swayed by others. These young people may patch together fragments of the values of a consumer culture with fragments of values learned in Sunday School or in the youth group. Without an inner core identity of who they are as persons, they are void of the resources needed to know who they are before God. They know what it means to be like Christians; they do not know what it means to be a Christian. What they need are internal and external assets which inform and strengthen their faith commitments. (see appendices 2 and 3)

#### Conflicting Approaches

Many people are concerned about the decline of values among the youth of the world, especially in our inner cities. Public officials, school leaders, and concerned citizens are striving to find a solution before the next generation destroys itself. There are two conflicting approaches to the problem. *Values clarification* represents one approach which is characterized by the belief that people discover values by looking inside themselves. *Traditionalism* offers an alternative approach which is characterized by the belief that values must be preserved by society and transmitted to each generation.

#### Values Clarification

In general the American educational system is committed to solving the problem of declining morals through exercises in *values clarification*. Values clarification is an educational methodology which attempts to help youth develop a system of moral beliefs by exploring their true inner responses to hypothetical moral crises. It is largely the application of the research and theories of the noted psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg believed there exists certain inherent,

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universal values which govern the moral development of all people. At the core of his theory was the idea that all humans have a sense of justice which forms the sounding board for all moral reasoning.

According to Kohlberg people grow through predetermined stages of psycho-social development. Each stage is characterized by its own type of moral reasoning. Individuals at the same stage may have opposing views on moral issues but each will have reached his view through a similar process of reasoning. For example, young children determine what is right by considering the likelihood of rewards and punishment. Older children are governed by a sense of fairness and "law and order." One of the challenges of youth is to move from such *preconventional* reasoning into a stage of *conventional* moral reasoning in which one defines morality as the performance of good acts according to an established set of principles, for example, the Golden Rule.

The method of values clarification is dependent upon the belief that each individual must determine what is good by searching inside himself. Teachers and dialogue partners may facilitate the process especially by challenging inconsistencies in logic and noting the consequences of decisions, but the learner must decide for himself what is right and what is wrong. After all, it is argued, people live their lives by their own standards whether we want them to or not.

As a method, values clarification is not the great evil it is often portrayed to be. It simply asks the learner to solve a moral problem in a consistent manner and with personal integrity. If the learner accepts that there are authoritative sources outside of himself (God and His Word), then these exercises can help prepare for the unknown decisions which are in everyone's future.

But values clarification is more than a method. It is a movement in our society which is flawed at the core of its own reasoning. Those who promote values clarification erroneously claim that it is value neutral; it is non-sectarian. Through this method a pluralistic society is supposedly able to cultivate high moral standards without drawing upon religious doctrines. Students are never told what to believe; they are merely required to state their judgment about moral situations and defend through reason alone the judgment they have made.

The danger of the movement is that it does demand that

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the student adhere to a particular religious doctrine; a doctrine which teaches that humans are fundamentally good in their inner nature and are able to set their own standards of morality. As used in the public schools of America, values clarification forces children and youth to build systems of beliefs and values that are absent of God. It is idolatrous to ignore God, in any area of life. In the case of values clarification, He is denied His glory and sovereignty by the very process:

**Traditionalism**

Through much of western history, it has been believed that values must be found in the established traditions of society and that those traditions must be effectively transmitted to each generation. The emphasis is on *transmission*. Values are developed by accepting and conforming to established truths. Traditionalism stresses memorization as a primary tool for the transmission of truth, and discipline as the central means of conforming to the truth.

Traditionalism is rapidly disappearing in the western world. To a large degree, this can be attributed to the surrender of our children to state sponsored public education in a pluralistic society. There are many Christian groups which still espouse this philosophy. Most, but not all, are classified as conservative or fundamentalist.

Pentecostals should not be quick to subscribe to traditionalism. It is a man-made system which tends to reduce the transforming power of God's Spirit to the level of human effort. It is a deceptive system which teaches each generation that the greatest good is to conform outwardly. If the methods of values clarification teach that the individual is the final authority in determining what is good, the methods of traditionalism teach that human effort is sufficient to achieve all necessary good. Traditionalism fails because of its misguided optimism that values can be transmitted.

