

Capstone Paper:
Biblical Foundations for Youth Ministry

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Bible Exposition Capstone

December 3, 2019

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Introduction: The Current State of Youth Ministry

Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"
(Ecclesiastes 12:1, NASB)

The wise words of King Solomon reveal that faith and youth are important. He states that during the days of one's youth, it is important to establish a lasting faith. Supporting this, Barna research reveals that youth is a time where a majority of Christians are introduced to their faith in Jesus. One study revealed that, "nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their savior do so before reaching the age of 13 (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their 18th birthday."¹ For these reasons, youth ministries exist in most churches. Mark Senter writes that, "The history of Protestant youth ministry in America is the story of a search for Christian spirituality in young people."² Current youth leaders and pastors commonly define the purpose of youth ministry in the church as, "discipleship and spiritual instruction" (75%), and "building relationships" (48%)."³ This further highlights the important role that ministry to youth plays in the church. However, research has also found that youth ministry is not without problems. One such problem is that, "Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement."⁴ Even more alarming, a recent study has found that the typical life cycle effect of a Christian has begun to change. Research found that, "people didn't return to church when they moved into

¹ "Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids," The Barna Group, Last Modified: October 4, 2004, <https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/>.

² Mark Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 11.

³ "The State of Youth Ministry" (Edited by Barna Group. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2016) 54-55.

⁴ David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 22.

their thirties.”⁵ Related to this, there has been a large disconnect between the church and the faith of those leaving youth ministry programs. LifeWay Research reports,

What the research tells us may be even more concerning for Protestant churches: there was nothing about the church experience or faith foundation of those teenagers that caused them to seek out a connection to a local church once they entered a new phase of life. The time they spent with activity in church was simply replaced by something else.⁶

These studies and research reveal that ministry to youth is important, but, that it struggles to establish a lasting faith and a connection to the church in a large number of those who attend. It is the endeavor of this paper to explore a Biblical theology of youth that will support a lasting faith. This will be explored through the Old and New Testament examples and teachings, and then applied in contemporary ways to the church.

Ministry to Youth in the Old Testament

*One generation shall praise Your works to another,
And shall declare Your mighty acts.
(Psalm 145:4, NASB)*

The English term ‘youth ministry’ is never used in the Bible, but concepts of ministering to young people and passing on the faith from one generation to another are. In the Old Testament, instruction for youth typically happened in the household. Eugene Carpenter points out that, “Repetition by mouth and copying text and strict discipline (the rod!) were the two main pedagogical means of “impressing” a desired curriculum on a student or a child.”⁷ Further, Carpenter states that, “Covenantal commands and stipulations were passed down so that

⁵ “Young People Will Come Back to Church, Right?” Barna Group. Last Modified: October 2, 2019, <https://www.barna.com/young-people/>.

⁶ “Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church as Young Adults.” LifeWay Research, January 16, 2019. <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

⁷ Eugene Carpenter, ed. John Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. O.T.: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Vol. 1. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 459.

following generations would know and pursue them diligently.”⁸ In Ancient Near East cultures, the education and training of youth were important from both a social and spiritual perspective, and were primarily handled by parents. Therefore, the following section of this paper will proceed to look at how education and spiritual development of a youth was an important role of both the parents and community that the youth was developing in.

The *Shema* and Youth

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is an important passage as it relates to youth and their faith. The book of Deuteronomy itself is a powerful message delivered from one generation to the next. Moses begins by recounting Israel’s journey through the wilderness and calling the future generations of Israel to listen to the statutes and judgements given, that they may live and possess the land which the Lord is giving them (Deut. 4:1). Moses is calling the future generations to renew and live by the covenant that their parents had with the Lord. Into this setting, he shares what is known as the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4-5), a command that, “has been recognized universally as the great command to which all other commands are related.”⁹

The importance of the *Shema* is implied in its first statement, “Hear, O Israel”. The imperative to hear (שמע), is a call or summons to listen to what is being said.¹⁰ Its form carries the implied meaning that, “to hear God without putting into effect the command is not to hear Him at all.”¹¹ Moses is emphasizing the importance of what he is about to say. He then begins by referring to the Lord as “our God”. Michael McGarry points out that this, “explicitly links

⁸ Carpenter, 459.

⁹ Gary Schnittjer, *The Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 454.

¹⁰ “Deuteronomy 6:7 (NASB).” Blue Letter Bible. Accessed December 4, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H8085&t=NKJV>.

¹¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, vol. 4, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 162.

both the former and current generation's identity as the people of God."¹² Again, Moses' intent was to bridge the younger generation to the former generation's identity and faith as the people of God. As the passage continues, Moses states that they were to love God with all of their heart, soul, and strength (Deut. 6:5). This was a command that Schnittjer says is, "the basis of any true obedience and is thus basic to the kind of obedience that leads to life."¹³ Deuteronomy 6:4-5 is a vital passage that provides the foundational framework for a future generation to worship the one God of Israel.

