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BRIDGING THE GAP:
ENGAGING ADOLESCENT LISTENERS
THROUGH EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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APPROVAL SHEET

**BRIDGING THE GAP:
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“To the one whose constant encouragement and kindly criticism
has been of inestimable assistance in the years of preparation,
whose loyalty to Christ has been a source of inspiration,
and whose self-effacing spirit as life-partner
has made this effort possible,
this work is gratefully dedicated.”¹

From my great-grandfather, William John Herman,
to my great-grandmother.
And from me, eighty-two years later,
to my wife, Jackie.

¹ William John Herman, dedication of “The Essential Function of Old Testament Prophecy in the Christian Era” (ThD diss., Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1937).

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PREFACE

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The best practices of expository preaching texts, student ministry manuals, and adolescent pedagogy can be combined to form a coherent methodology for expository student ministry preaching. Once unified, a faithful, contextual, and intentional exposition to an adolescent audience is achievable.

A false dichotomy exists between the preaching ministry of the Sunday morning pulpit and the “talks” taught behind music stands during youth group. Literature on the topic of preaching within student ministry tends to be sparse, if one can find it at all. Expository preaching texts focus on exegetical faithfulness, habits of the preacher, and perhaps a few points on application.¹ Student ministry texts tend to favor speaking styles, rhetorical devices, targeted applications, and habits of storytelling to grip the adolescent imagination.² While such texts on either side are helpful, a bridge built between these two intricately connected worlds is noticeably lacking.

In addition, recent work on the psychological development of adolescents has given rise to new methods of communication, curriculum development, and instruction. These methods are empathetic to the needs and capabilities of middle and high schoolers in a way that accommodates growth, perception, and new means of processing information in a technologically overwhelming time. Connections between psychological texts, expository preaching texts, and student ministry texts are difficult to locate, or they

¹ See esp. Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

² Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think about, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

are sometimes attached as mildly worth considering in some later, still unpublished volume.

All three of these unique bodies of literature have their virtues, yet what is presently lacking is a methodology that extracts the best of these three worlds and values each's contributions in what they might provide to a preacher engaging an adolescent audience. Whether for a full-time preaching student minister or for a senior pastor tasked with a high-school camp preaching engagement, a manual that helps to bridge all three worlds, as of yet, seems unavailable. Because of the silo effect happening between these worlds, expository preachers may be struggling to engage their student populations. In addition, literature seems to relegate the role of student ministry to that of a glorified camp counselor, friendly advice giver, or lesson distributor.

All the while, students who have graduated from high school may be unfamiliar with the rhythms of an expository message and are leaving the church in disenchanted droves. There must be a way to bridge the beauty of biblical exposition with an empathetic and tactical approach which adolescent engagement requires. My purpose is to find and merge the best practices of faithful exposition, empathetic delivery, and adolescent instruction without sacrificing each's value. The hope of such an effort is that adolescent congregants will enter into adulthood as well-versed, equipped, and willing disciples eager for the preached word.

Expository Preaching Texts and the Student Listener

The standard expository preaching text tends to operate with three basic assumptions. First, the text assumes a largely adult audience. Second, the text assumes that this same audience will generally stay in the church for the duration of their adult lives. Finally, the text assumes that such preaching primarily, if not exclusively, occurs during the Sunday morning service. In assuming these three points, expository preaching texts tend to be less accessible to student ministers and are often shelved in favor of those

tied directly to their intended audience. Such a loss is tragic.

These assumptions are at times linked to further suppositions regarding the practice of student ministry in general. First, youth pastors may speak, talk, or chat, but they certainly do not preach. The student minister may spend the same amount of time each week crafting a message, exegeting both text and audience, and working through illustration and application. But at the end of the student minister's week, this same method produces a "lesson," for sermons are simply not their purview. Such an assumption keeps the student ministry texts and teaching texts largely dichotomized, essentially printed by entirely different publishing houses.

Second, shepherding students operates as a kind of transitional phase from academic training into some type of more fully formed, or "actual," pastoral ministry. Ordination practices in multiple denominations tend to operate with this same assumption. If one asks the average student minister of ten years whether or not he has been asked when he anticipates becoming an actual pastor, or asked if he has ever considered a ministry position, most such pastors will simply, yet knowingly, sigh and nod.

Third, many assume that student ministry ought to be primarily a ministry of presence rather than a ministry of the Word. The student pastor's requirements often primarily include attendance at multiple sporting events, band concerts, coffeeshop discussions, and the like. Conversely, senior pastors can attend conferences continuing to demand their isolated study and exegetical rigor, lest they fail at their primary ministerial obligation. Following these assumptions and continuing to allow these dichotomies will eventually produce a parade of rushed and frantic "lessons" rather than skillfully crafted expositions. Amid these expectations and assumptions, the allure of transitioning to a "credible" pulpit with a higher paycheck finds many skilled student ministers leaving after a year or two. Thus, the cycle continues, leaving adolescent listeners with a perpetually untrained pastoral populace. Surely there must be a better way!

The Assumption of Sunday Morning Exclusivity

In *The Priority of Preaching*, Christopher Ash argues that the Sinai assembly at the revelation of the Ten Commandments operates as a “prototype” for the further assembly of the church under the preached word.³ He continues by arguing that the same assembly is to be united as the Ark of the Covenant is brought into Israel in 1 Chronicles 13:5. It is at this point that he tips his hand:

The significance of “all Israel” is that we have one people gathered in the one place, the whole people, not any subsection of the people. It may be “all Israel” in the persons of their senior representatives, or it may be the whole assembly literally. But the point is that it cannot just be a homogenous subset of Israel, such as “all the wood-cutters of Israel” or “all the middle-aged fathers of Israel.” So Deuteronomy foreshadows for us as the normative shape of the church an assembly called together by the word of God, called together to hear the preached word of God, called together as a place of unity of the whole people of God, and called together under grace and so filled with joy. This is the day of the assembly.⁴

Further, Ash articulates the distinct difference between certain types of assemblies and what constitutes a true church:

That will be where my primary loyalty lies, perhaps to a one-to-one Bible meeting or a cell group in a cell church, where my primary loyalty is to the cell, or to a so called “youth church” where I gather with people like me. . . . The time when the whole local church gathers is a foretaste of the time when all redeemed humanity will gather. We could scrap Bible study groups and still be a church (an impoverished church, perhaps, but still a church); but if we fail to gather together in our main meetings under the preached word of God, we cease to be a church.⁵

Ash He is correct that the separation of the whole church into segmented groups all to gain independent loyalties is problematic. Additionally, he notes that a “youth church” might exist at the same time as a fully assembled local body. Should that assembly of youth intentionally be separated from the beauty and diversity of the full congregation simply for the sake of student homogeneity, such a movement often proves to be a great cause for youth to flee the church upon graduation.

³ Christopher Ash, *The Priority of Preaching* (London: Proclamation Trust, 2009), 80.

⁴ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 83.

⁵ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 92.

Yet what Ash seems to assume is that if such preaching occurs to the entire gathered assembly, then any other time during the week where particular assemblies gather may be edified by study but not preaching. He seems to imply that such preaching operates exclusively rather than primarily. While Ash's view of the function of the assembly is admirable, it will inevitably create confusion if no sermon could possibly be preached outside of the entire gathered assembly, local or otherwise. New Testament synagogue preaching may provide this norm for assembled populations. Yet the Gospels are replete with illustrations of the preaching ministry of Christ outside of synagogue assemblies and to particular groups on particular occasions. John the Baptist moves about from the wilderness to a preaching ministry that is occasional and directed toward varied groups.

In *Speaking God's Words*, Peter Adam echoes Ash in his description of preaching. It is "the explanation and application of the Word to the congregation of Christ in order to produce corporate preparation for service, unity of faith, maturity, and growth in upbuilding."⁶ Adam's definition would apply to any form of preaching regardless of day or audience, except he adds, "Moreover, Sunday-by-Sunday preaching is not the only way to address the edification of individuals."⁷ To his credit, Adam does not limit the larger ministry of the Word only to Sunday morning preaching, but his goal for pastors to be "committed to a wider ministry of the word" never indicates that any form of preaching can be done outside of Sunday morning assemblies.⁸ Rather, he advocates for personal conversation, Bible studies, and the like.

Abraham Kuruvilla's *A Vision for Preaching* seems to be confused on the nature of the congregation and whether or not preaching can occur outside of Sunday

⁶ Peter Adam, *Speaking God's Words: A Practical Theology of Preaching* (Nottingham, UK: IVP, 1996), 71.

⁷ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 71.

⁸ Adam, *Speaking God's Words*, 75.

morning. He notes that his stated definition “concedes that a spectrum of activities may be labeled ‘preaching,’” including “a gathering of men (or women, or young adults).”⁹

Yet a few short chapters later, he writes,

Thus the primary locus for the preaching of Scripture is the church, the assembly of God’s people, a setting that provides the direction and thrust for its interpretation. Of course, such an assertion could be taken to mean that preaching should occur in the presence of God’s people, however many or few they may be, and for whatever purpose they are gathered, whenever or wherever this might take place. But I would like to argue that the label “preaching,” in the ideal sense, be reserved for that activity conducted in the context of the regular worship service of the gathered faithful.¹⁰

Words like “primary” and “ideal” within this type of framework only add to the confusion. Would a Sunday evening service appended to the Sunday morning service constitute another opportunity for preaching, or is regularity enough to constitute preaching so long as the assembly gathered is of a particular size? Kuruvilla later adds that such preaching is best done in conjunction with the Lord’s Supper, which again is part of the “proper and primary response of the people of God to the voice of God.”¹¹ Kuruvilla’s definition offers a broad-brush perspective in the introduction, which the author concedes. But, his following definition of preaching being ecclesial narrows it to such a degree that student ministry contexts would not likely be considered. While he amends his definitions with terms like “primarily” or “ideally,” he follows in such a way wherein his definition, realistically, should be amended to “exclusively.”

The evident difficulty that links each of these texts is their perplexing definitions of the assembly or their imposed limitation of such an assembly to Sunday morning entire-congregation worship services as the only fitting settings for preaching. These texts are a small sample of the multiple expository preaching works which may

⁹ Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 11.

¹⁰ Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 53.

¹¹ Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 53.

have a secondary place for preaching in a student ministry context. By contending for the primacy (or exclusivity) of Sunday morning worship services in their definitions, these authors' definitions shape the remainder of their works. In doing so, they promote a primarily adult set of listeners with an adult mindset seeking adult applications for adult problems.

The Adult Assumption

The better majority of available texts on preaching either implicitly or explicitly target adult listeners. Such targeting is not problematic for these texts, as they are largely written for Sunday morning pulpiteers. If the primary place for preaching is a room largely occupied by adults, then applications, by necessity, will largely apply to adult experience. A cursory glance at a few contemporary texts which favor expository preaching will help to bear this notion out.

Conrad Mbewe's *Pastoral Preaching* largely aims to distinguish pastoral and evangelistic preaching. The greatest discrepancy between these two styles, according to the author, is the intended audience:

Pastoral preaching assumes that the primary hearers are individuals who have personally repented of their sins and trusted in Christ as their Saviour and Lord. It supposes that those being addressed have experienced the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and have begun to bear the fruit of obedience to God. Its understanding is that these individuals are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who will be taking what is being taught to them regularly and using it for their lives for their spiritual growth. It also presupposes that they have been initiated into the localized body of believers called the local church through baptism.¹²

Mbewe seems quite clear that the intended audience for the preponderance of pastoral preaching are adults. He continues by stating that the right context for pastors to carry out their preaching is the local church body, again designating these listeners as sinners who

¹² Conrad Mbewe, *Pastoral Preaching: Building a People for God* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Partnership, 2017), 13.

have been brought into the local church through baptism.¹³

Timothy Keller, in his work *Preaching*, provides a system which allows the possibility of preaching within a student ministry context, but again lacks explicit affirmation. Keller offers three levels of “Word ministry.”¹⁴ The first level is informal yet careful conversations, usually one-on-one. Second-level Word ministry exists in the space between “informal, every-Christian conversations and formal sermons.”¹⁵ Keller adds that “in this category of ministry, Christian men and women don’t preach per se; they prepare and present lessons and talks; they lead discussions in which they are presenting the Word of Christ.”¹⁶ With level 3 representing sermons, the confusion only continues when Keller states his aim to be “for all those who communicate their Christian faith in any way, particularly at levels 2 and 3.”¹⁷ The title of the book, lest one should forget, is *Preaching*. It is unclear from Keller’s text whether or not exposition to a smaller assembly of listeners, particularly students, would fall under the idea of a level-3 sermon or a level-2 lesson. Even if Keller were to locate the appropriate level of student ministers in their Word ministry, to say that preaching applies to either level only continues the difficulty.

Hershael York and Bert Decker offer a keen insight into an area which they admit “is hardly discussed at all in preaching books or circles, but those who give attention to it are the ones whose preaching connects and has tremendous effect.”¹⁸ This area considers how those who are listening to the preached word perceive it. “We don’t

¹³ Mbewe, *Pastoral Preaching*, 37.

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 1.

¹⁵ Keller, *Preaching*, 2.

¹⁶ Keller, *Preaching*, 3.

¹⁷ Keller, *Preaching*, 4.

¹⁸ Hershael York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 26.

take the time to think about *the way our audience* perceives, about how they process information. Instead, we just assume they enjoy the things we do, that they think the way we think. When we fail to think on the perceptual level, the conceptual level fails to excite anyone either. Good preaching takes both.”¹⁹ York and Decker are correct that many preaching texts fail to make this essential connection. Even when they take that extra step, however, they continue to assume adult listeners as primary targets. In doing so, they fall short of including adolescent members of their audience whose struggle to understand is not limited to the conceptual level alone. Adolescent listeners also represent a psychological and biological distance in what they are able to perceive. If preaching is meant for the entire audience, yet the expectations of preachers’ perceptions assume adulthood, then pulpit preaching is largely failing in the task of application.

Because the goals of expository preaching texts and the goals of modern student ministry are so utterly dichotomized, youth ministers attempting to glean insight into preaching are often led down trails of application which strictly apply to adult audiences. On rare occasions, there may be a brief nugget making sure that the preacher reaches each part of his preaching audience, but most suggestions for adolescent listeners are basic appeals to morality or occasional illustrations about homework. Application grids often include a place for student listeners within the congregation, but in doing so, they recognize that nine out of ten, or fifteen out of sixteen, possible applications simply will not appeal to adolescent listeners at all.

The Assumption of Permanence

Another challenge in the application of expository preaching texts to the practice of youth ministry is the assumption of an audience that will remain under the same preacher’s ministry for decades. The practice of preaching to a largely settled and

¹⁹ York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 26.

permanent audience offers methodological freedoms that the transient populations of student ministry simply do not afford. Text choice, one's ability to preach through entire books regardless of their size, and assumed listener familiarity with formerly preached texts are common among Sunday morning expositors. In student ministry circles, however, the perceptions of, and biblical literacy among, student listeners is in a state of constant flux, evolving at the beginning and end of every school year. Many expository texts will concede the occasional need for a topical sermon, assuming that it is done with the same level of preparation and exegetical rigor. Yet the demand for consecutive expository preaching is also a repeated chorus. Is such a demand only available to the Sunday morning preacher? Or can it be usefully applied even within a student ministry context?

The appendix in Christopher Ash's *The Priority of Preaching* offers an apology for consecutive exposition: "To do consecutive expository preaching gives God the microphone. We hand it over to him and we listen while God tells us what he wants us to hear. He sets the agenda for our teaching and our learning."²⁰ In addition, Ash laments, and seeks to "exorcise," the three demons of relevance, entertainment, and immediacy.²¹ He argues clearly that consecutive exposition is the easiest way to avoid the temptations of each. His understanding of the assembly in Deuteronomy allows for a slow advance through long portions of Scripture due to a lack of immediacy.²² This decision is tied to the notion that the majority of his audience will not leave in six-years' time. Relevance and entertainment are, to be sure, a plague in contemporary youth ministry teaching and speaking circles, but is immediacy problematic to the degree that it ought not be a consideration in whether one advocates a *lectio continua* method? If the

²⁰ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 111.

²¹ Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 112–15.

²² Ash, *The Priority of Preaching*, 83.

standard Sunday-morning preacher knew that his entire audience would leave their church body in six or seven years, would he be blamed for acting with some sense of immediacy? Those who desire to preach expository sermons in a student ministry context are bound to consider such a question.

Beginnings of a Bridge: Expository Preaching Texts Which Counter the Three Principle Assumptions

Not every text on expository preaching is willing to fall under these same three assumptions. Multiple works with the goal of biblical exposition begin by bridging the gap between exposition and student ministry. In doing so, they argue against the assembly exclusivity of writers such as Christopher Ash and the permanent adult audience assumed in the preponderance of expository preaching texts.

Edmund Clowney and the Denial of Sunday Morning Exclusivity

Edmund Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology* argues against the exclusivity of preaching to Sunday morning pulpit ministry. He certainly concedes that such ministry is part of the plan and aim of preaching, but he is unwilling to define it exclusively as such: "There is another aspect to the perspective of our preaching. We might say that it is not merely the time in which we preach but the place in which we preach. Our Lord has gone to glory, but we are not with him in his victorious rule. We are in the world as his witnesses, and we are in the world so that we may be his witnesses."²³

Clowney assumes that preaching is to be done in the context of the world as well as the four walls of the church. To Clowney, the task of the preacher includes the task of witness within a larger cultural context:

It was assumed that the task of the gospel to the whole world had been given to the apostles alone, and that with the end of the apostolic era this aspect of the church's calling disappeared. That this is poor theology should be evident from the great

²³ Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 68.

passage at the close of Matthew's gospel. Christ's promise that he will be with the church to the end of the age in the discharge of its task plainly shows that the work cannot be limited to the apostles. The gospel message as it is defined is a missionary message which concerns the whole world. He who does not see the need of proclaiming it does not understand it. The whole world, then, is the place where the gospel must be preached. It is also true that the place of preaching is in the church Paul not only preached in the market place at Athens, he also engaged in familiar discourse with the Christians assembled in the upper room at Troas.²⁴

Clowney is unwilling to follow Mbewe's dichotomy of evangelistic preaching and pastoral preaching, and he assumes that pastors ought to take part in both. He utilizes Paul's preaching as a model of both and an expectation on preachers that they do the same. If preaching can be done not only through the local church but also in the context of the entire world, then surely it can be done within a student ministry context. To do so does not diminish the nature of the assembly, nor should it imply that the two contexts stand on an equal footing. Dismissing one form as simply "not preaching" because of its location, proximity, or audience simply does not add up.

Preaching God's Word and the Recognition of Heterogenous Audiences

Texts highlighting expository preaching to an entire congregation almost entirely fail to offer any solution to engaging the adolescent listeners within an audience. Even the well-known 9Marks application grid fails to apply any of the sermon's twenty-four possible applications to the children and youth in attendance. It appears that the gap may need to be bridged almost entirely from the side of student ministry texts. Perhaps the only exception is to be found in Terry Carter, Scott Duvall, and Daniel Hayes's *Preaching God's Word*. Because of the flexibility of their minimal definition of what constitutes biblical preaching, Carter, Duvall, and Hayes offer a much broader scope when discussing audience analysis and congregant exegesis:

A wise preacher adjusts his sermon accordingly. You need to discern the spiritual situation of your congregation in order to tailor sermons suitable for them. Yet be

²⁴ Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 69.

cautious about oversimplifying this matter of congregational spirituality into terms of only high or low. The truth is that most churches consist of people with all levels of spiritual maturity, and to neglect a group or to preach only sermons geared to one group often results in leaving some behind in confusion or boredom.²⁵

While multiple preaching texts may say something similar, *Preaching God's Word* goes on to clarify that part of this audience analysis includes being aware of adolescents within the group:

Preachers can also find themselves standing before youth groups or senior adult groups. The approaches to these two age groups differ greatly, since each group has unique interests, needs, attention spans, and concerns. Be aware of the various types of people in the audience when you preach, and tailor your sermon accordingly. When preaching to mixed groups (the most common situation), it is important to avoid focusing on only one specific group week after week. Try to connect with everyone in your audience.²⁶

Carter, Duvall, and Hayes promote the adjustment of sermons to reach younger generations as a necessary part of the preaching endeavor.²⁷ Their accommodation for youth in the midst of the congregation also applies to their process of application. While they do not recommend targeted application to a teenage audience with every sermon, they at least acknowledge that the presence of youth within the congregation demands a thoughtful approach:

Audience exegesis provides critical information for developing whole-person application. . . . In the application part of sermon preparation, [preachers] make a list of the various types of people represented in the audience—single mother, divorced middle-aged man, business executive, teenager in a public school, young married couple, retired couple on a fixed income, father without a job, and the like.²⁸

The authors' consideration of youth within the audience at least begins to extend a bridge between the task of preaching and the necessary application steps which student ministers have to take on a weekly basis: "The more homogenous a congregation

²⁵ Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hayes, *Preaching God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 89.

²⁶ Carter, Duvall, and Hayes, *Preaching God's Word*, 95.

²⁷ Carter, Duvall, and Hayes, *Preaching God's Word*, 97.

²⁸ Carter, Duvall, and Hayes, *Preaching God's Word*, 98.

is, the more focused application can be. But if a congregation consists of a conglomeration of various types of people in various situations—which is indeed true of most congregations—you should provide various options for application within a sermon.”²⁹ Youth pastors should strive to provide this same type of variety in their communication styles and application choices. Even within a student ministry context, there is a variety of student experiences, and varied stages of adolescence are present. One can offer a myriad of applications even within such a particularized age group.

