

Research on the Current State of Christian Education for Adolescents

Characteristics of Adolescents: Adolescents undergo significant physical and emotional changes during this period, making it challenging for them to adapt. Managing them as we would children or imposing adult responsibilities on them can be counterproductive. This age is marked by rebellion, as adolescents seek to assert their independence, often challenging parental authority and questioning established norms. However, this rebellion provides a unique opportunity to introduce Christian values, helping them understand the true nature of sin. Furthermore, adolescents place a high value on friendship; they tend to establish relationships before developing trust. If we rely solely on preaching, it may be difficult to influence them effectively. Understanding these characteristics is essential for conveying biblical truths to them.

Historical Context of Christianity in America: The United States was founded on Christian principles, specifically rooted in Puritan theology within a constitutional democracy. At that time, the Catholic Church in England operated like an authoritarian regime, and Queen Elizabeth I mandated a single church—the Church of England—where Puritans could only participate. This repression led the Puritans to sail on the Mayflower to the New World in 1620, where they, though impoverished and alone, sought to establish a great nation and government based on democratic and constitutional ideals.

However, the current state of Christian faith among American youth is concerning. According to a survey by the Barna Group, focusing on the relationship between faith and culture, fewer than 1% of young people in America hold a biblical worldview. Even more startling, among Christians aged 18 to 23, the figure drops to less than 0.5%. More comprehensive studies indicate that many youth church programs prioritize entertainment and pizza over building young people's faith. This situation arises from a lack of biblical instruction in public schools, at home, and even in churches. Statistics show that our children spend an average of 30 hours each week in public schools, where they are taught ideologies that starkly oppose biblical truths, such as evolution and acceptance of homosexuality. Additionally, they spend another 30 hours at home, often watching sitcoms, violent films, or engaging in social media and gaming for hours. Many new immigrant students from Chinese backgrounds have had little to no exposure to the Bible or Christian faith. Even those who passively attend church often do so without genuine engagement, merely participating in games or meeting a couple of friends. It is no wonder that when these young people leave home, they lack a Christian worldview.

Many adolescents from Christian families abandon their faith upon entering college. This occurs because they have not established a personal faith; they possess only their parents' beliefs, which they have not internalized. Often, their true inner world remains concealed beneath years of parental restrictions but surfaces fully during college. Sigmund Freud serves as a notable example; despite receiving Jewish faith education in his youth, he ultimately embraced atheism, regretting this decision later in life. The root of his faith crisis lay in his failure to form a proper, faith-centered worldview during adolescence, leading to doubts about God and creation. Thus, we must guide adolescents out of their periods of faith doubt and help them establish a correct and lasting faith. It is imperative that a faith centered on Jesus Christ becomes a guiding beacon in their lives.

The Importance of Biblical Study for Youth: The adolescent phase is a critical period during which individuals often question their identity, purpose, and self-worth. For young people engaged in Bible study, exploring their identity in Christ can be a transformative journey. Understanding that their true worth comes from being children of God can profoundly influence how they view themselves and those around them. Biblical study plays a vital role in the spiritual growth and development of young people, laying the groundwork for understanding their faith, values, and beliefs, while providing guidance and wisdom for navigating the complexities of life. Regular Bible study allows young people to deepen their relationship with God, cultivate a sense of purpose, and seek direction in a world filled with distractions and uncertainties.

One crucial reason why studying the Bible is essential for young people is that it is a source of truth and knowledge. In a society where moral relativism and changing values are prevalent, the Bible offers eternal principles and doctrines that can serve as a compass for making wise decisions. Through in-depth study of the Scriptures, young people gain insights into living a life pleasing to God and aligned with His will. Furthermore, studying the Bible promotes spiritual maturity and personal growth. When young people grapple with issues of identity, purpose, and direction, the Bible provides answers that clarify and soothe their hearts. By learning from the life of Jesus and the faithful examples of biblical figures, they can acquire valuable lessons on resilience, courage, humility, and love.

For new Chinese immigrants, understanding mainstream culture in America necessitates knowledge of Christianity and the study of the Bible. This is particularly true for Chinese immigrant youth, who can better integrate into campus life and American communities by understanding and engaging with biblical teachings and Christian culture. The essence of the Christian spirit is real, and its truths should be rooted in the minds of young people.

Generally, Chinese culture tends to prioritize practicality and success. Chinese parents often hope their children will excel, investing significant resources in tutoring, music lessons, art classes, and computer skills. This focus on education can become imbalanced. We must use youth Sunday school as a bridge to instill proper educational values in modern parents, helping them realize that character development is more important than mere knowledge acquisition, and that parent-child relationships take precedence over academic performance. Once strong character is established, concerns about children succumbing to negative influences diminish. Adolescents are like fertile soil; we must diligently cultivate it, sowing seeds at the right time to reap a good harvest. It's important to remember that even the best soil must be plowed and weeds removed before sowing.

The family church movement that emerged in China during the 1980s and 1990s has now entered a new phase. Previously, churches focused more on evangelizing and nurturing adults; now, nurturing the next generation of believers has become one of the church's key challenges. Christian education is necessary in China for several reasons. First, children in family churches face a completely secularized world, heavily influenced by media and commercial culture, and more than ever, by their peers. We need to educate them according to their developmental stages, guiding them to establish values and worldviews that align with Christian faith. Second, Chinese churches lack the freedom to evangelize effectively, while students in many other countries have various channels for accessing faith information and experience a more diverse culture. Third, our churches are still in their early stages and need to improve in pastoral care.

