Eutheology: Youth Ministry as Contextual Theology

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Abstract

The separation of youth from the rest of the church is often justified in terms of addressing specific developmental needs. However, this reasoning can also include the tacit assumption that youth are merely immature, on their way to a predetermined *telos* of eventual full participation in the congregation. However, understanding adolescence not only as developmental stage but also as culture helps us to view youth ministry in terms of missiology. If youth are considered to inhabit their own culture, then the separation in the church takes on overtones of prejudicial exclusion. This sort of segregation has precedence in Christianity. In its mandate to spread the gospel, the church has at times fallen victim to colonialism, in which pre-Christian cultures are not encouraged to find the indigenous gospel in their midst, and evangelizing cultures are not encouraged to learn from the younger Christians. Instead, conversion means that the "new" cultures are called to assimilate to the dominant Christian culture; this is often what happens with youth, too. Therefore, taking a cue from missiology, perhaps we need to see the theological activity of youth as a legitimately contextual theology, just like the theology of other cultures, and engage it as such. "Eutheology," or "new theology," tries to do that, seeking to embrace and learn from the theological activity of adolescents as a necessary – and missing – part of the church.

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Research has linked the development of life-long Christian faith with integration in a larger intergenerational church body.[1] In other words, if an adolescent's faith community consists only of a youth group, a Young Life or Youth for Christ club, a camp, or a small group, but does not include a wider church body of non-peers, there is a very good chance that she will not identify with Christian faith within a few years of high school (or college) graduation.[2] There are theological reasons for this: if the Messiah accesses his followers by means of his own Body, just as he did 2,000 years ago, then it makes sense that we isolate ourselves from various media of God's grace when we segregate ourselves, including generationally, from parts of the body of the Church.[3] When Christians of any age are ghettoized, it should not surprise if the result is stunted faith development.

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[1] See, for instance, Kara E. Powell, Brad M. Griffin, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith, Youth Worker Edition: Practical Ideas to Nurture Long-Term Faith in Teenagers* (Zondervan, 2001).

[2] Given that many students who were involved in youth ministry but uninvolved with the larger congregation do not, upon graduation from high school, stay involved in a church, it might be self-evident why some of those students may postpone leaving the church until after graduation from college. Some college students, likely searching for a ministry experience similar to their high school ministry experience, become involved in youth-group-like college groups that remain disconnected from larger congregations. It would be helpful research to measure post-college church involvement of these sorts of students.

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his theology of sociality, illustrates how Christ is mediated to us through the Body of Christ. "*[T]he concept of the body of Christ* … expresses the presence of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in

However, we are not here interpreting youth ministry as a means of developing adolescents into "full believers."[4] Rather, we are interpreting the Church's engagement with youth as cross-cultural ministry. And, if we follow that interpretation down the tendrils of its implications, we may encounter new understandings of how we think of youth ministry, not merely in its form, but also its content. In so doing, hopefully we will see that theologically-understood youth ministry is needed not merely for the good of youth, but for the good of all of us.

"One-Eared Mickey Mouse"

Just about everyone who has studied youth ministry has encountered the idea of the "One-Eared Mickey Mouse" as a model to be avoided. This term, coined by Stuart Cummings-Bond in the late 1980s,[5] describes what had become a common idealization of the form of youth ministry in the United States. By that time, youth ministry had developed its own set of standards, resources, professionals, programs, and cultural ethoi that resulted in thicker boundaries between youth ministry and the larger ministry of the church.[6] However, the critique implicit in the image of the One-Eared Mickey Mouse is that the youth ministry of a church is often treated as an appendix; youth ministry can be, perhaps tacitly, understood as exterior to the essence of the church such that, if its youth ministry were excised, the church would still be intact. Even today, many churches perceived as most "successful" in youth ministry operate according to this model, where youth ministries have their own space, pastor, staff, budget,

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his church-community. The concept of the body in this context is not a *concept referring to form* but to *function*, namely the work of Christ…. Christ is fully present in each individual, and yet he is one; and again he is not fully present in any one person, but only all human beings together possess the whole Christ." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio* [1930]: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 1*, ed. Clifford J. Green, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 225 (italics original).

