

# Where Historic Christian Systematic Theology Meets and Shapes Youth Ministry: Facilitating Answers to Adolescents' Great Questions of Life

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What are we here for? What purpose do our lives have? What is our calling, our vocation? These queries of special interest to adolescents, and many of the other great questions of life, surge to the forefront of thought in the teen years and periodically resurface throughout life, even in this contemporary postmodern age in which we live.<sup>1</sup>

## The Bible and Theology

The beginning of the answer to the three questions above, which are actually part of one overarching question involving the doctrine of our vocation, is found in the teaching of God's Word to the church, the primary agency through which he is working out his plan of redemption. This teaching is the only hope for our society and the world. We cannot allow ourselves to be distracted from that essential task. Yet, as one of my students wrote in a paper on the importance of the Bible in youth ministry, this distraction regularly occurs in youth ministries in the church, where it has become fashionable to entertain the youth, based on the assumption that doing so will build numbers.<sup>2</sup>

It is likely the leaders of such groups are unaware of how little most teens, including those who claim to be Christians, know about the Bible. For decades careful research continually reveals the lack of knowledge of God's Word among adolescents. For example, The Barna Group states that two-thirds wrongly hold that Satan is not a living being but merely a symbol of evil; six out of ten mistakenly believe that a person can be saved just by doing good deeds; and 40% falsely said that Jesus committed sins while on earth (as did 52% of those attending a Protestant church).<sup>3</sup>

The "Bible Literacy Report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?" was released at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. and included panel participants George Gallup, Jr., Dr. John M. Templeton, Jr., and Charles C. Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center. As part of that report, a survey of teens in general, the Gallup organization disclosed their findings that close to 10% believe Moses was one of the 12 apostles; fewer than half knew Jesus turned water into wine at a

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<sup>1</sup> It has become vogue to use the word postmodern as an adjective to modify Christian matters, e.g., "postmodern church" and "postmodern youth ministry." Such usage of this contemporary secular philosophy, some aspects of which are useful but the key tenets of which are essentially unbiblical, makes the combination with Christian and Biblical subjects oxymoronic and confusing and thus will be avoided in this essay, except in quotations of others. It also should be noted that the historic Christian theology presented here is applicable in all times and places, for it is based on the Bible which is God's Word for all generations throughout the world.

<sup>2</sup> See also Patricia Sully, "The Role of the Bible in Youth Ministry," in *REC FOCUS*, Vol. 2, No. 4, December 2002, pp. 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> The Barna Update, "Teenagers' Beliefs Moving Farther From Biblical Perspectives," October 23, 2000. URL: <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdate&BarnaUpdateID=74>. Accessed: August 9, 2005.

marriage in Cana,<sup>4</sup> and two-thirds of students indicated that the statement “David tried to kill King Saul” was true.<sup>5</sup>

This Gallup research was part of a national study of over 40 English teachers recommended as “best” by their peers from 10 states. In that survey 98% of the teachers said that a knowledge of the Bible “gives a distinct educational advantage” to teens who have such knowledge, not only in being able to understand such subjects as art, culture, history, language, and literature, but also to score higher on standardized tests.<sup>6</sup> Significantly for church education, and youth ministry in particular, the survey also showed that only eight percent of public schools offer an elective course on the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

Most teenagers are not reading the Bible by themselves either. The National Study of Youth and Religion reported that “less than one-third read the Bible each week.”<sup>8</sup>

Is this a time for youth ministries to spend more time in antics with shaving cream than in the study of the Bible? Of course, we need to provide enjoyable and even fun activities in youth gatherings; the key matters are priority scale and proportion of time allotted for the items on that scale. In making these decisions we need to keep in mind an observation of my friend, South African professor Malan Nel. “All members of the faith community are being called to a level of theological (Biblical) literacy. The responsibility of leadership is to lead them to such literacy,” argues Nel.<sup>9</sup>

Providentially, some leaders are exercising that responsibility. *Christianity Today* associate editor, Collin Hansen writing in a cover story on Calvinism stated that

[t]he young people I talked to want churches to risk disagreement so they can benefit from the deeper challenges of doctrine. [Former youth leader, now pastor] Joshua Harris said years after he graduated from high school, he bumped into his old youth pastor in the grocery store. The pastor seemed apologetic as they reminisced about the youth group’s party atmosphere, focused more on music and skits than Bible teaching, Harris said. But the youth pastor told Harris his students now read through Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*.

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Camp, “Teenagers Lack Knowledge of Bible, Teachers Say.” NC News. April 27, 2005. URL: [http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2005/4\\_27\\_2005/ne270405teenagers.shtml](http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2005/4_27_2005/ne270405teenagers.shtml). Accessed: August 9, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Baptist Missionary Association of Texas, “Landmark National Report Reveals 98% of High-School English Teachers Surveyed Believe Bible Literacy Gives Distinct Academic Advantage.” URL: [http://bmaweb.net/news/archives/050505\\_bible\\_literacy.htm](http://bmaweb.net/news/archives/050505_bible_literacy.htm). Accessed: August 9, 2005

<sup>6</sup> Baptist Missionary Association of Texas. For confirmation of the impact of the Bible on the English language and literature see *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*, David Lyle Jeffrey, general editor (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), passim.

<sup>7</sup> Baptist Missionary Association of Texas.

<sup>8</sup> Phil Schwadel and Christian Smith, *Portraits of Protestant Teens: A Report on Teenagers in Major U.S. Denominations* (Chapel Hill: Odum Institute for Research in Social Science at The University of North Carolina, 2005), pp. 5, 9.

<sup>9</sup> Malan Nel, “Why Theology? It Is Only Youth Ministry.” *Journal of Youth and Theology* (Vol. 4, No. 1; April 2005), p. 9.

“I think there’s an expectation that teens can’t handle that, or they’ll be repulsed by that,” Harris told me. “[My youth pastor] is saying the exact opposite. That’s a dramatic change in philosophy in youth ministry.”<sup>10</sup>

During adolescence, when young people are asking profound questions about the meaning of life and their place in it, the heritage offered in Biblically based historic Christian systematic theology is an outstanding source of hope and encouragement and is essential for meeting their needs. Further, young people, as well as adults, are daily in the process of trying to make sense out of life. This theology is able to shape an especially effective youth ministry that provides a worldview and perspective for understanding, coping with, and managing the phenomena adolescents encounter each day and “equip [Christ’s] people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” (Ephesians 4:12-15 TNIV)

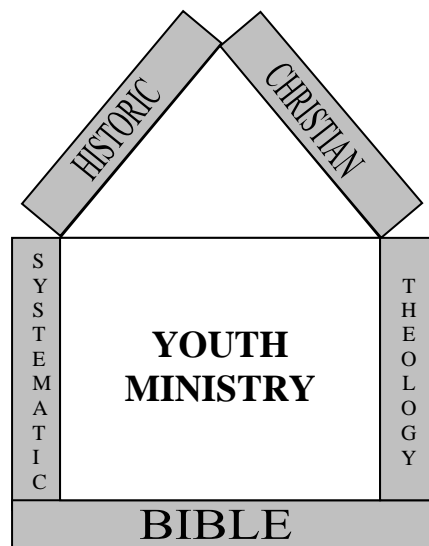


Figure 1 The Bible as the Foundation and Historic Christian Systematic Theology as the Structure of Youth Ministry

Bible study, while providing the strong foundation on which all else rests, should be accompanied by an understanding of systematic theology, the structure of the building based on that foundation as visualized in Figure 1. Systematic theology, the organization of the Bible’s teaching by subject, provides a Biblical structure and perspective for understanding life and the great questions of time and eternity. When people only engage in the study of several books of the Bible or excerpts from it, they can have a good,

<sup>10</sup> Collin Hansen, “Young, Restless, Reformed: Calvinism is making a comeback—and shaking up the church,” *Christianity Today*, Volume 50, Number 9 (September 2006), p.37.

though limited, view of a few trees but can't perceive, and don't know where they are, in the forest. For the most helpful understanding of the Scriptures and the answers to the great questions of life, an understanding of theology is required.<sup>11</sup> As Kenda Creasy Dean insightfully states, “[i]f the church fails to offer a theological alternative to secular views of passion, Christian ‘youth programs’ cannot significantly relieve young people who are in distress. In fact, they may actually contribute to adolescents’ sense of fragmentation by reinforcing cultural views of passion that contradict the unifying Passion of the cross.”<sup>12</sup>

Further, not just any theology, and not just any systematic formulation of it, will do. We need to be careful. Especially in modern times some people have gotten it into their heads that they know better than the great theologians who are our spiritual ancestors, and they’ve written theologies, even some more or less systematic, where they’ve departed from the traditional understanding of the Bible. In essence they’ve said, rather arrogantly in my opinion, that the church has been wrong for 1800+ years! That not only takes “a lot of crust” or chutzpah, but upon careful examination, they are the ones who have departed from the most accurate interpretation of the Bible as has been articulated by a consistent teaching of the essential Biblical truths in traditional Christian theology for millennia. Thus, in this essay I urge us to teach the *historic* Christian systematic theology to our young people, their parents, and other adults.

Systemic theology is actually a different form of Bible study, one which helps students understand all that the Bible teaches on the subjects of God, humankind, Christ, the application of salvation, the church and the future *and how these key Biblical teachings fit together and apply to life as God is calling us to live*. This vital study helps them make sense out of life, what they are experiencing, and enables them to help others do so as well.

### **Learning the Language of the Christian Community**

It is very important to be careful in the selection of theology and in the theological education of youth leaders, both volunteer and professional. Paralleling teenagers’ significant lack of understanding of the Bible today, George Barna alerts us to another, and not unrelated, challenge: A “behavioral pattern reflects people’s disinterest in and declining involvement with the Bible...The consequence is a watering down of Christian theology to such a low standard that it often conflicts with, rather than conforms to, Scripture.”<sup>13</sup> We must therefore be careful that the theological words we use are taught in the Biblical manner and that our youth leaders, both volunteer and professional, are all on the same page theologically, a vital dimension of leader selection and continuing education. Youth leaders not only need to have a Biblical theology, they must also be able and willing to help others, especially young people, understand and articulate that

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<sup>11</sup> See also Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 24 and passim, including 246 ff. on the need for theology in youth ministry and for helpful applications of theology to youth ministry.

<sup>12</sup> Dean, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> George Barna, *Real Teens* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), p. 123.

theology.

Teenagers today are unaware of the Biblical terms that inform us of God and his plan of redemption, and even those who are Christians are unable to adequately explain their relationship to God in Christ. In his recent report on the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest study of this subject ever undertaken, Christian Smith writes,

We were astounded by the realization that for very many teens we interviewed, it seemed as if our interview was the first time any adult had ever asked them what they believed. By contrast, the same teens could be remarkably articulate about other subjects about which they had been drilled, such as drinking, drugs, STDs, and safe sex. It was also astonishing how many Christian teens, for example, were comfortable talking generally about God but not specifically about Jesus. Philosophers like Charles Taylor argue that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality...So, for instance, religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality. A major challenge for religious educators of youth, therefore, seems to us to be fostering articulation, helping teens to *practice talking about* their faith, providing practice at using vocabularies, grammars, stories, and key messages of faith. Especially to the extent that the language of faith in American culture is becoming a foreign language, educators, like real foreign-language teachers, have that much more to work at helping their students learn to practice speaking that other language of faith. Our observation is that religious education in the United States is currently failing with youth when it comes to the articulation of faith.<sup>14</sup>

I am not saying that we should include all that historic Christian systematic theology teaches on the following doctrines in our youth ministry. I do contend that we should teach the essence of these doctrines and relate them to each other, to the great questions of life to which each applies, and to program content and structure decisions. These understandings, and why they are important, should also be taught to the church staff (professionals and volunteers), to other church leaders such as the church board (e.g., elders, council, consistory, session) members, and especially to parents.

We must not avoid teaching teenagers the essential Biblical and doctrinal terminology, such as “only begotten,” “sanctification,” and “ecclesiology,” the very composition of the words themselves being informative. As Sara Little wrote, we must help youth learn the language of the Christian community,<sup>15</sup> especially the words of the Bible, such as “only

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<sup>14</sup> Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 267-268.

<sup>15</sup> Sara Little, *The Language of the Christian Community* (Richmond: The Covenant Life Curriculum, 1965), pp. 13-17.

begotten” and “sanctification.” Many if not most adolescents will grow in their respect for the discipline of theology and the reflected life in Christ if they are taught well. Engaging teaching methods have been designed that provide excellent resources for helping instructors facilitate this learning. When we have no problem requiring teenagers to learn such multisyllabic jargon as deoxyribonucleic acid and its acronym (DNA) in their school science classes, how can we neglect teaching them the language of the church, indeed of the Bible itself? It’s not as though the word beget, or its plural, begets, is unheard of in our culture. For example, it appears in crossword puzzles as an answer to the clue word, “have children.”<sup>16</sup> It is also in the English dictionaries, which do not identify it as an archaic or out-of-date word.

Craig Dykstra links learning the language of the Christian community with an important dimension of adolescent identity formation. He writes,

We come to have a world and find a place for ourselves in it by learning the language, symbols, stories, metaphors, images, rituals, and modes of speech of the community of interpretation that gives us our world. If we do not know the language of a community, we can neither see the world as that community sees it nor become a part of that community ourselves. But when a community’s language becomes the language we use, we ourselves become members of that community and increasingly come to see the world and structure our own lives through the lenses of that language.<sup>17</sup>

If we want our identity-building adolescents to identify with the church, the body of Christ, how can we not intentionally, passionately, teach them our language, the key aspects of which have come from the very Word of God?! Further, how can we expect our young people to identify with, feel part of, participate meaningfully in, and become excited about being members of the church, when they don’t know our language? How can we be surprised when they don’t engage in conversations and communicate with older members of the church? They don’t know our language! And they know they don’t, so they don’t try to engage; they don’t have the lingua franca by which they can access entrée into the community and feel they can participate meaningfully in it.

The same is true for adults. We need to provide instruction in the language of the Christian community for those adults who are new in Christ, so they, too, can warmly feel they belong; it can be done as part of a new members’ class. It’s helpful to provide refresher classes, one session at a time or minicourses (two to four sessions), as a review for other church members and for non-members who are seekers, who are “checking us out” to see if they fit in.

A question for you: In your church could such a class include teenagers by invitation? Market it for adults but invite young people to be part of it as well, thus treating them

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<sup>16</sup> “TRIBUNE CROSSWORD,” Loveland, Colorado *Reporter-Herald*, July 12, 2011, p. B6.

<sup>17</sup> Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 121.

with respect and helping them feel they are maturing to the point of being treated as maturing in Christ. Further, many if not most adults enjoy a time with teenagers, especially in such a context.

The failure to teach the language of the church has resulted in many negative outcomes, not the least of which is Chuck Colson's oft-quoted observation regarding the contemporary American evangelical church as being 3,000 miles wide and an inch deep! The unreflected life does not long satisfy, and it cannot effectively serve God, who said, "Come let us reason together," (Isaiah 1:18) in a complex age where people are raising the great questions of life and rightly expecting Christians to have some answers. (1 Peter 3:15) Further, teenagers in their level of intellectual development (e.g, Piaget's stage of formal operational thought) enjoy stretching their new mental capacity, and engaging Biblical and theological concepts, especially when they can see the connection with the great questions of life and eternity emerging in their consciousness.

### **The Beginning and Context of Youth Ministry**

I want to preface this presentation with the premise that youth ministry in the church is at best frosting on an already delicious cake...baked at home. It's a vital support and a supplement, but it doesn't supplant, the education the youths are receiving from their parents.

This is God's plan for his children's development in relationship with him. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) Grandparents are also commanded to teach God's Word to their grandchildren. (Deuteronomy 4:9) The family is the context where God wants his children brought up in relationship with him. Parents thus have the primary responsibility and opportunity to raise their (actually God's) children in the faith.<sup>18</sup> We cannot improve on God's plan, and the Bible nowhere states that God's original plan would be in effect only to the 21st century A.D., when families would experience the stressors they now encounter, and when they could abdicate their responsibilities to the church.

All youth ministry should exist to encourage and support the work of the parents, which task they have been given by God's *command*. If we are truly trying to serve God, we will do everything to facilitate the operation of his plan and nothing to interfere with it. That said, the family needs the help of the church for many reasons, not the least of which is to expose and engage their teens to and with others of like mind.

Some say that the family, especially in America and other industrialized nations, has disintegrated. As Mark DeVries and others respond, the figures these critics present are

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<sup>18</sup> Malan Nel, *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Congregational Approach* (Pretoria, South Africa: Design Books, 2000), p. 113.

questionable and overstated.<sup>19</sup> Obviously, many people we're commissioned to reach for Christ do not have families who are committed to teaching them the Bible and to walking in the way of the Lord, but we nowhere read God saying in his Word, "This is my plan until the 21<sup>st</sup> century A.D. when many families will break up; then you're on your own." We cannot condone committing the naturalistic fallacy, as many do, and say in effect, "God, your way may have worked somewhat for 4,000 years, but you have to understand that this is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and times have changed! We have a better way now." Further, many families, including single parent families, have followed God's plan with the resultant blessing of children who are walking with the Lord and serving him well.<sup>20</sup>

Teenagers and young adults in our highly secular culture long to hear this Biblical message. Whenever I talk with them about faithfulness in and prior to marriage, including my own of 48 ½ years to the same woman until she died, and parenting, their eyes are riveted with rapt attention. The same is true when I talk about how we both in obedience to God saved our virginity for each other and were able to give that special gift to each other and why that blessing is so significant. They express deep gratitude for the encouragement and realistic expectation I've given them for a marriage and family of their own for which they so fervently hope. They're grateful to know that it is possible to have such a marriage and family by following God's ways in his Word. They just want to see a Christ-like model. It's not hard to do even in this age. It can be done with a commitment to trust and obey the Lord. One way to help the youth make that commitment is to ask them to answer and keep in mind this question: "Whose opinion of you and what you do counts the most to you? Your friends' opinion or God's opinion?"

Teach teenagers the reasons to never consider cohabitation. God's Word is clear and powerful, and the scientific research is strong, on this subject. Show them the results, which I've identified and explained in my essay, "Is Cohabitation an Option for God's People?"<sup>21</sup>

Teens are relieved to know that the contrary message about marriage and the family they've been receiving in the media and from peers is neither normative nor necessary but negative and in fact destructive. God's special revelation in the Bible states these truths clearly. We would thus expect that God's general revelation empirically observed with the human eye and with *careful not bogus* science<sup>22</sup> would illustrate what we read in

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<sup>19</sup> *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), pp. 192-193.