The real problem before us is not to help teens adopt established Christian values as if values are options which may or may not be added to a base model of being Christian. True values flow out of our personal sense of identity. They are expressions of our deepest beliefs about who we are and how we are to relate to others. What we value cannot be separated from what we believe. *Our objective is not to help teens form Christian values but rather to form teens in the Christian faith so*

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that Godly values flow out of them. The values they express will reflect how well we helped them become mature Christians, persons of deep conviction.

### Convictional Values

Conviction is not a popular word. Sadly, the church has substituted the language of "values" for the language of conviction. We often want to help our kids clarify their values or adopt our values, but rarely do we strive to help them develop convictions. Our convictions form the core of our character. They are those tenacious beliefs, which when held, give definition to the character of a person or of a community, so that if they were surrendered, the person or the community would be significantly changed (Dykstra 50-62). So we might say that we are our convictions. People of conviction are those whose manifold activities have a coherence. Their lives tell a truthful story. They embody the traditions of their faith community not in the nature of conformity, but in such a manner as to articulate its foundational beliefs. People of conviction may, at times, "break the traditions" in order to point toward the true meaning of faith. Jesus breaking the Sabbath laws in order to heal is an example of this. People of conviction are a "convicting presence" in the world, pointing to the very heart of faith.

Convictions are formed and expressed as testimony. Recall the persons you know whom you would say are people of conviction. They have a story to tell about how they came to believe and to act as they do. Their convictions have been developed through life experiences by sustained attention to the truth of Scripture and of their faith community. Their convictions have endured and matured through the hardships of life and empower them to endure until the end. A people of conviction will keep the faith in spite of hardships, persecution, and temptation. They are not easily swayed by "every wind of doctrine." Yet they are without harsh judgment. They do not coerce others into believing as they do. However, they do exist as judgment upon a world of false truth. Their very existence exposes the lies of a pluralistic society.

How do we nurture such persons? Are they a relic of the past? Should we give up on our teens being persons of conviction and hope that they will at least develop "some decent Christian values"? It is our contention that we should

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not give up. Rather, we should gird ourselves for the battle ahead for the souls of our children. The battle begins by asking the question "what does it mean to truly know and love God?" It is continued by asking, "what does it mean to be a mature Christian?" These are the core questions of life and death, heaven and hell. Our teenagers must be led into asking these questions for themselves, and then finding the correct answers.

Unfortunately, many Pentecostal churches are avoiding the central questions of Christianity. They offer their teens programs without the transforming power of God. They are conforming to the world and the world's standards for maturity. They are forming their youth into religious "patchwork kids" who lack the knowledge of salvation.

### The Formation of Religious Patchwork Kids: A Case Study

Sunshine Fellowship is located on Disneyland Avenue in a growing community. Things are booming at Sunshine. They are noted for their powerful worship services and charismatic leadership. Their youth ministry has the reputation of being the most dynamic in the state. Sunshine also excels in developing patchwork teens. Their "formula for failure" may be summarized into four points: focus on peripheral issues, farm out the youth ministry, separate the youth, and don't offend the youth.

#### Focus on Peripheral Issues

Sunshine's youth ministry is noted for its activities. The youth minister's calendar is filled with outings, lock-ins, concerts, and a host of other opportunities for youth involvement. The people of Sunshine are proud of their newly developed family life center where the young people can have all types of recreational activities. The church recently purchased two new vans.

Sunshine's youth meetings are filled with fun activities with competition being critical for continued growth. Bible study is packaged so as not to be too long or too boring. It is the icing on the cake after a night of action-packed activities. The Bible studies focus on the teenagers' needs such as developing a better self-image or overcoming depression. The youth at Sunshine have never studied the beliefs of their denomination. They do not know what is distinctive about

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being a Pentecostal believer.

**Farm Out the Youth Ministry**

The adults at Sunshine are proud of their youth ministry. They are able to afford a full-time minister of youth who is a bright and energetic recent college graduate. He has pulled together a team of five or six young adults to work with him. The pastor has stressed to the youth minister that the youth at Sunshine are his responsibility. Rarely does the pastor discuss with the minister of youth issues relating to the spiritual life of the young people. Instead, he periodically checks his activities calendar and his attendance records. As long as the parents and teens seem happy, the pastor is content. Most of the adults of Sunshine had little or no contact with the youth of the church. They enjoy the once-a-month youth services presented by the youth and are thrilled by the drama and musical presentations the youth perform on special occasions.