[4] This, of course, is how youth ministry is sometimes understood. And there is merit to this understanding; adolescents have particular needs that adults and children do not, needs that seem to require a sort of development. For instance, neurological changes in adolescence enables more abstract cognition (see Piaget Jean and Bärbel Inhelder, *Psychology of the Child* [1950], trans. Helen Weaver (Basic Books, 2000), and psycho-social particularities in adolescence signal changes in self-conception (see, e.g., Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* [1950], 2nd ed. (W. W. Norton and Company, 1963)). For that reason, there should be programming addressing the unique capacities and needs of adolescents, just as there should be programming addressing the unique capacities and needs of other people-groups. However, my contention is that this is not the only – or even primary – way that youth ministry should be understood. Before adolescents are people with particular age-group needs, they are merely people, part of the Body of Christ. That should be first of all how we see them and how they should be treated.

[5] Stuart Cummings-Bond, "The One-Eared Mickey Mouse," *YouthWorker Journal* 6 (Fall, 1989), 76.

[6] This separation was abetted by a host of historical developments. The emergence of youth-oriented para-church organizations as early as the mid-nineteenth century suggested that ministry to youth could be imagined separate from the local church. Around the same time, the development of "Sunday School" aimed to help children and youth in their religious education as a complement to what the public school education; many Catholic parochial schools sprung up for the same reason. In the twentieth century, the development of educational programs for youth ministers and for-profit resource organizations that aimed to provide them with resources, while helpful for thinking specifically about ministry to and with youth, also created a youth ministry "culture" that distinguished itself from ministry to and with the rest of the congregation. For a review of developments in Protestant youth ministry, see Mark H. Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Baker, 2010).

classes, trips, and even their own mission statement, such that it is understood as a "church within the church." And while there can be advantages to this model, it can also become a "church beside the church," treated as a group or program merely connected to the rest of the congregation, even at only a single point, as in the tangential relationship described by the One-Eared imagery.

Of course, no one would claim this state of affairs to be the desire of their church. But in describing what had become the unintended cultural form of youth ministry in this country, Cummings-Bond articulated a theological worry. What if, in the development of youth ministry, our ecclesiology has made adolescents unnecessary to the ontology of "church"? The goal, then, if we are to have an understanding of church that includes youth, was to pull youth ministry back into the sphere of the church such that it is was understood as one among many ministries of the church, just as much a part of the congregation as children's ministry or the missions committee or the worship team. Intergenerationality became more emphasized with many laudable efforts made at connecting youth ministry with "big church."

However, despite these efforts and what must be a unanimous theoretical rejection of the One-Eared Mickey Mouse, its vestiges remain. And despite our understanding of the need for intergenerationality, youth continue to leave the church after graduation. Why? *Perhaps it is because our problem was never pushing youth ministry outside the church, but rather pushing adolescence outside the church*. This might be more clearly seen by understanding adolescence not merely as a developmental stage, but as a culture. To do this, it is helpful to view youth ministry through the lens of missiology.

Theology of Mission

Missiology embraces many different subjects. It examines the development of Christianity as a *history* of the expanding gospel of God's people on mission. Within that horizontal expansion, missiology also examines the *anthropology and sociology* of how that gospel becomes vertically indigenized deep within different cultures, or how people relate the gospel and different aspects of their lives. Finally, missiology examines the *theology* that undergirds this expanding and indigenizing gospel – sometimes called "missional theology" – by relating the engagement of gospel and culture as a fundamentally theological activity.[7]

This theological understanding has three implications. First, mission is fundamentally God's work in which we participate. It is God's mission, not any church's mission, and we participate in that mission as missionaries wherever we are. Second, we participate in God's activity within particular cultural contexts. From our standpoint, there is no such thing as an objective, context-free gospel; Jesus came to us in a particular place and time, and our extension of that mission in the power of the Spirit also happens in particular places and times. Third, as we participate in God's mission within particular cultures, we must work to discern who God is, who we are, and what it is we are to do. In other words, participation in God's mission necessitates asking (and answering) theological questions.

