

**TGC**

**G O S P E L  
C E N T E R E D  
Y O U T H  
M I N I S T R Y**

**A PRACTICAL GUIDE**

**EDITED BY CAMERON COLE + JON NIELSON**

“Few of us take a trip without some kind of GPS device at our side. We need help navigating the route, the traffic, and the current road conditions, all in an effort to reach our final destination. In humble, authentic and truth-tested ways, *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* provides that level of clarity to those who are passionate about engaging, connecting, and discipling young people within the reach of their calling. With advice anchored in the timeless truth of God’s Word, *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* delivers light to the unlit roads of working with young people. It underscores the priority of this mission, while amplifying the impact that an effective student ministry can have within a church community. Filled with wisdom, light, hope, and guidance, the contributors point to a clear objective—making lifelong followers of Jesus the Christ.”

**Dan Wolgemuth**, President/CEO, Youth for Christ

“This book is both theologically insightful and practical . . . and a book about youth ministry must be both. This is a commendable resource for youth pastors, volunteers, students in training, and search teams looking for a youth pastor.”

**Jay S. Thomas**, Lead Pastor, Chapel Hill Bible Church, Chapel Hill, North Carolina

“We see the lamentable statistics about younger people walking away from the church, despite every attempt over the last couple of generations either to turn up the cool factor or to fight the culture wars—or both. The contributors point to a better way. They have tested their gospel-centered approach and honed and refined it along the way. This book is not only a wake-up call, it is a practical guide for ministry to our younger brothers and sisters. I’ll be recommending this book far and wide.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on the Christian Life*

“You are holding a very helpful, straight-to-the-point examination of the fundamental how-to’s in youth ministry. Covered here are the key areas of successful Christian youth leadership. Broad in scope but sharp in focus, this book will clearly help anyone who strives to have a ministry built on gold rather than straw.”

**Ken Moser**, Assistant Professor of Youth Ministry, Briarcrest College and Seminary; author, *Changing the World through Effective Youth Ministry*

“The contributors to this volume have reflected deeply on the nature and power of the gospel. Drawing from their years of experience, they have given us theologically rich and practical reflections on youth ministry that aim to exalt Christ, strengthen the whole church, and equip teenagers for ministry.”

**Mary Willson**, Associate Director of Women’s Initiatives,  
The Gospel Coalition

“Gospel-centered youth ministry is the need of the hour. It’s rare to find a book that brings together expertise on everything from evangelism to small groups, from mission trips to social justice, but Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson have given us the perfect primer. I’m grateful for this book and look forward to putting it in front of my students!”

**Alvin L. Reid**, Professor of Evangelism and Student Ministry,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *As You Go:  
Creating a Missional Culture of Gospel-Centered Students*

“Here are 14 chapters written by 14 practitioners each with his or her own personality, writing style, and insight. Yet there is one focus—Jesus. For these writers, youth ministry is not only about teaching the teachings of Jesus, although that is important. Youth ministry is about making disciples—life-long learners personally following and growing in Jesus. These chapters are heart-felt and teen sensitive, with a profound respect for the gospel. That, plus a lot of practical insight make this a book worth having in your youth ministry library.”

**Terry Dittmer**, National Director of Youth Ministry for the Lutheran  
Church Missouri Synod

“*Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* is a substantial step in the right direction toward faithful discipleship of students. Not only should anyone in full time, part-time, or volunteer youth ministry purchase this book, but pastors and parents need to pick up a copy as well. Your church will be blessed by it.”

**John Perritt**, Youth Director, Pear Orchard Presbyterian Church,  
Ridgeland, Mississippi

“Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson provide a clear vision of holistic ministry, encouraging and challenging readers to integrate the gospel as the center of their ministry with youth.”

