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*Adoptive Youth Ministry:*

A New Typology for the Theological Grounding of Youth Ministry Practice

“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called peace. And be thankful.”

* Colossians 3:12-15

Youth ministry has been on a journey, and is now growing up.

For decades we have basically gone it alone, or felt that way, having been faithful when it seemed as if few others cared. But now we are beginning to discover that, while much good has been done in the name of youth ministry, in our zeal to encourage personal engagement and passionate commitment we may have offered both too little long term support and meaningful missional empowerment. We have seen that faith is not a one-off commitment but rather a lifelong vocation to be enjoined along with today and yesterday’s fellow sojourners. We have become more pointedly aware that the young need the church, and the church needs the young. We are growing up.

For several decades, practitioners and influencers have sought to describe the basic goal of youth ministry. In the early years of parachurch ministry’s focus on adolescents, the goal was straightforward and the mission was clear: youth ministry is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. Embedded within this, however, is the implicit expectation that personal faith is all that matters. The basic understanding and framework of youth ministry in North America grew out of the tent revival season of the early 20th century,[[1]](#endnote-1) where the mission was unashamedly focused on the individual, and the “decision” moment. These are the two hallmarks of youth ministry, albeit uniquely shaped by denomination and tradition, since the 1950s. As Mike Yaconelli of Youth Specialties often put it, “Jesus and kids; that’s who we are, that’s what we do.”[[2]](#endnote-2) It is this history that has shaped most youth ministry thinking and philosophy around the globe even today.

Yet, at the same time, there has been a regular and increasing encouragement and commitment to connect youth ministry to the larger body of Christ. While our history has generally considered the larger church to be a necessary structural relationship that is sometimes adversarial, there has always been an almost grudging acknowledgement that youth ministry is not “ministry” except for its connection to the greater body (even the word for church, *ecclesia*, means “the gathered”[[3]](#endnote-3)). In messages, articles and books concerning our calling and mission for the last three and more decades, those who lead and influence youth ministry have been wrestling with the relationship between the particularity of youth ministry practice and Jesus’ command to “love each other” (John 15:17). Depending on denomination or tradition, this affiliation has been approached in different ways. But now there is an erupting groundswell of recognition that no youth ministry that has staying power should be, or even can be, disconnected from the larger church body. What this means and, more importantly, what this looks like, remains a work in progress.

*Youth Ministry in North America*

Youth ministry as practiced in North America both in the church and the parachurch grew out of a desire to correct what many saw as a dangerous neglect in the church’s concern for young people. Many have written about how society has relinquished our historical commitment to care for the young, like David Elkind (*The Hurried Child[[4]](#endnote-4)*) and Patricia Hersch (*A Tribe Apart[[5]](#endnote-5)*).In these and other studies, including brain research examining related to what is sometimes called “extended adolescence,” and the recognition of those who have embraced Jeffrey J. Arnett’s new stage of development, *emerging adulthood*, there is overwhelming evidence that the world today’s young people inhabit is vastly different from the world of their parents, and this has profoundly affected the adolescent experience. Today there is a general consensus that there has been a massive shift over the past several decades in what it means and takes to grow up into productive and self-aware adulthood. In the church, however, few outside of those in youth ministry have seemed to notice. These sweeping changes have further emboldened youth ministry to wave the flag for the focused ministry to adolescents.

One of the strongest arguments for how cultural changes have impacted the young is what spawned youth ministry in the first place, the neglect of the young. Perhaps the most prominent voice in describing the reasons behind our changing social climate is Robert D. Putnam from Harvard University. In his book *Bowling Alone*, written nearly two decades ago, he opined:

“Compared with teenagers studied in the 1950s, young people in the 1990s reported fewer, weaker, and more fluid friendships. Similarly, (others trace) the growth of depression among younger Americans to ‘rampant individualism,’ coupled with ‘events that have weakened our commitment to the larger, traditional institutions of our society.’”[[6]](#endnote-6)

Putnam’s basic thesis in this groundbreaking but at the time highly controversial book was that we as a society have lost our collective way and have decommissioned our once tightly held commitment to living in meaningful and supportive community, what he calls *social capital*. According to Putnam, social capital “refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Concerning young people, Putnam ascribes the summary struggles young people have growing up to the erosion of social capital:

