

Faith and Money for Young Adults: A Call For Mentors

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One can fill an entire bookshelf and separate media drawer with materials that teach new adults about money—how they should think about it and how they should manage it. Resources that begin with a faith dimension are also many. Materials are age-graded, linked to other stewardship themes and designed with interactivity in mind. Self-guided PowerPoint files, videos, Parent-Teen curricula, web sites, and youth retreat formats are available. All the major ministry resource agencies have something developed or in the works. Resources can be purchased over the web, in your favorite bookstore, or if you wait long enough, the Christian Education Committee will purchase one for the congregation you attend. Denominations are waking from slumber as well—realizing that if they do not engage young adults in the practice of generosity, funding for denominational ministries will disappear. Add to this the marriage and family classes in junior high, high school and college, the high-octane shows of CNBC, and televised lectures from women of wisdom such as Suze Orman or Oprah Winfrey. Everywhere one turns a resource can be found if one is looking. I have personally contributed to many of them.

So resources are plenty. They are accessible. They are well produced. They are effective. But why does something seem to be missing? Why is there a disconnect between the content of these resources and the way life is lived? Why do young adults from our churches graduate from college owing more than their first year of income? Why are they unable to balance a checkbook? Why does their generosity for volunteering not seem to translate to generosity in giving money to ministry? Why are young adults (as well as adults from all generations) unable to think reflectively about their economic lives?

Perhaps the answer is not found in a need for more resources but in the need for more mentors. There simply are not enough teachers who think of money mentoring as serious spiritual work. People become unavailable as mentors because their own money life is in disarray. They may be unwilling because they think the subject is unimportant or beneath them. Perhaps they excuse themselves because the subject feels too private to discuss. Maybe they are among the newest generation of seniors (the baby boomers) looking to an inheritance from their parents as their own retirement. Their plan is to spend the inheritance in funding a nice standard of living during their own retirement years. This means they will consume the wealth of their parents and their own earnings, leaving nothing for the generation that follows. Their plan for consumption is the message they articulate in the hearing of their offspring. They can teach instant gratification and consumption but are unqualified to teach self-discipline and economizing.

When there are few mentors there are also few intentional examples. Money becomes thoroughly disconnected from spirituality, community-building or any act of responsibility. Money is thought of in instantaneous ways rather than as a long term investment that benefits multiple generations. Money becomes something to gratify me. Partnership with God is dropped from the equation. Maintaining a personal balance sheet, an accurate bank balance, and a sustainable lifestyle disappears.

Moments of opportunity

Our oldest child was recently accepted into college, receiving a generous academic scholarship she richly deserved. The combination of her scholarship, her savings, her financial aid package and her advanced placement will leave her penniless after her first year of college—and she saved half of everything she earned since junior high! How will she pay for the remainder of her education?

Some young adults accept the invitation of their churches to give a year or two to mission work—sharing the gospel, building homes, digging wells or staffing clinics. They receive no pay and no college credit for this work. They return home rich in

experience but significantly behind their peers in vocational development. They remain financially dependent on their parental household.

Other young adults enter the workforce after their vocational training. They marry, purchase homes, start families, and get beautiful rides. They start to wonder if maybe they need to teach their children some values, and wonder if their childhood church or some other church is the best place to provide it. They want to benefit from congregational life, but giving sacrificially to make it possible is not yet in their thoughts.

These moments described above are opportune times for teaching or reinforcing key lessons. If only those who already walked this way are poised to offer it in loving ways! Let's dream for a minute, however, that more individuals are making themselves available and intend to offer perspective and advice at critical moments like these. Such a delivery system requires at least three elements.

Mentoring up close. Whether or not mentoring takes place in a formal classroom, between friends or from parent to child, it is most effective when delivered at a teachable moment. That is, a mentor must have organized their own life well enough that they are free to anticipate the moments when a young person will be glad for perspective or assistance and to be available at just the right time. Those moments might include one's first paycheck, the first time they file taxes, their first opportunity to participate in a giving campaign, enrollment in college, their first investment opportunity, setting up their first household, marriage, or the birth of a first child. Being there is not accidental. It is planned.

I am grateful for my father's mentoring at these moments. He expected me to help balance the family checkbook from age twelve on. He helped me set up a relationship with an accountant when I first began earning an income. He helped my fiancée and me set up an investment plan when we were starry-eyed twenty-year-olds whose combined income was less than his when he was my age. He was also nearby to dispense financial advice at the birth of my own children, and has reminded me several times since of the

need to keep my estate plan updated. He even helped me begin to plan to use my estate—regardless of its size—to bless the various ministries with which my family is involved.

Not everyone has a savvy father though. This means those of us who had good mentoring need to be available for multiple persons beyond just our own children if we wish to make a lasting difference. We can make a significant contribution by blessing nieces, nephews, neighbors, college students, immigrant families, and so on. We do not just add to ourselves. We multiply.

Mentoring with word and deed. For young adults to connect Christian faith to a life with money, there needs to be verbal instruction combined with visible example. How else can an individual learn about the god-like power of money, the benefit or harm from compound interest depending on whether one is saving or borrowing, wise use of credit, and the importance of disciplined generosity for one's own health and strength of community? This instruction is best given, not by curriculum, but by people who live them out *and* describe what they are doing as they bring people with them. Hoping that young adults will somehow grasp something done in secretive silence is a belief in magic.

Mentoring correctly. Correct mentoring is as much about intentionality and availability as it is technique. If one is intentionally available, and understands this is about helping young people become net contributors to the fabric of church and society rather than net consumers, one journeys well down the road toward mentoring correctly.

While writing this article, I spent an hour with a single adult, now thirty years old. His life had been poured into alcohol for fifteen years. He is dry now and his commitment to the Lord runs deeper than the previous commitment to drink. The money issues generated over those fifteen lost years have not gone away, however.

We developed a personal balance sheet and discovered his estate is worth less than \$500 (This is far better than many). We looked at his spending plan and learned that if he keeps

on his debt repayment plan for the next three and a half years, he can accelerate giving to a tithe and beyond, his savings can grow to 15% of income or more, and he can finally upgrade his ancient car. He is going to call a financial planner with a heart for young people connected to his congregation. Perhaps more can be done that someone working in a professional capacity might recognize.

This young man's life is a battle against the power of a consumer culture, but he left our conversation smiling. The secrecy has been removed. Hope has returned. Faith and money are getting into alignment. He has friends who will check on him.

A resource or two were used along the way, but mentoring made the difference.