**Brian H. Cosby**, Pastor, Wayside Presbyterian Church, Chattanooga,  
Tennessee; author, *Giving Up Gimmicks: Reclaiming Youth Ministry  
from an Entertainment Culture*

## **Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry**



# **Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry**

*A Practical Guide*

Cameron Cole and  
Jon Nielson, editors

FOREWORD BY COLLIN HANSEN

 **CROSSWAY**  
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*

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Jon Nielson:  
*For my daughter Emilie.*  
*May you know the riches of the glorious*  
*gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ!*

Cameron Cole:  
*To my gospel heroes,*  
*Frank Limehouse*  
*John Harper*  
*Mark Upton*  
*Gil Kracke*  
*Thank you for leading me to the true gospel of grace.*





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# Foreword

Growing up, my family didn't make church a high priority. But I still took two years of confirmation classes and joined the youth group as a freshman in high school. I don't remember a lot of what was taught, and if I did, I'd probably disagree with much of it now. I know in one meeting we watched *The Seventh Sign*, starring Demi Moore, and I'm still confused as to how that movie was supposed to foster spiritual growth.

But one thing I saw in youth group began to change my life forever. For the first time I began to see peers who loved Jesus. I didn't know that was possible, because until then I only knew religion as an empty ritual. These peers introduced me to the crucified and risen Jesus. And I trusted him to forgive my sins and make a way to eternal life by the power of the Holy Spirit in the presence of my heavenly Father.

This experience has made me simultaneously thankful for youth groups and also concerned that they not lose their way. When we're so concerned with keeping the youth entertained or promoting a moral lifestyle, we can easily forget the message of first importance. The apostle Paul explains, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8–9).

In our work at The Gospel Coalition, "We have committed ourselves to invigorating churches with new hope and compelling joy based on the promises received by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." That's why I so eagerly commend *Gospel-*



*Centered Youth Ministry: A Practical Guide.* Over years of publishing these writers' works and watching their local church ministries, I have seen the hope and joy in their students as they receive grace through faith in Christ. What an eternal difference it would make if churches and youth groups around the world caught this vision to put the gospel at the center of their teachings, Bible studies, retreats, small groups, mission trips, and service projects.

Following this vision is simple, but it's not easy. There are many temptations and distractions. Youth workers, often young themselves and lacking ministry experience, get more feedback than counsel. This guide, then, offers an excellent start for any youth worker eager to make much of Jesus and to see students filled with everlasting hope and joy.

*Collin Hansen*  
*Editorial Director*  
*The Gospel Coalition*

# Introduction

Many would say that youth ministry, a relatively young field, concluded its first generation near the turn of the twenty-first century. Experts invested much attention and energy in examining youth ministry's efficacy in forming young disciples with lasting faith. A disturbing dropout rate suggested that churches had failed miserably in their mission with young people.

The second wave of research assessed why the dropout rate among young people soared precipitously. Experts identified problems, including a lack of family involvement and the segregation of students from the multiple generations of the church. No factor appeared more influential, however, than the composite theology of youth ministry, which Christian Smith coined as *moralistic therapeutic deism*.

Smith defined moralist therapeutic deism in this way:

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful.<sup>1</sup>

One will be challenged to find a more direct antithesis and more powerful answer to this theological trend than the gospel of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup>Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 163.

Christ. The gospel proclaims what God has done *for* sinners above the moral performance *of* sinners. The gospel offers an inspiring call to live for God's kingdom, as opposed to living a shallow life focused on self-affirmation and self-centeredness. The gospel speaks of a God who is more than a fallback plan; he is a sovereign, living Lord actively involved with his people.

This book champions the gospel as the core of effective youth ministry. It argues that the message and reality of Christ's victory over sin and death should permeate every single facet of ministry to young people.

The theology sounds like a wonderful idea, but at the end of the day, kids will show up for Bible study and retreats, and we need to be prepared to practice the theology. The authors of this book believe that the gospel has practical implications for the way we conduct all areas of youth ministry.