Now that Moses has established Israel's identity and their great command in verses 4-5, he continues the importance of how this command was to permeate into the lives of the Israelites. With the intent that this command should be on their "heart" (Deut. 6:6), Moses immediately communicates the important role that a parent plays in this process. In verse 7, he states that, "You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." The word for 'teach' is also translated as *impress* or *sharpen* in the Piel verb form in Hebrew, and it carries the idea of a craftsman engraving an image.¹⁴ Again, Michael McGarry points out that, "parents are to carefully, skillfully, and diligently impress God's commandments into their children's hearts."¹⁵ The shape of the children's faith was cultivated and crafted through the diligent and intentional work of the parents. Moses continues by stating that the nature of this work should be, "when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:7b). The nature of this commandment and their faith was to be both

¹² Michael McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry Teenagers in the Life of the Church* (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 2019), 21.

¹³ Schnittjer, 456.

¹⁴ "Strong's H8150 - *Shanan*." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed December 4, 2019. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=H8150&t=NKJV>.

¹⁵ McGarry, 24.

structured (taught/impressed), but at the same time casual (as they walked or sat at home). It was to permeate their lives, and the Israelites were to symbolically let the commandments be on (and in) their heads, on (and through) their hands, and on (and throughout) their homes (Deut. 6:8-9).

What is clear from all of this is that the *Shema* places a high priority on the family and faith. Concerning this, Michael McGarry states that, “It is important to note that, Israel’s conception of the family was broader than the nuclear family.”¹⁶ The nuclear family was aided in their rearing by the broader family and the community. Evidences of this can be found throughout the Scriptures, but perhaps the clearest event can be found in the childhood of Jesus. Luke 2 records that, at the age of twelve, Jesus was lost in a walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem by his parents. Luke states that, “supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day’s journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances.” (Luke 2:44). This event illustrates that the culture and community were seen as an extension of the parents and were active in the rearing of children. As it pertains to the faith of youth, Deuteronomy 6 taught that parents had an active role in their youth’s faith. The context of the passage and culture also brought this responsibility to all who see themselves as under “our God. Together, Israel had a duty to raise and pass on their faith to their children.

From One Generation to the Next

¹⁶ McGarry, 26.

Another common theme in Old Testament literature is that God expects older generations to bear the responsibility of proclaiming and teaching the younger generations. In Psalm 71:18, the Psalmist prays,

*And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare
Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come.*

The importance of his request to the Lord is found in the psalmists intention to continue to declare God's strength and power to the future generation. The psalmist states that his duty in old age was to be faithful to raise another generation in the faith that has sustained him. This concept of responsibility is taught throughout the Psalms, but perhaps one of the clearest places it can be found is in Psalm 78. The long Psalm begins with this important introduction:

*Listen, O my people, to my instruction; Incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us. We will not conceal them from their children, but tell to the generation to come the praises of the Lord, and His strength and His wondrous works that He has done. For He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which He commanded our fathers that they should teach them to their children, that the generation to come might know, even the children yet to be born, that they may arise and tell them to their children, that they should put their confidence in God and not forget the works of God, but keep His commandments, and not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not prepare its heart and whose spirit was not faithful to God.
(Psalm 78:1-8)*

The rest of the Psalm recounts God's work and the story of Israel. Derek Kidner calls this a "sermon from history" and points out that, "The psalm makes its point by its selection of material from the past, and drives the lesson home relentlessly."¹⁷ The psalm focuses on telling the generation to come of the praises of the Lord, and was also a reminder about those who did not keep the covenant and refused to walk in God's law, forgetting His deeds (v.9-11). A Psalm such as this provided an important teaching tool for the youth, while at the same time, warned a

¹⁷ Derek Kidner. *Psalms 73-150*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009), 311.

mature generation of their responsibility to tell the coming generations of the glorious deeds of the Lord, that they should not be like their fathers who were stubborn and rebellious (v.8).

The Psalms often reflect an intergenerational call ministry, and the failure in heeding this call can be seen throughout Israel's history. In the case of Moses, the faith of one generation had been taught to another, and was taken up by the next. Joshua's generation walked in the statutes and commands of the Lord. In Joshua 24:14-15, the leader famously stands before a future generation and charges them to make a choice as to whom they would serve; the gods of the Amorites and those beyond the River and in Egypt, or the LORD. It is said that in Joshua's days, the people made the right choice, and served the LORD (Judges 2:7). But, in the days after, "there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel" (Judges 2:10b). The nation went on to serve Baal and followed other gods from among the people who were around them. While the author of Judges gives us no indication of how long or how many generations later they had abandoned the Lord, he did immediately pair it with the death of Joshua and the end of his generation (elders). It would seem that in the focus of the conquest of the land and witnessing great works for themselves, that somewhere as time went by, his generation did not focus on passing their faith on to the next generation. It led to the Lord allowing them to be ruled by the hand of their enemies and a period where the Lord was against them in all that they did. Sadly, this was a common pattern throughout the book of Judges. One generation experienced the work of the Lord, and then neglected their duty to pass along that witness and teach the next generation. This failure inevitably was one important aspect that led to their downfall and serves as a great warning that the experience of one generation was meant to be passed along and taught to the next.

