

Taking Youth Seriously: A Conversation with Steven Garber

Derek Melleby

It's no secret: Many students who are serious about their commitment to Christ in high school go off to college and something happens to weaken that commitment. Some students simply walk away from the faith, never to return. Others continue to confess Christ, but aren't as confident as before. Still others have a great experience in college, which spurs them on to deeper faithfulness. For students who do make the most of college, coming out the other side with a clearer knowledge of where they are in God's world, there was something about their time in youth ministry that prepared them for the challenges they encountered.

For youth ministry to be successful, students will need to be prepared emotionally, intellectually and spiritually for life after high school. If that is the goal, we need to be thinking critically and creatively about our current ministry practices. Are they effective? Are they preparing students for the future? What are the areas of youth ministry that are being done well? What changes need to be made?

I wrestle with these questions in my work as the Director of the College Transition Initiative. I have the privilege of speaking to youth groups, parents, pastors and college students about these issues on a regular basis. One thing I have learned: I can't answer these questions on my own. I need to pull others into the conversation. Together, working within the Body of Christ, I think we can begin to settle in on some answers.

Over the years, Steven Garber has become one of my most important conversation partners. He has worked with young people in different ministry settings for over 30 years. His award winning book, *The Fabric of Faithfulness: Weaving Together Belief and Behavior*, has recently been re-released in an expanded edition. The book helps readers answer this critical question: How do parents, professors, campus ministers and youth pastors help students—during one of the most eventful and intense periods of life—learn to connect what they believe about the world with how they live in it? Currently, he is the director of The Washington Institute, which has as its core conviction that the church and society are renewed as a richer, truer vision of calling is taught and practiced.

Recently, I had the opportunity to ask Dr. Garber a few questions concerning the transition from high school to college. I think you will find his answers helpful as you think about preparing your own students for life after high school.

Melleby: What percentage of entering Christian freshmen would you estimate are prepared—spiritually, theologically and intellectually—for the challenges of college life?

Garber: I have no idea of the numbers. My experience over the years is that most are not. They have no idea how hard it will be. And sadly, watching even very healthy, holy churches—those that care profoundly for their young—they often don't seem to understand the character of the challenge facing freshmen as they enter their university years. As harsh and crude as it is, Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons* is a heart-wrenching account of a girl going off to college sure that she knows who she is (i.e., "I am Charlotte Simmons!") and yet, from her first day onward, having that self-confidence fractured by the social/cultural/intellectual conditions she encounters.

Melleby: Some prominent youth leaders have claimed that as few as four percent of young people continue with a committed Christian faith after they graduate from high school and continue into adulthood. Do you think these claims are fair or are they overblown?

Garber: Again, I don't know the numbers. But my experience is that most don't. The reality of that, and the weight upon my own soul that it was, eventually took me into a PhD program to

try to understand why it is so hard to keep on keeping on. Having taught university students for most of my life in many different settings, always longing for them to “get it,” I have been graced by the first of Jesus’ stories; the parable of the soils. Though he is not giving mathematical ratios that normatively echo across time, it is instructive to us that it is only one of four who have ears to hear—which is always the dynamic of discipleship. There are different reasons of course, each one having to do with the heart. Importantly, the biblical vision is that we hear out of our hearts, because our hearts are the core of who we are as human beings. So what is worth pondering is the nature of the teaching given to high school students, which principally comes from home and then is added to by churches and campus ministries, and to those that go to faith-formed colleges, the curriculum of the college itself. To what extent are we addressing the heart? And are we faithfully and creatively communicating the integral relationship between heart and mind? Unless we are able to teach the next generation that there is to be a coherence between doctrine and discipleship, belief and behavior, worldview and way of life, they will not sustain their commitments from adolescence into adulthood. So is it four percent? God alone knows. What is clear is that this is a perennial problem, and one that Jesus as rabbi understood very well.

Melleby: What would you say are the primary reasons that young people who attend years worth of youth ministry programs still struggle spiritually once they leave high school?

