How to turn teenagers into teen leaders…like Jesus did!

Jesus was a youth leader. When Peter, Jesus and the rest of the disicples went into Capernaum only Peter and Jesus paid the temple tax ([Matthew 17:24-27](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+17%3A24-27&version=NIV)). If you cross-reference this passage with [Exodus 30:14](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+30%3A14&version=NIV) it becomes clear that the temple tax was only for those 20 years old and older.

If I'm reading these passages correctly, Jesus was a youth leader, with only one adult sponsor (and one really rotten kid named Judas.)

But within the span of 3 1/2 years (about the time a typical teenager is in high school minus summer vacations) he turned those teenagers into teen leaders. After the ascension here's how the big dawg religious leaders of the day viewed them, "When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus." Acts 4:13.

These teen leaders went on .to take the Gospel to the ends of the world. Some even went on to write books that would be included in the canon of Scripture and be used of God to build the church on a firm theological foundation.

No better leaders have ever been built out of such raw material. These young disciples ranged from fisherman to tax collector to zealot. They were mostly blue collar, red neck Jews who had most likely been overlooked by the religious community when they were younger to potentially become rabbis when they were of age.

That's why many of them had adoped their father's trades as their own. They probably viewed themselves as average or below average.

But Jesus has a way of taking the sub-par and turning it into the spectacular. He loves to choose "the foolish things to confound the wise" and, I can guarantee you, that most of the religious leaders of Jesus' time viewed his choice of disciples as utterly foolish and misguided.

So how did Jesus do it? How did Jesus take 12 ordinary young men and turn them into 11 extraordinary leaders (remember Judas flamed out)? Here's how he did it..and how you can, through the power of the Holy Spirit, do it too:

1. **He gospelized them**.

The word “gospelize” is the old English word for evangelize. And we must never forget how crucial this is, even for student leaders.

First things first. Jesus made sure they were believers.

Long before Jesus called them to put down their nets and follow him as their leader, their rabbi in Matthew 4:19, he had them lay down their pride and trust in him as their Savior. In John 1:35-42 the Bible tells us,

“*The next day John was there again with two of his disciples.**When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!”* *When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, “What do you want?” They said, “Rabbi” (which means “Teacher”), “where are you staying?”**“Come,” he replied, “and you will see.” So they went and saw where he was staying, and they spent that day with him. It was about four in the afternoon.*

*Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ). And he brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon son of John. You will be called Cephas”(which, when translated, is Peter).*”

They are still kicking the tires on Jesus. That’s why I love what Jesus tells the disciples, “come and see” and Andrew tells Peter the same thing.

Soon after this in John 2:1 when Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding of Cana they stopped kicking the tires and bought the car. That’s exactly what John 2:11 tells us, *“What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.”*

It was at least several months before he called them to drop their nets, leave everything and follow him as their rabbi. He made sure they really believed in him before he addressed their behavior. He made sure they had faith before he called them to forsake.

In the same way, we must make sure our teenagers have put their faith in Christ before we dare to put them in a leadership position. We must make sure they are on "Team Jesus" before we challenge them to go all in and try to make the "starting team" as student leaders.

That’s why I never assume when I meet a crowd of student leaders. Even at our own leadership event, Lead THE Cause, a full week event designed to take student leaders to the next level…it’s called Lead THE Cause…we always give the Gospel at these events and at the vast majority we see teenagers come to faith in Christ.

**2.  He sensitized them.**

After Jesus gospelized them, he sensitized them. Jesus was constantly reaching out to the bad, the broken and the bullied in a spirit of utter compassion. He touched lepers. He reached out to the outcasts. He engaged the dregs of society (and he enraged the holier-than-thou religious leaders of his day in the process.)

You couldn't follow Jesus without going across the tracks. That was his way. He was drawn to those who were hurting, to those who already knew they were sinners and felt a sense of hopelessness and spiritual need.

When you read Matthew 9:36-38 you can't help but sense the conviction that the disciples must have felt when they witnessed the love of Jesus for the crowds that were following him, "*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* *Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.* Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.'”

Jesus had a broken heart for the broken-hearted and he longed to send out broken-hearted harvesters into the harvest fields to reap a spiritual harvest.

How can you break the hearts of your teenagers for the lost? Take them out.

Take them on a mission trip to a developing country.

I’ll never forget when I first went to a developing country and got a snapshot of true poverty. I went to India on a preaching tour.

I remember encountering actual lepers because one touched me from behind and when I turned around, honestly, sadly I jumped back. I was shocked at the sight of it.

I’ll never forget people living in abject poverty. Open sewer canals running through their shantytowns…people longing for one meal, just one meal for the day.

I’ll never forget my most vivid memory of poverty: the Little Girl knocking on my window while we were in traffic motioning that she wanted food.

When I took my then ten year old son to Colombia to see true poverty for the first time it broke his heart and transformed his perspective forever.

But you don’t have to leave the country to encounter poverty. Sometimes it’s good to get a change of scenery without breaking the bank.

**Take them out to the broken parts of a different city** to engage with the people there. Help them see the lost with the eyes of Jesus.

