

The Theology of Youth Ministry

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I. What is Theology?

A. Broadly, Theology is defined as “the science (or study) of God and of the relations between God and the universe.” (Strong, 1907, p.1).

1. “relations between God and the universe” is a key phrase in the definition, as it means that if God has a relation with a segment of the universe, then God has a plan and reason of interaction with that segment, and thus a theology of that relationship must exist and needs to be explored, determined, and acted upon. (In the broadest sense, Youth Ministry is a part of the "Universe" with which God deals.)
2. "Anthropology (the study of man) is a part of theology, because man's nature is the work of God and because God's dealings with man throw light upon the character of God. God is known through His works and His activities (Ibid). (Youth are a distinguishable and developmental part of the human race with which God has a relationship.)
3. The word “Theology” comes from the two Greek words, “Theos” –God, and ‘logos’ – speech or expression. Thus theology is the application of God's Word/Truth in relation to a particular part of the universe that God created.
4. The “aim” of theology, according to theologian Emery Bancroft, "is the ascertainment of the facts concerning God and the relations between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth." (Bancroft, 1929, p. 3) Forming a Theology of local church youth ministry is an easy task since it falls into the realm of outreach, discipleship, and maturing the saints within the church, while being a specialization ministry that is justified throughout scripture. (i.e. Paul going to the Gentiles, Paul reaching out to the Jews, Paul reaching out to the Athenian intellectuals, Paul's strategy of "becoming all things to all people so that I may reach some" (1 Cor. 9:21-22).

B. Theology is commonly divided into Biblical, Historical, Systematic, and Practical. (Ibid, p. 41)

1. Practical Theology: Def. “Is the system of truth considered as a means of renewing and sanctifying men.” (Ibid) “Practical theology is concerned with the application of the Truth of God to the hearts of men.” (Chafer, 1947, vol. I, p.5) “To this department of theology belongs ‘Pastoral Theology’ since this involves the right methods of unfolding Christian Truth and bringing it to bear upon men individually and to the church” corporately or “it is the theological inquiry into the care of persons in an ecclesial (church) context.” (Ibid, p. 42).
2. Pastoral Theology has to do with God's Truth as it relates to the responsibilities of pastors (clergy) and the needs of the people under their care. Certainly, one who gives pastoral care to Youth would be considered to fall in the realm of a “pastor” since he cares for the needs of and communicates God's Truth to youth. The terms “elder”, “overseer”, and “bishop” are synonymous in the N.T. and are used interchangeably. Therefore the “youth” pastor is one who ministers to the youth of the church and is held at the same level of accountability as any other elder/bishop/of overseer/ - pastor (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9) Thus the term “pastor and teacher” (shepherd) is a person who is a “gift” to the church (Eph. 4:11-13) for the purpose of teaching and maturing the saints (youth included).
3. Both Practical and Pastoral Theology requires a "critical/contextualization" that takes into account the major sciences and human experiences, centered on the revelation of scripture. This is indeed a missiological and ethno-hermeneutical approach to theology that is modeled throughout by Jesus himself, Paul and other's work on the mission field. (Ex. Philip's ministry to the Ethiopian eunuch (Jn. 4:7-42, Acts 8, Ministry in Athens, Acts 17). The execution of Practical

Theology requires an examination of the Youth (where they are in their context), assessing their problems and needs, determining the goals and strategies that need to be addressed in bringing them into the Kingdom of our Lord, and all done with a critical evaluation of the Truths taught in Scripture that speak to the entire process.

4. Youth ministry falls within a subset of Practical and Pastoral Theology. It is not just "practical" but is "Praxis." Praxis goes beyond "practical" in that it assumes operating within a set of critically thought out principals that, though contextual, adhere to the mandates of cross-cultural and transferable Biblical principles that are not to be compromised or diluted through cultural adaptations whether those of church tradition or ethnic cultural history. It is irrelevant as to whether "church history" does not model today's modern youth ministry practice and programs, and practical theology's dynamic characteristic mandates methodological change while at the same time keeping the message of the Gospel pure.

II. God as "Youth" Pastor.

In the real sense of the word, God himself (and Jesus) was a youth pastor; one who communicated Truth to and pastored (cared for) youth and directed them to do the work of His ministry.

- God called out, and communicated to, and instructed and directed in ministry many YOUTH. (Joshua (Numbers 11:28), Isaac, Joseph (Gen. 37:1ff), David (1 Sam. 17:32-37, 42, 55;), Solomon (Eccl. 12:1), Naaman's servant girl 2Kgs. 5:1-5, King Joash 2 Chr23:19-24, King Amaziah (2 Chr. 24:1-2, King Uzziah (2 Chr. 26: 1-4), King Jotham (2 Chr. 27:1-2), King Ahaz (2 Chr. 28: 1-2), King Hezekiah (2 Chr. 28:1-2), King Josiah (2 Chr. 34:1-21), Jeremiah (Jer. 1; 7ff), Esther (Est. 2:1-7), Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego (Dan. 1:3-4), Ezekiel (Ezk. 4:13-14), Mary, Joseph (Gen. 37:1-2), several of the Apostles, Mark (Mk 14:51-52, Rhoda-servant girl (Acts 12:12-16), Timothy (Acts 16:1, 1 Cor. 16:21, 1 Tim. 1; 2, 18; 4:12; 2 Tim. 1:2), and many others including the Psalmist (Ps. 71:5, 17), and even angels (Mk. 16:5-7).
- God inspired an entire book of the Bible written to YOUTH. Proverbs was written originally as instructions to "my son." Pvb. 1:8, 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, 5:1, etc. to "my son, or sons"

* Certainly God and Jesus ministered to every age, but they also took the time to intentionally minister to (pastor) youth in both the Old Testament and New Testament time periods. Certainly, no one would thus question the legitimacy of assigning a church ministry surrogate to focus on just such a ministry with a much higher commitment level of time and expertise.

