



Teenagers:

God's gift to middle-aged parents

You might be forgiven for looking in amazement at the title of this article. In fact, you might even be forgiven for laughing out loud. Parents seldom consider their teens a gift of God. In fact, many parents of teens, even Christian parents, are often very frustrated with their teenage son or daughter. A houseful of teens — something which a number of us have — can be a daily challenge. It is certainly never dull. On the other hand, there are probably few teenagers, even Christian teenagers, who feel that they are God's gift to their parents. Sure, their parents love them, but more often than not they feel misunderstood and unappreciated. And yet this is the premise we are going to work with and examine: *Teenagers: God's Gift to Middle-Aged Parents*.

Most helpful in this study has been a book by Eugene H. Peterson, entitled *Like Dew Your Youth: Growing Up With Your Teenager* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994). Eugene Peterson is currently professor of spiritual theology at Regent College in Vancouver, B.C., Canada. He was a pastor for several decades at Christ Our King United Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, USA. He and his wife, Jan, have three grown children.

Peterson begins by suggesting that we often think that other people's homes and families are ordinary, and that ours is the only exceptional one. The moment an adolescent suddenly appears, or perhaps intrudes in a family the home is no longer ordinary. Parents are somewhat unprepared and assume that something exceptional is going on. They might even look in envy at other families where everything seems smooth sailing, where the teenagers seem to be well adjusted. But there are no well-adjusted adolescents. Adolescence by definition is a period of maladjustment. And getting adjusted is an often noisy, strenuous, energetic, exciting and contradictory process.

Yet this adolescence is at the same time a gift, God's gift to parents in middle age. It is a process designed by the Creator to bring his children into adulthood, but it is also designed by this same Creator to provide something essential for parents during correspondingly critical years in their lives. Christian parents are the ones most favorably placed to recognize and appreciate this gift.

Born at the right time

Now you might say, yes, children are a gift of God. No one who has held a newborn baby in his arms will doubt that for a moment. But teenagers? Get real! But I would concur with Peterson that the adolescent is no less a gift of God. As a brand new baby is a gift to young adult couples, so the adolescent is to the middle-aged. The teenager is "born" into our lives during our middle decades (30s, 40s or 50s). In these middle years we are susceptible to stagnation and perhaps complacency. There is sometimes a feeling of let-down, a realization that the hopes, the ideals and aspirations we held might not be fulfilled.

And then God's gift in a rather awkward package — the adolescent — comes into our lives bringing with it "a challenge to grow, a testing of our love, a chastening of our hope and pushing of our faith to the edge" (p. 4ff). And it comes at the right time. All the things that have become very ordinary and trite are suddenly in a "fresh form" before us, requiring our response and participation.

Growing up in Christ

The most important growing up for any Christian is growing up in Christ. Everything else is preparation and support for this growing up. Biological, social, mental, emotional, intellectual and

spiritual growth are all meant to be put into the service of growing up in Christ. Our task is to become mature in our relationship with God. This applies to the parents as well as to the teens, "...until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children..." (Ephesians 4:13, 14).

We adults have a tendency to presume that since we have completed our growth biologically, educationally and even professionally, that there is no more growing to be done. We have developed a blind spot concerning personal growth. But this blind spot can be fatal to Christian discipleship. Our adolescents, by challenging and testing personal relationships, by questioning many things that we take for granted, open our eyes to growth in ourselves. There is never any time that we become exempt from the realities of "growing up in Christ."

So adolescence is not a "stage" that parents have to suffer through or stoically endure. It's not something that teenagers "will get over." Parents may not attempt to ignore the process of growing up. Neither should they take the attitude that they have completed their own growth as a Christian, and now will simply preside over the growth of their teen toward Christian maturity. Parents need to seriously, honestly and joyfully follow the way of Christ themselves. Then they will not define adolescence as a problem that needs solving. *"They are engaged in Christian growth of their own, and permit their children to look over their shoulders while they do it"* (p. 9).

Covenantal families

The family is the best place for this to happen. *"Family life is like a hall endowed with the finest acoustical properties"* (p. 9). Growing children hear their parents' words... they also hear the intentions and the attitudes behind the words. Parents don't need to be experts in psychology or adolescent emotions. They don't need to live perfect lives, but they must take seriously what they are doing... that is, growing up in Christ themselves. They must do that openly in the presence of their teenagers, so that the adolescents can observe, imitate and make mistakes within the context of care, love and faith.

We need to emphasize that this growth toward maturity takes place within a covenantal context. Parents are dealing with adolescents who belong to God. Both parents and teens must respond to the promises of God, made to them at their own baptism. Parents will have taken a big step in that direction when they made public profession of their faith. This call to respond to God's grace must be taken seriously by the young people. The time of adolescence is the period within which this time of preparation takes place.