<sup>20</sup> Dean quotes sociologist Robert Wuthnow: "Family devotions as a child is the best predictor of adult [church] attendance, followed by seeing one's parents read the Bible at home, and after that, by parents having read the Bible to the child." (P. 146)

<sup>21</sup> This essay is located on the Marriage page of my Web site at [www.fromacorntoak12.com](http://www.fromacorntoak12.com).

<sup>22</sup> Always remember: Not all science is true science. Empirical research that is carefully done, i.e., rigorously following the established scientific method, tends to yield useful results. Examining the scientist's research report, especially the chapters focusing on the plan and the findings, typically indicates how well done, how reliable, the study is. If you do not have a strong background in science research, or even if you do but don't have the time to look up and check out the original study, another, and always the best, way to determine how careful and trustworthy a given study is can be ascertained by comparing and contrasting the report with God's Word. If parts of the report conflict with the Bible, you readily know at least those parts of it were not carefully done and are bogus; those parts should not be accepted as truth and they cast serious questions on the validity of the rest of the report. Such a conclusion is common: I



the Word; and we do! I treat this subject extensively in the above-mentioned essay and others I've included on my Web site.

With these and the many other fine resources available (which I've cited in the essays on my Web site) to provide some support, such as by offering parent education classes, parents can be encouraged to use their inordinate influence to help their children make the right choices. Unless you are, and have been for some time, a parent, it would be good to have a married couple who have a good track record with their parenting to teach that course.

Nevertheless, as a youth minister in your church, you have very helpful observations in your experience with the parents' children, and many other teenagers, that the parents and other adults in the church are interested in, need, and would like to hear. Furthermore, they want to come to know you and develop a relationship with you, who have an important ministry with their precious child(ren). You possess the most current knowledge about how the teens are functioning when their parents are not around. You know the needs, hopes, and desires of the adolescents and the latest and best of the literature in the field. These insights are very valuable and desired by parents.

Also offer opportunities periodically to meet with parents and discuss these matters with them over a cup of coffee. A lecture-discussion format is preferred. Offer a brief presentation on an important topic, then open up the meeting for Q & A.

Therefore, be sure to include an opportunity in these classes and other events for you to speak, keeping in mind also the apostle Paul's advice to young Timothy. "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity." (1 Timothy 4:11)

It is no surprise, except to numerous parents and many in the media, that careful studies consistently show teenagers value their parents' most important values over all others' opinions. Peers are influential, but not to the extent of parents.<sup>23</sup> In a study by the Barna

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remember professors in my doctoral program at Michigan State University saying on more than one occasion that "Over 90% of the studies in the field of education aren't worth the paper they're printed on!" From what I've observed since, there is not enough evidence to substantially change that figure. For more on this subject, see especially the first half dozen slides on the PowerPoint summary of my course, "Leadership and Administration in the Church: Balancing Two Key Dimensions of Leadership—Initiation of Structure and Consideration," on the "Church Leadership and Administration" page of my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Leadership-and-Administration-in-the-Church-Balancing-Task-Accomplishment-and-Caring.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Edward D. Seely, "Behaviors of Peer Leaders, Adult Leaders, Mothers and Fathers as Perceived by Young People Fourteen through Eighteen Years of Age" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, College of Education, Michigan State University, 1980), pp. 105-127, 133-142, 152-154, 164-166. That they have such influence astonishes many parents. One possible explanation is that many if not most identity-developing teenagers usually lack the ego strength to let their parents know they have that much influence until they are in their mid twenties at the earliest. Establishing an identity is more easily accomplished by stating what one is against than what one is for. As such contrasting is done concerning differences with parents, the emerging young adult finds it easier to establish the distance, especially psychologically, that independence requires. Adolescents fear as well that letting parents know they have such influence could

organization, of the 14 sources of influence on teens that the researchers studied, “parents were the only ones listed by most teens as having ‘a lot’ of influence on how they think and act...(78%)...No other individual or people group came close to having that degree of perceived influence.”<sup>24</sup> Again, cautious science confirms the old adage: “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” But periodically let parents know of this reality, for in their squabbles with their teens, they often become discouraged.

In *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, Carol Lytch describes her research and three primary ways parents influence their teen’s religious loyalty.<sup>25</sup> She writes (emphasis hers),

*First, teens are influenced in the most lasting way by how their parents connected them (or not) to the church from a young age. This was evident most in what the teens themselves said about the importance of having a “religious foundation” given to them from early childhood....My data point to the power of early socialization in childhood to shape the lasting dispositions of how people relate to their religious tradition....The impact of early religious socialization, especially through parents in the home (the most important childhood environment), continues in a secondary way as teens choose their social networks in their high schools and in the wider community.*

*Second, parents influence teens in what they believe and how they practice their faith by maintaining a church attendance rule even into the teen years. By doing so, they maintain the teen’s link with the church. The family is too small an institution to bear the whole burden of the task of religious nurture. [Remember this reality when we come to our discussion of the covenant, which was God’s original idea.] As influential as parents are, as important as religious practice in the home is, religious faith is taught, caught, and lived in powerful ways in congregations....It has also been shown that parents themselves are shaped by the distinctive beliefs and patterns of piety of their congregations....There is an interactive effect*

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embolden them to enact restrictions that would limit rather than facilitate freedom. Also, it is far easier for teens to tell an independent researcher, who usually doesn’t know their name and who, they assume, they’ll probably never see again, that their parents’ opinions matter most. However, after adulthood is achieved, together with its attendant functional independence, especially when acknowledged with appreciation by the parents, the admission can be made without fear of losing the newly developed adult identity.

<sup>24</sup> George Barna, *Real Teens*, p. 72. See also p. 68. In addition, see Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, pp. 115-116. This book is a report of the research of the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest and most detailed study of teenagers and religion. I use the word “careful” and related adjectives with the word “research” in this article to distinguish the significant difference between scientific studies that have followed established methods rigorously with the result of producing warranted and useful findings, contrasted with much research that has cut corners and produced unreliable results. Some in social science research contend that the majority of the studies produced today fall into the latter category. Caveat emptor!

<sup>25</sup> Carol E. Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), pp. 187-88.

between the church and home as each shapes the teen's religious sensibility. Since it is generally no longer possible to coerce teens to attend church by the time they are high school seniors, parents must persuade teens of the value of the "rule" about church attendance. They do this by setting an example of attending church, by fostering a warm family climate and a thick, religion-infused culture in the home....The "rule" works, because it has been internalized more than because parents enforce it.<sup>26</sup>

*Third, parents influence teen religious loyalty by choosing carefully the church to which they will link the teen.* A high percentage of parents (41 percent) switched churches during their child's growing-up years because of personal preference, not because of a change in residence. Church mattered so much to some parents that they went to the trouble of uprooting their family from their church rather than being dissatisfied and unmotivated to attend. [Cf. Hebrews 10:25] A church that offers corporate worship that is attractive both to parents and to teens tends to foster loyalty best. A church may have a vital youth program, and/or the teen may attend an effective religious school, but those involvements appear to be secondary in importance to the teen's engagement in the church's weekly gathering for worship.<sup>27</sup>

The implications of the above realities for youth ministry are profound and extensive. In his excellent article, Australian denominational youth leader, Jonathan Vandenberg, writes, "youth workers need to realise that family influence has a profound impact on a young person's values and lifestyle."<sup>28</sup> Ironically, numerous youth ministers engage in their work with an adversarial perspective on parents. I've heard many lament, "If I could only get rid of these parents, I'd have a really great youth ministry." Those youth workers don't usually last long. Is it any wonder?

Unfortunately, many other youth leaders, who do recognize the value of involving parents in their ministry, only want to use the parents as resources for themselves rather than being resources to the youths' primary caregivers. Parent involvement is much more than asking them to provide transportation, bring treats, and chaperone events. Since God has given parents the primary opportunity and responsibility to raise his children in

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<sup>26</sup> As I've tried to include in parent education on all levels in the churches I've served, this truth is easy to see. Since children value their parents so highly and look at them as "having arrived," they see their parents as models of what they want to be like. If the parents are not attending church, reading and memorizing Bible passages, and obeying God's Word, the children conclude that they don't have to do so either. The influence of parents cannot be underestimated. Social workers have told me that even children from abusive homes say they would rather go back to their parents than be committed to the foster care system.

<sup>27</sup> These influences are confirmed by the National Study of Youth and Religion, which reported that 87% of Protestant teens say they would choose to attend the same church if they had the choice of that or any other or none at all. (Pp. 10, 49)

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Vandenberg, "Youth Ministry: A Church Foundation or a Phase?" in *REC FOCUS*, October, 2004, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 27.

the faith as described in the Bible, in youth ministry we need to support the parents and supplement what they are doing, and help them to do anything else they should be doing, e.g., by acquainting them with resources and how to use them. Many youth ministers intentionally or unintentionally usurp the parents' prerogative, which is counterproductive, and often fatal, to their ministry. Youth leaders cannot replace the God-given role of the parents; the best we can do is support and supplement their nurture of their children. An imperfect but applicable analogy would be like a Minister of Education who would be trying to teach all the church school classes by him or herself instead of resourcing the teachers and helping them do their work more effectively.

If the family is the main part of God's plan for nurturing his people, does youth ministry have a place in the church? The answer is yes, but it supports and supplements, not replaces or interferes with, the home. Thus, with the Biblical and theological ignorance that characterizes many adults today, the most effective youth ministry will include an adult education program that contains a Bible overview course, theology, and parent education (taught by parents whose children have turned out to be maturing believers in Christ). It is also helpful to have age-related programming that facilitates peer and adult reinforcement of what the teens have been hearing at home and for those whose families have failed them spiritually.<sup>29</sup>

Theology originally was written to address the paramount questions of life and eternity that matter most to people, and therein we find the answers to the longings of life. As the centuries progressed throughout church history, theologians added layer upon layer of information pertaining to the essential theological truths in the Christian Scriptures, resulting in some systematic theologies that are so obtuse and in which it is difficult to see practical application that even other theologians as well as the average person have to read certain passages several times before understanding what the author is saying. Unfortunately, the result has been to dissuade many people from reading good and helpful theology. However, as we unpeel the layers, as with an onion, and arrive at the core Biblical teaching of each theological subject, we find the answers to life's yearnings. As we identify the felt needs of people, in this case the youth entrusted to our care, and relate these teachings of the Bible (which is what historic Christian systematic theology is, the teachings of the Bible grouped by subject in a thoughtful order) to the daily issues that are most important to them, we will tap into what motivates them and in so doing most effectively serve them, their parents, the church, and the Lord. Doing so also gives

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<sup>29</sup> However, this age-related programming should not be of the now normative, but unbiblical, "One-Eared Mickey Mouse" Model, a graphic description by Stuart Bond (*Youthworker*, Fall 1989), of youth ministry as an appendage to the church. It should include periodic special events such as trips, retreats, conferences, one-session classes, minicourses (2-4 sessions), and intergenerational programs and worship. The former practice of placing "the youth program" in a tangential relationship to the church (resulting in the "one-eared Mickey Mouse" approach), must be replaced with a more integrated approach in which adolescents experience contact and interaction with adults in the operation of the church. In this manner they'll learn how adults think and develop wisdom, maturing in Christ-likeness. Parents want their children to relate to adults who are mature in Christ and who will reinforce and add to what the youth have learned at home. Further, with many even in the church reflecting rather than leading the culture in the area of divorce and single parent families, children from such contexts have an additional need for relating to mature adult, especially male, role models. See also Malan Nel, "The Inclusive Congregational Approach to Youth Ministry" in *Four Views of Youth Ministry in the Church*, Mark H. Senter III, General Editor, pp. 2-19.

us the opportunity to teach other important subjects at the same time.

That we haven't been doing so is seen in the National Study of Youth and Religion. Only 49% of Protestant teens who attend church regularly report that church is a good place to talk about serious issues in their lives, especially in mainline churches.<sup>30</sup>

Much is being written about how busy and also stressed people are—adults, teenagers, and even children.<sup>31</sup> With the little time that we have our young people in church, and with the shrinking of their Bible knowledge, understanding, and application of God's Word to daily life, we must concentrate on teaching the Word and theology when his people gather for worship and learning opportunities.

Moreover, the youth themselves most want what the Bible has to offer: the truth about who God is, who we are, how we can connect with him, and how we fit into his plans, including our purpose in life, the very questions theology answers best. Thus, in youth ministry we need to see our *primary task* as helping the young people understand more of God's Word and acquainting them with these helpful systematic answers from the Bible to their questions and not to entertain them.<sup>32</sup>

“But we need to make the youth ministry fun to keep them coming back” some say. Consider rather that that concept “works” in limited ways for a limited time. Superficial emotional experiences lack staying power and over time become boring. Feeding their souls with the spiritual nutrition they need that facilitates answering their great questions of life, deeply satisfies and motivates not only regular and increasing attendance but

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<sup>30</sup> Schwadel and Smith, pp. 10 and 65. A key question for another study to answer is why so many young people feel they cannot talk with their youth leaders about these issues in the church.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., David Elkind's classic, *The Hurried Child* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1981), *passim*. Gaston E. Blom, Bruce D. Cheney, James E. Snoddy, *Stress in Childhood: An Intervention Model for Teachers and Other Professionals* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1986), *passim*. Dean cites “A Cornell University study of 8,000 adolescents [which] reported that, while steady romantic attachments can improve adult health and well-being, romantic relationships tend to cause stress and depression in adolescents.” (Pp. 133-34)

<sup>32</sup> Again, we need not spend time here on the obvious place in youth work for playing games and having fun, albeit not nearly to the extent which characterizes much youth ministry today. However, with the limited amount of time we have, we must make teaching God's Word our highest priority in our ministry to youth. While that teaching can be done in many creative ways, the subject of which transcends the scope of this essay, it is important to note that it should be done by examining passages of the Bible and then relating the text to the vocational calling of God to the young people and applying the Scriptures to their daily life and future. Our Bible teaching should not be in the form of a fast look at one of our favorite themes in search of a Biblical text to provide flimsy support. When we prayerfully study and exposit a Bible text to God's people, to the youth, to their parents, and to others we are privileged to teach, there is nothing more exciting in ministry! That is true for us, and for those who hear. We are providing tools that the Holy Spirit, the main teacher, will use to shape the development of our students into the Christ-like people he is calling them to be. One more axiom: make reading part of the Bible a nonnegotiable activity each day. Read systematically; i.e., start at the beginning of a book and read through the whole book rather than hopping and skipping around. Try to read at least a chapter a day, but don't let a day go by without reading at least a few verses. If you ever do experience the unenviable result of poor planning and wind up with a schedule that begins with meetings early in the morning and runs through until late at night when you are so exhausted you fall into bed without having read a passage, on any such occasion (and make sure it is rare), don't fall asleep until you mentally review a verse or passage you are memorizing.

maturity in Christ that facilitates the accomplishment of the Lord's purposes.<sup>33</sup>

### Theological Overview

Historic Christian systematic theology links six loci of Biblical teaching.<sup>34</sup> These loci provide a Biblically accurate framework for understanding the message of God's Word and for making sense out of life.<sup>35</sup>

All of the loci involve much more than can be considered in this brief overview, and they have significant implications for both the content and the structure of the most effective church-based youth ministry. Space limits our focus to only a few of those implications, mostly in ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church, which is also one of the areas of greatest need in the church today.

These six theological focal points enable youth leaders to tap into the strong internal motivations and passions of youth in a way that will balance the cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning and avoid a serious problem many youth ministers face today. The battle being waged in youth ministry in particular and in Christian education in general is typically expressed in words such as the following: "We've for too long taught only facts and information, and we don't see any spiritual growth; we have to emphasize the deeply emotional aspect of faith in Christ." This assertion is usually made without any supporting documentation, but enough of us can easily recall too many people who have been taught a lot of facts and who are not leading mature lives "attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" that we either silently let that assertion go unchallenged and/or respond with the other side: "Those who omit the factual basis of vital Biblical and theological study in favor of feelings and passion aren't giving youth the strong grounding that will help them overcome intellectual challenges to their faith and enable others to do so as well."

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<sup>33</sup> See the appendix for a list of many of the great questions of life and eternity that will provide a helpful start to engaging these questions teenagers are asking that link with their felt needs.

<sup>34</sup> The six loci, or major doctrinal themes of the Bible, that are presented below are Biblically based and logically integrated. Most denominations and independent megachurches specify at least a brief summary of these themes in their statements of what they believe, and most do so in the same or a very similar order, though denominations and churches typically include the distinctive doctrinal positions that have shaped their definition, some of which depart in certain doctrines from the main historic theological tradition pertaining to specific doctrines. Some denominations and churches don't list six loci, typically when they combine one with another. Significantly, the logic of the loci is seen even in those denominations that emphasize the emotional rather than the reflective dimension of the Christian faith. The Biblical rationale of God who said, "Come now, let us reason together" (Isaiah 1:18) is profound, extensive, and emotionally as well as intellectually satisfying. It becomes more so through continued study and reflection, a major point of this essay.

<sup>35</sup> The loci assume the truth of the Bible in which they are grounded. Therefore, it is good to offer a unit on apologetics for your teens. One outstanding resource is Paul Little's classic text; *Know Why You Believe*. Another is R. C. Sproul's, *Reason to Believe*. However, the strongest apologetic by far, and the framework within which to teach apologetics that will help our teens understand and commit to the Bible as the true Word of God, is to teach and demonstrate the love Jesus commanded in John 13:34-35 which Paul defined in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and obey the Word. As they see us living as Christ taught, they are motivated to follow.

Balancing the key components of learning, the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioral, is necessary for facilitating the maturing in the faith about which Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11-16. When we teach the six loci of historic Christian theology in a way that helps young people comprehend the core of each key doctrine, how each relates to the others and explains the main teaching of the Bible, *and how that core teaching links with their longings*, we connect with those motivations that issue in a strong love for the Lord and a passion to “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ,” to identify their calling, and to engage in his service. What, then, briefly, are these six loci and their relationship with each other Scripturally?<sup>36</sup>

### Theology, The Doctrine of God

In this first locus of study, theology explains all the Bible teaches about “Who is God, and what is he like?” This is the greatest question of life and eternity. It pleases God to have a relationship with the people he has created and in whom he has placed his image, but according to the Bible, unless we get the answer right to this question, the rest is usually moot, inadequate, and wrong with implications that are tragic. Of course, as indicated throughout this essay, your study of theology, as well as of the other five loci, will not be exhaustive, but you want to focus on those aspects that address the great questions of life that your youth are asking, while at the same time also working in very important aspects of God’s revelation in the Bible about who he is and what he is like that he wills they know about him.