Parental Wisdom

Another aspect of this responsibility for intergenerational connection is demonstrated in the Proverbs of Solomon. Daniel Estes states that, “The particular focus of this book is the training of young men, for the reader is frequently addressed as ‘my son’.”¹⁸ It should be noted that the book begins with a reminder that the Proverbs, “give wisdom to the child-like, and much learning and wisdom to those who are young” (Proverbs 1:4). They are special to a younger generation of those who need wisdom and to fear the Lord. Chapters one through nine comprise the first section of Proverbs, and are written primarily as wisdom imparted from a father to his son. The utter importance of passing on wisdom in the Lord to the next generation cannot be ignored with statements such as:

Hear, my son, your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck (Proverbs 1:8-9)

My son, if you receive my sayings and store up my teachings within you, (Proverbs 2:1)

My son, do not forget my teaching. Let your heart keep my words. (Proverbs 3:1)

My son, do not reject the discipline of the Lord or loathe His reproof, for whom the Lord loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights. (Proverbs 3:11-12)

O sons, hear the teaching of a father. Listen so you may get understanding. For I give you good teaching. Do not turn away from it. When I was a much loved and only son of my mother and father, he taught me, saying, “Hold my words close to your heart. Keep my teachings and live. (Proverbs 4:1-1)

My son, observe the commandment of your father and do not forsake the teaching of your mother; (Proverbs 6:20)

The wisdom and instruction given in the Proverbs is an example of the Old Testament importance of passing along faith from one generation unto the next. In the household, the

¹⁸ Daniel Estes. *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 218.

Proverbs highlight the utter importance of a father and a mother, and their ability to affect the future of their children.

Ministry to Youth in the New Testament

*Older women are to teach the young women...
Also teach young men...
In all things show them how to live by your life
and by right teaching.
(Titus 2:4,6,7)*

Jesus invested in the youth of his time. Whether it was his call to let the children come to him (Matt. 19:14), or, his lesson that reminded all who listened that the Kingdom of Heaven was accessed by those who were childlike (Matt. 18:3), the New Testament introduces us to a Savior who valued the youth and surrounded Himself with them in His ministry. This picture does not end with Jesus. As the church began, and Paul's ministry became a focal point, the ideas of ministering and developing youth are further taught and displayed. Both the ministry of Jesus and Paul are to focus of this section of the paper.

Jesus and the *mathētēs*

Jesus chose to spend a bulk of His time in ministry with those who were called his disciples. In New Testament times, the commonly used Greek word for disciple (*mathētēs*) had different layers of meaning. In the Gospels, it is said that three concentric circles (or layers) of disciples can be found. Concerning this, R.N. Longnecker points out that they may be identified as, "a large group of followers, from which the Twelve are chosen (Luke 6:13, 17; cf. Matt. 8:21) and which apparently included some women (Luke 8:1-3); the 'Twelve,' who were designated as 'apostles' and were especially called by Jesus to travel with him and learn (Mark 3:16-19); and

an inner circle of Peter, James, and John, who alone accompany Jesus on certain key occasions (Mark 9:2-13, Matt. 26:36-46).”¹⁹ As it pertains to the training of the twelve specific disciples called to follow Him, Jesus patterned His ministry after common rabbi and disciple relationships, but also created a new and unique aspect to this training. To begin, the disciple-master relationship that is formed was a common relationship at this time period. The Mishna taught that it was common for children to begin their study of the Scriptures, the Mishna, and the Commandments when they were under 13, and to study the Talmud and potentially be chosen by a Master for discipleship at age fifteen (Avot 5.21). In practice, the disciples would sacrifice important years of their youth to follow a rabbi and absorb his teachings. Reinhard Neudecker clarifies that, “By following the rabbi, his life would provide a practical example of his teaching.”²⁰ As a rabbi, Jesus chose His disciples, and fostered a unique relationship with them as a major aspect of His ministry. There are also differences in Jesus’ model of discipleship. Jewish scholar C.G. Montefiore states that, “Discipleship such as Jesus demanded and inspired (a following, not for study but for service—to help the Master in his mission, to carry out his instructions and so on) was apparently a new thing”.²¹ Jesus assimilated discipleship and used it to further His Kingdom work.

