



# Reconsidering



by | Christian Smith & Douglas Campbell

The senior leadership of Young Life recently published an eight-page document entitled, “Non-Negotiables of Young Life’s Gospel Proclamation,” in order, it says, to “provide a foundation on which [staff] creativity can be expressed.”

The non-negotiables spelled out are, according to the document, “not suggestions” but rather “key elements” to which Young Life leadership say they will “hold...accountable” all YL staff. Further, with regard to Young Life staff who “prefer to proclaim the Gospel in another way,” the document says that senior leaders “will maintain our position as described in this paper.”

That means that any staff members in Young Life who cannot completely endorse the document will have to leave Young Life—indeed, at least eight staff members have already been eliminated from their YL positions over apparent disagreements about the non-negotiables document.

We believe that the leaders who wrote the non-negotiables document meant well, and that most of the document affirms sound theological statements. Yet we also believe that the document contains at least five specific problems that warrant scrutiny, discussion, reconsideration, and revision—if not a retraction of the entire document.

One problem concerns the document’s motivation, two problems concern theological matters, and two problems concern implications for Young Life’s organizational culture and ministry style. The intent of what follows is not to attack Young Life but instead to prompt reflection and discussion by interested people, which we hope will lead to increased theological and organizational integrity toward sustaining the soundness and success of Young Life’s unique and important ministry into the future.

## 1. First of All...What’s the Point?

The first problem has to do with the unclear need for such a non-negotiable document in the first place. What exactly was so broken in or about Young Life that it needed this kind of fixing? The document itself is vague on the question, alluding merely to the “diverse backgrounds” of staff and volunteers and to “challenges” that “have arisen both inside and outside the mission” around gospel proclamation. But Young Life has functioned effectively and true to its founding mission for decades with an approach more focused on keeping Jesus at the center than on drawing firm external boundaries defining who should be in and who out.

Some of the issues on which the document takes a stand have been debated by Christians for much of church history, and evangelicalism’s and Young Life’s achievements are based in part on an historic willingness to live with differences of conviction about these longstanding issues. Why do leaders of a parachurch ministry believe they should or can settle these matters definitively within their own organization through such a decree? What, just now, so urgently motivates the need to put in official writing these kinds of non-negotiable theological and procedural specifics?

Lacking a clear answer to that question, the document fails to establish its own legitimacy and persuasiveness. It provides firm answers to questions about which many people remain uncertain. Why? Young Life donors, staff, and volunteers deserve a clearer explanation about the specific motivation for this document.

## 2. Repentance and Salvation

A second problem: The non-negotiables document states, “The Scriptures speak of repentance as inseparable from

# the “Non- Negotiables”

Concerns with Young Life’s  
New Statement on Gospel Proclamation

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... People must respond to and embrace the gospel in order to be saved.” In short, all Young Life gospel proclamations now must take the form, “Repent and then you will be saved.”

The defect here is in the conditional and sequential understanding of salvation as depending on our human repentance and faith. The theological commitment entailed in this position is a belief that God saves us because we repent—that salvation isn’t accomplished for people until they take action to embrace the gospel. In other words, God has provided *nearly everything* for our salvation; but God’s work remains ineffective until humans contribute their own last part of the transaction by “making a decision” and having faith.

This is insidious “works righteousness” alien to the sovereign love and grace of God in Christ at work through the Holy Spirit. It reflects less a biblical gospel of God’s elective and covenantal redemption than our American culture’s preoccupation with contractual agreements. We maintain that there are other theologically sound ways to understand the nature and place of human repentance in the work of salvation and the real need for personal commitment to Christ.

There is an important tradition in the historic Christian faith—which includes the theology of Augustine, Calvin, and other important thinkers—teaching that it’s possible for humans to respond to God in repentance *because and only after they have, in fact, been saved by God*. We thus repent

because God has loved us and saved us—not the other way around. “Jesus’ removal of sin” is not somehow conditionally dependent upon our acts of remorse for our perceived sin. Our repentance and faith *per se* add nothing to our salvation; they are mere responses accepting an already established, divinely-accomplished fact of redemption. (None of this, note, needs to entail universalism.)