Many of the adults at Sunshine are busy coping with their own life issues. They feel that they have little to give to the youth. They are relieved to have someone else nurture the next generation. These adults come to church to get a blessing. They have not yet matured to the point of coming to church to be a blessing.

**Separate the Youth**

On the surface, it would seem that Sunshine gives the youth many opportunities in which to find their "place." But in actuality, there is only one place for them—in the youth program. Rather than regularly integrating the youth into the full life of the church: its worship, its fellowship, its study, and its witness, Sunshine has totally separated youth worship, fellowship, study, and witnessing. Most of the youth have never been asked to take up the offering, lead in prayer, play a musical instrument, assist in a Sunday School class, or participate in visitation. They are not encouraged to offer their testimony, and it is rare when the youth and the adults pray together at the altar.

Sunshine is giving the youth exactly what their society as a whole is giving them: institutional formation by peer grouping. Many of their youth have been institutionally isolated from adults since as infants they were placed in day care centers. Their public school experiences have provided

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little interaction with the adult world and often their parents are too busy to spend the time needed to integrate them into the adult world. For many of the youth, their closest companion is the television, where illusive images give them a fleeting sense of intimacy.

While the youth at Sunshine have experiences with God, they have little opportunity to form these experiences into a Christian life-style. To do so would require the assistance of caring adults. The adults of Sunshine are not available.

**Do Not Offend the Youth**

Many of the adults at Sunshine remember the days when, as young people, they were subjected to legalism. They recall "horror stories" of not being allowed to participate in activities such as swimming parties, proms, and even ball games. The parents of teens at Sunshine did not want their children to view the Christian life as a list of taboos. Instead, they wanted them to know God as a God of love and to be guided by Christian principles rather than rules. They wanted the youth minister to emphasize the positive side of being Christian.

The folks at Sunshine do not discipline their youth because they do not want to offend them. Instead, they have provided a ministry free from fear. The kids are not fearful of missing the Second Coming of Christ. They are not fearful of hell. They are not fearful of the church leaders nor their parents. Consequently, the youth do not know what it is to fear and to respect God. Their "god" understands them and overlooks their weaknesses. He is like a mild mannered coach on their journey toward self-fulfillment. God is only one part of their patchwork identity. He is not the central core.

Also, in its desire not to be legalistic, Sunshine has failed to critique the dominant cultural values which are being offered to their youth on a daily basis. Instead, the church offers "Christian" consumerism, "Christian" competition, and "Christian" individualism. The youth at Sunshine are not critical of their environment to the degree that they feel like "resident aliens" in a strange land. They (and their parents) are comfortable with the world. For instance, many of the youth are addicted to MTV or violent video games. They have found these to be an after-school alternative. The minister of youth finds it difficult to compete with the surreal images of hype and the adrenaline rushes experienced through MTV and video games. When he has attempted to enlist the parents'

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assistance in curtailing these activities, he often gets excuses such as, "it's hard to know what they are doing all the time. We can't seem to control them, especially when we are not at home."

Sunshine Fellowship is helping to raise a generation of patchwork kids. But what can we do to truly disciple our youth? How can we turn patchwork kids into convicted ones? Do we return to a form of legalism? While authoritarianism has its appeal to a patchwork generation (witness the rise in cults), it is not a legitimate, biblical model for instilling a core of values and beliefs which will stand the test of time. There are several critical "ingredients" which are vital toward developing youth who have that all important integrated sense of self.

#### Developing Convicted Teens: A Case Study

Morning Star Church struggles with roughly the same societal pressures as does the Sunshine Fellowship. Yet Morning Star is much better at helping their youth develop an integrated Christian identity. Their "formula for success" may be summarized into four key ingredients: emphasize the essentials, own the youth, integrate the youth into the life of the church, and be willing to discipline.

#### Emphasize the Essentials

The people at Morning Star attempt to provide a balanced program for their youth. They provide Bible study, service opportunities, worship, and fellowship. They have specific goals in each of these four areas. For instance, one of their goals in the area of Bible study is "for the youth to experience direct Bible Study which helps them to interpret life in light of Scripture." The youth minister's calendar reveals an attempt to provide adequate fun times while providing opportunities for the other areas.