Another of the important aspects of this pattern for discipleship is in the expected age of the disciples. The Scriptures state no definitive age. However, common practice of the day, saw disciples were formed from age fifteen into their late twenties. Concerning the stages of life, again, the Mishna taught in Avot 5 that,

¹⁹ David Freedman, Astrid Beck, and Allen Myers, eds. “Discipleship.” *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 348-349.

²⁰ Reinhard Neudecker, “Master-Disciple / Disciple-Master Relationship in Rabbinic Judaism and in the Gospels,” *Gregorian* 80:2 (1999), 249.

²¹ Montefiore, C.G. *Rabbinic Literature and Gospel Teachings*. (Macmillan, 1939), 218.

By eighteen the bridal canopy; At twenty for pursuit [of livelihood]; At thirty the peak of strength; At forty wisdom; At fifty able to give counsel; At sixty old age; At seventy fullness of years; At eighty the age of “strength”; At ninety a bent body; At one hundred, as good as dead and gone completely out of the world.²²

It is clear that Jesus was thirty when he began His ministry (Luke 3:23). Michael McGarry notes the youthful references to the disciples when, “Jesus refers to them as ‘children’ (tekna), ‘little children’ (teknia), and ‘my dear children’ (paidia). It would be highly offensive to refer to one’s peers or elders in this way and this makes certain that Jesus was addressing people younger than Himself.”²³ According to the Mishna, Jesus was at the early age range for a rabbi, and the disciples were likely to be found in the common age range of their teens and early twenties. Further support from the Scriptures can be found to indicate that some (but probably not all) of the disciples were in their teens. When the temple tax is required (Matt. 17:24-27), and Jesus asks Peter to summon the coin from the mouth of a fish, the Matthew states that Jesus says that the tax was for you (Peter) and Me (Jesus). Concerning this, it is stated in the Exodus 30:14-15, that the temple tax was only required of those above the age of twenty. Matthew’s account does not tell us if other disciples were present, so, this is not a conclusive indicator of their age. It is likely that Peter was older than most of the other disciples, as he is the only disciple mentioned as married (Matt. 8:14–17, Mark 1:29–31, Luke 4:38), and he owned his fishing boat (Luke 5:1, John 21:3; support the pursuit of livelihood which occurred in their twenties). Along with Peter, there are indicators that are a few other disciples that may have been in their twenties. Matthew is mentioned as a tax collector (Matt. 9:9), Simon is mentioned as a zealot in Mark 3:18 (a movement association with Israel’s freedom), and Andrew is mentioned as being a previous disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:40). Aside from those four, evidence appears to appeal to a

²² Avot 5:21.

²³ McGarry, 45.

younger age of the majority of the disciples, based on the behaviors and actions. Perhaps one of the more humorous evidences that a majority of the disciples were younger lies in what Phillip Yancey calls the “denseness” of the disciples. Yancey points out that Jesus constantly has a sense of awe at the lack of mental acuity of the disciples when he says such things as, “Are you so dull?” Jesus asks, and again, “How long shall I put up with you?” Yancey goes on to say, “Their gnostic faith exacerbates Jesus. After every miracle, they fret anxiously about the next...Much of the time, a fog of incomprehension separates the Twelve from Jesus.”²⁴ Other youth minded instances can be seen in examples such as: asking to call down fire from heaven (Luke 9:51-56), arguing over which of them is the greatest (Luke 22:24-32), and constantly misunderstanding Jesus (Mark 8:14, Mark 6:52, Luke 18:34). Instances such as these build a fairly strong case that Jesus chose to surround himself and disciple young men in their teens and twenties.

So far, it has been seen Jesus employed a form discipleship that was common in his day, but differed in focus, and that the disciples were young. Neudecker notes another important aspect of Jesus’ discipleship, stating that, “rabbi’s of the day would have differing schools and were known to reject unworthy students.”²⁵ Students were chosen for their merit, and studying under a rabbi was considered a high honor; even greater than the commandment to honor one’s parents (Keritot 6:9). Into this culture, Jesus breaks the mold. Jesus chose disciples that would later be singled out as “unschooled, ordinary men” (Acts 4:13). They were from humble origins, and he even allowed women to follow as disciples (Luke 8:1-3). A.B. Bruce points out that, “The truth is, that Jesus was obliged to be content with fishermen, and publicans, and quondam zealots, for apostles. They were the best that could be had. Those who deemed themselves better were too proud to become disciples, and thereby they excluded themselves from what all the

²⁴ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 99.

²⁵ Neudecker, 249.

world now sees to be the high honor of being the chosen princes of the kingdom...And so Jesus was obliged to fall back on the rustic, but simple, sincere, and energetic men of Galilee.”²⁶

Further, Luke points out Jesus had different criteria than the rabbi’s of his day as he records Jesus praying all night before choosing his disciples who would become his apostles (Luke 6:12-13).