Describing the current state of Christian education in China as "a hundred flowers blooming" is not an exaggeration. There are various forms of education, including spontaneous home education by parents, specialized educational institutions, and church schools. Some schools focus on children from family churches, while others cater to children from multiple churches. Many initiatives in Christian education, taken with faith, are still in the process of being developed and refined. Establishing an educational system depends on building a robust curriculum, which is reflected in the selection of teaching materials. However, the use of these materials is still in a somewhat chaotic exploratory phase.

Many schools utilize the ABK curriculum for English instruction. Due to the lack of a systematic approach, teachers in Christian schools often bear a heavier workload. One principal noted that a public school teacher mentioned their preparation is less arduous because their teaching goals are clear and lesson plans are straightforward; teachers can simply follow the script. In terms of establishing an educational framework, some schools adopt existing systems based on trust, borrowing from established Christian classical education models like the Logos Schools, including their management manuals and curriculum guides. The main challenge in the adaptation process is localization, as many detailed tasks still need to be addressed. While foreign textbooks may be well-structured and distinctive, their adaptation for use in China is not straightforward, making localization essential. For example, the intensity and difficulty of English

language instruction must be carefully designed, considering that Chinese is the mother tongue and English is a second language. Much of this still needs to reflect American cultural perspectives.

The Challenges and Innovations in Christian Education for New Immigrant Youth: While Christian education may still lack a fully developed curriculum, it does have strengths in nurturing students. However, this is not necessarily the case, especially for Christian educational institutions independent of churches. Effectively nurturing these rebellious adolescents has been a continuous exploration for educators. By the time students reach middle or high school, their learning abilities, habits, character, and qualities are largely established, making it difficult to enact change. Many of their challenges stem from family upbringing. Although education for adolescents primarily occurs in schools, it is deeply interconnected with family life. Therefore, educating parents in Christian values must also be prioritized; otherwise, conflicts arising from differing adult perspectives may be difficult to resolve. We face numerous challenges in an environment where significant change is unlikely.

We should explore more innovative approaches, such as online education and internet courses. Currently, Christian education lacks high-quality bilingual (Chinese and English) Bible textbooks for middle and high school students. There is a scarcity of these materials worldwide, particularly specifically designed for new Chinese immigrants and bilingual Chinese students. Through extensive research and inquiry, we have found that no complete set of bilingual Bible study materials suitable for Chinese new immigrants or ELD (English Language Development) students exists across online platforms, physical locations, or educational institutions within the Chinese community globally. English training organizations, Chinese churches, and missionary agencies all require bilingual textbooks that teach both English and the Bible by grade level. This educational material serves two purposes: first, to teach English to new immigrants, and second, to promote Bible teaching.

Spilus, a nonprofit organization founded in 2013, has helped many students address their English learning and life challenges over the past decade. However, we have observed that these new immigrant students and families still struggle to integrate into campus and community life in the U.S. Through extensive data analysis, we have identified key issues troubling new immigrant students and families. Besides language barriers, cultural and ideological differences are significant obstacles, with Christian culture and faith at the heart of the solution. In my 20 years of experience teaching English, I have witnessed many new immigrant families face confusion in learning and living in the U.S. The primary issues include:

Language Barriers: Many new immigrant adults and students arrive in the U.S. with English proficiency below grade level. This language gap is the most significant barrier to their integration into American communities and school life. It is crucial for new immigrant families to find ways to quickly improve their English skills to approach native proficiency.

Cultural Differences: The deep-rooted Confucian values of the Chinese community contrast sharply with the predominantly Christian and Western culture in the U.S. Understanding American and Western culture, along with Christian principles, is essential for the Chinese community to integrate into American society. The Christian teachings of love, interpersonal connections, and mutual assistance can help new Chinese immigrants build relationships, experience warmth, and learn to "love thy neighbor" and "love others as oneself," thereby improving their integration into community life.

In addition to helping new immigrants quickly enhance their English skills and address language issues, it is important to impart Christian values. Therefore, Spilus has prioritized outreach and planting seeds of faith. We have decided to develop an "English Bible Curriculum" suitable for various grade levels for Chinese students. This curriculum will incorporate bilingual instruction for younger grades and primarily English instruction for older grades, cleverly combining language education with the dissemination of Christian culture and values.

The "English Bible Course" developed by Spilus will draw on over a decade of curriculum

development experience from ivyGoal, collaborating with seminaries for design and organization. Biblical scholars will execute and write the materials, while seasoned American educators and experts will review and revise them. Through these "English Bible Learning Materials," Chinese students can improve their English proficiency while gaining insight into Christian cultural ideas. This approach integrates education across grade levels, preparing new immigrant students to become committed believers with a strong foundation in Christian faith.

The Importance of Wisdom and Christian Values in Adolescent Education: Most adolescents do not actively seek wisdom and often resist correction. However, their struggles during this period present a unique opportunity to guide them toward seeking wisdom. We need to help young people recognize that wisdom is a beautiful and wonderful pursuit. As Proverbs 3:13-18 states: "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, the one who gains understanding." The Bible provides us with a cultural framework, and a Christian worldview shapes its own culture.

The Bible defines success as loving God above all else and loving others as oneself. Success is not measured by the size of one's house, the prominence of one's title, or even by enviable athletic talent or appearance. The essence of the Christian spirit is real, and its truths should be deeply rooted in the minds of young people. We must teach Chinese immigrant youth the truths of the Bible and the Christian worldview. It is essential to sow seeds in the hearts and minds of Chinese adolescents, to cultivate and prepare the ground, and to convey Christian culture and worldview through various means. This will give them more time and opportunities to understand the Bible and engage with its teachings.

Ten years can feel long in a child's growth but short when considering the broader goal of "raising a person over a hundred years." Therefore, on one hand, we must take responsibility for the children, carefully considering and clarifying our approach to Christian education. On the other hand, knowing that the journey ahead is long and that it pleases the Lord, we commit ourselves in faith to the task of Christian education for the next generation!