Adolescence ... not a disease

Adolescence is a period of time during which we become ourselves. All the things that we've learned and absorbed in our childhood are assimilated into a new individualized identity. Parents do not have a lot of control over this process. This loss of control often causes them a lot of anxiety. But adolescence is not a disease or some sort of affliction. It is a healthy, normal process of growth, one which the Christian parent can approach with good hope.

Teenagers are occupied almost full time in trying to figure out who they are. Maybe that's why they spend so much time in front of the mirror. For teens it is not a particularly pleasant process. They often feel awkward and insecure. The period of rapid physical growth can sometimes be quite disconcerting for adolescents.

It reminds me of what happened when one of our sons was going through a tremendous growth spurt. It was just after a five-day Thanksgiving long weekend. In all seriousness he asked me, "Mom, do you think it's possible that I got taller over the weekend?" I asked him why he thought this. He said, "It's really weird, Mom, but it seems like some of my friends at school are shorter than they were last week." It sounds silly, but it does make clear that teens are often ill at ease about their physical changes, not to mention all the other ones which accompany adolescence.

When their teens were toddlers, parents made most of the choices for their children. Children were allowed to choose whether to wear their denim shirt or plaid one, but they were not free to choose which school to go to, or even whether or not to go to school. On the whole, children trust their Dad and Mom to make the right choices. But now things are different.

Learning to make decisions

Adolescents begin to demand a say in decisions. Their bodies develop sexual maturity, their minds develop an intellectual agility, and their emotions greater depth, sensitivity and variety. And they want to make up their own minds. This is good. The task of adolescents is to learn how to make decisions and then, once they have made a decision, to live with the identity that such a decision brings. As such, these decisions cannot be their parents' decision. A young person needs to develop the ability to make responsible decisions. The adolescent who says, "This is the decision or choice I have made," will also learn to say, "I am the person who has made this choice."

In early adolescence, there is a lot of fuzziness about self-identity. Adolescents sometimes deal with this by taking on the identity of some hero — sports or otherwise. Most cover their uncertainty by assimilating and blending into a group. The sameness in dress and language is like a protective armor for young people. But as they grow and mature and gain skill in making decisions for themselves, they gradually begin to recognize their own individuality. If they are not able to do this, they fail to complete the task of adolescence. Now this is not a smooth or easy process. Sometimes it stumbles and lurches along. Sometimes it moves along, with such breathtaking speed, that parents stand amazed. And again at other times parents wonder if their teen will ever lose that sulking, slouching posture.

"I'll dress the way I want!"

Young adolescents often define themselves by demonstrating what they are not. They are not what their parents say they are, or what their parents would like them to be. They show this by adopting hair and clothing styles that horrify and might even embarrass their parents. It can give rise to noisy conflict in the family. Young people insist, "I'll dress the way I want!"

If parents let this type of conflict dominate the relationship, their teens will conclude that the parents are more concerned about the externals, about what the Mrs. So and So in church will think, or what the teachers at "our" Christian secondary school might think about them as parents. The teens presume that parents are not too interested in the deeper developments stirring beneath the surface. Then the young people have a legitimate point. They should be able to expect more from their parents. And parents need to get beyond looking at their children as objects which give them their identity in the community. Read this last sentence again:

Parents need to get beyond looking at their children as objects which give them their identity in the community.

Samuel: Self-identity

The story of Samuel as related in 1 Samuel 3 gives insight into what a young teen goes through, and encourages a respect towards it. This story is particularly useful, since it places the adolescent experience in a theological setting for this "*coming of age*" — a theological setting which takes into account both the promises of God and the call of God. This incident of Samuel in the tabernacle establishes the significant adolescent identity-formation in the context of the revelation of God.

Samuel had been placed in the temple at an early age by his thankful parents, Hannah and Elkanah. He served under the care and direction of Eli, who seems almost a surrogate parent, as well as priest. Undoubtedly, Samuel had enjoyed a devout upbringing, having been provided with a religious environment to grow up in. He seems a fairly typical child, willing to run errands and taking care of Eli's needs.

When Samuel hears the voice in the night, he presumes it is that familiar voice he has been hearing during his childhood years — the voice that gives instruction and guidance that need to be heeded. He

tries the usual response but it does not work. There is no connection between the voice and his customary response.

Then Eli tells Samuel to respond to this voice not as the call of a parent but as a call of God. Samuel had reached the time in his life at which he needed to respond, in his own right, to God. His life would no longer be regulated by the temple routine and parental (by way of Eli) orders. From now on he would not serve in the temple just because his parents had dedicated him. There was the voice of God, personal and direct. It was not a voice that a parent or a priest could mediate. He heard it for himself.

