
What's So Unique about Youth Ministry?

Colossians 1:1-23

Devon Berry

Introduction

I am always thankful for the opportunity to speak about ministry to youth. For two reasons mainly. First, I genuinely enjoy youth ministry and it is gratifying to talk about things you really like. Second, there are so many misconceptions about ministry to this group and any occasion to clear some of those up publicly is welcomed. Tonight, I want to allow the book of Colossians to shape our understanding of ministry in the church and make some specific applications to ministry to youth as we go along.

Colossians, A Little Background

The context for Paul writing the Colossians is a little different than some of his other letters. One of the largest differences is that it appears he has never been to Colossae – he has never met the church that exists there. He likely was nearby on his third missionary journey (Laodicea), but the gospel made its own way 10 or 15 miles down the road from there. An evangelist named Epaphras seems to be one of those primarily responsible for the gospel effort and was closely involved in starting the Colossian church. At the time of writing this letter, the church was probably 5-10 years old and made up of more than a few Gentiles.

The occasion for writing is to address false teachers and false doctrines influencing the church. As part of this argument, Paul interweaves in Chapter 1 the basic foundations of the church which are as much a protective against false doctrine as the specific rebuttals he will make in Chapter 2. I imagine that there was more than a little excitement about receiving this letter – whether it be positive or negative is hard to say. The early church would have been underway long enough now for the Apostle Paul's status and authority to have been clearly established among the Christians of the day. To receive a letter from Paul would have likely been an "event" of some proportion. It is like the distinguished but little known guest who has been invited to a party. When he stands and clears his throat, everyone stops what they are doing and listens. This may be the first and the only time you hear this individual speak directly to you. Every word is important.

Paul takes the opportunity to do more than simply fire off a warning against wrong teaching... The entire letter reminds this young church of who they are – their identity in Christ. These are the kinds of things that *every* church must always be remembering and reinforcing. [Let's Pray]

How Does the Kingdom Expand (vv. 3-8)?

I want you to do an exercise – you have just found out that you are going to be the Chapel's next pastor for youth. Your first ministry moment is about 60 seconds away. You are to be explaining to the body what you will prioritize in the ministry under your leadership. Take a moment and turn to the person next to you and share what first comes to your mind.

With that in mind, let's read **Colossians 1:1-8 [Read]**. You might want to put your finger on the actual text for this next part so you can follow along closely. Paul describes what it is he is thanking God for – first, we see faith in Christ Jesus (v.4), second we see love for all the saints (v.4), and third, we see what is behind their faith and their love, their belief and behavior, **the hope laid up for them in heaven** (v.5). Hmm. What is this hope? Paul explains, **Of this [the hope laid up in heaven] [they] have heard before**. In what way did they hear of it? **In the word of truth, the gospel...** (v.5). What did it do? The same thing it always does – transforms people and expands the kingdom - **bearing fruit and growing...** (v.6). How does that happen? Hearing it (**since the day you heard it**) (v.6), understanding it (**understood the grace of God in truth**) (v.6), and learning it (**just as you learned it**) (v.7). Who did it? God's servant Epaphras. Final result? **Love in the Spirit**.

You can range far and wide in the Scripture, Old and New Testaments, and you will always find the same basic formula – a Word ministry resulting in transformed people. The whole of Colossians is shot through with it – in verse 9 Paul prays that the Colossians would be **filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding**. Where does that knowledge come from? It is not mystical (as you can see later in Colossians). In verse 25 Paul says he became a **minister according to the stewardship from God... to make the word of God fully known**. He goes on in verse 28 to say, **Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ**. To be clear, in the Church, the ministry of the Word, that is the teaching and preaching of the Word, is THE primary means by which God saves and matures his people. Thus in chapter 3 verse 16 Paul says **Let the word of God dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom...**

So, what about youth? How should the church minister to them? Well Pastor Dale established for us in earlier sermons that ministry directly to children (among whom youth are included) is a legitimate exercise in the Church. We know this because children are categorically identified in the church and the church at Colossae is no exception as Paul speaks directly to them in verse 20 of chapter 3. Further, the Lord has put parents in the primary place of responsibility for discipline and instruction (Ephesians 6:4). Because the church is responsible for ministering to adults, of whom many are parents, it must be active about supporting them in their ministry to their children so that they might fulfill the will of God with an ever-increasing level of maturity.