**Timothy Keller, Hughes Oliphant Old,
and the Denial of Permanence as an
Expectation for Exposition**

In *Preaching*, Keller offers a bridge between a call to textual faithfulness and the continually shifting audience one can expect in a student ministry context. He argues that while one ought to prefer a *lectio continua* method, such a method can be modified to meet the needs of transient populations. Keller claims that the early history of the church largely dealt with immobile populations who had a sense of permanence. Because of this reality, preachers to fixed audiences could proceed through continuous expositions of whole books over long periods of time. In contrast,

Today the population is far more mobile and church attenders much more transient. In the *lectio continua* method it is easy to spend a year or more on a single book of the Bible. However, if a family is going to be at your church for two years, do you really want them to learn only from 1 Samuel? Or even just from the Gospel of John with no time in the Old Testament? One of the strengths of exposition, as we have seen, is that it exposes the congregation to the full range of biblical teachings and subjects. Yet a strict, consecutive, whole-Bible-book approach will guarantee that most of your people will actually be exposed to less of the Bible’s variety.³⁰

Keller contends that an expository preacher with a mobile population ought to consider a modified *lectio continua* method similar to the ministries of John Stott and Dick Lucas,

²⁹ Carter, Duvall, and Hayes, *Preaching God’s Word*, 125.

³⁰ Keller, *Preaching*, 40.

who preached to highly transient populations.³¹

Student ministry populations are transient by nature. The most consistent students within the population will depart after seven years. Unlike congregations full of lifelong adult members, student ministers preach to students on something of a timeline, with a definite end in sight. To a youth minister, the task of preaching responsibly through whole books with expository faithfulness and exegetical rigor can easily be shelved in favor of outsourced seven-year curriculum plans and video series. Keller's proposal for a *lectio continua* that at times breaks from whole books into an "expository mini-series" paves the way for faithful exposition within a context that allows for a continuously shifting audience.³²

The student ministry audience shifts from year to year. It also shifts dramatically in terms of biblical literacy. The audience ebbs and flows from lifelong children of church members well versed in biblical narratives to those who, having been invited to church, are hearing the Scriptures read for the first time. In addition, the ebb and flow of age groups within a given student ministry can produce times when the concentration of students is pre-to-mid adolescence. A few years later, deeper perception and abstraction have become the new norm. There must be some room for student ministers to adjust their preaching rotations intentionally in order to tailor their message to their student population without simply becoming a source of topical preaching or falling into the business of entertainment. Keller's wisdom provides such an option.

Keller largely derives his understanding of *lectio continua* from the earlier work of Hughes Oliphant Old in his massive *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Old's contributions offer a reminder that while Keller's solution is helpful, it can easily swing from one side of the pendulum

³¹ Keller, *Preaching*, 41.

³² Keller, *Preaching*, 41.

to the other. Old writes that during Thomas Cranmer's career, Cranmer's frustration with modifications to the *lectio continua* had reached a boiling point. Student ministers would be wise to see the patterns of many youth ministries reflected in the following words:

But these many years passed, this godly and decent order of the ancient Fathers hath been so altered, broken, and neglected, by planting in uncertain stories, Legends, Responds, Verses, vain repetitions, Commemorations, and synodals, that commonly when any book of the Bible was begun, before three or four chapters were read out, all the rest were unread.³³

Old points to Cranmer's difficulty in attempting to acquaint Englanders with a full understanding of Scripture due to the perpetual chopping of unrelated Scripture references amid old wives' tales and fascinating stories unrelated to Scripture in any conceivable way.³⁴ Cranmer's solution, and the solution of the *Liturgies of Edward VI*, was to allow for the occasional interruption of the liturgical calendar but at a much less frequent rate than previous iterations.³⁵ Old reminds readers that even the magisterial Reformer Ulrich Zwingli, a staunch advocate of *lectio continua*, would occasionally preach on various topics when he felt it necessary to do so.³⁶

Together, Old and Keller offer a balanced approach which prefers continual exposition when possible but recommends a selected reading when appropriate for the intended audience. Student ministry preaching is often characterized by the same sort of chopped and topical approach to Scripture that Zwingli and Cranmer found unnerving. Scriptures may be mentioned, but, in some instances, they are relegated to the bottom of the list beneath interesting illustrations, overwrought word studies, and moralistic

³³ Joseph Ketley, *The Two Liturgies, A.D. 1549, and A.D. 1552: With Other Documents Set Forth by Authority in the Reign of King Edward 6: viz, the Order of Communion, 1448: The Primer, 1553: The Catechism and Articles, 1553: Catechismus Brevis, 1553* (Miami: Hardpress, 2017), 17, quoted in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Church*, vol. 4, *The Age of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 152.

³⁴ Old, *Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 4:153.

³⁵ Old, *Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 4:154–55.

³⁶ Old, *Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures*, 4:46–47.

recommendations broken down into three easily digestible points. While expository preaching offers a clear solution to these devices, Keller's warning against continuous exposition for its own sake, rather than for the edification of the listener, provides balance to the rigors which whole-book preachers may inflict on a transient audience. Old states that while the other side of the coin is far from preferable, even the most ardent historical figures found place for nuance for the sake of their congregants.

Bridging the gap from the side of expository preaching texts may prove difficult but is certainly not impossible. Expecting these texts to speak directly to adolescent listeners proves fruitless, but finding the best practices for audience application and exegetical faithfulness and beginning to construct a new model that utilizes these practices is indeed possible.

CHAPTER 2

STUDENT MINISTRY TEXTS: RHETORIC, IMAGINATION, AND STYLE

Introduction: The Bizarre World of Student Ministry Speaking Texts

In contrast to the usually monotone and drab color schemes of expository preaching texts, the student ministry bookshelf on speaking tends to be full of brightly colored, eye-catching, and zany-font-bearing collections of words that may or may not deal with actually communicating to students. Four key errors tend to plague these texts. The first is a failure to adequately communicate what exactly one does when delivering the Word to students. Terminology varies dramatically from book to book, or even from chapter to chapter, between preaching, teaching, and speaking. In addition, the terminology of the nature of the delivery itself creates confusion. Does the student minister deliver a sermon, a message, a chat, a talk, a lesson, or an experience? Such confusion makes the student minister's role difficult to define, and his practice and preparation methods will vary accordingly.

Second, there is a great discrepancy from book to book about what exactly a student minister ought to do with the biblical text. To be sure, these variations no doubt exist between books on expository preaching methods, but the spectrum of variation among youth ministry speaking books is considerably vaster. Exegetical methods from book to book assume greatly different levels of ministerial training, and some take up multiple chapters, while others keep exegesis down to a three-point system on less than one page.

Third, some of the more popular texts on student ministry emphasize a tendency toward almost unbearable showmanship and entertainment models. Finally,

texts which consider the role of the student minister vary widely on what constitutes the central goal of his task. Various descriptions and nicknames abound. Expectations of time management shift dramatically. Whether or not one's calling includes actual, disciplined, and planned-out biblical preaching shapes the entire course of the text, and the entire nature of one's student ministry career.

The Terminology of the Role, the Task, and the Message

A new idea has crept in with regard to preaching, and it has taken various forms. A most significant one was that people began to talk about the "address" in the service instead of the sermon. That in itself was indicative of a subtle change. An "address". No longer the sermon, but an 'address' or perhaps even a lecture. I shall be dealing with these distinctions later. There was a man in the U.S.A. who published a series of books under the significant title of *Quiet Talks*. *Quiet Talks*, you see, as against the "ranting" of the preachers! *Quiet Talks on Prayer*; *Quiet Talks on Power*, etc. In other words the very title announces that the man is not going to preach. Preaching, of course, is something carnal lacking in spirituality, what is needed is a chat, a fireside chat, quiet talks, and so on!¹

Martin Lloyd-Jones delivered this address in the spring of 1969. His words at the time described a crisis of preaching. Such a crisis has only intensified in the recent past and has reached a cacophony among student ministry texts, with each announcing "that the man is not going to preach."² If not, what is he supposed to do? A consideration of a few of the most popular books on student ministry should suffice.

Guide, Navigator, and Compass: The Terminology of Jon Middelndorf

Jon Middelndorf's introduction to *Worship-Centered Youth Ministry* reveals his methodology. He tells a story of an experience near Niagara Falls, where some are hesitant to know the might of its power for fear of getting wet. Though some fear the mist, Middelndorf "sees the mist coming off the falls as the insight that is only available

¹ Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 23.

² Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 51.

to those people who get close enough to God to be able to catch a real sense of who He is.”³ In addition, throughout the course of his ministry, Middendorf, as a guide and navigator, “makes sure that [the students] all stay close enough to the falls” as he “tells the Story well enough, that someday there will be an opportunity for that light to come on and for God to reveal himself to my kids.”⁴ The text declares itself a compass meant to navigate students to the “true North” of the biblical story.⁵ In the midst of this oddly passive language, Middendorf goes on to prescribe whole-book expositions, lectionary guides through set books, and textual faithfulness even though his primary function is less on being a preacher and more on being a “guide” or “navigator.”

Meeting Needs through Crowd Programs: The Terminology of Doug Fields in Contrast to Haddon Robinson

An icon among student ministry readers is Doug Fields’s *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*. Fields utilizes the five key purposes from Saddleback Church, where he was the longtime head of youth ministry. He gives systems and implementation strategies for nearly every aspect of the youth minister’s vocation. This ministry, “defined as ‘meeting needs with love,’”⁶ includes communicating to gatherings of students at “crowd programs” built around positive environments, fun, involvement, and an understandable message.⁷ Fields consistently utilizes the communication of a “message” as the task and regularly talks about “speaking” rather than preaching of any sort. He does occasionally see his role from the stage as “teaching,” and he emphasizes that he does so primarily

³ Jon Middendorf, *Worship-Centered Youth Ministry: A Compass for Guiding Youth into God’s Story* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Press, 2000), 12.

⁴ Middendorf, *Worship-Centered Youth Ministry*, 14.

⁵ Middendorf, *Worship-Centered Youth Ministry*, 59–61.

⁶ Doug Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 50.

⁷ Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*, 117.

through topical messages; but, he is willing to make an exception in order to promote depth:

When teaching the crowd audience, I regularly teach topics. For example, I ask myself “What does the Bible say regarding friendships?” I do the same thing with topics such as temptation, family, sex, peer pressure, language, and so on. At other programs, for students with more spiritual depth, I teach through books of the Bible or on contextual passages.⁸

Fields never delineates between a contextual and a non-contextual passage. In addition, he advocates for a simple message. He utilizes the “big idea” approach from Haddon Robinson (though he calls it his own) and makes sure to emphasize its necessity by saying, “It’s depressing, but, even when they understand the message, most students will forget it within twenty-four hours. Because your messages won’t be retained for long, try to simplify them to one key statement.”⁹ Field’s use of Robinson’s “big idea” approach is simply not utilized for the same reason. According to Robinson,

If we preach effectively, we must know what we are about. Effective sermons major in biblical ideas brought together into an overarching unity. Having thought God’s thoughts after Him, the expositor communicates and applies those thoughts to the hearers. In dependence upon the Holy Spirit, the preacher aims to confront, convict, convert, and comfort men and women through the proclamation of biblical concepts. People shape their lives and settle their eternal destinies in response to ideas.¹⁰

Robinson sets out to use the big idea in order to shape lives and eternal destinies. Fields does so knowing that one’s message will not be retained for long. While Robinson does admit that many in the congregation are prone to forgetting the sermon the following day, he advocates the use of a big idea not as a concession to audience forgetfulness but in order to preach in such a way that it might not happen.¹¹ Fields

⁸ Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*, 125.

⁹ Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*, 125.

¹⁰ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 39.

¹¹ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 34.

advocates for a message from a minister who meets needs with love to a crowd program rather than with a sermon to a flock. In doing so, in the midst of his 397-page work on *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, the entire section on the necessity, preparation, and delivery of biblical messages occupies eight pages.

**Contemplator, Namer, and Presence
amid Anxiety: The Terminology
of Mark Yaconelli**

Taking a completely different approach than Fields, Mark Yaconelli's *Contemplative Youth Ministry* advocates for a ministry of presence as the primary goal of youth ministry. Yaconelli sees the role of contemplation as primary in the youth minister's calling, but he refuses to call this approach a "ministry model."¹² He claims that this ministry is necessary because "what youth need most are people who know how to be present to God and present to others."¹³ Yaconelli has grown tired of traditional models of youth ministry which appeal solely to entertainment for the sake of increased attendance:

Ministries of distraction keep youth moving from one activity to the next: rafting trips, pizza parties, game nights, ski retreats, beach fests, music festivals, amusement parks, taco-feeds, scavenger-hunts, crowd-breakers, raves, skits, and whatever other activities attract kids. It's a Nickelodeon approach to youth ministry that seeks to appeal to kids' propensity for fun and recreation. . . . While such ministries may keep youth entertained, they often keep youth distracted from the deeper rhythms and practices of the Christian faith.¹⁴

Yaconelli argues that most of these contemporary strategies are manifested fears of adult anxieties in response to the anxieties of their student children.¹⁵ Yaconelli responds by stating that the measure of effective ministry is not numbers or common

¹² Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 25.

¹³ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 24.

¹⁴ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 45.

¹⁵ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 66–67.

metrics but “how we respond to this question of becoming fully alive.”¹⁶ He states that the best way to do so is to adopt ancient monastic practices, such as *Lectio Divina* and centering prayer.¹⁷ At no point in the entirety of the text does Yaconelli reflect on the importance of the Word delivered through any kind of address, formal or otherwise. It is simply enough to meet the needs of students through being present to God and others. This presence in contemplative form is completely freed from the bonds of anything that would deal with God’s revelation of himself. Rather, the presence of Christ is primarily felt through the dormant presence of Jesus within the students as they are seen, named, contemplated, and quietly moved through processes alongside their anxious shepherds.¹⁸

Speaker: The Terminology of Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins

Years after the publication of *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Doug Fields co-wrote *Speaking to Teenagers* alongside popular student ministry professor and speaker Duffy Robbins. Their joint effort has since become an extremely influential book among student ministers due to its enlightening grasp of communication theory and adolescent response. Fields and Robbins utilize one of the more popular and ambiguous terms to define the role of the student minister in relation to the Word: “speaker.” Because of its grasp of communication theory, their terminology occasionally shifts to “communicator,”¹⁹ but it most often refers to the act as simply “speaking.”²⁰ Fields and Robbins make no reference to preaching, proclaiming, declaring, or any similar act usually used by authors referring to expository preaching. Even so, *Speaking to*

¹⁶ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 67.

¹⁷ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 83–93.

¹⁸ Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 128.

¹⁹ Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think about, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 236–37.

²⁰ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 44–60.

Teenagers remains ubiquitous in student ministry circles due to its practicality and deep research.

Experiential Storyteller: The Terminology of Mark Miller

Mark Miller's *Experiential Storytelling* seeks to answer the question of why so many students are disconnecting from the narrative message of the Scriptures and leaving the church in droves. He attempts to solve this process through experiential storytelling, which he defines as "creating an environment that allows others to participate in the telling of a story through sensory interaction."²¹ Miller believes that any sense of the authority of the Word being delivered has passed, and it is no longer "generally accepted that the person behind the podium had something important to say."²² The church, Miller claims, should transition from the old language of information to the new language of experience—or be left in the dust.²³ The problems of new post-modern learners seem not to be a lack of appreciation for authority but the fact that they expect any type of authority in the first place. Consider Miller's approach:

Proponents of experiential education critique the traditional classroom style with its hierarchical structure. They see traditional education as a deductive approach that begins with an assumption that an information transfer must occur between an enlightened teacher to ignorant student. . . . Today's emerging generations no longer need the informed to be the informer. The Internet has given them unprecedented access to information that's only a few clicks away. This shift in need has also brought a shift in learning styles. Experience that is interactive and relational not only attracts the younger generations, but is the key to educating them as well.²⁴

To Miller, the very idea of an ambassadorial authority declaring the very words of God (a hierarchical approach, no doubt) completely misses the point. Rather, "the real

²¹ Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God's Message* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 7.

²² Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 12.

²³ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 20–21.

²⁴ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 22–23.

beauty of experiential education is that it places trust in the learner to derive meaning from his or her experience.”²⁵ Miller responds to the idea that he is abandoning biblical authority by placing himself in the line of the “reformers, missionaries, and others through history” and claiming that he is simply doing the work of contextualization to a culture steeped in experience.²⁶ Hence, his desire is for “a complete reconstruction of how we communicate and educate.”

The primary function of the youth pastor, per Miller, is to be a “storyteller: a person who invites others into the experience of a story.”²⁷ Miller claims that his perfect model for this type of storyteller is Jesus: “Jesus also could have opened the Hebrew texts, read every passage flawlessly, exegeted every paragraph with precision, and explained every verse in minute detail. But he chose not to do any of that. Instead, he chose to tell stories.”²⁸ While Miller points out the storytelling prowess of the Savior, he seems to neglect Jesus’s preaching ministry, which includes the Sermon on the Mount, synagogue preaching, and multiple authoritative declarations.

But such sermons, according to Miller, are all but an extinct praxis from a church stuck in Mayberry: “A sermon tells people what to think. A story forces people to do the thinking for themselves.”²⁹ He remarks that “preaching comes across as a tool from the era of conquest. Being preached at is like a one-sided battle in the age of the Crusades.”³⁰ He still concedes that sermons are powerful tools, but he contends that they lose all power when propositions are utilized at the expense of narrative.³¹ The shift in

²⁵ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 23.

²⁶ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 25.

²⁷ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 30.

²⁸ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 40.

²⁹ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 41.

³⁰ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 80.

³¹ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 80–81.

culture has moved toward the interactive, and collaborative experience has been added “to the recipe of exposition and narrative preaching.”³² Miller is unwilling to forego the use of Scripture as a basis for such storytelling; however, he simply commends that Scripture be used as a starting point rather than a central focus in a series of propositions.

Thirteen Options for the Choosing: The Terminology of Dave Stone

Group Publishing primarily publishes speaking texts for student ministry audiences due to their large influence within the worlds of student and children’s ministries. So, while Dave Stone wrote *Refining Your Style* for a general audience of preachers and teachers, the book has gained a much larger readership among student ministers. Stone utilizes media from thirteen influential Christian speakers, all with different styles, in the hopes that they will help worried preachers to hone their own styles. He warns against wholesale imitation but encourages listening to others for the point of sharpening one’s communication skills.³³ As he analyzes each style, Stone highlights illustrations of Christ’s own use of these particular methods alongside interviews of each communicator. Stone is flexible with his usage of terminology, which includes speaking, communicating, preaching, and teaching. He is so flexible, in fact, that each of these thirteen styles are usable within a ministry context. One can be a Creative Storyteller, Direct Spokesperson, Scholarly Analytic, Revolutionary Leader, Engaging Humorist, Convincing Apologist, Inspiring Orator, Practical Applicator, Persuasive Motivator, Passionate Teacher, Relevant Illustrator, Cultural Prophet, or Unorthodox Artist.³⁴ In doing so, one can echo the communication strategies of Max Lucado, Franklin Graham, Tim Keller, Erwin McManus, Ken Davis, Lee Strobel, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Bob

³² Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 85.

³³ Dave Stone, *Refining Your Style: Learning from Respected Communicators* (Loveland, CO: Group, 2004), 8.

³⁴ Stone, *Refining Your Style*, 12–13.

Russell, Zig Ziglar, Liz Curtis Higgs, Gene Appel, Chuck Colson, or Rob Bell, respectively. While many of these communicators identify themselves with multiple particular styles, Rob Bell adds “Mind Stretcher” and “Fundamentalist Frustrator” to his titles, and Erwin McManus describes himself as a “Mystic Warrior.”³⁵

Stone intends *Refining Your Style* to be an act of charity to those who feel pigeonholed into one particular type of speaking. He strives to point out various ways in which one can adequately preach, teach, and generally communicate. Yet the definitions are so vastly different that it becomes almost impossible to narrow down what actually constitutes the task of the communicator. The idea that the same task can be done by Scholarly Analytics, Unorthodox Artists, and Revolutionary Leaders is already difficult to conceive, and adding ten more styles only increases confusion in the name of making the practice easier. A simple definition of the task at hand would go a long way in providing helpful solutions.

Ninja: The Ridiculous Terminology of Matt Maiberger

Should one want to find the most popular text on Amazon by searching for “youth ministry preaching,”³⁶ he or she will more than likely stumble upon Matt Maiberger’s *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*. “Speaking” is the general term used throughout the text to describe the communication process, but Maiberger does not shy away from ninja terminology in exceedingly perplexing ways:

Ninjas are notorious for their stealth movement, expertise, and rigorous preparation and training. Imagine if you could be a ninja-like youth speaker; moving strategically across the stage, delivering a well-thought out message, while wearing a black morph suit and chucking throwing stars at the students. Wouldn’t that be amazing? Well, everything except for that last part.³⁷

³⁵ Stone, *Refining Your Style*, 14–15.

³⁶ As of April 10, 2019.

³⁷ Matt Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja* (n.p.: CreateSpace Independent

The book winds through the ten “ninja questions” on prayer, preparation, and delivery. No explanation is given as to why these questions have anything to do with ninjas, but they are there nonetheless.³⁸ Some of Maiberger’s ninja applications may seem curiously ordered as well. For instance, in the “What does the Bible Say?” section, Maiberger’s first three steps include, in order, (1) take the proper time to study; (2) use the internet; and (3) ask the key question “What does the Bible say?”³⁹ Ninja Question 7 (“What is the last thing I should say?”) includes four possible ways to close one’s message. They are, in order, (1) “The Platinum Illustration,” (2) “The Token Response,”⁴⁰ (3) “The Human Video,” and (4) “The Gospel.”⁴¹ Maiberger intends to build ninjas, and he does so at the expense of building preachers of any sort.

What Does the Youth Minister Do with the Text of Scripture?

The title of the youth pastor notwithstanding, there are also a variety of concepts and titles that permeate the youth ministry world when faced with the questions of what one should do with the biblical text. The following are but a few of the dozens of potential options available to the contemporary youth minister.

Unpack It: Andrew Root and the Threefold Word

Andrew Root’s *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry* is one of his many contributions to his Theological Journey through Youth Ministry series. In the text, a fictional youth worker named Nadia is embroiled in a drama involving a student’s

Publishing Platform, 2013), 7.

³⁸ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 8–9.

³⁹ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 21.

⁴⁰ In which one gives a token or item to the listening crowd.