At the centre of the story is the call itself, "*Samuel, Samuel!*" Peterson suggests that this particular naming tells us almost all we need to know about adolescence. Here the identity of a person, Samuel, son of Elkanah and Hannah, is raised to a new level. It is emphasized and defined (p 15). The name is the most personal form of address. It evokes a response in us. It does in Samuel. It does in each of us.

Saying "yes" to God's "yes"

So we can never look at adolescents as a category — as a group of kids who are just going through a phase, or who are suffering some sort of affliction. Each one of them is a person with a name. Each one of them is a child who has the promises of God, and will be asked to respond to them. Samuel is called, but he also listens to the voice of God. He recognizes his name and identifies himself as the one called by God.

The story provides a window through which we can see that the most significant reality in adolescent development is their relationship with God. The young are confronted with the church's doctrines of covenant and election. They live in a world where God actively chooses, and where their highest act is a response to that choice — saying "yes" to God's "yes."

Within this context, decision-making by adolescents can never be trivial. These decisions are not simply muddled spasms of self-will which eventually lead to "fulfilling your potential." Neither are they only a matter of following in Dad's footsteps. Real identity is being formed with each decision. Therefore, every choice a youth makes — even about such seemingly insignificant matters as hairstyle and clothing — is part of the process in which he is learning to make choices that will make him what he will be in Christ.

Parents need to learn another lesson from the story of Samuel. Much of the process of teenagers developing their identity is one in which parents are more like observers or outsiders. Samuel was alone. Eli trusted him to deal with the situation. He did not take charge of the situation. Parents need to follow that example. They also are no longer the ones in charge. This is not easy for them. Parents need to be prayerful and interested. They need to observe with intelligent sympathy and they need to pray for and with their teens with knowledgeable confidence. It becomes a "hands off" situation, but a wise parent will fold those hands in prayer.

You can't make me!

Adolescence is a time of challenge to parental authority. We all know that parents indeed do have authority. That is obvious. How they exercise that authority is not so obvious. Under the defiance, questioning and pressure of adolescent rebellion, parents are forced to examine the base of their authority and evaluate the ways in which they choose to exercise their authority.

It is not good enough just to quote Ephesians 6:1, "*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for that is right.*" Our teens know their Bible too, and will point to verse 4 of the same chapter, "*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger...*" One of the most important tasks that adolescents have is to learn to internalize the acts of obedience and submission, to learn how to be guided by the elders. The parents' task is to learn how to exercise their authority in proper, wise and Christian ways.

No moan and groan sessions

It is of little value for parents to get together and have gab sessions in which they bemoan how their children refuse to be obedient, how society is going down the tubes, and how young people

have no respect for authority anymore. It would be much more mutually upbuilding to discuss ways in which they themselves exercise their authority. The question should not be, "How can I get my child to obey me?", but rather, "How can I properly and wisely exercise my authority in this particular situation?" There is a biblical context in which this can be done — a style and a grace — to which parents need to pay particular attention.

Granted, this is a shift from when the teens were children. Then it was the parents' task to teach obedience. However, when children reach adolescence, parents should spend more time and attention on the way they themselves exercise authority, and less time worrying about exacting obedience.

We parents fool ourselves if we think that our teens will listen every time we lay down the law. We need to provide a context within which our teens have freedom to learn — sometimes from making bad decisions. An example, perhaps. My husband and I do not encourage our teens to go to movies. We do not forbid it either. I always read the reviews in the daily paper. This gives a parent a pretty good grasp of what's showing. One Friday evening one of our older sons — we have five sons — informed us that he was going, with some friends, to see a particular movie. It was not a good movie. I mentioned what I had read in the reviews. We encouraged him not to go, but he insisted. In the end, he did go, knowing full well that he did this with his parents' disapproval. I believe he watched that movie with different eyes than if he had simply been secretly circumventing a hard and fast, authoritarian parental edict, "No movies, ever!" At least he could come home and give us his assessment of the movie. Perhaps this approach led to another occasion when one of his brothers and several friends felt free to walk out of a theatre because they quickly saw that what was being shown was not what they had expected or could watch with a clear conscience.

Joseph and Mary as models

Some parents love to quote Proverbs 13:24, "*He who spares the rod hates his son...*" as the basis for good parenting. It almost seems as if some parents take this verse as a license to beat up children who do not do as they are told. Perhaps they are not comfortable with the advice that they as parents need to be in a process of growth along with their children. They would be better off to look at Luke 2:41-52 as a model for exercising parental authority within a family.

