

How is the Gospel ‘Good News’ to Young People?

Abstract

This paper explores how the gospel is good news to young people. It is suggested that the gospel is perceived as good news when it engages the felt needs of the people group, but it must move beyond this to addressing the real and most fundamental needs. Drawing from the results of a number of recent Australian surveys, the diversity of felt needs of young people are seen to include a need for hope, comfort, protection, belonging, identity, acceptance, forgiveness, purpose and direction. Yet at the same time many young people are happy, consider their situation in life as favourable, and are optimistic about the future. While these felt needs are diverse, it is suggested that the most fundamental real need is universal, and often hidden – the need for the problem of sin to be dealt with, enabling a relationship with God. Some suggestions are made which highlight how the gospel engages with the young people’s felt needs. Yet ultimately, because of Jesus’ saving work on the cross, the gospel is good news for young people because it engages with their felt needs, and goes beyond them to address their real need.

1. Introduction

News is heard as “good news” when the recipient perceives it to be positively dealing with a felt need, or responding to a problem they are experiencing. As a starting point, it is affirmed that the message of the gospel is in reality “good news”,¹ and the task is to present it in such a way so that it is rightly perceived as good news by young people today.² The methodology adopted here aims to achieve this by working from felt need to real need.³ As such, this paper first explores the felt needs and real needs of young people today, then suggests ways that the gospel can be effectively presented as good news to these young people in response to their felt and real needs. The term ‘young people’ is used here to broadly capture Australian’s aged 10 to 24, and particularly those in the North-Eastern suburbs of Melbourne, presumably with a predominantly postmodern worldview.

2. Felt Needs and Real Needs of Young People

2.1 Hopelessness and Pessimism Not to Be Overstated

Understanding young people and their felt needs in light of a postmodern worldview is helpful.⁴ There are indeed needs relating to identity, belonging, and brokenness particularly as a result of laxity of moral standards which are perhaps symptomatic of a postmodern moral relativism. Nevertheless, the true

¹ The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον literally translates as either “gospel” or “good news” in the NT.

² I heard a story recently about a dog who got hit by a car. The dog was severely injured, and when people arrived to lend assistance, though they tried to restrain the dog to take it away for surgery, the dog broke free biting off the lower lip of the woman who was struggling to restrain it. While the dog’s life was being saved, the assistance was not perceived as such. In fact it was perceived as a further attack. This highlights the common inconsistency between perception and reality. Often Christians with pure motives are misunderstood as offering something other than good news.

³ For the postmodern person who might link perception and reality too strongly, an example of a headache makes the distinction clear. A person who has not drunk any water all day will experience a headache as a result of dehydration. Here, the headache is the felt need, and water is the real need. Both need to be addressed.

⁴ Understanding postmodern culture is particularly helpful in regard to thinking about methods of evangelism. That is: effective evangelism in a postmodern setting is highly relational, and focuses more on experience than on rational proofs or arguments.

extent of these problems is not to be over-stated, particularly with regards to hopelessness and pessimism. Walsh and Keesmaat identify what they call 'cybernetic global optimism'.⁵ They observe that many living in a postmodern milieu have a renewed sense of optimism about the future, and see economic growth as well as technology as largely providing answers and solutions to the world's problems. Many young people in today's Australian culture – as expressed in TV shows like 'Australian Idol' and 'The Biggest Loser' – believe that if they put their mind to it, they can achieve anything. So, while some are gripped with the pessimism of a postmodern mindset, others (and sometimes even the same people!) are staunchly optimistic.⁶

As such, there is great diversity in the felt needs, desires, and aspirations of Melbourne's young people in the North-Eastern Suburbs. A variety of these are captured below, but they are certainly not all present in all young people.