The pastor and parents believe that it is essential for the young people to know the basic tenets of their faith. Therefore, the church provides opportunities for their youth such as classes on "Knowing Where You Came From" or "Getting to Know Your Faith." Some of the youth recently participated in a drama which depicted the founding of the Pentecostal movement. They were fascinated to find out how

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the Klu Klux Klan had actively persecuted the early Pentecostal believers. One youth commented, "I played the role of one of the Klansmen who participated in the burning of one of the Pentecostal's first church buildings. We were really hated! I have a new appreciation for the sacrifices made by our founders."

The pastor at Morning Star recently stated to the congregation, "If we do not attempt to ground our youth in the essentials of being a Christian, no one else will do this for us. We can forget about the world helping us to raise our kids as Christians. It is up to us to help our kids develop a distinctive Christian identity."

#### Own the Youth

The people of Morning Star take their children and youth very seriously. From the time of their birth, the children receive both verbal and written blessings from members of the congregation. The pastor and the elders constantly remind the congregation that the children and youth at Morning Star are gifts from God to every member of the congregation. They are reminded that they have a responsibility of stewardship, even though they may have no children themselves. The message the kids receive is that they are both wanted and needed by the church.

The youth at Morning Star are not "farmed out" to a few overworked people. Prayer mothers and fathers are assigned to each child and teenager. The Sunday School has an apprentice system with a youth being assigned as an assistant to veteran teachers. Whenever there is a special event in a kid's life, it is noted and celebrated by the congregation.

The youth at Morning Star feel that they have a place, a home where they belong. The "place" called church is not just one of many places they happen to visit. Rather, it becomes a central place of identity for them. One youth recently told the pastor, "Whenever I'm at school I have a feeling that I'm not one of them . . . I mean I like everyone and I get along well . . . but at church I can be myself . . . like you guys really want and need me." In the mind of the pastor, this was the highest complement anyone could make about the church.

Morning Star's ownership of its kids does not come easy. They have youth whose parents are not committed Christians. Some of the congregation don't seem to understand why they

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have to be bothered with helping to raise someone else's kids. Their youth live in a world which entices them with other identities and relationships. Yet, the church continually strives to lay claim to their kids, for they know that the world is not neutral territory. It is composed of active forces vying for ownership of their youth. The people at Morning Star know that there are people such as Bob Pittman, one of the creators of MTV, who has made the observation: "At MTV, we don't shoot for the fourteen-year-olds, **we own them.**" (Schultze 192)

#### Integrate the Youth Into the Life of the Church

The "place" that the people of Morning Star give to their young people is not a ghetto called the youth program. While the church has specific programs designed only for adolescents, these programs are not the only place you will find the young people. On any given Sunday morning you will find the youth assisting in Sunday School classes, working in the church nursery, singing in the choir, playing their instruments in the orchestra, taking up the offering, reading Scripture, taking prayer requests, and participating in a host of other ways in the life of the church. While the church has special youth services, the youth are not limited to these occasions. The youth are the church as it worships, studies, fellowships, and serves.

The people at Morning Star realize that their young people need opportunities to integrate their Christian experiences into the life of the community. They know that their kids need the world of adults and the world of adults need the youth. The youth need the presence of adults who will guide them, protect them, observe them, exhort them, encourage them, touch them, and hear them. These adults provide a tangible "otherness" over against which the youth can develop that important inner core of identity. These adults serve as mirrors to the youth, reflecting to them the Christian life-style. Often the pastor will remind the people that their lives are open books being read by the younger generation.

It is important, therefore, for churches like Morning Star to designate those who are spiritually mature as elders. The church takes very seriously those New Testament passages describing the qualification of church leaders. They do not allow novices in the faith (no matter how much energy and enthusiasm they have) to lead the youth. It is known at

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Morning Star that if you want to work with the youth, your life will have to measure up to strict standards.

By being integrated into the life of the church, the youth at Morning Star have learned that the church does not exist merely for their entertainment. They have had to learn to endure Sister Jones' litany of her most recent fight with the devil. They have come to appreciate the diversity yet the unity which can be found in the body of Christ. The values developed by the youth are not being developed in a vacuum. They are not being developed without the presence of significant adults whose lives point toward a life-style characterized by conviction.