This book lays out how the gospel relates to the major categories of youth ministry. The first section of each chapter provides philosophical and theological grounding for how the gospel informs a specific category of ministry. Then, each author explains how you can practically implement the gospel theology in that specific area of ministry in such a way that will help you both work out of the power of the cross and also explain to students the gospel purpose behind the activities.

We begin this book with what we consider to be the major foundations of effective youth ministry. These seven foundations include:

1. Gospel centrality
2. Discipleship
3. Expository teaching
4. Relationships
5. Community
6. Partnering with parents
7. Generational integration

Then we offer guidance on four practical elements of youth ministry, including:

1. Small-group Bible study
2. Volunteer training
3. Music
4. Retreats and events

Finally, while the first sections focus on our spiritual formation of students, the last chapters discuss the students' role in the redemptive mission of the church. We offer guidance on leading students in

1. Evangelism
2. Serving the poor
3. Short-term missions

Be encouraged: the work you are doing is important! God has placed you in a pivotal position in his church. We hope that these pages will aid you in leading a ministry that fosters lasting change in the lives of your students and brings light to this dark world.

*Cameron Cole*  
*May 2015*



Part 1

**FOUNDATIONS FOR A  
GOSPEL-CENTERED  
YOUTH MINISTRY**



# The Gospel at the Heart of All Things

*Youth Ministry Founded in the Gospel*

Cameron Cole

What attracts people to ministry to youth? Why are they in this field? Is it the massive salaries? *Probably not*. Is it the promise of feeling impressive when they tell people at family gatherings or high school reunions about their career path? *Unlikely*. Is it easy hours and strict boundaries between work time and personal life? *Not a chance*.

Youth ministry can be a frustrating field of employment and a challenging volunteer calling. According to various studies, the normal tenure of a youth minister at a local church lasts approximately eighteen months.<sup>1</sup> Ministry to youth attracts a diverse collection of

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<sup>1</sup>No comprehensive national survey exists but numerous regional or denominational studies consistently reveal an average tenure between 12–18 or 18–24 months.



people, in terms of personalities and backgrounds, but the motivation behind a person's entry into youth ministry is relatively universal. Certainly, it is not for the money, the status, or the ease. Youth ministers generally work countless hours for third-world pay while often being regarded as adult teenagers. They rarely sleep at night without at least one late-night text from a troubled or overly social teen. Then, after working to the brink of exhaustion much of the time, they field questions from parishioners like, "When you grow up, what do you think you want to do with your life?"

Given the lack of glory associated with ministry to youth and the personal emotional and physical cost of serving youth, a person who stays in the field—either as a volunteer or paid staff member—must see something extraordinarily precious that outweighs every difficulty. Two themes drive our mission and passion for ministry to youth:

We long to see God heal, redeem, and free young people as they trust Jesus personally, and we long to see God birth something beautiful and redemptive in this broken world through their lives as they bear witness to their Savior.

Any person living in relationship with teenagers aches at the commonplace sufferings and intermittent traumas these young people endure. Witnessing the awkward, insecure, acne phases of middle school and the failed fashion experiments of high school makes me cringe. Seeing kids screaming for attention through provocative tweets and Facebook messages breaks my heart. Knowing the loneliness and alienation that comes in these years of self-doubt, religious questioning, and parental conflict causes me to lament. Yet these are the common experiences of almost every teen.

When I consider their exposure to divorce, pornography, drugs, alcohol, death, suicide, and violence, I long for the second coming of Jesus Christ. When I see the world in which these kids live, I begin to say to myself, *They're only children; this is just too much.* When I witness the suffering of teenagers, my passion for youth

ministry explodes because I want their hearts healed. I want them to have hope. My commitment to youth ministry ignites because I know that news of what Jesus has done through his life, death, and resurrection contains the power to set them free. I know that God can bring them alive through faith in his Son.