By contrast, Young Life’s new non-negotiable position is arguably semi-Pelagian, suggesting that people are both able and obliged to play an essential role in helping to accomplish their own salvation by making a decision and having faith. Only then can Jesus’ work “begin.” Anyone coming from a theologically Reformed tradition should choke hard on this. More importantly, any believer should recognize that a Young Life staff member can faithfully proclaim the gospel to teenagers without having to tell the story in such a way that suggests that their salvation is dependent upon their own acts of remorse, repentance, and faith.

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Some staff members who’ve been eliminated from Young Life ministry have been removed in part precisely because they believe God has (first) saved us and so therefore we all should (then) repent and live into the fact of our salvation that already exists by God’s gracious work in Christ and through the Holy Spirit. Not everyone has to agree with this position, of course. But to make non-negotiable for all Young Life workers a view suggesting by contrast that God has done nearly all of the work of salvation *but* that teenagers need to fill in the last piece with their own repentance and faith is theologically misguided, organizationally parochial, and pastorally counter-productive in the subsequent discipleship of believing teenagers.

### 3. A Sequential Issue

Third, the non-negotiables document states:

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 should be 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 about the resurrection of Jesus Christ”

The document goes on to list “the invitation God extends to us, the call to discipleship, and the public proclamation of that response.” The significant problem here involves a set of interrelated issues:

- a) This sequence formalizes a separation of the person of Christ from the work of Christ into two distinct subjects, in between which sin must be discussed. But theologically, the person and work of Christ are inseparable. The divinity of Christ is directly connected to the cross. The humanity of Christ is part of his being our Second Adam. The incarnation is itself part of redemption. Christ’s divine perfection is bound to his “becoming sin” for us. The life and teachings of Christ are inseparable from his death. Christ’s two natures are linked to his resurrection.

It undermines the coherence of the gospel to split the person from the work of Christ with an intervening “talk” about sin and separation. It should not be theologically or rhetorically problematic to adjust the prescribed sequence, for instance, to first tell teenagers who Jesus is and what in love God the Father in Christ has done for them through the cross and resurrection, and then explain the real sin and guilt from which God has saved them. Yet the current non-negotiable sequence of presentation of themes prohibits that

- b) The non-negotiable sequential separation of sin/wrath/separation from cross/resurrection/salvation invites sub-Trinitarian thinking, which appears to contradict the document’s earlier insistence that “We proclaim the Person of Jesus Christ in every message.” This sub-Trinitarian approach plays directly into erroneous but popular beliefs about the Father as a God of law, sin, anger, judgment, and wrath, while Jesus by contrast is about love, grace, and forgiveness. That is (heretical) tritheism, not Trinitarian doctrine.

Theologically and pastorally, this sub-Trinitarian tendency confuses teenagers who do not see how the Father and Son (with the Holy Spirit) belong together as one God; it also sets up teenagers who respond positively to the gospel with a schizophrenic view of God, which tends to backfire spiritually and emotionally when teenagers inevitably stumble and sin and then feel themselves falling back under the wrathful judgment of the angry and punishing Father.

A robustly Trinitarian theology requires that proclamation of sin always be made in light of a larger proclamation about God the Father’s love and grace, Jesus Christ’s salvation, and the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives. God’s very real “No!” to sin must always be told in the larger context of God’s more resounding “Yes!” of unconditional

love, grace, and embrace. Such a Trinitarian theology refutes popular errors and confusions about God. But the non-negotiable sequence of themes now required by Young Life tends to obscure the straightforward proclamation of such a fully Trinitarian theology.

- c) The significance of the precise sequential logic required above is cognitively impossible for certain teenagers to even grasp, process, and appropriate. This is certainly true for many mentally impaired teenagers that Young Life reaches through Capernaum ministries; this may also be true for some apparently non-impaired teenagers who hear and understand reality in non-linear ways. Not all people best grasp the message of the gospel through cookie-cutter systems of presentation. The Holy Spirit does not work with all people through one, predetermined, uniform procedure.

Given its resolutely relational and person-centered approach to youth ministry, Young Life of all evangelical organizations should understand this. Yet it’s not clear that the senior leaders who wrote this non-negotiable document have considered this problem of comprehension or are prepared to

accommodate its implications in their various programs and staff needs. The elimination or marginalization of Capernaum workers in significant part over this very point suggests they did not and are not.

