

## **NON-NEGOTIABLES OF YOUNG LIFE'S GOSPEL PROCLAMATION**

November 8, 2007

The mission of Young Life is very clear. We exist “to introduce adolescents to Jesus Christ and help them grow in their faith.”

Because of our stated purpose, the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is at the heart of everything we do. With thousands of staff and volunteers who come from diverse backgrounds and serve in more than 52 countries, we must be clear as a mission on our call to be good stewards of the message which God has entrusted to us. We want to be clear in our presentation and true to Scripture, our mission’s history and our Statement of Faith.

In recent years, challenges have arisen both inside and outside the mission regarding how we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. To provide direction and clarity, this document has been written by the senior leadership of the mission. We, as senior leaders, are grateful to have this opportunity to revisit our core values. Our goal is to clearly define what we believe are the non-negotiables of the Gospel message proclaimed by Young Life staff and volunteers in camp, club and one-on-one settings. The intent of the paper is not to squelch the creativity of our staff, but to provide a foundation on which their creativity can be expressed. However, these are not suggestions. They are the key elements of what we will present and what our audiences can expect when they are involved with Young Life. With a prayerful posture, we affirm these essentials of our proclamation:

- 1) We proclaim the Person of Jesus Christ in every message.**
- 2) We proclaim the reality of sin and its consequences — that apart from divine grace, we are estranged from God by our disobedience and incapable of a right relationship with God.**
- 3) We proclaim the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the ultimate proof of God’s love and the only solution to our problem of sin.**
- 4) We proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**
- 5) We proclaim the risen Christ’s offer of salvation by inviting our middle school, high school and college friends to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.**
- 6) We proclaim God’s call to discipleship by encouraging all who respond to grow in their faith.**

A further explanation of these essentials:

**1) We proclaim the Person of Jesus Christ in every message.**

We affirm that Young Life is, and always has been, a Christ-centered mission. As our founder, Jim Rayburn, said, “Jesus is not just what Young Life is all about. Jesus is all that Young Life is about.” We talk about Jesus knowing that most kids do not have a clear picture of His character, His personality, His power, His love. A great distinctive in Young Life is how we share the Gospel narratives with our young friends. We help them see this amazing person who cares so much about them. Jesus comes alive for them as we present Him in Gospel stories.

Our message is Jesus — the historical, wonderful, supreme revelation of God and the Savior of the world (John 1:14-18; John 12:32). Salvation history has both its origination and its culmination in Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:15). Each and every moment of salvation history points to God’s redemptive purposes in Jesus Christ. It is the Jesus Christ who is attested to us in sacred Scripture who we follow and trust. The Old Testament anticipates our Lord and the New Testament surrounds Him in faithful witness. We affirm that in any talk, Jesus Christ should be proclaimed as the center of God’s redemption. Acknowledging rare exceptions (e.g., possibly a first night message at summer camp focusing on God as creator or a second semester club where the main Scripture is an epistle, etc.), every talk will center on and spring from a Gospel account of an event in the life of Jesus. Again, our staff and volunteers are encouraged to be students of the culture, of the media and of theology, but only to the extent that it clarifies the person of Jesus Christ.

Jim Rayburn underlined this commitment when he said:

“Christ is the strongest, grandest, most attractive personality ever to grace this earth, but a careless messenger with the wrong approach can reduce all this magnificence to the level of boredom.”

“Everyone has the right to know the truth about Jesus Christ. They have a right to know who He is, a right to know what He’s done for them, a right to know how they relate to that, a right to know Him personally. Furthermore, they have a right to make their own choice of Him.”

“First, we must stick to presenting Jesus Christ. There are all kinds of secondary things we could get involved in, but they aren’t Young Life’s business. We are not to ‘major in minors,’ but in the one all-important essential: that Jesus Christ is our greatest need, and that He’s all we need.”

