

## THE MYTH OF ADOLESCENCE

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Ours is the generation of surveys *and statistics*. It seems that if a point is to be made or if it is to have gravity, it needs to be stacked with numbers and percentages. Though some of this data is sensationalized, these studies are pointing out something. The grave reality coming from many of these studies indicates that the church, and particularly youth ministry, is having little effect on the lives of the teenagers who enter its doors. The most recent studies reveal a less than ten percent difference between students in the church and those not in the church in either attitude or behavior.

But those are statistics and studies. Do they really reflect such mediocrity among the students in our ministries? Sadly, the answer appears to confirm what such studies are reporting. An honest interview with most youth pastors would reveal that of the students under their pastoral care, those who are exhibiting independent dependence on Christ are a minority. Why are so few of our teens “walking in a manner worthy of the calling with which they have been called” (Ephesians 4:1)?

For the answer, we must carefully examine what is going on in the name of youth ministries through the lens of the Word of God. A surface and sweeping observation of current trends in youth ministry reveals at least four “assumptions” prevalent among the philosophies of many, if not most, youth ministries in our generation. Unfortunately, these presuppositions find no biblical support. A quick examination of these trends will help reveal what is perhaps the single most devastating misconception in youth ministry.

### Four Wrong Assumptions in Youth Ministry

1. A youth ministry must entertain/amuse students to be effective.

The 1970s and '80s were replete with conferences, seminars, and conventions regarding youth ministry. A common thread running through this era was an emphasis on what it takes to “draw” a student into ministry. The common questions seemed to be, “What will it take to get kids to come to church?” and/or “What will it take to keep the kids we have?” It is obvious that these are the right questions, yet the way they have been answered for the last twenty years in youth ministry circles is astonishing! Everything from \$50,000 sound systems to dances and contests have been used and promoted as legitimate means for drawing kids in. The all-important principle to remember when assessing such means is that whatever you use to draw a student into a ministry is what you’ll have to use to “keep” that student coming. It is easy to see how many youth pastors burn out trying to keep their students entertained and interested enough to start and keep coming. There must be more to youth ministry than entertaining and amusing students.

2. A youth ministry must be activity-centered.

It is difficult to trace the development of youth activities as a focus in youth ministry. But no matter how it started most of us as youth pastors have inherited what could be called an “activities monster.” The most common questions from students is, “What fun thing is next?” Holding youth activities is

not necessarily an evil, but when a youth pastor spends more time on planning hay-rides, afterglows, and fifth quarters than he does in the study of the Word and in prayer, something is out of balance! (Note the emphasis of the Apostles in Acts 6:4.)

3. A youth ministry must be program-centered.

Structure is good. But over-structure is exhausting. It seems as though when a youth pastor identifies a problem or has a new idea, a new program is instituted to meet the need. It is not long before the issue in the student's mind becomes "*what's happening* at church." Again, it's not that programs are bad, but when the focus in a student's mind is *what's going on* more than Christ Himself, there is a problem. There is a constant pressure on youth pastors to crank out a variety of programs and to view simplicity as naïve. The tragedy in this fallacy is that for every program or aspect of a program added, the youth pastor's focus becomes that much more dispersed. We must ask ourselves if "spinning plates" is prudent in youth ministry.

4. A youth ministry must be focused primarily on the "issues of being a teenager."

Again, we have been bombarded with "help" concerning running a youth ministry from a variety of sources and people. One over-arching theme coming from such literature and seminars is a perspective that to be effective in teen ministry one must immerse himself in the needs of teens. To a certain extent, this perspective can be seen as true in that the Scriptures are clear that the shepherd must know his sheep. However, the imbalance comes when the shepherds know the sheep better than they know the Great Shepherd. Though teens do have special needs, a constant focus on these needs points a ministry horizontally (to man) rather than vertically (to God). We must ask if our job as leaders is to meet needs or to present God!

### Why are These Wrong Assumptions Prevalent in Youth Ministry?

All of these fallacies, and many others, may be traced to one tragic misconception. Ministry to youth has assumed a presupposition that is based on a cultural myth rather than the Word of God. The cultural idea that must be exposed as myth is commonly called adolescence.

### The Myth Called Adolescence

The age group which youth ministry deals with is commonly known as adolescence. Our modern day society has been identified as unique in history for classifying teenagers (ages 12 to 20) as a group of people called adolescents. What is meant by saying that a teenager is an adolescent is that he is no longer a child, but not yet an adult. Note Webster's definition: "the state or process of growing up; the period of life from puberty to maturity terminating legally at the age of majority."