2.2 Studies Reflect Both Positive and Negative aspects of what Youth are Feeling

A variety of studies conducted in the last few years have highlighted particular concerns and felt needs of young people in Australia. There is a mix of both positive and negative aspects of the experiences of Australian youth. The National Survey of Young Australians 2006, conducted by Mission Australia, shows that young people most highly value family and friends, as well as wanting to feel needed, valued, and be independent.⁷ Key areas of concern identified by young people included bullying/emotional abuse, family conflict, drug and alcohol issues, as well as mental health issues such as depression, coping with stress, suicide, and self-harm. Body image emerged as a new key area of significant concern.⁸ The 2006 report by Kids Helpline reflected similar results, with issues relating to family and peer relationships as the most common reason for Victorians accessing the service (17.2% and 13% respectively of 11,354 calls).⁹

A 2007 report by the Australian Children's Foundation (ACF) reveals key issues of children aged 10 to 14 including (1) self confidence and body image, (2) peer relationships and bullying, and (3) broader global issues.¹⁰ A similar report by the ACF in 2006 revealed that 49% fear getting cancer, 39% fear terrorism,

⁵ Brian. J. Walsh & Sylvia. C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 26.

⁶ Walsh and Keesmaat capture this brilliantly: "Somehow, crushing despair and even nihilism capture the imagination of a generation that at the same time is buoyantly optimistic about the future. What we see here is both a sense of the emptiness, betrayal and ending of a particular cultural mythology and—at the same time and often in the same people!—a retrenchment, intensification and rebirth of that very same worldview or cultural myth. Walsh & Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed*, 26.

⁷ *National Survey of Young Australians 2006: Key and Emerging Issues* (Mission Australia, 2006), 93

⁸ *National Survey 2006*, 93.

⁹ Regarding family relationships, 46% related to frequent or major family conflict or disruption. Other key reasons for accessing the service included emotional/behavioural management (9.1%), partner relationships (9%), mental health issues (8.6%), bullying (6.2%), child abuse (4.3%), suicidality (3.4%), pregnancy (2.9%) and leaving home/homelessness (2.8%). *Kids Help Line Victoria 2006: Highlights from 2006*. (Kids Helpline, 2006), 2.

¹⁰ Firstly, it reveals that 46% do not feel confident about themselves, 57% worry about what others think about them, 41% don't every feel like they're doing well enough, and 47% worry about the way they look. Secondly, 57% of children are concerned about being teased, 54% concerned about not fitting in with friends, and 52% concerned about being bullied. Thirdly, regarding global issues, 52% are scared that there will not be enough water in the future, 44% are worried about the effects of climate change, and 43% are worried about the pollution of the air and water. Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. and Goddard, C. *Children's fears, hopes and heroes – Modern Childhood in Australia tracking Australian children's attitudes and concerns about childhood* (Australian Childhood Foundation and the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University, 2007), 11-12.

and 27% fear the world ending before they grow up.¹¹ These are significant, adult fears, yet at the same time, it positively reports that 84% of young people often feel happy.¹²

Beyond these concerns and felt needs captured in these reports, the youth worker is aware of a range of other felt needs prominent in those entrusted to his or her care. These include a strong need for: acceptance, belonging, love, forgiveness, community, to be understood, safety and security, hope, and freedom. Often these needs are not able to be articulated but they are felt deeply, and consistently.

Providing further contrast, a study commissioned by Dusseldorp Skills Forum¹³ reveals a more optimistic outlook. The title of the report “Fearless and Flexible – The Views of Gen Y” captures the overall theme of optimism about the future, at least in regards to employment and financial security.¹⁴ Revealing this optimism regarding the future, the report suggests that members of Generation Y feel that the future is in their hands, and that dreams-come-true are centered around family, home and the car.¹⁵

So it seems that on the one hand, young people are experiencing significant issues, fears, and felt needs, centering particularly around family and friendship networks. While often not articulated in this way, the felt needs include a need for hope, comfort, protection, belonging, identity, acceptance, forgiveness, purpose and direction. Yet at the same time, in the same cultural group, there is a sense of optimism about the future. The irony is that the issues and fears are predominantly regarding relational and emotional issues, yet the solution and optimism regarding the future is couched in economic growth.

2.3 Real and Universal Need Hidden Beneath the Diversity of Felt Needs

Perhaps this irony can be explained in part by the *hidden nature* of the root cause of all this brokenness. Namely, human ‘fallen-ness’, or more accurately, human sinfulness. So logically, if the true cause of a problem is hidden, then it follows that the true solution will also be hidden.