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[7] For more on the history and theology of mission, see Darrell Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998); Guder, The Continuing Conversion of the Church (Eerdmans, 2000); David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Orbis, 1991); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* [1978], rev. ed. (Eerdmans, 1995); Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Orbis, 1996).

Thus, when the earliest Christian missionaries encountered a culture that was new to them, new questions emerged. Both the "older" and "younger" Christians grappled theologically with the gospel, discovering it in new ways; this is summed up nicely in the dictum "mission is the mother of theology."[8] It is only in the catholically anthropological and sociological expansion of the gospel that it becomes more and more catholically theological. It is as we holistically engage the salvific work of the Spirit that we come to see more and more what it is that God is doing as the world is reconciled to God's own self.[9]

Neo-Colonialism

However, as missionaries go out into the world, the gospel is not all that they bring with them. The emergence of postcolonial theory in the second half of the twentieth century critiqued the idea of "first-world" colonizing as an unqualified good.[10] Postcolonialism points out that colonization entails imperialism; when a stronger power establishes a colony in a weaker power, usually without the permission of the latter, there is a disproportionate exertion of influence and control such that the stronger power wills to dominate the weaker power. Even if this domination is not the conscious intention of the colonizer, the result is built into the structure of colonization.

Because Christian missionaries came out of Western colonizing powers, the desire to bring the gospel to pre-Christian people groups was tied up with imperialistic tendencies. As mentioned above, the gospel is always indigenized, and so colonizing cultures could not help but bring their own form of Christianity along with the rest of their culture. In addition, the gospel that was introduced by missionaries to pre-Christian people groups was not the "naked" gospel, but was rather a cultural form of the gospel native to the missionaries that was often taught as normative. The result was a Christianity that could be experienced as oppressive rather than liberating, and as foreign rather than intimate.

While the era of Western colonization has long-since passed, that does not mean that colonialism no longer takes place. Instead of planting state colonies in "new" lands in order to stake a territorial claim, within increasing globalization, institutional entities enter into "new"

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[8] See Martin Kähler, *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission* [1908] (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971).

[9] In the age of colonialization, Western Christians saw themselves as having the correct understanding of God, and needing to introduce that understanding to non-Christians in the new land that they found. In some senses, this is understandable; in mission work, we are often introducing the gospel to people who have never heard of Christ. However, what many Christians found in the process of mission was that the new Christians, as they came to better understand the gospel, often had a deeply embedded understanding of God, even if not explicitly Christian, that helped the older Christians themselves better understand the gospel they preached. It further helped the older Christians recognize the blinders that their own context had put on them, especially as the new Christians asked questions the older Christians never considered. For two examples, see Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* [1978], 25th Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003) and George Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West ... Again* [2000], 10th Anniversary Edition (Abingdon, 2010).

[10] For three seminal works on postcolonialism, see Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004). For a general introduction to postcolonial theory, see Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies: The Key Concepts* [2000], 3rd ed. (Routledge, 2013).

cultures by other means. Commercial, educational, religious, national, and even relief-oriented organizations, with various motivations for engaging other cultures, cannot help but bring their own culture along with them. This is sometimes called "neo-colonialism"; though it is naïve to think that there is not mutual influence when two cultures encounter each other, nevertheless there is a tendency – again, systemically, even if unconsciously, built into the form of engagement – of the colonizing culture to dominate the colonized culture as an unavoidable consequence of power dynamics.

This is no less true in cross-cultural ministry. We cannot help but minister out of our own frame of reference.[11] So while we might desire to help those of another culture in various ways, we sometimes may not pay sufficient attention to the hard work of listening and learning what someone from that culture may want or need.[12] The result can be "benevolent oppression," a sort of paternalistic cultural assumption of what others want or need that can lead to ministry that ends up subverting foreign cultures.[13] In the name of helping others, we can, at some level, be exerting power that attempts to cause others to conform to us, or even for us to gain or maintain control of others.[14]

What does this have to do with youth ministry? Isn't this just a danger we would have to worry about when doing ministry in other countries? If that was the only time that we dealt with other cultures, then yes. But much, perhaps most, ministry is cross-cultural because, in ministry, we deal with groups of people that live within particular contexts. And this is true for youth ministry as well.

