

Teenage Religion and Spirituality

A recent major study about teenage religion and spirituality came to the conclusion that teenage religion largely reflects the world of adult religion, rather than being marked by strong rebellion. However, that isn't exactly good news. Sociologist Christian Smith's conclusion is that "the de facto dominant religion among contemporary teenagers is what we might call 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism'" (Soul Searching, p. 163). He unpacks that rather intimidating description as involving five ideas: (1) God exists and watches over life on earth; (2) He wants people to be good, nice and fair to one another; (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself; (4) God doesn't need or care to be particularly involved in one's life, except when he's needed to solve a problem; and (5) Good people go to heaven when they die. [Based on an article by Gary Inrig]

That seems to me to be a pretty good summary of the 'gospel' believed by many Australians. It is the "default" understanding by which people evaluate themselves spiritually. Sadly, it not only falls short of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, it also serves for many as an effective shield against it. "Who are you to judge? I'm happy this way?"

Unfortunately, present happiness is no substitute for reality. The bad news is that heaven is not the assured destiny of "good people" apart from Christ. The good news is that the God who made us is neither distant and remote, but personal and present.

In the person of his Son, God came to reveal his love and grace and to provide for all who trust him, things deeper and more substantial than good feelings and positive self-image. But people will not be convinced if we just tell them that. The genius of the gospel is that God's purpose is to wrap his message in the lives of Christ-followers, collectively and personally, so that we become living proof to a watching world of a loving God.

More than anywhere else, living proof needs to be seen in our homes. One of Smith's conclusions is "contrary to popular misguided cultural stereotypes and frequent parental misperceptions, the evidence clearly shows that the single most important social influence on the religious and social lives of adolescents is their parents" (Soul Searching, p. 261). That is both disconcerting and challenging. So whatever age your children or grandchildren, consider investing time in their lives and be a genuine example of what it means to be a Jesus follower. You can be living proof of a loving God who is intimately involved in our lives.