“15 years ago, in *Bowling Alone*, I compiled evidence that revealed steady withering of Americans’ community bonds. Ten years later, an independent study (by scholars originally skeptical of my findings) reported that both kin and nonkin networks have shrunk in the past two decades, but that the decrease in nonkin networks is greater. In effect, they found, Americans’ social networks are collapsing inward, and now consist of fewer, denser, more homogeneous, more familial (and less nonkin) ties … if it takes a village to raise a child, the prognosis for American children isn’t good: in recent years, villages all over America, rich and poor, have deteriorated as we’ve shirked collective responsibility for kids.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

During this period, then, youth ministry has been responding to this relational “collapsing” of social capital, especially as it was experienced in the church. As early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many if not most adults in the church may have expressed generalized support for young people, the indicators were that what was happening in society was taking place in the church: we care, but our caring is predicated on how the young behaves and conforms to expectations. Nurture was to invite the young to sit and observe, to learn what it means to be a Christian by learning the code and not being disruptive during gatherings. In the church, then, systemic abandonment and the erosion of personal social capital was less about ignoring the young than seeking to shape them into our image.

What grew out of this subtle but pervasive attitude toward the young during the middle decades of the 20th century became the seedbed of youth ministry: to “keep them in the church” while not having to go through the confusing and difficult (and even painful) experience of considering how to integrate them into the body. Thus the notion of the youth pastor and a handful of “relevant” adults became the default way the church expressed love for the young. From the early 1970s until today the vast majority of churches have recognized, even celebrated, the value of youth ministry while at the same time holding fast to the conviction that the default response to nurturing the young to lifelong faith is to move them out into a separate and distinct programmatic community that reinforces supportive rhetoric while keeping them at arms’ length.

Eventually, the merging of the erosion of social capital (and not just for the young, but for all of us) with the sanctifying of individual faith contingent on personal performance has now created a perfect storm for youth ministry. Even in the best of churches, with a youth ministry staff and a vibrant program, ultimately the lack of broad and long-term social capital and a message of rugged individualism has become one more agenda-driven environment. It is little wonder that churches in every tradition loses large numbers of young people, with the first wave leaving early in high school when they get “too busy” for church, and the second shortly after they graduate from high school.[[9]](#endnote-9) Without meaningful social capital, to an adolescent navigating increasingly precarious waters even a faith environment can feel unsatisfying and unsafe. With all we have learned over the decades of perfecting youth ministry practices, perhaps we have neglected the impact of isolationism and atomization in terms of both environment and faith. With the best of intentions, over the last three to four decades most churches in North America have essentially set their young adrift while they were growing up by treating and leading them as if they were not only on their own to interpret and integrate faith, but that the only people that were sincerely interested in them are only temporary, and even then only those found in a segregated community of peers.

Recently some have begun to recognize the necessity of the church being more directly invested and involved in ministry to young people. Over the last several years many people have been attempting to not only understand why young people choose to leave the church at such alarming rates and also to help the church to make a more concerted proactive effort to better engage young people before they leave high school. The Fuller Youth Institute (FYI), for example, has been highlighting research in order to help the church understand what it takes to give young people the greatest opportunity to develop lifelong faith through the efforts of what is called Sticky Faith. This is but one of many endeavors by various people and groups recognizing that both parents and churches must provide greater emphasis to helping the young development sustaining faith. Youth ministry simply cannot, and should not, attempt to “do” youth ministry on our own. As Mark Canister says, “So here is a radical thought: the faith formation of teenagers in the church is not the sole responsibility of youth ministers. It is primarily the responsibility of the adult members of the church!”[[10]](#endnote-10) As far back as 2001, I was on this ministry trajectory as well, writing in *Starting Right*:

“Addressing the uniqueness of adolescents cannot be limited to the sole responsibility of the youth ministry leader, team, or program. The church, as a family of “families,” is called *as a community* to be the prime agent of nurturing this and any future generation.… Youth ministry, then, is not an appendage of the body, it is rather an expression of the *whole* body caring for a specific group. Adolescents need an adult community who will love them appropriately and with great care. This is the call of the church.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Today, in an effort to broaden the scope of engaging adults in the faith formation of young people, the two most prominent movements are parents/family ministry and “intergenerational ministry.” Both of these have had a variety of expressions for many years, but only recently have they achieved the level of focus where churches are taking extraordinary notice. Both providing support to parents and enhancing intergenerational relationships are obviously important ways to not only augment a church’s commitment to young people’s faith journey, but to strengthen the church itself. Yet the temptation for many churches is to reduce these highly significant and developmentally important relational connections to ministry programs among many other ministry programs. Evidence shows that while it is vital for young people to believe that they have at minimum a few non-parental adults who they know love them and who will be there for them in the years to come,[[12]](#endnote-12) simply offering an intergenerational ministry program rarely provides the depth and longevity required to bolster the kind of inner confidence adult relationships can and should instill. Even parent and parent training ministries are helpful and important aspects of a church’s commitment to serving the young, yet merely offering seminars, blogs and books for parents is but a starting point to creating environments that ensure the parents and churches walk together in the faith development of children and adolescents.