⁴¹ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 54–55.

parents, angry deacons, and her relationship with Scripture. While some parents are fed up with the lack of biblical knowledge among their fictional children, Nadia reminds them, “I don’t think the point is just basic ‘knowledge.’”⁴² Root emphasizes that such controversies are happening in student ministries because of our fundamental disconnect with how Scripture actually works:

Too often we’ve thought of the Bible as if it were primarily a pool of information that we want young people to drink from. Mrs. Richards [a fictional mother] has biblical knowledge—knowledge she’s possessed since she was a child. This is commendable—but is it what we are ultimately after in youth ministry, especially given the way in which knowledge itself has changed?⁴³

Root then uses the case of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 to illustrate what must be done with the text in order administer it faithfully: “Philip is not so much focused on the question of what the text says and how one should understand it. Philip is much more concerned with what the text *does*. He talks about how these words of Scripture point to the crucified and risen Jesus, and how in pointing to him, the Scripture moves and lives.”⁴⁴ Philip provides a model, says Root, that allows student ministers to be much freer with the Word and to stop spending so much time on its intent: “Our pursuit when it comes to young people and the Bible is not to fill them up with information, but to invite them into the action of interpretation.”⁴⁵ Rather than clarifying apparent contradictions in Scripture for the sake of students, Root argues that the task of the youth pastor is to embrace “the contradictions as the central distinctive of Christianity” since “the contradictions are, in almost every way, the very point or heart of Christianity.”⁴⁶

Root’s idea of “unpacking Scripture” is simply to see it as void of any sort of

⁴² Andrew Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, Theological Journey through Youth Ministry Series (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 19.

⁴³ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 26.

⁴⁴ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 32–33.

⁴⁵ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 37.

⁴⁶ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 52.

authority apart from its function:

The Bible has no authority of its own; if it's disconnected from the act of God, it is only a book—a book that possesses as much authority as *The Taming of the Shrew* or *Harry Potter* or *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But because God has chosen to use the Bible in a unique way to reveal God-self, it possesses authority because God acts through it.⁴⁷

By way of reminder, this is part of a collection specifically aimed at bringing theological rigor into the practice of student ministry.

Root ends his discussion on “What the Bible is” by defining its three-fold nature:

What this all means is that the Word of God comes to us in a three-fold manner, it comes to us in three forms that can't be dissociated from one another. . . . Most primarily and most completely, the Word of God is Jesus Christ, God's action. But in order to encounter God's action, we need the biblical text; the biblical text becomes the Word of God as it witnesses to the action of God that is Jesus Christ. The Bible can live only when it is connected to the living Jesus; it can only be the Word of God as it witnesses to the Word made flesh. But there is another form of the Word of God—the preached or proclaimed Word of God. The preached or proclaimed Word is the action of taking the biblical text, dwelling on how God moves in our context, and speaking this to others.⁴⁸

Thus, Andrew Root, in trying to bring youth pastors into the theological fold, espouses a Barthian threefold form. Root's desire to change the theological structure of the Scriptures from containing any sort of authority within themselves leads to a student ministry model that moves away from any kind of formal declaration or information. The Word exists not to be proclaimed on its own authority by ambassadors but through interpreters leading interpreters.

Exegetical Simplicity: Matt Maiberger and a One-Page Approach to Exegetical Rigor

Matt Maiberger's demand on the youth speaking ninja is to encourage exegesis before moving into delivery. While such a demand is commendable in such a short text,

⁴⁷ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 82–83.

⁴⁸ Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 88–89.

Maiberger's expectations for exegesis are far from rigorous. Maiberger makes sure to warn the potential ninja away from eisegesis, and then he encourages the following three step process:

1. Lookup your selected verse(s) in the Greek interlinear Bible. Utilize the interlinear Greek/New American Standard to figure out the root Greek verbs that are used in the passage that you are studying.
2. Determine the tense, voice, and mood of the verb with the parsing guide. Using Han's parsing guide, figure out the tense, voice, and mood of the Greek verb you are exegeting.
3. Refer to the parsing chart to see how the verb is literally translated from Greek to English. Once you understand the tense, voice and mood, it becomes possible to determine the meaning of the verb as the Spirit intended. Often, English translations are somewhat short here. That's it.⁴⁹

Maiberger has accomplished what most theologians only dare dream; he has taken the entire exegetical process down to three simple steps, each involving a parsing chart. Maiberger's recommendation for exegesis may seem limiting, however, in that the only exegetical work done is on verbs. Even more limiting is the fact that he only expects exegetical work to be done on Greek texts, much to the chagrin of the other thirty-nine books of the canon.

Study: Duffy Robbins, Doug Fields, and Eric McKiddie

In *Speaking to Teenagers*, Fields and Robbins expect youth pastors to deeply study their intended texts prior to any development of illustrations. They state three goals of study: (1) allow the text to speak for itself, untarnished by the student minister's assumptions and preconceptions; (2) identify the timeless message God has for his people; and (3) consider what these timeless truths mean for the student minister's life and for the lives of his students.⁵⁰ A far cry from Maiberger and Root, Fields and Robbins

⁴⁹ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 20.

⁵⁰ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 110.

demand study as the first step of any message worth speaking. They argue that the focus of the study will be largely determined by whether or not an expository or topical message is to be expected.⁵¹ In either case, careful determination of the text, prayer for insight into the original message, deep reading of the larger context, and engagement in commentaries form the backbone of Fields and Robbins's approach to the text.⁵²

In a similar vein, Eric McKiddie's chapter in Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson's *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* argues that the best possible method for preparation is to plan an expository sermon. Rather than Fields and Robbins's approach, which allows for choice between textual (expository) and topical message, McKiddie clearly states that expository preaching is the best way forward.⁵³ The approach to the scriptural text demands steps of rigorous interpretation. Initial outlining of the message is followed by commentary study and the utilization of Bryan Chapell's "fallen condition focus" from *Christ-Centered Preaching*.⁵⁴ Only then can the process of application, unified sermon outlining, and sermon composition fully begin.⁵⁵

While I have only surveyed a few books, it is clear that the variety of expectations for student ministers in their relationship to the Word of God is, at the very least, confused. Hope is found in the writings of Fields, Robbins, and McKiddie. While their texts begin to build a bridge to expository preaching methods, their contributions represent but a few pages in a sea of other popular approaches. These approaches vary in theological accuracy as well as their willingness to concede to models that include

⁵¹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 110.

⁵² Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 110–20.

⁵³ Eric McKiddie, "The Impact of Expounding God's Word: Expository Teaching in Youth Ministry," in *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide*, ed. Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 58–59.

⁵⁴ McKiddie, "The Impact of Expounding God's Word," 61–63. See Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 50.

⁵⁵ McKiddie, "The Impact of Expounding God's Word," 63–65.

showmanship at the expense of authority.

Baptized Vaudeville

[Kerygma] describes the work of the preacher in apostolic contrast to jovial flippancy, high-flown speculation, sentimental gush, moralistic nagging, and a dozen other abuses of the pulpit. Nor can it be applied readily to such sermon substitutes as book reviews, interpretative dancing, panel discussions, feature movies, or baptized vaudeville.⁵⁶

Edmund Clowney's *Preaching and Biblical Theology* offers this stunning critique of what occurs when the authority of Scripture is compromised and the ambassadorial, kerygmatic function of the preacher is abandoned. Each of Clowney's negative examples are prone to become stereotypes of youth pastoral efforts to deliver the Word in the absence of biblical authority.

Such stereotypes are not exclusive to student ministry, as John Piper reveals these same tendencies among Sunday morning preaching in *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*:

Pastors have absorbed this narrow view of gladness and friendliness and now cultivate it across the land with pulpit demeanor and verbal casualness that make the blood-earnestness of Chalmers and the pervading solemnity of Edwards's mind unthinkable. The result is a preaching style plagued by triviality, levity, carelessness, flippancy, and a general spirit that nothing of eternal and infinite proportions is being done or said on Sunday morning.⁵⁷

Newer approaches have begun to spring up in student ministry circles to avoid these types of problems, such as Brian Cosby's *Giving Up Gimmicks*.⁵⁸ Yet multiple popular texts still advocate for flippancy, gush, triviality, and vaudeville in the name of reaching student imaginations.

Miller's *Experiential Storytelling* approaches the engagement of the senses as a

⁵⁶ Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 20.

⁵⁷ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 57.

⁵⁸ Brian Cosby, *Giving Up Gimmicks: Reclaiming Youth Ministry from an Entertainment Culture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2012).

primary means of gaining student response. Miller pleads for pastors and teachers to remove argumentative language and replace it with “beautiful narratives.”⁵⁹ In doing so, however, ministers sacrifice authority for personal experience. His recommendation on the use of space is very telling:

For example, if your story is speaking to the issue of loneliness, think of ways you might use your space to speak to that. One way could be to place the participants in a dark setting. Lighting can create powerful settings. Silence could also be used to speak to this loneliness. Or you could combine the two elements to create a sense of outer space-like isolation. Another possibility is to go the opposite direction. You could use an overabundance of noise to create this same sense. Sometimes we feel the loneliest when there is too much noise around us.⁶⁰

Miller’s use of lighting, isolation, or an overabundance of noise is great for the purposes of entertainment but perhaps overwrought for the purposes of speaking with authority. Not only is set decoration and design essential for an understanding of loneliness but also for transcendence. As Miller explains,

In one of our experiential stories, we wanted to express a feeling of transcendence. With a room that had a nine-foot ceiling and brown carpeting, this seemed to be an impossible task. Enter the recycled Monster Wrap. We took pieces of this stuff and hung them from the ceiling. With some soft lighting reflecting on them, it created a very cool otherworldly effect. Since that time, whenever we want to create a transcendent or supernatural feel, we use this material.⁶¹

John Piper recognizes this type of manufactured transcendence and the illusion of supernatural elements as the exact type of problem that plagues current preachers in their efforts to connect with their listeners. Rather than manufacturing transcendence through gimmickry, Piper argues that preaching should be defined by kerygmatic authority which evidences itself in genuine supernatural weight. Such earnestness in the efforts of the preaching in the communication of the Word can produce gravity regardless of the nature of technique and delivery:

⁵⁹ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 26.

⁶⁰ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 100–101.

⁶¹ Miller, *Experiential Storytelling*, 102.

We have fallen so far from the conception of preaching because we couldn't imitate it if we tried. I say *fallen* because, whether a manuscript should be read or not, and whether a sermon should be two hours or not, and whether sentences should be long and stories few, the fact is that the glory of these preacher was their earnestness—and earnestness that might be called gravity.⁶²

The utilization of gimmicks is present throughout Matt Maiberger's *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*. Video, drama, "quippy, twitter-length, yet thought provoking statements," and all other forms of entertainment are available in the arsenal of the trained ninja speaker.⁶³ Among the most shocking forms of "baptized vaudeville" is Maiberger's section on refining the sermon to exclude certain elements:

The topic that night was sharing Christ with your friends. A college intern at the camp was going to star with me in an adapted skit we were using at the end of the message. A very intense skit. Without going into too much detail, allow me to just say there was a boat-load of fake blood, scary background music, and incredibly intense dialogue. At the end of the skit, I (covered in blood) was giving the challenge for students to take sharing their faith seriously. It was only about a two-minute closing; however, there was one huge problem. At the most inopportune moment possible, one of the band member's phones began ringing onstage. It wasn't just any ringtone. It was a hideously high-pitched, loud, hyperactive squirrel-type laughing ringtone. And it would stop. Talk about ruining the moment So much for trying to end the week on a serious note.⁶⁴

Maiberger never states that the blood-soaked skit with a two-minute challenge was worth refining. He does say that one should consider refining one's message down to "only what is necessary to share."⁶⁵ Yet he never returns to the illustration to refine what it is he would eliminate. Seemingly, the greatest obstacle to student engagement is not the two-minute conclusion to a blood-soaked skit full of scary background music but, instead, the distraction of a cell phone ringtone. It seemingly would have ended the week on a serious note without the presence of an interruption, but the seriousness was only achievable by the utilization of a "boat-load of fake blood."

⁶² Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 56–57.

⁶³ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 25.

⁶⁴ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 37–38.

⁶⁵ Maiberger, *How to Become a Youth Speaking Ninja*, 39.

Youth ministry is bombarded by these types of shock-and-awe methodologies and experiences in the hope of engaging student listeners. Some expository preaching texts are prone to dryness and lack of imagination, while, conversely, student ministry texts are prone to the type of flippancy, joviality, sentimental gush, and high-flown speculations that Clowney so ardently fought against in the name of authoritative declaration of God’s Word to God’s people.

Nurturers, Teachers, Architects, and Pastors: Student Ministry Texts and the Variety of Expectations

Another difficulty in student ministry textbooks is the variety of possible answers to the question of the youth pastor’s primary role. To those in senior pastoral positions, texts such as *Preaching and Preachers* offer strong reminders that “the primary task of the Church and of the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God.”⁶⁶ But in the climate of youth ministry—where one can be a guide, navigator, crowd-programming needs-meeter, messenger, speaker, experiential storyteller, unpacker, contemplator, or ninja—discovering one’s primary purpose can be exceedingly difficult.

Nurturer and Recipient: The Terminology of Chap Clark

Hurt 2.0 is a jarring treatment of the current lives of teenagers amid a culture of systematic abandonment. In the book, Chap Clark recognizes that the state of teenage culture is a dark one, and, at the book’s conclusion, he demands solutions from the world of student ministry. These solutions are based on a culture of authentic care from adults toward students marked by “refocused, nurturing organizations and programs . . . , a stable and secure loving presence . . . , and authentic, intimate relationships with adults.”⁶⁷ Student ministries, Clark observes, are susceptible to the same type of

⁶⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 26.

⁶⁷ Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today’s Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011),

institutional and programmatic structures that continue to promote an abandonment culture.⁶⁸

Clark contends against the traditional model in his claim that

Ultimately, the goal of youth ministry is not about helping to shape a personal faith. The goal is the full relational and systematic assimilation of the emerging adult into the life of the Christian community known as the church. . . . In a culture in which the young have been set adrift without a structure designed to invite them back into the core of adult life, the church must be different.⁶⁹

Clark's conception of a youth ministry primarily concerned with nurture and systematic assimilation into the larger community is commendable. Even with Clark's ideal ministry setting, he leaves room for the ministry of the Word to be part of the nurture- and community-building project.

Teacher: The Terminology of Dan Lambert

Dan Lambert's *Teaching That Makes a Difference* is a confusing read simply because of the author's use of "teaching" to describe traditional "preaching" within a youth ministry setting. Lambert clearly indicates that such teaching is to be done in the presence of student ministry.⁷⁰ He even reverts to outlining the traditional "hook, book, look and took"⁷¹ method that defined youth ministry communication for decades. Teachers, according to Lambert, are characterized by "being filled with the Holy Spirit."⁷² They know that their teaching "comes from God, not from themselves."⁷³

171.

⁶⁸ Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 186.

⁶⁹ Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 190.

⁷⁰ Dan Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference: How to Teach for Holistic Impact* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 16.

⁷¹ Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, 132–33.

⁷² Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, 23.

⁷³ Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, 24.

Lambert tells readers that “the Holy Spirit does the teaching,” and he quotes 1 Corinthians 2:12–14 to verify his claim. Yet in his chapter on preparation, he mentions nothing about sermons; instead, he primarily uses the language of “lesson plans,” even though he expects the Holy Spirit to be active in the course of teaching.⁷⁴ Toward the end of book, in his discussion of evaluating one’s teaching, Lambert states that “teaching youth is a high and holy calling that is an extreme privilege,” and he argues from Paul’s claims of apostolic freedom in 1 Corinthians 9:19–24.⁷⁵ Lambert never seems to separate the role of preaching from the role of teaching. Though his methods, choices of Scripture, utilization of youth group as a general setting, and dependence upon the Holy Spirit seem to apply primarily to a preaching setting, Lambert never veers from “teaching” as the principle term.

Architect: The Terminology of Mark DeVries

Sustainable Youth Ministry, by Mark DeVries, is less a book on the speaking nature of youth pastoral work and much more a work devoted to the creation of structures and systems which enable youth ministry to endure longer than the pathetically low national average. In order to achieve his aim, DeVries argues that youth pastors need to step away from the role of camp counselor and into the role of architect:

Unfortunately, most churches perfectly design their youth ministries to guarantee volunteer problems. Here’s how: they hire camp counselors to lead their youth ministry instead of ministry leaders. Now, there’s nothing wrong with having a “camp counselor” working with youth. In fact, having people who see their primary role as building relationships with kids is crucial to every youth ministry. But we have a name for folks who play that role, a name that might surprise you: volunteers.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, 119–37.

⁷⁵ Lambert, *Teaching That Makes a Difference*, 168.

⁷⁶ Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn’t Last and What Your Church Can Do about It* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008), 141.

DeVries then poses the question of what would happen if professional youth workers made their role of relating with students secondary to the role of ensuring that students had multiple adult inputs into their lives.⁷⁷ The answer for DeVries is the youth pastor as “architect.” He builds and develops systems and structures rather than being overly concerned with a ministry of presence.⁷⁸ Throughout the course of his book, DeVries highlights this role multiple times, with little mention of the necessity of any kind of preaching, proclamation, or preparation.

Pastor: The Terminology of Duffy Robbins

A landmark text in student ministry training is Duffy Robbins’s *This Way to Youth Ministry*. Robbins attempts to go against the grain of other student ministry texts with his assertion that “youth ministry is primarily a theological enterprise.”⁷⁹ He adds that “youth ministry without theology—divorced from deep intimacy and communion with God—is little more than a vulgarity.”⁸⁰ Robbins also understands the nature of student ministry as inherently pastoral: “Part of the problem is that the church in general, and youth ministry in particular, suffers from a weak pastoral theology.”⁸¹ Robbins utilizes multiple metaphors in his section on what constitutes pastoral leadership within a student ministry framework but notes that “each role highlights a different texture and tie-in, but the two main tasks of pastoral responsibility have always been feeding and leading.”⁸²

⁷⁷ DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 143.

⁷⁸ DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 75.

⁷⁹ Robbins, Duffy Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry: An Introduction to the Adventure* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 18.

⁸⁰ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 19.

⁸¹ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 52.

⁸² Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 52.

Robbins then argues that pastoral theology needs to address the key question of identifying the nature and function of youth pastors in particular: “The question that emerges almost immediately in our study of pastoral theology is simply this: In what sense is it theologically correct to refer to someone as a youth *pastor*? Is youth ministry *real* ministry? Can someone be *called to youth ministry*?”⁸³ He argues—alongside John Calvin—that the function of pastor, presbyter, bishop, and minister are biblically interchangeable,⁸⁴ and he concludes by saying, “Might we conclude then that it is proper to speak of a youth *pastor*? Perhaps, and perhaps not. What we can conclude is that to make such a clear distinction . . . between a *youth pastor* and a real minister, at least in terms of church office, is to draw a bold line where Scripture seems to draw a fuzzy one.”⁸⁵

Robbins hides his true opinion in a footnote referring to the previous quotation:

The reader will notice that I have used quotations and biblical guidelines that refer to the *pastor* as if they can be equally applied to the *youth pastor*. With the exception of a few rare cases, I am convinced that this is the case. If the role of youth pastor is to have any validity, it must take its shape and its basic requirements from the New Testament role of the pastor. Obviously, there are distinct differences in function between the two roles. But in essence, they are two stems that grow from the same root.⁸⁶

If Robbins’s argument is indeed the case, then it opens up entire worlds of application for youth ministers who are called not only toward architecture or nurture but primarily to the preaching of the Word. Pastoral ministry may include the other functions recommended by Clark, Lambert, and DeVries; but, if the youth leader is truly to be a pastor, Lloyd-Jones’s call to the primacy of preaching becomes essential to the task of ministering to students.

⁸³ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 61.

⁸⁴ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 62, citing John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion, Book II*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1972), 321.

⁸⁵ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 63.

⁸⁶ Robbins, *This Way to Youth Ministry*, 63n41.

CHAPTER 3
THE ADOLESCENT MIND AND
THE ADOLESCENT LISTENER

Introduction

Numerous books from the expository preaching world contend for the practices of audience analysis, cultural exegesis, and sensitivity to the needs of the listener. Yet because of their bent toward adult audiences, sermon contextualization in a way that benefits adolescents can be difficult to find. Conversely, student ministry books tend to promote an appeal to the adolescent needs of entertainment and brevity rather than discussing methods of deep engagement. To bridge the gap, one needs to find a realm of scholarship wherein such deep and intentional engagement to adolescent listeners exists. Sensitivity to the adolescent processes of information and the limitations of the pre- and mid-adolescent mind should be taken into consideration as well. Finally, adolescent listeners should be engaged in such a way that they will not immediately forget but, instead, retain the information presented. Such literature is rare within expository preaching or student ministry speaking texts but is largely available in adolescent psychological analyses and classroom teaching texts.

It is important to note that such books are written for the benefit of therapist or teacher rather than intended to provide help for authoritative, divine declarations. Yet thorough analysis of the adolescent mind is crucial for the youth pastor's process of contextualization and audience sensitivity. Such analysis should affect the youth pastor's methods, systems of delivery, and the appropriateness of his applications. In the same way, helpful strategies for classroom instruction provide unique tools for preachers attempting to engage not only the senses for an evening but also the mind and heart over

weeks, months, and years. Insights into the state of the adolescent's relationship to current cultural methods of information and plausibility structures should be considered as well. Such consideration should be done on a regular basis since adolescent structures, interests, and communities as well as technological advances continue to shift at a much faster rate than those of standard adult preaching audiences.

The Nature and Limitations of the Adolescent Mind

According to Daniel Siegel, any attempt to understand and engage with the adolescent mind is already made considerably difficult by cultural preconceptions of adolescent behavior. If one should disagree, he or she should consider the responses of the standard adult congregant when hearing the words "middle school." Siegel's *Brainstorm* attempts to counteract these popular myths and misconceptions through psychological analysis of the adolescent mind:

Isn't adolescence just a period of "immaturity" that teenagers just need to hurry up and get through? Isn't the impulsive, risk-taking behavior that take takes place during this time of life simply a result of "raging hormones?" And doesn't the adolescent period end when the teenage years end? No, no, and no. I wanted to explore each of these myths and other misguided views, so that these erroneous, and oftentimes harmful, perspectives could be debunked.¹

Siegel sees adolescence not as a time of innate rebellion or prideful departure from tradition but as "an essential time of emotional intensity, social engagement, and creativity."² Siegel is not so optimistic that he fails to recognize potential downsides inherent in adolescent growth, but he is also not so pessimistic that he encourages those surrounded by adolescents to merely survive.