Additionally, Jesus treated the disciples in different ways than traditional masters did. He chose a closer group of disciples (Peter, James, and John) that experienced important moments that others were not privy to. Moments such as the raising of the little girl (Luke 8:50-55), the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-2), and his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-39), highlight the fact that Jesus chose some for deeper lessons and experiences. Another important aspect of Jesus’ ministry that differed from those of first century Judaism, was Jesus’ treatment of the disciples as more than students. Talking to His disciples, Jesus said,

“This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. This I command you, that you love one another.” (John 15:12-17)

Jesus treated His disciples with an unbelievable amount of love, grace, and compassion. He treated them as more than just students, he loved and bore with them as family. With patience he answered Thomas’ doubting questions (John 14:5, John 20:24-29). With compassion, he responded to their request for one to sit at his right hand and one on his left in His Kingdom (Mark 10:37). With boldness and trust, he prayed for them, gave them power, and sent them out to do the work of the ministry (Luke 10:1-20). With long-suffering, he bore with Peter, knowing

²⁶ Alexander Bruce, *The Training of the Twelve* (San Bernadino, CA: Pantianos Classics, 1871), 27.

he would reject him and deny him three times (Luke 22:54-62). And, with patience, he bore with Judas, all while knowing he would eventually betray him (John 6:70). Truly, Jesus modeled the lesson that he wanted His disciples to bring to the world, love one another.

The disciples' close proximity and Jesus' compassion was a key ingredient for faith that would endure. There is no denying the fact that the disciples fled when Jesus was arrested, and floundered after his resurrection. It would seem that the immediate results of his discipleship indicated that this model had failed, as did their faith. However, as the reality of His resurrection sank in, and the Holy Spirit came upon them, Jesus' model of discipleship crystalized a vision of the Gospel that became their lifeblood as the church developed.

Paul and Youth in the Church

As the Church develops in the New Testament, so did the idea of ministering to youth. Continuing into the early church was a worldview that had an, "emphasis on corporate identity rather than individual identity."²⁷ Into this setting, the Gospel brings believers into a new family (Matthew 12:46-50), where they are considered a part of the household of faith (Ephesians 2:19). N.T. Wright states that in the believers in the church function, "to encourage one another, to build one another up in faith, to pray with and for one another, to learn from one another and teach one another, and to set one another examples to follow, challenges to take up, and urgent tasks to perform. This is all part of what is known loosely as fellowship."²⁸ The Gospel necessitates a new foundation for family as people are adopted in as children of God. This presents particular responsibilities within the church. It also maintains similarities stemming from the collective mentality and responsibility of passing on faith that is seen in the Old

²⁷ McGarry, 48.

²⁸ N.T. Wright. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. (New York, NY: Harpercollins, 2010), 211.

Testament. Additionally, in moving from the Gospels and into the writings and ministry of the Apostle Paul, elements of the model of discipleship that Jesus displayed can be found, as well as the Old Testament focus on intergenerational responsibility.

The discipleship that was outlined earlier in this paper concerning Jesus, was also familiar to Paul, who studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). It would appear that he often mentored other young men in a way similar (but not identical) to Jesus. For instance, early in his travels with, young men are involved. A young “John Mark” joins them (Acts 12:25), and later departs, leaving Paul at odds with Barnabas because of the nature of his desertion. The IVP Bible Background Commentary states that, “there are many theories as to why he might have left, but the most numerous suggestions relate his departure to his youthful inexperience.”²⁹ It goes on to suggest that John Mark may have been homesick, had difficulty living and ministering in new cultures, or the 100-mile journey to Antioch was something he was not ready for. Nonetheless, John Mark serves as an early indicator that Paul valued youth, and was just as frustrated as any modern youth pastor becomes when a student abandons the work being done by God.

Mark was not the only youth to cross the ranks of Paul. As the book of Acts unfolds, and his epistles record, there were many other young disciples (and future leaders) that Paul invested in. While the exact ages of young men such as Timothy, Silas, or Titus are never mentioned, neither is any occupation (aside from the ministry), trade, or spouse mentioned, which would seem to indicate a younger age. Silas became a great partner with Paul in the ministry, and endured many of the hardships and even imprisonment and scourging with Paul (Acts 16). Timothy joined Paul and Silas and is portrayed by Paul as a young man (1 Timothy 4:12). In Acts 16:1 it mentions that Timothy’s father was a Greek, that his mother was a Jewish woman

²⁹ Clinton Arnold, ed., *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 340.

who was a believer, and we later find that his grandmother was instrumental in his faith (2 Timothy 1:5). This reveals both the importance of the familial faith influence and the role that Paul would play as a father-in-the-faith figure. Additionally, as Paul travelled with Barnabas, Paul brought Titus along and he appeared to lack development and experience (Galatians 2:1-3). These young men were being trained for ministry by walking with Paul and experiencing the life and lessons of ministry with him.