It must be noted here that this state called adolescence is a twentieth century, Western invention. Ours is the only culture in history to see three stages of development to maturity, namely childhood, adolescence,

adulthood. All other cultures outside of Western culture and its influence, as well as history in general before the twentieth century, see only two stages in the development of maturity, namely childhood and adulthood. What we've done is create an unnatural state called adolescence where a person is not a child, yet not an adult. From where did such an idea come?

In 1904 Dr. G. Stanley Hall published a book entitled, *Adolescence: Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion and Education*. This is the first known treatise on adolescence as a stage in a person's life. In it Hall argued that the stages in a child's development parallel in mankind's development in history. The thesis of his book is that the period between thirteen and eighteen is a crisis and stormy period in a young person's life. Hall concluded that these years almost always include extreme inclinations for a young person to be very good or very bad. It was his book and these expectations that were the basis segregating school children by age for educational purposes. It was at this point that adolescence was invented. What should be made of such an arbitrary assertion?

Consider the history of Judaism. Since the days of the Pentateuch, the Jews have celebrated the passing of a boy from childhood to adulthood in their Bar Mitzvah (Son of the Commandments) Ceremony. In other words, the Jews have held for centuries that at around age thirteen a person should be fully accepted as an adult in the religious community. We find Christ as a twelve-year-old going through a similar ceremony in Luke 2:41-47.

The thesis of this study is that the teens to whom we minister are not adolescents; they are adults. Granted, they are "young" adults, but adults nonetheless. Physically, emotionally, and volitionally they have capabilities commensurate to adulthood. Yet, of all sources, the church (through youth ministry primarily) retards the young person's spiritual development by not allowing or expecting him to be spiritually responsible or challenging him to the extent of biblical expectations or examples. We are not too different from Saul and the rest of the men of Israel who looked at a young teen named David as an insignificant youth (see 1 Samuel 17:33 and context) just before he leveled Goliath. If God put such stock in a "youth," why don't we?

By creating this mythical state known as adolescence the teenager is in constant flux between childhood and adulthood since he is accepted fully as neither. This is a significant part of the teen problems in our society. It contributes greatly to the teen syndrome of seeking identity in peer groups, gangs, drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex. It also generates anger at parents and a general anti-establishment attitude. The problem is that in some contexts, the young person is patronized as a child, yet in others he is expected to act responsibly as an adult. And we wonder why teens are so confused!

The tragedy is that this tension is propagated in youth ministry. We try to keep our feet on both sides of the fence between children's ministry and adult ministry by implementing elements of both while at the same time neglecting elements of both. The current assumptions and expectations in youth ministry have problems that must be corrected if we are to raise up a generation for Christ.

### Problems With the Myth Called Adolescence

1. Adherence to the idea of adolescence promotes a low view of teens.

The reason our teens are not living Spirit-filled lives is because we don't expect them to. Our view of teens and their effectiveness in ministry is embarrassingly low compared to God's view and expectation of teens.

As we consider Scripture, it is clear that the Bible does not recognize adolescence. Certainly no Greek or Hebrew term represents such a stage. And perhaps we need only consider the following brief list of the significance of teens not only as adults, but also as the heroes of our faith. Throughout the Bible we see God calling and putting teenagers at the cutting edge of His work and trust. Consider Daniel and his friends, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joseph, Hezekiah, Ruth, Mary and Joseph, David, Josiah, and Mark. If God Himself put such great stock in teens, why don't we? Because we don't really believe that teens can be significant for Christ.

We must call our young people to the standard of following Christ that the Scriptures require and expect of any Christian. Maybe our whole discussion can be summarized by stating that God's Word is not age graded! Our goal must be to not only present Christianity, but expect Christianity out of our young people.

## 2. Adherence to the idea of adolescence promotes a low view of God.

Following on the heels of this first point, low expectations of the potential for spiritual maturity of teens reflects a low view of the heart and power of God. Colossians 1:28-29 reveals Paul's passion for the maturity of the saints: "And we proclaim Him, admonishing *every* man and teaching *every* man with all wisdom, that we may present *every* man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me" (emphasis added). It is the heart of God that every man be made complete in Christ. The point needs to be underscored that the students in our ministry fall under the category of "every man." To underestimate students' spiritual capacities and capabilities with regard to loving and serving Christ is to underestimate God. The Bible record is a testimony to the fact that God is quite pleased and capable to minister to and through teens. To back away from this emphasis is to back away from the heart of God. Either we believe God has the power to work through our teens or we don't. The issue must be pressed to this point of trusting God at His Word. Buying into the cultural lie that adolescents cannot be spiritually responsible merely reveals a deeper problem, namely a belief that God cannot or will not use our teens to touch our world.