Siegel's Four Essential Qualities

Siegel breaks down the fundamental changes of the adolescent mind into four

¹ Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2015), xiv.

² Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 4.

features of adolescent growth:

1. *Novelty Seeking* emerges from an increased drive for rewards in the circuits of the adolescent brain that creates the inner motivation to try something new and feel life more fully, creating more engagement in life. Siegel sees the downside of novelty as the potential for sensation seeking and risk taking that overemphasize thrill and downplay the potential for dangerous results. Conversely, the upside is an openness to change and an ability to find new ways of solving problems.
2. *Social engagement* enhances peer connectedness and creates new friendships. The downside of such social engagement, per Siegel, is a tendency to retreat from adults and to mainly associate with other teens. At the same time, adult knowledge being rejected and adult reasoning being dismissed can lead to increased at-risk behavior. The upside is the creation of supportive relationships that “are the research-proven best predictors of well-being, longevity, and happiness throughout the lifespan.”
3. *Increased emotional intensity* gives an enhanced vitality to life. The downside of such intensity is the possibility of emotional override leading to impulsivity, moodiness and extreme reactivity. The upside of such is that life can now be filled with energy and a sense of vital drive that give an exuberance and zest for being alive on the planet.
4. *Creative exploration* with an expanded sense of consciousness. An adolescent’s new conceptual thinking and abstract reasoning allow questioning of the status quo, approaching problems with “out of the box strategies, the creation of new ideas, and the emergence of innovation.”³

Siegel sees the potential downside to such creativity as a newfound lack of direction, the possibility of an identity crisis, and vulnerability to peer pressure. The upside, per Siegel, is that

If the mind can hold on to thinking and imagining and perceiving the world in new ways within consciousness, of creatively exploring the spectrum of experiences that are possible, the sense of being in a rut that can sometimes pervade adult life can be minimized and instead an experience of the “ordinary being extraordinary” can be cultivated.⁴

Siegel then provides a helpful acronym for remembering these four essential features, in what he calls the “essence of adolescence”: “ES” for “emotional spark,” “SE” for “social engagement,” “N” for “novelty,” and “CE” for “creative explorations.” The

³ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 7–8.

⁴ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 9.

result is “ES-SE-N-CE.”⁵ To deny these essential features of the mind is to do so at one’s own peril: “If adults fight against these fundamental features of adolescence, it’s like fighting against the natural push of a waterfall. The force of adolescence will find some way to manifest itself in a teen’s external actions and internal mental shifts. You cannot stop a waterfall, but you can learn to direct its course and harness its power.”⁶

Siegel also sees the adolescent pushing against boundaries to be a fundamental part of the development process rather than a fallen act of rebellion. This adolescent response to what is “known, safe and familiar is a two-sided coin.”⁷ There are dangers inherent in such a response that advocate for risk-taking and pushing over boundaries that may have been intended for their safety. On the other side, new and creative ways of thinking can produce a sense of inventiveness which creates new models and paradigms of thought.⁸ When experienced in a safe environment, such boundary-pushing allows adolescents to form new communities and value existing relationships. When done poorly, it can produce extreme isolation:

We are meant to live in community, meant to live in connection with others. So if the pushing away from adults leads a teen to become isolated even from his or her peer group, then that total disconnection can be quite disorienting. Remember, adolescents pushing away from others is natural; shutting others out totally is not helpful (nor is it natural) for anyone.⁹

Siegel and Enhanced Reward

Another beneficial insight into the shift of the adolescent mind is Siegel’s emphasis on the function of dopamine and the increased drive for reward evident in teenage life. For those who have ever witnessed teenage behavior and silently thought to

⁵ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 11.

⁶ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 17.

⁷ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 23.

⁸ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 23–24.

⁹ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 27.

themselves “Why would they have possibly thought that was a good idea?,” Siegel’s explanation is extremely helpful:

During adolescence there is an increase in the activity of the neural circuits utilizing dopamine, a neurotransmitter central in creating our drive for reward. Starting in early adolescence and peaking midway through, this enhanced dopamine release causes adolescents to gravitate toward thrilling experiences and exhilarating sensations. . . . It can also lead them to focus solely on the positive rewards they are sure are in store for them, while failing to notice or give value to the potential risks and downsides.¹⁰

Because of the increase in dopamine during adolescent development, new drive for reward, says Siegel, manifests in three important ways: impulsiveness, susceptibility to addiction, and hyperrationality (i.e., an increased bias toward more likely positive outcomes).¹¹ To work alongside these changes, Siegel recommends “taking the time needed for processing, for reflection and self-awareness,” so that one’s first reaction does not turn “immediately into action without reflection.”¹²

Siegel and the Purpose of Adolescence

Throughout *Brainstorm*, Siegel makes sure to remind readers that adolescence is not merely a time of irrationality and immaturity but an opportunity for actual growth that benefits adulthood: “It matters because if we see the adolescent period as just a time to wade through, a time to endure, we’ll miss out on taking very important steps to optimize the essence of adolescence.”¹³ Siegel sees integration as one of the primary goals of adolescence: “One outcome of integration is the growth of fibers of cognitive control that ultimately decrease impulsivity. As a result, adolescents are afforded more and more space in the mind to pause and consider other options of response than an initial

¹⁰ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 67.

¹¹ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 68–69.

¹² Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 67.

¹³ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 75.

impulse.”¹⁴ A willingness to provide the types of spaces for these levels of reflection is optimal for student encouragement and growth.

Frances Jensen on the Teenage Brain

Alongside Siegel, neuroscientist Frances Jensen understands the development of the mind during adolescence as a time for great possibility as well as great caution. In *The Teenage Brain*, Jensen claims that “the teen brain offers *major advantages* on the one hand but unperceived and often *unacknowledged vulnerabilities* on the other.”¹⁵ Though the terminology differs slightly, Jensen echoes Siegel’s understanding of the basic developmental steps which allow for the possibility of growth or isolation, depending on student environment. Jensen also breaks down the effect of a number of current trends and their psychological effects on teenage development. Such trends include sleep deprivation, drug use, risk-taking, stress, mental illness, the digital realm, gender issues, crime rates, and the like.

Jensen is also helpful in understanding the nature of the adolescent mind as continually growing throughout the course of its development. Jensen utilizes current medical studies and the rise of imaging from functional MRIs to provide a map of the teenage mind:

In the last decade, the National Institutes of Health conducted a major study to examine how brain regions activate one another over the first twenty-one years of life. What they found was remarkable: the connectivity of the brain slowly moves from the back of the brain to the front. The very last places to “connect” are the frontal lobes. In fact, the teen brain is only about 80 percent of the way to maturity. That 20 percent gap, where the wiring is thinnest, is crucial and goes a long way toward explaining why teenagers behave in such puzzling ways—their mood swings, irritability, impulsiveness, and explosiveness; their inability to focus, to follow through, and to connect with adults; and their temptations to use drugs and alcohol and to engage in other risky behavior. When we think of ourselves as civilized, intelligent adults, we really have the frontal and prefrontal parts of the

¹⁴ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 77.

¹⁵ Frances Jensen, *The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 8.

cortex to thank.¹⁶

Because of this lack of connectivity, Jensen advocates for sensitivity to teen learning but also for repetition of instruction to counteract risky behavior. She recalls multiple tragic stories of students losing their lives due to impulsiveness, foolishness, and being spurred on by intense amounts of peer pressure. Her response is gripping:

How parents deal with these tragic stories and talk about them with their own kids is critical. It shouldn't be, "Oh, wow, I'm so glad that wasn't my child." Or, "My teenager would never have done that." Because you don't know. Instead, you have to be proactive. You have to stuff their minds with real stories, real consequences, and then you have to do it again—over dinner, after soccer practice, before music lessons, and, yes, even when they complain they've heard it all before.¹⁷

Jensen's approach demands intention, repetition, and consequence. She also utilizes data from the University of Missouri which suggests that student apprehension of this information simply cannot be done while attempting to "multitask."¹⁸ Jensen states plainly that phones, background music, texting, and computers utilized in the course of trying to retain any sort of pertinent information and instruction from parents are proven to decrease apprehension dramatically.

Patricia Wolfe on Memory and Elaborative Rehearsal

Patricia Wolfe's heavily researched *Brain Matters* considers the development of the brain from birth through adolescence (largely in agreement with Siegel and Jensen). The second half of the book is a practical guide through how the brain receives information, remembers it, and stores it long-term. Wolfe then offers a long list of practical steps to utilize the right kinds of learner-sensitive instruction in light of the brain's capacity for memory at various stages.

Wolfe first sets out to correct two common errors about memory. The first is

¹⁶ Jensen, *The Teenage Brain*, 37.

¹⁷ Jensen, *The Teenage Brain*, 39.

¹⁸ Jensen, *The Teenage Brain*, 41–44.

that memory is a “kind of intellectual muscle; the more you use it the stronger it becomes.”¹⁹ The second is the Platonic view of the mind as a tablet on which impressions are formed.²⁰ Wolfe quotes Siegel, who says that memory is a function of neural networks which were previously established; thus, reactivation of any part of those networks tends to reactivate the network as a whole.²¹ Wolfe then differentiates between the bombardment of sensory stimuli and the mind’s need to translate it from a host of sensory signals to a perception:

The assignment of meaning to incoming stimuli, therefore, depends on prior knowledge and on what we expect to see. In a sense, the brain checks existing neural networks of information to see if the new information is something that activates a previously stored neural network. This matching of new input to stored information is called pattern recognition and is a critical aspect of attention.²²

In light of this phenomenon, the filtering processes of the mind tend to favor “whether or not the incoming stimulus is different from what we are used to seeing.”²³ The novelty of the stimulus is what determines whether one considers it worth noticing. In addition, attention is influenced by the intensity of the stimuli or its movement.

But what about long-term memory and retention? Wolfe identifies different types of memory storage which allow learners to retain an incredible amount of information throughout the course of their lifetime. The first is what Wolfe calls “declarative memory,” or “our ability to store and recall information that we can declare (speak or write).”²⁴ Such memory is *reflective* rather than *reflexive*, and so it requires conscious processing. Declarative memories can be further broken down into episodic

¹⁹Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2010), 108.

²⁰ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 108.

²¹ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 109.

²² Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 113–14.

²³ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 115.

²⁴ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 145.

memories (those which allow individuals to remember where they were when information was acquired) and semantic memories (those which include words, their associated symbols, rules for manipulating those words, and relevant definitions).²⁵ In contrast to declarative memories are procedural memories, which recall motor skills and basic functions and which largely address not what things are but how they are to be done.²⁶

These memories, Wolfe argues, are not stored in some type of large vault in their full form but, rather, must be reconstructed by the brain every time: “Our knowledge is built on bits and pieces of many aspects of a given thing—shape, color, taste, or movement—but these aspects are not laid down in a single place; there is no memory center in the brain that represents an entire event at a single location.”²⁷ To understand how memories are retained over time, Wolfe claims that the process of long-term memory is done over time rather than with immediacy:

We know now that memory is not formed at the moment information is acquired; it is not a simple fixation process. Rather, it is dynamic, with unconscious processes that continue to strength and stabilize the connections over days, weeks, months, and year. Consolidation is undoubtedly enhanced by rehearsal. When we “replay our experiences” (i.e. when we talk and think about them), we provide more opportunities for consolidation. Perhaps this is why instruction that allows students to connect to information to previous experiences increases the strength and complexity of their neural connections and, therefore, their retention of the information.²⁸

While Wolfe is cautious about utilizing neuroscience research educationally for fear that such research is not yet fully developed, she does offer some implications for consolidation and retention in classroom instruction:

For example, building elaborative rehearsal strategies into our instruction—allowing students time to process information in depth—will likely increase the strength of

²⁵ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 145–46.

²⁶ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 146.

²⁷ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 151.

²⁸ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 155.

students' learning because these strategies allow consolidation to take place. Another way to increase the possibility of consolidation is to incorporate new information gradually and repeat it in timed intervals. Seldom is information stored reliably after being introduced once. Most memories disappear within minutes, but those that survive the fragile period strengthen with rehearsal spaced out over time.²⁹

But why favor elaborative rehearsal over systematic statements of facts? Wolfe states that elaborative rehearsal, that is, the use of a broad category of strategies that “encourage learners to elaborate on information in a manner that enhances understanding and retention,”³⁰ is far more useful than rote rehearsal (such as memorization or repetition) in producing long-term declarative memory:

The more fully we process information over time, the more connections we make, the more consolidation takes place, and the better the memory will be. Most of [these strategies] require students to reflect on the information being taught, relate it to something they already know, form meaningful mental associations, or employ some other effective elaborative encoding strategy.³¹

Wolfe narrows down her understanding of the best practices for producing long-term memory of information in classroom students to four tenets of effective rehearsal:

1. The more elaboratively information is rehearsed at the moment of learning, the stronger the memory becomes
2. The more modalities used to rehearse, the more paths that are established for retrieval.
3. The more real-world examples given for a concept, the more likely it is that the concept will be understood and remembered.
4. The more information that is linked to previous learning, the stronger the memory will become.³²

²⁹ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 157.

³⁰ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 134.

³¹ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 158.

³² Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 164–65.

Adolescent Engagement, Questioning, and Rigor

The adolescent mind needs a certain approach not only to being taught but also to being questioned in a way that builds maturity and connectivity. Rightly delivered information can quickly be dashed in the presence of poorly delivered follow-through. Adolescent pedagogy has experienced a wealth of literature in recent years on this topic.

Choice and Metacognition: Thomas Armstrong's Strategies for Effective Teaching

Thomas Armstrong, an expert in learning and human development, agrees with Siegel in his assessment that adolescent development is a time for nurture and affirmation rather than mere survival or disdain. In *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, Armstrong offers eight “brain friendly practices for adolescents” within classroom settings in order to develop integration and encourage novel thinking practices. Armstrong writes against traditional educational systems and structures, declaring them “brain hostile” rather than productive through the course of adolescent development.³³ In response, he recommends the following: (1) opportunities to choose, (2) self-awareness activities, (3) peer learning connections, (4) affective learning, (5) learning through the body, (6) metacognitive strategies, (7) expressive arts activities, and (8) real-world experiences.³⁴

While some of these eight elements may not be overtly usable in a preaching setting, many of them can be used in other areas of youth ministry, such as small groups (for peer learning) or student mission trips (for real-world experiences). Where Armstrong's strategies are particularly useful within the preaching context are in the areas of choice and affective learning: “One of the sad ironies of modern education is that as students move into a stage where they need to develop the ability to make good

³³ Thomas Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2016), 28.

³⁴ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 33.

decisions in preparation for adulthood, the school system provides fewer and fewer opportunities for them to make choices.”³⁵ Armstrong argues that when students are given the power to choose the nature of their study, their engagement will increase dramatically. He recommends the avoidance of any form of required reading lists; he also recommends the use of student polling to view areas of interest.³⁶

In addition, due to the incredible rise of emotional sensitivity during adolescent development, contextualizing education to meet the needs of highly affective and emotionally volatile audiences is an act of kindness and educational wisdom. Armstrong recommends a variety of methods to provoke this kind of affective learning to middle and high school students. Primarily, he recommends incorporating emotional language and expression into the classroom setting,³⁷ including being willing to bring one’s own experiences into the classroom and the integration of controversy for the sake of retention. Controversy in choice of books, current topics that cause debate, and issues of social justice are all fair game in the classroom.³⁸ In addition, utilizing humor and engaging the imaginations of adolescents makes the education process not only more exciting but also more memorable to a constantly shifting adolescent brain.³⁹

Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia’s Assessment of Student Engagement

In *Engagement by Design*, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Russell Quaglia offer age appropriate and developmentally appropriate classroom strategies to increase student learning through increased student engagement. Engagement is built on a three-

³⁵ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 39.

³⁶ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 42–43.

³⁷ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 84–86.

³⁸ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 87–88.

³⁹ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 89–91.

pronged foundation: teacher-student relationships, intentional clarity, and classrooms that foster an atmosphere of challenge.⁴⁰

Clarity. Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia tell the story of two demographically and organizationally similar schools and seek to answer the question of why student learning results were vastly different between the two. The first noticeable discrepancy was in the style of questions being asked of the students as they worked:

In the first school—we'll call it Blossom Valley—the principal regularly stopped to talk with students, typically asking, “*What are you doing?*” Nearly every student queried related information about the task at hand. In the second school—we'll call it Mountain View—the principal asked students a different question: “*What are you learning?*” And nearly every student responded with a personal version of the learning expectation from the day.⁴¹

Recognizing the difference between approach and student response, Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia once again went through the same schools, asking students the same three questions: (1) What are you learning? (2) Why are you learning that? (3) How will you know that you have learned it?⁴² The results were striking:

The students at Blossom Valley had a very difficult time answering these questions. In most cases, they answered what they were doing rather than what they were learning. When asked why they were learning the content, the answers focused in three areas: (1) future events such as getting into college or getting a job; (2) the state standards; and (3) they had no idea. Not one of the Blossom Valley students could tell us how they would know if they learned the content.⁴³

By contrast, the students who were regularly asked clear and targeted questions about what they were learning responded in a completely different way:

Nearly every student we talked with could tell us what he or she was learning. They understood the daily learning intention but expressed it in their own words. . . . When asked why they were learning the content, students' responses clustered into

⁴⁰ Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Russell J. Quaglia, *Engagement by Design: Creating Learning Environments Where Students Thrive* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2018), 12–17.

⁴¹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 54.

⁴² Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 54.

⁴³ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 54–55.

one of three categories: (1) They would use this information outside of the classroom. (2) They would learn about themselves. (3) They needed to know this for future learning.⁴⁴

Mountain View produced a much more engaged and memorable place for learning through its use of a highly visible “daily learning intention.” Engagement also increased due to a clear desire to understand its student’s *learning* rather than their *doing*. Compared to the students at Blossom Valley, Mountain View students were significantly improved in areas of academics, increased ownership of their own learning, and behavioral and disciplinary issues:

The suspension rates were also very different, with Mountain View experiencing fewer suspensions and no expulsions. Although this occurred at two elementary schools, it is equally applicable at middle and high school. It seems that when students know what they are supposed to learn, why they are learning it, and how they will know that they have learned it, they learn more, behave better, and engage in school in more substantial ways.⁴⁵

Clarity in goals, instruction, and assessment is vital to the process of student engagement, according to *Engagement by Design*. Such clarity is often counteracted by teachers and professors who favor cognitive dissonance and unpredictability as key methods for engaging their audience. In response to such teachers, Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia argue that relying solely on unpredictability robs students of an opportunity to genuinely engage their areas of content. This unpredictable, dissonance-heavy method is “about the worst descriptor of a classroom. It’s in direct opposition to clarity. Students should always have a clear understanding of *what* they are learning and *how* they will be learning the content. Without this, we risk turning our students into passive, rather than active, listeners.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 55–56.

⁴⁵ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 56.

⁴⁶ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 75.

Challenge. *Engagement by Design* also highlights the importance of challenge within the classroom as a key tool for increasing student learning. Rather than listening to the same or rehashed content, students ought to have an expectation that something new will be learned throughout the day. When students complain that the content is difficult by nature of the challenge, teachers ought to respond firmly and charitably: “Yes, it is hard, and it should be. When students interact with content, it’s supposed to be challenging. If they already know how to do all of the things that they are asked to do at school, then we’re wasting their time.”⁴⁷ The classroom, according to Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, is the optimal place for struggle. Not only is it a possibility; it should also be a priority as “we reserve struggle for the classroom, in the presence of an adult who knows how to leverage it for learning.”⁴⁸

While students may increase their *fluency* of a particular topic through continued repetitions that are exceedingly easy and less complex, student retention and understanding of topics will increase as the level of difficulty and complexity increases.⁴⁹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia do not claim that all student work should be challenging, but responsible instructors should strive to integrate more of such work for the sake of their students. In addition, the presence of an adult willing to guide students through material should increase as the difficulty and complexity of the material increases. So some tasks of low complexity can be completed individually and independently, whereas tasks of increased difficulty and complexity will “frequently require more collaboration with others.”⁵⁰ Further, as students move through increasingly difficult levels of learning, from *fluency* to *stamina* to *strategic thinking* to *struggle*, the information they attain at higher

⁴⁷ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 91.

⁴⁸ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 92.

⁴⁹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 94.

⁵⁰ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 95.

levels is transferred back to lower levels. What was initially a struggle now becomes a matter of fluency and acts as a foundational piece to ascend to new levels of cognition.⁵¹

Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia also recommend particular practices within classrooms to create struggle that fosters expertise. They define “expertise” as follows:

Experts are able to formulate judgments about quality, make decisions, and evaluate situations with a high degree of accuracy. In school, capacity is built through tasks that require critical thinking skills. These critical thinking skills require that students recognize quality, are able to synthesize and analyze across sources, and can solve ill-defined or unstructured problems.⁵²

One of the key pedagogical methods which increases engagement in hopes of building expertise is close reading within and across documents. Close reading is “the ability to take a complex document in order to unearth the deeper nuances of the text, not just the literal meaning.” While some texts are simpler and more accessible, close reading pertains to texts that “require a careful inspection, necessitating rereading, strategic thinking, and metacognitive questioning.”⁵³ Because of the nature and difficulty of these texts, close reading is optimally done in the presence of a knowledgeable adult guide.

Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia offer four essential qualities of texts which can be used for instructional close reading:

1. The passage is short enough so that the students can reread and discuss the text within a class period.
2. The passage can be self-contained, but many are excerpts from longer texts the students are reading.
3. Rereading is done for authentic purposes, primarily to address text-dependent discussion questions posed by the teacher.
4. Because meaning is constructed over an extended period of time, often thirty minutes or so, students are encouraged to annotate the text in order to chronicle insights and

⁵¹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 96.