Youth Ministry as Cross-Cultural Enterprise

Perhaps the dominant paradigm of youth ministry is one of development.[15] According to this paradigm, youth ministry is oriented toward adolescents that need to be developed into

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[11] See Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Conflict: Building Relationships for Effective Ministry* (InterVarsity Press, 1994).

[12] Mennonite pastoral care scholar David Augsburger once noted, "Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person, they are almost indistinguishable." David W. Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Hear and Be Heard: How to Hear and How to Be Heard in Equal Communication* (Herald Press, 1982), 12.

[13] It should be noted that this assumption is not always wrong; it is sometimes not difficult to deduce some needs that others may have. However, what I am referring to is the tacit assumption that one group knows what another group needs merely because the first group knows better. Instead, what is needed is a partnership, a friendship between the older and newer Christians; it is only within that relationship that one might find what the other really needs. At the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, V. S. Azariah, an Anglican bishop from India, gave a talk on "Native Church and Foreign Mission" in which he said, "I do not plead for returning calls, handshakes, chairs, dinners, and teas, *as such*. I do, on the other hand, plead for all of them and more if they can be expressions of a friendly feeling, if these or anything else can be the outward proofs of a real willingness on the part of the foreign missionary to show that he is in the midst of the people, to be to them not a lord and master, but a brother and a friend." He ended his talk with the famous line: "Give us FRIENDS!" "The Problem of Co-Operation Between Foreign and Native Workers," in *World Missionary Conference, 1910: The History and Records of the Conference* (Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1910), 311, 315.

[14] See Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor … and Yourself* (Moody, 2009).

[15] One might argue that this is the most dominant paradigm of ministry in general – that the task of ministry is to develop people into what a Christian ought to be. But the postcolonial critique would respond to this paradigm by

Christian adults. And there is merit to this paradigm; youth ministry is oriented toward adolescents, and adolescents have particular developmental needs that other people do not have as they move from childhood to adulthood. However, that is not all that youth ministry is, and, in the midst of questions concerning the cultural norm of Christian adulthood, an argument can be made that that is not primarily what youth ministry is.

"Culture" can be very basically defined as the symbols, ideas, and narratives that are associated with the values, beliefs, feelings, and actions of a group of people.[16] Even more basically, culture are all those things that express, organize, and shape what a people-group hold as meaningful. This people-group could be as large as a nation, race, or ethnicity, and as small as a family or friend group; understood in this way, we are part of several cultures at once, each with varying levels of power upon and significance to the participant.[17]

Adolescence, then, is not only a developmental stage. It is also a unique culture. There is a "youth culture." In fact, there are many youth cultures. In any particular context, youth are a people group that are identifiably grouped together, largely by segregation.[18] Because adolescents are mostly left to themselves, they develop their own values, beliefs, and actions,

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pointing out that the idea of "what a Christian ought to be" is merely an idealized cultural form. Thus, what is seen by some to be "development" or "maturation" or "spiritual growth" is merely cultural assimilation or conformity. See Duane Elmer's triology, *Cross-Cultural Conflict* (noted above), *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), and *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (InterVarsity Press, 2006). Missional theology offers a helpful corrective; in mission (or ministry), two people (or two groups or people), in word and deed, together come to discover the gospel more and more as each serves as the Holy Spirit to the other.

[16] This is a very general definition of culture; there are many that exist. Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential cultural anthropologists of the twentieth century, defined culture as "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." The Interpretation of Cultures (Basic Books, 1973), 89. Paul Hiebert, probably the most influential missiological anthropologist of the twentieth century, defined culture as the "more or less integrated systems of ideas, feelings and values, and their associated patterns of learned behaviour and products shared by a group who organize and regulate what they think, feel, and do." *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Eerdmans, 1985), 30.

[17] Occupying multiple cultures at once can, especially for those who are more identified with a non-dominant culture, mean that one must communicate in multiple forms of "language." In the realm of linguistics, this is called "code-switching." For those who must constantly code-switch, especially if such code-switching is needed for survival, communication or self-expression can be exhausting and alienating. See Andrew Molinsky, "Cross-Cultural Code-Switching: The Psychological Challenges of Adapting Behavior in Foreign Cultural Interaction" in *Academy of Management Review* 32.2 (2007), 622-640.