Something needs to be done, and that is the impetus behind adoptive youth ministry*.* In 2010, Trinity’s Mark H. Senter closes the epilogue of *When God Shows Up*: *A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* with ten questions “for those who would minister in the second decade of the twenty-first century and beyond.” Two of these are: “Much of youth ministry claims to function as a part of local churches, yet many students have no meaningful relationships with adults outside the youth ministry context. How can the faith community be resurrected so that adolescents become vital parts of the Christian fellowship?” and “Where does youth ministry find its theological grounding?”[[13]](#endnote-13)

Adoptive Youth Ministry is a theologically-grounded and biblically-driven framework to provide youth ministry leaders, thinkers, writers, teachers, influencers and practitioners to both build the necessary relationships within the church that young people need and intuitively crave, and to help youth ministry locate its biblical and theological grounding within the context of living together as God’s household.

**Adoptive Youth Ministry: Living into what God is doing**

In my initial forays into Paul’s language for who we are in Christ as a way to ground ministry, I made what I now see the mistake of simply re-labeling the goal of youth ministry, or any ministry directed toward a disconnected person or community, as “adopting” as opposed to “assimilating” them into the body of Christ.[[14]](#endnote-14) Because to “assimilate” is not a helpful nor accurate expression of God’s invitation to the lost because it means that I get to join you *when and if I become you* (an issue that the New Testament epistles spend a great deal of time debunking). When I first explored the notion of adoption, then, I tended to try and squeeze the same idea into a different word and lean in on the idea of “adopting” the young into the body of faith. But through a variety of conversations leading me to deeper theological study and reflection, I began to see that even the use of adoption – as in “adopting” the young – is as problematic as assimilation in that it is inherently hierarchical and controlling. *Adoptive* youth ministry, then, does *not* mean that we encourage people to “adopt” the young, or any person or group that feels disconnected from the core, but rather that we as God’s people proactively *live into* the reality of our common adoption, *especially alongside those who feel the most outside*. This is what I believe we need to re-imagine and re-energize within the household of God – that we are family. It is not that we the strong and the “adult” *adopt* the young, the weak, the old, but rather we encourage God’s people to recognize and function as connected and committed siblings in God’s household. This, if applied, will change everything – how we think, how we relate, and ultimately how we construct our youth ministry strategy and practice.

To live into our placement as God’s children intimately connected one to another, adoptive youth ministry must be framed in such a way that we not only can grasp the theology of this reality, but also how we can communicate to others the implications of what it means and looks like to actually function as God’s household. This perspective does not mean that we leave behind what we do well, or even how we or our ministries are structured. What it does mean is that we must begin and end all ministry conversations and decisions with this concept at the center.

As we imagine adoptive youth ministry, I offer three “framing” statements that I believe can help us to live more fully into God’s call as his family.

*Adoptive Framing #1: The Theological Basis for Adoptive Youth Ministry*

John 1:12-13 reveals what it is that happens when we come to Christ by faith: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.” The word “right” is actually “authority” or “privilege” to become a child of God.[[15]](#endnote-15) In Galatians 4:4-6, Paul uses the notion of “adoption” to describe who we are in Christ and what God has done, and is indeed doing, for us:

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship (and daughtership). Because you are his sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, *“Abba*, Father.”

The idea that as God welcomes the adult into his presence as his *child* is further illuminated in Galatians 4 (see also Romans 8 and 9, and Ephesians 1:5), where our “sonship/daughtership” is not something we will eventually grow into or must somehow seek out, it is what occurs when we come to Christ by faith. This adoption is God’s doing (the denominational and traditional nuance of this language is up to the reader to decipher), and it is indeed consistently presented in Scripture as a fact, not something we work to achieve. Adoption is what we are granted in Christ by faith. Adoptive youth ministry, then, is the idea that in our ministry to children, adolescents or emerging adults – people who are by definition in transition and at least relatively vulnerable – is not that we “adopt” the young, but rather that we live into the reality of what God has and is doing in proclaiming the adoption of those we are called to serve by treating one another as siblings. Youth ministry, then, is by definition *adoptive* ministry.