It was not any easier for Joseph and Mary to be parents of adolescents than it is for any other parents. The incident related in Luke 2 shows the tension between authority and obedience that developed in this unique family. You all know the story. When Joseph and Mary find out that their son Jesus is missing they race back to Jerusalem. Of all things, they find him calmly sitting in the temple among the teachers, acting as if nothing was out of the ordinary! Then the confrontation between parent and youth, "*Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you*"(v. 48).

In *Mary's* eyes — and I say this with all due reverence — Jesus had been both disobedient and inconsiderate. Parental authority had not been honored. Without their knowledge and consent, he had remained behind in the temple. If the question were simply to be narrowed down to a question of authority and obedience, we could stop right here. Mary and Joseph are right and Jesus is wrong. If the only text we want to hang onto is Proverbs 13:24, Joseph might have taken off his belt, administered a good whipping in front of the rabbis and taken his son back to Nazareth. End of story.

Jesus as model

But thankfully, the story does not end here. What does Jesus reply to his upset parents? "*Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?*" The Lord Jesus was telling his parents that he had a life apart from them — that he had a relation to God that would take him into ways that they could not anticipate. He was no longer a child whom they had to watch over all the time. The obedience he had learned as a child would now be exercised in a broader context, apart from his parents.

Now, granted, the Lord Jesus was unique, yet we can learn from this incident. The adolescent is more than the sum total of what his parents have produced. The parent as God's representative must be ready to step aside when the appropriate time comes. The adolescent will reject his parents' control, emphasizing that he is a new person in the process of becoming an adult. Jesus rejects his mother's reprimand and emphasizes God's authority over him as well as the task he must do. The divine command first heard via his parents' authority over him now have a shape and force apart from parental commands.

The story continues. *"Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men"* (v. 51, 52). The parents continued to exercise authority; the young man was obedient. But there was a difference. The obedience was no longer just a matter of living up to parents' expectations, although these were not ignored. The give and take of authority and obedience were still in operation but in a wider context. It is a gentle, quiet story. There is no advice here to parents to keep their kids in line; neither is there license for teens to do whatever they feel like doing. But there is a breaking out of the parent-child mold into a pattern of flexibility that demonstrates awareness of a new reality from both points of view the parents' and the youth's.

Authority and obedience

This story gives us a number of helpful insights in negotiating the shifting requirements of authority and obedience during the adolescent years.

Authority when challenged does not bluster. Parental authority does not gain in strength when the parent raises his voice or makes the punishment more and more severe. If the stick gets bigger and bigger as the child grows up, the parents are the ones who have the wrong idea of parental authority and how to exercise it. Mary and Joseph took the road of quiet counsel, pondering and praying.

Secondly, authority must be courteous. There was no pushing, shoving or yelling in the temple scene. The sound biblical basis for parental authority does not excuse the parent from being polite. Exercising authority does not mean doing or saying whatever you want in order to exact obedience. Authority is given to parents in order to assist them in bringing up their children in the "discipline and instruction in the Lord." Parents may not take advantage of this authority for their own convenience, in order to get their own way.

Thirdly, this story in Luke shows us that authority is not coercive. Since parental authority is God-given, parents should imitate the One who has ultimate authority. God does not exercise his authority in a coercive way. God is not a bully. He does not push his children around. He creates us, provides for us, loves us and disciplines us. But he does not *make* us do things. The pattern in Scripture is so clear, that parents have no excuse to assume that divinely given authority allows them to act as dictators over their teenagers. The same God who gives this authority also demonstrates in His Word how this authority is to be used.

Again, of course, there is a difference between how parental authority is exercised over little children and adolescents. Reality also shows that we cannot force our teens to obey. We are no longer strong enough or smart enough. We also cannot be wherever they are. But then we shouldn't be either. Authority simply loses all force and energy when it becomes authoritarian.

Apprenticeship

John Stott, in his explanation of Ephesians 5, explains the concept of authority as one of care, not of control. To discipline a youth means to teach by example, to provide training and instruction. This is different from being a disciplinarian who is simply interested in catching a wrongdoing, and then meting out punishment. Perhaps the best model would be one of an apprentice learning from the master craftsman. Over an extended period of time — years in fact — the parent offers himself as model and teacher. Dad and Mom provide guidelines, give encouragement, demonstrate skills, point out errors, establish standards and point out sloppy or careless work and above all, work with the apprentice until he is ready to become a journeyman and eventually a master craftsman. This

apprenticeship program involves a personal relationship between "master" and "student," so that the younger is shaped by the maturity of the older. Truly, the heart of biblical discipline and authority is careful attention that guides growth.

And the wonderful reality is that as the parents guide, lead, support and nurture their adolescents toward *"growing up in Christ"* they will find that they themselves are blessed with their own continued growth *"... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that (they themselves) may no longer be children..."*

S Vandergugten

© 2012

www.christianstudylibrary.org