Nowhere does Paul ever single out children or youth for a "kind" of ministry that is fundamentally different than what is intended for the rest of the Church. There is no chapter in the Bible on youth ministry. So why belabor this point? Because, I want to make it emphatically clear to you what the youth of Clearcreek Chapel need and what youth all over the world need, is the ministry of the Word. There may be activities, there may be events, there may even be Flamingos!, But if any of these are allowed to displace the primacy of the Word, we do our youth the greatest disservice. Therefore, in the youth ministry at the Chapel, we are primarily concerned with **making the word of God fully known** (v.25) through the careful and purposeful teaching of the Bible in a developmentally appropriate way.

Yes we canoe, yes we have lock-ins, yes we go tubing, yes we camp out in 40 degree weather... but all of this is geared toward supporting what is ultimately a Word ministry. Why engage youth in dodgeball at 2:00 AM? Because, at 2:00 AM youth leaders are building relationship with youth. Relationship creates the bridge between people upon which ***the word of truth, the gospel***, (v.5) can be carried across interpersonally. We won't spend time illustrating it tonight – but if you don't see relationship functioning as a vehicle for ministry in Colossians, read the book carefully once on Monday and then again on Tuesday and then ask your flock elder on Wednesday to make it clear – Colossians drips with the intersection of relationship and gospel ministry, beginning with verse 2 of chapter 1.

On Sunday mornings the youth ministry works faithfully through a six-year curriculum oriented by four “threads” or organizing concepts: Hermeneutics – Provide instruction and opportunities for the youth to become competent Bible readers. Doctrine – Install systematic knowledge of the Bible's teaching and its application. Family-based – Support parents in their responsibility to biblically nurture and discipline their children. Topical – Orient youth to the wisdom application of Bible teaching in key areas of life. This is the core of the youth ministry. All of our other “goings on” are designed to enhance and support Word ministry.

What Do Kingdom People Do? (vv.9-14).

Paul has given the Colossians a clear picture of how their spiritual birth occurred – almost as a mother or father recounting the events leading up to the moment of a child's delivery. But, now born, what does Paul continue with in his prayer for the Colossians? [***Read Colossians 1:9-14***]. Paul says from the day they heard... of what? Of the faith and love born in God's elect in Colossae - he began to pray. He was praying that the Word ministry we just spoke of – that is how the Colossians gained ***the knowledge of his will*** (v.9) – would yield its fruit through ***wisdom and understanding*** (v.9). Knowledge is not enough, for it alone puffs us up (1 Corinthians 8:1). It dries us up. It does not grow us up. Knowledge must issue forth in a walk, a way of living, that is worthy of the Lord. Fruit must be yielded. Let's pause for a moment.

What Paul is talking about in verses 3-8 is not simply a transfer of information. It is at least that, but it is most definitely not just that. I have no doubt that some of you parents weep in your hearts over your children who can answer every Bible trivia question known to man, explain the substitutionary atonement, define propitiation, and argue about the difference between imputation and infusion but they are neither alive nor maturing in the Lord. It is not enough for the youth ministry or our parental ministry to simply instill knowledge. We must pray for and show to our youth how it is applied in wisdom and understanding – beginning with the repenting from sins and acknowledging Christ as Lord and Savior.

How will we know when our youth are being ***filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding***? ***They will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God*** (v.10). This is simply James 2, ***faith without works is dead*** (James 2:17). As we often say, faith alones saves, but faith is never alone. It is Romans 6, ***Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies... but present... your members to God as instruments for righteousness*** (Romans

6:12-13). It is Mark 4, ***But those that are sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold*** (Mark 4:20).