Furthermore, when I see the world into which these children are headed, I long for redemption. I lament over the widespread addiction, broken sexuality, pervasive corruption, normalized self-absorption, flagrant injustice, unapologetic materialism, chronic depression, and utter despair. While the temptation arises to wallow in hopelessness and accept the status quo, I know that God intends to bring hope to those on earth through the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of his followers. The kids to whom I minister can be witnesses to God's redemption, sources of light, and agents of justice in a fallen, dark, desperate, crooked world. I want them to be people of the kingdom during their time in my ministry and every day after they leave the fold and enter the world. When I remember that, as a minister to youth, I am sitting in the most pivotal, influential position in the world to promote this global movement, I can be nothing but inspired. It's energizing to think of all God can do in the life of a person who lives for Christ and the kingdom from high school and on into college, marriage, family, and career.

I want this work of healing in young people's hearts and this passion for God's redemption in Christ to continue for the rest of their lives. I'm not looking for this to be the "Jesus phase" that they look back on as "cute" or "fun" when they enter their thirties. What a heartbreaking waste of time that would be! While I realize that not all the kids in my ministry will surrender their lives to Christ, I long for the currents of God's work in the kids to flow when they are eighteen, twenty-eight, and seventy-eight.

Given that youth ministry focuses on *lasting redemption*, what catalyzes transformation in the lives of teenagers? Is it close friendships, fun games, moral training, positive role models, community service, or uplifting music? Not really. *Perhaps the most important*

*thing a person ministering to youth can possess is an accurate appraisal of the fundamental problem in both people and the world and a clear understanding of the way God can restore them both.*

## **The Problem and the Solution**

My most influential mentor in my early years of serving in youth ministry impressed upon me an important maxim: “Theology drives methodology.” This is a jargon-filled way of saying that what you do in ministry reflects what you believe.

Perhaps critics of youth ministry have used too much hyperbole and generalization in characterizing the practice of youth ministry. Stereotypically, the practice of youth ministry included entertaining events, lessons on moral behavior, an emphasis on good spiritual habits, and efforts to inspire students toward deeper commitments to God in the context of a group of friends. In playful terms, youth ministry is dodgeball, abstinence, and pep rallies with your buddies in the name of God. While this description is an exaggeration, some truth lies beneath the stereotype. (If you’re starting to roll your eyes and say, “Not this again!” . . . stay with me. There is extremely good news coming.)

Traditionally, youth ministry methodology demonstrated a specific theology about kids’ biggest problem. It suggested that kids lack both proper knowledge about moral Christian living and sufficient motivation to adhere to the standards. The kids would do right if they just knew how to obey God, and if they had consistent reinforcement to “be good Christians.” Therefore, youth ministries functioned to educate students on Christian behavior and exhort kids to live for God. This belief may have manifested itself practically through frequent messages centered on behavior, worship designed to generate emotional responses, and exhortations for increased effort in the pursuit of moral Christian living.

Presently, I think youth ministries are moving away from these methods. Due to the volumes of research suggesting that the moralistic, emotional, entertaining approach to youth ministry has had

little to no efficacy in creating lasting followers of Jesus, many youth pastors have put the dry ice machine in the church attic and toned down the underage drinking speeches. Still, I am not confident that youth ministry as a whole has identified the substance of what God uses to change lives.

The kids of today have the exact same problem as their great-great-great-great-grandparents, Adam and Eve. Humanity has not fundamentally changed since the days of the garden of Eden. Any person ministering to youth can understand the three fundamental issues underlying every teenager's problem with an investigation of Genesis 3. There we find the record of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, in disobedience to God's word. Let's think together about this account for a few moments.

#### Problem 1: Source of Truth

Teenagers lack an accurate understanding of the source of truth. The Serpent's initial act of deceit in Genesis 3:1 comes when he asks, "Did God *actually* say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" God had spoken clearly to Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:17, telling them that eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil will result in death. Eve even acknowledges this. Their downfall begins, however, with this statement in Genesis 3:6: "When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight *to the eyes*." Eve shifts from operating under the authority of what God verbally had revealed to her and now uses her own senses and judgment for her view of morality, herself, and God.