III. Paul as a "Youth" pastor.

- Paul led Timothy to Christ and took him along as young teenage missionary and mentored and taught him to be a mature Christian and minister. (1 Tim 4:12-16, 2 Tim. 2:15-16). Paul reached out to other youth; slave girl (Acts 16:16-18), Eutychus, (Acts 20:9-12).
- Again, Paul was not a "Youth Pastor" = Noun) but was a pastor to youth (adjective), and thus for the church to advocate a more committed focus to pastoring youth is certainly not a stretch given the more complicated evolution of the adolescent culture being experienced beginning in the late 19th and throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. To argue from silence that "The Bible does not mention the term "youth pastor" or "youth ministry" and therefore conclude that youth ministry and the position of youth pastor is "unbiblical, or without theological support is to not understand one of the basic principles of sound hermeneutics, as to whether a statement or lack of a statement in

scripture is “descriptive or prescriptive.” To assume a statement or lack thereof is “prescriptive truth – for all times,” as opposed to a “descriptive declaration – only for that time in history,” is to confute the whole point of context evaluation involved in grammatical/historical-critical exposition. (not liberal 19th cent. “higher criticism”).

- Certainly this was all in sync with Paul’s direction to young Timothy in Eph. 4:11-14 as part of a church-wide (including youth) mandate to “mature the saints to do the work of the ministry.”

IV. Local Church Pastoral assignments

- As modeled in the early church in Jerusalem in the book of Acts, the elder identified a special group of people in the church who needed special attention – Greek Widows. The apostles selected the appropriate Greek Christian deacons to minister to them.
- “Youth” certainly qualifies as a special group of people within the church who need specially qualified leaders/pastors to minister to their needs. (Titus 2:4-6, 1 Jn. 2:13-14)
- “Youth” is defined differently in almost every culture, but whether the age span is 4-40 and single, or 10-29 and single, all represent a state of development that is between childhood and societal recognition of attaining full adult responsibilities and privileges. Rites of passage are globally recognized whether formal or understood, and thus separate the “youth” from adults, and thus require a dynamic and developmental approach to ministering to this sub-section of the human race. Such is the goal of Practical Theology, to understand God’s will as it relates to his creation (youth in this case) and then using every legitimate means available (including the earth sciences) processed through a critical contextualization process to accomplish His will in the life of youth.

V. “Youth” in the Scriptures.**

**The following is a study of the word “Youth” in the scriptures by Dr. Kim K. Bearden, D.Min., Ph.D. Though not exhaustive, the study reveals how the word “Youth” is used and interpreted in both the Old and New Testament. (a paper written by Dr. Bearden entitled “A Theology of Youth.”)

(Dr. Bearden, at the time of this writing, was an adjunct professor of Education Leadership at New Orleans Baptists Theological Seminary, New Orleans, LA, and a Teaching Fellow in Historical Perspective, Oxford University, Oxford, England. With permission of Dr. Bearden, the section of his excellent paper on a Theology of Youth ministry is quoted in full below. Section V of this study.)

Detailing the biblical teachings about youth is more difficult than it might appear. At least nine Hebrew words in the Old Testament could be translated as "youth." Likewise, the New Testament authors employed several Greek words that could mean "youth." Beyond that, the biblical view of youth is not clearly articulated in specific passages. Nevertheless, the following is an examination of biblical texts describing and instructing young people. This study seeks to separate the discussion of childhood from that of people who have achieved puberty, though this at times may be an unnatural division as many of the words in the Bible, which can be translated as "youth" can also be translated as "child." Based on the study, an attempt has been made to develop a biblical theology of youth.

Youth in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is replete with stories of and allusions to young people. Joseph is seventeen at the beginning of his story. David seems to be a teenager when he faces Goliath. Esther was likely not yet twenty when she was elevated to the queen. Solomon seems adamant that youth must heed his warnings.

The primary words used in the Old Testament to refer to young people are ‘alma, betulah, bahur, yeled, and na’ar. The words vary in meaning and usage. Most of the Old Testament stories that guide a biblical theology of youth use one or more of these words. Each word is treated below.

Na'ar

The most common word used to describe “youth” in the Old Testament is *na'ar*. The Book of Genesis calls Joseph a *na'ar* at the age of seventeen (Gen 37:2). Jeremiah described himself as a *na'ar* when objecting to God's call by claiming to be too young (Jeremiah 1:6). Huey writes, “Although his age is uncertain, [Jeremiah] probably was not quite twenty.”¹ *Na'ar* does not signify a specific age range but can refer to any young person from infancy to young adulthood. However, Hamilton notes, “There seems to be no case where a *na'ar* was married.”²

First Samuel 17 details the story of the *na'ar* David defeating Goliath with a sling and stone. Jesse had sent his son, David, to the battle lines with food for his brothers. When David heard the challenges and threats from the Philistine giant, Goliath, David told the king he would kill the man. Bergen correctly writes, “David's words to the king express youthful idealism in its full flower.”³

At first, King Saul refused David's proposal. “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him,” Saul said, “for you are but a youth [*na'ar*], and he has been a man of war from his youth” (1 Sam 17:33).⁴ In this case, *na'ar* probably indicates that David was a teenager, younger than the twenty years required for Hebrew men to enter military service (Numbers 1:3).