Other problems or dangers with believing in the concept of adolescence:

- Low moral standards
- Low and little expectations
- Minimum or low responsibility—lack of accountability
- Prolonged immaturity
- Sexual promiscuity
- Irresponsible spending habits—debt
- Poor work ethic
- Wasted opportunities
- Irresponsible spontaneity
- Lack of self-control
- Identity crises (neither child nor adult)

- Problems in the home
- Laziness
- Substance abuse

Three words sum up the impact of “adolescence” on the life of a teen:

- Confusion
- Frustration
- Rebellion

### Implications for Student/Teen Ministry

1. Focus on becoming a “youth ministry” rather than a “youth group.”

The first step to changing our focus from “adolescent” ministry to teen or student ministry must begin with checking our philosophy of what we are about. In other words, we must decide if we are going to have a youth “group” or a youth “ministry.” By definition, a youth group consists of students who group together, period. But by contrast, a youth ministry consists of students who minister together. The subtle emphasis contained in what we call what we do reveals much more than a title. We are either a ministry or a group.

The weight of the direction of a given ministry gravitates ultimately to the leader. For this reason, it is clear to see why understanding the assumptions, expectations, and philosophy involved in what we do and why must be carefully thought through by the youth pastor/leader.

2. Hold students accountable to the biblical standard.

Just as a young Jewish boy was expected to obey the Torah after his Bar Mitzvah, we may expect that our teens can obey the truth of the Word of God. We can thus hold these young people responsible for how they deal with their time, money, and opportunities. This expectation also raises the bar for our study and teaching of the Scriptures.

3. Deal with students as adults.

The church should be a leading influence in these young people’s lives to grant them both the responsibilities and privileges of adulthood. We should help them understand biblically how to make decisions, allow them to utilize their creative energies for the Lord, help them find a place of ministry in the body of Christ, include them in evangelistic and discipling efforts, and let them be examples of Christian virtue (1 Tim. 4:12).

## APPENDIX

### Exegetical and Historical Data

(Adapted from a study by Rick Carbonneau)

#### 1. Biblical Support:

**Hebrew OT:** There are some fifteen words that refer to small child, youth, young man or woman. In some contexts some of these words refer to people up to the age of forty. There is no specific word that refers to teenagers as seen in the modern view of adolescence.

*na'ar* (and derivatives) It has a wide range of uses. The primary use however is the age between weaning and marriageable young manhood.

- infant/child
  - Baby Moses: Ex. 2:61
  - Young Samuel: Sam. 1:22, 24, 25, 27: 2:11, 18, 21, 26; 3:1, 8, 19!; 12:2
  - Bathsheba's baby: 2 Sam. 12:16
- marriageable teenager (youthful)
  - Rebecca as a young maiden (teenager): Gen. 24:14, 16, 28, 55
  - Joseph (age seventeen): Gen. 37:2
- mature man
  - David calls Absalom a "young man"—he had children at this time, rebelled against his father: 2 Sam. 14:21; 18:5
  - Eli's sons who were priests/married (had to have been at least twenty): 1 Sam. 2:17
  - Children of one's *youth*: Psalm 127: 4

*yeled* (and derivatives) Also has a wide range of uses. It was used for young children and young adults probably up to forty.

- infants
  - Isaac was weaned: Gen. 21:8
  - the midwives let the boys live: Ex. 1:17
- teenagers
  - Joseph at the age of seventeen: Gen. 37:30
  - Elisha cursed the forty-two lads and two bears tore them up: 2 Kings 2:24
- mature manhood
  - the young men who grew up with Rehoboam counseled him. In their twenties or thirties: 1 Kings 12:6-14 (10)

*bachar* (and derivatives) Its uses basically refers to choice young men or young men probably from puberty to forty.

- Ruth did not go after "young men," poor or rich: Ruth 3:10
- used of Saul as king: 1 Sam 9:2
- the young and old contrasted: Prov. 20:29
- refers to the ages of puberty to forty: Eccl. 11:9; 12:1

Greek NT: There are about ten words in the Greek that refer to small child, youth, young man or woman and in some contexts, like the Hebrew, some of these words refer to people up to the age of forty. There is no specific word that refers to teenagers as seen in the modern view of adolescence.