Hence, beloved, a youth ministry must be committed to preaching and teaching the truth that a gospel that does not transform is no gospel at all. A believer that does not grow, however slow, in godliness may be no believer at all. That kind of talk is very unpopular. It can deeply hurt the feelings of an adult, let alone a youth. It can cause an existential crisis. It can cause an identity crisis. It can make a youth angry. It can make a parent angry. Even so, the lullaby that lulls a youth into a sense of peace with a holy God while long-established patterns of sin and fruitlessness go unchallenged is indeed a damning tune.

The real receiving of the ***word of truth, the gospel***, will, however slowly, be worked out in ***wisdom and understanding*** so as to produce a manner of walking, that is living, that is ***worthy of the Lord***. Some of the hardest, but most significant, conversations I have had with individual youth have been those that directly challenge their claim to faith. Parents, let us not limit this call to examination to the youth. Many parents, perhaps, refuse to have this kind of conversation with their youth only because it forces a question they themselves will not answer: If the gospel be true – then how do I explain the absence of Godward change in my own life?

Before we move on – there is a corollary here – which is what Paul is highlighting in the case of the Colossians. It sounds like this: Because the gospel is true – there will be Godward change. For God's children, this is a sweet morsel and I think it is exactly what Paul is getting at in the last phrase of v.10... ***increasing in the knowledge of God***. Seems kind of circular, does it not? Knowledge of his will, worked out in wisdom and understanding, produces a walk that bears fruit in every good work, making it worthy of, and fully pleasing to, the Lord... leading to more knowledge of God. That is to say, those who walk with the Lord come to know the Lord – we are not talking direct infusion of knowledge here, a mystical experience, or an intuition on steroids – we are talking about a Psalm 37 kind of sureness about who the Lord is and how he operates. Beth and I have the real pleasure of great (though not perfect) harmony in our relationship. How has this come to pass? In part, it is because we know each other – and this kind of knowledge could only have been won through the walking of many days together in all seasons of life. Similarly, we ought to encourage our youth by reminding them that the Lord will mature his children and he will bless them with the sweetest knowledge, that of himself, as they faithfully walk according to his will over the longhaul.

Well, Paul does move on and so must we. He continues to pray in verse 11. He asks that God would give the Colossians power – ***according to his glorious might***. That is quite a bit of power, no? But why? Paul tells us – ***for all endurance and patience with joy giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light***. Clearly, Paul is presuming a few things here. First, that the Colossians are going to experience things that are going to make them want to quit, give up, throw the towel in. Secondly, they are going to experience things that will try their willingness to wait on the Lord, to be calm, to trust. Thirdly, in the midst of these trials, temptations, hardships, and struggles, Paul asks that the Colossians endurance and patience would be characterized by joy and

thanksgiving to God for what is essentially, the gospel – God’s rescuing work of us through Christ.

This combination – endurance, patience, joy, thanksgiving for the gospel – is, what seems to me, an almost unobtainable response to life. How much of your day to day attitudes, desires, and behaviors are characterized by these qualities? In course of difficulty – how much of your day to day attitudes, desires and behaviors are characterized by these qualities? [*Illustrate if time, not just the big things, dinner with the kids*]. Hence Paul prays that we would be strengthened with all power according to this glorious might! That’s because this is what it takes for us live in the manner Paul is praying for. Is it possible? Yes it is – because we have been **delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of his beloved son**(v.13). We have been purchased. Our sins are forgiven. Hope abounds. True life transformation, the kind that marks us off as different from the world, is not a hypothetical, it is a reality for the Christian.