In addition to the mentoring that Paul practiced, he also taught that there was a responsibility to teach and develop the youth in the family setting of the church. Robert Banks states that in the early church, “churches were household gatherings focused on community and relationship.”³⁰ The Scriptures tell us that most of the churches planted by Paul were in cities, therefore, most people who were a part of these churches were city dwellers. There was a unique variety of family, free men, slaves, and even business owners of the day. It was common for them to meet in houses, such as the case in Ephesus with Priscilla and Aquilla, evidenced when Paul says that, “Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.” (1 Corinthians 16:19b). However, there are also instances where they gathered in larger “upper rooms” or spaces (Acts 2:1, Acts 20:3). Longenecker and Still note that determining the size of any church that Paul planted is nearly impossible, but given the sizes of the meeting places, “no group could number more than 50.”³¹ This is in unison with Robert Banks who notes that at times it appears that they, “gathered together in a larger assembly of 40-50 people, but the common household meetings could only host up to 35 people in a well-to-do home. This meant that on the larger scale, a church could include as many as 50 people, but most likely referred to

³⁰ Robert Banks. *Pauls Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in Their Cultural Setting*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 26.

³¹ Bruce Longenecker and Todd Still, *Thinking through Paul: An Introduction to His Life, Letters, and Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 44.

30-35 people.”³² It is not until the third century that, “there is evidence of special buildings being constructed for larger church gatherings, and even then, they were modeled after the typical room that received guests in a Roman and Greek household.”³³ In larger cities, there were undoubtedly multiple churches, that at times might gather together as a whole, but were numerically smaller than most modern churches, and for their size, more diverse. All of this means that churches were small and personal. Into this environment, Paul instructs youth that he expected to be present in the church gathering. In Ephesians 6:1 and Colossians 3:20, we see that Paul is referring to the youth in his audience as he instructs them to obey their parents. We can understand from this that Paul expected youth to be present in the assembly of the church as this letter was to be written. Children and youth were a part of these small churches.

In his letter to Titus, Paul wrote a clear command for one generation to minister to another generation within the church. Paul encourages older women in the church to set a good example for younger women (Titus 2:3-5). They were to help young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be sensible, pure, workers at home, to be kind, and to learn to be subject to their own husbands. In America, the modern age of having children has risen to 26.3 years old, according to data from the 2016 National Center for Health Statistics.³⁴ But, in Paul’s day, it was common to begin maternity at puberty as the women were married. Dr. Eugene Weitzel states that, “girls were ready for marriage as soon as they were physically ready to conceive and bear children, which according to the law was twelve and one-half years. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was probably no more than fourteen years old when she gave birth to the Son of God.”³⁵ This

³² Banks, 35.

³³ Banks, 35.

³⁴ “FastStats - Births and Natality.” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Last modified January 20, 2017. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/births.htm>.

³⁵ Eugene Weitzel. (2010). *I Want to Be a Husband and Father for Life and a Catholic Priest Forever* (U.S.: Xilbris Corporation) 113.

means that Paul's instruction in Titus was for the older women to mentor the young teen girls in the church. Paul proceeds to exhort the older men to, "urge the young men to be sensible; in all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with purity in doctrine, dignified, sound in speech which is beyond reproach, so that the opponent will be put to shame, having nothing bad to say about us." (Titus 2:6-8) Paul is stating that the older men and women in the church need to take responsibility for the youth. They are the models for maturity that are to come alongside and teach the youth as they grow and develop their faith. Paul clearly taught and modeled the importance of working with the youth and helping them to maturity.

Biblical Application of Youth Ministry

*If you have a group of twelve students who don't understand your illustrations and one of them wants to kill you, you have a youth group like Jesus.
(Mark Yaconelli)*

Youth Ministry Starts in the Home

This paper has provided a Biblical basis for ministry to youth that can be applied in ways that develop a lasting faith. One of the primary things that can be gleaned, is the Old and New Testament teaching concerning the family and the faith community's responsibility to invest in the faith of the next generation. This is by no means a guarantee that future generations will assume the faith of the past, but it is undoubtedly a call to faithfully endeavor to pass along the teachings, experiences, and story of faith that the Scriptures speak. The Old Testament clearly shows that this ministry begins in the home. The National Study of Youth and Religion has determined that parents have been found to be the most influential factor in a faith that lasted.