The real need that lies at the core of all people is universal. When limiting a view of life to that experienced before death, then the most fundamental needs are those which support one’s *physical* life, including food, sleep, and shelter. However, in view of a life span beyond that experienced in this body, one that continues for eternity, even deeper and more fundamental than these needs, is the most basic and fundamental need – that which supports *eternal* life. That is, for the creature to be in a loving relationship with its creator. Since humanity’s state is one of sinfulness, and since it is this sin which stands in the way of the relationship between God and people, the real need of all people is for this problem of sin to be dealt with.

¹¹ Tucci, J., Mitchell, J. and Goddard, C. *Every Child Needs a Hero: A Report Tracking Australian Children’s Concerns and Attitudes About Childhood* (Australian Childhood Foundation and the National Research Centre for the Prevention of Child Abuse at Monash University, 2006), 10.

¹² Tucci, Mitchell, and Goddard, *Every Child Needs a Hero*, 11.

¹³ This study explored what young people aged 16 to 24 were thinking about education, work and the future.

¹⁴ “Big-picture issues that affect employment, specifically globalisation, are not on their radar ... Perhaps liberated by a broad disinterest in these matters and emboldened by having never known anything other than sustained economic growth, they hold few fears for the future.” *Fearless and Flexible: Gen Y Talks About Their Generation: Media Release, 30 September 2006*, (Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006), 1.

¹⁵ Dusseldorp Skills Forum, *Fearless and Flexible*, 2.

3. Good News of the Gospel to Young People in this Setting

Having given significant attention to highlighting the felt needs and real needs of young people in Australia, the discussion now turns to examine how the gospel can be good news to young people in this setting. In fact, the gospel will only be *perceived* as good news to the extent that it engages with felt needs. However, it must not stop at merely engaging the felt needs. For the gospel to *truly be* good news, it must move from addressing felt needs to fulfilling the real and fundamental needs, needs which have perhaps been previously unknown or unacknowledged.

3.1 Gospel is Good News to All

It has been suggested here that the gospel needs to be tailored to meet the felt needs of each young person, so that it is heard as good news. It has also been argued that though the felt needs do vary, the most fundamental need is common to all – the need for a relationship with God. Therefore, it can be said that the gospel is good news to *all* because it addresses humanity's broken relationship with God. The gospel is good news for all because it opens up the way for eternal life and a relationship with God. The good news is that Jesus died on behalf of sinners to pay for their sin, so that they may enter into a right relationship with God (2 Cor 5:21).¹⁶ The promises of the gospel are therefore accessed via the cross. The promises of good news become a reality in a person's life through their relationship with Jesus as Lord. The *core* of the gospel for all therefore remains unchanged because it addresses these fundamental needs.

3.2 Many Young People Don't Know What They're Missing

It has also been highlighted that some young people are all too aware of the brokenness of life, while others are actually generally happy. Many live in families that are basically loving, have relatively stable friendship networks, and many have not yet exhausted the world's avenues for happiness, and have not yet, and may never, grow dissatisfied and disillusioned with searching for happiness in these places. However many young people, even though they may consider themselves basically happy, are unaware that an offer of eternal life – in both duration but also quality – is actually a red-hot option. In short, many young people who don't have a relationship with Christ, don't know what they're missing out on.

As such, the good news sometimes needs to be preceded by a sobering reality check for those who are unaware of sin and its consequences.¹⁷ The good news follows the bad news (the real need): that humanity stands in a state of sin, and is unable in and of itself to rectify its broken relationship with God. Only with this sobering perspective, is the good news of the gospel brought into sharp relief.

¹⁶ Colin Kruse identifies 'righteousness' in 2 Cor 5:21 as a right relationship with God. "*Righteousness of God*, understood as that which believers have or become, is the gift of a right relationship with God based upon the fact that he has adjudicated in their favour by refusing, because of the death of Christ in their place, to take account of their sins." Colin G. Kruse, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (TNTC; Downers Grove: IVP, 1987), 129.

¹⁷ This was the case for myself. I was generally happy with life and my family, and it was only after I realised (via a presentation of the gospel) that I was a sinner, and that I was not currently experiencing what the bible described as 'eternal life', that my heart yearned to accept Jesus Christ as Lord.

