

by Lonnie Jones

# Challenge Youth Conference

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Challenge Youth Conference (CYC) is an annual event that takes place in the Gatlinburg-Pigeon Forge area of Tennessee. It is referred to as a conference, seminar or mega youth rally. Regardless of the title that is chosen, the mission is pretty simple: to *challenge youth* to greater spiritual growth and development.

The schedule begins on Friday night and ends after worship on Sunday morning. In the early years, attendance was small enough to have breakout classes. Now that the numbers have grown into the thousands, the format is basically a series of devotional periods (singing praises and praying) with five to six keynote sessions. That's the same amount of lessons in a Sunday through Wednesday gospel meeting all in one weekend.

## Goals of CYC

I don't think the organizers expect the conference to be an endgame event. That is to say if the chosen theme is purity or evangelism or choices, they hope the students will leave the conference with the chosen theme being used as a catalyst to focus them in the coming weeks and months on the particular topic.

In addition to the opportunity for spiritual growth, the students are exposed to an opportunity to do some form of service. Each year they are challenged to set aside some of their weekend money and use it as part of a special contribution on Sunday morning. The funds collected have helped families with medical expenses, gone to nonprofit groups such as camps, or been used to supplement mission efforts. Most years have also offered optional events solely for the purpose of entertainment - for example, Brian Staron as a magician or various skit and singing groups.

Not only does CYC attend to the goal of strengthening and encouraging young people in their spiritual growth, but the conference also has the goal of being a unifying event rather than a controversial event. The organizers are trying to follow Romans 14 and be aware of people who, in good conscience, cannot participate in some of the newer innovations that have appeared in worship styles.

It is my observation, having been to the conference for the last 13 years, that the organizers take a serious look at the things that seem to divide our fellowship. Without dictating to any individual



*The West 7th Youth Group, from Columbia, Tenn., at the Challenge Youth Conference in Gatlinburg, Tenn.*

eldership what they should or should not do at their home congregations, they have identified a few divisive practices and have requested they not be done while attending the conference. This is in keeping with the statement in Romans 14 to pursue what leads to peace and mutual edification (see v. 19).

No doubt there will be some negative responses to this article if I do not delineate all the things that are not allowed at CYC; but if an event, activity or congregation is defined only by what it does not do, then its purpose for existing is seemingly reactionary and abrasive. Jesus said that people would know we were His disciples by our love for one another (John 13:34-35). Our identity as Jesus' people is not found in the lines that divide us but in our efforts to get past those things without compromising the purity of New Testament teaching.

One of my favorite quotes is "If all you do is weed your garden, then the only thing you have left is dirt." The purpose of CYC is to challenge young people to see what Christians stand for in both teaching and example. Once

we know what the church stands for, then the things that are anti-Christian will show up in sharp contrast. This includes practices as well as attitudes.

### The Appeal of CYC

An appealing feature of CYC is that, generally, the caliber of lessons is focused on a mature Christian audience. That is to say we are not "dumbing down" the message to appeal to a youth group mentality. Old-fashioned youth ministry (let's entertain the kids and keep them out of trouble, or let's show them that Christians can be "cool" too) is out of vogue at any youth event worth its salt.

Real youth ministry understands that young Christians are still Christians. They need to understand salvation, faith, grace and restoration when they fall or fail. They also need to understand that they are called to a lifestyle that the world or their friends may not see as cool or even understand.

They also need to understand maturity. That to me is the real strength and draw of CYC. It is about positive

improvement. It is about positive conservatism. The conference is not about how to be better than the pagans, denominations or the "liberals." The conference is about how to be better people of God.

CYC's message is not "how to be different from them" but how to be more like Christ. We do not attend fitness classes whose only message is "do not sit on the couch and eat doughnuts." We take fitness classes that teach us movement, flexibility, cardio conditioning, strength training and proper technique. The appeal of CYC is that when the organizers choose a theme, it is usually a positive action theme – a challenge.

Don't get me wrong; once you present what a Christian is to be, then a pretty sharp line has been drawn that has behavioral and ethical implications. Still, CYC's approach has always been about the positive rather than the negative. □

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