Concerning this, the study found that, “82 percent of children raised by parents who talked about faith at home, attached great importance to their beliefs, and were active in their congregations were religiously active as young adults”.³⁶ This means that any relevant youth ministry done in the church should provide a bridge between the home and the church. Sadly, in one study, it was found that, “Only one out of every five parents of children under 13 (19%) has ever been personally contacted or spoken to by a church leader to discuss the parents’ involvement in the spiritual life and development of their youngsters.”³⁷ Youth ministry can be mistaken by parents as an alternative or substitute for their influence on the spirituality of their children. However, relevant youth ministries, with the intent of building a faith that lasts, will look for ways to inform parents and creatively partner with them in encouraging the faith of their children. This is not easy, and it requires the work of both the youth ministry, church body, and parents. One particular application of an idea that can foster a bridge for parents to talk with their students about their faith, is in regard to the messages being taught in youth ministries. In my experience as a youth pastor, I have found it helpful to work with my senior pastor to teach through the series or Bible passage that he is teaching the congregation. This provides an opportunity for parents to discuss a teaching that both they, and their teen, has just heard at church. Parents can also be encouraged by a youth pastor to read devotionally with their students. I have recently done this with success as we broke down the book of Ephesians in our small groups, and then encouraged parents to read a daily devotion with students at home. Typically, youth ministries have tried to involve parents by encouraging them to stick to service activities such as driving

³⁶ David Briggs. “*Parents Are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults.*” The Christian Century, Last modified November 5, 2014. <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2014-11/parents-no-1-influence-teens-remaining-religiously-active-young-adults>.

³⁷ “Parents Accept Responsibility for Their Child’s Spiritual Development But Struggle With Effectiveness” Barna Research Group, Last Modified May 6, 2003, <https://www.barna.com/research/parents-accept-responsibility-for-their-childrens-spiritual-development-but-struggle-with-effectiveness/>.

students to an event, picking up friends, or cleaning the youth room. While those are positive things that should not be discouraged, the active communication between the church and parents is perhaps one of the most important functions of a youth pastor or leader in this area. A mentor of mine wisely taught me that youth ministry is really a ministry to students, leaders, and the parents. Pastors and leaders must communicate what is being taught to the youth, and partner with parents at every point available. A leader should continually look for ways to encourage and equip a parent to build into their student's faith. Both youth and senior pastors have the foundational job of teaching parents of their responsibility, and to equip them for the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:12). There's an old saying that goes: "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." While parents do not possess the power to manipulate the faith of their children, they definitely have a positive influence and Biblical call to pass along their faith.

Youth Ministry is Done Together

This first application should lead to a natural question. What about the youth who have immature parents or unbelieving parents? It is hopeful that youth will witness and invite those to church who are outside of their faith, and it is also hopeful that at some point, they place their faith in Jesus. As young Christians, are they destined for failure if their parents are not supportive or unable to nurture their faith at home? Questions like this reveal the important role that the church is meant to play in the lives of these young believers. We see that in both the Old and New Testament, the community of believers has a responsibility to care for and support the faith of the younger generation. Chap Clark describes the way this happens in youth ministry as a form of adoptive ministry in the church. Clark describes it this way, "Adoptive ministry is vital because we are witnessing to the fact that in Christ, God has invited those who "believed in his

name” to “become children of God” (John 1:12). This is the message of the good news. Therefore, our message — in our lifestyle, service, and word — is adoption.”³⁸ Clark goes on to remind readers that in the church, the leadership and those who are mature have a responsibility to make sure that every child, youth, or vulnerable outsider is brought into the center of this family. Both the Old and New Testament speak to a body of believers who assume the calling and responsibility of investing in the youth. A youth ministry that will support a lasting faith in the next generation must look for ways to also create a bridge between the church body and the youth.

Youth ministry has valiantly tried to make a teen’s church experience relevant to them and their peer groups. This has led to many churches building separate facilities for youth, teachings and worship adopted to youth culture, and typically, completely separate leadership. Situations exist where senior pastors are hardly a familiar face in the youth ministry. In the Barna *State of Youth Ministry* report, polling concerning the goals of youth ministry was done of youth pastors, senior pastors, and parents. Of the reported statistics, no one listed church integration or belonging as an important factor. There were other positive factors such as discipleship, instruction, and building relationships, but this was all contextualized within the youth ministry program.³⁹ This data means, that a current primary focus of youth ministry is to integrate youth into youth groups and not the church body. The New Testament church had no such model. Teens were a part of the regular community of believers and were present when Paul’s letters were read, messages were taught, and meals were shared. While the nature of teens raised in our modern American society is individualistic and not community driven, it is still extremely

³⁸ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations Into the Family of Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 3-4.

