

Theology of Youth Ministry

In the world of Christian Education

Andrew A. Boucher

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Dr. Chapman Clark, Professor

Abridged without examples.

My theology of youth ministry in a Christian school setting is built on the biblical-historical foundation of the partnership of God ordained institutions to provide for the vocational and spiritual training of the young person. I also find a biblical-historical precedent of God's use of mentors in partnership with mid to late adolescents in their training. Finally, I see the biblical-historical record shows that God has a tremendous value for adolescents and has created them with zeal, ambition and a sense of adventure so that He can use them to accomplish His will on earth. In summary, my theology of youth ministry is as follows:

I believe that God has ordained the family and the church as the primary institutions for the spiritual and vocational education of children; I believe that God has historically used mentors to train up young people for His Kingdom; I also believe that God values mid-adolescents and that He created them with energy, zeal, ambition and a sense of adventure in order to carry forth the work of His Kingdom; and finally, I believe that cultural relevance is crucial to any youth ministry. Because of my beliefs, my ministry to youth in the arena of Christian education will partner with the home and the local church. In doing so, I believe that we should build upon the foundation laid by our students' parents and home churches to mentor our students in the use of their youthful energies in order to further the Kingdom of God on earth and to provide a lifelong benefit to the local church. In doing so, we will seek to remain culturally relevant in our means and methods of ministering to, mentoring and releasing the mid-to-late adolescents who attend our Christian school.

On the following pages I will expand on my theology of youth ministry in a Christian high school and describe how I am working toward implementing my theology through our Student Ministries Department at Colorado Springs Christian High School (CSCS).

I believe that any education or ministry of children and adolescents begins with the parents and church flow from our belief that the Bible sets up the family and the church as the primary institutions of influence on children. From my knowledge of Scripture, there are three basic institutions¹ that God has ordained for mankind:

1. The family (Genesis 1-3)— *to model the image of God and the family of God to the world, reproduction & socialization*
2. The civil government (Romans 13)— *law & order, protection of God-given rights.*
3. The church (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 4:11)— *advancement of the Kingdom of God on earth through evangelism and discipleship*

The family was the first human institution ordained by God and God very specifically has given parents the responsibilities for the upbringing and education of their children. The family is designed by God as the agent of *reproduction and socialization* and to model the image of God on the human race on earth. God has designed the family as a sacred institution in which His image is most directly seen in marriage of the father and mother; through which the world sees the example of the Family of God; in

¹ This discussion on the three God ordained institutions comes from a paper I wrote for our Bible Department entitled *The Role of Christian Education in the Family and the Local Church*.

which children learn the laws of nature, to deal with sin and forgiveness, the laws of reaping and sowing, in which children are raised to themselves be productive reproducing citizens of this world, and so on.

The best examples of God's instructions to parents and parents teaching their children as found in Deuteronomy and Proverbs². Though these verses only give us a glimpse of life and education in the Jewish family and God's instructions regarding educating children, they set an important tone as to the education of children.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives his farewell instructions to the Jews before he dies and they enter the Promised Land. Near the end of his instructions, Moses commanded the people of Israel, saying, "Take to heart all the word I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law"³. In chapters 4 and 6, Moses stresses to the people to teach, remind, inculcate, and cause their children to understand who God is and what God has done for Israel. "Impress them on your children," Moses commands them in Chapter 6. "Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up"⁴.

King Solomon, models parent education by giving his son instructions in the book of Proverbs. He opens his guide to living for his son by saying, "Listen, my son, to your father's instructions and do not forsake your mother's teaching"⁵. Most of the proverbs are lessons from a father to a son, but the last chapter also includes lessons from a mother to her son. Moses' instructions in Deuteronomy focus mainly on spiritual issues, Solomon & Lemuel's mother provide a more temporal guidance to living a wise and godly life on earth.

Some would say that the entire responsibility of educating one's children both spiritually and otherwise is solely the parents. That could be argued, but there seems to be a quiet underlying assumption of teachers and mentors outside the family in addition to the parents throughout the Old and New Testaments. This is more prominent in the New Testament especially when there is an understanding of synagogue schools that young Jewish children went to as they grew up. The historical record shows that these schools developed over the centuries to assist Jewish parents in teaching the Torah to their children which was essentially their formal religious education⁶. In his letters to Gentile believers Paul also mentions teachers and school to those who were familiar with Greek culture which had an emphasis on education⁷.