Garber: The world and the flesh and the devil—to put it simply. And yet of course to answer in that way is also to acknowledge the tremendous complexity that is involved in training up a child in the way he or she should go. Our longing is that our dear ones will not depart from that way, and yet we all know that so many do. Good books have been written about this, and we are not interested for a moment in a cheap critique. I will say this: it dismays me how lightweight the high school discipleship curriculums typically are. It seems that there is little sense of the overwhelming nature of the secularizing, pluralizing world that our young enter into, either in college or after. And sadly, many are not prepared, theologically, philosophically, sociologically, with an understanding of what they believe and why they believe what they believe that will sustain them through their university years and beyond.

Melleby: Based on what you have seen with young people of college age, how would you define success for junior high and senior high school youth ministry programs? What kinds of definable goals should these programs aim for to achieve success with kids?

Garber: These two words matter a lot: understand and translate. If we think about those who do make it into adulthood with a deepened faith, they are people who both understand the whys and wherefores of the Christian faith, but they are also able to translate that into language and lifestyle that can make sense of what they do and why they do what they do—across the spectrum of their responsibilities and relationships. Think of Tom Shadyac as a filmmaker or Bono as a songwriter. They are clay-footed people who are serious about Christian belief, and at the same time live and move and have their being right in the middle of the world, telling stories and singing songs that communicate to the world at large something of the way things ought to be.

Melleby: What would you like to see strengthened, changed or eliminated in junior high and senior high youth ministry programs to insure that young people are spiritually sound and growing?

Garber: As I watch that world I have a great respect and affection for those who have the amazing, unusual gift of helping kids laugh their way into the most serious things of life. There is a lot about being an adolescent that needs laughter, just to keep the angst at bay. But I do want to hold those two together: to laugh and to think seriously. My guess is that too often we fall off the table on either side, not engaging on the one hand by a failure to laugh enough, and not being worth all the time and energy on the other by a failure to offer enough substance that honors that image of God in the adolescent heart. It never ceases to amaze me how often I am

reminded that people want to be taken seriously; we hunger and ache for that as human beings. And I would say that is not only true relationally, but intellectually; and not only true for adults but for adolescents, too.

Melleby: What do you see as one of the main challenges to the spiritual formation of today's young people, and how have you addressed this challenge in your work?

Garber: We could spend hours on this, but I will focus on one phenomenon: the info-glut culture, the 24/7 barrage of the information age. One longtime and very gifted minister to high school students recently lamented about the "ipodization" of high school kids, and said that he found it harder and harder to engage even his best students in serious conversation. They were so plugged into the "noise" of the culture that they were decreasingly able to look someone in the face and have a real conversation. That is frightening. My own choice has been to address it head on. In fact, to begin there, challenging students to rethink what it means to know. Since the central issue of life for followers of Jesus is whether we can really know and really love at the same time, this is not small. What makes it hard is that it is so against our deepest dispositions. "Now I know!"—and therefore now I can be a cynic. On the last night of her life, Simone Weil wrote, "the most important task of teaching is to teach what it means to know." I am sure she was right, whether the teaching takes place in the pre-modern, modern, or postmodern world. This is at the very heart of spiritual formation that grows out of the gospel of the kingdom.

Melleby: Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers about the challenges of "life after high school"?

Garber: Just this. Over the last few years I have chosen to take up sexuality as the way in with high school and college students. My conviction is this: unless a young person is persuaded that the biblical vision of life and the world makes sense of what seems most central to who I am as a boy-becoming-a-man, a girl-becoming-a-woman, helping me to understand the roiling emotions and desires, hopes and griefs, that are all bound up with my sexuality, then it is awfully difficult to believe that the Christian vision can make sense of anything else, like politics, the arts, business, globalization. And because I eventually want to get them to explore the meaning of faith for all the rest of life, I work very hard to explore the meaning of faith in the swirl of a sexualizing society, hoping that by God's grace they will begin to have confidence that the Word of God honestly makes sense of the world made by God.

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For more information about the College Transition Initiative visit:
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