The story of David and Goliath highlights several important observations about the word *na'ar* as it relates to youth. For example, as a *na'ar*, David held responsibility not typically assigned to a child. Beyond having the somewhat dangerous task of protecting sheep from lions and bears (1 Sam 17:36), David was tasked with traveling alone to carry food for his brothers to the battlefield (1 Sam 17:17–18), a journey of more than fifteen miles.⁵

Joseph had similar responsibility and authority as a *na'ar*. At the age of seventeen, his father sent him alone on a journey of thirty miles to check on his brothers (Gen 37:14). When Joseph discovered his brothers had moved on, he traveled an additional fourteen miles to find them (Gen 37:17).⁶ Likewise, God gave the *na'ar* Jeremiah the responsibility and authority to confront the nations on His behalf (Jer 1:4–8).

The Old Testament appears to treat young women (*na'ara*) differently. For example, Numbers 30 details an interesting law concerning young women (*na'ara*):

If a woman vows a vow to the Lord and binds herself by a pledge, while within her father's house in her youth, and her father hears of her vow and of her pledge by which she has bound herself and says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand, and every pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father opposes her on the day that he hears of it, no vow of hers, no pledge by which she has bound herself shall stand. And the LORD WILL FORGIVE HER, BECAUSE HER FATHER OPPOSED HER.
(Numbers 30:3–5)

This law appears to limit the authority of a *na'ara*. Her father could simply nullify any vow she made.⁷ However, the verses immediately following give the same privilege to a husband that this law gives to the father (Numbers 30:6–8). The limit of authority appears to be inherent in her gender rather than her age.

Another observation about the story of David and Goliath involves the accusation of youthful folly by David's brother (1 Sam 17:28–29). The hand of God was on David, and his courage is laudable, but a danger existed for David in his decision as an untrained soldier to enter battle with Goliath. Walton suggests, “Youth [*ne'urim*] can be a time of rebellion (Ps 25:7) and sin (Job 13:26).”⁸ The story of David and Goliath does not show David to be rebellious, though youthful tendencies are evident. Still, as an older man, David looked back on his youth and pleaded with God, “Remember not the sins of my youth [*ne'ura*] or my transgressions” (Psa 25:7). Peter Craigie comments, “When

¹ F. B. Huey Jr., Jeremiah, Lamentations, New American Commentary, vol. 16 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 51.

² New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (NIDOTTE), s. v. “*na'ar*.”

³ Robert D. Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, New American Commentary, vol. 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 193.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version.

⁵ Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, 192.

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, Genesis 16–50, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 353.

⁷ NIDOTTE, s. v. “*na'ar*,” explains that rabbis limited this law to young women who had not attained puberty and taught a father lost this right when she attained puberty.

⁸ NIDOTTE, s. v. “*ne'urim*.”

he prays for forgiveness . . . he specifically refers to the sins of his youth—not those of childhood, but those of early adulthood which were rashly committed and live on to haunt him in the middle years of life.⁹

While youthful folly can be illustrated in numerous ways, perhaps none is as graphic as the story of the *na'ar* Shechem, the Hivite who fell in love with Jacob's daughter Dinah [*na'ara*]. Shechem raped her, then apparently held her captive while his father negotiated with Jacob and her brothers to make her Shechem's wife. The brothers of Dinah executed a devious plan to kill Shechem and every male in his household (Gen 34).

Finally, David displayed passionate faith. He took offense at Goliath giving offense to the armies of the living God (1 Sam 17:26). He showed great confidence in God; just as God had delivered David from lion and bear, He would deliver David from Goliath (1 Sam 17:37). He stood his ground against the giant placing all confidence in God (1 Sam 17:45). As much as David saw his days as a *na'ar* as days of folly, this story illustrates that they were days of passionate faith. Again in the Psalms, David said, "O God, from my youth [*ne'uray*] you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds" (Ps. 71:17).

'Alma

John Walton states that when applied to males, *'alma* connotes virility, the physical ability to father a child, "or, more neutrally, 'a strapping young man.'"¹⁰ *'Alma* is used in a similar manner when discussing young women. Genesis 24 tells of Abraham sending his servant to find a wife for his son, Isaac. The servant asked God to reveal the chosen woman in a specific way. "Let the virgin [*'alma*] who comes out to draw water, to whom I shall say, 'Please give me a little water from your jar to drink,' and who will say to me, 'Drink, and I will draw for your camels also,' let her be the woman whom the LORD has appointed for my master's son" (Gen 24:43–44). Rebekah did exactly what the servant had prayed. People of Rebekah's culture would have assumed she was a virgin, but "virgin" is probably not the best translation of *'alma*.¹¹ Walton writes that "the term refers to one who has not yet borne a child and as an abstraction refers to the adolescent expectation of motherhood."¹² An *'alma*, then, is a young person who has passed puberty but has not yet become a parent.

The Old Testament appears to connect the term *'alma* with youthful exuberance. In Psalm 68 the *alumim* are seen playing tambourines in the progression of faith (v. 25). Job uses *'alma* to refer to a call for a renewal from a desperate man: "Let his flesh become fresh with youth [*na'ar*], Let him return to the days of his youthful [*'alma*] vigor" (Job 33:25). An *'alma* should be like Rebekah—eager to serve, able to work, and compassionate with other people.

Bethulah

The word *bethulah* is normally translated "virgin." While that may not be an exact translation, the word does seem to connote the idea. The rape of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is useful in understanding the idea conveyed by the word. Tamar was the daughter of King David, the half-sister of Amnon. Amnon became obsessed with Tamar and lured her into his bedchambers, feigning illness. Despite her pleas, he raped her. Then, instead of taking her as a wife, as the law prescribed, he sent her away.