Our Statement of Faith, Article II and IV, affirms this:

## **Article II**

*In the Scriptures, God reveals Himself as the living and true God, Creator of all things. Perfect in love and righteous in all His ways, this one God exists eternally as a Trinity of persons: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

## **Article IV**

*The only Mediator between God and man is Jesus Christ our Lord, God's eternal Son, who, as a man, fully shared and fulfilled our humanity in a life of perfect obedience.*

**2) We proclaim the reality of sin and its consequences — that apart from divine grace, we are estranged from God by our disobedience and incapable of a right relationship with God.**

It is critical that as communicators of the message of hope in Jesus Christ, we understand the condition of humankind in the sight of God. We believe that the Scriptures do, in fact, teach that sin is a present reality which renders unbelievers estranged from God and totally incapable of living an abundant, eternal life (John 8:24; I John 5:11-12).

We maintain that sin's consequences include a broken relationship with God, so relational words such as *estrangement, alienation, lostness* and *purposelessness* do represent our condition. We also maintain that words such as *guilty, rebellious, separated* and *condemned* are descriptions that characterize sinful humanity and necessitate God's ultimate rescue in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Great care must be taken to keep Jesus present in this message about sin. Gospel narratives, including the paralytic brought to Jesus by his friends, the woman at the well, the rich young ruler, the woman caught in adultery, Peter's characterization of himself as a "sinful man" and other passages all may be used to communicate this message. Also we should not make a distinction between God's nature and the nature of Jesus Christ, as if God is wholly content to condemn sinful humankind while Jesus is wholly loving and forgiving. We affirm that in Trinitarian unity, God's love and justice are manifest in all three Persons without distinction between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

In our proclamation about sin and its consequences, we must present that sin's reality defines our condition and our behavior (Romans 3:10-18). This is true corporately and individually. Our world and our lives are broken because of sin. We are incapable of repairing the damage and brokenness on our own, of accomplishing our redemption and reconciliation (Romans 5:6). Neither our good works, our good intentions, our sincerity, nor even our faith is sufficient to accomplish our salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9; Isaiah 59:1-2).

In fact, ceasing to do bad things — were that possible — would not make right our relationship with God. We do not wish to communicate a moralistic Gospel as if good/bad behavior is the issue (Titus 3:4-5). Scripture makes it clear that people are accountable before God for their rebellion *and* for their sinful actions.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we must never forget that it is not the effectiveness of our proclamation that will convict kids of their sin and motivate them to respond to God's love. It is the ministry of God the Holy Spirit who convicts unbelievers of their sin and enables them to respond to God's loving provision (John 6:44; John 16:8). We should never presume that it is our job to make kids feel convicted or allow kids to "wallow" in their sin as if wallowing will bring more conviction. That is manipulation. God, through the Holy Spirit, can and will convict in His timing, allowing kids to respond to His love and justice simultaneously.

Leaving our audience feeling hopeless is also unnecessary and inaccurate. We should always communicate that God is more powerful than our sin and that His loving provision is the death and triumphal resurrection of Jesus Christ. We should never end our proclamation about sin by trying to leave kids feeling hopeless and then force them to go hours before they hear the hope of the Good News. Jesus' pursuit and love of us is not diminished by sin's reality or subsequent consequences. We are not **hopeless** because of the love of God in Jesus Christ, but we are **helpless** to make things right with God on our own. Understanding His presence and His pursuit "while we were yet sinners" leads us to repentance, turning from life on our own apart from God to life in relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Our Statement of Faith, **Article III**, affirms this:

*God made man in His image that He might have fellowship with him. Being estranged from God by his disobedience, sinful man is incapable of a right relationship to God apart from divine grace.*

**3) We proclaim the crucifixion of Jesus Christ as the ultimate proof of God's love and the only solution to our problem of sin.**

As stated in our Statement of Faith, both God's justice and mercy are evident at the cross.