One aspect of God’s character that he has revealed and which he desires the youth know, and which they want to know, is a study of his attributes, his characteristics. This study in theology shows that each of his characteristics blesses people with many practical benefits. This study is exciting to the young people and for their leaders!

Churches want their youth ministers to teach about God, and most are willing to do so, but curiously, most want to write their own curriculum rather than finding the best available and applying it to their particular situation. Recently, a high school youth ministry director showed me his curriculum he had written that was to be the centerpiece of his mentor-based confirmation program. After carefully reading it, I tried to be as affirmative as possible in my response, but I had to point out that he nowhere mentioned God as being triune, an essential Biblical teaching about God, who has revealed himself as such in his Word. I asked the youth minister, “You want the young people to be effective witnesses in the schools, but to whom are they going to point in their witness? How will they explain the Trinity to the many Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others

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<sup>36</sup> The reader is encouraged to read and reflect on historic Christian systematic theology and its implications for youth ministry much farther than is possible here. My purpose here is to briefly summarize key aspects of each of the six doctrines and identify some of their practical and helpful applications to the content and structure of youth ministry. Then do so for the other Biblical teachings in each of the six doctrines. For more on how to balance the three domains of human learning and development, the cognitive, affective, and behavioral, see my essay, “Curriculum Development for Lesson Planning: For Teachers & for Teachers of Teachers,” on Church Education page of my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Curriculum-Development-and-Lesson-Planning-For-Teachers-for-Teachers-of-Teachers.pdf>.

coming into the area, as well as unitarians already here (e.g., Jews, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarian/Universalists), not to mention agnostics, atheists, and other unbelievers, none of whom believe that God is triune?"

The best analogy I've seen to help teenagers and others understand the concept of the Trinity is the sun, which Albertus Pieters describes in his book, *The Facts and Mysteries of the Christian Faith*.<sup>37</sup> He explains how the sun, with its ball of fire, light, and heat, is an example of an entity being at the same time three in one. I especially like this illustration, because one of its strengths is that all three distinct elements are continually present as with the triune God. Pieters goes on to even draw a further connection with the three Persons who constitute what in Christian theology is called the Godhead, the Trinity. He suggests the ball of fire represents the Father; the light coming forth signifies the Son, who said "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12); and the heat, the invisible life-giving power of warmth which pervades all which the light has illumined and remains in the evening and on cloudy days, can refer to Holy Spirit. With both the analogue and its Most Holy Referent, no one element or Person is ever present without the other two, nor any two without the remaining one, and all three in the case of the sun constitute one luminary, and regarding the other, one God.

Analogies in the physical realm, while helpful, are limited in their usefulness to explain much greater and complex spiritual entities. However, this one and others demonstrate that it is reasonable and not absurd to hold to a concept of something having three distinct entities or parts, and each being always present, while sharing a common oneness in essence or substance. Nevertheless, *we must be careful using this analogy in cross-cultural settings*, e.g., in Africa and Asia, *and with students coming from those regions*, where many polytheistic religions shape their cultural worldview. Without careful explanation, many people think you are telling them the sun is a Trinitarian god. With people who have such worldviews, consider just using the first part of the analogy, which is its most powerful, easily understood, and useful component, showing the reasonableness of an entity having three distinct dimensions that share one substance.

The analogy can work just as well without specifying the specific symbolisms pertaining to the three Persons of the Trinity. The main point of the analogy is to show how it is reasonable, and not at all absurd, to conceptualize something as being three and one at the same time. The youth observe this great symbol that God has built into his creation to point to himself (Romans 1:18-20) every day, indeed 24/7, when considering that the sun also is present at night by reflection off the moon. Being temporarily obscured by the darkness and/or by cloud cover, does not destroy the reality of the existence of either the sun or the God to whom it points. Further, the engaging analogy spawns obvious related analogies stimulating further reflection and discussion. Ask your group to suggest one or more, e.g., the darkness pointing to Satan's temporary and ineffectual interference.

A study of the attributes of God's character is especially motivating. God's essence is love, which is the meaning of 1 John 4:8, "God is love." Love is the core of God's

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<sup>37</sup> Albertus Pieters, *The Facts and Mysteries of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1933), pp. 188-189.



character. God's love is not just a part of him or something he does at certain times. Love depicts himself, his essential being. Everything else about him, including his acts as well as his attributes, comes from his love, what theologian Karl Barth described as "an overflow of His essence."<sup>38</sup> The doctrine of God's immutability (unchangeableness, Hebrews 13:8) in the light of the fickle behavior of humans gives great comfort in the assurance that God will always love us and treat us rightly and well, contrary to the gods portrayed in other religions. We never have to worry about his having a bad day and taking it out on us. Similarly, God's eternity means we never have to be concerned that he will die and leave us all alone to fend for ourselves. Further, teaching about the justice of God (consider Psalms 37 and 73 to begin) and the other doctrines, provides a clear, helpful, and much-appreciated response to the question I've heard most often in over 40 years of ministry in the church, "How can a good and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?" Talk about youth meetings that are engaging, enthusiastic, and exciting! Could they be any more so than by helping our youth connect and identify with the triune God who owns and governs the universe?!

One of the most vital aspects of the character of God that young people (and all others) must know is the doctrine of the holiness of God. In Isaiah 6:1-8, and in Revelation 4:8, God is revealed as being not only holy, but holy, holy, holy! What does this mean, and how does it apply to our lives? Briefly, in the Bible the word holy means that which is uncommon and set apart from sin and evil for God's purposes. The Scriptures clearly state that what is evil and contaminated with sinfulness cannot exist in the presence of God who is most holy. Biblical Hebrew had no superlative, so to demonstrate that which is greatest, it would be repeated three times; hence, holy, holy, holy, means most holy.

*It's only when people understand the holiness of God that they can understand the need for Christ.* Otherwise, they'll think they are "doing just fine" without him. Any arguments that deal with a humanly based rationale for accepting Christ can be countered with claims of being able to handle the situation themselves. Many try to talk people into believing in Christ for other reasons, e.g., "You'll be much happier;" "You'll be more fulfilled;" "You'll meet great friends." People can blow off all these reasons. Yet when their view is raised to include who God is, and what he is like and what he requires, then, with the Holy Spirit's help, they are in a position to see a criterion they themselves can't meet. The essential need they have for Christ, and that only he can meet, is to be able to enter the presence of God who is most holy and who requires those who would enter his presence to also be holy. (Leviticus 19:2; 1 Peter 1:15, 2:9-12 [relate these and corresponding passages to 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20, especially verse 19 for a dynamic youth meeting!])

Entering God's presence also involves his willingness to hear their prayers, but contrary to politically correct popular opinion, he doesn't listen to the prayers of everybody. He hears the prayers of those who are righteous.<sup>39</sup> This reality must be in the forefront of our

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<sup>38</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume II: The Doctrine of God, Part I*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), p. 273.

<sup>39</sup> Psalm 18:41, 66:18-19; Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 1:15, 58:4, 59:1-2; Jeremiah 11:11; John 9:31; James 5:16; 1 Peter 3:12.

teens' perception of their identity and vocation, a major objective in the content and structure of our youth ministries that are to nurture our young people and equip them for the mission to which God is calling them.

The study of God as Creator is of great interest to youth, who are required to learn evolutionary theories in school and wonder how to make sense out of these two frequently conflicting concepts. Moreover, they sense that the Biblical revelation of God as the Creator, a living being who cares about his creation, including having a loving relationship with the people to whom he has given life, hope, and a glorious future, is much more intellectually sound and emotionally pleasing, satisfying, and fulfilling than the alternative, and its implications, that is offered by evolutionists. Therefore, they want to have solid reasons for their own encouragement and to help others believe in the Bible's account of creation in their Christian witness. Thus, the work of Christian astrophysicists, astronomers, biologists, and other scientists writing and producing DVDs from a Biblical perspective is very helpful and inspiring. For such resources, for example those by Hugh Ross and others referred to in this essay, log on to the Ministry Resource Center at [www.library.calvin.edu/collections/mrc](http://www.library.calvin.edu/collections/mrc).

The Bible teaches a balance between God's transcendence and his immanence. His transcendence includes the revelation that he is above and beyond all his creation, sovereign, governing all that exists, and the Ruler of the universe. "The LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens. Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?" (Psalm 113:4-6) For just one illustration, relate what the youth are studying in the field of physics to these Scriptures. Light travels at the speed of 186,282 miles per second in a vacuum. Some galaxies are 10 billion light years away from us. If one of those galaxies had exploded five billion years ago, we wouldn't be able to detect the explosion for another five billion years! And yet Psalm 113 says God stoops down to look upon these stars!

At the same time, he is immanent. In his immanence we see him in a loving and caring relationship *with* his people. "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people." (Psalm 113:7-8; 1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19)

Since he is transcendent, sovereign, and all-powerful, God is not controlled by any force on earth or elsewhere in the universe. He is in control of all that occurs in the whole world, including of all going on that does not please him, but which he allows for a time and which he will use to bring about good ultimately. (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28) He is fully able to accomplish all his purposes. Because he is immanent, he knows about our needs; because he is transcendent, sovereign, and all-mighty, he is capable of overcoming any obstacle; and because he loves us, he will help us.

These realities are great comfort to young people who are bullied, who lose loved ones and friends to a premature death, and who have significant worries about what the future will be like for them. "He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves

the alien, giving him food and clothing.” (Deuteronomy 10:18) In Romans 8:31-32 Paul wrote that he is “convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” These veracities are great comfort to young people who bear weighty worries about what the future will be like for them, deep concerns that result in intense pain. We need to remind adults who thoughtlessly chide teens, “Your problems are nothing like ours; wait until you grow up!” that teenagers have the same central nervous system adults do, that they process input from the environment as do older people, and that their emotional responses are as great if not greater than those of adults whose adaptive behavior and coping procedures are typically farther advanced due to more years of experience and maturity. God’s transcendence and sovereignty are especially comforting to adolescents as well as adults.

To tap into the passions and motivations of young people today, we especially need to teach how transcendent God is, to offset the contemporary overemphasis on his immanence by Eastern religions and New Age adherents and the plethora of small false gods being presented by secular evangelists. As Dean writes, “[f]or postmodern youth who crave transcendence amidst a glut of truth claims, [what Niebuhr called] ‘radical monotheism’ has fresh relevance, not because they have no other gods to choose from but because they have so many to choose from. Only a transcendent God rises above the rest, stays afloat in shipwreck, and carries us to shore.”<sup>40</sup>

Another way to help teens, their parents, and others understand the importance of who God is and what he is like can be accomplished by helping them look at how humans live and their view of God. To show how people’s perception of God (their theology) issues in practical actions, ask, for example, “Next door to which of the following would you rather live? The first is a person whose view of God is that of a great grandfather in the sky, rocking in his lounge chair, reflecting on earlier eons when he was younger and sowed wild oats of his own, and observing that ‘boys will be boys’ and girls sometimes aren’t all they should be as well, but that’s OK, because God loves everybody and wouldn’t think of doing anything mean like judging them. Or, would you rather have your neighbor view God as sovereign, most holy, one who hates sin, who is truly loving and therefore just and righteous, meaning that he will bring to justice those who abuse and oppress those he loves? Which of the neighbors is most likely to care about you and treat you well?” Further, teaching about the justice of God and the other doctrines, provides a clear, helpful, and much appreciated response to the theodicy question, “How can a good and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?”

The sovereignty of God is a hallmark of historic Christian systematic theology; yet enhancing our understanding of his complete sovereignty is the Bible’s portrayal of humans as being able, and thus having the responsibility, to choose between doing what pleases God and disobeying. (John 14-15) Even though people disobey, because God is sovereign, nothing they do can prevent God from accomplishing the fulfillment of his plans for his creation. Marvelously, he is so completely in control of the universe that he

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<sup>40</sup> Dean, p. 111.

can allow a limited but genuine freedom of choice for human beings and still bring about all things to the appointed end he has established. (Revelation 21-22) To help young and older people in their decision-making about whether to obey God's will or to cave into peer pressure, ask them this simple but key and powerful question: "*Whose opinion is more important to you: God's opinion or your friends' opinion?*"

Now in the Biblical logic of the loci we see a problem emerging. As we've seen, the core of theology is the doctrine that God's essence is love. (1 John 4:8) Many rush to conclude that since God is loving, he grades on the curve. A closer look reveals that God's love is pure, which means it is also just and righteous. (Jeremiah 9:24) He thus judges according to a criterion, not a norm, standard of reference. He will not compromise his integrity, condone evil, and allow that which is sinful and evil to enter his presence. What does God do with humans? Many, if not most, think people are essentially good. Is that a true understanding of human nature? Or is it not only untrue but dangerous?

### Anthropology, The Doctrine of Humanity

In fact, now appears a huge problem: the human condition. As we see in the doctrine of God, he created the first humans in his image, and they were very good. (Genesis 1:27-31) We understand the image of God being that God fashioned us with some of his characteristics in microcosm that he possesses in macrocosm. For example, since he is capable of rational and logical thought, we, too, have that capacity, though he is infinitely more capable in the use of his great mind than are we, though our minds are a wonderful reflection of and should point us to him. (Isaiah 1:18; 55:8-9) Similarly, God's basic attribute is love; he is love to the core of his being, (1 John 4:8) and he has created us with the capacity to love. (Matthew 5:44; John 13:34-35; 14:21; 1John 5:1-5)

For one more example of how we bear God's image, consider our freedom. God is free to do whatever is within his will to do. (Isaiah 55:8-11; 1 John 3:21-24; 5:13-15) He has also given us freedom, though within limits. (Genesis 2:15-17; 1 Corinthians 8-10, e.g., 8:9-13)

Yet, sadly, the Bible explains that those first humans misused their freedom and disobeyed God. In the process of doing so, they corrupted human nature with the result that mankind is essentially sinful, inclined to disobey God, and therefore unfit to enter his presence. His wonderful image in which he created us has been tarnished but does remain intact, except for true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness that has been destroyed but is replaced in those who believe in Christ Jesus as their Savior and Lord. Further, as a result of God's forensic judgment, Adam's<sup>41</sup> sin has resulted in spiritual and eternal death for humankind (Genesis 2:17, Romans 5:12-21), since he was our representative. When you teach this doctrine, be sure to help your students learn not only the grim realities unleashed by demonic evil and human sinfulness and sins, but emphasize the great help and hope God has given us with this revelation in his Word and in the calling he's given us (which we'll look at more closely in other loci, especially in

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<sup>41</sup> In a significant wordplay in Hebrew, Adam is also the word for mankind in the generic sense (*adam*).

the doctrine of the church) to tell others.

Help your young people to see and become excited about how eminently practical this historic Christian theology is! For example, spend some time discussing the safety issues involved when people view human nature as being essentially good. Ask them how safe they would be, and feel, if they didn't lock the door of their home at night when they go to bed (and even before they go to bed!). If they truly believe that human nature is essentially good, why lock the door? Why even have locks? Ironically, and hypocritically if they even think of this reality, those who say they believe that human nature is essentially good, do not act accordingly.

Ask some other questions: If one believes human nature is good, why lock the door when leaving for work or for vacation?<sup>42</sup> Why does the roofing company that replaces the shingles on the roof of your home or a business require a down payment? Why have jails? Why not just have an honor system for people we now put in jail? What often occurs when people leave their car running while they quickly run into a store (because they don't want to shut off the engine so the car will remain cool or warm)? (Ask the police for the answer or see your daily newspaper, radio, TV, or digital newsfeed. Some who have done so have not only lost their car but children and pets in the car as well!) Furthermore, this vital practicality of Biblically-based historic Christian systematic theology is true not only of anthropology but of all six loci.<sup>43</sup>

When young people learn that God is most holy and that he will not coexist with that which is sinful, specifically that humans are corrupted with the disobedience of Adam and Eve, are essentially inclined toward that which is evil, and are unworthy to be in God's presence, they are faced with another dilemma to be reconciled. They want to know how they can come into the presence of God and live with him.

How do we help them? According to developmental learning theory, motivation in adolescents and adults occurs internally in the process of mentally retrofitting previously held views with new information in order to make the old consistent with the new and vice versa. Having a dilemma makes one uncomfortable, for the normal state is that of equilibrium, where understanding occurs and things make sense. This is why questions are a good teaching tool, which is readily seen in a review of the four accounts of the Gospel in the New Testament where we observe how many times Jesus used questions in

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<sup>42</sup> You may have a student in your group who has lived in a very rural locale where people have traditionally left doors unlocked. You can ask, "In the light of what we know about human nature, is that practice now much riskier, especially in this point in our history, where we are seeing more and more people who do not know, much less have a saving relationship with, the Lord Jesus Christ, and where the Biblical values on which this country was founded are no longer as extensively practiced?"

<sup>43</sup> Some examples are herein given in this brief overview of the loci, but the primary purpose in this essay is to focus on the key content of each and their logical interrelationship. For much more, including many examples of the practicality of each of the six loci in historic Christian theology, see the Christian Theology page of my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/theology/>. It is a work in progress, so please keep checking back. As always, all these resources on the Web site are free in their digital format; feel welcome to copy and use them with acknowledgment for educational purposes, including sharing them with others, worldwide.

his teaching. When a question is confronted to which there is not a ready answer, the resultant feeling of discomfort motivates the person to reach understanding. People easily “blow off,” discard, didactic and propositional statements; on the contrary, long after we leave a person, questions we’ve raised remain and prompt continuing mental reflection to reach resolution. Also, as we saw above when we engage young people in the core teachings of the Bible and link with their longings, we tap into internal motivations that, with the Holy Spirit’s help, issue in a strong love for the Lord and a passion to “grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.” Such students are not bored!

We start then, with God, who is most holy and essentially true love, whose love is therefore just and righteous. We then expose our students to the Biblical teaching that all humans are sinful (Romans 3:23) and unfit for God’s presence. Yet, because God is love, he is unwilling to destroy us; but because he is just, he will not dwell with us as sinners and compromise his integrity, his very being. Next, ask this question: How could God, who loves us, make it possible for us to be in his fellowship without going against all he is and stands for? Further and specifically, how can he bring together you and someone who has unjustly oppressed you into his presence?