*Adoptive Framing #2: Responding to the basic longings of the young*

While scholars vary in the way they describe development, there are three fundamental longings of youth: the longing to be nurtured (supported, loved), the longing to have a mission and a place in that mission (agency), and the longing to belong. The language of adoption and adoptive ministryfulfills all three of these basic longings with clarity and focus.

* *The longing to be nurtured*  In a culture dominated by systemic abandonment, every adolescent and even emerging adult carries within them a driving need to have people in their lives who are further along life’s journey than they are. Although few adults recognize this, every young person wants someone who not only cares for them but consistently initiates with them. Nurture is not about “speaking into” someone’s life, but rather coming alongside and being a dynamic presence of encouragement, comfort and support. Scholars have known for some time that young people need adults in their lives, and now the latest brain research confirms it, as David Siegel notes:

“In many ways, developing secure attachment models is an important way to support the *essence* of adolescents. With security our emotional spark can be freed to enrich our lives with passion rather than pushing us toward states of being chaotically overwhelmed or rigidly shutdown. With secure models, too, we can have social engagements that are mutually rewarding and enable us to feel both differentiated and linked within the integrative social connections that help us thrive as adolescents.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

When we build a youth ministry within the context of the household of faith, what I call adoptive youth ministry, we offer young people a community of older peers who are committed to providing them with secure nurturing attachments within that community, because that’s what families do – take care of each other.

* *The longing to have a mission* Every youth worker knows that young people are by definition bundles of “passion.” A common emphasis of youth workers, then, is to try and direct this “passion” in the direction and service of “authentic” faith. To ignite this “godly passion” in adolescents, however, the most important first step is to invite them into the kind of environment where passion is present and organically lived out. As Kenda Creasy Dean notes in *Practicing Passion*,

“Whether (young people) discover the true source of passion–whether they ever connect their desire for love with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or with the church at all, for that matter–largely depends on whether the church bears witness to a love more true than those available in popular culture and that, of course, depends on whether the church practices the passion we preach.”[[17]](#endnote-17)

We have all been created with the drive to be participants in God’s kingdom. What developing passion means in youth ministry, then, is a call to draw out this God-given desire for agency and help each young person to recognize and live in light of God’s economy where each of us is created with the power to act, and to make a difference. Unfortunately, all too often in youth ministry we limit our understanding of “passion for God” as merely a plea to an emotional commitment to personal faith. But that is a far cry from the passion that God has instilled and empowers within each of us and calls each one toward. Passion doesn’t exist in a vacuum, it comes from an inner sense that I matter, that I am considered worthy by the team. By framing youth ministry as adoptive ministry, we not only provide a environment of nurturing attachment relationships (the longing to be nurtured), we also empower and encourage each young person’s call to kingdom agency.

* The third longing, which youth ministry has always known and excelled at, is the unquenchable desire to belong. Theologically, in a fallen world we are orphans, and in Christ we are offered a new identity, a child of God (John 1:12), and a new family (Ephesians 2:19). When a youth ministry is grounded in adoptive youth ministry, the fundamental goal of every small group, every event, every talk, every retreat or mission trip is to use that programmatic tool to draw a young person into an authentically intimate and long-term familial relationship with God’s people as a fellow adopted child. When a church is supportive of and aligns with adoptive ministry, then the same applies to all aspects and expressions of a community’s life together. To live into what God declares is true, that we all in Christ are orphans who have been found and who have been granted the authority to receive our adoption as God’s child, not only enhances a young person’s sense of belonging but also every other member of the community.

*Adoptive Framing #3: How We Live Together As God’s Household*

I have always had mixed feelings regarding mentoring as a typology for ministry. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that in many cases mentoring can be a highly successful option for guiding someone through a issue or season in life. On the other hand, the idea of mentoring itself assumes a priority relationship – mentor and mentee. In one (of many) of Jesus’ exasperated experiences with his disciples, he pointedly tells his friends what it will take to live in the kingdom of God: “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15). Hierarchy, power, authority – they are all biblical, but the *reasoning* and *application* of these human expressions are given in service of the household of God, not to be used for personal gain or influence, but held lightly, to be exercised within the context of mutuality and familial equality. “The greatest among you must be your servant” (Matthew 23:11), Jesus told his followers, comparing life in his household with the Pharisees. Adoptive ministry calls for living together as “little children” who use their gifts for the benefit of the household in the service of love for God, neighbor and one another. So how does this look in youth ministry?