It is the parents' responsibility to bring up their children in the ways of the Lord and to provide training for them to be productive contributors to society. However, I don't see that the Bible is explicit

² My biblical research on the family comes from an early Youth Ministry Practicum paper entitled *What the Bible says about "youth" and "youth ministry"*.

³ Deut. 32:46 (NIV)

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:7, (NIV)

⁵ Proverbs 1:8, (NIV)

⁶ During the Maccabean Period of Jewish history, "Simon ben Shetah, the leader of the Pharisees, founded schools for boys of sixteen and seventeen to promote the study of the Scriptures". (Holman Bible Publishers)

⁷ see Galatians 3:24; Romans 2:20

that the parents are not to share this responsibility with others outside the family who can provide quality biblical and vocational training. Frankly, I don't see that it is possible to make a strong argument on either side, but it seems to me that all would agree that the training of the child must originate from the parents and that regardless of who does the training, the parents are ultimately responsible to have their children trained well.

The second institution that we see God establishing is that of the civil government. The civil government is God's agent on earth designed and delegated by God to keep *order* on the earth. Human government is designed by God to *protect and defend the rights* and freedoms that He gave to mankind. It is not important to spend a great deal of time discussing the civil government in this paper, but it is important to recognize its institution at this point in my discussion.

The final institution we see that God sets up in the Scriptures is the local church. The Church is the community of God's ambassadors of His kingdom on earth⁸. The role of the church is to bear *witness* to the Good News of Jesus Christ on this world that all people might have an opportunity to know God and the salvation of Jesus Christ. The church is then charged to *disciple* those who believe in Jesus and are saved and to teach them to obey everything that Jesus commanded His disciples⁹.

Schools have historically developed as outgrowths of families training their children for vocations and churches training their youth people in the doctrines of the church (catechism). For ages parents either trained their own children in the family vocation or they made arrangements with other families to train their children in an alternative vocation. For a period in history, this developed into the system of apprentices, journeymen and masters as well as the more noble system of pages, squires, knights and lords. On the other hand, schools have also grown out of a variety of religious traditions where the religious community provides religious training for their youth—this is best exemplified by the three great monotheistic world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

As today's western cultures and societies have evolved in the last 200 years, education has become a hybrid of the families' vocational training and the religious communities' religious training. Particularly in America, both early American families and the church founded a fourth institution—community education of children—to be a social benefit. The first public schools in America were established by the Puritans & Pilgrims in New England¹⁰. As America grew, expanded westward and prospered, this fourth institution began to be coordinated by the government. Originally schools in the west were established by citizen groups to the benefit of their children. As governments were organized and schools grew and education became of higher social premium and needed regular funding, schools

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:20

⁹ Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Acts 1:8.

¹⁰ First public school promotes Christianity. Massachusetts Puritans found the first "free grammar school" in North America explicitly to teach religion. Puritan schools reflect the religious faith and values of a homogeneous community. Puritan minister John Cotton stresses "zeale is but a wilde-fire without knowledge." The Puritans' goal is to have a devout and well-educated community. Even in the 19th and early 20th century, U.S. public schools will remain *de facto* Christian institutions (1635: First Public School), (John Cotton). Also see *America's Godly Heritage* [video] (Barton).

came under the auspices of the local government. As local, state and federal governments grew in size and power and became increasingly liberal during the 1930's, '40's and '50's, so did the power of the government over schools and the curriculum in the schools. During the late 20th Century, formal religion and religious teachings were forcibly removed from the public school system¹¹.

So western civilization has developed a culture in which the vocational training of children and much of their socialization has been given to the local schools. In America, that development has long been a part of our American culture and was embedded in Christian socialization and religious thought and ethics. Therefore, the secularization that our increasing liberal governments brought to our schools posed a difficult issue for American Christian parents. Do they leave their children in an increasingly secular training environment that has come under the influence of a secular-humanist system of thought and ethics and rely again on the family and the church to provide the religious and ethical socialization of their children or do they begin an entirely new brand of education that combines the more traditional American religious combination of vocational and religious education. Thus the Christian school movement of today shifted into high gear.

Recognition must be given to a number of Christian branches or denominations who have and continue to provide this combination of vocational and religious training for their children. They have set the model for the newer movement of "evangelical" Christians to establish their own versions of Christian schools. Many new evangelical Christian schools have followed the traditional models of the Catholic, Reform and Lutheran churches in starting schools in the basements of their churches.