### Christology: The Doctrine of Christ

The answer to these questions is to change the people; but, counterculturally, the change is one we humans cannot make ourselves, for we daily add to our sins and sinfulness.<sup>44</sup> The way God has resolved this issue is to make sinful people righteous in his sight. Since he requires every human to obey his Law, and since no one does so perfectly (Romans 3:23), the next step in his plan was for God himself to come in the Second Person of the Trinity to take on human flesh in one perfect man, who could fulfill that requirement, Jesus Christ, being the only begotten (i.e., of the same essence) Son of God. As a human being but empowered by divinity, he fulfilled his Father’s commands in his Law by living out the required righteousness, which no one else has done or is able to do. Jesus Christ was 100% divine (Matthew 1:23, John 10:30, Titus 2:13) and 100% human (John 1:14; Hebrews 4:15-15; 1 John 4:2).

The term “only begotten” is a Biblical term we need to teach our young people. It must not become extinct from the language of the Christian community, even though many well-meaning but misguided people are trying to eliminate it from much of our usage,

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<sup>44</sup> Some, if not many, may challenge you on this point, thinking that they haven’t sinned that day. First, ask them if they have done everything they should have done today. For example, did they see someone who needed help whom they passed by? Have all their thoughts been pure? Have they made a good decision but for the wrong reasons (e.g., primarily for how it would benefit them)? Do they give at least a tenth (tithe) of their income for the Lord’s work? Show them that we sin by omission (those sins we do by failing to do what we ought, Matthew 25:41-46) as well as by commission (e.g., those sins we do that we know we shouldn’t do, Matthew 5:28). Next, remind them that God uses a criterion standard of judgment, not a norm standard (grading on the curve). We may look OK in our own eyes, as we look at ourselves over against others, but we come up short when we evaluate our daily performance over against the criterion, God’s will as seen in the Bible and in particular in the life and obedience of Jesus Christ. Then, quote a passage such as 1 John 1:8-10.

including contemporary English translations of the Bible. The English words, “only begotten” translate the Greek word, “monogenes (only begotten),” in such passages as John 3:16 (cf. KJV, NASB). Many modern translations leave out this term in order to simplify the message for seekers and others. They substitute “only Son;” but “only Son” does not mean “only begotten Son,” i.e., that he shares the same substance with the Father, which is an essential teaching of the Bible. Unless our youth and others in the church understand this doctrine clearly, they cannot conduct an effective apologetic to contemporary Arians such as the Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Unitarians, and others. Therefore, in reading these texts, include the words, “only begotten,” and explain what they mean: another opportunity to teach the language of the Christian community.

The only begotten Son of God overcame the power of evil and took on himself the punishment for sin required by the Law’s justice. Taking our place, representing us, and suffering the punishment we deserve, Jesus Christ accomplished the righteousness required by the Law for all who would live and serve in the presence of God who is most holy. He did so with great passion, which needs to be highlighted in ministry to youth who are at a stage in their development when emotions are heightened.<sup>45</sup> As Kenda Creasy Dean writes, “Unless Christian theology retains a central place for the Passion of Christ—and unless the Christian community engages youth in practices that identify with Jesus’ suffering love—youth looking for something ‘to die for’ will, inevitably, look elsewhere. In the absence of a Christian vocabulary of passion, youth will turn to the broader society to interpret their passions for them, where consumer culture is only too happy to oblige”<sup>46</sup> with seductive idols that do not satisfy and are destructive.

It is vital to teach Christ and his passion in the light of who God is and what he is like contrasted with who human beings are and what we are like; otherwise, people don’t understand why they need Christ and conclude they don’t need him. Specifically with regard to God, we need to emphasize that God’s essential love is just and righteous; that he is not only holy, but holy, holy, holy, and that he requires all who would enter his presence to also be holy and righteous. Specifically concerning humans, we need to show how we are unworthy in ourselves to be in the presence of God who is most holy and can enter his presence only by being changed, a change that we cannot ourselves accomplish. As sinners, far from the perfection God requires, we actually “increase our guilt every day” in the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 13.<sup>47</sup> It is imperative that we teach the Biblical theology that there is only One person, Jesus Christ, who has satisfied the demands of God’s Law that a human be righteous in order to commune with God. (Hebrews 10:11-14; 12:1-3, 22-24) In that case, how is his righteousness transferred to us?

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<sup>45</sup> Dean, p. 6. See also p. 15 where she observes that “the passions of young people serve as signs of a deeper, human longing for love that is most fully addressed by the Passion of Christ—a Passion that mainline Protestants have failed to share fully or faithfully with young people.”

<sup>46</sup> Dean, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> “The Heidelberg Catechism” adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in North America Synod of 1975, with some editorial revisions approved by the Synod of 1988. *The Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), p. 865.

### Pneumatology, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Application of Redemption

Those who would be acceptable to God, and enter his presence, need to be made worthy for his fellowship. This is God's work, not the idea or the ability of mankind to do. God credits Christ's righteousness to those who believe in him, thus granting forgiveness and salvation, including eternal life serving God in his presence and making them holy. (Romans 4:24; Ephesians 4:17-5:20; Colossians 1:21-22; Hebrews 2:11; 10:10, 14; 13:12) This fourth of the six loci is also called soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. (>Gk. *soter* = to save + *logos*, word, study of)

How, then, do people come to faith? Because some are smarter than others, well educated, or figure things out better? Not at all! When the Son completed his work on earth and ascended to be with the Father in heaven, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit<sup>48</sup> (>Gk., *Pneuma*) who would apply the Son's work to redeem God's whole creation, beginning with his people. The Spirit regenerates (>L. *re*, again + *generare*, to beget, thus causes to be born again, John 3:1-8) those who believe in Christ. The Holy Spirit thus gives a new nature thereby making possible the faith in Jesus Christ that saves those who so believe.

God thereby declares that those who have faith in Christ are just and righteous, forgiven of all that would separate them from him who is most holy, and are now worthy of being in his presence. This declaration is referred to as justification. Simply put, justification is God's once-for-all declaration that believers in Christ are acceptable to him by virtue of his crediting Christ's righteousness to them as a result of their faith that he has made possible, a gift of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 4:18-25; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Ephesians 2:8-10) The English words, righteousness and justice, translate the same Greek word as is seen in different translations of the Bible. The Spirit also provides spiritual growth and development in a process called

#### Sanctification

By means of God's Word and the Holy Spirit's work vertically within a believer and horizontally through others, especially his or her parents and also the rest of the church (e.g., youth group leaders, other adults, and believing peers), he or she matures in Christ in a lifelong process the Bible and theologians call sanctification, i.e., growth and maturity in Christ-likeness. (1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 2:11; 2 Corinthians 7:1) The root word for sanctification in the Greek of the New Testament (*hagios*, as well as its Old Testament counterpart in Hebrew, *qados*, and the Latin, *sanctus*) means holy, i.e., set apart from the worldly orientation away from God to be in relationship with him and to serve him. (1 Peter 2:9-12) This process is illustrated in Figure 2.

The large circle represents the world's population. When a person has been regenerated, or given the new nature by the operation of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3; Titus 3:5), faith is made possible. This faith is what justifies a person in God's sight. (Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17) God declares the person is just (justified) or righteous, i.e., in the words of

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<sup>48</sup> John 14:26, 15:26.



an old mnemonic, “God looks at me as being ‘Just-if-I’d’ never sinned.”

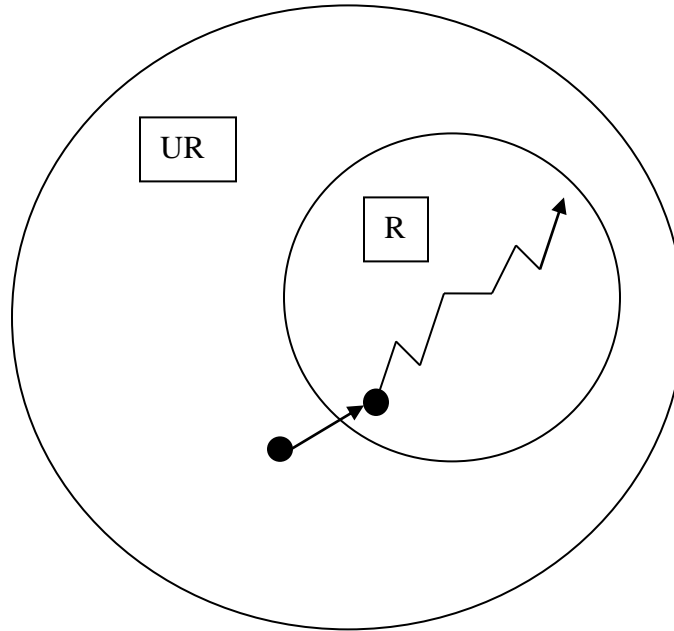


Figure 2 The Sanctification Process

Justification moves the believer from the realm of those who are unregenerated (UR in the graphic above) to a new state or relationship with God. The justified person becomes part of God’s covenant community (those who are regenerated, having received the new nature, i.e., been born again, represented in the graphic by R), existing within the world but not part of the world.<sup>49</sup>

Once part of the covenant community, the regenerated person begins the process of sanctification, which continues throughout his or her life. This process is not a straight, smooth, onward and upward line but one that is up and down with level (stagnant) periods, yet all of which are generally headed upward, though often in a “two steps forward, one step backward” progression. Sometimes in our progress we’re on a spiritual mountaintop and at others in the valleys (the peaks and the pits) of life; sometimes we’re just existing, “spinning our wheels” and not growing. Then after a period of time growth continues, albeit in this phase of life, in this age, still with ups and downs but progressing with purpose. It is a work of the Holy Spirit in which the believer willingly cooperates in the desire to grow more and more Christ-like.

<sup>49</sup> Historic Christian systematic theology also incorporates the Bible’s use of the word covenant in a broader sense that refers to a legal relationship between God and humans, including both believers and those connected with believers who are unregenerate and therefore who do not believe, e.g., the reprobate sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas. (1 Samuel 2-4) Within the covenant community are some who are unregenerate, wolves in sheep’s clothes and weeds in the garden. (Matthew 7:15-23; 13:24-43) See also below on the visible church and Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Company, 1933), pp. 159-160. Don’t be put off by the date of this excellent book. As with the Bible upon which it is based, these doctrines are not time bound.

Throughout the Bible and the history of the church, development in holiness, sanctification, has been seen to occur by means of the interaction of God's Word, the work of the Holy Spirit, and engagement with the people of God, the church. (Proverbs 27:17; 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 10:24-25) The authority to which we turn to determine what is actual development is in the Bible (Matthew 5:17), in the Spirit's leading (John 14-16), and in the church (Matthew 16:18-19; 18:15-20; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). However, the church's authority is a derived authority, and it must be consistent with God's Word. *God's Spirit does not contradict himself; he will not tell an individual believer, or the church, to do something that he condemns in his Word.*

A vital dimension of youth ministry is to help young people explore and incorporate the truths of sanctification into their lives. Study such passages as those above in this section and challenge the youth to consider the implications for their daily living in Christ. Ask, "What is God saying in 1 Corinthians 6:13b-20, especially in verse 19, regarding sexual immorality?" Discuss also Ephesians 4:17-5:20 in the light of this question and other issues youth are facing today. These passages are at the heart of the Biblical basis for abstinence from sex outside of marriage, a subject youth long to hear, and need to hear, with a firm foundation taught by adults who are living obediently.

Comprehending the sanctification process also enables us to understand other spiritual phenomena, such as why many if not most of those who have been part of the covenant from infancy do not know a specific time when they began to believe in Christ as their Savior and Lord. And that is OK. This doctrine helps us explain how a regenerated person raised in the covenant may feel he or she is a believer for the first time after an especially moving retreat or other exceptionally meaningful experience, whereas that event may simply have been the catalyst for a significant step forward in the sanctification process. It is important to help young people and their leaders understand this reality.

Sometimes people who have been previously baptized into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit want to be rebaptized after such a moving experience. In such circumstances we in the tradition of historic Christian theology sensitively and sympathetically explain the meaning of baptism (see below) and that it is not necessary to be baptized again, which is why that is not the practice of Lutheran and Reformed churches (Christian Reformed, Reformed, Presbyterian) and most others as well who are in the historic Christian tradition such as Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Anglican (most of whom are called Episcopalian in the United States).

A significant implication of sanctification for church-based youth ministry regards teacher/leader education concerning their perspective. We view, plan for, and act toward church teens as though they are covenant people in various stages of development in their relationship with the Lord and not as pagans, which understanding greatly affects programming structures, e.g., having some different programs for church youths and for outreach to community young people.

Here is an important way that our understanding of sanctification shapes youth ministry, e.g., helping leaders orient their view of church youths to see them as covenant people in the process of growth in their relationship with Christ and in their understanding and doing of his will for them. The Holy Spirit has been working in their hearts and minds for many years. Therefore, the leaders don't treat the church teens as non-Christians, e.g., evangelizing them. (This understanding is also the rationale for the churches holding to the tradition of historic Christian theology to not have "altar calls" in worship services where God's covenant people have gathered together to praise him, hear his Word, and respond to him.)

Leaders do help church youths discover where they are regarding Christ (i.e., in need of justification [recognizing that not all in the visible church have been regenerated<sup>50</sup>] or, more likely, how they are doing in their development in the sanctification process). Leaders do encourage the young people to make public profession of faith, do help them continue to grow in and serve the Lord from that point, and do program accordingly.

Since peer pressure is an important factor in the life of teens, a significant aspect of youth ministry is to facilitate the development of friendships within the covenant community. Best friends should be other believers. (Proverbs 1; Psalm 1)

Another of my students has well written the following implications of the doctrine of sanctification:

Youth should find hope in the fact that they have the Holy Spirit alive in them. Peer pressure is a major issue in the lives of youth. The fact that they have the Spirit in them and assurance of a bright future in Christ, should give them hope and life, allowing them to discern between good and bad....The fact that we are made [h]oly through Christ is such a blessing, and it should take many burdens away from us. In the youth panel [that was in our class], many of the issues that were talked about related to peer pressure and the expectations of others to be 'cool.' The fact that we are made [h]oly through Christ and that we are set apart for sacred use should give us strength to overcome the obstacles that peer pressure presents. Unfortunately, people don't understand the impact that sanctification has on our lives. In contrast, many individuals and youth in particular, suffer from cases of depression and the feeling that we will never be good enough, or 'cool' enough. The fact that God wants to use us and has made us [h]oly provides so much hope. Youth need to hear these words and the youth ministry needs to portray to these individuals that they are special. They matter to the church and more importantly they matter to God. Many times leaders of a church talk down to the members, feeding them information that they are already aware of. Youth meetings

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<sup>50</sup> Thus it is appropriate, indeed vital, to ask each youth at some point if he or she confesses with his or her mouth that "Jesus is Lord" and believes in his or her heart that God raised him from the dead. (Romans 10:9) However, doing so is significantly different from structuring a program on the basis of the unwarranted assumption that even covenant children are unbelievers.

need to teach the students where they are at. They crave deep conversations and more meaning in their meetings. Make separate programs for outreach and utilize the time with students to really engage them in the Word.

Good point! Our church teens in Christ are holy to him; we must treat them that way, one means of which they know they are holy to the Lord. The Bible calls them “saints.” (Acts 9:32; Romans 1:7; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4; 11:18; 14:12; 19:8; 22:21)

Another important part of pneumatology, in particular the application of salvation and the sanctification process, and the youths’ identity development, regards their spiritual gifts and bearing the fruit of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit also gives gifts with which to serve God, and he helps believers bear fruit (Galatians 5:22-23) to do so as well. A crucial aspect of youths’ identity development involves helping them ascertain and nurture their gifts,<sup>51</sup> to grow in their sanctification, i.e., to mature in Christ, and produce fruit. (Matthew 7:20; Galatians 5:22-23; James 2:23-26)

We are saved to serve. As we’ve been seeing, the regeneration which permits our faith in Christ Jesus that saves us is God’s free gift to us, his grace, which means unearned favor. His grace comes to us out of his love for us. I’m a believer in Jesus Christ solely due to God’s grace, not because I’m smarter than some unbeliever and figured all this out and he didn’t. Furthermore, we’re saved not for status but for service. We can never look down our noses at unbelievers; we are to love them and try to help them also come to the Lord and serve him.

God has work for us to do. Look closely at how the apostle Paul explained this matter to the Ephesians.

<sup>8</sup> For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God;

<sup>9</sup> not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

<sup>10</sup> For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

(Ephesians 2:8-10 NASB)

We are not saved by good works; we can do nothing to earn our salvation. In fact, as we saw in the above-mentioned catechism, we rather daily increase our debt!<sup>52</sup> ***We are saved NOT BY BUT FOR good works.*** Further, the works give evidence of our saving faith, for God’s Word clearly states that the true believer will do good works as a result of his or her new, i.e., regenerated, nature, which desires to glorify God. Let us also contemplate the following Bible passages and their implications for our lives:

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<sup>51</sup> The Ministry Resource Center of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary recommends several good materials for such lessons. Log on to <http://library.calvin.edu/collections/mrc>.

<sup>52</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism, Q & A 13.

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:8)

[Jesus said] Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him. (John 14:21)

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? <sup>21</sup> Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? <sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead. (James 2:14-26)

The words "alone" in verse 24 and "faith without deeds" in verse 26 are key words. James is not saying that works alone can save or are sufficient in themselves. Otherwise the devil's counterfeit pagan humanitarianism would qualify for salvation, which it clearly does not as we see in John 14:6 and throughout Scripture, including the texts cited in this essay. What the Holy Spirit, speaking through James, is saying powerfully is that it is not enough to only believe (which even the demons do), but we must also obey (which the demons want no part of doing).