#### **Article V**

*By His death in our place, Jesus revealed the divine love and upheld divine justice, removing our guilt and reconciling us to God. Having risen bodily from the dead and ascended into heaven, He rules as Lord over all and intercedes for us as our Great High Priest.*

We explain to our friends what it means when we say, "Jesus died for our sins." We speak of Jesus' death as a sacrificial atonement which means that a mysterious transaction occurred. Jesus assumed our sin, paid our penalty and because of this, He now offers the transfer of His righteousness which is given freely to all who trust in Him (II Corinthians 5:21).

While one talk could never adequately cover all that was accomplished through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, we do affirm that on the cross, Jesus:

- Demonstrated the love of God (Romans 5:8)
- Paid for the reconciliation of all who want to be reconciled to God (Colossians 1:20-22), whereby a new relationship with God is restored for all who trust in Christ
- Dealt with sin by redemption (Mark 10:45; Romans 3:22-26)
- Made propitiation or atonement for our sin (Romans 3:22-26)
- Provided for our justification (Romans 3:22-26)
- Conquered the power of Satan, evil, sin and death (Colossians 2:13-15)
- Died as a substitute for sinful humanity (Isaiah 53:5-6; II Corinthians 5:21)

While the Scriptures are filled with references to these truths, our primary text for proclaiming the cross must always be the crucifixion narratives found in the Gospel. Therefore, proclaiming the truth of the cross must center in the Gospel events of the crucifixion itself with other texts, such as parables or selections from the Epistles or the Old Testament, etc., used only as secondary references. The awful reality of the crucifixion's brutality may be presented, but only to communicate the seriousness of our sin and the extent of God's love. We should never allow our representation of the events at Calvary to become simply a gratuitous portrayal of violence, nor should we do anything to cause people to "feel sorry for Jesus" or be emotionally manipulated. We maintain that even in His crucifixion, Jesus was in control of every moment. Verbal proclamation that gives attention to the historical Gospel accounts is much preferred over video representations which often play on the emotions and do not adequately explain Jesus as our substitute. Because of that, the crucifixion narrative as stated in the Gospels will be our main text in proclaiming Jesus' work on the cross.

#### **4) We proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ.**

Sometimes in Young Life we do not give adequate time to the proclamation and explanation of the resurrection (I Corinthians 15). We maintain, with the Church for two millennia, that Resurrection Day, rather than Good Friday, is the focal point of the Gospel. We will be sure that the resurrection is highlighted and that its implications are fully explained. We will tell the Easter story using the Gospel accounts. We will communicate to kids that the resurrection validates the claims of Christ, illustrates God's triumph over sin, ensures that we, too, are now and will be resurrected to a new life. Jesus Christ is alive and lives in us today, imparting to us love, freedom, healing, identity, purpose, abundant and eternal life (John 10:10).

We joyfully announce that the resurrection of Jesus gives all of us a hope for the future, unconditional acceptance and transformation. Kids no longer need to feel boxed in by their sin or their position in life. Isaiah 61:1-3, a passage Jesus uses in His sermon in Nazareth in Luke 4:16-19, describes the incredible changes the Lord makes in our lives. Through Christ's power as illustrated in the resurrection, I John 4:4 can be true for these kids who feel mired by their lives. "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

**5) We proclaim the risen Christ's offer of salvation by inviting our middle school, high school and college friends to confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and respond in faith.**

We maintain that the Gospel demands a response; that the sacrifice of Jesus, although sufficient for the salvation of the whole world, is only efficient for those who confess Jesus as Lord and respond in faith, appropriating Jesus' death and resurrection for themselves.

We affirm that it is God's grace that saves us through what He accomplished on the cross. Faith is a gift from God and a response to God's activity in our lives. Our response of repentance is only evidence of our change of heart, not the reason for our salvation. Yet the Scriptures speak of repentance as inseparable from our appropriation of the Gospel message.

We believe that only in responding in faith and repentance can Jesus' removal of sin and imparting of life begin.

We are clear to declare that we are inviting our friends to respond to a person not a religion and not to a concept or an idea. This is all about an invitation to respond to a person, the Living Christ.