At the time of the incident, Tamar wore "a long robe with sleeves, for thus were the virgin daughters of the king dressed" (2 Sam 13:18). Bergen suggests David "rewarded his virgin daughters' sexual purity" by providing such a garment.¹³ Keeping their virginity provided the best opportunities for marriage.

Because of the rape, Tamar apparently lost her status as a *bethulah*.¹⁴ This is evident as she tore her robe. Arnold reflects that her robe "signified her status as an unmarried princess (2

⁹ Peter C. Craigie, Psalm 1–50, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2004), 219.

¹⁰ NIDOTTE, s. v. "alumim."

¹¹ The chapter uses several words to describe Rebekah. In addition to *'alma*, she is described as a *na'ara* ("young woman") and a *betulah* ("maiden"). She is also called an *isba* ("woman"). Apparently, all of these terms applied to Rebekah.

¹² NIDOTTE, s. v. "alumim."

¹³ Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, 392.

¹⁴ NIDOTTE, s. v. "bethula."

Sam 13:18). Once she tears it, the robe symbolizes the ruin of her life."¹⁵ Finding a suitable husband would be difficult for her after losing her maidenhood. Even so, Walton does not believe "virgin" adequately represents what it meant by bethulah. He explains three criteria required for the label: age, marital status, and sexual status. The bethulah was a young woman past the age of puberty. While "adolescence" does not do justice to the Hebrew understanding, Walton suggests that it is the closest English equivalent to the idea of her age. A bethulah also was defined by her single status. A bethulah could be betrothed, but a married woman would normally not be referred to as a bethulah.¹⁶

Bethulah also suggested the sexual status of a girl. The word is not always used for a virgin. For example, Esther apparently is a bethulah even after her night with the king (Esther 2:19). She does not appear to lose her status as bethulah until the king takes her as his wife and makes her his queen. Nevertheless, as Walton notes, "at least certain types of sexual activity preclude one's being considered a bethulah." He suggests a girl's reputation may be more the point of the word.¹⁷

To be a bethulah implied purity and innocence. In the time of Judges, Jephthah made a vow that he would sacrifice to the Lord the first thing to come out of the door of his house. Tragically his daughter, a bethulah, ran out to greet him. She asked for two months to go to the mountains and mourn her maidenhood before her father carried out his vow (Judges 11:29–40). Job claimed that he had never looked upon a bethulah with lust (Job 31:1). Jeremiah metaphorically described Israel's years of bethulah as a time of unfaithfulness to Yahweh (Jer. 18:13–14; 31:21). He highlighted the tragedy of a young woman being unfaithful during her adolescent years.

Bahur

Jeremiah cried out that he was "weary" of holding in his message about the "wrath of the Lord" (Jer 6:11). God's answer to him was that he would pour the message out on all people, young and old: "the children in the street," "the gatherings of young men," "husband and wife," "elderly and very aged" (Jer. 6:11). The "gathering of young men" is the bahurim. Bahur describes a young man past puberty but not yet married. Walton suggests that "the bahur represents the most robust and energetic—the hope represented in the next generation."¹⁸

The Book of First Samuel calls young Saul a bahur when God chose him as king (9:2). Bahur is combined with the word tob [good], a phrase the ESV renders "a handsome young man" (1 Sam 9:2). Bergen suggests a more literal translation would be "chosen and good,"¹⁹ and Tsumura prefers "young and good."²⁰ Tsumura finds this a description of Saul's nature and personality as much as his appearance.²¹

The book of Ecclesiastes instructs the bahur to "rejoice, O young man [bahur], in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth [bahurote] (Eccl 11:9). Murphy cautions the reader not to misunderstand this as a "call to hedonism."²² While the author of Ecclesiastes celebrates the blessings of youth, he calls the bahur to see it as a fleeting time, followed quickly by age and death.²³ That leads the author to call the bahur to "remember also your Creator in the days of your youth [bahurote], before the evil days come . . ." (Eccl 12:1). Appropriate life for the bahur involves giving careful attention to the creator.

¹⁵ Bill T. Arnold, 1 & 2 Samuel, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 564.

¹⁶ NIDOTTE, s. v. "bethula." In this entry, Walton further notes: "In Judg 21:11–12 a contrast is drawn between nāšîm (wives) who had had sexual relations and betûlôt who had not. One might then infer that a young girl who becomes an 'iššâ (wife) ceases to be a betûlâ."

¹⁷ NIDOTTE, s. v. "bethula."

¹⁸ NIDOTTE, s. v. "bahur."

¹⁹ Bergen, 1, 2 Samuel, 120.

²⁰ Tsumura, The First Book of Samuel, 264.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Roland E. Murphy, Word Biblical Commentary: Ecclesiastes, vol. 23A, ed. David A. Hubbard. Note: Young references Plato, Alcibiades 1: 121, and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books, 1992), 116.

²³ Ibid., 118.

In Saul, we see both the promise of bahur and the failure. The time of youth seems to be a time in which an intimate connection with God is both possible and required. It is also a time in which the danger of folly is significant.