³⁹ *The State of Youth Ministry*, 13, 17.

important to integrate them into the general life and worship of the church. This is where they can be brought into the family of God. It is still important for youth ministries to provide a place where teens growing up in an individualistic society can be introduced and disciplined in the faith in a way that they can grasp (youth group), but that attempt should not overshadow the responsibility of integrating teens into the church. Michael McGary argues that, “Youth ministries cannot become stand-alone (or parachurch style) ministries that are simply sponsored and hosted by churches.”⁴⁰ Youth ministries that can find creative ways to integrate teens into the life of the church are building into the lasting faith of a student. To this point, the church’s responsibility to reach down to the youth in an attempt to minister to the next generation, is just as important. In my experience, some of the greatest moments of “church” happened when teens and older generations were able to connect. Many years back, I decided to get our seniors ministry (Seasoned Classics) and our youth ministry together for a night of bunco, pizza, and ice cream. Initially, this did not appeal at all to the youth. But, as the event unfolded, and the seniors and students mixed and played, you could hardly hear the numbers being called out during the game. The loud laughter and fun that was drowning it out. A recent tutoring program that we have created is pairing adults from our congregation with students that need help in their schoolwork. Interestingly, it is the adults who have found themselves absolutely excited and thrilled to bless the youth in this way (the youth still are not excited to do more schoolwork). For the last seven years, our church has hosted a service and dinner on one Wednesday evening a month, entitled “Together”. During this night, youth ministries are paused, small groups cease, and the youth join the whole church for a free meal, time of worship, message, and communion. While naturally, students would rather be in their own youth group with their friends, it is

⁴⁰ McGary, 15.

providing them a consistent opportunity to mix in with the older generations and understand that they are a part of the church as a whole. As I have travelled and interacted with other youth pastors, I have noted that in some churches, youth ministries will join the adults for a time of worship, or perhaps even the whole Sunday service, while maintaining a midweek youth group. Integrating teens into a service requires more work by the senior pastor (as he teaches across a broader generational spectrum), patience by the adults in the congregation, and foresight by the parents to see that though their teen may not “like” it as much, the experience is building a relationship with a church, and that is more important than fun.

When integrating the youth of a church, it is easy to state that students can and should be involved in the church as a whole, but it should also be noted that the Biblical responsibility fell upon the adults to minister and pass along their faith to the youth. In youth ministry, this responsibility has fallen on the shoulders of youth pastors and leaders as they attempt to care for and disciple youth. But, Titus 2 reminds readers that the mature men and women of the church need to find ways to connect with the youth and nurture them to maturity. Additionally, church should be integrative for youth, not completely segregated. Though it can be extremely difficult given the present nature of youth ministry, pastors and leaders should seek integrated times where the youth in a church are a part of the church worship/teaching experiences, where adult volunteers serve in youth ministries, and when auxiliary ministries (men’s, women’s, etc.) find ways to integrate with youth.

Youth Discipleship Is Crucial

So far, the Biblical teaching, has suggested that churches and youth ministries focus on integrating parents, and integrating the church into the faith of the youth. The scope of this paper has also looked at the ministries Jesus and Paul, and from them, evidenced a healthy model of discipleship and mentoring as it pertains to the youth they worked with. As previously noted, amongst the youth pastors and senior pastors that Barna polled, discipleship is listed as the highest priority of a youth ministry. It is positive that youth ministries focus on this. However, polls also found that most youth pastors, “have a hard time defining goals of discipleship and offer nebulous answers such as ‘becoming more like Jesus’, and ‘growing in spiritual maturity’”.⁴¹ Scripturally, discipleship had goals such as a becoming a learner, become committed obedient believers (Luke 14:25-33; Mat. 19:16-22), developing a loving relationship with Jesus (John 15:12), loving one another and becoming one together (John 15:17; 17:21), fighting the good fight and keeping the faith (1 Tim. 1:18,19), and doing the work of the ministry (Luke 10:1-20; Eph. 4:12). While these are just a few of the many goals of Christian discipleship, these types of goals are not accomplished in environments focused on attendance and entertainment. As we see with Jesus and Paul, the bridge to such a faith is personal interaction. Youth pastors and leaders have the important role of bringing personal connection and guidance into the lives of students. Leaders are tasked with thinking strategically about the end goals that youth ministry is meant foster. Often, success happens outside of a church building, and within the social and familial spheres that students live within. I have often found that if you have more than ten students in a ministry, it is vital that a team of youth workers is trained and understand their part in the discipleship process. Effective youth ministries find ways to connect with youth in their

⁴¹ *The State of Youth Ministry*, 14.

sports, arts, school activities, at youth group activities, camps, retreats, and anywhere a leader can find.

In Conclusion

Youth ministry is difficult and challenging. Youth leaders and pastors face the task of building bridges. They must build bridges between parents and their interaction in their youth's faith. They must build bridges between the church body and the younger generation. And they must build personal bridges to mentor and guide youth through some of the most challenging and confusing years of their lives. Often it can feel like failure. It may not always play into the cultural individualism that most young people deem as "cool". This paper has demonstrated that throughout the Old and New Testaments, ministry to youth was important and vital to the faith community. In the end, the Bible speaks clearly that youth ministry is not about numbers, relevance, followers, crowd size, or having the most studious group of disciples. The Bible lays out a foundation for youth ministry that is about making lasting connections with parents and the church, that strengthen the faith of the younger generations.

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