As Paul states in Ephesians 1, we affirm that our adoption and our salvation are located outside of chronological time. But we also affirm that the Scriptures teach that people must respond to and embrace the Gospel in order to be saved. We invite our adolescent friends to make a "decision" or a "commitment" to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to confess Him as Lord and to follow Him. We do this in a thoughtful, non-manipulative invitation to respond to what they have heard and to what God is doing in their hearts. We do not allow an environment to be created where kids feel pressured to respond or ostracized if they do not. Still, we provide the opportunity for a public proclamation of faith.

**6) We proclaim God's call to discipleship by encouraging all who respond to grow in their faith.**

Indispensable to our proclamation is the message that Jesus is a living Lord. We do not intend to produce only converts but disciples in the kingdom of God. This means that the intentional encouragement of kids in their walk with Christ must be part of our proclamation. When we confess our sin and begin our faith journey as followers of Jesus, we are saved, redeemed and reconciled to the Father. However, as Paul says in Romans 7:14-25, we are never fully free from

the bonds of sin and are in constant need of giving ourselves over to God's grace. This is a primary reason for being involved in a church and a fellowship group that will encourage confession, accountability and continued growth. After inviting kids to respond to Jesus Christ, we must proclaim what it means to follow Christ for a lifetime, what it means to be part of the church, what it means to make a difference in the world. We will help them understand that this is not an individualistic discipleship only; it is also being part of Christ's body with all other believers as they live out their faith in obedience. Mission Leadership, staff and volunteers must both teach and model this kind of commitment.

## **Presentation**

We affirm Young Life's *style* is relational and incarnational. This means that our proclamation of the Gospel will almost always proceed from the context of relationships with adolescents. We are not impersonal messengers. As God "became flesh" in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 18), so we in Young Life seek to "become flesh" in our proclamation. As Paul said in I Thessalonians 2:8, we share "not only the gospel of God, but our own lives as well." We believe that this style of proclamation is both biblical and effective.

We affirm that Young Life is open to new methodology. We need to be flexible and willing to adapt our methods to find the best possible ways to engage adolescents and introduce them to Jesus Christ. Geographic, demographic, racial, social and cultural differences may all have an impact on the way we introduce Jesus to kids (I Corinthians 9:19-23). **However, while our methodology may change, our message does not.**

We affirm that developing and presenting a series of messages that unfolds the Gospel to our friends has stood the test of time. A sequence of talks that covers the following themes is a hallmark of Young Life:

- The person of Jesus Christ (This is the overarching theme of all our talks.)
- The reality and consequences of sin (This should be explained before the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.)
- The truth about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ
- The truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ
- The invitation God extends to us
- The call to discipleship
- The public proclamation of that response

## **Summary**

We affirm that it is both the responsibility and commitment of the senior leadership of Young Life to communicate these non-negotiables of proclamation and then to train our staff and volunteers on how to proclaim the Gospel. Once our staff and volunteers are trained, we will hold them accountable for the content and the clarity of our proclamation. We understand that there may be Young Life staff members or volunteers who would prefer to proclaim the Gospel in another way. But because the issue of how we proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to kids is at the heart of what we do and because we are called to be stewards of this high and holy responsibility, we will maintain our position as described in this paper. We must have whole-hearted commitment and mission unity in the way we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is how we will proclaim the Gospel in Young Life, knowing that every opportunity for proclamation is a call to prayer. We must continue to recognize our utter dependence upon God and His Spirit (John 6:44, 63). Although we endeavor to be faithful, effective proclaimers of the Truth, we fully understand that it is ultimately the ministry of God that we are joining. We serve as stewards of the message knowing we are wholly incapable of changing the minds, much less the hearts, of our audience (I Corinthians 2:1-5). As a mission we seek to be faithful to the Scriptures. We base our proclamation on our understanding of God's Truth contained therein, and we stand on the shoulders of faithful men and women who have effectively proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout Young Life's history, to the glory of God.