[18] Studies show that, in the Western world, there is increasingly little connection between adolescents and adults. "Whereas once the worlds of youth and adults were intertwined, today few adults have a relationship of any significance with a young person." David F. White, "Empowering the Vocation of Youth as Youth: A Theological Vision for Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 2.2 (Spring, 2004), 16. There are many different reasons for this – prolonged adolescence, cultural expectation, an increase in single-parent homes, double-income families, urbanization, to name a few – but the upshot is that there is cultural separation between two large people-groups within the same geographical space. On adult abandonment of youth, see Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Baker Academic, 2011), and Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (Random House, 1999). The authors of *Sticky Faith* theorize that youth need five significant adult relationships in their church. See Powell, Griffin, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith*, 79. For a theological account of abandonment, see Michael D. Langford, "Troubled Complexion: Adolescent Abandonment as Spiritual Facelessness in the Thought of James Loder," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 13.1 (Fall, 2014), 89-108.

often cobbled together from different sources, including family, school, peers, and media outlets.[19] The result are distinct, contextualized, and highly sophisticated youth cultures.[20] While the cultural phenomena of a youth culture may intersect with those of other cultures in which adolescents participate, they nevertheless make up an identifiable cultural reality. To belong, adolescents must adapt to this culture, and, because they are largely abandoned by adults, adapt they must.

So, then, youth ministry is not merely ministry to help adolescents properly grow into adulthood. It is also cross-cultural ministry. It is people from one culture – a culture of adults who have much more power – ministering to people of another culture. And, because of that, youth ministry deals in all the dynamics of transcultural encounter.

Postcolonial Critique of Youth Ministry

We have noted the neo-colonial tendencies in cultural encounter, where the dominant culture seeks the control or conformity of the subordinate culture. Applied to the activity of colonial-era missionaries, this means that the "old" Christians, even if unconsciously, sought not merely to convert "new" Christians to the gospel, but to convert them to their dominant form of Christianity, which was ineluctably tied up with other aspects of their culture, rather than allowing a relationally-actualized emergence of a more indigenous form of Christianity. If we are all engaging in God's mission at all times, and if most ministry is across cultural boundaries, then it is not hard to see the implications. Evangelizing can become subsumed by colonizing. In cross-cultural ministry, it is very difficult not to fall into the colonialistic trap of seeking to make the ministered-to conform to the ministers.

Seen in light of the model of the One-Eared Mickey Mouse, we might perceive how this rings true in youth ministry. The implicit critique advocates for drawing the sphere of youth into the sphere of the church. Postcolonialism, however, points out that the effect of this "inclusion" is control or conformity of subordinate culture by the dominant culture. Here, that would mean that, while well-intentioned, the sought-for inclusion of the youth into the rest of the church can be the result of a desire for the control or conformity of youth (the subordinate culture) by adults (the dominant culture).

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[19] "Adolescence is further destabilized by the recession of adult mentorship and sponsorship – a void now filled by the entertainment media that ushers young people into a specious adulthood. Relegating youth to media-driven peer culture and isolating them from adult relationships … leaves youth with a vague yearning for more influence or social agency, but without the opportunities or skills that come through experience in negotiating complex practical and social problems." White, "Empowering the Vocation of Youth as Youth," 19-20. However, if youth are to gain a consistent sense of self and world, there must exist significant relationships with adults. "As adolescents develop the capacity to reflect, they may begin to wonder about the adequacy of parental voices and test those voices. … Sometimes the widening circle of adults is essential to survival. … Sometimes the cords of connection and identity are woven in profound and nourishing ways. … This is precisely why it is so critical for adults to mediate the norms of belonging and purpose as teenagers are forming groups of identification." Daloz et al, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Beacon Press, 1996), 39.

[20] We might say that different youth cultures share commonalities as well as distinctions from each other, just as, say Pacific Northwest culture may be distinct from Southern California culture, even as both share in aspects of "American" culture.