⁵² Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 118.

⁵³ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 121.

observations.⁵⁴

The key to keeping students engaged in a period of close reading is to make sure that the pace of these text-dependent questions is appropriate to the task and time.

As rereading is done through struggle, the teacher ought to ask these text-dependent questions in four stages. The first stage are questions at the “literal level and focus on the general meaning and key details of the piece.”⁵⁵ This assesses foundational knowledge and allows students to determine the essential qualities provided by a surface level reading of the text.

The second level asks questions of the “structural elements of the text”:

These structural elements include literary devices in narrative, such as foreshadowing and allusions, and expository structures, such as compare and contrast or cause and effect. . . . Word choice and vocabulary are crucial elements of the structure of the text, especially within the context of the discussion about the author’s purpose of the text.⁵⁶

After the structural elements of the text have been considered, the “third phase marks the time when students are fully applying critical thinking skills to determine what the text means.”⁵⁷ This is a time for the teacher to include questions of evidence, formal reasoning, argumentation, and the text’s connectivity to other texts or pertinent issues. It also provides a window for students to discuss their potential disagreements with the author’s position.⁵⁸

The final step is asking questions of purpose, or “What does the text inspire you to do?”⁵⁹ The goal of such close reading is a more fully engaged, fully learning student populace. Again, as texts increase in their difficulty and complexity, the presence

⁵⁴ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 122.

⁵⁵ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, 122.

⁵⁶ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, 122.

⁵⁷ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, 122.

⁵⁸ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, 123.

⁵⁹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, 123.

of an adult to guide them through these text-dependent questions becomes more of a necessity. Close reading may take time to develop in light of its challenging and disciplined rigor, but the eventual goal is students who become readers who can assess difficult texts across multiple fields with fluency.

Eileen Depka and Strategies for Asking the Right Kind of Questions

One area of frustration for teachers attempting to utilize *Engagement by Design*'s methodology is the struggle of asking the right types of questions which will foster student learning. Glossed-over eyes and blank stares often greet periods of classroom discussion which are meant for rigor, engagement, and struggle. How then should teachers consider not only the place for asking questions but also the way in which they make sure to ask questions of quality? Eileen Depka wrote *Raising the Rigor* with the goal of answering that challenge. She notes that teachers tend to dwell too deeply on surface-level questions and fail to discipline themselves to ask anything with more depth.

Depka utilizes Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning to craft questions along the six major steps that build knowledge: (1) questions of *memory* (or simply reviewing the text on a surface level for the attainment of basic facts); (2) questions of *understanding* (or those which begin to make meaning of the information provided); (3) questions of *application* (or the utilization of the information in various situations); (4) questions of *analysis* (or the ability to relate parts back to the whole; such questions tend to be investigative in nature rather than responsive); (5) questions of *evaluation* (or those which utilize evidence to support personal judgments about the information); and (6) questions of *creation* (or those which demand that listeners produce something original or recreate something known).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Eileen Depka, *Raising the Rigor: Effective Questioning Strategies and Techniques for the*

Another of Depka's helpful clarifications is the difference between questions of difficulty and questions of complexity: "Think of *complex questions* as those that are more intricate, and view *difficult* questions as those that are hard to answer."⁶¹ Questions that demand an intense amount of time, or time spent on innumerable rote repetitions, may be difficult by nature of their investment of hours, but questions of complexity are those which demand synthesis or sophisticated reconstruction. As Depka avers, "Difficult problems may take the same amount of time without the deeper, richer experience"; conversely, "when we ask students complex questions, we get more for our efforts because we engage students in a more sophisticated manner."⁶²

**The Presence of Darkness:
Gloria Stronks and Nancy Knol
on Grief in the Classroom**

Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents is written from the perspectives of two teachers, Gloria Stronks and Nancy Knol, in the world of Christian school education. Hence, the book predominantly discusses the ethos and particularities of Christian education. In their third chapter, Stronks and Knol reflect on the newfound awareness of pain and loss in the lives of adolescent learners. Particular to the middle school years is a "longing . . . to name some of the sufferings and perhaps in the process to find a measure of understanding and healing."⁶³ As students approach pre- or mid-adolescence, they begin to transition away from parental dependence. To do so, "they must grab hold of whatever problems disable them and take responsibility for addressing those problems."⁶⁴

Classroom (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press: 2017), 27.

⁶¹ Depka, *Raising the Rigor*, 60.

⁶² Depka, *Raising the Rigor*, 60.

⁶³ Gloria Stronks and Nancy Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents: Succeeding in Deeper Waters* (Colorado Springs: Association of Christian Schools International Press, 1999), 34.

⁶⁴ Stronks and Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*, 35.

Though this transition can manifest in recklessness and impulsivity, Stronks and Knol identify it by “a fierce desire [of adolescents] to identify themselves and see what repair needs to be done.” Rather than sidestepping pain and loss, Stronks and Knol encourage teachers to walk alongside students and help them use these experiences to heal: “We must help our students speak their regret about this reality. In the process we cannot restore that kindergarten innocence, but perhaps we can help them remove a mask or two.”⁶⁵

To be a teacher in today’s environment can include intentional questioning and rigorous lesson planning, but to be sensitive to students’ needs requires more: “We no longer teach in an era when academic instruction is what we are all about. We are sometimes about sorting through a whole lot of garbage before any of our lesson plans matter.”⁶⁶ In order to reach students effectively, the messages and lessons must address these realities: “Emily Dickinson once wrote ‘We grow accustomed to the Dark.’ Illness, grief, and loss are all part of that darkness. As middle school teachers we must enter into our students’ sufferings and offer way to ‘fit our vision to the dark’ so that their lives can ‘step almost straight.’ Anything less won’t do.”⁶⁷ And yet, even as some aspects of pain and loss remain consistent between all generations, this darkness is prone to change shape with new technologies, new social experiments, new abuses, and new pains. Understanding the students served and the culture they inhabit is crucial to promote real engagement and learning.

Current Cultural Frameworks of the Teenage Generation

One of the most popular phrases used to describe the current state of youth is

⁶⁵ Stronks and Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*, 39.

⁶⁶ Stronks and Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*, 44.

⁶⁷ Stronks and Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*, 47.

the one coined by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton: “moralistic therapeutic deism.”⁶⁸ Provided from an especially thorough report of American youth done by the National Study of Youth and Religion, the phrase has become a byline and phrase of the moment used to define an entire student population when attempting to understand current adolescent understandings of belief. While some of these results are still evident in contemporary culture, it is important to remember that these surveys took place between July 2002 and March 2003,⁶⁹ a time period when the preponderance of today’s average American teenagers did not exist. While moralistic therapeutic deism is a fine way to engage culture on a topical level, it does disservice to the intensely shifting emotional and technological realities of the current youth group student. In each of the following cases, the same caution should be noted. While other models may be more up to date in terms of their research and methodology, discrepancies in demographics, culture, and environment are more likely than uniform definitions and characteristics.

Youth as Commodity

One of the important distinctions that must also be noted is the difference between the patterns that exist across youth within the current culture and the current culture’s obsession with the idea of youth. In *YouthNation*, Matt Britton describes a seismic shift in the culture of youth. What was once seen as a transitional stage throughout the 1960s and 1970s has now become a hallmark of life and something that is worth remaining firmly fixed. In order to address this culture of eighteen to thirty-four year olds and their newfound buying potential, marketers must be “forever young if we want to compete.”⁷⁰ Youth is “no longer an age, or even a demographic, but the primary

⁶⁸ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁹ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 4.

⁷⁰ Matt Britton, *YouthNation: Building Remarkable Brands in a Youth-Driven Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, 2015), xxiii.

catalyst of business and culture.”⁷¹ Britton maintains that marketers are not primarily targeting the teenage demographic, but are using the experiences and desires of adolescence to market specifically to adults: “Everybody, young or old, in some sense wants the very same thing: shareable and memorable life experiences that can live perpetually on social media platforms, and tell our life stories, moment by moment.”⁷² This desire to create not only consumption but also experience has led to youth-as-commodity marketing strategies by companies (e.g., Whole Foods), nightclubs, and fitness centers.⁷³

By commodifying youth, whole industries have shifted dramatically. Hotel chains and taxi services have lost massive profits to Airbnb and Uber.⁷⁴ Gentrified neighborhoods begin with a bohemian community feel and shift largely to Starbucks and chain stores—what Britton calls the “youth-ification of cities.”⁷⁵ Celebrities are made based on their social influence rather than any discernible talent.⁷⁶ All the while, adult consumers continually submit to these models because they promote the communitarian and experiential pleasures inherent to adolescent development.⁷⁷

The American evangelical church is not immune from these same pressures. In *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, Thomas Bergler notes that churches have not only increased their desire to serve the youth of the church but also bought into the idea that in order to be truly Christian, one must remain truly youthful:

Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and

⁷¹ Britton, *YouthNation*, xxiv.

⁷² Britton, *YouthNation*, 24.

⁷³ Britton, *YouthNation*, 27–33.

⁷⁴ Britton, *YouthNation*, 48–54.

⁷⁵ Britton, *YouthNation*, 62.

⁷⁶ Britton, *YouthNation*, 190–99.

⁷⁷ Britton, *YouthNation*, xxiv.

developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages. It begins with the praiseworthy goal of adapting the faith to appeal to the young. But it sometimes ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith.⁷⁸

Bergler understands Britton's marketing approach to consumerism and the adolescent experience well. He sees it as a potentially disastrous combination:

People who know who they are, who think carefully about purchases, and who exercise self-control are harder to persuade to buy products they don't really need. In contrast, impulsive people who are searching for a sense of identity, who are looking to salve their emotional pain, who desperately crave the approval of others, and who have lots of discretionary income (or are willing to spend as if they do) make ideal consumers. In other words, encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business. . . . Immersed as we all are in the culture of adolescence, it becomes increasingly hard to embrace the self-denial and character formation necessary to achieve what used to be called mature adulthood.⁷⁹

Marketing has so affected the state of adults that their desire for youth can create a church culture wherein youth is celebrated far more than maturity. The church then becomes a place of shared experiences, sensory manipulation, friendships that prefer assent rather than disagreement, and emotionally driven worship and teaching styles. The results of such efforts to keep the church forever young have been monumental:

Although juvenilization has renewed American Christianity, it has also undermined Christian maturity. First, the faith has become overly identified with emotional comfort. And it is only a short step from a personalized, emotionally comforting faith to a self-centered one. Second, far too many Christians are inarticulate, indifferent, or confused about their theological beliefs. They view theology as an optional extra to faith, and assume that religious beliefs are a matter of personal preference. Many would be uncomfortable with the idea of believing something just because the Bible, the church, or some other religious authority teaches it. And they are particularly resistant to church teachings that impose behavior restrictions. If we believe that a mature faith involves more than good feelings, vague beliefs, and living however we want, we must conclude that Juvenilization has revitalized American Christianity at the cost of leaving many individuals mired in spiritual immaturity.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Thomas Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 4.

⁷⁹ Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, 6–7.

⁸⁰ Bergler, *The Juvenilization of American Christianity*, 225.

Thus, in order to understand current teenagers, one must understand that in their world, they have inherited two cultures—the church and the marketplace—both of which agree that their current lifestyle is king. In essence, the lives of teenagers have become model behavior for the market and for church experience. This phenomenon provides the foundation for, and the importance of, their social media presence. Since the lives and idealism of teenagers are worth emulating, they must continue to reveal their own lifestyles for the sake of perpetuating the common good.

Rather than viewing adolescence with the upside and downside approach of Daniel Siegel, when youth is a commodity, all of adolescence is upside and worth perpetuating. Impulsivity, recklessness, risky behavior, boundary-pushing, immediacy, and a proclivity toward addictive behavior are all part of the consumer experience as well. Worse yet, such characteristics can become part of church experience if youth becomes commodified and worthy of imitation. Students engage a church culture full of adults pining for their glory days and spending immense amounts of money to remain in them. The message is made loud and clear that maturity is overrated and unnecessary for the Christian life. As pastors caught up in this same culture appeal to their majority audience, they promote these same basic behaviors, not realizing that the end result is a completely hollow faith.

The Culture of Today's Students

James Emery White's *Meet Generation Z* provides a long look at the current cultural trends which define those born between 1993 and 2012. White details multiple ideological and foundational shifts which have occurred between Generation Y and Generation Z as well as the implications such shifts have for church and evangelistic practice. He begins by describing the atmosphere of American religious life characterized

by the “rise of the nones.”⁸¹ Citing Pew Research Center statistics, White points out that while between the 1940s and the 1990s, there was only a 3-percent increase of those identifying their religious affiliation as “none,” there has been an 11-percent increase between 1990 and 2012. The numbers continue this level of increase between 2012 and 2015. What once took fifty years of slow religious shift now takes less than ten. The largest statistical demographic for these shifts takes place in adults under the age of thirty, where a full 33 percent now identify with no religious affiliation.

According to White,

More troubling is that of the 85 percent of American adults who were raised Christian, nearly a quarter of them no longer identify with Christianity. Former Christians now represent 19.2% of the US adult population overall. To put this into perspective, says Allen Cooperman, Pew’s director of religion research, “there are more than four former Christians for every convert to Christianity.”⁸²

Because of these striking numbers, Generation Z is the first predominantly “post-Christian” generation in the US. Per White, “Barna Group has concluded, based on fifteen metrics related to faith, that nearly half of the nation’s adult population (44 percent) now qualifies as post Christian. But that’s not all. ‘The pattern is indisputable: The younger the generation, the more post-Christian it is.’”⁸³ Relying on today’s youth to attend, or be at all concerned about, life in the church simply because of cultural expectation or peer pressure simply will not work anymore.

In addition to being post-Christian, White identifies four other qualities that mark Generation Z. The first is that they are marked deeply not by the excesses of the 1980s but by the recessions resulting from the crashes of 2000 and 2008.⁸⁴ In light of this characterization, they are more likely to embrace socialism and are often deeply worried

⁸¹ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2017), 21–33.

⁸² White, *Meet Generation Z*, 23.

⁸³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 24.

⁸⁴ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 39.

about the present.⁸⁵ Because of the chaos of the marketplace and the global economy, teens embrace coping mechanisms which “have led to a strong sense of independence and an entrepreneurial spirit.”⁸⁶ This entrepreneurship is more often done in communitarian settings or through crowd-sourced advocacy projects.

Second, White describes Generation Z as one that is completely “Wi-Fi Enabled.”⁸⁷ Because of the incredible rise and portability of technology, students now spend “nearly nine hours a day absorbing media.”⁸⁸ They will most likely receive their first tablet between age eight and eleven, and they are unable to fathom a world without individual personal computers for each member of the family.⁸⁹ Because of these trends, White notes that “like no generation before, Generation Z faces a widening chasm between wisdom and information.”⁹⁰ They are no longer primarily concerned with *attaining* information because such information is readily available at their fingertips at all times. Rather, they are much more concerned with *evaluating* the information they encounter. Education becomes less about informing and more about understanding multiple possible interpretations. There are limitations to what teens are comfortable with in terms of online social interaction, but those limitations are shrinking.

The third quality of the Generation Z is their multiracial and multiethnic awareness.⁹¹ Due to a massive influx in immigration, particularly from Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, Generation Z does not understand American culture as predominantly or necessarily “white.” As White explains, “Since the early 1700s, the

⁸⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 40.

⁸⁶ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 40.

⁸⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 41.

⁸⁸ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 42.

⁸⁹ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 42.

⁹⁰ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 44.

⁹¹ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 45.

most common last name in the United States was Smith, but now it is Rodriguez.”⁹² Not only is Generation Z more diverse than previous generations; they are the first generation for which diversity is a natural concept.⁹³ They are keenly aware of a world that is massively larger than their home communities; thus, their openness to new ideas and new forms of expression represents a dramatic increase from previous generations.

This openness and awareness produced the last defining quality of Generation Z, which is their expression of sexuality as something fluid.⁹⁴ They are much more in support of gay marriage and transgender rights, and they see sexuality as non-binary.⁹⁵ They view “male” and “female” as constructed realities rather than creation mandates or biological imperatives, and they often will refuse labels such as “homosexual” or “heterosexual” for fear that such definitions are too narrow to address their individual experiences.⁹⁶ White states that this sexual fluidity is based on a uniquely new conception of love, which finds “the idea of ‘acceptance’ as often interchangeable with the idea of ‘affirmation.’”⁹⁷

White is also less concerned with the decision-making of Generation Z and sees it more as a byproduct of the decision-making capabilities of their parents. He notes the transition from older models of parenting which were originally far too strict and overbearing to new models of “free range” parenting that allow for choice and unstructured time unavailable to previous generations of adolescents.⁹⁸ Because of this more “open” parenting model, Generation Z is exposed to adult content and pornography

⁹² White, *Meet Generation Z*, 45.

⁹³ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

⁹⁴ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46–48.

⁹⁵ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

⁹⁶ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 47.

⁹⁷ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

⁹⁸ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 51–54.

at a much younger age than previous generations. White concurs with Neil Postman that this reality represents a complete disappearance of childhood, whereby innocence is lost at a much younger age than it ought to be.⁹⁹ Because of these trends, children and youth share little distinction from their parents in what they view, how they dress, how they speak, and their physical appearance. White also claims that this actuality is primarily the fault of under-protective parents who are far more concerned with their children fitting in to the current culture than they are with promoting wisdom and patience.

Conclusion

In order to prepare messages that are developmentally appropriate to student listeners, three different means of contextualization are helpful. The first is the understanding of the nature and functions of the adolescent mind. Simply thinking that preaching texts largely written toward adult audiences will be able to grasp the complexity of the developing adolescent mind will lead to poor delivery and application. Pastors must fully grasp strategies that are age-appropriate and understand how students learn and retain information long-term in order to adjust the nature of sermon structure and delivery systems to meet their needs more fully. Finally, audience analysis and congregational exegesis which include an understanding of the complex and ever-changing experiences and expectations of youth is an act of kindness in sermon preparation. These three areas acting in concord will allow pastors willing to exposit Scripture to do so in a way that honors and understand his listeners. Hopefully, such sensitivity and strategy will produce long-term memory and fluency to those who hear the Word regularly preached.

⁹⁹ White, *Meet Generation Z*, 55, citing Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Random House, 1994).

CHAPTER 4

BRIDGING THE GAP: A METHOD FOR FAITHFUL EXPOSITION TO MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL LISTENERS

Introduction: The Best of Three Worlds

When it comes to identifying a system for preaching to adolescent listeners, the three types of texts covered thus far prove helpful in some ways and unintentionally hurtful in others. Expository preaching texts excel in the areas of word-centeredness, exegetical rigor, identifying the weight and primacy of preaching in pastoral ministry, and utilizing targeted applications. Further, these texts overwhelmingly address the necessity of the Holy Spirit in the entire act of sermon preparation and delivery. Their weakness, however, is their failure to understand how these methods might be contextualized and communicated to an adolescent audience as well as how to address texts to a transient student audience in a way that promotes long-term retention.

Student ministry texts are helpful in terms of application strategies and motivational techniques for engaging a student crowd. Some provide modified delivery systems for speaking to youth in a church setting and basic frameworks to youth pastors who may not have post-graduate seminary training on how to break down and deliver a message. They also have strong emphases on illustrations, memorable means of getting student attention, and methods for the occasionally necessary topical message. Their weaknesses are a tendency toward showmanship, confusion over the function of the scriptural text and the exact nature of the speaker's role, and all manner of differing opinions on what types of exegetical methods should be utilized for the sake of faithfulness to the Word.

Contemporary adolescent psychological studies and classroom strategies for

student retention are exceptional in their understanding of the whirlwind of the adolescent mind. Their understanding of student retention, solutions for long-term memory creation, and optimistic view toward the function of adolescent development are all praiseworthy. They fall short, however, in their varied applications and subject matter applications, which tend to favor a five-day-a-week school setting. In addition, their bias toward evolutionary psychological structures concerning student flourishing can create applications and outcomes which do not accord with a biblical worldview. At no point is there a notion that what is being taught has any outside or divine authority, which leads to systems that encourage interpretation not for the purpose of finding transcendent meaning but to foster communities of trust and affirmation regardless of any authority of perspective.

This threefold summary and evaluation is not to suggest that each of these genres fall short of their intended goals. The majority of expository preachers are full-time adult senior pastors. The majority of youth pastors tend to favor a topical approach. The majority of classroom teachers need not assume a transcendent authority or a kerygmatic function to their teaching. For each of their respected fields, these texts are mostly beneficial. The difficulty remains, however, in that if one is attempting to effectively preach an expository message which is sensitive to the developmental characteristics of adolescent listeners, such a methodology appears not to exist. In order to create such a methodology, one must glean the best of these three worlds and find a way to integrate their strengths. Such a methodology must have the goal of clear, authoritative, listener-sensitive sermons which faithfully interpret and declare the Word of God. In addition, these faithfully interpreted and structured themes must be delivered through developmentally targeted content and applications meant to meet the affective and cognitive capabilities of youth group students. If student ministry pastors preach with these features in mind, their sermons should promote long-term memory leading to student fluency, stamina, and engagement with the biblical text outside of their youth

group community and, ideally, for a lifetime after graduation.

In addition, the utilization of these methods ought to produce nothing but a *preached sermon*. It does no service to the youth pastor or to the student to refer to these sermons as communicated messages, spoken talks, or fireside chats. It does no service to the Word if a sermon becomes only a matter of spoken opinion rather than divinely mandated and heralded ambassadorial proclamations of the King. To this end, youth pastors, in their delivery, do not merely teach or give a lesson but *preach*. The content of their preaching, therefore, should be termed a *sermon*. Utilizing appropriate terminology is the first step in providing the appropriate weight to the proclamatory responsibility of student ministry pastors.