Yeled

Like na'ar, yeled (or the feminine yaldah) can refer to a person from infancy to an unmarried young adult.²⁴ In certain instances, the Old Testament uses yeled to discuss youths. For example, Jewish exiles Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah were yeladim (Dan 1:4). Young points out that Persian youths began their education at age fourteen.²⁵ Miller argues, "It is reasonable to assume that the Babylonians commenced the training of young people at about the same age."²⁶ Since Nebuchadnezzar wanted teachable youths, Miller concludes Daniel likely was about fourteen years of age.²⁷

It is unclear why Nebuchadnezzar wanted the young Israelites trained for service. Goldingay suggests possible explanations such as discouraging rebellion, indoctrinating future leaders, or simply developing additional manpower.²⁸ Regardless, the Hebrew youths certainly passed all expectations. Daniel and his friends displayed remarkable spiritual maturity. Goldingay muses, "We wonder what will happen to Israelite youth and Israelite wisdom when it is thrust into exile and taught Chaldean. We hoped that the qualities of those young men would mean that things would turn out all right; now Daniel gives us the first concrete indication that it will indeed be so, showing himself to be a worthy member of this elite."²⁹ The Old Testament characterizes these yeladim as young men who were experiencing the presence and power of God (Dan 1:9, 17).

A contrary example of yeled occurs when Rehoboam succeeded his father Solomon to the throne of Israel. Rehoboam rejected the advice of his father's older counselors in favor of "the young men [yeladim] who had grown up with him (1 Kings 12:10a). Their advice was rash: "Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,' thus shall you say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.'" (1 Kgs 12:10b–11). Rehoboam followed the advice of the yeladim. The kingdom split in two, and Rehoboam lost the Northern tribes.

These yeladim were not likely teenagers. Even so, House noted, "Like Rehoboam, they are young, ambitious, proud, and insecure."³⁰ The story includes a clear warning against the folly of youth.

Youth in the New Testament

As with the Old Testament, the New Testament offers glimpses of a biblical understanding of youth. New Testament authors use several different words to describe the situation of being young. While the New Testament does not offer the breadth of discussion found in the Old Testament, a number of important concepts appear in the passages.

Pais

The word pais is a general reference to a child, male or female,³¹ and is used with some

²⁴ NIDOTTE, s. v. "yeled." The terms refers to an unmarried adult every time in the Old Testament except one. In Ruth 1:5, Naomi's two sons who were both married when they died are referred to as yeladey.

²⁵ Edward J. Young, *The Prophecy of Daniel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 42. Note: Young references Plato, *Alcibiades* 1:121.

²⁶ Stephen R. Miller, *Daniel*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 18 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 60.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ John E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 30 (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

³⁰ Paul R. House, *1, 2 Kings*, *New American Commentary*, vol. 8 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 182.

³¹ *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis (NIDNTTE)*, 2nd ed., s. v. "pais."

frequency in the New Testament.³² Hippocrates suggested a child of up to fourteen years could be referred to as a *pais*, though how universally that standard applied is unclear.³³ A *pais* brought the five loaves and two fish to Jesus (John 6:9). Jesus called the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, *pais* when he raised her from the dead (Luke 8:54).³⁴

Twelve-year-old Jesus is also called *pais* (Luke 2:40,43). Luke presented Jesus as an infant, detailing his birth, presentation in the temple, and circumcision. But Luke has something different in mind as he describes the trip of Jesus with His family to Jerusalem for Passover. Bock said, "It is not an infancy account since Jesus is on the edge of adulthood as far as the ancients are concerned."³⁵ While the custom of Bar Mitzvah began after the time of Jesus,³⁶ Stein claims, "At the age of thirteen a Jewish boy became obligated to observe the law."³⁷ Bock concurs, explaining that while twelve-year-old boys could receive instruction concerning vows, "they are not responsible for them until age thirteen."³⁸

Through some confusion, Jesus was not with either of His parents when they began the voyage home, a fact they did not discover until they had traveled for a day. They immediately returned to Jerusalem, and, after some searching, found Him in the temple, listening to the teachers and responding to their questions (Luke 2:43–45). The custom of the time required a *pais* to be trained in such a way—by asking and answering questions.³⁹ However, Jesus' insights astounded those who heard Him. Apparently, the oversight of Jesus by His parents was because they were used to Jesus being where He was supposed to be.⁴⁰ They did not understand that the appropriate place for Jesus was in His Father's house (Luke 2:49).

Luke provides this one episode from Jesus' childhood to give readers a glimpse of Him as He prepared to become a Jewish man. In the closing words of the story, Luke wrote, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Geldenhuys points out that this verse serves as a summary of Jesus' years as a young man.⁴¹ Luke had presented Jesus as the perfect child. Here, he gives us an understanding of Jesus as He grew to manhood. As Geldenhuys wrote, "There is a big difference between the perfection of a child and that of an adult—the difference between perfect innocence and perfect holiness."⁴²

Parthenos

At the close of his third missionary journey, Paul visited Philip, one of the seven, in Caesarea. Luke explains that Philip had four unmarried daughters with the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9). The girls were called *parthenia*—a word typically translated "virgins." However, in the ancient world *parthenos* was not exclusively used to refer to a virgin. A more exact translation might be something like "maiden."⁴³ Because virginity was prized in the ancient world, a young maiden would have been assumed to be a virgin. And, indeed, the word seemed to take on that implication. Hamilton points out, "Parthenos is derived from *par* ('past') and *then* ('growing'), that is, a young woman who has ceased to grow. She is, therefore, adult and

³² The Greek word *teknon* is also translated "child" although generally used in a parent/child relationship. Paul also uses the word metaphorically to describe his relationship with Timothy, his true *teknon* in the faith (1 Tim 1:2). Jesus used the term to address a paralyzed man who came to him for healing (Matt 9:2), and when addressing His disciples (Mark 10:24). NIDNTTE, 2nd ed., s. v. "teknon."

³³ NIDNTTE, 2nd ed., s. v. "pais."

³⁴ Luke also calls her by the diminutive *paidos*—"little girl"—in 8:51.

³⁵ Darrell L. Bock, Luke 1:1–9:50, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 259.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 264.