If the sole focus of youth ministry is adolescent development, postcolonialism does not offer a critique because, within that paradigm, youth ministry exists, at least in large part, to make adolescents more like adults. However, if youth ministry is also cross-cultural, then problems begin to appear. What about the unique form of faith within adolescent culture? What about the things that God is doing within that culture, things that can become obliterated in cultural assimilation? What about the things within that culture that the dominant culture needs to learn?

Youth Ministry as Contextual Theology

We have noted above that one of the tasks of missiology is, given the cultural embeddedness of Christianity, looking at how diverse expressions of Christianity help us to expand our understanding and experience of the gospel. It is in cross-cultural encounter that we come to see more and more who God is, who we are, and what God is doing in the world. We also noted that, fundamentally, mission is first of all an activity of God in which we participate. And if the youth of our church are a particular culture that interacts with God in unique ways, then that means that, just as adults can help youth better engage facets of the gospel, adolescents' understanding of the gospel would help the rest of us engage its fullness. Put more poignantly, in our segregation from each other, both adults and youth have a truncated gospel.

One of the unfortunate consequences of the developmental paradigm of youth ministry is that it can see the faith of adolescents as an undeveloped form of adult faith. If that is true, then there is much that youth can learn from adults, but nothing for adults to learn from youth. However, if youth ministry is also cross-cultural engagement, then that means that an adolescent's faith exists as part of a cultural form of Christianity that indigenously understands and experiences the gospel in a way that is legitimate though different than within the dominant adult culture; in other words, an adolescent's faith is not merely an immature version of dominant culture faith. And, if that is true, then the gospel as understood and experienced by both the dominant adult culture and subordinate youth culture are authentic, and both cultures need each other to more fully instantiate the gospel in their midst. But if this is to happen, there must be mutuality and interpenetration of understanding and experience.

Helpful here is the understanding of "praxis." Praxis is not merely "practice," but is rather the intentional and mutual interaction of action and reflection.[21] We act out of our understanding of reality, and our understanding of reality is deepened through our reflection on action. The importance of praxis is borne upon the realization that there are many different forms of and ways to knowledge; we come to know things not merely through didactic instruction and critical thinking, but also through experience, practice, and reflection upon them. Put bluntly, we do not merely know and then do, but we also come to know through doing.

Youth ministry is praxiological. By this I mean that in the practice of youth ministry, we come to better understand the gospel. Why? Because in youth ministry both adults and adolescents are interacting with the faith of a different culture. Theologically, we might say that, in youth ministry, because we engage in a relationality, we participate in the movement of the

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[21] For basic theory in practical theology, see Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (InterVarsity Press, 2001); Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008); Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

Holy Spirit; it is the Holy Spirit that joins together those who, in Christ, mutualize across difference.[22] It is for this reason that some will define youth ministry as ministry "with" youth rather than merely "to" youth. If *only* conceived as "to," youth ministry can become a neo-colonialistic imposition of one faith-form over another. If *also* conceived as "with," youth ministry can become a robust cultural interaction where both "older" and "younger" Christians come to a more expansive understanding and experience of the gospel through practice and reflection.

If it is the case that we come to more deeply and richly understand and experience the gospel in our interaction with adolescents, it means that, as we together engage Christ, youth ministry is theological activity. This implies that, if it is the case that the faith of adolescents has an integrity all its own, we ought to take very seriously what adolescents have to say about who God is, who we are as humans, and what it is we are to do in the world. We need to listen to these reflections – this theology – so that our own reflections might be richer. In other words, the theology of adolescents is a legitimate contextual theology, no less than the theology of any other identifiable people-group.

Contextual theology is theology that is intentionally done within a recognition by those who do it that they are ensconced within a particular place and time.[23] Of course, all theology is contextual, including dominant culture theology. However, especially when the power of institutional Christianity resided within a primary cultural demographic, theological assertions have been made with the tacit assumption that the context from which those assertions are made is normative. It is for this reason that, at times, the theologies of non-dominant cultures are "contextual"; Liberation, Disability, Feminist, and Womanist Theology are examples of what is often referred to as contextual theology because they are theologies done from non-dominant cultural contexts. Nomenclature notwithstanding, theologies such as these are important precisely because they are done with self-conscious attention to the particularity of their cultures, especially cultures that have not had the voice of dominant cultures. If youth, also, exist in a non-dominant cultural context, why would we not also give their theological reflections similar attention?