**Order of Operations: Best Practices from Fields
and Robbins’s “S.T.I.C.K.,” Eric McKiddie’s
“Seven Steps,” and Ramesh Richard’s
“Purpose Bridge”**

How should expository youth messages be created? Can the same steps for expository sermon creation and systems of structuring be utilized to reach adolescent audiences? Yes and no. Utilizing and synthesizing two youth ministry methods, the first from Eric McKiddie’s chapter in *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* and the other from Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins’s *Speaking to Teenagers*, is helpful in creating teen-targeted sermons. Bridging these two methods with Ramesh Richard’s seven-step method in *Preparing Expository Sermons* is helpful in creating steps from text choice to delivery. In addition, recognizing the adolescent need for time to process and reflect evident in the works of Chap Clark and Patricia Wolfe adds an extra dimension and strategy which should benefit students’ long-term retention of information.

The three basic approaches of McKiddie, Fields and Robbins, and Richard can be compared side by side in order of development from start to finish (see table 1). A few noteworthy features are readily apparent. First, the basic structuring order of all three approaches are quite similar, and the areas that are exceptions oftentimes fit into another

part of the structure. Second, each approach finds its central focus to be finding the main theme of the text. In all three, all methods of study flow into creating the main point, and all methods of delivery are derived from and explain it. Third, while Fields and Robbins allow for each text to be used in a topical manner, they also allow for “textual” (or expository) preaching methods to be utilized as well. Taking all three of these approaches into account and integrating their strengths, the result is an eleven-step process for sermon creation, delivery, and reflection: (1) Select the Series; (2) Select the Text; (3) Study the Text; (4) Find the Central Proposition of the Text; (5) Outline the Sermon; (5) Study the Flock; (6) Illustrate the Sermon; (7) Add Listener-Specific Applications; (8) Compose the Sermon; (9) Deliver the Sermon; (10) Process the Sermon Together.

Table 1. Comparison of the methodologies of McKiddie, Fields and Robbins, and Richard

Eric McKiddie	Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins	Ramesh Richard
Textual Interpretation	Study: Text Selection and Biblical Interpretation	Study the Text: The “Flesh” of the Text
Utilize Commentaries and Other Secondary Study resources	Utilize Commentaries and Outside Sources	Structure the Text: The “Skeleton” of the Text
Determine Fallen Condition Focus	Think: Understand the Condition of Your Audience	
Find the Gospel Solution to the Fallen Condition Focus	Find the Main Point of the Text	Find the Central Proposition of the Text: The “Heart” of the Text
Develop Key Applications	Illustrate	The Central Proposition: The “Heart” of the Sermon
Sermon Outline	Construct: Sermon Composition	Structure: The “Skeleton” of the Sermon
Sermon Composition	Keep Focused: Craft for Clarity	Writing and Preaching: The “Flesh” of the Sermon

Step 1: Select the Series

Student ministry is transient. If students remain consistent, they will stay under the particular preaching of their youth pastor for roughly seven years. In light of this actuality, youth pastors must embrace the transient nature of their adolescent audience and utilize it to structure not only individual sermons but entire sermon series. Strange accounts persist of long-tenured puritans slogging their way through one or two biblical books over the course of their lifetime. Preparing adolescents for a continued stay in the church demands a different approach. Tim Keller's understanding of largely transient urban audiences is helpful here. Student ministry audiences, like Keller's transient urbanites, may benefit from a primarily consecutive expository approach that occasionally allows for expository topical preaching or the study of multiple books in varied genres.¹ Because of the varied nature of adolescent experience, the preacher should avoid inhabiting one or two particular genres and disregarding students' desire for variety. Staying in epistolary letters for multiple years at the expense of prophetic, legal, historical, apocalyptic, poetic, or narrational texts can engender boredom amid repetition. At the same time, topical genre-hopping from week to week can be hermeneutically exhausting to listeners. Hence, the general flow of consecutive readings of one genre at a time, with exploration of multiple genres over the course of seven years, is recommended.

Controversy, Challenge, and Student Choice

Though it may feel that one is acting with consideration to students when providing mostly clear, helpful, and encouraging texts, educational research states that the very opposite is true. It is folly to underestimate the capacity of adolescent audiences to embrace challenging, mysterious, and controversial texts. Instead, per Michael

¹ Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 41.

Armstrong, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Russell J. Quaglia, utilizing challenging and controversial texts is more likely to promote retention in adolescent listeners. Armstrong affirms that if one wants student interest, then one would do well to assign controversial books. Indeed, “the fact that classic works such as *The Catcher in the Rye* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* are still banned or challenged by some communities and school districts in the United States make these books attractive to adolescents.”² Even in books that seem straightforward, Armstrong demands that communicators use the opportunity to mine controversial topics from the text in order to promote learning. “Delving into these issues,” says Armstrong, “will ignite the emotional brains of adolescents while also stimulating those vital connections to the prefrontal cortex that link feelings to higher-order thinking.”³ The canon of Scripture provides the same opportunity. In different cultures, diverse taboos will be addressed head on by various canonical books. This notion does not mean that controversial texts ought to be preached exclusively, but it assuredly means that they should not be avoided for fear of student harm.

Challenging books and texts are not to be avoided either. Though they may not be explicitly controversial, texts and books which are hermeneutically or cognitively difficult should be pursued rather than cleverly dodged. As discussed above, Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia observe that the more challenging a concept is to understand, the more it should be guided by an adult authority: “We reserve struggle for the classroom, in the presence of an adult who knows how to leverage it for learning.”⁴ Preaching texts which have already been covered multiple times throughout the course of students’ Sunday

² Thomas Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain: Strategies for Teaching Middle and High School Students* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2016), 87.

³ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 88.

⁴ Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, and Russell J. Quaglia, *Engagement by Design: Creating Learning Environments Where Students Thrive* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2018), 92.

School education does disservice to those who are longing to gain insight into the difficulties inherent in the Word. Struggling through difficult texts together and preaching through that same struggle does not compromise a pastor's expertise, but it will promote empathy and hermeneutical rigor within listeners.

To promote even more empathy and interest, occasional opportunities for students to choose future sermon topics or series is extremely beneficial. According to Armstrong, "Studies have shown that when students perceive their classroom as encouraging personal autonomy, their engagement increases."⁵ He goes on to say, "Researchers in the field of literacy agree that all students benefit academically and emotionally when they read books that they can relate to and have an interest in."⁶ To the preacher, it is extremely simplistic to assume the most urgent needs and interests of youth group students. Giving them occasional opportunities to choose future series and books promotes long-term learning and shows them that their voice is heard within the context of the larger church. While youth pastors who favor a consecutive expository method may be hesitant to utilize such an approach for fear of becoming inconsistent or permanently topical, allowing for student choice of whole books of Scripture which currently captivate their interest is helpful in keeping students engaged. This recommendation is not to suggest that for the sake of the flock, youth pastors cannot override requests to make sure they are covering a wide swath of biblical genres or styles; instead, it suggests that on occasion, giving voice to student opinions is not only kind but also educationally beneficial.

Finally, planning an entire series is the first opportunity for the youth pastor to begin the process of elaborative rehearsal. Preaching in such a way that student retention is not only piqued short-term from individual sermons but also cognitively consolidated

⁵ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 40.

⁶ Armstrong, *The Power of the Adolescent Brain*, 42.

across an entire series begins at this stage. This consolidation and rehearsal ought to bridge individual applications to the main point of individual sermons and promote long-term student retention of connections between sermons and whole series.

Patricia Wolfe's four key laws of elaborative rehearsal are helpful here. First, the more elaboratively information is rehearsed at the moment of learning, the stronger the memory becomes.⁷ To promote long-term retention, attempts to reduce every sermon to three points with rote delivery simply will not suffice. Rather, the preacher should choose the series, read through and find unifying themes of entire books, and work to bridge each individual text to that larger theme. In this way, students recall not only individual sermon points but also the way in which those larger points apply to a coherent whole. Where controversy and challenge make these connections more difficult, long-term memories are actually created with greater ease rather than enhanced confusion. Considering, for example, the preacher who pursues a series on 2 Samuel with the primary point that Jesus is the better David, though such rehearsal seems obvious amid the thrilling and largely virtuous lifestyle of David within the first chapters, such a claim comes under controversy and challenge when David's increasingly horrendous sins and spectacular downfall are revealed in later chapters. Herein lies the difference between a rote rehearsal which fails to take account of evident disagreement and elaborative rehearsal which ties entire books and sermons series together effectively.

Second, the more modalities used to rehearse, the more paths that are established for retrieval. Are there outside opportunities to promote the themes of the entire series? Can youth group events, song choice, outside discussions from experts within the larger church body, and whole nights dedicated to deep discussions of particularly challenging texts be used to promote better retention? Absolutely. Utilizing

⁷ Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating Research into Classroom Practice*, 2nd ed. (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2010), 164–65.

multiple modalities, including the physical body, cultural context, and outside perspective on the themes of a sermon series, can aid long-retention dramatically. Adding these modalities does not begin with individual sermon texts but with whole-series choice and study. The opportunity of a youth pastor to offer events for both student entertainment and promotion of long-term retention is an underutilized gift.

Third, the more real-world examples given for a concept, the more likely it is that the concept will be understood and remembered. This point is crucial to series choice and preparation. Rote rehearsal of individual sermon propositions should be seen as the lowest possible goal. Elaborative rehearsal of a central series theme in connection to individual propositions is a higher, but not complete, goal. The apex of long-term retention across an entire series is an elaborative rehearsal of a series-wide theme that connects to individual sermon propositions and individual, real-world examples. This notion does not imply that a central series theme must be entirely pragmatic; rather, the central series theme is woven through individual sermon propositions and applied pragmatically by students on their own terms as part of processing the text. Though the bridge from individual scriptural texts is often far afield from evidently pragmatic ends, the bridge from an entire series to real-life applications can be much easier to narrow when well delivered and intentionally processed.

Fourth, the more information that is linked to previous learning, the stronger the memory will become. Here is where Doug Fields's assessment of student retention falls woefully short.⁸ The idea that the best sermon propositions are quickly discarded by the next morning may have less to do with the power or finesse of each proposition and more to do with the way each of these central propositions connects to an overall theme. When the apostle Paul shifts dramatically from theological imperative to doxological delight, whole-series connections help to bridge such diverse shifts within a larger text in

⁸ Doug Fields, *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 125.

meaningful ways. Students should not come away one week with merely an isolated proposition and the next with merely a worshipful fervor; instead, they should be connecting one to the other as they connect to the larger theme of the book and series. When such previous learning is discarded out of an underestimation of student insight, or simply a misplaced desire to care for students in the moment, long-term retention is exceedingly unlikely.

Step 2: Select the Text

Now that the entire series has been identified and the theme of the series chosen, the preacher moves to the sermon text for the week. This individual text, or “preachable unit” per Hershael York and Bert Decker, is a “passage that recognizes the natural divisions of the author yet acknowledges time constraints that a preacher must respect.”⁹ York and Decker’s consideration for text choice strikes a delicate balance:

The preacher has to strike a balance between paying too little attention to the text to do it justice (because he fears preaching the same book for too long) and spending too much time in a single book (because he fears missing *anything* of value). Too little time in a passage betrays the wealth of Scripture, while too much time ignores the totality of Scripture.¹⁰

This same balance is true in finding an appropriate text length for adolescent listeners. Consideration should be made for the transient nature of their time in the youth group so that multiple genres can be explored before their impending graduation. Texts which are so minute that they fail to make any connection with the larger theme of the series on a whole are a good indication that a larger section may be more beneficial for the purposes of integration and consolidation.

In an exceptionally thorough approach to finding the right length of text, Abraham Kuruvilla’s understanding of pericopal theology is noteworthy:

⁹ Hershael York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 36.

¹⁰ York and Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance*, 37.

The substantial and momentous nature of the content of the corpus promotes this use of pericopes in the ecclesial setting; the density of this divine discourse, packed as it is with significance and meaning, makes it possible, even advisable, to engage the Scriptures in smaller segments. Considered one at a time, pericopes allow a more intensive exploration of the depth and force of the text, enabling the particularity and potency of each pericope to impact the congregation.¹¹

Furthermore, when attempting to find the appropriate length of text, Kuruvilla's essential definition of a pericope is helpful as it provides a rubric for particular texts: "Any given pericope therefore is essentially a self-intact sense-unit bearing a relatively complete and integral idea that contributes to the whole, a defined portion of Scripture that reflects a unified span of thought and content, and that can be expounded within the constraints of the corporate gathering."¹²

The youth pastor using Kuruvilla's definition should ask five questions in order to choose an appropriate text:

1. Is the unit of Scripture a self-intact sense-unit? If the text simply does not make sense on its own, or if a first-level reading indicates that the text is basically insufficient, then expand the text.
2. Is the unit of Scripture a complete and integral idea? It may be a complete independent clause, but if it is only half of the author's intended point or a beginning to a larger and more complete thought, then it is insufficient for a sermon text.
3. Does the unit of Scripture contribute to the whole? Can the text be integrated and consolidated for the sake of the listener into the larger series theme? Though a small passage may possess some novelty, mere novelty is insufficient in light of a larger text that demands that each section contribute to the whole unit.
4. Is the unit of Scripture defined in a way that reflects a unified span of thought and content? If the text only has a main point when paired with previous or subsequent texts, then such texts must be added to the pericope. If the text poses a question that is answered by the following verse, it is foolish to separate the two. If the narrative arc reaches a crescendo only to be dropped until the next week, then the text is insufficient for the demands of the listener.
5. Can the unit of Scripture be preached in the time allotted? If not, then for the sake of the listeners (and in student ministry, their parents who have arrived to drive them home), more honing and clarification must be done. Initial answers to this question may require adjustment when further study demands cutting or lengthening to meet

¹¹ Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text: A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2013), 91.

¹² Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text*, 92.

needs that were initially unseen. In addition, consideration should also be made for the appropriate amount of student processing time which ought to follow the sermon. Longer or more controversial texts may require longer time for integration and consolidation to take place; thus, adjusting the schedule of the evening to meet student needs should be considered as part of this question.

Step 3: Study the Text

The idea of textual study for the purposes of preaching is nothing new. One of the key discrepancies between expository texts and student ministry texts is that study is often seen, on the one hand, as the most crucial step in preparation for Sunday morning exposition and, on the other, as a necessary evil to the youth pastor. As example of the latter, in the opening to their chapter on the nature of study, Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins quip, “In the world of youth workers, as most of us are well aware, nothing spells excitement like S-T-U-D-Y. It’s right up there with terms such as *meeting*, *to-do list*, *budgeting*, *elder board*, *senior pastor’s kids*, and *colonoscopy*.”¹³ In the following few pages, Fields and Robbins identify three potential pitfalls and temptations to youth workers as they undergo scriptural study.¹⁴ After their discussion of all of the problematic areas of study, the authors offer a helpful five-step study process: (1) determine the text; (2) beg God for insight; (3) read (and reread) the text; (4) allow commentaries to enlighten you; and (5) go beyond commentaries.¹⁵ Fields and Robbins are quick to point out the benefit of studying early and with rigor.¹⁶ In doing so, they go well above and beyond other popular student ministry texts that tend to devote the primacy of sermon preparation to illustration and application.

On the other side of the bridge is Andreas Köstenberger’s *magnum opus*

¹³ Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think about, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 106.

¹⁴ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 108–9.

¹⁵ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 110–19. The “beyond” includes other scriptural texts, cultural study, and general wisdom.

¹⁶ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 121.

Invitation to Biblical Interpretation. Köstenberger’s key tool for the purpose of scriptural interpretation is the “hermeneutical triad” of a passage’s historical setting, literary context, and theological message. Study, per Köstenberger, must include the following three elements working together in harmony:

Regardless of the passage of Scripture, the interpreter needs to study (1) the historical setting; (2) the literary context (including matters of canon, genre, and language); and (3) the theological message, that is, what the passage teaches regarding God, Christ, salvation, and the need to respond in faith to the Bible’s teaching.¹⁷

The remainder of Köstenberger’s text spells out how to exegete effectively utilizing each of these three interpretative horizons.

In a more succinct way, Ramesh Richard’s chapter on text study for sermon preparation offers a helpful breakdown of these same processes. Richard defines study in two phases: “seeing” deals with the surface level questions one should ask of the text before them, while “seeking” draws meaning from the gathered details inherent in the study.¹⁸ For Richard, seeing includes both the observation of key words and the relationships between them.¹⁹ Seeking asks a set of diagnostic questions regarding these words and their relationships to one another and then answers and analyzes them according to a series of five tests to make sure one’s interpretation stands on stable footing.²⁰ Richard then provides an outlined breakdown of each step within his process of study (see appendix 1).

My desire here is to integrate the approaches of Fields and Robbins, Köstenberger, and Richard into a course of study for the expository student ministry

¹⁷ Andreas Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Press, 2011), 78–79.

¹⁸ Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 35.

¹⁹ Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 35–36.

²⁰ Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 45–49.

preacher (see appendix 2). This approach, rightly administered and applied, should provide a strong structural, historical, and literary backbone for study ministry preaching. Through rigorous study of words and relationships within the text and then asking the right questions of the text, the youth pastor can ground his next steps of forming propositions and beginning construction of a larger deliverable message.

Step 4: Find the Central Proposition of the Text

Now that the work of textual study is complete, the youth pastor moves from written conclusions to oral delivery. For the sake of spiritual nurture and long-term retention, this shift requires the assistance of one central, clear, and connected proposition.

A Central Proposition: Robbins, Robinson, and Richard

Student ministry and expository preaching texts both agree on the nature of having one specific and central proposition drawn from the text for the sake of the listener. From the student ministry perspective, Fields and Robbins claim, “We’re convinced that one of the key elements for crafting messages that matter is to clearly articulate one solid idea, one main thought, one ‘remember this’ point to an audience. In your thinking process, go after that one compelling thought, the essential action, the basic principle that your students might take home with them.”²¹ In arguing for one central point, they agree with Richard’s assessment of the importance of a unifying and central proposition. Richard writes,

The central proposition is the singular theme/thrust around which the details of a biblical text are woven. Since we want to communicate one major point for the people to hear, understand, and obey, we seek to communicate the major proposition of each Scripture text in contemporary terms. If we leave our text (or sermon) to a chance perception of what this central proposition is, we are not really

²¹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 130.

necessary in the dispensing and receiving of God's truth.²²

Fields, Robbins, and Richard point back to the Haddon Robinson's concept of the "big idea."²³ Per Robinson, "A sermon should be a bullet, not buckshot."²⁴ Robinson goes so far as to claim that a sermon itself is "the explanation, interpretation, or application of a single dominant idea supported by other ideas, all drawn from one passage or several passages of Scripture." To find this central proposition, Robinson, Fields and Robbins, and Richard all recommend utilizing the findings done while studying the text. One should not establish a novel or compelling idea and hope that the text will somehow provide its necessary support. Rather, the central proposition is a natural product of in-depth textual study. Robinson finds the central proposition in the early stages of study as he breaks each preachable unit into three parts. The subject asks what is being described in the text, while the complement defines how what is described should be talked about. The idea distills and unifies the subject and complement into a coherent statement.²⁵ The idea does not exist outside the text but is distilled directly from it at an early stage. "Finding the subject and complement," Robinson claims, "does not start when we begin construction of our sermons. We pursue the subject and complement when we study the biblical text."²⁶

Fields and Robbins agree that waiting until sermon construction to find a compelling idea is too far along the process: "You're not ready for *construct*-ion until you know the purpose of your *instruction*. You can't complete your talk until you have

²² Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 66.

²³ Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 33–50.

²⁴ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 35.

²⁵ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 43–46.

²⁶ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 42.

one big idea.”²⁷ In order to continually apply the central proposition throughout the sermon development process, Fields and Robbins apply it in three stages. The first is simply to “develop your takeaway.” This step provides clarity for the remainder of the construction process. Second, the preacher should “discern why your audience needs to hear this key idea.”²⁸ This step provides an empathetic approach to sermon construction and to guarantee a clear delivery: “What you’re really asking at this point is this: What’s in it for them—not just from my perspective, but also from their perspective, from their end of the bridge? How will this one big idea speak to their lives?” The final step is to “decide the clearest way to say it.” In seeking out clarity, Fields and Robbins echo the sentiments of Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia.

A Clearly Stated Proposition: Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia

To the adolescent listener, propositions are only helpful insofar as they are clearly crafted and communicated. As discussed above, a difference manifested between two demographically similar classrooms when students were asked a set of three questions: (1) What are you learning? (2) Why are you learning that? (3) How will you know that you have learned it?²⁹ These same diagnostics enhance student retention when applied to purpose statements. Similar to “big ideas,” purpose statements “communicate the learning intentions and serve a cognitive priming function as they alert the student to what will follow.”³⁰

If the central proposition of the sermon is clearly stated at the outset, it fulfills Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia’s four essential elements of teacher clarity: (1) the teacher

²⁷ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 180.

²⁸ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 181.

²⁹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 54.

³⁰ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 75.

knows what the students are supposed to be learning; (2) the teacher knows how students learn (pedagogical content knowledge); (3) the students know what they are supposed to be learning; and (4) the teacher and students know what success looks like.³¹ The big idea, central proposition, or purpose statement not only unifies the text to the sermon but also allows for adolescent listeners to retain the information long term. Indeed, “when teacher and student are in agreement about what is to be learned and how both of them will know when learning has occurred, we save a whole lot of time that would have otherwise been spent floundering around looking for purpose.”

A Connected Proposition: Patricia Wolfe

For the sake of general sermon retention, a clearly stated proposition is vital; but, for the sake of long-term adolescent retention, the youth pastor should strive not only to connect the central proposition to the text but also to other central propositions. In turn, each of these central propositions from previous sermons ought to tie into the larger central theme of the series. To do so allows for scriptural texts to be engaged not as disconnected sets of moral propositions but as a unified whole book that connects to a unified whole canon. If the central proposition of the previous week is “Jesus is our great High Priest” and that of the following week is “Don’t Date Unbelievers,” then adolescent minds struggling to consolidate the two propositions into a unified whole would rather soon forget the first and hope that, eventually, connections might be made to the second. Instead, grounding each individual sermon proposition into a larger series proposition allows for students to see the importance of biblical context while they retain information more effectively.