Thus, I like to refer to Christians as "believers in and followers of Christ Jesus," believing referring to the cognitive assent part of faith and following referring to the obedient behavioral part of faith as we walk in faith in Christlike maturity. (Ephesians

2:10; 4:13) We connote similar concepts when we speak of Jesus as our Savior and Lord, the Lordship of Christ indicating, among other qualities, obedience to God.<sup>53</sup>

We see here and elsewhere throughout the Bible that God is not impressed with words only; they have to be backed up and “enfleshed” by deeds. In fact, the very words for “word” in both Hebrew (דָּבָר *dāvār*) and Greek (λόγος *logos*) mean word and deed integrally within the concept. Any thought of ever believing something and not acting accordingly is completely foreign to and not at all valued by God’s Word; indeed, God will have no part of it and calls it for what it truly is: hypocrisy! (Cf. e.g., Matthew 23)

God not only calls us to serve him, he gives us the tools to do so. The gifts the Spirit gives to each believer (including each adolescent) are “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Romans 12:4-8, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4:11-13) Youth need the church’s help in identifying, nurturing, and using those gifts. Vandenberg adds,

We need to ask what the gifts are of the young people and children in our congregations and how are we going to put them to use. We need their ministry; we need to be blessed by them and by doing so they, in turn, will grow. What is haunting is this: in the dream of youth ministry we spend many hours doing ministry to the child and by doing so, we separate them and disable their ministry to the body. In doing this, I think we actually stifle their growth as body members....<sup>54</sup>

Children and adolescents, as all of us, learn by doing. If we want them to develop cognitions, skills, and affect, that produce the desired effects, we must provide for them the opportunities. The most effective opportunities will be as apprentices for and with those who are older. Then, as they are able, we should give them more responsibility.

Here’s another way to look at this vital subject. Children and youth like to receive gifts. Recall how excited they are at Christmas and on their birthday! In youth ministry let us help them discover their spiritual gifts. God has given his precious children these gifts! Several instruments have been produced to help young people and others identify their gifts.<sup>55</sup>

Once you have helped your teens discover their gifts, help them use them. Connect them with opportunities to use their gifts in the Lord’s work. Give them time during your youth group meetings to report back on what they are doing, how it is going, and how

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<sup>53</sup> “Lord,” Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, Everett F. Harrison, Editor-in-Chief (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 328.

<sup>54</sup> Vandenberg, p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> Logon to the Ministry Resource Center and use the keyword, Spiritual Gifts. Consider beginning here: <http://ulysses.calvin.edu/eg/opac/results?bool=and&qtype=subject&contains=contains&query=Spiritual+Gifts&bool=and&qtype=title&contains=contains&query=&bool=and&qtype=author&contains=contains&query=&fi%3Aaudience=&locg=103&pubdate=is&date1=&date2=&sort=pubdate.descending&adv=1>.

they feel about it. Want to guess what they'd rather be doing: that or playing with shaving cream?

Do we serve effectively alone? In this harsh world we not only need other believers for encouragement, instruction, and admonition but also, through combining resources, to be as productive as possible. Moreover, as revealed throughout his Word, God works with people individually and through others, and the former in the context of the latter.

### Ecclesiology: The Doctrine of the Church

God's ultimate objective is to redeem not only individuals but the rest of his creation as well. (Isaiah 60, 1 Timothy 2:4, Revelation 21) To do so, he drew together a select group of people through whom he would work to accomplish his redemptive purposes. Think of what that means! We have the privilege of being called, collectively and personally invited, to work with God in the most important job in the cosmos! Let's help our young people capture the significance of the concept. Including the implications for each of them personally!

#### God's Covenant of Grace

He established a covenant, a relationship with his people in which he has charged them with a great mission: He has delegated his redeemed people to bring the good news of redemption to the whole world so that all others who will come to him through faith in Jesus Christ may be saved and also engage in God's redemptive work. He blesses us and expects us to be a blessing. (Genesis 12:1-3; 15; 17; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Romans 4; Ephesians 2:10)

The visible manifestation of this covenant community is the Christian church. (Galatians 3:29, 1 Corinthians 11:25, Hebrews 8:8-13) The Bible teaches that those whom God calls and who accept that call in Christ Jesus are referred to as the church (the translation of the Greek word, *ekklesia*, > ecclesiology), literally "those who are called out" (Gk. *ek*, out of + *kaleo*, to call) of the world to God (Figure 2) and into his eternal service and presence, called to be holy (set apart) to God to accomplish his purposes. The church is the body of Christ, the primary agency through whom God has chosen to redeem his creation.

Historic Christian systematic theology is based on the covenant, a term that Biblical scholars refer to as a major motif, or theme, that occurs throughout the Bible, and we've learned much about this motif in the last half century as a result of archaeological research.<sup>56</sup> The most common Hebrew word for covenant, *berith*, occurs 286 times in the Old Testament and 33 (Gk. *diatheke*) in the New Testament. On numerous other occasions references occur to covenants and covenantal relationships apart from the use

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<sup>56</sup> James Muilenburg, in *Old Testament Theology*, a course taught at Western Theological Seminary, spring 1966.

of the word covenant.<sup>57</sup>

Seeing a concept repeated that many times, do you start thinking God is trying to get our attention? Do you remember your mother saying to you, “How many times have I told you....?”

This covenant is an agreement made by God with his people with whom he has chosen to be in a relationship. In this covenant relationship of grace flowing from God’s steadfast love, the formal establishment of which was with Abraham, God promised to be the God of his people and to their descendants. (Genesis 17:3-7) The covenant is not a contract, and it is not democratic. The parties in this covenant are not equal. God did not ask for Abraham’s opinion on how it should work; he told Abraham how it would be structured and managed. The covenant God established with Abraham, which was structured somewhat similarly to other Near East covenants at the time, had a three-fold format, seen in the Book of Deuteronomy. The fifth book of the Pentateuch begins with an historical prologue (1:6-4:49), recounting God’s relationship and actions with his people from the beginning; then follows a statement of stipulations (5:1-26:19) that God requires and which constitutes the bulk of the book. These first two sections are followed by a statement of sanctions (27:1-30:20), blessings that come from obedience, and what can be expected as a result of disobedience. God employed a construct familiar to his people to teach a key concept for the accomplishment of his plan of redemption.

Covenant membership is not the same as salvation, though God’s promises encourage believers that he will grant the regeneration that will provide saving faith in covenant children, as he does for believing adults. The covenant is primarily about what God has done, is doing, and will be doing in relationship with us (which is also what baptism, the sign and seal of covenant membership, signifies<sup>58</sup>). In the covenant God promises to be our God and the God of our children. He also requires that we be faithful, including obedient, to him.

Teaching teens about the covenantal basis of the church will also help them understand and value the church. Many young people, and a growing number of adults, do not have this understanding and thus see no or little need for the church or for their membership in it.

### Implications of the Covenant for Youth Ministry

Youth ministers have long intuitively sensed the importance of relationships and have constructed programs to focus on the relational implications involving parents, teachers, potential spouses (dating), and many others. However, Biblical and theological aspects of relationships have not been addressed as needed either in the content or structure of youth programming.

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<sup>57</sup> G.E. Mendenhall, “Covenant,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 715.

<sup>58</sup> See the section below on baptism.



Vandenberg observes, “Young people now are driven by relationships and by a real experience of life and faith. This is only going to increase in the future...The good news, I believe, is that in our rich history of the covenant we have a theological building block to approach the future with confidence and anticipation.”<sup>59</sup> He also adds, “The covenant lifestyle seems one of being a part of a rhythm more than being a part of a program. Since a postmodern generation is anti-structural, anti-institutional, and less interested in age classification, I believe a community of grace that is rhythmic and inclusive, not rigid and segregating, will be more appropriate to the postmodern world.”<sup>60</sup>

The doctrine of the covenant has profound significance for a youth’s identity development and belonging needs. See the research by Erik Erikson<sup>61</sup> regarding the identity-formation task in this stage of human development and the research of Abraham Maslow<sup>62</sup> and others regarding basic belonging needs. This need to belong is most fully and effectively met through the vertical relationship with God in Christ and horizontally with fellow believers together with the Holy Spirit in the covenant community (koinoia). Covenant living also involves a strong sense of purpose that meets another basic human need: the need to make a lasting contribution. The Lord has given us a task, a mission, which will change the world forever. (Isaiah 60, Revelation 21)

A key issue is: Are we teaching our children and young people about their membership in God’s covenant and what he expects of them and us regarding the stipulations of the covenant? This matter links with several great questions of life teens are trying to answer, including: “Why am I here?” “What is my purpose in living?” “How does God want me to live?” Helping them find the answer to those questions in their covenant membership and obligations, and equipping them for the vocation (their calling) God is giving them, will please God and greatly enrich the lives of the young people,<sup>63</sup> enabling them to experience much joy, especially as they engage those questions in the light of the loci.

At this point an important caveat is necessary. Youth ministers like to make the point that doing certain things that are considered high marks for Christians are not enough to make one acceptable to God, i.e., to be saved. One example youth leaders like to point out is church attendance is not enough. Of course in so doing they make a good point. However, they hammer away at this point to a fault. When overdone, one unintended but counterproductive result that occurs is that young people come away with the conscious or subconscious concept that neither church membership nor church attendance has any significant value.

This result is undoubtedly one reason why a huge percentage of teenagers and young adults do not join a church. I’ve even counseled with many college students who want to

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<sup>59</sup> Vandenberg, pp. 23-24.

<sup>60</sup> Vandenberg, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*, Second Edition Revised and Enlarged (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1963), pp. 261 ff.

<sup>62</sup> Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), pp. 43 ff.

<sup>63</sup> See Genesis 17, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Romans 4, Galatians 3:29, John 14:21.

enter professional ministry who aren't aware that they have to be members of a church in order to be ordained. It is not surprising that many independent churches don't have a membership list and don't require attendees to become members. Sadly, people who don't commit to membership in a congregation in the body of Christ miss out on many blessings, as I've argued in another essay in a series of articles I've written entitled, "From Acorn to Oak," the section on ecclesiology, "What is the church? Why should I become a member?"<sup>64</sup>

So what should youth leaders do in this regard? It is fine to mention church attendance in a list of activities that are good in themselves but that don't earn salvation. That point should still be made. However, state the point and don't interfere with the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in the lives of these young people. Don't keep hammering away at this point and in the process undermine the importance of church attendance (including especially worship, Bible study and other classes, fellowship groups, and service opportunities) and church membership. In fact, it is necessary to help the youth understand why church membership is important, indeed vital, to maturing in Christ and serving him most effectively.

Another key implication of the covenant concerns leader selection and pre- and in-service leader education. Again, regular youth meetings, where the covenant members in varying stages of sanctification are gathered for meat not milk (Hebrews 5:13-14), should not be oriented to the fewer (usually very few) unbelievers who may be present.<sup>65</sup> Since the Bible, and the Gospel in particular, is at the core of all we do, unbelievers who do come to the meetings, will grasp the essence of what we believe, and leaders and others (including their believing friends with whom they mostly likely came) can and should reach out to them individually.<sup>66</sup>

To be sure, church youth leaders must intentionally include a missional component in their youth ministries, but the primary subjects of that mission are youths outside the church. That component should involve two dimensions: witness and evangelism.<sup>67</sup> For example, the leaders should work to identify those in the congregation who have the gift of evangelism, include them on their youth ministry team, and facilitate their ministry of outreach into the community. Many fine evangelistic activities have been designed to reach young people, corporately and individually, who are not part of any church, e.g., concerts, neighborhood events in church members' homes, and camp ministries, as well as pre-service and in-service programs to equip adults and young people to reach out to

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<sup>64</sup> See the Christian Theology/Ecclesiology page of my Web site, [www.fromacorntoak12.com](http://www.fromacorntoak12.com).

<sup>65</sup> Adolescents usually choose friends and church youth groups who are most like themselves. Even those youth groups especially oriented to evangelistic outreach usually attract only those students most like the church's young people. Chap Clark, "The Missional Approach to Youth Ministry" in *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church*, Mark H. Senter III, General Editor, pp. 86, 87, 110. See also Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*, where they report the findings of the NSYR that very few adolescents are "spiritually seeking," pp. 82, 32.

<sup>66</sup> Also, skilled youth ministers and teachers can make comments that give enough information for those without the prerequisites so they can understand.

<sup>67</sup> For definition and further development of these terms and this concept, see the discussion below on vocation.

youth in one-to-one settings. Consider also partnering with a good parachurch organization that does well in evangelism.<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, the failure to distinguish between covenant members and nonchurch young people, and neglecting to focus on the former in youth ministry, is one reason why many young people are turned off and don't want to attend church-based youth groups. They say, "I've heard all that before." In many cases they are right. One young person, a confessing member of the church in which he had been raised, was attending his church's youth group meetings regularly, meetings where the youth minister did not have a covenantal perspective and viewed the teens as a mission field. After several months of such programs the teen told me, "If he puts us through one more evangelism program, I'm not coming back! He treats us as pagans!" The youth wanted meat not milk! There are many subjects and texts in the Bible that teens need to be taught, which they've never heard. Let's do it, so we avoid angry responses I've heard when as adults they do discover these texts and say, "Why wasn't I ever taught this before?!"<sup>69</sup>

A student of mine wrote the following statement on the importance of this Biblical teaching for meeting key longings of youth: "The sense of belonging and purpose that can be brought from exploring with young people how they fit in this community is paramount in modern American society, where large numbers of young people feel isolated and estranged from the groups and people that surround them. [The covenant community (manifested in the church)] can also provide a large support network for the youth within the congregation as a whole, not just within the youth ministry. It is important that the youth understand that although there are seasons of life where the race of life must be run alone, it is a race that we are meant to run with each other."

Another aspect of the covenant where historic Christian systematic theology informs not only the content but the structure of youth ministry regards intergenerational relationships, which facilitate youths' development of knowledge, skills, and wisdom as well as encouragement, hope, and a further sense of purpose in adults. What can we do to help all our young people develop healthy relationships with fellow covenant members? For developing relationships with adults, begin by facilitating a strong parent education program, teaching parents their God-given command and opportunity to raise their children (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) and grandchildren (Deuteronomy 4:9) in relationship with God and all that means.

Also consider the inclusive congregational approach to youth ministry advocated by

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<sup>68</sup> See the discussion below on parachurch youth ministries.

<sup>69</sup> We also need to communicate this reality to the publishers of Sunday school and other church education curricula. They tend to focus on the same Bible passages throughout their publications. They offer seemingly strong arguments, based on such factors as the cognitive development of children and the need for reinforcement. While well meaning, these needs can be accomplished in other ways, and they don't meet the greater need of exposing, especially our covenant, students to more of the Bible, including the especially rich stories and other passages that are not included in such curricula, dealing with subjects related to teenagers' felt and unfelt needs.

Malan Nel.<sup>70</sup> Mark DeVries in his excellent book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, adds many other valuable suggestions. Both authors provide profound and practical help for the contemporary church to reengage its covenantal obligations. Again, consider employing an apprentice system. The family, and especially the single-parent family, needs the support of the church to fully enfold their children into God's covenant community. Children, including teenagers, look especially to their parents but also to other adults as having "arrived," just what they want to be and do. It's valuable to connect them with those adults of like mind and to facilitate that bonding in Christ. Doing so also reinforces what they've learned from their parents.

For developing relationships with other youth, start by not trying to break up cliques, a favorite practice of well-meaning church leaders. Cliques exist to meet a sociological need: the need for belonging and friendship. To try to break them up is unfruitful and counterproductive. Instead, work with the cliques to accomplish Biblical objectives. Affirm friendships and regularly and in varied ways, give these special relationships the opportunity to grow in Christ. Then, while affirming them, periodically urge them to take some moments while at church to say "Hello" to someone new or who doesn't have a friend. Teach the ancient practice of Christian hospitality. Tell them they don't have to "hang out" with these others all the time; just warmly greet them and encourage them, as we read in many places in the Bible (e.g., Romans 12:13; Hebrews 10:25, 13:1-3). In youth group activities, include the disenfranchised in the small groups.

**An adult leader should assign students to task groups.** Don't tell the youth to choose who they want in these clusters. Think of the pain that is felt by the one(s) chosen last with all the others looking on. Some have told me they've fervently prayed, "Oh Lord, **please** don't let me be chosen last!" Think about that poignant plea! If that prayer doesn't bring tears to your eyes, stop right now and read it again, slowly, putting yourself in that youth's place. If you still aren't deeply moved, stop again and ask God to help you develop the perspective and sensitivity to how deeply these precious children of his are hurting.

As the young people come to know one another, some will become amazed at the previously unknown abilities and skills of others and grow in appreciation of and respect for them. At the same time facilitate the development of relationships among those who are disconnected. Provide opportunities for those who don't have friends in the youth group to connect with others, to form friendships in Christ. Involve especially the disconnected in some functional ministry in the youth group and/or elsewhere where they can receive affirmation of their gifts and abilities in the church.

### Baptism: The Sign and Seal of Covenant Membership

Since the sacraments are commands the Lord has given to his church, it is important church leaders in general, and youth leaders in particular, understand the sacraments and

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<sup>70</sup> Malan Nel, *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Congregational Approach*. Pretoria, South Africa: Design Books, 2000. Malan Nel, "The Inclusive Congregational Approach to Youth Ministry," in *Four Views of Youth Ministry in the Church*, Mark H. Senter III, General Editor, pp. 2-38.

their significance so they can help others comprehend their meaning. Regarding baptism much confusion exists. Largely due to the understanding of the early church in its continuity with the Old Testament covenant, New Testament writers did not need to repeat and explain many subjects and practices that were well understood by those to whom they were writing but which are foreign to many people today. Therefore, we need to teach them. Specifically with the subject of baptism, there is thus not a chapter and verse where it says, e.g., to baptize children as well as adults, but we can infer from many passages in both testaments that such a practice not only occurred but is God's will.

In historic Biblical scholarship and an understanding of Christian systematic theology based on the Biblical record, the covenant is God's relationship with his people. Baptism is a sign and seal (guarantee, authorization, certification) of the work of God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, that the recipient is a member of the covenant and thereby a member of the church, which is the visible manifestation of the covenant. Baptism signifies cleansing, the washing away and forgiveness of sins, which God provides in Christ for his covenant people, and is a seal of that provision for the one receiving the sacrament.

Teaching teens the concept of forgiveness of sins and relief from guilt is important, as the struggle with guilt is common and often severe, leading many young people to seek that relief in misguided activities that only add to their struggle and pain for many others. Freedom from the oppression of guilt is a huge relief that will bless the lives of teens who are taught the meaning of their baptism and covenant membership.