*pais* Refers to a little child, young man, boy, girl, maiden (either virgin or married).

- young child  
-all the male children two years and under: Mt. 2:16  
-Jesus at the age of twelve: Lk. 2:43
- young man  
-Eutychus the young man was revived by Paul: Acts 20:12 (see *neanias* below)

*paidon* Refers to a little child most likely under puberty.

- Jesus at His circumcision: Lk. 1:59

*neanikos/neanias* A youth up to the age of forty; young man.

- The rich Pharisee came testing Him about the law and said he had kept it. Owned much land: Mt. 19:20,22; (Bar Mitzvah). Probably in his twenties or thirties
- those who stoned Stephen laid their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul (Pharisee). Probably in his twenties or thirties: Acts 7:58
- A certain young man named Eutychus: Acts 20:9

*neotes* Youthful referring to the age under forty.

- the man claimed to Jesus that he had kept the law from his youth: Mt. 19:20; Mk. 10:20; Lk. 18:21
- Paul's defense before king Agrippa where he said that the Jews know my manner of life from my youth up, probably referring to being a Pharisee: Acts 26:4
- "let no one look down..." Timothy was no doubt past puberty and under forty: 1 Tim. 4:12

*neos/neoteros* Younger men and women under forty.

- younger widows are to get married and bear children: 1 Tim. 5:14
- younger women contrasted with older women are to love their husbands and children...workers at home: Tit. 2:4
- younger men contrasted to older men of v. 2: Tit. 2:6

The significance of this study shows that there is no Greek word that is specifically used for teenagers. These words refer to strictly a child (*Paidon*) or a youth from puberty to age thirty/forty.

Biblical examples: (teenagers) How God views young people.

- Joseph (age seventeen): Gen. 37:2 *na'ar*, 28, 36; 39:1, 2
- Ruth (widow): Ruth 2:5, 6; 4:12 *na'ara*
- Samuel (young boy/child): 1 Sam. 1:22, 24 *na'ar*; 2:11, 18; 3:1-8
- David (youth): 1 Sam. 17:31ff. *na'ar* ; vv. 41ff., 55, 58
- Solomon (young): 1 Chron. 22:5, 6 (charged with the temple)
- Azariah (age sixteen): 2 Kings 15:2, 3

- Josiah (age sixteen): 2 Chron. 34:1, 3 (cf. 2 Kings 22:3)
- Daniel & friends (probable): Dan. 1:5 - 7 (v.3)
- Jeremiah (youth): Jer. 1:6, 7 *na'ar* (he was a prophet)
- Zechariah (young man): Zech. 2:3, 4 *na'ar* (prophet)
- Obadiah : 1 Kings 18:7 - 12 (feared God from his youth)
- Jesus (age twelve): Luke 2:41 - 47 (generic term for child)
- Possibly John Marc

## 2. Religious and Historical Support:

### Traditional Religious Viewpoints:

- Solomon (age fourteen): Josephus, *Ant.*, VIII.7.8 (cf. 1 Ki. 3:7- *na'ar*)
- Mary (age twelve): *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, 4th Century Document (cf. Is. 7:14 *alma-marriageable virgin*)

### Cultural Religious Viewpoints:

- Talmud: ancient Hebrews could marry at twelve.
- Rabbis: tradition for men to study the Torah at fifteen and marry at eighteen.
- Rites of Passage: on the day after their thirteenth birthday for the men and the day after their twelfth birthday for the women. (cf. "Bar Mitzvah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 4:243-47; Philip Birnbaum, "Bar Mitzvah," *Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts*, p.94)
- This tradition is found in the Midrash and Talmud: Jewish commentaries on the Law. It was official after fifteenth century/ informal before there are sources that speak of this rite dating back to the second temple (Ezra/Nehemiah). It means "son/daughter of the commandment." It refers to both religious and legal maturity: obligated to fulfill the commandments, vows were considered valid, able to buy and sell property, he joined the synagogue, allowed to read the Torah the first Sabbath after his thirteenth birthday.

## 3. Historical Viewpoints:

- Roman Law: two thousand years ago women could marry at twelve and men at fourteen. "Rites of passage" was at sixteen.
- English Law: was virtually the same.
- American Law: two hundred years ago women could marry at twelve and men at fourteen. By the 1950s that changed to eighteen for women and twenty-one for men. Presently, its eighteen for both.