Beloved, trials and difficulty, sin and suffering, will come for believing youth, that is a certainty. All too often a parent’s impulse is to mitigate the circumstances and to comfort or even coddle. While mitigating and comforting *can be* appropriate responses, many times, I am afraid, we seek to dull the sharp edge of the Lord’s scalpel as he does heart surgery on our youth. We inadvertently encourage and approve the half-hearted, quickly quitting, impatient, sad and defeated thanklessness, with nary a gospel thought in view, disposition that our youth can so easily fall into, that we can so easily fall into. Now the call here is not to “be harder on your kids” – that is not the point at all. The point is to help your youth to biblically identify their response to hardship and to challenge them to a **walk in a manner worthy of the Lord** (v.10)! The challenge is not an empty admonishment to “bootstrap it.” It is a bright-eyed hopeful reminder that they have been transferred out of the kingdom of darkness, to the kingdom of Christ, and they have a power that is on par with the might of our mountain-raising, star-throwing, tempest-creating, death-defeating God! This is the God of angel armies! Youth must not stop, we must not stop in our fight to bear fruit in every good work, to love, to be in unity, to sacrifice and deny oneself, to declare the gloriousness of our Savior in life and in word. The believer is never given license to stop striving, in God’s power, for full obedience regardless of circumstances – our godliness is not a contingency arrangement. Hence, in this effort it is not likely we ever arrive at a point where we can declare that we have done all we can because God will never arrive at a point where he declares his power according to its glorious might has done all it can. Grace always abounds for righteousness. And righteousness is continually finding new avenues for expression – it is a gloriously never-ending process.

Thus, a youth ministry must both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We are not adhering to many of the psychological models for healthy development. Our chief concern is not that the youth find themselves. Or find their social network. Or find their career. Or find happiness, at least as the world defines it, though all of these things have their place. We are however, chiefly concerned to see them saved and become the kind of believers who patiently endure with a thanks-giving joy in all circumstances. Or as Paul puts it just several verses later (vv. 22-23) that Christ’s sacrifice be shown by believers to be the glorious act that it is by their continuing **in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the**

hope of the gospel that they have heard. This is the vision for the youth – not spiritual midgetry, but spiritual giantism! Those who will not easily give up or lay down in the pursuit to live out their “transferrance” from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son (v.14).

Who is the King of the Kingdom? (vv. 15-23)

We have discussed how the kingdom expands and what kingdom people do. Along the way we have made some specific applications to the youth ministry. To answer the question – what is so unique about the youth ministry? The answer is simply nothing. The youth of the Chapel, saved and unsaved, baptized and unbaptized, need all the same things that every other group in the Chapel needs... But we have yet to answer the most significant question... who is the King (vv. 15-23)?

I am genuinely thankful for the genre of movie over the past 15 years that has focused on medieval times – although many these movies leave much to be desired, I think it is hard to argue against the fact that they are helpful in shaping our view of what *kingdom* life was like (albeit idealized) – particularly when it comes to the allegiances that were sworn, the awe that was imbued, and the honor that was given to the king. As Russ often points out, it is hard for we Americans to wrap our citizen-minds around this conviction... particularly as the government is shut down! Who would you die for? Who would you fight for? Whose reputation is so pristine, pure, and glorious that you would bow before? Who would you unendingly rejoice to be in the presence of? Of whose valor and might would you sing and shout of? Of whose tenderness, and mercy, and love, would you, in tears of thankfulness, speak of? Who!? If we cannot answer this question in our heart of hearts we cannot answer any question.

Beloved, even with all that has been said tonight, it is still not enough. There is a way to do youth ministry that prioritizes the role of the Word, stands firm on the transforming nature of the gospel, but does not exalt – in everything – the King. The former are necessary, but not sufficient. The person of Christ must be real and central in the midst of youth ministry lest it become a sophisticated form of cultural Christianity where adherence is the savior and displaces kingdom Christianity where Christ is the savior. We must declare and then live out the reality that we serve a living *person* and his name is Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. We do not serve a set of correct doctrines, we do not serve a moral ideal, we serve Christ! And he is King.

Paul leads us into verse 15 reflecting on the kingdom of the beloved Son and his greatest act – redeeming us. In the ESV you will see a subtitle at the head of this paragraph. It uses the word preeminence: the fact of surpassing all others; superiority. [WSU illustration if time] Will you stand with me? Open your Bibles, or look up on the screen, I want you to read with me, aloud, Paul’s most majestic and comprehensive description of the splendor of our King. [Read: Colossians 1:15-20]. [Pray].