

Foreword

One of the key features of life today, the idea that I must live ‘authentically’, presents a tremendous challenge to youth and young adults. How do they make their own way in the world, dealing with sexuality, work, family, leisure, and then how do those of us who are ‘further along’ find ways to play a constructive role in their journey? What help can we offer when a typical part of their journey involves rejecting what they’ve inherited from faith and family?

One young man cited in chapter two of this discussion resource complained about all the people ‘mumbling’ prayers in the church of his childhood. “Those are the people I don’t admire, because it’s just, it’s not really spiritual. If they’re not living their values according to God, they should be true to themselves and admit that.” He rejects the traditional religious practices of his home church and its older members, including his parents. They just go through the motions, he thinks, and ought to follow their personal convictions in regards to God that, by extension, need not have anything to do with traditional religion. Making one’s own way with God would be respectable. Yet as he muses on his own journey, he’s not at all sure to whom he should go for words of eternal life. It turns out most of his friends don’t believe in God anymore. Caught between the now of doubt and the not-yet of faith, he feels alone and struggles to know how to move ahead.

This young man embodies the style and substance of so many young people today, and it ought to cause the church to ask some hard questions about the relationship of faith and young adulthood. Fortunately, we now have a means to ask such hard questions together in this wise and winsome volume *Spring of Christian Life*, the latest addition to the series of studies of *The Seasons of Christian Life* by Dick and Judy Reuning. Their work - and this latest volume is no exception - holds together key aspects of what serious Christians need to think straight about the challenges we face today.

By way of encouraging your diving right in, either to buying this fine resource for yourself or getting started using it in your congregation or small group, let me briefly highlight six key reasons this resource strikes the right chord: it is simple, with substance, intergenerational, communal, integrative, and interrogative. With that list, who could resist getting a group together and jumping into this compelling conversation about what we all can do to respond to the challenges young adults face today?

Briefly, by way of leading you into their work, let me take each of these key words describing the Reuning style on display in *Spring of Christian Life*. You should know, by the way, that an equally thoughtful companion Leader’s Guide is available with teaching tips and suggestions for handling emotional discussions.

Simple

Their aim, as if knowing how the attention span of people today has grown short through the formative experience of new media, is to offer engaging and bite-sized pieces of conversation with real-life voices at the heart of each chapter. Thus in their authorship they model the kind of open and accessible invitation to conversation they hope to inspire in the groups that take up their resource.

With substance

They go for depth along side the simplicity of their approach. No easy answers here, or prematurely resolved challenges. They instead use trusted 'travel guides' who are well-known theologians and biblical scholars, psychologists and sociologists, turning their insights into carefully set out bits of insight at just the right moment in order to keep the conversation going deeper into the complex issues those in the 'spring' of life now face.

Intergenerational

They push against age segmentation and invite mixed-age groups, expecting and encouraging the sharing of examples and stories across the generations. But the really clever idea is that if discussion groups are formed to do this kind of intergenerational work, they build community and become wise for one another, finding ways to live the questions together in richer and more meaningful ways than would ever be possible for a 'young adult' study. The authors wisely recognize that the church is one of the few spaces in our society where such a multigenerational gathering can happen, and encourage us not to miss this gift sitting right before our noses.

Communal

In a similar way they push against individualism and invite communal participation. Such community vision takes seriously how broken our experience of family is today, with the social trends of high mobility and high divorce rates combining to make us more disconnected from community than ever before. The authors do this not only with the intergenerational group gathered for the conversation but also drawing on wisdom from the Scriptures as 'Food for the Journey' as if our ancestors in the faith set a table for us, giving us the things we need to sustain our conversation as we seek the means to live faithfully today.

Integrative

They don't allow consideration of faith disconnected from daily living, something that is endemic in modern society. "After all, I love God and try to be a good person, but that doesn't have anything to do with my love (driven by romantic and pleasure-seeking motives), my work (driven by reward-seeking motives) or my involvement in politics (driven by self-interest)." Wrong! The authors clearly present the connections between our life in Christ and the spheres of life that

make up our lives, from the most intimate (sexuality) to the most public (social media like blogging).

Interrogative

They know they don't have all the answers, but they trust they can spark a conversation by asking good questions. They not only encourage good questions by asking a few of their own, and holding open the space for provocative discussion of such questions raised in the study group, they also affirm that questions are faithful. Too many versions of Christianity focus on answers, typified by the classic "The Bible says it, I believe it and that settles it." That style is a recipe for stagnation, not spiritual growth. And when the answers no longer fit, young people simply leave the church, not realizing that other answers are possible or that questions are valid forms of engagement in the life of faith. The authors of this study are by that standard a bit unsettling to 'easy-answer Christianity.' But they are unsettling in exactly the right way to open space for us to consider how God is present in the midst of our lives, leading us into more faithful living through all the seasons of life.

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