³⁷ Robert H. Stein, Luke, New American Commentary, vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 121.

³⁸ Bock, Luke 1:1–9:50, 264.

³⁹ Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 127.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ NIDNTTE, 2nd ed., s. v. "parthenos."

marriageable."⁴⁴

When the angel appeared to Mary to announce she would bear the Son of God, Mary is identified as a parthenos (Luke 1:34). Luke is clear that she was a virgin by employing the phrase "I have not known a man" (Luke 1:34).

Mary was probably a teenager at this time. Stein suggests she was no older than fifteen and likely closer to thirteen as this was "the normal age for betrothal."⁴⁵ God chose Mary for the honor of bearing His Son. One should not view Mary as being worthy of the honor God gave her. Nevertheless, Luke holds Mary up as an example of faith. Geldenhuys explains,

Mary submits herself completely to God's will This was no trivial matter to her Mary was placed in an extremely difficult and even mortally dangerous position. For she clearly realized how radically it would influence her social position and especially her relation to Joseph if she should become pregnant before her marriage.⁴⁶

Despite the risks, Mary submitted herself to God and praised Him for His goodness, not only in bestowing this honor on her but also in sending the promised Messiah to redeem Israel (Luke 1:46–55).

Neaniskos

The word normally translated "youth" in the New Testament is *neaniskos*. *Neaniskos* is derived from the word *neos*, meaning "new" and usually means a youth or a young man.

In Acts 20, a *neanias* named Eutychus fell asleep during one of Paul's long sermons. Bruce speculates, "Perhaps he had put in a hard day's work from dawn to sunset, and now in the stuffy atmosphere not even the words of an apostle could keep him from falling asleep."⁴⁷ He fell from the third story window. It appears Eutychus was killed, and Paul raised the *neanias* from the dead (Acts 20:9). He is referred to as a child [*paida*] later in the story (Acts 20:12), so it seems likely Eutychus was young, perhaps a young teenager.⁴⁸

Mark wrote of a *neaniskos* who, on the night of Jesus' arrest, followed Jesus clad only in a linen cloth. Some of the church fathers believed the *neaniskos* was Mark himself.⁴⁹ When soldiers grabbed him, the *neaniskos* lost the cloth and ran away naked (Mark 14:51). Lane suggests that the language Mark used "designates young men who are exceptionally strong and valiant, or faithful and wise."⁵⁰ He identified this as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Amos 2:16: "And he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day" (ESV). Even the valiant young men were scattered the night of Jesus' arrest.

Paul uses a form of the word when he warns Timothy to "flee youthful [*neōterikos*] passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace . . ." (2 Tim 2:22). Mounce believes that while "youthful passions" could include "the sensual lusts of youth,"⁵¹ The context better fits a "youthful temperament and the possible difficulty of avoiding arguments."⁵² Such issues seem more easily associated with "faith, love, and peace" (2 Tim 2:22).

John offers insight into the role and expectations of the *neaniskos* when he addresses the church as children, fathers, and young men in 1 John 2,

I am writing to you, little children,⁵³ because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men [*neaniskoi*], because you have overcome the evil one. I

⁴⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 355.

⁴⁵ Stein, Luke, 82.

⁴⁶ Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, 77–78.

⁴⁷ F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 385.

⁴⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 326.

⁴⁹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 527.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 533.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Teknia*, the diminutive form of *teknion*.

write to you, children,⁵⁴ because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men [neaniskoi], because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:12–14).

Twice John repeated that the neaniskoi have "overcome the evil one" (vv. 13, 14). He casts the young men as warriors. Because they are forgiven, they can overcome the devil. Stott writes, "The forgiveness of past sins must be followed by deliverance from sin's present power, justification by sanctification. So in both messages to the young men it is asserted that they have overcome the evil one. Their conflict has become a conquest."⁵⁵

In verse 14, John explains why the neaniskoi have overcome: they are "strong," and "the word of God abides" in them (1 John 2:14). Kruse indicates that the reason they are strong is because the word of God dwells in them.⁵⁶ He writes, "Believers' victory over the evil one [is] achieved because God himself abides in them and his Son, Jesus Christ, protects them, and as a result, they are able to overcome the evil one through their faith in God."⁵⁷

Paul told Timothy, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example..." (1 Tim. 4:12). Timothy was a young pastor when Paul wrote this to him, likely in his late twenties or early thirties.⁵⁸ Still, the instructions seem the appropriate biblical call to neaniskoi. They are to live as examples of faith.

Dr. Bearden concludes his paper with the following findings and implications (cited below in full).

Findings

This study has examined the language used in the Old and New Testaments to describe youth. While not exhaustive, the data covered the major terms, their typical meaning, and the implications for understanding youth. Given the data, what follows is an attempt to shape a theology of youth.

First, the biblical understanding of youth does not seem to correspond to the American idea of adolescence. The terms used to describe youth are not precise as to the age to which they refer. In one sense, youth can be seen, not as a stage of life, but merely a general descriptor. A youth is one who is young. This certainly would fit the Hebrew words *na'ar* and *yeled*, and the Greek word *pais*. Nevertheless, a full study of the concepts can lead to a more exact biblical definition. Following concepts of the Hebrew words *'alma*, *bethulah*, and *bahur*, and Greek words *parthenos* and *neaniskos*, youth can be thought of as a time beginning in puberty and reaching to marriage or around thirty years of age. The Bible shows little difference in the way it describes an unmarried fifteen-year-old and an unmarried twenty-five-year-old. Still, this definition is vague of necessity. But this second description of youth seems more helpful.