Here’s a picture from Rob Tombrella, a youth leader at one of our Lead THE Cause events. I love this picture because it shows teenagers reaching out to a homeless man on, what we call our care day. This day sensitizes teenagers.

As a matter of fact, I’d like back it up a bit and give you a snapshot of what we do at Lead THE Cause and why we do it because I think it will help you program your own youth ministry outreaches more effectively and help your teens to become more sensitized.

We spend four full days training teenagers in four key areas. The whole process really sensitizes them…but especially the first two days…

**Prayer day**…start praying for their unreached friends, their schools, the people of the city they are in.

**Care day**…we equip them to engage people in conversations and then unleash them to serve the city. In some cities it’s working with Dream Centers to do service projects where poorer people in the hurting parts of a city are cared for in some way. In other cities it’s

**SHARE day** is all about Gospel conversations. They go into the city, ask people how they can pray for them and then engage them in Gospel conversations all afternoon.

Teenagers come back from the outreach so excited! They are so pumped up because they've been mobilized to gospelize. They come back with a roar that we have nicknamed “the sound of evangelism.” Often they come back from the outreach literally dancing! It's our version of an evangelistic dance party…and, yes, there are Baptist kids that are still trying so hard to get some rhythm.

The key though is that they have been sensitized to the needs of the lost! Their eyes are opened, sometimes for the first time, to the hurting around them.

Take your teenagers, especially your teen leaders, to the hurting parts of your own city. Rescue missions, government housing, apartment complexes and trailer courts!

Why? Because it will sensitize them and it is strategic! Charles Spurgeon said these words in an excellent sermon he preached called, “Preaching for the poor”

*“If we would (set) a building on fire, it is best to light it at the basement; so our Savior, when he would save a world, and convert men of all classes, and all ranks, begins at the lowest rank, that the fire may burn upwards, knowing right well that what was received by the poor, will ultimately by his grace be received by the rich also.”*

Think about the poorer apartment complexes, government housing and trailer courts in your city. Why not send your teenagers there to serve that community in some way and reach out to their teenagers with the hope of Jesus and plug them into your church?

I remember my youth leaders taking us out on Saturdays to apartment complexes around our city and going door to door to invite their kids to come to Sunday school and their teenagers to come to youth group. And, I had been living in apartments complexes for most of my life up to that point.

But the hurting are not just the poor. Every school day of the year teenagers encounter hurting teenagers on their campuses. Teenagers are struggling with depression and anxiety like never before. Far too many teenagers have attempted suicide or committed it.

We need to equip our teenagers to be sensitized to those around them and to be drawn to the hurting with the hope of Christ.

There are people that need the love of Jesus all around us. We must just open our eyes.

Sensitize your teenagers to the lost through action (getting them out there) and through prayer (interceding together for their salvation) and relentlessly reminding them to open their eyes to the hurting at their schools and in their networks.

Jesus sensitized his teenagers.

1. **He mobilized them**.

Months after they believed in Jesus and watching him live and share the Gospel he approached them in Matthew 4:19-20 and said, ‘Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.’At once they left their nets and followed him.”

In other words he mobilized them. What does this mean? He equipped them to reach others with the Gospel! They were fisherman so they knew how to fish and Jesus was going to teach them to fish for people.

When you fish you simply go to the fish who are in the water and bring them onto shore. And that’s what we are trying to do. We are taking those who are out lost in sin and bring them into the hope of Christ.

**With fishing for fish you use poles, bait and nets**. But with fishing for people you simply boldly proclaim the Gospel.

What makes a good fisherman is what makes a good witness for the Lord Jesus Christ. **Good fishermen know where the fish are and know to bring them to the shore**.

I recently caught a fish that was pretty big…fly fishing (picture). But the reason I was able to catch this fish is not because I was good but because this guy smiling behind me, Mike Tatlock, knew where the fish were and knew how to catch them. I just did exactly what he told me to do.

He taught me to fly fish for fish. But we are called to teach our teenagers to fish for people. Which presupposes that we know how to do it.

We can’t train effectively what we have not internalized personally. If we don’t know how to evangelize how in the world can we train our teenagers how to do it?

In many ways Lead THE Cause, not only trains teenagers how to share the Gospel, but youth leaders as well. It’s awesome to see many youth leaders learn how to effectively share the Gospel for the first time!

The first full two days of Lead THE Cause are focused on a PRAYER day and a CARE

But the place that you must mobilize your teenagers the most is not at Lead THE Cause, Dare 2 Share Live or some other outreach event…but in the mundane, day-to-day lives of your teenagers.

We must help our teenagers view their school year as a 9 month long mission trip and their summer break as a 3 month outreach event.

We must give this cause-hungry generation the satisfaction of a cause worth living for the rest of their lives. And there's no greater cause than The Cause of Jesus to make and multiply disciples.

I can’t help but think of my buddy Don Olding (picture) from Go-Live-Dare in South Africa. He told me the story of how it was really a youth movement in South Africa that stopped Apartheid.