Baptism throughout church history has been administered both to adults and to the children of believers.<sup>71</sup> Members of the covenant who are children receive daily blessings of the Holy Spirit directly and indirectly through their believing parents and also through other members of the church.<sup>72</sup>

Infant baptism is based on the command of God to circumcise infants, on the eighth day after they were born, as a sign of the covenant. (Genesis 17:12) That command, which instituted circumcision as the sacrament of the covenant in the Old Testament and gave the privilege of covenant membership to infants, has never been taken away, though circumcision has been replaced by baptism. (Colossians 2:9-14; Galatians 3:29)

People overlook God's commands at their peril. God takes his commands seriously, including this one to give the sign of the covenant to infants, as we see in an incident when Moses was returning to Egypt from Midian. This leader of Israel, who was at least

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<sup>71</sup> "A Statement on Infant Baptism," *The Church Speaks: Papers of the Commission on Theology Reformed Church in America 1959-1984*, ed. James I. Cook, No. 15 in The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 65-68.

<sup>72</sup> This is why in Reformed theology infants are baptized only when at least one parent is a believer in Christ and a member in good standing in the church. Of course, in all churches it is preferred that both parents be so, for it is through the believing parent(s) that the Holy Spirit primarily works in the life of the little child to make possible and facilitate the development of his or her faith in Christ. While it is not always required in other Protestant churches that at least both parents be believers in Christ, it is certainly preferred.

80 years old and should have known better, had failed to circumcise his son. God met Moses at a lodging place on the way and was about to take the leader's life. Moses' wife quickly took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses with it saying, "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me." Then the LORD let Moses alone. (Exodus 4:24-26) Since this command was so important to God, and since there is no evidence in either the Old or the New Testaments that he rescinded that command, we maintain that giving the covenant sign to infants remains his will.

Such consideration in the early church is the most likely explanation as to why there is little mention of the practice until well into the second century. One of the leaders, Tertullian, who questioned the practice, admitted it was universal throughout the church. Origen, an outstanding scholar of the Scriptures, writer, and preacher, who was martyred for the faith, said the tradition came from the apostles and is the custom of the church. With the early church literature clearly mentioning the controversies that existed at the time, the silence of any controversy concerning giving the covenant sign to infants argues for rather than against the practice.

Circumcision and baptism signify the cutting off or washing away of sins and membership in the covenant. Peter explains more in Acts 2:38-39, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." In the hermeneutical audience principle, we see Peter speaking to a group who were mostly Jews, who were hearing him in the context of the covenant commands that always included their children of all ages. (See, e.g., Nehemiah 8:3 and 10:28.)

In the New Testament God changed the elements of the sacrament which signify covenant membership, but we see no indication in the Bible that he ever removed the privilege for children and the original command to administer the sacrament to infants. The original covenant, which God called eternal (Genesis 17:7; Matthew 5:17-20), is still in effect, though it is now in Christ, the One to whom it, as all the rest of the Old Testament, always pointed, with the modification of baptism replacing circumcision and other modifications as mentioned throughout the book of Hebrews. Thus in historic Christian systematic theology, infant baptism is grounded in the unity of the covenant. (Matthew 21:23-46; Romans 11:17-24; Galatians 3:26-29; Hebrews 8)

The essential unity of the covenant throughout the Old and the New Testaments is also seen clearly in the Greek of the New. In all but one (Hebrews 12:24) of the references to the new covenant in the New Testament, the Greek word, *kainos* (new) is used. The word *kainos* means new in nature or quality, renewed, not new in time or origin which is designated by another Greek word (*neos*). See Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:8 (quoting Jeremiah 31:31 [38:31 in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in the third century B.C.]); 8:13; 9:15. The word *neos* signifies something that was not there before in contrast to *kainos*, which means "different from the usual, impressive, better than the old, superior in value or

attraction.”<sup>73</sup> Thus, though the New Testament (NT) does at one point refer to the covenant’s newness in and through Jesus the Christ in calendar time, the NT’s main emphasis is clearly on the major significance of the covenant’s newness in the sense of what God has recently done regarding its eternal nature and quality in Christ Jesus.

*Is there a connection between baptism and regeneration?*

Some denominations in the line of historic Christian theology, such as the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and Anglican or Episcopal churches, believe that at baptism the Holy Spirit regenerates the child’s spirit, thus making him or her “born again.”<sup>74</sup> Some pastors in those denominations fear that doctrine can lead to an unwarranted assurance of salvation for people as they grow up and live their lives any way they please, even with lifestyles counter to God’s Word and will; thus those pastors emphasize the importance of raising the child in the Lord Jesus through a conscious effort by parents together with the support of the church.

Churches in the Reformed tradition of historic Christian systematic theology do not baptize infants on the basis of the concept of baptismal regeneration (the belief that the Holy Spirit gives a person the new nature, making him or her born again, in and through baptism). Yet they do acknowledge the Book of Acts revealing times when regeneration occurred prior to (Acts 10:44-48), at the time of (Acts 19:6), and following baptism (Acts 8:12-17. Notice in this passage that even here there was no rebaptism; Peter and John just placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.).

Reformed Christians also recognize that baptism signifies regeneration. But how? As some have written, the regeneration is based on an understanding of prevenient grace, an unmerited favor God grants ahead of time,<sup>75</sup> that assures regeneration at some time in the future. No one, though, wants to indicate implicitly or explicitly that the Holy Spirit wouldn’t regenerate a baby or anyone else at baptism if he wills to do so. Yet, pertaining to prevenient grace, Louis Berkhof has written,

children are baptized on the ground of the all-comprehensive promise of God in the covenant, which also includes the promise of regeneration.... The covenant and the covenant promise afford the only certain and objective ground for the baptism of infants. Children of believers are baptized, because they are in the covenant, irrespective of the question, whether they are already regenerated or not.

...it may be assumed that the beginnings of grace present in the heart are strengthened in some mystical way. But it is not necessary to assume

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<sup>73</sup> See Johannes Behm, “Kainos” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 447 ff.

<sup>74</sup> The doctrine of baptismal regeneration, as it is called in the theological literature, is not always used by churches that hold to this concept.

<sup>75</sup> The derivation of the word, “prevenient,” is from the Latin word, *praevenire*, meaning “to come before” or “to anticipate.”

that the operation of baptism as a means of grace is limited to the very moment of its administration. It may be instrumental in strengthening faith later on, when the significance of baptism is clearly understood.<sup>76</sup>

Therefore, there is not a significant difference among the churches in the historic Christian theological tradition. Some say the regeneration comes at baptism. Others say it can, but at least grace is present that permits and facilitates regeneration either at that time or in the future if not already at some point prior to baptism. When that grace occurs or occurred, is known only to God, but the believer in and follower of Christ Jesus as his or her Savior and Lord can be sure he or she has it. (1 Corinthians 12:3)

Churches in the tradition of historic Christian systematic theology thus see baptism as being significantly different from dedication. Dedication, which is not commanded in the Bible, is focused on what the *parents* are committing to do. Parents may even choose not to dedicate their children. Dedication neither affirms children as members of the body of Christ nor emphasizes assurance of the gracious promises of God to the children of the faithful.<sup>77</sup>

In contrast, the primary emphasis in baptism is upon what *God* does in the life of the recipient of the sacrament. Baptism is a command of God, one of the two sacraments instituted, and the practice of which is commanded, by our Lord, and a vehicle of God's grace. In baptism children and adults are affirmed as members of the body of Christ. The sacrament also assures the gracious promises of God to the children of the faithful.

When the child matures, it is necessary to make a confession and confirmation of faith in Jesus Christ to publicly testify to his or her relationship with Christ.<sup>78</sup> (Romans 10:9) Youth leaders do need to talk with the covenant young people and encourage them to make public confession of faith, explaining the reasons for doing so, at which time they can discover any who have not as yet made a commitment to Christ as their Savior and Lord and help them to do so.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 321-322.

<sup>77</sup> Dedication only occurs once in the Bible, where Hannah dedicates Samuel to the Lord's work in the tabernacle. (1 Samuel 1:21ff.) Hermeneutical principles prohibit making Scriptural occurrences normative that take place only once and without a command to do so.

<sup>78</sup> Berkhof writes, "in the case of [covenant children there is] a reasonable assurance that the covenant will in time become a living reality in their experience. This is based on the promise of God, which is absolutely reliable, that He will work in the hearts of the covenant seed with His saving grace and transform them into living members of the covenant. As long as they do not manifest the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant life. And when these children come to years of discretion, it is incumbent on them to accept their covenant responsibilities voluntarily by a true confession of faith. Failure to do this is strictly speaking, a denial of their covenant relationship. . . . If they do not turn to God and accept Christ by faith, they will be judged as breakers of the covenant." *Manual of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 166-167.

<sup>79</sup> Space does not allow us here to consider the controversial question of the validity of the rite of confirmation in traditional Christian systematic theology. Strong arguments point out the lack of necessity for such a rite in covenant theology with a Biblical understanding of baptism. Nevertheless, I argue for maintaining this well-established practice especially on the basis of educational and sociological grounds.



If a baptized youth does not want to make confession of faith when given the opportunity, we should not despair, and we should not treat him or her as a pagan. Because of God's covenant promise and the significance of the youth's baptism, we are assured that God is not finished with the young person. We can even be encouraged that someday, he or she will most likely remember and respond to his or her roots in Christ through the continued work of the Holy Spirit. (Proverbs 22:6; Psalm 138:8; 1 Corinthians 1:8-9; Philippians 1:6) To facilitate that result, we should pray for the young person, continually demonstrate to him or her unconditional love, clearly indicate our desire to always be available to talk (keeping the door open), include him or her in all family activities, and invite him or her to all youth and church events as appropriate. Parents, faithful siblings, and other believers who have a close relationship with the young person should keep watch, allow a respectful space, and make sure he or she doesn't become involved in pursuits that are dangerous and counterproductive to his or her well being. In such cases a prayerful, careful, and loving exhortation should be made.<sup>80</sup>

Regarding exhortation and the need to speak the truth in love, youth ministers should be alert to the lifestyles of their volunteer staff and lovingly and carefully admonish and facilitate the proper change of behavior if and when necessary. I recall an occasion where I had to facilitate such a conversation by helping a youth leader I supervised to talk with one of her popular volunteer staff members who, we discovered, moved in with her boyfriend in a cohabiting relationship. She was a relatively new Christian and was somewhat surprised that her moving in with her boyfriend was wrong. (Here is an example of why it is good to have youth leaders not be new Christians, even though those new to the faith in Christ are often very enthused, "on fire for the Lord," and willing to serve.<sup>81</sup>) We all agreed that she would immediately step down, explain to her young people why she was going to take a leave of absence and repent of what she had done (fornication being contrary to God's Word), assure them of her love for them, and make the other changes she needed to do. After a proper period of time, and after she and her boyfriend married, she was allowed to regain her ministry with the youth. In this way she taught some powerful lessons concerning God's Word and the importance of living in obedience to his Word.

A seriously counterproductive result would have occurred if no one had said anything and the young people had found out what their youth leader was doing and concluded that their leader was a hypocrite. Some of them would also have concluded that if she could do what she did and still be a leader, it must be OK for them to do as well! Sadly, many Christians who emphasize God's grace, and lack a connection of faith and obedience, think they can do whatever they want, simply ask forgiveness whenever they do the same deed, and everything will be "just fine." As we've been seeing above, it doesn't work that way. Recall what the apostle Paul had to say about such thinking.

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

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<sup>80</sup> Galatians 6:1-2; James 5:19-20; Leviticus 19:17b; Ephesians 4:15.

<sup>81</sup> Compare the Biblical principle Paul applies to giving new converts time to mature in Christ before being appointed as an overseer. (1 Timothy 3:6-7)

<sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

<sup>5</sup> If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. <sup>6</sup> For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—<sup>7</sup> because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

<sup>8</sup> Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

<sup>9</sup> For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

<sup>11</sup> In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. <sup>12</sup> Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. <sup>13</sup> Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. <sup>14</sup> For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (Romans 6:1-14)

Paul condemns the thinking that we can just sin, ask forgiveness, and let grace abound, with a very strong Greek term that the NIV translates, “By no means!” in verse two and again in verse fifteen. Notice also the connection the apostle makes with baptism in refuting this serious error. Such a grievous sin, evil, and wickedness does not characterize the new (*kainos*) life in Christ and renders one who thinks and acts this way as vulnerable to obeying evil desires instead of the Lord and keeps him or her from accomplishing the Lord’s purposes in his or her calling to be holy.

Throughout church history baptism has been celebrated in the context of the church in corporate worship, and the covenant people during baptism vow to support the parents in their instruction, prayer for, and training of the child being baptized to raise him or her in the Lord. In Reformed churches the congregation must be present, except in extraordinary circumstances, to witness the reception of the sacrament and to make that vow. Churches in the Reformed tradition, therefore, do not baptize infants, believing adolescents, or adults at a camp, on a beach, in the Jordan River, or anywhere else apart from the individual’s home congregation at worship.<sup>82</sup> We are all in this discipling

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<sup>82</sup> Further, all three modes of baptizing, sprinkling, pouring, or immersion, that have been used throughout church history, are Biblically permissible. The water symbolizes cleansing and the new life in Christ regardless of the quantity used. The rationale of a small amount sufficing to include the whole is also seen in Jesus’ explanation for washing only the disciples’ feet, as he responded to Peter in John 13:10. One reason for the Bible’s silence on the mode of baptism is likely seen in the circumstances throughout church history where only a small amount of clean water has been available for one or more baptisms.

process together (Matthew 28:19-20), though the parents have the main responsibility. (Deuteronomy 6:4-7; Psalm 78; Ephesians 6:4; Colossians 3:21) It is the church that cares for its youth (and all other ages) throughout the life span. Implications for adults making that vow include the conscious awareness that being “too busy to teach” must be the exception rather than the rule. We should also be willing to become actively involved engaging physically or spiritually fatherless or motherless children in conversations and in helping them in other ways needed, especially in prayer.

Teenagers who have not been baptized as infants are baptized as adults in churches that follow historic Christian systematic theology. As with adults, a confession of faith always precedes the baptism of a teenager.<sup>83</sup>

In baptism God in effect says, “This person is mine and is set apart for my work.” What is that work?

### Vocation: God’s Call and Its Context

The concept of vocation (L. *vocare*, to call) in historic Christian theology signifies that God calls people to serve him by being his witnesses in word and action to his redemption in Christ in whatever career or other occupation we’re engaged. We’re called to be Christ’s witnesses wherever we find ourselves. Not only pastors and youth ministers but homemakers, businesspersons, custodians, physicians, mechanics, government officials, truck drivers, and attorneys have a calling to serve God in their work, each making a contribution to the accomplishment of God’s purposes. Discussions in the locker room or over lunch are usually (in deeds as well as in words) decidedly different for Christ’s followers, especially those progressing in the sanctification process, becoming “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”<sup>84</sup>

We should distinguish between witnessing and evangelism. The former is that which all believers in Christ are called to do. (Matthew 28:19-20; Acts 1:8; 1 Peter 3:15) Evangelism is a gift of the Spirit that some but not all believers receive. (Ephesians 4:11) While the verbal aspect of witnessing can be facilitated by conversational gambits, Scripture indicates it is a response to the query of others. (1 Peter 3:15) Evangelism, as seen in the Bible and in those throughout church history who have been given the gift, is a proactive initiative with individuals and often if not usually in groups (e.g., small groups, Vacation Bible School, and other outreach programs) and even large groups as in

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<sup>83</sup> While the foregoing is the essence of the essential aspects of baptism in historic Christian systematic theology, it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully explain the theology of baptism and other related key doctrines that apply so significantly to youth ministry. For further information and an especially helpful explanation of baptism (pp. 315-322), and the other doctrines, see Louis Berkhof, *Manual of Christian Doctrine* and the Ligonier Audio Tape Series: *Into the Sanctuary: Worshiping God in Spirit and Truth*, the lectures on the sacraments by R.C. Sproul, 1991 and the *Worship CD Series* by R.C. Sproul.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. also Colossians 3:23-24. An effective witness for Christ involves both word and deed. No room exists in the Bible for any concept of speaking one way and acting in the opposite; such hypocrisy is condemned throughout God’s Word. (Proverbs 11:3, Matthew 23:28) There is much more to the doctrine of vocation, which can be read in the excellent presentation by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Engaging God’s World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living*, especially chapter 5.

the crusades many lead.

It is good to make this distinction in our teaching and in our work with young and older people. Many who don't have the gift of evangelism have labored under sometimes intense guilt for not being able to initiate and proactively engage nonbelievers in an explanation of the Gospel, though they have not been equipped to do so. However, when they are asked "to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have," they have been and will be better able to respond, especially when they have been "prepared," by learning sound Biblical theology in a systematic manner.

These six loci and their logical order are easy to remember. Encourage your young people to use the loci in explaining their meaning to others.

Give them opportunities to practice doing so in youth group meetings. A type of role play, called reality practice role play, is a helpful way to enable students to learn the basic content of the loci and develop the skills to communicate it most comfortably in a witnessing situation.

*Reality Practice: Here's How It Works.*

- Divide the youth group into subgroups of three (one or two groups can have four if necessary).
- State the scenario. For a witnessing example, "You are at school sitting at lunch and a non-Christian says he doesn't believe anything about needing Jesus for salvation. What do you say?"
- Assign roles. Tell the group that the person in your group of three who lives the farthest from the church will be the Christian in the first round of the scenario. The person who lives the closest to the church will be the observer. The other person will take the role of the nonbeliever.
- Each person will have a two-minute turn to speak the truth in love from all three perspectives in the scenario. At the end of two minutes the observer will express what he or she thought the Christian said that was helpful and then offer any suggestion that came to mind as to what else the Christian could have said to effectively speak the truth in love. The others can respond as well. Try to finish in three minutes.
- Next rotate roles. Observer becomes the Christian; the Christian in the first round takes the role of the unbeliever; the person who took the role of the unbeliever in the first round becomes the observer. Repeat the process and then one more time so each person has an opportunity to participate in all three perspectives.
- Debrief the reality practice activity in the whole group. First ask for volunteers to say how they felt about the activity. Then ask what they learned that was an effective response to the unbeliever's assertion and to other comments made.
- Repeat from time to time in other youth group meetings.

We have such little time to help believers understand and communicate a cogent articulation of God's Word that we cannot allow our youth meetings to be drawn off

track. This doesn't mean we can't have fun and great fellowship; it does mean that the heart and core of what we do and the content of the time we spend is not the fun and games but the solid focus on God's Word *and its applications* in the daily lives of the young people we have been called to equip for his ministry in the world and in the church. Here we have a golden opportunity to teach our students about their calling to extend and nurture God's Kingdom, the only hope of the world, and to help them develop the knowledge, skills, and wisdom to engage their calling and do well.