3.3 How the Gospel Engages Young People's Felt Needs

So the core of the gospel remains unchanged, yet the access points to the gospel do indeed change. The access points which enable the gospel to be heard as good news are the felt needs of the young person.

For those young people experiencing suffering in a variety of forms – whether it be from bullying, emotional abuse, family conflict, drug and alcohol issues, depression, stress, or self-harm – the gospel is good news in that it provides hope in the midst of that suffering. This hope takes on different forms depending on the situation. There is hope in Jesus' ability to break people free from addictions (Luke 4:18), hope in God's omnipotence to bring good out of the worst situations (Rom 8:28), and hope that Jesus will always provide the strength and comfort to get through (Matt 11:28-30; Rom 8:38).

For those gripped by fear – whether regarding their future, their safety, the safety of a family member, or the future of the planet – the good news is that there is comfort and protection available in the midst of that fear. Perfect love drives out all fear (1 Jn 4:18). God truly values each person, they need only fear him, not other people (Matt 10:18-32). Trouble will come, but in the end God will reign, and restore all things (Rom 8:18-23; Rev 21:4-6).

For those who feel lost, and experience a deeply felt need for belonging and acceptance due to brokenness in families and friendship groups, the gospel is good news because it is inclusive, restorative, and draws people together in reconciliation. God is passionate about restoring those who are Lost (Luke 15). In Christ, all brokenness is restored (Jn 11:25-26; 2 Cor 5:17), particularly a sense of identity,¹⁸ and God passionately pursues reconciliation between people, and ultimately with himself (2 Cor 5:18-20). Further, God promises a deep sense of belonging in the context of a relationship with him and the church (John 17:20-26).

For every young person who experiences guilt about past actions and choices, the gospel is good news because it offers forgiveness and a fresh start (Jn 8:1-11).

For those who have felt needs relating purpose and direction for their lives due to a pessimism about the future and current worldly systems, the gospel is good news because it reveals the true purpose to life, provides direction, and looks forward to a time when all things will be made new again (Rev 21:5). Life's purpose is to know Jesus and have a relationship with him (John 17:3). Direction in life is found by following Jesus daily (Lk 5:27; 9:23-24; Jn 14:6). This direction and purpose goes beyond the here and now, and reaches to eternity! The purpose connects with the restorative work of God – his followers become partners in his work (2 Cor 5:20; Rev 20:6).

Even for those who have good family and friendship structures, who view their circumstances in life as quite favourable, and who have confidence in their own abilities, the gospel is still good news because it reveals an *even better* way! It promises life to the full (John 10:10). It goes beyond economics and places value in the currency of love, forgiveness, service and reconciliation. Yet at the same time, it

¹⁸ In answer to the question "Who am I?" the Christian young person can answer "I am a much loved child of God" (1 Jn 3:1). If they begin to doubt it, they need look no further than the cross to see God's demonstration of that love (Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8).

values economic wealth, because this is a resource with which to bless the poor, improve their situation, and bring equality (2 Cor 8:14-15).

Using these felt needs as access points, the gospel will indeed be heard as good news, however the message must move to identify humanity's core issue: the problem of sin, and the saving work of Christ on the cross. Only through the cross is the problem of sin dealt with, and reconciliation between the young person and God made possible. To stop short of the cross is to perform an abortion on the gospel.

4. Conclusion

The Gospel may be *perceived* as good news by young people because it engages their felt needs. The Gospel is *in reality* good news because it deals with the deeper and the most fundamental human need. While there is much brokenness, the picture is not one-sided. Many young people are crying out for help, yet many also consider their situation as relatively favourable. While many feel depressed, many also feel happy. However, beneath the varying felt needs, the most basic and fundamental human need lies hidden, and often unacknowledged. The gospel is good news for young people because it engages with their felt needs for hope, comfort, protection, belonging, identity, acceptance, forgiveness, purpose and direction, and goes beyond them to meet the most fundamental and often hidden human need – the need for the problem of sin to be dealt with, so that these young people may enter into a loving relationship with God.

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