

## **“Will My Child Be a Christian?”<sup>1</sup>**

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Proverbs 22: 1-6

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Gone are the days when young people embrace faith simply because ‘it’s the right thing to do’. Young people are leaving the church in droves.<sup>2</sup> A recent LifeWay Research poll found more than 2/3 of young adults who attend a Protestant church stopped attending for at least a year between the ages of 18-22. About a third of those said they had not returned to church by age 30.

The statistics are concerning. Rodger Nishioka is a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary. He recently studied young adults in their 20s and 30s. He says “we are on the cusp of . . . a Reformation-type age”<sup>3</sup>. The signs are all around us that a post-denominational age has arrived.

*Reformation? Post-denomination?* What does this mean? Well, for one thing, many people---especially young people---have no denominational loyalty. A majority of people who go to Presbyterian churches were not even raised Presbyterian!<sup>4</sup> The times they are a-changing, and they’ve been changing for a long time.

We have seen this. People go shopping these days. People go church shopping when they move to a new town. When they are unhappy with the pastor, or the music, or the programs. Some young people go church shopping when they go away to college. Or when they get married, or when they have a baby. When our children or our grandchildren find any kind of a church home, in any recognizable Christian denomination, we get down on our knees and thank God. It’s just not a given anymore.

These are the signs of the times. They affect every single mainline church. Presbyterians are not going to stop this trend. Though these signs of the times raise anxiety about our future, denominational loyalty is not our biggest concern. After all, Christ did not say, “Go and make

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon title derived from an article by Miroslav Volf, entitled, “Will my son be a Christian?”, The Christian Century, April 4, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> [www.christianpost.com/artile/20070808/28813\\_Survey](http://www.christianpost.com/artile/20070808/28813_Survey)

<sup>3</sup> “Nishioka points denomination toward needs of post-denominational young adults”, Scanlon, L., The Presbyterian Outlook, September 3, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7. 60% of people attending Presbyterian churches were not raised Presbyterian. 15 percent of that group did not grow up attending church at all.

Presbyterians of all nations. . .” Though Christianity would indeed be diminished if we Presbyterians went the way of the dinosaurs, there are bigger issues at stake.

You can say young people don’t care about God. You can talk about the ‘me-generation’, but it’s more complex than this. A lot of the young people I know do care. They are hungry for meaning. They want to impact the world. They want their faith to mean something.

Eboo Patel is the young founder of an organization called *Interfaith Youth Core*. Young people are drawn to organizations they believe in, groups that give them a purpose. Churches aren’t the only ones interested in attracting young people. Patel says, “You know, there’s another youth organization out there. It’s called al-Qaeda. And al-Qaeda’s been built over the past 25 years, with lots of ideas on how you recruit young people. . .”<sup>5</sup> Bigger issues at stake, indeed.

Will my child be a Christian?

It may seem strange to consider this question with Hebrew texts. But these lessons from Deuteronomy and Proverbs are exactly what concern us. They’re about teaching the young. They take us back to basics. They remind us of the central place of God’s law in our history and in our hearts.

*“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”* These words are recited by observant Jews every single day.

Jews call these words the “Shema”. “Shema” is the Hebrew word for “Hear”. But Shema has a much bigger meaning than just “hear”. SHEMA means “act”. “Obey”. “Do”. “Carry out what I have told you to do”. It’s rather the opposite of what my mom used to say when we weren’t listening to her: “in one ear and out the other”.

To understand Shema is to understand that God’s commands go in the ear and move around one’s entire being, change one’s chemistry, mess with one’s head, write on one’s heart, upset one’s gut, so one is never ever the same. So one never ever forgets.

Several weeks ago one of our young elders was talking to me about our youth. He said: “There is nothing more important in the life of our church than nurturing young people in the faith”. Whether he knew it or

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<sup>5</sup> From, [Religious Passion, Pluralism, and the Young](#), *Speaking of Faith*, with Krista Tippett, National Public Radio broadcast, Spring 2007.

not, he had SHEMA in mind. Whether he was conscious of it or not, he had Proverbs in his heart.