Patricia Wolfe’s research bears this notion out. Adolescent minds are continuously searching not only for content but also for meaning that gives content its

³¹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 57.

weight. Disconnected central propositions produce content but fall short of providing meaning worth noting. When connections are made, not only does engagement increase but also retention follows suit: “Information that fits into or adds to an existing network has a much better chance of storage than information that doesn’t.”³² In order to make information meaningful, Wolfe says that one should “associate or compare the new concept with a known concept—to hook the unfamiliar with something familiar.” Connecting central propositions to previous propositions and, in turn, to the entire series is absolutely necessary for preaching in a way that meets the needs of adolescent listeners. Going back to these previous statements and showing how they connect allows for consolidation to occur at a greatly increased level:

Consolidation is undoubtedly enhanced by rehearsal. When we “replay” our experience (i.e., when we talk and think about them), we provide more opportunities for consolidation. Perhaps this is why instruction that allows students to connect new information to previous experiences increases the strength and complexity of their neural connections and, therefore, their retention of the information.³³

Bridging the Gap

Taking these three strands into account, the student ministry preacher should format a central proposition utilizing the following set of assessments: (1) Does the central proposition flow from the study of the text? (2) Does the central proposition connect to the central proposition of the series? (3) Does the central proposition connect to previous propositions within the series? (4) Is the central proposition as clear as possible for the intended audience? If these five assessments are satisfied, then, and only then, can the youth pastor begin to format the remainder of the sermon around this central point.

³² Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 135.

³³ Wolfe, *Brain Matters*, 155.

Step 5: Sermon Outlining and Structure

Now that the central proposition of the sermon has been located, structuring and outlining the sermon to continually move toward and out of that same proposition is essential. Yet traditional models of outlining tend to favor an audience who tend to be capable of abstraction and formal logic. Michael Fabarez claims that “scholasticism has had a lasting impact on the face of modern preaching.”³⁴ If this syllogistic approach to principles is already difficult on the surface for young adolescents to understand, then the rigidity of early outlining practices ought to be reconsidered. While some have tried to move away from scholastic approaches, Fabarez argues that many have simply modified them. In doing so, they have formed sermons that are “undoubtedly applicational” but which consist of “a Bible lecture with an applicational addendum.”³⁵ The solution, per Fabarez, is to outline according to the “text’s intended impact on our lives.”³⁶ Rather than elucidating points and then shoehorning in application, Fabarez flips the process of outlining the text on its head, demanding a structure that flows both toward and out of the central proposition of the text. While not intended for adolescent audiences, Fabarez’s integrated approach to the central proposition will no doubt prove helpful for an adolescent listener’s ability to understand and consolidate the most important parts of the sermon.

Kuruvilla adds a note that traditional sermon construction may be helpful in its production of points, but the fabric of the sermon that holds these points together is often incredibly unhelpful to the intended audience, regardless of their age.³⁷ He goes on to say,

³⁴ Michael Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 57.

³⁵ Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 58.

³⁶ Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 59.

³⁷ Abraham Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 81.

Such propositions and points, as seminary students are taught to create, are inherently stagnant, resulting in “static and turgid” sermons: the transitions between points are tenuous at best, making a three-point sermon “three sermonettes barely glued together,” with no substantive single movement from start to finish that retains the thrust of the text, maintains the momentum of the sermon, and sustains the interest of the audience.³⁸

Simply structuring a glued-together series of propositions with appropriate segues will not suffice to capture any audience, not to mention an adolescent mind desperate for ease of integration.

Rather, Kuruvilla favors an approach away from sermon-constructing to what he calls sermon-plotting.³⁹ Plotting not only allows hearers to understand a set of learned conclusions but also enables them to be guided through the process of interpretation and illumination as they hear: “Rather than deliver a pre-chewed and digested meal, the goal is to guide listeners to experience the same momentum and excitement that came with the preacher’s study of the text, enabling them to see the text in the same way as the preacher did, thus allowing them to catch the *thrust* of the text for themselves.”⁴⁰ In preaching through a plotted sermon, the pastor mimics the practice of study for the sake of the hearer. Per Kuruvilla, in the study and the pulpit, the preacher moves from textual details through the process of discovery to the final textual thrust. Fabarez demands that every aspect of the sermon flow toward and through the thrust of the text, while Kuruvilla adds that the processes undertaken to determine and fully understand that thrust should be included not for those who study the Word but for those who hear it preached.

From the educational perspective, Fabarez and Kuruvilla form a bridge to the metacognitive process of “close reading”—utilized by Fisher, Frey, and Qualia—as an active means of student engagement and retention.⁴¹ Close reading within documents

³⁸ Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 81–82.

³⁹ Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 82.

⁴⁰ Kuruvilla, *A Vision for Preaching*, 83.

⁴¹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 121.

(similar to expository methods) and across documents (much like topical exposition) establishes “an instructional routine, frames a process for doing so, thereby building the expertise of readers.” Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia structure close reading practices according to four distinct phases of questioning. These questions begin (1) at the literal level, move to (2) questions of structure, next transition to (3) questions of meaning, and finally end with (4) questions of inspiration toward action.⁴² In terms of textual study, Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia echo Köstenberger’s method, which moves from the historical dimension to the literary, theological, and applicational dimensions.⁴³ In utilizing close reading as an approach to sermon structure, youth pastors allow space for students to struggle alongside the text in hope of building long-term retention and expertise in front of Scripture itself.⁴⁴

The structure of a sermon, for the purposes of clarity and adolescent retention, bridges all three of these approaches together. Textual study produces a central proposition. The preacher replicates the process of discovery of that same proposition as a method of plotting the sermon. He moves from questions of literal meaning to questions of literary structure, leading to students discovering for themselves the central proposition. Moving from that proposition to questions of inference, the preacher makes necessary intertextual and redemptive-historical connections which move students to the process of application, integration, and consolidation. Structuring the sermon along these lines allows for the text itself to outline the nature of its delivery. If the text of Scripture moves quickly and is full of facts, then the sermon itself echoes such features within its very structure. If the text moves slowly and includes a ponderous argument, then the sermon slows down and ponders alongside the passage. If done effectively, the preacher

⁴² Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 122–23.

⁴³ Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 78–79.

⁴⁴ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 118.

will lead students through the plot of the text. He will move students to discover the thrust of the text. And through the whole structure of the sermon, the text's intended impact on student's lives will be evidenced.

Step 6: Study the Flock

With the structure of the sermon complete, the hard work of communicating a peculiar message to a very peculiar audience forms the next step. Demographics and populations of preaching audiences should always be considered before simply assuming that one set way of delivery is optimal. Multiple factors should be considered when addressing a distinctly adolescent crowd, including developmental considerations, the reality of adolescent pain, the fallen condition, the presence of idols, the advice of experts, and the need to integrate new frameworks.

Adolescent Developmental Considerations: Daniel Siegel

Moralism is deadly to any type of expository preaching and is especially useless in terms of gaining an adolescent audience's attention. In *Brainstorm*, Daniel Siegel states that "gist thinking draws on the gut feeling and heartfelt sense of a positive value, of aiming *for* something rather than inhibiting something."⁴⁵ Though a sermon structure should include direct demands and imperatives, these imperatives demand reasonable explanation from the adolescent listener. For example, is the retort "because I said so" really the best possible means of communicating to an adolescent?

In addition, preaching in a way that is developmentally empathetic will include space for integration and consolidation of given statements within a sermon. Assuming that this integration can be done without guidance may work for an adult audience, but

⁴⁵ Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain* (New York: Penguin, 2015), 80.

the empathetic preacher not only makes statements but also lovingly connects them alongside listeners for the sake of their retention. Siegel helpfully reminds communicators that to the adolescent, “how you focus your attention throughout life, and especially during the adolescent period, plays an important role in shaping the growth of your brain. Attention maintains and strengthens existing connections, and . . . helps us grow new connections and makes those connections more effective.”⁴⁶

**The Reality of Adolescent Pain:
Gloria Stronks and Nancy Knol**

In an effort to promote applicational preaching, youths pastor should not overlook the present reality of pain among their audience. The sermon that ends with a simple application to cheer up, or to know that things will get better, is utterly disintegrated from many adolescent students’ comprehension of their lives at the moment. To engage adolescent attention under the structure of the text, preachers should not shy away from the controversial, the challenging, or the painful. Early- and mid-adolescents should be invited to “confront their problems, whether they are as extreme as a life-threatening illness or as commonplace as poor social skills.”⁴⁷

Sermon delivery to an adolescent audience should assume that unless someone is an extraordinary outlier, every single listening ear is barraged by a maelstrom of insecurities. Students are confronting new heights of physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and psychological distress.⁴⁸ Sermons that give hope and provide space for integrating these painful realities into the reality God’s unfolding story are crucial markers for student growth. Any shepherd knows well the cry of his sheep, and those tasked with hearing the cries of adolescents would be wise to integrate such pain into the sermons

⁴⁶ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 82.

⁴⁷ Gloria Stronks and Nancy Knol: *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents: Succeeding in Deeper Water* (Colorado Springs: Association of Christian Schools International Press, 1999), 35.

⁴⁸ Stronks and Knol, *Reaching and Teaching Young Adolescents*, 36.

they preach.

The Fallen Condition: Bryan Chapell

Shepherding adolescents well allows for preachers to engage them in sermons at the point of their greatest need. A sermon meant for adolescent audiences will benefit from utilizing Bryan Chapell's "fallen condition focus."⁴⁹ In doing so, "making sure that they identify the spiritual hole that a text addresses keeps preachers from offering solutions that are merely human responses." Chapell's detailed definition of this fallen condition focus is as follows: "The Fallen Condition Focus is the mutual human condition that contemporary believers share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him."⁵⁰

Those who preach to students must do the additional work of finding commonalities between adolescent listeners and the text's original intended audience, even if such an audience was of a different age or time. Consecutive expository preaching of the whole counsel of God will include scriptural texts dealing with the frailty of age, the sorrows and joys in parenting, whole and broken marriages, childlessness, and the geopolitical conflicts of the Ancient Near East. The temptation to avoid these Scriptures and, instead, simply apply a topical approach rejects the necessary steps of consolidation and integration which train students to understand the entirety of a text. What is required, then, is the ability to do the deep and detailed work of finding commonalities even when they appear not to exist within a given text. Though the pain of age may be different, the pain of adolescence still shares a commonality in its needs for a redeemer and friend. Conflict on a middle school scale may be a drop in the bucket compared to the conflicts

⁴⁹ Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 299.

⁵⁰ Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 50.

of the Old Testament, but conflict remains conflict until the appearance of the King in his glory. Rather than assuming that such texts simply do not apply to the adolescent experience, those who preach to adolescents must dig more deeply and know their flock well in order to engage their interest in a text that may seem distant and foreign.

Idols and Experts: Tim Keller

Communicating a specific message to a student requires an abundance of contextualization. Tim Keller says that such contextualization “means to resonate with yet defy the culture around you. It means to antagonize a society’s idols while showing respect for its people and many of its hopes and aspirations. It means expressing the gospel in a way that is not only comprehensible but convincing.”⁵¹

To youth pastors, the culture around them and the culture around their students may be two very opposed subcultures. To benefit the audience as they seek integration and consolidation, preachers ought to recognize cultural idols and influencers and bring them into discussion with the preached text. Such work requires, as Keller says of the apostle Paul, that one “takes some of his listeners’ right beliefs and uses them to criticize their wrong beliefs in light of the Scripture.”⁵² Though many hold that youth culture is to be completely disregarded or abandoned, Keller says that contextualization rightly applied should both care for and confront the culture of the audience. To reach a culture effectively, Keller offers six steps: (1) use accessible or well-explained vocabulary; (2) employ respected authorities to strengthen your theses; (3) demonstrate an understanding of doubts and objections; (4) affirm in order to challenge baseline cultural narratives; (5) make gospel offers that push on the culture’s pressure points; (6) call for gospel motivation.⁵³

⁵¹ Keller, *Preaching*, 99.

⁵² Keller, *Preaching*, 101.

⁵³ Keller, *Preaching*, 103.

Keller's demand for right language, compelling confrontation, embracing questions, challenging cultural narratives, and pushing on the culture's pressure points are all useful steps in engaging contemporary adolescent culture. Because adolescent culture tends to change not by the year so much as by the day, youth pastors need to be afforded the time to find cultural idols and experts in order to challenge them with both empathy and exactness. This need presents a challenge in evaluating not only the larger subculture of adolescent trends but also the trends from individual school districts, including social strata, family structure, parental conflict, internet subcultures, and the like. But an empathetic preacher asks how each student's unique culture embraces, or is repulsed by, certain texts and how individual students may struggle with concepts introduced by individual texts in light of the world they inhabit.

Framework Formation: John Piper

One of the great gifts of preaching to an adolescent audience is not only the week-to-week adventure of contextualization but also the ability to offer new content and frameworks into minds that are desperately longing to integrate them. John Piper agrees with Keller that the sermon ought to be contextualized but adds that "we must also labor to bring about, in the minds of our listeners, conceptual categories that may be missing from their mental framework. It may be that if we only use the thought structure our audience already has, some crucial biblical truths may remain unintelligible, no matter how much contextualizing we do."⁵⁴

While considering the flock in preparation for a sermon, those who preach to students should not merely shy away from a concept because it may not have yet been on the listener's radar; instead, they should attend to and include it meaningfully and joyfully! Those who underestimate the capacity of adolescents to engage in challenging

⁵⁴ John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 128.

theological concepts, or expect them to shy away from new frameworks, miss out on an incredible opportunity while they prepare to deliver the Word. Contextualization is a helpful bridge, but on occasion, the preacher should simply present an otherworldly concept as a reflection of a wholly other God. While these concepts should be attended to with additional time for integration and processing, the end result of building new frameworks is long-term retention in light of student challenges and struggles.

In light of these considerations, after in-depth study and structure, the preacher should ask the following questions of the sermon structure in light of his intended adolescent audience: (1) Does the sermon reflect a positive value, or is it merely inhibitive? (2) Does the sermon address the true fallen condition of the students, and does it provide a solution? (3) Does the sermon confront and care for the current student context? (4) Are there opportunities to create new frameworks within this message? (5) Does the structure of the text demand a certain tone or style of delivery?

Step 7: Illustration

Once the sermon has been structured according to the text and the needs of the specific audience are considered, preachers can add illustrations for the purposes of relevance, engagement, and offering points of connection to real world applications.

According to Fields and Robbins,

In one study conducted with 2,000 students, about 10 percent more information was retained when speeches used a variety of illustrative devices, figurative language, analogies, stories, and so on. This was true whether the audience was listening to a live speaker or merely an audio recording. To borrow from the apostle Paul, illustrations provide a “visible image of the invisible.” In other words, illustrations help teenagers see.⁵⁵

It is crucial that the illustrations are added at this stage, rather than setting the stage for the text to be delivered, as is the habit of the harried youth pastor. The central proposition needs to be the basis by which illustrations are either moving students toward discovering

⁵⁵ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 133.

the proposition or applying the proposition to the everyday. The basis of the practice of illustration, per Fields and Robbins, is “you always want to look for places in your content where a teenager might say ‘show me what you mean. You’re pointing to something that isn’t really visible to me, and I want to understand.’”⁵⁶

Contemporary adolescents are exceptionally visible and visual learners, so the integration of a compelling picture to give weight to the concept is effective in promoting retention. Integration is also aided, per Fields and Robbins, by offering a connecting line: “A story needs to be connected at both ends, going into the story and coming out of the story.”⁵⁷ Failure to connect a story to the central proposition in any way may allow for a memorable story but ultimately distracts from the central point more than adds to it if done without intention. As Fields and Robbins remark, “Entertaining? Maybe. But enlightening? Not likely. There’s no main message. There’s no take-away value.”⁵⁸ The authors include a range of visuals, readings, personal stories, and object lessons which can all be applied with great care while helping to promote student learning. Each type of illustration demands the use of words which are precise, specific, descriptive, short, vivid, familiar, and full of sound.⁵⁹

While the purpose of illustration may be engagement and retention, the function of illustration in any setting, according to John Piper, is the stirring of the affections of the listener.⁶⁰ Any text can be preached in a way that merely addresses the cognitive needs of adolescents; but, where illustration proves powerful is the provocation of the intense emotional spark—per Daniel Siegel—inherent in adolescent

⁵⁶ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 134.

⁵⁷ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 138.

⁵⁸ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 152.

⁵⁹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 154–56.

⁶⁰ Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 92.

development.⁶¹ In addition, illustration provides connection between emotional affections, a quest for novelty, and an increased rate of retention and consolidation. Piper speaks of Jonathan Edwards's use of illustrations as a way to "compare abstract theological truth to common events and experiences."⁶²

The task of apt illustration is difficult in any preaching endeavor, for "who can find images and analogies that come anywhere near creating the profound feelings we ought to have when we consider realities like hell and heaven?"⁶³ But, the task is essential for the sake of the listener. Illustration takes a text and its central proposition and utilizes sound, image, and story "to give light to the understanding and heat to the affections." This element is especially crucial in an adolescent setting when emotional instability can be honed and hyper-rationality can be integrated into the drama of redemptive history rather than being seen as problematic or outside of it. The illustrations utilized must speak plainly to adolescent experience. Yet they must also be handled carefully so that they only promote the central proposition rather than override it through overstimulation. If the illustration is remembered at the expense of the text, then the preacher has irresponsibly leveraged his adolescent listeners against the goal of their edification and retention.

Step 8: Listener-specific Application

Fabarez: Commonality and Uncommonality

Michael Fabarez offers a helpful insight in his assessment of applications meant to reach particular audiences. Fabarez generally writes to those preaching weekly to a fully assembled congregation, but his application methods can be utilized to reach

⁶¹ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 11.

⁶² Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 92.

⁶³ Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 93.

those of any age group. Specifically, Fabarez writes about the importance—and lack—of commonality in targeted applications. After doing the work of assessing the original intent of the text, Fabarez states that

The challenge now is to thoughtfully determine how you can best unite the relevant application of the text to your specific audience. At this point, the carefully analyzed application made to the original audience may be abstracted to a more general principle, or it may be directly transferred without any modification based on the criteria discussed above. Of course, this assumes a certain knowledge of your hearers. A wise preacher learns what is important to his congregants, and why it is important. The presumption that “all of us Americans think alike” is a dangerous one for any preacher to hold, particularly new ones moving out of their own neighborhoods to other parts of the country!⁶⁴

He then gives four questions to help determine the goal of the intended sermon: (1) What specifically does your audience have in common with the original audience? (2) In what specific areas does your audience lack commonality with the original audience? (3) How is your audience currently practicing the application? (4) How is your audience currently neglecting or abusing the application?⁶⁵ Fabarez’s assumption that the audience generally has commonality with the original listeners, but also lacks commonalities with the original listeners, opens the door to expository preaching applications that apply to more than simply adult congregants. In arguing this point, Fabarez allows for sermon applications not only tailored to adult listeners but also to adolescents at various stages of development and perception.

Doriani: The Four Questions

Daniel Doriani also provides a framework for audience-specific applications. He advocates the use of four questions in order to get the heart of the audience’s need for the text: (1) “What should I do? (2) Who should I be? (3) Where should I go? (4) How

⁶⁴ Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 48.

⁶⁵ Fabarez, *Preaching that Changes Lives*, 48–51.

can I distinguish truth from error?”⁶⁶ These questions are useful for any audience, but their relevance is particularly important to an adolescent audience begging for integration, purpose, and consolidation and steeped in conflicting authority structures. After deep study of the text to determine its central proposition, and in-depth study of the flock to determine their fallen condition, Doriani states that “the chief task, then, is not finding something to say, but fingering the one *chief* application that drives home the central theme of the text and arrays the subpoints around it.”⁶⁷ As the adolescent audience stands at varying stages of integration, asking all four questions, rather than only utilizing one type throughout a series, will be helpful to meet all needs rather than to prefer one particular learning style. When this chief application is found and then made as clear as possible for the sake of one’s listener, using developmentally appropriate vocabulary, only then should one consider the best means of its delivery.

Fields and Robbins: Connecting Illustration to Application

According to Fields and Robbins, even though the audience may know the preacher’s central proposition and the illustration which supports it, the central point of application will fall flat when unintentionally or haphazardly connected to the rest of the message.⁶⁸ The authors go on to say,

Be brutal on yourself here—this can make or break a message. *Will my description of this topic connect with a teenager’s life, and am I saying it in a way that she’ll “get it”?* I chose the word *deliberate* because I really believe that effective communicators need to spend some significant time struggling over connecting points from message to audience.⁶⁹

By tending to these small connections, the preacher allows for the sermon to flow with

⁶⁶ Daniel Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001), 122.

⁶⁷ Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 81.

⁶⁸ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 182.

⁶⁹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 182–83.

greater ease along the plotted lines.

To narrow down the best possible application, a combination of the approaches of Fabarez, Doriani, and Fields and Robbins is helpful and entails asking the following questions:

1. What are points of commonality or uncommonality with the original audience?
2. Are the students currently practicing or neglecting the application of the text?
3. In light of the fallen condition focus, what type of question are students likely to ask?
4. How does the application of the text provide a redemptive answer?
5. Have I established clear connections between this application and the remainder of the message?

Step 9: Compose the Sermon

It may seem as though the sermon has already been entirely composed at this point, but there is still the final step of compiling every aspect of the previous eight steps into a coherent whole. Preachers weave illustration and application with effective and strategic segues and verbal cues. They craft the message in such a way that every point leads to, or flows from, the central proposition of the text. In doing so, they reach an adolescent audience whose minds are wired for this style of integration, connection, and consolidation. In *Speaking to Teenagers*, Fields and Robbins demand at this stage that the preacher “Keep Focused” and “Craft for Clarity.”⁷⁰ They add that “the most effective communicators are never finished with their message just because they have it composed. They’re always tweaking their content, praying for their audience, and evaluating their own hearts to make sure they’re focused.” To clarify whether or not such composition and focus has taken place, the authors ask nine questions of assessment to indicate any lack of preparedness:

⁷⁰ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 184 (see also pp. 184–97).