Second, from a biblical perspective, youths are adults. They have the responsibility and authority of adults. David had the responsibility of taking food to his brothers on the battlefield (1 Sam 17:17–23). Rebecca chose to leave home to become the wife of Isaac (Gen 24:58–59). Saul became a king (1 Sam 10:1).

More than that, God appears to give adult responsibility to youths. He called Jeremiah to be His prophet (Jer 1:6–10). He chose Mary to bear the Messiah (Luke 1:30–31). At age twelve, Jesus was at the brink of adulthood and goes to the temple to prepare instead of leaving Jerusalem with His parents (Luke 2:46–49).

The fact that youth were viewed as adults does not indicate they were not subject to the authority of their parents or of the community. The fact that David's father sent him to his brothers (1 Sam 17:17–23) demonstrates his father's authority in David's life. Similarly, when Joseph went to find his brothers; he was doing the bidding of his father (Gen 37:12–14). Peter

⁵⁴ Paidia.

⁵⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 102.

⁵⁶ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 93.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁵⁸ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 258.

instructs the neaniskoi to submit to the elders in the church (1 Pet 5:5). The biblical idea of adulthood does not seem to be incompatible with authority.

Third, the Bible presents youth as particularly vulnerable to youthful folly. Youth certainly do not always act wisely or with restraint. For example, Shechem showed no restraint with his feelings toward Dinah (Gen 34:1–2). The yeladim who advised Rehoboam showed no wisdom (1 Kgs 12:10–11). While youth should be seen as adults, they are adults without experience. They are in need of the wisdom of the family and the community to guide them in life.

Paul instructed Timothy to "flee youthful passions" (2 Timothy 2:22). David looked back on his younger days and begged God to forgive him for his sins of his youth (Psalms 25:7). Youth may struggle with sexual temptation, anger, pride, aggression, and a host of other temptations. This is not to say that these temptations are unique to youth. Adults of all ages are certainly vulnerable to the lure of temptation. Nevertheless, the Bible presents youth as particularly in danger of life-destroying choices.

Finally, the Bible presents youth as those who should be full of passionate faith. Examples of youth who demonstrate this passion abound. Mary submitted to God to bear the Messiah (Luke 1:38). David killed a giant (1 Sam 17:48–51). Jeremiah became a young prophet (Jeremiah 1:9–10). John described the neaniskoi of the first-century church as those who had overcome the devil (1 John 2:13–14). Youth is a time to look to your creator (Ecclesiastes 12:1), to allow the word of God to dwell in you (1 John 2:14), and to celebrate the goodness of God (Luke 1:46–55; Psalms 68:25). Youth in the Bible are not incompetent children. They are not limited in their abilities. They are encouraged to let no one look down on them, but to be an example of faith (1 Tim 4:12). That is the biblical description of youth and that should form our theology of youth.

Implications for the Faith Community

To be relevant, theology must be integrated into culture. While a careful examination of the implications of the theology of youth is beyond the scope of this paper, some suggestions are in order. First, the faith community should begin to view adolescents in a more adult capacity. Culturally and legally, adolescents are minors and the church bears a greater responsibility for them than those of the legal age of majority. The church must anticipate risks and plan for a safe environment.⁵⁹ Even so, the faith community should begin to view adolescents differently. Greater expectations for participation and leadership will help adolescents to overcome the cultural stigma of being a grown adult with no adult authority or responsibility. Placing adolescents in a youth ministry ghetto with no interaction with other adults is unlikely to help them develop.

The faith community must view adolescents as part of a family unit and should include opportunities for families to worship, recreate, and study together. However, this must not preclude young adults from participating in the broader faith community, engaging with their peers, or investing in younger members of the congregation. Such experiences are both culturally important and helpful in developing them as adults of faith.

The faith community must provide youth with significant role models to aid them in gaining experience as adults. It should not be surprising that research has indicated that youth who have heart connections with at least five godly adults have the best opportunity to develop a mature faith.⁶⁰ Youth group leaders can certainly serve as these role models, but churches must be sure they are selecting youth leaders who are good examples of passionate Christian adulthood, rather than merely individuals who enjoy playing with kids.

The faith community needs to address the challenge posed to adolescents and young adults by youthful folly. In a culture in which sexual promiscuity is expected, youth need

⁵⁹ Jack Crabtree, *Better Safe than Sued: Keeping Your Students and Ministry Alive* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2009), 27–40.

⁶⁰ Jack Crabtree, *Better Safe than Sued: Keeping Your Students and Ministry Alive* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2009), 27–40.

⁸¹Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith: Youth Worker Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 57.

help understanding the dangers of youthful folly. The faith community needs to offer real-life strategies for fleeing inappropriate passions—whether they relate to money, anger, sexuality, or pointless arguments. We need to help youth to pursue peace, purity, and life.

Finally, the faith community must call youth to passionate faith. The church must not be content with church attendance or simplistic answers. The faith community must raise the level of expectation of youth to be true examples of passionate faith.

Dr. Bearden's findings and implications are consistent with the notion that youth are to be treated with respect in the church and given the status of not just "leaders of tomorrow" but as "leaders of today." It stands to reason that if God, Jesus, Paul and other great men of the scriptures could not only "Love," but "Call," and "Use" youth as tools in the Kingdom of our Lord then so should we today. They may not have great experience, but when committed to the faith, they can be trained and equipped as commanded in Eph. 4:11-13, to do works of ministry and be mature in their faith. There is no "age limit" cited in Eph. 4. The questions the church must ask itself are: "How are we as parents and as a church family going to treat our youth? How much are we willing to invest in them for equipping and training to reach their own generation?" The question of "integration" and "sex/age segregation" are valid issues that need to be addressed in local church youth ministry. The truth is, and seen in Dr. Bearden's study, that both familial and congregational integration are supported in scripture, along with "developmental" discipleship of youth in both sex and age-segregated programs. It is not either/or, but both/and. Creating a "youth ghetto" by separating the children and youth from families and congregational worship is certainly not only unwise but dangerous for the maturing/modeling motif of discipleship taught throughout scripture. However, equally as devastating for the church is the idea that developmental specialization leadership for youth ministry should be replaced with a solely "total integration" of the youth and eliminating the use of theological-Biblical and strategically trained youth pastors or directors.