In Deuteronomy, Moses' generation was worried about the future. They were people on the move. In transition. Reformation time. Post-denomination time. And there was a great temptation to forget the law Moses had just reaffirmed. You know, when you're moving your family across the desert for forty years, it's easy to forget where you've come from. It's tempting to let the old ways slip through your fingers, like so much sand. So this command in Deuteronomy underlines and highlights and makes no mistake about what is #1.

And what is #1 is passing the central message of faith down to our children and to our children's children. It's what Jesus told lawyers and young rulers who needed an easy-to-remember, concentrated sound bite:

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. [and] Love your neighbor as yourself.*  
(Mark 12:29-30)

Jesus, the good, observant Jew, reciting the SHEMA to those who had ears to hear.

We all know it takes more than words, more than even the bold words of the SHEMA, to make a Christian. We are pretty sure memorizing scripture isn't enough. Children need to learn the words of the faith, to be sure. And they need to see and experience the actions of faith. And somewhere, in that mix, we believe the Holy Spirit has a hand, as well.

Miroslav Volf is a theologian and professor at Yale Divinity School. He worries about what it takes for children---even his own---to be Christian. He'd almost rather his son Nathanael be no Christian at all, than to be an indifferent Christian. He wants Nathanael to embrace Christianity as a faith by which to live and for which to die.<sup>6</sup> To love the Lord with his whole heart and mind and strength.

How did Volf acquire such a high vision? Volf tells of his own father's conversion to faith in the death camps of Europe. There, the elder Mr. Volf encountered a man who rebelled against the horror around him. This man dared talk about God's power and love in the midst of hell on earth. Mr. Volf was compelled by this man's witness. By the way

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<sup>6</sup> Miroslav Volf, "Will my son be a Christian?", *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2001.

this man lived it out in the worst of times. Miroslav's father became a minister and worked hard to pass his faith on.

But as a young man, Miroslav, like so many, turned away from faith. He quit church. God was just too much trouble, he said.

Do you know what brought him back? It was the Holy Spirit, though Miroslav says it was his mother's prayers. Right language about God matters; godly life matters even more. Yet neither are enough. If the seeds sown by word and deed are to grow and bear fruit, they will need the life-giving water of God's Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

Then there's Michael Allen. He's no theologian, at least not in the formal sense. Allen is an attorney in Tyler, Texas. But first and foremost, he is a Christian. He shares how he learned the Christian life. In an article in Austin Seminary's magazine, Allen says, "These teachings were passed down to us not simply through sermons, stories, and songs, but also through personal example. For years on Sunday mornings, a successful businessman in our church would routinely come by my house and ask me to ride with him as he made trips through the countryside picking up kids, many in ragged clothes, bringing them to Sunday school."

"An elder with serious health problems kept the doors open to his credit grocery-feed store so that farmers. . . would have food to feed their families and livestock. An older couple provided educational funds for needy students in spite of the fact that [things on their] farm were in serious need of repair."

Examples such as these shaped Allen's life and taught him how to live and share the gospel.<sup>8</sup> To hear, to do, to act. SHEMA.

If we allow God's Spirit to enter in, the *gospel will grow* in lively and meaningful ways. If we live out what it is to be Reformed and always reforming, if we struggle with Christ's message in the real world. . .If we respond to the deep hunger for spirituality. . .If our children see being a Christian matters to us, matters so much our lives are changed---I believe reports of our untimely denominational demise will prove to have been greatly exaggerated.

Because this is how the Spirit teaches us: through our collective lives, through our mission and our meditation, through our worship and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Michael D. Allen, "An intertwining of vocation and faith", Windows, Summer 2007.

our work, through our witness and our wrestling. . . We are not, dear friends, through with God, and God is certainly not through with us.

But more important than the survival of our denomination, I believe with all my heart and mind and soul that if we live this way, if we hear and obey and live out God's commands, if we SHEMA, my children and your children and Miroslav Volf's and Michael Allen's children and all God's children whom we touch and whom we teach will be Christian. Christians who not only attend church on a regular basis, but Christians who have faith by which to live and faith by which to die. God willing, may it be so.