Our youth must learn that the workplace is only one location where vocation is exercised. Our calling is to serve God in all we do, primarily in our witness for Christ in word and in deed, glorifying him in every aspect of our lives, e.g., in dating, in our marriage and family relationships, in helping others, in improving the environment, in conversations with a neighbor over the backyard fence, and in anything else that contributes to ameliorating and renewing the conditions in God's world. In this calling he has given us, we are participating with God in his redemption of his creation. Doing so answers one of youth's great questions: What meaning does my life have; how can I make a difference?

### The Nature of the Church and Youth Ministry

It is very important at this stage in the students' lives, in which identity development is involved, to help them understand the nature of the church, those whom God has called out, as holy to him for his service in the world as well in the church. (Ephesians 1:22-23; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16) It is vital to help young people incorporate these doctrines into their view of themselves, their identity development, their calling, and their service. Young people are engaged by the awareness that God approaches them both individually and corporately. Think of the impact on the life of an adolescent who integrates into his or her identity construction process the understanding that he or she is called by the Ruler of the universe to be on his (God's) team with the most important mission ever. Talk about self-esteem that cannot be taken away! Moreover, as in the texts just cited, the church is the body of Christ. It is the agency in which God has established his plan of salvation, and it is the church to whom he has given the vocation of participating with him in the redemption of the world.

Here youth ministers in the United States face a monumental challenge: our culture's counter-covenantal insidious individualism. That cultural factor, combined with a developmental stage that is still characterized by a significant degree of egocentrism (cf. the research of Piaget and Kohlberg) together with an increasing awareness of problems in the church, has resulted in what I perceive to be an alarming number of youth who see no need for the church or at least for their membership in it. Many young people are excited about following God's call to serve him but don't understand what the church is, how the church is necessary, the evidences of the church's positive impact upon the world, or why they need to be members of the church. However, when those matters are explained, they usually readily respond positively.

The church is an organism and an organization. The organizational, institutional, aspects of the church (e.g., administrative structures) provide a system of accountability (that our

fallen human nature requires) that serves to facilitate, enhance, and make effective the ministries of the organism (the members). We need to help young people learn of these administrative structures and why they exist. How can we do so?

Begin by inviting well informed and articulate church leaders to talk to the youth group about what they do and why. Then offer opportunities for young people to work with those leaders in their ministries, even as apprentices, and urge them to do so. To facilitate involvement, allow a couple of young people to work together with an adult. It will take more work, but be more productive, if you help connect these adult leaders with the youth, including asking adult leaders to invite particular young people to assist them. Don't issue blanket invitations; ask specific individuals.

The church, conceptually and in practice, is divinely instituted and a key means through which God works directly and indirectly to help his youth develop and serve in normal circumstances and to provide therapeutic care in the abnormal and very challenging circumstances in which many young people exist today. Psychiatrist Roger Sider has observed that teens in increasing numbers are suffering from “a lack of gender identity, a sense of purpose, some excitement coupled with responsibility, and older, nonparental role models. In other words, teens need an authoritative community to take them under its wing,”<sup>85</sup> a good description of one aspect of the church's life and work.

From Bible times God's people have lived and worshiped together intergenerationally.<sup>86</sup> God established the family within the covenant community, the larger unit supporting the smaller unit. The often quoted, but sometimes misunderstood and misapplied, African proverb, that it takes a village to raise a child, is a contemporary illustration of life in the covenant.<sup>87</sup> As noted above, Lytch observes, “[t]he family is too small an institution to bear the whole burden of the task of religious nurture. As influential as parents are, as important as religious practice in the home is, religious faith is taught, caught, and lived in powerful ways in congregations.”<sup>88</sup>

This reality has far reaching implications for the structure as well as the content of church-based youth ministry. The former practice of placing “the youth program” in a tangential relationship to the church (resulting in the “one-eared Mickey Mouse” model), must be replaced with a more integrated approach in which adolescents experience contact and interaction with adults in the operation of the church.<sup>89</sup> In this manner they will learn how adults think and develop wisdom, maturing in Christ-likeness. Parents want their children to relate to adults who are mature in Christ and who will reinforce and

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<sup>85</sup> *The Grand Rapids Press*, November 20, 2004, p. D-1.

<sup>86</sup> Exodus 33:7-11; Leviticus 23:33-44; Numbers 10:1-10; Deuteronomy 15:19-23; 16:9-17; 31:9-13, 31; Nehemiah 8-10; Luke 2:41-52 (esp. v. 42); Acts 20:7-12 (The Greek words for “young man” in vss. 9 and 12 indicate Eutyclus was likely from 8-12 years old.)

<sup>87</sup> A video illustration of magnificent ways all ages are cared for, included, and engaged in worship in just one church I visited while on a teaching assignment in Lilongwe, Malawi can be viewed in the Ministry Resource Center of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary.

<sup>88</sup> Lytch, p. 187.

<sup>89</sup> Malan Nel, “The Inclusive Congregational Approach to Youth Ministry” in *Four Views of Youth Ministry in the Church*, Mark H. Senter, III, General Editor, pp. 2-19.

add to what the youth have learned at home. Further, with many even in the church reflecting rather than leading the culture in the area of divorce and single parent families, children from such contexts have an additional need for relating to mature adult, especially male, role models.<sup>90</sup>

A church's worship services significantly affect teenagers, especially when they have been attending since they were young children. Lytch found that a "church may have a vital youth program, and/or the teen may attend an effective religious school, but those involvements appear to be secondary in importance to the teen's engagement in the church's weekly gathering for worship."<sup>91</sup> Careful research reveals a significant (at least twofold) reduction of the practice of premarital sex among adolescents who attend worship services regularly contrasted with those who are nonattenders or even infrequent attenders.<sup>92</sup> For adolescents who attend worship regularly, we see at least a two to fourfold reduction of drug and alcohol use. According to David Larson, "[a] national survey of 12,000 adolescents documented that the lowest rates of adolescent drug abuse were found among the more theologically conservative religious, predominately Christian, groups."<sup>93</sup> For those who attend worship regularly, at least a three to fourfold reduction of suicide and a four to fivefold reduction of smoking, dropping out of school, and delinquency are observed.<sup>94</sup>

As confessed in the Nicene Creed, the historic creed most used by churches throughout the world, in historic Christian theology the church is understood to be one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic. All believers in Christ are united in him (John 17:20; Ephesians 2:14; 4:4-6), and they are holy, i.e., set apart from sin and evil and to him for the accomplishment of his purposes (Leviticus 19:2; Ephesians 5:3; 1 Peter 2:9). In its catholicity the church is seen to be universal with the mission to reach out to and include members from every tribe, language, people, and nation throughout the world (Psalm 2:8; Revelation 5:9; 9:7). The teaching of the church is based on that of the Apostles (the meaning of the church being Apostolic in historic Christian theology, thus interpreting Matthew 16:16-19; 1 Corinthians 7:10; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 2:19-21; 3:14-16). The Biblical understanding of the nature of the church must be taught in ways that help the young people integrate that understanding into the core of the identity they are shaping.

Traditional Christian systematic theology distinguishes between the visible church and the invisible church. The latter refers to all who are regenerated. The visible church refers to the congregation comprising those who are regenerated and those who are not but are either children of the faithful who do not yet believe or are the "wolves in sheep's

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<sup>90</sup> The reason for this need is that most families broken by divorce are headed by mothers, many of whose children's fathers are no longer involved in their lives. I've had numerous single mothers implore me to facilitate the opportunity for their children to relate to male role models in the church.

<sup>91</sup> Lytch, p. 188.

<sup>92</sup> David B. Larson, President and Research Coordinator of the National Institute for Health Care Research, Rockville, MD, in phone conversations with the author on March 13 and 15, 1996.

<sup>93</sup> David B. Larson, M.D., M.S.P.H., and Mary A. Greenwold Milano, B.A., "Are Religion and Spirituality Clinically Relevant in Health Care?" p. 149.

<sup>94</sup> Larson, March 13 and 15, 1996. Other research reveals that "Teens who eat dinner with a parent six or seven days a week or more are less likely to smoke, use alcohol or marijuana, or have sex." Dean, p. 212.

clothes” which Jesus warned would be among us. (Matthew 7:15-23) This understanding helps teens and adults comprehend why some who claim to be Christians act in very bad ways, and it helps us interpret such difficult passages as Hebrews 6:4-6.

The invisible church refers to another hallmark of historic Christian theology: the kingdom of God, the rule of God in regenerated human hearts that are growing in sanctification. The extension and nurture of God’s kingdom are the two main principles and overarching components of the content and structure of church-based youth ministry.

The *extension* of God’s kingdom occurs numerically as more and more people believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. Yet the Bible clearly teaches that more than faith is necessary. (Recall our discussion above of John 14:21, Ephesians 2:8-10; and James 14-26.) If all we do is facilitate the regeneration of young people and others, we’ll have a church full of immature spiritual infants.

We also need to *nurture* God’s kingdom, to facilitate believers’ maturity in Christ. We all need to believe in but also follow Jesus. We have to acknowledge and obey him as our Lord as well as our Savior.

#### Partner with Sound Parachurch Ministries

Many parachurch youth ministries do excellent work for Christ. These organizations specialize in bringing together in contexts where adolescents gather, adults and teenage leaders who have the gift of evangelism and other gifts from the Lord that enable them to reach vast numbers of young people. Some have drawn together Christians with gifts, skills, and a helpful network of interpersonal connections that are able to facilitate the accomplishment of certain objectives in certain locales that any one local church is not likely to be able to do. Nevertheless, the most effective parachurch ministries work closely with local churches that hold to the historic Christian theological tradition in order to provide the regular ongoing spiritual nurture and succor that the human soul needs, which transcends the limits of what even the best parachurch ministries can provide.

Parachurch organizations and other entities outside the institutional church don’t follow through a person’s life providing the continual care necessary for becoming “mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13) Stating this reality is not to disrespect the fine work many parachurch groups do, e.g., in evangelism, but there is much more to the Christian life that follows conversion to Christ, and that development and the ensuing ministries occur in the context of the organized church in not only its local branches but its regional, national, and international work as well. The church is the primary agency through whom God is redeeming his creation. To be sure, parachurch organizations are part of the church catholic, and the individuals involved are part of the church as an organism, but they’re not as independent of the organized church as some think. For just one example, the lion’s share of their funding comes from the church, individually or corporately.



Further, as valuable as they are, parachurch ministries are able to only perform certain aspects of the life and work of the church. In addition to the above, they cannot ordain those God calls to ministry in the church or properly offer the sacraments. They will not be teaching all the theology the young people need to “be built up...in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” They need especially the institutional dimension of the church to facilitate the spiritual development, including the discipline, of those they reach for Christ.

It is also incumbent on the church to welcome and nurture the new believers, reached by parachurch ministries. That nurture will most effectively occur by a strong grounding in God’s Word and in that special fellowship including with adults, which the Bible calls *koinonia*, that the church uniquely provides. Our young people will not always be young. They are growing and moving through the stages of life, and they will be nurtured most effectively as they do so walking with fellow believers in and followers of the Lord who constitute his body. (1 Corinthians 12:27 ff.) Observe that there is no concept in the Bible of a ministry of believers functioning outside of and independently from the organized body of Christ with its duly appointed pastors, elders, and other leaders.

Parachurch youth workers also need the nurture of the body of Christ. At least weekly they need to hear God’s Word; to be reinforced with the study of the Scriptures within the church’s special *koinonia*, fellowship; to celebrate God’s grace in the sacraments; and to be nurtured in many other ways. The most mature and successful parachurch leaders I’ve seen are well-grounded in the church both in its organizational and organismic dimensions. They realize they also have much to give as well as receive in the church. As a youth minister in the church, the Lord has placed you in a key position to be a strategic catalyst for parachurch leaders to engage with the church. Develop a relationship with them and warmly invite them to do so.

Thus, both church-based and parachurch youth ministries should actively strive to work together in a cooperative rather than in an adversarial relationship. Don’t let the latter characterize the relationship between these two types of youth ministries in your area and become counterproductive to the cause and commission of Christ. As youth leaders we need to develop partnerships between church-based youth ministries and parachurch youth ministries to employ the strengths of each type of youth ministry in order to most effectively extend and nurture the Kingdom of God. It doesn’t matter who takes the initiative and reaches out first, but such connections must be established.

Young and older people do not reach the levels of maturity about which the Apostle Paul is speaking in Ephesians 4:12-15 when they live outside the church. For example, those who prefer to be independent from the church and disconnected from it go along blithely until a crisis occurs, then they wonder where God was. One answer is that he was and is where he always is, everywhere, and especially with his people, the body of Christ. We need one another; when difficulties in life arise, we are there for one another, and moreover, God is there beside and through us. Refer to Hebrews 10:25 and all the passages on encouraging one another (e.g., in all of Paul’s letters and in Hebrews and Acts). We must avoid the insidious inclination toward individualism so rampant in the

American ethos, which is counter to the Biblical covenant of which we are a part. Unconnected parachurch ministries can feed and exacerbate that phenomenon.

One of the most moving of the many stories that have been attributed to the great 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist, Dwight L. Moody, involves a visit he had in the living room of a man who thought he didn't need the church. "I can worship God just as well in my garden, in fact even better," the man maintained. When he avowed that contention Mr. Moody didn't say anything but arose from where he was sitting, went over to the fireplace, took the tongs, and removed a flaming log from the fireplace; he set the burning timber on the hearth and returned to where he was sitting. The two men silently watched the flame on the log Moody removed gradually diminish and begin to die out. Continuing in silence, the evangelist walked back to the hearth, again took the tongs, and replaced the log in the fireplace with the other burning timbers. Instantly it burst into flames and did what it was intended to do: it immediately provided more light and warmth, physical and emotional, in the room where the two men sat. At that moment the man who thought he didn't need the church saw the powerful point: "Now I understand," he said, in recognition of what occurs when people absent themselves from the covenant community, who are called out to do the Lord's work extending and nurturing the Kingdom of God. "I'll be in church on Sunday."

The church is those who are called out to be God's agents through whom he is working to redeem all aspects of his creation, including, e.g., the corporate human institutions and the ecology of his natural order as well as individuals. What is all this work leading to?

#### Eschatology: The Doctrine of the Last Things, the End Times

The word, eschatology, comes from two Greek words (*eschaton*, last, and *logos*, word, study of), and it refers to the Biblical teaching of God's plan for the ultimate conclusion of his redemptive purpose. A major aspect of eschatology involves the last things, corporately and individually: the end of history and of our own personal lives on earth.

While this doctrine is often considered last, it is not an afterthought or a peripheral or less important concept as is often maintained by many people who focus only on certain parts of this teaching of the Bible. The first indication of the essence of eschatology is already found in Genesis 3:15, when God in judging Satan reveals in rudimentary form his plan in Jesus Christ to undo the tragic effects of Adam and Eve's disobedience: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Genesis 1-3 is the preface of the Bible and essential for understanding all the rest of God's Word. Everything following chapter three is an explanation of the unfolding of God's plan to redeem and renew his creation, culminating with Revelation 21-22.

As theologians Anthony Hoekema and Jurgen Moltmann have observed, eschatology is at the core of Christian theology and the plan of God's redemption and renewal of his creation. In his classic text, *The Bible and the Future*, Hoekema writes, "PROPERLY TO UNDERSTAND BIBLICAL ESCHATOLOGY, WE must see it as an integral aspect

of all of biblical revelation. Eschatology must not be thought of as something which is found only in, say, such Bible books as Daniel and Revelation, but as dominating and permeating the entire message of the Bible.”<sup>95</sup> Hoekema then quotes Moltmann as follows: “From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of the Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set...Hence eschatology cannot really be only a part of Christian doctrine. Rather, the eschatological outlook is characteristic of all Christian proclamation, and of every Christian existence and of the whole Church.”<sup>96</sup>

Can you see how vital this understanding is for youth ministry? Many of today’s teens have given up on having as good a life as their parents. Many wonder whether social security will be there for them; many urban teens do not expect to live to age 18! Much more than games, these young people want hope, hope that is firmly established and that they can count on, hope that is far different from what the world means by hope, as in “I hope the Cubs win the world series next year.” What an open door for the eschatological hope the Bible uniquely offers! Biblical hope is a realized expectation as seen in the two dimensions of eschatology:

#### Inaugurated<sup>97</sup> Eschatology and Cosmic Warfare

As Paul taught the Ephesians (6:10-20) and the Thessalonians in his second letter, as John disclosed in Revelation (especially in chapters 12-20), and as referred to elsewhere in Scripture, God’s people are in a spiritual battle. We must be prepared for it in order to fulfill his call and not go about our daily lives “blissfully ignorant” of the cosmic war going on all about us, and that which is yet to come, as many if not most believers are doing today. Those of us here in the United States live in the most dangerous country of the world...spiritually. In this culture most Americans’ focus is on the drive to achieve more personal gratification, often including higher status, for example, bigger and finer homes, cars, and other consumer luxuries; more comfortable and higher paying jobs with more “power;” and other engagements that will make them feel good, much of which is not evil per se but all of which in the context of this “blissful ignorance” draws their attention away from God, his vocational call, doing his will, and accomplishing his purposes. Many church people, including youth, take their cue more from our culture than from God’s Word. Then, when a 9/11 or any 9-1-1 type of event occurs in their lives, their lives often shatter, having been built on the sandy beaches of fun in the sun instead of on the Solid Rock which can withstand the onslaughts of life in a fallen world. This worldview and understanding of reality is a necessary and vital component of one’s identity, to which we have been called and vow at their baptism to help each young

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<sup>95</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>96</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, p. 16 quoted in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, p. 3.

<sup>97</sup> The term inaugurated eschatology is from Hoekema, referring to that part of God’s plan which has already been fulfilled with blessings now being enjoyed in part by those he has redeemed in Christ and in reference also to future eschatology.

person develop.

In youth ministry we can build on the natural interest of young people in what the Bible teaches about the future and inform them that the future has already begun in the Biblical understanding of eschatology. The Kingdom of God, the rule of God in human hearts and minds and wills, is here (Luke 17:21), but not yet in fullness, which will come when Christ returns. (Matthew 24-25, Revelation 19-22)

### Future Eschatology: Individual and Corporate

The second part of eschatology, future eschatology, has two components: (a) the last part of our individual lives and (b) the end of history and the fulfillment of God's plan to redeem his creation in and through Christ, all in which young people are fascinated and highly motivated to consider. It is no wonder that in all the youth groups I ever taught, when I asked them what book of the Bible they wanted to study, they consistently replied, "Revelation." Other youth ministers continually report the same finding.