Eutheology

I am calling the contextual and praxiological theology done in youth ministry "eutheology." Now, of course the theological work that youth do on their own is eutheological as well. However, it is as the adult church engages youth, and allows itself to be engaged by youth, that we might together glimpse the gospel through a eutheological lens or, perhaps more accurately, youth might help us do so.

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[22] Karl Barth sees the Holy Spirit as the ongoing work of God in creating reconciliation – between God and humanity, between people, and between the world and the Kingdom of God. See Barth's *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4.1 [1953], trans. G. W. Bromiley (T and T Clark, 1956) on the Holy Spirit's work relationally joining God and humanity in faith, *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4.2 [1955], trans. G. W. Bromiley (T and T Clark, 1958) on the Holy Spirit's work relationally joining human and human in love, and *Church Dogmatics* Vol. 4.3.1 and Vol. 4.3.2 [1959], trans. G. W. Bromily (T and T Clark, 1961, 1962) on the Holy Spirit's work through the people of God in bringing about the Kingdom of God in the world.

[23] For a helpful primer on contextual theology, see Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* [1992], rev. ed. (Orbis, 2002).

"Eutheology" is, fittingly, a playful nomenclature: said quickly, it sounds like "youth theology." Also fittingly, it sounds like "you theology." But I also chose this title because of its etymology: the Greek prefix "eu" means "true" or "good" or "new." Because of the particular developmental and cultural realities of adolescence, the theology of youth is theology that has a deep truth that is grasped only by those asking particular questions, a fresh goodness to it as it adds to our collective understanding of the gospel, and a delicate newness to it relative to the theology of the dominant culture.

I want to briefly suggest three different reasons that eutheology can inform the dominant theology of adult-driven culture. I want note that I am here, for the most part, describing what I see as the form of this theology; I do not want to get too far into suggesting theological content because it is not indigenous to me. However, in light of the fact that we have all been adolescents, and some of us (hopefully!) have intimate interaction with them, I think we can resonate with the shape of a eutheological take on the gospel.

First, eutheology grasps the relationship between our faith and identity. Adolescents are squarely in the midst of identity formation.[24] Now, while, to some extent, we are always engaged in identity formation, in adolescence, it is more intense and critical than in the rest of the lifespan.[25] If a focus of our lives is negotiating who we are and what we are doing, adolescence is the "human condition on steroids."[26] So while the centrality of identity formation makes adolescence excruciatingly difficult, it is also makes for a keen awareness of how various realities relate to identity, including faith.[27]

This adolescent relationship of faith and identity is a blessing to the adult church that can isolate faith to a Sunday identity. The theological ponderings of youth are focused on what it means to be a Christian, on who God calls us to be and what God calls us to do as we follow Jesus, no matter the place or time. Adolescents intuitively grasp the cost, the radical horizon, the holiness of faith. Eutheology is "you theology" in that it reminds us that faith should be inexorably entwined with the whole of who you are; the Holy Spirit uses youth to constantly point us back to the foundation of our identity as being in Christ.

Second, eutheology gives permission to be creative in our theological reflections. Adolescents are notoriously playful, imaginative, and energetic. Again, it is part of our human make-up to be playful and imaginative, but, in adolescence, the negotiation of identity within the

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[24] Erik Erikson, noted above, breaks down human development into psychosocial stages, with each stage characterized by a "crisis" that must be resolved to advance to the next stage. For adolescents, one must find a sense of "identity" and avoid "role confusion." See Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (W. W. Norton and Company, 1968).

[25] As adolescents cognitively and socially grasp, for the first time, a world larger than that which they have hitherto know, reality itself is called into question. Things are no longer taken for granted as that which family or other authority has told me. Who am I? What is life? Why do I live it? Adolescents learn that they must come to some sort of answer, at least provisionally, to these questions. Though we may always be wrestling with these questions, dealing with them for the first time can be traumatic and, failure to come to some sort of answer can lead to psychic groundlessness. See James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Jossey-Bass, 1998).