Many times, teenagers express hesitation about God based on the suffering they see in the world. They frequently question his goodness based on disappointments they have experienced in their lives. They often open statements about moral convictions with "I think" and "I feel." Like every other human being, they naturally derive their views on truth through their own experiences and ob-

servations. Rarely would a person confidently consider God good and just if they based their views on their own experience, given the normal pains in life and evils in the world. Would any teenager abstain from sex until marriage if left to his or her own rationality?

The first part of the solution to this fundamental problem involves pointing students to the authoritative sources, Jesus and the Bible, which accurately represent God, man, and truth. Youth ministry hoping to make lasting change needs to constantly hold Jesus up “as the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). Christ-centered ministry moves students toward embracing the goodness and holiness of God. Furthermore, effective ministry bases its lessons and teachings on Scripture. It moves students toward a worldview grounded in the truth God has revealed in the Bible.

#### Problem 2: View of Self

The second problem plaguing all teens is a false view of self. The Serpent sold Adam and Eve the lie that they could “be like God” (Gen. 3:5). After eating from the tree, the first couple demonstrated this distorted belief through their actions, which screamed independence. First, when they realize they have sinned and created damage, the wounded couple takes matters into their own hands by crafting leaves to cover their shame (Gen. 3:7). They did not believe that they needed God; they could handle this problem on their own. Then, when God confronted them about their misdeed, Adam and Eve both shifted blame. Adam says, “That woman made me do it,” and Eve, “It’s the serpent’s fault” (see Gen. 3:11–13). They behaved as if they were above accountability and did not have to answer to God.

The view of the human condition depicted in Scripture is not a pretty picture. Jesus himself referred to his disciples—the cream of the Christian crop—as “evil” in Matthew 7:11. Christ told Nicodemus in John 3:19 that, “people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.” In Romans, Paul said that all “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). The

prophet Jeremiah took it to another level, saying that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Wow! This is brutal news.

Before things become too depressing, we must remember that human depravity, although deep, has simple roots: humans think they can be God. Teenagers, like all people, naturally believe they can live their lives, independent of God and without his help. Effective youth ministry does not need to beat teenagers over the head about their “wickedness.” It simply needs to inform and remind students that they are made to live in a dependent relationship with God, and that they naturally defy this need. It must help them understand that all of their sin originates from attempting to be the lord in their own lives, rather than allowing Jesus to be their King. But let’s be frank: sugarcoating the reality of human sin is a major disservice to kids. It’s like telling a person diagnosed with cancer that it is only a cold.

### Problem 3: View of God

Finally, the third issue plaguing all teens is a false view of God. The Serpent created seeds of doubt in Adam and Eve when he told them that God was lying—they would not surely die by eating from the tree (Gen. 3:4). Then he led them to believe that God was holding out on them, because he knew that they would be “like God” if they ate the fruit (Gen. 3:5). The Serpent portrayed God as a liar who withholds goodness from his children. Adam and Eve took the bait and ate from the tree. After their fatal deed, they demonstrated their new theology in the way they reacted to God’s entrance into the garden. What did they do? They ran and hid, and then they lied. Their behavior exhibited their belief that God was one who would not forgive and whom they could not trust. God was bad according to this new “theology.”

Perhaps the most important element of effective youth ministry, then, is proclaiming the goodness and love of God. No teenager will entrust his or her life to a person they cannot trust. However,

who can resist trusting and knowing the *true* God of the Bible? He is “slow to anger and . . . forgiving” (Num. 14:18). He “waits to be gracious . . . and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy” (Isa. 30:18). His works are perfect and he is without flaw (Deut. 32:4). God is the One who teenagers can cast their cares upon because he cares for each one of them (1 Pet. 5:7). Knowing the true character of God heals the teenage heart, as young people see his love poured out at the cross of Jesus.