#### Be Willing To Discipline

A sign in the window of a Washington toy shop listed the changing advice that child specialists have given about discipline over the past sixty years:

- 1920 - *spank them*
- 1930 - *deprive them*
- 1940 - *ignore them*
- 1950 - *reason with them*
- 1960 - *love them*
- 1970 - *spank them lovingly*
- 1980 - *to hell with them*

(Campolo 69)

To discipline means to train or to mold a person into a desired way of life and behavior. Unfortunately, the church has often adopted the last slogan. It seems easier to give up on discipline than to struggle to do it right. Yet, the people of Morning Star are willing to pay the price of molding and shaping their kids into people whose lives reflect godly character.

But the struggle is what the people of Morning Star are willing to do. While they do not favor the long lists of taboos experienced in legalism, they do believe that the Christian life is a marked life. One which is marked by the righteousness of Christ. They believe that Christians should be convicted people.

In order to help their youth develop Christian convictions, the people of Morning Star are willing to live out their own convictions. They are willing to live disciplined lives. The

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people at Morning Star take sin seriously. They encourage confession and repentance within the context of covenant and accountability. Whenever a young person confesses a sin there are adults ready to help that young person receive the joy of forgiveness and to help them in the difficult task of facing the consequences of their behavior. They walk with them through the withdrawal of addictive substances. They go with them when restitution is needing to be made. They lovingly support a teenage mother through her pregnancy, and are available to help her in deciding her child's future. The youth at Morning Star are not immune to sin, but they are learning to lead lives which overcome the power of sin. The people at Morning Star stress the need for sanctification. They encourage their youth to seek to have their desires changed to the degree that they begin to hunger for that which is godly and to hunger for God.

The pastor at Morning Star helps the congregation to be critically aware of their world. Recently he and the youth pastor asked the parents to watch one hour of MTV and to make a note regarding everything that was presented during this block of time. The parents and the ministers got together and compared notes. They expressed horror and dismay at the blatant evil being presented to young audiences. All of the parents who participated came to the conclusion that MTV would be off limits to their kids. More and more of the parents at Morning Star are taking "radical" measures such as discontinuing cable television altogether. Conviction is being expressed by both the parents and the youth. For instance, one youth recently expressed disgust at the teenage magazine found in her school's library. "God has convicted me of reading them. I was finding myself wanting to look like and even act like the people portrayed there."

The people at Morning Star are not afraid of knowing what is going on in the world about them. They want to guide their youth in critiquing the values of the larger society. Often the youth and the adults do not see eye to eye on some issues, such as music. But they are striving to respect each other and to fear God more than the larger society. Such discipline takes huge efforts of getting involved in the lives of the youth, however, the people at Morning Star have come to realize that the "to hell with them" approach will do just that—resign them to the prince of darkness who would be delighted to have them.

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## Conclusion

It is not easy to be a Christian teenager today. Paganism, not Christianity, is the state religion of America and much of the world. While early Christians knew themselves to be a minority in an environment hostile to Christianity, we often tend to think that our beliefs and values are to be supported by society. We are shocked to see our kids turning into pagans worshipping the gods of this age. It is time to wake up. Our world is not even neutral territory. We and our children are aliens, strangers in a world which is not yet fully under the rule of Christ. How then, do we live? How do we carve out a place in this present darkness which will be light and salt? And how do we help the next generation keep this light alive in the face of such hostility?

How do we raise a generation of people who can consistently discern right from wrong? How do we help teenagers develop that all important core of fundamental convictions and beliefs? How do we cultivate conviction in the lives of our teens?

As a result of their patchwork identity, today's teens draw their values from the fractured sources of society. They find it easier to patch together a variety of values than to do the hard work of constructing an integrated core belief system. Consequently, their values are highly subjective and may change overnight. Therefore, we offer the following guidelines for teaching and imparting values and moral standards.

1. Know thoroughly what you believe and the values you hold.
2. State clearly why you believe and the moral code you accept.
3. Live consistently so that what you believe and how you live are congruent.
4. Engender responsibility in your teenager by helping him struggle with decisions rather than always making his decisions for him or giving him the answer.
5. Establish discipline in connection to values by helping your teenager see the consequences and/or fruitfulness of his decisions and actions.



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6. Direct your teenager to explore and critique his beliefs, values, and the moral code by which he lives.
7. Encourage your teenager in forming and applying his values by listening to him, giving guidance, resisting the urge to rescue, and by praying with him about his values and searching the Scriptures.
8. Instruct your teen in the ways of the Lord, using the Bible as the authority for matters of values and morality and by living the Word before him.

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