[26] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

[27] It is for this reason that youth are so good at sensing authenticity, or a lack thereof – they are hardwired to gauge how things fit into identity.

encounter of a wider world – abetted by newfound cognitive abilities – encourages an inward re-construction of reality. It is hardwired in adolescents to consider new possibilities, to explore outside the constructs that they have been given, to "try on" new ways of being.

And this developmental playfulness can express itself in how youth think about God, humanity, and the world with "new" ("eu") theology.[28] Given this capacity, the rest of the church can learn from adolescents as they help us to theologically "play." New images, symbols, narratives, and foci can emerge among youth in service of the entire Body, giving everyone the space to creatively imagine a new reality. The Kingdom of God is not tied to the cultural structures to which we grow accustomed; to live reality according to a "new heaven and new earth," within a "new Jerusalem," takes audacious imagination. Youth can lead us in that.

Third, eutheology focuses us on the elemental. Adolescence invites passion; as the safe harbors and conceptual boundaries of childhood dissolve, youth become keenly aware of what matters most for existential survival. Youth, even unconsciously, are in touch with a need to belong, a search for meaning, a call for guidance. What adults often think of as "over-reaction" is the outpouring of an adolescent sense that some things *really matter*, a sense to which adults can become anesthetized.

In a sense, adolescents have an intuitive grasp of what is "true" or "good" (also "eu") and our need to connect to it. This sort of intuition is essential for a Church that is called to passionately affirmation of that which is true and good. At times, this call is counter-cultural and prophetic when we – or others in our cultures – lose sight of what is valuable. In those times, those outside the cultural power-structure of the church are needed to remind us of what matters most. When adults are concerned with stability or cashflow or career (and those things can certainly have significance), a walk onto a high school campus or street corner or playground can remind them of the more elemental need to belong to a community, to have meaning in vocation, to have direction toward beauty.

It could be that we do not welcome eutheology into the church because it is a threat to the status quo. It calls us to take our Christian identity seriously, it challenges boundaries, and it is undomesticated. It is for reasons like these, perhaps, that some of us have pushed youth ministry to the literal and figurative edges of our churches – not because we do not care for youth, but rather because we do not care for adolescence.[29] But it is precisely this sort of cultural subordination that we must avoid if we are to apprehend the fullness of the gospel in our midst.

Filling Up the Ear

It is not wrong to have youth ministry as an "ear" of the church; I am not suggesting that we dispose of youth ministry as an identifiable ministry of churches. It is good to have ministries that deal with particular issues encountered by particular sub-groups within our church, especially when those issues are neglected by the wider culture. But the idealization of youth ministry cannot be the One-Eared Mickey Mouse, either, where youth ministry is only tangentially connected to the rest of the church. Disconnected youth ministries, where youth are

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[28] See Sarah Arthur, *The God-Hungry Imagination: The Art of Storytelling for Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Upper Room, 2007).

[29] Thomas Hine speaks of the "teenage mystique"; from the perspective of adults, adolescents possess a cultural foreignness that causes adults to, at best, regard adolescents with ambiguity or anxiety or, at worst, with fear. See Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (Perennial, 1999).

welcome to attend with but do not really belong to the wider congregation, result in youth and adults that are segregated from the diverse Body of Christ. The result is a neutered gospel that grasps culturally partialized forms of faith.

However, what I have tried to show through postcolonialism is that incorporating youth into the life of the church cannot be about forming youth to our image, either. Adolescents do not have adolescent faith that needs to be "adultized." Rather, the particular cultural form of faith expressed by adolescents needs to be honored and, in fact, valued as essential for the rest of the church. Eutheology, the theological work of adolescents, is a culturally legitimate way of doing theology that can help non-adolescents understand the gospel in ways that are more difficult for those who are not in touch with the cultural reality of adolescents. The truths grasped by youth give them a privilege and power that can benefit others.

The key is for us to affirm that particular privilege and power, and to submit to it. But we cannot dictate its content. It is not ours to possess. But, within relationality to youth, we can together engage the gospel in new ways. I can learn with them. I can learn from them. If they are part of the Body of Christ, I *must* learn from them if I am to come closer to grasping the fullness of who God is, who we are, and what we are to do in our world.