Building on the American tradition of education and the model of older Christian denominations, a new unique feature in the modern rise of Christian schools is the multi-denominational approach to schools. This approach has at times proven difficult, yet very successful when schools are established to support the general Christian community (usually focusing on the Protestant evangelical version of Christianity to the exclusion of the Orthodox, Roman Catholic or Lutheran versions) in teaching shared values and doctrines. Christian schools have always been more than Christian people teaching "secular" topics such as math, reading, writing, the arts and the sciences. Christian education has always been about the dispensing and infusing of God's truth not only through these "liberal arts", but very specifically teaching young Christian children to "understand and obey the things Jesus taught" His disciples so that they may live godly lives, serve as witnesses of Jesus Christ to the lost¹², and teach others how to live godly lives¹³.

In summary, if the role of the parents has historically been to socialize and train their children vocationally; and if part of the historic role of the church is to train their children in their religious beliefs; and if western society and specifically American society has historically created a separate institution to assist in accomplishing these things, then a role of Christian education is to be the delegates of the Christian family. As delegates, the Christian school assists the parents in the socialization and vocational training of their children so that they enter the post high school world as

¹¹ (Barton)

¹² Acts 1:8

¹³ 2 Timothy 2:2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17

productive godly Christian citizens in the world of business and in their calling to raise a family. The role of Christian education is to provide religious training so that the local community of believers have young people who are strong in the tenants of their common faith in Jesus Christ and are equipped and trained in how to serve and participate in the local church as the local church works to advance the Kingdom of God on this earth.

Christian education is the servant partner of the Christian family and the local church. Christian schools are to serve the community of local churches by preparing, equipping and training Christian young people who can think, create, analyze, process and produce from God's perspective. Christian schools train up young people who are well trained in the Spiritual Disciplines and the accurate study of Scripture as well as vocationally and liberally trained as productive Christian citizens. The church looks to Christian schools to produce their best and brightest preachers, teachers, evangelists, prophets, apostles, artist, leaders, and servants. The church looks to Christian schools to produce the most excellent of business leaders and in a democracy to produce critical thinking politicians. All so that the work place is governed by the prosperous principals of the Gospel of Christ and the government is run by Scriptural principles resulting in peace and prosperity. Finally, the young men and women from Christian schools marry, have kids and raise up godly men and women to fuel a new generation.

I believe that it is consistent with the biblical-historical model that our ministry to students in a Christian high school needs to stress the mentoring of students. The Bible provides many examples of mentoring in the training of young people to do God's work¹⁴. Some notable examples of this include Moses and Joshua; Elijah & Elisha; Barnabas and John Mark; and Paul and Timothy & Titus. In each of these stories, men of God took on the cause of a younger man of God and championed his cause, gave him life experience and pointed him to God.

I think that in varying degrees these biblical examples of mentoring provide us with the basis for youth ministry—whether church based or otherwise. The role of the mentor/youth minister is to come along side the parents and to build upon the foundation they've laid in the lives of their children. Paul really emphasized this in his writings to Timothy: "I am reminded of your sincere faith that dwelt first in your grandmother...and your mother...and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well. Continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed...and how from your childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings...."¹⁵

When we have a biblical ministry to youth, we need to remember that the primary responsibility of teaching and training is, in fact, the parents. They hold the ultimate responsibility. Because of this, we who are teachers and youth workers should be always cognizant of the parents' wishes regarding their child's (or adolescent's) education—both spiritual and vocational. We are serving these parents at the least and at the most we are partnering with them. As we do so, we need to remember that we are to first honor God in our teaching and part of honoring God is to honor a student's parents—regardless of how the parents are doing or seem to be doing in the raising of the student. This can be a difficult

¹⁴ My biblical research on the mentoring comes from an early Youth Ministry Practicum paper entitled *What the Bible says about "youth" and "youth ministry"*.

¹⁵ 2 Timothy 1:4-5; 3:14-15

challenge in the world of mid-adolescents where my ministry is focused. During this stage in a young person's development, they are essentially practicing being an adult. This means stretching their boundaries and questioning authority. This means examining the issues they assumed were true all their lives to see if what they were taught was in fact real and true. This means testing their faith to see if it is really their faith. When we are partners with parents, we come along side these young people and we reinforce the biblical values and teachings of the home. At the same time we need to make sure that we leave space for difference in biblical and cultural applications that may have been taught at home. We need to be extremely cautious of directly challenging the teachings of parents, but rather encourage students into a dialogue with the Scriptures and their parents. We need to not take over for our students' parents, but to provide reinforcement of a biblical standard and provide examples of how other Christian adults live out their faith. There are times when the parents are absent or have not taught biblical values. Our role continues to be one of caution in that we need all the more to display biblical standards and teachings in our lifestyles. However, sometimes our biblical lifestyles and teachings may contradict that of the students' parents. In such a case, we need seek to teach and challenge our students to discover the truth through a dialogue with the Scriptures as guided by the Holy Spirit while still honoring and respecting their parents.