### Summary

The above six loci of historic Christian systematic theology contain much more than mentioned in this brief introduction, which has been included to provide an overview so youth leaders can help young and older people understand the rationale of the Bible's message and have a context for their study of specific Scripture passages. The loci provide a framework for Christians to help people understand what God is doing in his plan of redemption in a way that they can find answers to the great questions of life and eternity and to make sense out of life and the issues they confront daily. When we help young people apply these understandings to their daily lives, a passion deep within them emerges with a desire for the Lord and his service.<sup>98</sup>

The profound and far-reaching effects of theology's shaping of youth ministry involve both the content and structure of the ministry. Regarding content, there may be some units we teach on specific theological subjects, such as these six loci of historic Christian theology, and especially where students indicate a felt need for the subject matter, such as "The Bible and the Future" (eschatology) and spiritual gifts.

Typically, though, we'll work theology into the subjects we're discussing, e.g., by treating the Bible passages from within the covenantal perspective in which they were written and by relating them to the needs the students sense they have. Regarding structure, we'll do well to remember, e.g., the implications of such doctrines as the covenant for how we view the young people and teach them, those who are covenant

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<sup>98</sup> Some useful resources to supply such additional information include, Louis Berkhof, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Engaging God's World: A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living*; and "Our World Belongs to God: A Contemporary Testimony," a contemporary confession of faith of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1988), pp. 1037-38.

children and those who are not committed believers in Christ.

Historic Christian systematic theology provides an essential resource where the teachings of the Bible are grouped by subject to answer the great questions of life and eternity that are on the hearts and minds of people, in particular young people, in all times and all places. It is therefore necessary to apply theology and its implications to our work in youth ministry not only with the teenagers themselves but also in our work with their parents, youth group leaders, and others. In so doing this strong Biblical theology will shape both the content and the structure of youth ministry in the church and with God's help most effectively equip his covenant children to engage their holy calling to extend and nurture his kingdom throughout the world and far into the future.

### **Epilogue: Implications for the Theological Education of Youth Leaders**

Now, what are the implications of the foregoing for the future of youth ministry in churches that are part of the historic Christian theological tradition and others? We should at least consider the following seven, most of which also apply to other Christian denominations as well.

First, youth leaders should be taught the values of committing to a long-term tenure in the churches they serve. In a profession where the message is mainly about relationships (the vertical one between humans and God, and the implications for the horizontal ones among people with each other in the light of the vertical), the message is not adequately communicated where youth leaders fly into a location, touching down only briefly before taking off again to some other place where they can employ their repertoire. No wonder I've seen so many tears and heard the heartache of many who sadly recounted how they were just beginning to develop a relationship with a youth minister and he or she left for someplace else. I've heard the youth department described as having a revolving door; as some leaders come others leave, and no one stays long enough to make a significant and long-lasting difference in the youths' lives. This reality is a key reason why many youth pastors experience great frustration in their inability to sense their ministry has made an impact: they don't stay long enough to see the growth and development the Holy Spirit provides in the sanctification process, which usually takes much time with significant steps often occurring as people walk through challenging times together.

Development requires much time. As Ted Ward has observed, the key reason why Jesus included plants in many of his parables is not that all in his audience were farmers (they weren't) but that plant growth requires nurture over time as does human development. Remember Jesus' parable of the sower. The seeds that are sown spring up, but if there is insufficient nurture, including fertilized nutrients, cultivation, and watering, the tender plant can wither, weaken, and even die.

Second, churches should be instructed as to what they can do to facilitate the long-term tenure of youth ministers who are doing their work well. Many well-meaning but misguided churches have in place a system that is counterproductive to keeping youth

ministers whom they should hold onto.<sup>99</sup> Such instruction for churches should include what to do and not do in the search process, beginning with the other statements in this section but including much more: e.g., proper budget provisions (for both the program and the person); respect for the position and for the youth minister him or herself; encouragement for the minister and his or her family; time and compensation including for continuing education.<sup>100</sup> Churches should also be advised about monitoring the youth minister's mentoring, workload, and fairness in the review process.<sup>101</sup>

Third, seminaries and churches, especially those with their historic emphasis on the importance and even priority of preaching, should not only teach, but also emphasize, the parity of ministry. This important verity, taught in Scripture (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12), is widely neglected in the churches where youth leaders and others in specialized ministries are often treated as "second class citizens." Such treatment comes in the form of explicit and implicit spoken words, policies, and practices. These oversights, while usually not malicious, nevertheless are exceedingly painful to youth leaders and counterproductive to the church. Seminaries and denominations should work together to implement the steps required to facilitate the respect youth ministers need in order to be most effective in their equally important ministries.<sup>102</sup> To be sure, youth ministers must act in ways that engender respect and provide a model for young people to strive, but they should be accorded respect initially, primarily, and always as a result of their vocation and spiritual giftedness.

Fourth, churches will do well to encourage the men and women in their congregations who have gifts for ministry to attend colleges and seminaries that teach historic Christian systematic theology. Not only those who want to be youth ministers professionally, but also volunteer youth leaders, benefit from college and seminary youth ministry courses, and other courses, e.g., in systematic theology. The churches they serve benefit as a whole, as do their young people in particular. Church members of all ages hunger for the rich and profound understanding of such traditional Christian theology.

Many such institutions of higher learning offer courses online. Some denominations offer a path to specialized ministry as a commissioned pastor, where one is equipped to function as a pastor with a focus on a particular aspect of ministry.

Historic Christian systematic theology is a profound and challenging theological

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<sup>99</sup> To cite just one example: the concept that when a new lead or administrative pastor comes to a church the staff including but not only the youth minister should resign, negatively effects the church, the continuity of its program and other values, the youth, and the youth minister's family. This concept is not needed by mature and skilled lead pastors and administrators, and it is now practiced by fewer and fewer churches, but it is still unfortunately being done by too many in one manner or another.

<sup>100</sup> Church boards, administrators, and pastors can consult *Group* magazine for their exceptionally helpful survey conducted periodically on youth ministry salaries by region, experience, education, and many other useful variables.

<sup>101</sup> Several of these vital practices are described by Doug Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry: A Personal and Practical Guide to Starting Right* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), pp. 282-84.

<sup>102</sup> This process should begin with a credentialing mechanism that is esteemed by denominational, seminary, college, and church officials.

construct, and it cannot be learned sufficiently with its many implications and applications in supplementary, especially short term, remedial programs. Further, this theology is often misunderstood. I've heard explanations of covenant theology by some non-covenantal teachers, especially with regard to the sacraments and eschatology, and remember saying to myself, "If that were the teaching of covenant theology, I wouldn't believe it either."

Fifth, select seminaries carefully. For example, in the Reformed denominations, some having a Reformed heritage and some who call themselves Reformed have taken a different direction from classic Reformed theology, especially in recent years. Some have eliminated key Reformed doctrinal distinctives, and others have not been as careful as they should with Biblical hermeneutics and contemporary social issues, taking stands that are contrary to the Bible.<sup>103</sup> The same situation has occurred in other denominations, e.g., Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Anglican. This is why some megachurches are spurning seminary education and trying to train their own members for their future leadership. This, too, raises more problems than it solves.

Sixth, local and interchurch judicatories, e.g., district, classis, presbytery, should provide support for students to attend the seminaries of their denomination, or a faithful sister denomination, that are remaining true to their historic theological tradition based soundly on the Bible. It is very costly for students, especially those who are older and married with families, to attend a seminary many miles and some states and provinces away from where they live. Church bodies should consider providing such resources as the following:

- a. Churches should establish a scholarship fund for their sons and daughters to study for professional ministry, including youth ministry.
- b. Churches and seminary boards should appoint a committee (or, if you prefer the contemporary term, team) to construct a human resource pool for their seminary students. The finances are available. God still owns the cattle on a thousand hills and other stock in a thousand companies.
- c. Organizations owned by Christians have resources and many will be willing to help.
- d. All denominational judicatories should institute scholarships for students coming under their care, and *not just for those seeking ordination*. The Christian Reformed Church models a good start in this regard with each classis having at least some financial aid policies in place. The Classis of Chicago of the Reformed Church in America has developed a financial aid policy that can serve as a starting point for others.<sup>104</sup>
- e. For further support contact The Fund for Theological Education

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<sup>103</sup> For example, see my book, *What Is God's Will Concerning Homosexuality? Help for Church Leaders and Others to Speak the Truth in Love*, available for free in a digital format on my Web site at [www.fromacorn12.com](http://www.fromacorn12.com). Using the "Find" feature will quickly take you to the page(s) that contain the subject matter of your search.

<sup>104</sup> This policy can be seen by logging onto the Ministry Resource Center web site at this URL: <http://library.calvin.edu/collections/mrc>. On the tool bar select "Search the MRC," then "Advanced Search," and type in classis as the Keyword.

([www.thefund.org](http://www.thefund.org)).

Seventh, churches must be more careful in whom they hire, and they should submit to the counsel and approval of their denomination's higher judicatories, e.g., district, classis, presbytery, where stipulations are already in place but often neglected. Churches hiring youth ministers trained by institutions with a theology that is out of sync with historic Christian systematic theology, should not be surprised when, for example, their young people wind up questioning such doctrines as infant baptism, much less being able to explain it to others, and fail to understand and be nurtured by the many benefits that are implications of that doctrine.

Theological education, and its absence, significantly impacts the church and its youth. Each church should carefully consider the formative experiences its leaders should have and support those theological institutions, and the church's future leaders who attend them, in order to provide the required leader education that will facilitate answers to adolescents' great questions of life and eternity.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

1. In the light of this essay, what implications do you see for church-based youth ministry in your congregation?
2. How can we most effectively teach the Bible and theology to high school young people today? To middle school or junior high youth?
3. How can we most effectively teach the language of the Christian community to our young people and to their parents?
4. How should youth ministers relate to parents?
5. In the light of the covenant, how do we program for the children of church members and for those not yet in Christ?
6. How does our understanding of the sanctification process affect the content and structure of our ministry to youth?
7. Why is the doctrine of the church especially important today?
8. How do we balance the nurture and missional dimensions of youth ministry? How can we help young people develop the ability to be more effective witnesses for Christ?
9. What doctrines are lacking in the understanding of those to whom and with whom you either are already ministering or anticipating serving?
10. How should we support theological education for youth ministers and others in



professional ministry?

### **Appendix: Some of the Great Questions of Life and Eternity**

NOTE: These are some of the great questions of life and eternity that most all if not all humans wonder about and for which they seek answers. Included also are important questions that Christian young people are raising. This is not an exhaustive list. Your teens may be asking others; be sure to add them to the list and address them in your youth ministry.

You may wonder, “If these are universal questions, how can the Christological questions be included, since many in the world have never heard of Jesus?” While it is true that many still have not heard of the Christ, this situation is less so now than in previous centuries due to the extensive growth of the church in what the late outstanding pastor, theologian, and missionary John Stott called the majority world, including Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere as a result of missionary work and the ubiquitous media including radio, television, and the Internet now increasingly present even in many remote locations throughout the world. Moreover, those who have never heard of Christ still wonder about the matters Christ addresses: how to bridge the divide between the holiness of the divine and the evil that contaminates and separates human beings and the rest of creation from the Creator. (See, e.g., Romans 1:18-20.)

Similarly, the church is included for the same reasons. Many people even in remote locations have heard of the church. Moreover, many all over the world, including in the United States, have a lack of understanding and in countless cases a substantial misunderstanding of what the church is and how God is working through the church to accomplish his redemptive purposes for his creation.

As you reflect on the six loci, you can see readily the connection of each doctrine with its respective great questions. Notice also how each of the loci provides the most helpful basis for answering its associated questions and other related great questions of life and eternity. However, keep in mind that, while each question is placed in the doctrinal category that provides most of the information for answering that particular question, information from other loci will sometimes need to be added. For example, in order to adequately answer the great question pertaining to our human nature and whether we are just another classification of animals or whether we are especially unique and far superior to the animal kingdom, we need to draw on the anthropological teaching of Scripture pertaining to the *imago dei*, but in so doing we need at the same time to explain the theological doctrine of the attributes or characteristics of God. The loci are discrete but logically connected categories.

Since these questions constitute felt needs and therefore motivations you can tap into in planning your ministry, you will engage the continued, increasing, and ongoing interest in the teens who are members and friends of your church. Through them you will meet many others when they hear of your addressing these great questions of life and eternity,

that are emerging in their hearts and minds in ever more profound ways, with the authority you have in your high and holy calling from God, and as you base your explanations upon his Word, teaching the truth in love.

### Theological Questions

1. Who is God and what is he like?
  - a. Is God personal?
  - b. What is the trinity? How can something be three and one at the same time?
  - c. How can I know God?
  - d. How does he work in my life?
  - e. Does he communicate? If so, how can I communicate with him?
  - f. Does he love me?
  - g. How can I know his will?
2. Is the Bible true? How can I know?<sup>105</sup>
3. Is the Bible God's Word? How can I know?
4. Can the Bible help me in my daily life?
5. How can I understand the Bible?
  - a. Are all religions basically the same?
  - b. Do science and the Bible conflict?
  - c. How can I make sense out of life?
6. Questions Regarding Creation
  - a. How did everything come to be?
  - b. Are there any other beings in the universe besides us?
  - c. What relationship do I have with the cosmos? Who am I?

### Anthropological Questions

1. Who are we human beings, and what is our nature truly like? Have we always been this way? If not, how did we get this way?
2. Are we just another group of animals, or is there something unique about us? If the latter what is it that sets us apart? What is the *imago dei*; what does it mean that we have been created in the image of God?
3. Is human nature essentially good? What are the implications of the answer to this question for our daily lives today?
4. What is sin and evil? How did they come into existence? Does their involvement in our life affect our relationship with God? If so, how?
5. Why are there problems, including suffering and evil?
6. Does my life have significance, meaning? Is my life important? How do I find myself? (ego need for esteem)

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<sup>105</sup> The apologetic aspect of the authenticity of the Bible as the Word of God is usually undertaken in historic Christian systematic theology in an introductory category often called the prolegomena, from the Greek word, *prolegein*, meaning to say beforehand. In this case the prolegomena contain the statements as to why we believe the Bible is trustworthy and the only written and authoritative Word of God. I've included this subject in the category of theology, since it is the Word of God and since it comes first, all the following subjects being based and dependent on God's Word. However, I have addressed key subjects in the prolegomena in a separate category on my Web site at <http://www.fromacorntoak12.com/theology/>.

7. How can I find fulfillment, purpose? (need for self-actualization, fulfill potential, to give a gift that matters, to sow a seed that continues [leave a legacy])
8. How free can I be?
9. How can I resolve conflict? (need for peace)
  - a) How can I overcome bitterness?
  - b) How can I obtain forgiveness?
  - c) How can I be understood?
6. How can I find relief from guilt? (need for peace)
7. How can I relieve my stress? (need for peace)
8. How can I overcome depression? (need for peace and to belong)
9. How can I overcome my loneliness? (need to belong)
10. How can I be physically healthy? (physiological need)
11. What are the main differences between Christianity and all other religions?
12. How can I be safe, secure? (need for safety)
13. How can I be at peace with God?

### Christological Questions

1. Who is Jesus Christ, and what is he like?
2. How can Jesus be both divine and human?
3. Did Jesus really die on a cross? Why did he have to die? Why did he have to shed blood?
4. Did Jesus Christ really rise from the dead? How can we know?
5. How does Jesus help me?

### Pneumatological, Soteriological Questions Pertaining to the Application of Redemption

1. How can I have well-being after I die? How can I be saved?
2. How can I obtain the benefits of Christ's death on the cross and his ascension to heaven?
3. Who is the Holy Spirit? What does he do?
4. How does the Holy Spirit help people be saved and mature in Christ, becoming more and more like Jesus? How can I become more like Jesus?
5. How can I experience the Holy Spirit in my life?
6. What are the gifts of the Spirit? Do I have at least one gift of the Spirit? How can I know? How can I develop my gift(s) from the Spirit and most effectively use it or them? Can I ask for a gift I don't have?
7. What does it mean to "be filled with the Spirit?" How does that occur? How can I have that filling of the Spirit?
8. What is prayer? When and how should I pray?
9. What is sanctification?
  - a. Is there a right and wrong?
  - b. Is sex outside of marriage ever OK?
  - c. Is abortion right or wrong, sometimes or always?
  - d. Is homosexuality right or wrong, sometimes or always?
  - e. Is suicide ever right?

- f. Is war ever just?
  - g. Is divorce permissible?
  - h. Is gaming wrong?
  - i. How free can I be?
10. Can I have joy, harmony? (need to sing a song of joy)
  11. How can I experience love, affection, and respect most fully? (need to belong, love and be loved)
  12. How can I prepare for, cope with, and overcome persecution of all kinds, from minor but painful rejection, e.g., like shunning, negative comments, and workplace injustices to life-threatening situations, as is occurring more in the world today than ever previously?

### Ecclesiological Questions

1. What is the church?
2. What does it mean that the church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic?
3. Is the church necessary? If so, why?
4. What is the purpose of the church?
5. How do I become a member of the church?
6. How does the church help me?
7. How can I be a witness for Jesus Christ? What does that mean, and how do I do it?
8. What is church worship?
  - a. Is Jesus present in the worship service? Is the rest of God in church worship in a special way? How?
  - b. Are we connected with believers in heaven when we worship? How?
  - c. What are the sacraments? What is their purpose?
  - d. Why should I give money in worship? When and how much should I give?
9. Why are some people who claim to be Christians so unlike Jesus?
10. Whom should I marry?
  - a. What kind of friends should I have?
  - b. How can my marriage improve?
  - c. How can I get help with my kids?
11. What obligations do I have for others?
  - a. In my family?
  - b. Where I work?
  - c. In my community?
  - d. Nationally and internationally?
12. How can I tell a true church from a false church?

### Eschatological Questions

1. How can I have hope?
2. How do I prepare for retirement and the end of life?
3. What occurs when I die?
4. Will I live again, and what will that be like?

5. What is the difference between reincarnation and resurrection?
6. What is the difference between nirvana and heaven?
7. What will take place when Jesus returns to earth?
8. What will take place in the Last Judgment?
9. Is there really a hell? What is that like?
10. What will the new heaven and the new earth be like?

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