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- d) The murkiness around the motivation for formalizing and requiring the “sin across/resurrection” sequential ordering leaves open the door for evangelism programs in which teenagers are made to stew for some time in their bad feelings about their sin and separation from God the Father, as arguably justified by the specified sequence, before the good news is later preached in a subsequent talk about Jesus aimed to bring relief and repentance.

Other texts in the non-negotiable document suggest that this temporary “hiding” of Jesus for reasons of emotional impact is not permissible, but many readers currently lack a clear understanding of the agenda behind the specified “sin must be explained *before* the crucifixion and resurrection” requirement. So the door is left open for evangelism approaches in which

teenagers, after an initial introduction to the “person” of Jesus, are impressed by and left for a significant time with a deep sense of their sin, guilt, estrangement, condemnation, and separation from God the Father.

This would appear to have the desired effect of allowing sin to sink in for some time, so as to trouble teenagers deeply enough to motivate them to be happily relieved to receive the subsequent and separated message in the prescribed sequence, namely, salvation from sin through the cross and resurrection. Such an approach not only tends to be emotionally manipulative but is also, for reasons named above, theologically and pastorally defective.

#### 4. This Isn't McDonald's

Fourth, the new non-negotiable document is problematic in the degree of detail and standardization it seeks to impose on ministries that are otherwise intentionally relational, organic, developmental, somewhat situational, and open to and dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Young Life's history and culture as guided by the vision of Jim Rayburn clearly suggests that, in contrast to this document, the only “non-negotiables” in Young Life should be commitment to the biblical gospel of the Father's saving love and grace in Jesus Christ working through the Holy Spirit, and to real relationships as the means of reaching teenagers.

Within that clear framework, diversity appropriate for conditions “on the ground” should be allowed to flourish, as indeed it successfully has for decades. Instead, the current non-negotiables document spends page after page detailing particular points of theology and procedures about which now nobody may even attempt to negotiate. This, we suggest, is a leadership strategy of micro-management modeled on uniform commercial franchising, not the kind of leadership of the relational, person-centered ministry that Young Life has always been.

Sociologists write about the problem of the “McDonaldization of Society” as a modern process of organizational standardization, rationalization, uniformity, and procedural management spreading to more and more institutions. Young Life's senior leadership appears to be McDonaldizing its ministry now with this non-negotiable document. This is inconsistent with Young Life's own organizational history and culture, with diverse New Testament models of evangelism, and

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with trust in the work of the Holy Spirit. To think that highly qualified, highly experienced, long-term Young Life staff are now being eliminated from Young Life ministry over these non-negotiables is greatly alarming.

#### 5. Method and Message Are Closely Tied

Fifth and finally, the non-negotiables document asserts that, “While our *methodology* may change, our *message* does not” (italics in original). That is naïve, wishful thinking. Method and message cannot be so easily disentangled. One's method is always inescapably part of one's message. In fact, that's exactly the genius behind Young Life itself: Real relationships with teenagers in real life become the grounds upon which the teenagers may come to understand the real relationship of new life that God in Christ offers them.

That is sociologically brilliant, the way we know most faith conversions actually happen—and much more important than, say, the precisely sequenced order of thematic talks. The method very much is the message. But, failing to see this connection, the authors of the non-negotiable document apparently fail to recognize the ways that the document's particular character, specificity, and use as a means to eliminate staff will indeed alter the message and future organizational culture of Young Life—we think for the worse.

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#### A Call for Reconsideration

Again, we affirm that most statements in the non-negotiable document are sound and sensible *per se*, and we believe that those who wrote it meant well. But we believe that, if there are real grounds for thinking that some teachings in some Young Life settings are thin or fuzzy, there are more effective ways to deal with those concerns than instituting a one-size-fits-all, non-negotiable set of requirements.

Thus, for the reasons explained above and for the good of Young Life and the innumerable teenagers it reaches, we oppose the current non-negotiable statement as it's being pressed on staff in all details. We ask Young Life's leadership (including its Board of Trustees) to reconsider its problems and the need even for its existence. And we request that national and regional leaders stop using the document as a litmus test of the purity and acceptability of otherwise faithful, committed, and theologically orthodox staff and volunteers.

Staff who have been eliminated by the enforcement of this well-intentioned but problematic document also deserve at least sincere public apologies, if not reconciliation back into the Young Life ministry. 🍷



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