Apartheid was a system of institutionalized racial segregation that existed in [South Africa](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Africa)  from 1948 until the early 1990s. Apartheid was characterised by an authoritarian political culture based on *a theory of* [white supremacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_supremacy)). It encouraged state repression of blacks and others for the benefit of the nation's [minority](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dominant_minority) [white population](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_South_Africans).

I’ll never forget walking through the Apartheid museum in Johnesburg, South Africa being absolutely mortified by this horrific chapter in South African history. But, through the leadership of Nelson Mandella and others, a youth movement rose up to break apartheid’s grip.

Young people protested, sang songs and were often shot by the authorities but these young people and their courage for the cause, eventually won the public over and Apartheid’s grip was broken.

Don Olding now wants to break another even more horrific grip in South Africa… Satan’s. Don is committed to seeing a generation rise up with another cause, the cause of Christ. He is unleashing teenagers to reach their friends for Jesus at their schools and with their friend groups. He is mobilizing teenagers until every teenager in Africa hears the Gospel from a friend.

David Banda is doing the same thing in Zambia, George Webere is doing the same thing in Kenya and Stephen Bahago is doing the same thing in Nigeria.

A movement is rising up in Africa…a Gospel Advancing movement! And it’s all based on teenagers being mobilized to reach teenagers with the Gospel!

That’s our prayer for the United States as well…that teenagers would be mobilized for the Gospel!

How did Jesus turn teenagers into teen leaders? He gospelized them! He sensitized them! He mobilized them! And, finally, he….

1. **He authorized them.**

In the same passage that Jesus mobilized his "youth group" to make disciples he also authorized them to finish the task.  In Matthew 28:18-19 Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...."

Luke 9:1,2 puts it this way, "*When Jesus had called the Twelve together, he gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases,* and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick."

I’ll never forget when I was in fourth grade I was asked by my teacher to be a crosswalk monitor. That’s back when students could be the ones to help other students cross the road without getting hit. They gave me a little belt and a little badge.

I would be able to stop traffic with that stop sign and that badge and control my classmates movement. It felt like the ultimate power. As a ten year old I was able to stop 18 wheeler trucks with my tiny badge and my big sign.

Well guess what, we’ve been given a much greater authority as followers of Jesus and so have our teenagers…to go and make disciples. The world, the flesh and the devil must stop in their tracks as we exercise that authority.

In this politically correct, everything’s acceptable culture of tolerance, the narrow-way message of Jesus will be increasingly marginalized and mocked. But we’ve been given a badge. We’ve been given authority…not to be obnoxious…not to be pushy…but to lovingly and boldly proclaim the good news of Jesus. And so have our teenagers!

Jesus deputized his disciples to ride straight into Satan's kingdom and rescue the lost from his grasp. In a have-it-your-way culture of spiritual smorgashborg beliefs, Jesus was telling his young disciples to go and point to Jesus as "the way and the truth and the life" and to remind everyone that "no one comes to the Father except through" him.

We need to help our teenagers embrace the reality that they have been authorized by the God of this universe to share the Gospel with anyone and everyone. Barna calls this generation of teenagers (Generation Z) the first post Christian generation in the history of the United States. To reach this generation we must re-cast Christianity as a love story that just happens to be true. After all, the most famous verse of Scripture starts with these words, "For God so loved the world...."

And the temptation is to be silent. Because in this culture to call yourself as a Christian may be construed as someone who is a narrow minded hater instead of an open hearted, open handed lover of the lost.

As we equip our teenagers to share this love story with their lives and with their lips it is crucial to remind them that they have been deputized and authorized by the King of kings to make and multiply disciples.

1. **He energized them**.

Moments before Jesus ascended into heaven he gave his disciples a power-filled promise. He told them, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" Acts 1:8.

Ten days after Jesus ascended the Holy Spirit descended and lit their tongues on fire with and for the Gospel. From this moment on the disciples were energized to evangelize.

In the same way we need to help unpack the life-transforming, boldness-infusing, Gospel proclaiming power of the indwelling Holy Spirit to our teenagers.

Don’t underestimate the importance of consistently reminding your teenagers of the importance of the Holy Spirit…but the Holy Spirit is not a burst of energy but a steady stream of energy.

All of us have heard the band called ACDC. Well, they got their name from an abbreviation of two types of power. Alternating Current and Direct Current.

Alternating current is what we get from an outlet…a steady current of energy that is continuous and consistent.

Direct current is what we get from a battery…a direct current of energy that will run out when the battery runs down.

There was actually a huge battle for the electrical grids in the 1800’s. Thomas Edison pushed DC and Nikolas Tesla pushed AC. Tesla won because what America needed was a steady flow of electricity that was easy to regulate…not a burst of energy that would run out.

So many times we are dependent on a DC form of energy with our teenagers…a battery burst of energy that will eventually run out instead of a the steady flow of the alternation current of the Holy Spirit!

I often talk about how impacting my youth ministry was growing up…describe…but they were operating on DC…a battery cell. I learned the power of AC…the Holy Spirit… my freshman year at college…and it changed everything.

In the same way let’s make sure our teenagers are energized by the Spirit and not a lesser power source!

Let's raise them up and turn them loose!

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