



Character Building Ministries
1320 Saddleback Road, York, PA 17404

(570) 772-1643

www.CBMinistries.com

RELEVANT OR REVERENT? Connecting with Today's Kids without Compromising the Gospel

by Bill Klees

This article originally appeared in Edify (Spring 2005), CBM's free newsletter for camp directors. If you would like to begin to receive a free copy of Edify bi-annually, just send your camp name and address to us. Permission is granted to duplicate and copy this material.

I recently led some campers in West Virginia mountain biking at the beautiful New River Gorge. As we rode down I was given the opportunity to make a very practical illustration from the trail. We stopped at the upper portion of the gorge. Along one side of the trail was a ravine that, through erosion, was now bare and rocky. On the other side was a steep drop-off into the raging river. For a person who doesn't consider himself to be a biker, this was not the most comfortable place for me. But the illustration to the campers, I pray, was one they will not soon forget. The Christian life is just like that path. We are *in* the world, but we are not to be *of* the world.

In ministry this analogy also applies. One path that we should be constantly evaluating is our ministry's desire to *relate* to the youth we are serving with the need of not compromising the glory of the gospel message. The decision to add a new program to reach a new group of campers or to rejuvenate a declining outreach should never overlook this crucial area. For in our need to be relevant we must never cease to be *reverent* to God and His Word. No matter how spiritual our motives may appear, what is of paramount importance is keeping Christ and His gospel central, clear and untainted by the anti-Christian messages of the world.

On one side of this path is the ravine of relevance that seeks to relate to the culture in such a way that any distinction in the ministry is lost—the truth is eroded away, and you are left barren. Christians are called to transform the culture, not to adopt it or become like it. Our ministries must remain distinctly Christian. If we are simply adapting the techniques for youth work from the world, we have underestimated the world's message, which is contrary to Christ. Just like slow erosion, it usually doesn't happen all at once. It is never one storm that clears the side, but rather the constant storms that wash away the trees. It is never one program or one special event that erodes the core message, but is a process that, if left unchecked, can leave a well-intended ministry bare.

On the other side of the path is the drop-off of tradition. It declares that we shouldn't and we won't change anything. If youth don't like our program, then they can go somewhere else. At the bottom of this is a raging river that sweeps away any worthwhile ministry. Although the *message* of Christ can never change, the *methods* we use may. Youth and culture constantly change. The difficulty is

determining which fad, program, or method doesn't compromise the reverence of the gospel in order to be relevant.

There are key questions that must be asked to keep us on the path of reverence. My desire is to inspire critical thinking and prayer within your ministry as you seek to be reverent to the gospel. These questions can be summarized into four key categories—identity, responsibility, authority, and conformity. Within your particular ministry you may add more, however these are key theological questions that must define the message you are communicating.

1. Identity—Who am I?

Our Christian message must seek to instill a Biblical worldview that contains a proper perspective on a camper's identity. We are all created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27), but we are all fallen in sin (Romans 3:11-18). Therefore, we are not self-determining creatures. We are not good by nature. The worth and identity of every camper derives from being *created* by God, not from clothes or friends. The worth and identity of every camper who is a believer in Jesus Christ is also that of being *redeemed* by God. Apart from God, we have no worth. Self-esteem is really God-esteem. There is a big difference and the goals of our programs must be distinct and clear, lest we wobble from the path of Biblical identity.

2. Responsibility—What am I doing?

Our culture has almost lost all notion of responsibility. Whether it be in responsibility to others, responsibility for our actions ("it isn't my fault..."), or in determining our own value. Biblically speaking we are here to seek and to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31; Acts 17:26-27). Christians have a purpose—we are to be like Christ (Romans 8:28-29). We have a responsibility to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:37-40). There is a God who provides objective truth and absolutes. When we are trying to reach campers, we must make sure that we don't slip down the road of tolerance and forsake these key truths.

3. Authority—Who am I listening to?

For many youth their authority comes from their peers and the media. Our culture has very few proper role models. The difficult challenge facing ministries today is to instill a notion of Biblical authority. This is never a popular topic, but youth need to know that they are under God's authority, their parents authority (Ephesians 6:1), and others who are over them (Hebrews 13:7). What does your authority structure convey? It is vital that we listen to the real needs of youth and are not so rigid that we fail to properly serve them.

4. Conformity—Who am I following?

It is natural for youth to be shaped by contemporary media. Take a look at a current teen magazine or a television show. Look at the latest fads and extreme sports. What message is being conveyed? We cannot allow unbiblical nonverbal statements to overpower the need for youth to conform themselves to Christ (Philippians 2:5) or to be transformed by the renewing of their minds

(Romans 12:2). We are to be like God (1 Peter 1:16). Are our actions and methods at camp following the world or following Christ?

Everything we do has a message that conveys identity, responsibility, authority, and conformity. It isn't just the words we say; it is also the look of our marketing tools, the clothes staff wear, and the goals we pursue. Each conveys a message. The challenge is to evaluate everything from the desire to be reverent to God and His truth.