In Job 32 and 33, Job's young friend Elihu waited for their older three friends to speak wisdom to Job regarding his situation. However, their words were not wise. They spouted knowledge and platitudes and "conventional wisdom", but not necessarily the wisdom of God. As a respectful young person, Elihu waited for the older three to talk and then said this:

Surely it is God's Spirit within people, the breath of the Almighty within them, that makes them intelligent. But sometimes the elders are not wise. Sometimes the aged do not understand justice. So listen to me and let me express my opinion.¹⁶

Elihu was the youngest of Job's friends, but he spoke with the wisdom of Almighty God. So too, this generation, when inspired by God in their spirits have the ability to speak life-giving truth into our world and to be used by God to change the world for His glory. This leads me to the next belief that I have in my theology of youth ministry: God highly values youth and that He created youth with certain characteristics in order to fulfill His plan on earth¹⁷. Throughout history, God has repeatedly used young people to accomplish His work on earth. In the circles of youth ministry, we are very familiar with the stories of young people that God has used to accomplish His will. These young servants of God include Samuel who was maybe the youngest at 9 or 10 years old; David who killed Goliath when he was 14-16 years old; Jeremiah who didn't want to prophesy because he was too young (possibly in his late teens); Daniel and his friends who were most likely teenagers when they first arrived in Babylon in Daniel chapter 1; Mary, the mother of Jesus, who historians tell us was probably in her mid teens when she was "found with child"; and, finally, Jesus' disciples who were probably in their late teens or early twenties. These are only to mention a few.

¹⁶ Job 32:8-10 (NLT)

¹⁷ My biblical research on the value God places on youth comes from an early Youth Ministry Practicum paper entitled *What the Bible says about "youth" and "youth ministry"* and from another Practicum paper entitled *Biblical Mentoring*.

God values youth. He speaks highly of the strength and zeal of youth. It seems natural to me that He created youth to be a time of boundless energy, optimism, strength and seeming immortality. Youth are much less cautious than older adults and God has historically used that “reckless abandon” to accomplish His work. This is not necessarily new to those who work in the world of youth, but it is an important observation that shapes what biblical youth ministry should look like. In light of the innocent ambition of youth, we need to release our young people into God’s service. This is maybe more of a discussion of the overall idea of Christian education (whether in a church, school or home setting), but, in order for our youth (our mid-adolescents is my focus here) to do God’s work and be agents of change in their worlds like Samuel, David, Jeremiah, Daniel, Mary and the disciples, we need to lay a foundation for them so that they are amply prepared to stand for God and to serve him in whatever situations they find themselves in when they reach college. Each of these young servants of God had a definite and accurate view of who God was and what He desired and were therefore prepared to hear His call and reckless enough to have the faith to follow it. Their view of God was developed by their parents and teachers as they grew up—in their childhood/pre adolescent years. The emphasis is on pre-teen training, teaching and guidance.

For those who work with these mid-adolescents (whether we are parents, youth pastors, teachers or counselors), as we work with these young servants of God we need to challenge them to be world changers not shelter them, coddle them and try to keep them safe. This may mean sending them to public school, letting them go on missions trips, encouraging them when they want to start radical ministries or Bible studies. We need to let them love the poor and care for the environment and start prayer meetings. We need to help them understand boundaries and how to pick themselves up when they fail. We need to let them go crazy for God now because the older they get the more cautious they will be because they will have bought into this world more, have jobs they might lose, families to take care of and a lot less energy.

Finally, in regards to my theology of youth ministry in a Christian school, I believe that we must do all we can to be culturally knowledgeable and relevant as we work with the mid-adolescents at our school. To do so, I believe that it is important for those who teach the Scriptures to our students and those who are involved in the practical application side of ministry to be well studied and fluent in the current cultural trends of today’s mid-adolescents. Just as any missionary in preparation for their work in a foreign country goes through studies in the culture and language of their target audience, so to must our missionaries to our youth be engaged in knowing and understand the culture and language of our adolescents. In today’s youth culture, I believe that it is in fact more important for adults to understand and find areas of appreciation and acceptance of today’s youth culture rather than to look youthful. The best way to be culturally engaged today is to stay involved and in touch with youth culture as one increases in years. Once a person steps out of the ever changing youth culture it is difficult, but not impossible to re-submerge into their culture. It is not only important to be a student of today’s culture, but also to be immersed in it. Often today’s adults have stepped “out of youth culture”

study and observe Buster and Mosaic culture¹⁸ in order to criticize it rather than to become part of the culture in order to work with and understand and mentor today's youth. I have observed this mostly of older Busters and Baby Boomers.