VI. Concluding Personal Remarks.

Global Church Youth Ministry – Past, Present, Future.

Local Church, pastor-led Youth Ministry – an American anomaly or a Global mandate?

I was a full-time local church youth "pastor" in the U.S. for 30 years and have trained full-time youth "pastors" for the past 27 years for U.S. churches and churches in foreign countries through teaching seminars, conferences, Bible Colleges, and Seminaries. So, I have a really good perspective on the development of "youth pastor led" local church youth ministry. What I mean by "pastor-led" is when a youth ministry is led by a theologically trained youth leader; formally trained in both conservative evangelical theology, and in a sound Biblical strategy of youth ministry. This training will typically include a bachelor's degree at a Bible college or seminary along with a youth ministry major or minor with 15 to 30 credits in youth ministry courses. Now, having said that, one need only go back in time to the early 1960's to find that person and position functioning in the United States. Prior to the early 1960's, faithful volunteers led 95% of the local church youth ministries. And, these volunteers had very limited, if any, Biblical/theological training, and almost zero youth ministry strategic training. Any youth ministry training was typically gained from Sunday school programs offered by denominational Christian education departments. Prior to the late 60's most of the successful youth ministry was done by para-church ministries such as Young Life, Youth for Christ, Christian Endeavor, Miracle Book Club, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Campus Crusade, Intervarsity, Chi Alpha, and a few others, and thank God for them. However, these groups were not supported by or sponsored by local churches or denominations, and frankly, they existed because the church had failed to respond to the needs of the new emerging "adolescent" teenager rage that started in western countries about 1945, post-WWII.

In the 1960's and 1970's the youth pastor position was **THE** most sought-after career job by local churches. The success of the para-church youth ministries mentioned above, in

reaching and discipling the teenage culture, finally forced the church to see their mistake in ignoring this new phenomenon called "teenagers" and thus churches and denominations jumped on the bandwagon of reaching this young generation. And, wow... it worked! Consider that in 1965 there were NO conservative evangelical schools that offered a full degree in youth ministry to TODAY when we have more than 250 Christian institutions that offer from a BA, MA, MDiv., DMin., and even a Ph.D. in youth or youth and family ministry.

Regrettably, today (21st century) in the U.S., the position of a full-time theologically trained youth pastor is being criticized and maligned as allegedly being "past its day" and "obsolete." The fact is this is NOT true! [see a recent (2016) Barna research report on the success of U.S. youth ministry; <https://www.barna.com/research/the-priorities-challenges-and-trends-in-youth-ministry/#>]. On the contrary, I would suggest what **SHOULD** be "past its day" and "obsolete" is much of today's **BAD** pastor-led local church youth ministry. Namely, that being done by many current-day "youth pastors" who are; liberal/progressive theologically, social-justice driven, entertainment-oriented, Biblically anemic, evangelism/discipleship starved, politically correct, gender/sexual identity issue confused, and who lower the bar for ministry involvement by youth and also buy into the "everything small" and "less is better" mentality. My experience is that many evangelical parents of teens today are literally CRYING about the fact that their children are not being given the same wonderful opportunities they themselves had while participating in a theologically solid, family balanced and aggressively evangelistic youth ministry led by a youth pastor who raised rather than lowered the "bar" of challenge and expectations for the youth. Don't get me wrong, there are still many good youth pastors "out there" doing great work, but I am afraid their "kind" is sadly dwindling in numbers.

My point is this; outside the borders of the U.S., in virtually every non-western country and region to which I have traveled, churches and denominations are literally **begging** for theologically and Biblical youth ministry-trained leaders. GCYM and other similar youth ministry training organizations receive many requests each year to come train local church youth leaders, both informally and through formal theological degree programs. Why, because good theologically sound, Biblically-based, local church relational youth ministry done with excellence **STILL WORKS!**

I would ask, why is this "outdated traditional" strategy of youth ministry working in non-western cultures and allegedly, as some propose, "no longer" working in the U.S.? I think the answer is that perhaps we have "left our first love" of aggressive and challenging local church youth ministry that was born in the 60's and 70's; not the methods, but the spirit, creativity, courage, commitment, counter-culture challenge, sacrifice and drive that produced youth who were not afraid to "go against the grain" of pop-culture and its politically-correct progressive agenda and win their generation to Christ... no matter what it took! We should be producing youth like those models God gave us in scripture; David, Joseph, Samuel, Josiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Esther, Isaac, Mary, Mark, Timothy, and numerous other youth in the Bible who God, Jesus, and Paul trusted and used to impact their generation as young teenagers. Where are these youth in today's **church**? The fact is, these youth are **in** the church today, but why are they not being challenged and equipped to serve and minister as these teenagers in scripture?

Two conclusions... let's get back to **GREAT** biblical youth ministry and let's multiply our efforts to "Train the Trainers" of youth leaders globally! There are **2.5 BILLION** youth between the ages of 10-29 who still do not know Christ as Savior and Lord! That is **NOT** acceptable!

© Dr. Randy Smith, President/Founder – Great Commission Youth Ministry