1. Do I know the big-picture hurts and specific needs of my audience?
2. Have I prayed for them? Do I have a spiritual burden and genuinely care that my students understand and apply this particular message?
3. Do I have a good grasp of the content I will be teaching?
4. Have I thought about how my content will connect and how it might matter to my teenage audience?
5. Do I have a clear, simple map for how I will communicate my content?
6. Do I have good illustrations, graphics, experiences, or exercises that will help me engage and connect to my audience?
7. Have I chosen the clearest, most powerful words?
8. Have I identified one main idea that I really want them to know when they get home?
9. What is in my message that is not essential? What can I cut?⁷¹

From the expository preaching perspective, Paul Tripp describes this stage of the process as analogous to cooking a thanksgiving feast:

Gathering the best ingredients is analogous to the *content* part of preaching. Good preaching is rooted in gathering fine gospel ingredients out of the passage before you. But on Thanksgiving Day, I don't put ingredients on the table. Ingredients are the substance, but they are not a meal. They must be formed into attractive, tasty, nutritious, and consumable elements that together form a meal. A hunk of butter, mouthful of flour, followed by a spoon of cornmeal, is not very appetizing or digestible. But cornbread is a wonderful thing. The finest of turkeys, placed raw on a table, would be neither appealing nor edible. The forming of the fine ingredients collected into a beautiful meal is analogous to the *communication* aspect of preaching.⁷²

Moving the sermon from the conceptual realm to the deliverable realm is an essential step to the process for the sake of both clarity and communication. This process of combining all the elements of research, text plotting, audience exegesis, illustration, and listener-centered application is essential to breathe life into the delivery of the sermon. Practiced rehearsal of the sermon to hone precise words and bridge content

⁷¹ Fields and Robins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 187.

⁷² Paul Tripp, "The Craft of Life-Changing Preaching," *Gospel Coalition*, August 26, 2012, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-craft-of-life-changing-preaching>.

allows for final adjustments from written content to confident oral delivery. The nature of the deliverable—be it completely memorized, outlined, or fully manuscripted—will depend largely on the comfort level and preference of the preacher.

Step 10: Deliver the Sermon

The sermon composed and rehearsed, it is now ready to be delivered to the congregation with weight, authority, and listener-sensitive communication methods. Sensitivity to an adolescent audience does not mean a wholesale rejection of weight or monologue. Martin Lloyd-Jones warns against such an approach:

We are told that today they cannot think and follow reasoned statements, that they are so accustomed to the kind of outlook and mentality produced by newspapers, television and the films, that they are incapable of following a reasoned, argued statement. We must therefore give them films and filmstrips, and get filmstars to speak to them, and pop-singers to sing to them and give “brief addresses” and testimonies, with just a word of Gospel thrown in.⁷³

Lloyd-Jones is referring here to an adult congregation in 1969. How much greater is the temptation to utilize methods of communication to an adolescent audience who is far more digitally attached and visually driven? Yet the answer is not rote recitations and bare facts but, rather, a willingness to be accessible to the needs of the congregation while simultaneously allowing the content of the sermon to challenge adolescent constructs and build new frameworks. Lloyd-Jones adds later that many encounters with those who remained under his preaching were made aware of this very benefit. Though originally these hearers did not really understand much of what Lloyd-Jones was talking about, they later admitted that they gradually began to find that they were absorbing truth unconsciously and that it began to have more and more meaning for them.⁷⁴

Fields and Robbins have heard the same complaints lobbed against Lloyd-Jones fifty years prior:

⁷³ Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 135.

⁷⁴ Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 139.

Some very creative and articulate youth ministry thinkers believe we should be moving away from “the talk” as we’ve thought about it in the past. They believe our communication needs to be more visual in delivery, more active in approach, and less linear in form Is it really wise and strategic to speak to a teenage audience for 10, 20 or 30 minutes using the spoken word? We believe strongly that it is. But we also believe that to do it effectively is difficult work—often very difficult.⁷⁵

With a particularly visual audience, the balance of contextualization and framework creation is exceedingly difficult to master. To do so effectively, the youth pastor should find not only the right method of sermon construction but also sermon delivery.

Methods of sermon delivery must be both biblically conscionable and audience sensitive. To bridge the gap between expository preaching texts and youth ministry manuals is to unify these two approaches rather than to falsely dichotomize and polarize them into unnecessary extremes of a spectrum which simply does not exist. In delivery, the youth pastor moves from helpful contextual illustration to point to authoritative proclamation. All the while, he allows the adolescent ear the opportunity to integrate themes and concepts. Delivery of the sermon merges each of the previous nine points into a unified feast rightly and thoughtfully set before students to enjoy. Voice, volume, pitch, timbre, eye contact, dress, variety, pace, gravitas, and pathos work *alongside* integration rather than *in spite of* it. Field and Robbins quote Haddon Robinson on the subject: “Speech consists of more than words and sentences. The voice conveys ideas and feelings apart from words. We make judgments about a speaker’s physical and emotional state—whether he is frightened, angry, fatigued, sick, happy, confident—based on the tremor of his voice, its loudness, rate and pitch.”⁷⁶

Integration and long-term retention will absolutely fail if the nature of the text and the delivery system are dis-integrated from each other. Adolescent minds built for new forms of interdependence seek authority that not only gives authoritative information

⁷⁵ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 212–13.

⁷⁶ Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 160, quoted in Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 226.

but also communicates it in a way where the weighty information is communicated with appropriately integrated weight. Piper says of all preachers of the Word that “lack of intensity in preaching can only communicate that the preacher does not believe or has never been seriously gripped by the reality of which he speaks—or that the subject matter is insignificant.”⁷⁷ How much more, then, will an audience fail to see the authoritative importance of the Word when their own developmental frameworks are linked to integrating new emotional intelligences and challenging authority structures? For youth pastors to reach their audience, a well-exegeted and well-structured message devoid of necessary passion and authoritative weight is both unhelpful and, as a means of discipleship, does more harm than good. On the contrary, when the delivery systems and methods are effectively integrated into the flow, weight, and demands of the text, adolescent listeners are not only challenged but also evidently well-loved by their shepherd.

Step 11: Process the Sermon as a Group

Perhaps the greatest difference between preaching to a largely adult audience and preaching to an audience of adolescents is the necessity of building in time to intentionally process and integrate the content of the sermon. Adult audiences may have the luxury of waiting for a few days to process the sermon’s contents within a small group. Adolescent integration and consolidation benefit most by immediate discussion and the inclusion of personal real-life applications from the students themselves. Offering time, opportunities, and space for students to process the information given is essential to long-term retention of the material. In addition, such time allows for previous central propositions and series themes to be tied together to form a cohesive whole. Creating groups of both peers and adults of various generations will also foster adolescent

⁷⁷ Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, 105.

interdependence. In doing so, preachers create new “attachment figures” of wise, accessible adults who are both a “safe harbor in which [students] feel secure” and a “launching pad from which [they] can take off and explore the world.”⁷⁸

Building time for processing among peers and trusted adults also provides opportunities for adult advocacy of each individual student. As Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia rightly suggest, “To grow up, children need advocates who will go to great lengths to ensure that they are successful. . . . Importantly, it’s not just physical protection that our students need. Physical protection is important, but so is psychological, social, and emotional well-being.”⁷⁹ The author’s understanding of the importance of processing time with trusted adults also builds fluency within students and allows them to make larger connections to previously retained information.⁸⁰

While the sermon has led students through questions about the text, processing time allows for questions to be asked of application and integration. Simply having an adult who monologues is not sufficient for integration and growth. Rather, student voices allow greater long-term retention and independent engagement in future learning:

Students want to be understood and should be expected to share their voice as part of the learning process. The school and classroom should be safe places where students can express their honest opinions and concerns, ask questions, and have meaningful decision-making opportunities. When students believe they have a voice in school, they are seven times more likely to be academically motivated! Yet only 43% of students report that adults in their school listen to student suggestions, and 44% believe they have a voice in decision making at school.⁸¹

If youth pastors and churches value independent learning in their students, then youth ministries must create similar safe spaces for student voices. Such spaces are not meant for the re-interpretation of the central proposition of the text, or to be a mere circle

⁷⁸ Siegel, *Brainstorm*, 145.

⁷⁹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 47.

⁸⁰ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 97.

⁸¹ Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 140.

of feelings, but as an opportunity for long-term retention and integration. In addition, engagement only increases with opportunities to be heard.

Finally, group processing and individual student contribution promotes maturity and wisdom. Processing time moves students “from admiring their problems to living with a solution-oriented mindset.”⁸² But in order to do so, youth pastors would be wise to make sure that students do not simply ask questions but that they ask the right kind of questions. Eileen Depka proves helpful at this juncture. Utilizing a revised form of Bloom’s Taxonomy of Learning, Depka creates a rubric for asking questions of varying levels. For the sake of integration and consolidation, questions asked by student leaders should not primarily inhabit simple rote memory or repeat the central proposition of the text; rather, they should primarily be questions of application, analysis, evaluation, and creation.⁸³ By asking questions of increased complexity, students are asked to integrate and consolidate at a higher level of learning.

In addition, questions should be evaluated on the levels of factual learning, conceptual understanding, procedural knowledge, and metacognition. Questions should favor the latter three rather than merely refer to facts and statements. For the purpose of long-term retention and integration of information, the youth pastor needs to provide both the space to process information as well as questions which rigorously and methodically engage student interest.

Yet pastors cannot dichotomize the goals of long-term retention and integration from the larger aims of student ministry. Students who are fluent in retained information and dis-integrated from the larger community of the church need processing time to continue to build and foster core relationships for their education and continued

⁸² Fisher, Frey, and Quaglia, *Engagement by Design*, 147.

⁸³ Eileen Depka, *Raising the Rigor: Effective Questioning Strategies and Techniques for the Classroom* (Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press: 2017), 27.

discipleship. As Chap Clark avers,

Ultimately, the goal of youth ministry is not about helping to shape a personal faith. The goal is the full relational and systematic assimilation of the emerging adult into the life of the Christian community known as the church. According to the Bible and historical theology, for faith to be truly Christian, it must be understood and expressed both personally and corporately. . . . In a culture in which the young have been set adrift without a structure designed to invite them back into the core of adult life, the church must be different.⁸⁴

With the sermon finished and student processing concluded, it is now time for the pastor simply to pray for the conviction, comfort, and illumination of the text which can only be given through the power of the Holy Spirit. No amount of sophistication, preparation, emphatic delivery, or peer conversation will ever save a soul. And yet, by sheer grace alone, the pastor can rest. God remains on the move.

⁸⁴ Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 190.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUDING REMARKS AND
LARGER IMPLICATIONS

The adolescent is possessed of mind, ears, and soul. Bare statements of fact may engage the mind. Rhetorical flourish may tickle the ear. But the Word of God stirs the soul. Student ministry has long been a world inhabited by speakers devoid of any sense of authority or weight. At the same time, Sunday morning pulpитеers who wish to reach an entire audience are prone to miss out on an entire section of students begging to integrate and remember what they hear. Moreover, the classroom educator has honed strategy after strategy not only to teach for the day but also to connect years of rigorous training and study through thematic series. The local church needs to hear from all three for the sake of the adolescents who fill its pews, chairs, and—oftentimes—couches.

For the sake of student ministry, youth pastors need clarity of their purpose in front of, behind, and alongside the Word of God. Simple declarations that “we hope you can teach the kids,” or baseline expectations of little more than behavior modification, set youth pastors on a track of contextualization and entertainment that simply cannot compete with current adolescent culture. Maturity does not come from a series of slick illustrations pointing to self-actualization or moralistic applications. Nor does it come from erudite declarations so far removed from the capacities of the audience that none can hope to remember. But youth pastors are equipped to bear far greater glories than these. The Word of God, living and active, rightly studied, interpreted, and delivered to an adolescent audience will bear fruit where God allows growth. The seeds of Scripture sown among adolescents are always good. Methods vary, and different occasions call for interruptions and modifications of style, but the authoritative declaration of Scripture is a

means of God to rescue, restore, and reconcile his people. And his people include those who sit week by week in the presence of youth pastors desperate to communicate a transcendent Word in a particular time to an ever-changing audience. Pity, then, when churches continue to view such a weighty exchange as nothing more than a mere lesson, chat, or talk. A devotional nugget nourishes no one, not even an adolescent who feels that such a nugget is all he or she can stomach at the time.

If the church is willing to engage adolescents not with chit-chat but with preaching, then it also receives the benefit of students who are already trained to understand the nature and function of the scriptural text. Students who sit under a preacher willing to labor rigorously to integrate and connect his sermons and deliver them according to the needs and specifications of his students' growing minds will later arrive at the church as thoughtful and attentive adult congregants. They will not be stunned by the authority and weight of their senior pastor while expecting gimmickry; instead, they will remain stunned by the beauty of the authoritative Word which he preaches. When students are equipped to learn under a preached Word and integrate it thoughtfully, the possibility of their long-term retention of information is far more likely. And when these same students mature in a culture where the Bible is discussed at length, processed in community, and made evident in real-life experience, they will run to ministries where such community is continually fostered in the larger church. Pastoral feedback, small group ministries, fellowship, Sunday School, and all other adult ministries of the church are nourished when the students they will soon inherit are nurtured under the Word.

But in order to produce this type of nurture, structure, and maturity, youth pastors should be encouraged and equipped to preach with these considerations in mind. To do the type of study, contextualization, proclamation and processing that this method demands, youth pastors will need a greater allotment of both training and time. To be able to engage students at this level of study and long-term retention, youth pastors

should be encouraged to pursue higher education and the same pastoral training as those behind the pulpit on Sunday morning. While this reality is certainly not possible in many churches at present, it should be seen as a long-term goal for the sake of future students. Can a church get by on volunteer-led student ministries when the best they can muster is a video clip or a quick chat by an untrained but tender-hearted lay-leader? They can, and oftentimes, they do. But the question is not whether such a ministry is feasible but, rather, what the best possible option looks like for future consideration. The question is not whether one's youth pastor is sufficient for the task, for no pastor is on his own. But is he encouraged by the church to view his job as a shepherd or simply a showman?

The larger church itself can benefit from this methodology, even though it is primarily tailored to an adolescent audience. Late adolescents and adults are now inhabitants of a culture with massively integrated long-form stories that stretch for decades across all forms of media. Would they not benefit from a strategy that ties together central propositions which stretch across entire sermon series? Even though adolescent integration demands relatively immediate processing time, would not the entire congregation benefit from practicing group discussions immediately after hearing the Word preached? Because this methodology draws from expository preaching texts, not only does it bridge the gap from these texts to student listeners, but it also allows students to bridge the gap to an adulthood that is steeped in similar methods for the sake of listeners of all ages. If a student hears an authoritative message only after taking part in a Sunday morning service for the first time, it is no wonder that students tend to leave their congregations after graduation. If they are accustomed to hucksters and savvy rhetoricians, only to eventually sit under, and be frightened by, the intensity of the preached Word, then the youth ministry has done more harm than good. But if youth pastors prepare their students to hear the weight of the Word through the proclamation of preaching, and if their senior pastor is willing to allow the same space for processing and integration for all those involved, who will not benefit?

The church needs preaching. Sheep need shepherds. And the notion that sheep can only begin hearing the heralded call at the age of eighteen is a blot on the notion of covenant families and the blood-bought access of the gospel to all who might hear it and believe. When this inconsistency is recognized, the church needs to step toward its adolescent listeners. As it engages them, it should train those called and willing to do the hard work of engaging shifting and challenging minds and hearts. Rather than seeing their adolescents as rebellious, foolish, licentious, and backward signs of the end of the age, the church should see their students' development as an opportunity to form new frameworks and speak peace amid the wind and waves. Adolescents are not to be seen as those with a monopoly on rebellion or restlessness, for all are rebels and fools before the Spirit's quickening, and all who believe in Christ find rest for their restless and weary souls.

Adolescents need the church. The church needs its adolescents. The gap between the two is perceived as endlessly wide, but God remains in the habit of reconciling across seemingly impossible chasms. The Word of God is perplexing to the steadiest of adult minds. But it is knowable and lovely even to the ever-exploring and adventure-seeking mind of a teenager. Students face a world of constant change, but the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Those who try to contextualize to adolescents find themselves in a whirlwind of new trends and developments at an unprecedented rate in human history. God's Word penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit; it can reach a culture of confusion. Can the true Word of God be meaningfully preached, rightly communicated, and powerfully delivered in a way that produces long-term retention by an adolescent audience? By God's grace and extravagant mercy, indeed it can!

APPENDIX 1

RAMESH RICHARD'S OUTLINE ON TEXT STUDY FOR SERMON PREPARATION¹

- I. Seeing
 - A. Observe words
 - 1. Long words
 - 2. Unusual words
 - 3. Repeated words
 - B. Observe relationships
 - 1. Grammatical relationships
 - 2. Logical relationships
 - 3. Chronological and/or geographical relationships
 - 4. Psychological relationships
 - 5. Contextual relationships
 - a. The context of the Bible
 - b. The context of the book
 - c. The context of the text
 - 6. Relationships in genre
 - a. Teaching
 - b. Narratives
 - c. Poetry
 - d. Parables
 - e. Miracles
 - f. Prophecy
- II. Seeking
 - A. Asking questions
 - 1. Questions for words
 - a. What do these words mean now?
 - b. What did these words mean at the time they were written?
 - c. How have the Bible, the author, and the authors used these words elsewhere?
 - 2. Questions for relationships
 - a. Grammatical relationships
 - i. Tense
 - ii. Number

¹ Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 50–52.

- iii. Gender
 - b. Logical relationships
 - i. Cause and effect
 - ii. Reason
 - iii. Result
 - iv. Contrast
 - v. Comparisons
 - vi. Conditions
 - vii. Purpose
 - c. Chronological and/or geographical relationships
 - d. Psychological relationships
 - e. Contextual relationships
 - i. The Bible context
 - a. The historical context
 - b. The biblical or literary context
 - c. The cultural context
 - d. The theological context
 - ii. The context of the book
 - iii. The context of the text
 - f. Relationships in genre.
- B. Answering questions
- C. Analyzing answers: “five tests”
 - 1. Authenticity
 - 2. Unity
 - 3. Consistency
 - 4. Simplicity
 - 5. Honesty
- D. Applying answers
 - 1. What kind of application?
 - 2. What is the application?
 - 3. What is the legitimate basis of the application?
 - 4. How can I leave the audience sure that the authority of the text is the basis for the application?

APPENDIX 2

OUTLINE INTEGRATING THE APPROACHES OF FIELDS AND ROBBINS, KÖSTENBERGER, AND RICHARD

- I. Determine the preachable unit¹
 - A. Seeing the text: read (and reread)²
 1. Historical setting³
 - a. Observe words of the text
 - i. Long
 - ii. Unusual
 - iii. Repeated
 - b. Observe the basic skeletal structure of the text
 2. Literary setting⁴
 - a. Observe relationships of words in the text
 - i. Grammatical
 - ii. Chronological
 - iii. Psychological
 - iv. Contextual
 - v. Genre
 - B. Seeking the text⁵
 1. Historical questions
 - a. Original meaning
 - b. Current meaning
 - c. Historical interpretations
 2. Literary questions
 - a. Grammar
 - b. Logic
 - c. Chronology

¹ Hershanel York and Bert Decker, *Preaching with Bold Assurance: A Solid and Enduring Approach to Engaging Exposition* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003), 36; Doug Fields and Duffy Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers: How to Think about, Create, and Deliver Effective Messages* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 110.

² Ramesh Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons: A Seven Step Method for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 34–35.

³ Andreas Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Press, 2011), 78–79.

⁴ Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 79.

⁵ Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 36–45.

- d. Psychology
- e. Context
- f. Genre
- 3. Answer and analyze: the “five tests”⁶
 - a. Authenticity
 - b. Unity
 - c. Consistency
 - d. Simplicity
 - e. Honesty
- C. Determining the theological setting of the text⁷
 - 1. Applying answers
 - a. Nature of initial application
 - b. Basis of initial application
 - c. Form a central proposition⁸
 - 2. Allow commentaries to enlighten you⁹
 - a. Hebrew and Greek grammars¹⁰
 - b. Lexicons
 - c. Language-specific concordances
 - d. Theological/exegetical dictionaries
 - e. Bible encyclopedias/dictionaries
 - f. Bible atlases
 - g. Old and New Testament introductions
 - h. Charts
 - i. Commentaries
 - j. Systematic and biblical theologies
 - k. Communicator’s tools
 - 3. Go beyond commentaries¹¹
 - a. Historic understanding of the text or its application
 - b. General wisdom regarding the text or its application
 - c. Audience-specific understanding of the text or its application

⁶ Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 47.

⁷ Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 724–40.

⁸ Richard, *Preparing Expository Sermons*, 66.

⁹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 117.

¹⁰ Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 730–35.

¹¹ Fields and Robbins, *Speaking to Teenagers*, 119–20. Going beyond commentaries is Fields and Robbins’ parlance for audience exegesis specific to the current passage.

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ABSTRACT

BRIDGING THE GAP: ENGAGING ADOLESCENT LISTENERS THROUGH EXPOSITORY PREACHING

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The goal of this ministry research project is analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of three types of contemporary literature to form an integrated methodology for preaching to adolescent listeners with the goal of long-term information retention. By finding the strengths and weaknesses of expository preaching texts, student ministry manuals of delivery, and classroom teaching texts utilizing current studies in adolescent psychology, the goal is an exegetically sound, listener-sensitive sermon in the hopes of retaining the information for later in life.

The first chapter evaluates expository preaching texts and analyzes their tendencies to avoid adolescent listeners within their purview. The second chapter evaluates manuals for student ministers dealing with communication to students and identifies their propensity for showmanship or lax exegetical practices. The third chapter identifies current trends in adolescent psychology and studies concerning how students form long-term memory during the early and middle stages of adolescent development. It then identifies classroom strategies which maximize retention and student engagement. The fourth chapter takes the strengths of all three streams and brings them together in an eleven-step sermon methodology from series choice through processing the delivered sermon as a group. The fifth chapter describes the possible long-term and whole-congregational benefits of this practice as teens grow into adult members of their local church.

VITA

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