On the other hand, culture must always be filtered through the eternal and unchanging Truths of Scripture. This has been a balancing act that the church hasn't always done well at. The tendency is to the extremes. the church has either completely pulled out of culture and been completely separate and aloof from that culture and not had an impact on that culture at all or it has completely immersed itself in the culture around it and has diluted the Truths of Scripture so that it may fit in to the culture and thereby lost it's distinctiveness and the power of the Truth it has been entrusted with.

The Apostle Paul set an example of this when he entered into the discussion of religion and philosophy with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill¹⁹. Paul didn't abandon the Truths of Scripture, but as a student of their culture and philosophy, he entered into a conversation with them using their reasoning and aspects of their beliefs to bring them to the Truth of God. In the same way, we need to acquaint ourselves with today's youth culture—it's influences and philosophies. We need to learn to understand things including the thought processes of this generation. Instead of complaining about the influence of media on this generation or bashing postmodernism, we must learn how to use the media to speak the Truth of God to this generation—whether it be using quotes from contemporary movies or songs that speak the Truth or understand the underlying assumptions of postmodernism well enough to use them to the advantage of the Gospel.

I believe that one of the best ways to do this is to continue to speak the Truth and to teach the Truth to our students, but also to give greater voice to the Busters who are entering the world of education and ministry. Busters have a greater understanding of today's Mosaic generation in that Busters are the first "postmodern generation". We also need to give full hearing to our students as they seek to live out their lives as Christians in a postmodern world. Our students think like and understand the thinking of today's youth culture. We need to let them help us understand how to reach their own generation.

I also believe that we need to re-examine what we label as Truth. Truth is Truth and is everlasting; however, many of us and our decades or centuries old denominations and religious backgrounds have taken interpretations and preferences and moved them over into the category of "Truth". We need to re-examine the Scriptures to re-discover "Truth". We need to differentiate between Truth, interpretation of Truth and personal preference. Recent multi-denominational developments and movements (at least in our part of the country) has made this much easier as many churches have moved to define themselves more by what the Bible says rather than along man-made denominational settings. As this trend continues we need to encourage our students along these lines to continue the trend throughout their generation and not become imbedded in a way of doing things.

¹⁸ My references to "Buster" and "Mosaic" and "Boomer" generations as based on David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' book unChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity...and why it matters. (Kinnaman and Lyons)

¹⁹ Acts 17: 18

Those of us who are Busters can model this as our maturing generation has tried to redefine traditional Christianity.

In wrapping up my theology, I think that it is important to keep in mind the setting of my ministry—education. My ministry takes place in a school. Because of this, I need to specifically keep in mind that our primary and distinctive role as a Christian institution is to educate and train mid-adolescents. All mentoring, training, releasing and cultural relevance needs to be done in the context of education. Though it is important that we minister to our student body, our educational job in our Student Ministries Department is to provide a training extension to the biblical education that is provided at our school. In relation to the local church, it is very important to remind ourselves and our students that we are a school and not the church. This is important as it relates to partnering with churches in ministering to and training students. In relation to the rest of the school—especially the academic side of things, the training and releasing of students is important, but must be considerate of the fact that the whole reason these students are under our care is because they are in our school to study math, science, history and so on. In our ambition and enthusiasm, we must continually hold the educational mission of the school up as it's primary mission remembering that we are servants to that mission.

In conclusion, the process of developing this theology of youth ministry has been tremendously helpful to me in making me thinking through what I do at our school; it's theological and philosophical reasons and the practical application of all these reasons. I have found that by the grace of God, it seems there is a lot of biblical support for what we do. This I attribute to my parents, mentors, youth leaders and teachers as well as to the godly men and women who guide our school. Yet, as I have tried to refine my theology of youth ministry, it has provided me an opportunity to become more concise in what I believe, why I do what I do and how I go about it. As a person who is more driven by passion and vision than what is reasonable and normal, it is helpful to consider the why's and the context and the application. All we do needs to have a reason, a defense and a proper place. This theology of youth ministry has helped me see how what I do fits into the overarching realm of Christian education; the raising of children; the purpose of the church and God's plan for mankind.

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