1. *Mutual mentoring* Adoptive youth ministry fosters an environment of “mutual mentoring,” where even the youngest member is respected as having something to contribute. Certainly, in terms of age, experience, giftedness, etc. some will invariably bring more to the community than others, but only in specific cases for specific seasons. A small group leader, then, is to be a listener and learner while providing a nurturing and safe presence for a developing child or adolescent. But always this same leader will determine to receive as well as lead.
2. *The mature must be the initiator* Adoptive youth ministry assumes that it is up to the strongest, the mature, and the powerful to carry the responsibility to initiate with those who are weak or feel outside. I have seen intergenerational programs fall apart because members of the older generation feel slighted because the young people do not initiate with them, or do not seem to respect them. That is why we must train our older brothers and sisters, and those who feel like they are in the inner circle, to be on the lookout in order to draw in the outsider. In a youth ministry context, this means that every child, adolescent or even emerging adult needs to receive from their elders respect and proactive love and fellowship as they are drawn into the center of the household.
3. *Encourage family-wide agency in the kingdom of God* Adoptive youth ministry means that those in power and authority must ensure that the weakest member is “equipped” by the strongest and most mature (Ephesians 4:11-12) to enhance and empower their vocation as agents in the kingdom of God. To empower the gifts and callings of young people means not only giving them permission to “use their gifts” but to seek out their perspective and counsel, to make sure that their voice is heard, respected and considered, and to resource their dreams and vision. For adoptive youth ministry to fully engage the lives and hearts of the young, leadership in the church must work diligently to listen and respond to the young in a way that convinces them that their worth and value is not limited to “peer” or “service” ministry, but that they are given the encouragement as much as any other member of the church family to explore the same vocational calling as any other agent of the kingdom.

**Adoptive Youth Ministry**

The church is not “like” a family, or even an extended family. When we envision adoption as a grounding metaphor for life in the household of God, and in this case, for youth ministry, we are going far beyond the traditional notion of intergenerational, parent or any other forms of ministry practice. We are strategically and programmatically reminding the body of Christ that one of the most pervasive and radical implications of the gospel found throughout the Old and New Testaments is that we are family, and we are siblings, and we need each other, regardless of age, money, status, power, maturity, understanding, gifts or talents.

In youth ministry, we’ve been on a journey for a long time. It is time to come home, to adoptive youth ministry.

1. See Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chap Clark, “The Adoptive View of Youth Ministry” in Chap Clark, ed., *Youth Ministry in the 21st Century: 5 Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 148. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Ecclesiology,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. First published as David Elkind, *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast, Too Soon* (Boston, MA: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1981), with four subsequent editions published. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey Into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Company, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), 227. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” in *Journal of Democracy*, January 1005, pp 65-78. Accessed online from <http://archive.realtor.org/sites/default/files/BowlingAlone.pdf> on September 13, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (Simon and Schuster, 2015), 211, 203. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. There is a great deal of discussion about both the scope and reasons for young people walking away from faith. The numbers are dramatic when considering a child raised in a faith community who is no longer pursuing active faith by the time they are in their early 20s. See fulleryouthinstitute.org for one such study, “The College Transition Project,” that found that roughly 50% of active high school seniors reported to be proactively engaged in their faith. Had this study, for example, started with a large sample of incoming ninth graders and followed them through their mid-twenties, it seems likely that the number would be significantly less, perhaps as low as 25-30% who retained an active faith commitment. Granted, the multitude of factors influencing such a question make precise predictions untenable. The point, however, remains the same: many young people, even from great churches and families, have for a variety of reasons felt like the faith presented to them was not sustainable. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Mark Cannister, *Teenagers Matter* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 228. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Chap Clark, “The Changing Face of Adolescence: A Theological View of Human Development,” in *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* by Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark and Dave Rahn, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Youth Specialties Academic, 2001), 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. I suggest the ratio of five non-parental adults invested in every child is what is social capital looks like for contemporary relationships. See Kara Powell’s article “Moving Away from the Kid Table” for a description of this idea: http://fulleryouthinstitute.org/articles/moving-away-from-the-kid-table. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Senter, *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America*, 312-313. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For many years early in my career I taught, spoke and wrote of the goal of youth ministry as “assimilation into the body of Christ.” It took me an African American doctoral student to help me to see that “assimilation” is inappropriate as a descriptor of what ministry to a disconnected person or population should be. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. This rendering of John 1:12 “right” is without controversy. See as example the Biblehub.com commentary: <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/john/1-12.htm> (accessed September 4, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Daniel J. Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Powr and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tharcher/Penguin, 2013), 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, CO, 2004), 6-7. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)