The problem of every teenager runs incredibly deep. The false beliefs that underlie their sin and suffering are deeply ingrained in their hearts from birth. Thinking that morals and motivational speeches will fix this problem is like believing a Band-Aid will heal a broken leg or that aspirin will cure cancer. Teenagers need a total overhaul of their belief systems. Above all, teenagers, like every person, need God to rescue, revive, and re-create them, as they repent of sin and entrust their lives to Jesus as Savior and Lord.

### **The Change Agent**

Youth ministry seeking lasting changes must flow out of the theology of the cross. The cross presents a picture of a just, loving, and revealed God. Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, bears the full punishment for the sins of God’s people in their place, in order to bring salvation.

God does not remain hidden. He exposes himself fully in the crucified Christ, whom we learn of through his Word, the Bible. He reveals himself as one in love with his people in his incarnation and through the holy inspired Word.

The cross tells honestly the depth of man’s problem with sin. Man’s sin issue is so deep that God himself would have to leave heaven, endure torture on a cross, and experience eternal judgment to fix it. That’s not a skinned-knee-level problem; that’s an issue of epic proportions. It is a problem only fixed by the power of God, not by the best efforts of people.

Finally, the cross sings the song of the immeasurable love of

God. His love for man is so great and passionate that he, in fact, would leave paradise to endure such suffering for his beloved people. He would take on hell to rescue his people from it. The cross is the most passionate, determined love story of all time.

This theology of the cross captures what Christians refer to as the gospel. In Greek, *gospel* means “good news” and, in the original cultural context, often referred to a comforting announcement of victory in either battle or politics. While many people define the gospel in various ways, these definitions generally revolve around God’s victory over sin and death in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This victory not only redeems sinful people who put their faith in Jesus, but it also extends to God’s broader work of restoring the fallen world through the Holy Spirit—a restoration that one day will be completed in God’s creation of a new heaven and new earth.

The reason the authors of this book consider gospel centrality so critical to youth ministry is that it addresses the heart of students—their true problems and their greatest eternal potential. Rules, motivational speeches, fun, and friends have no power to heal hearts and revive lives like the good news of Christ’s completed work. When we take ministry back to the gospel, we are connecting students with the power of Jesus’s cross and resurrection. God can accomplish the purpose of ministry to youth (*lasting change*) through the gospel as they believe in Jesus and follow him forever.

Given that this book focuses on connecting all facets of youth ministry to the gospel, I want to conclude this chapter by sharing personal stories that shed light on the practical implications of the gospel and express some of the passion fueling these pages. Too often “gospel people” (myself included) use the term flippantly without describing its concrete applications in life and ministry. Furthermore, we fail to define what aspects of the gospel we are referring to when discussing it.

In these final three sections of the chapter, I describe three aspects related to the gospel: (1) the gospel and salvation, (2) the gospel and grace, and (3) the gospel and redemption. I have seen



God redeem, heal, free, inspire, and comfort me through the gospel. He has brought life and fruit to my ministry that I never thought possible. I hope these stories and explanations will encourage and awaken readers to the rich possibilities of what God can do through the gospel, in a way that will breed hope, faith, and worship to Jesus.

## **The Gospel and Salvation**

While my passion for sharing the gospel began at a Disciple Now weekend at First Baptist Church of Birmingham in January 1993, it climaxed in a children's hospital resuscitation room on November 11, 2013. On that morning, my wife called me in utter panic to share the horror that our three-year-old son, Cam, had stopped breathing and had no pulse when she checked on him in his bed that morning. I raced from a youth campout to a children's hospital in time for the doctors to tell us they had exhausted all efforts: our baby boy was dead.

As we went to the resuscitation room to see our son for the last time, my wife, Lauren, and I recalled our conversation with Cam the previous afternoon. Cam told us that he wanted to go "visit" Jesus, and he suggested that we hop in the car. We explained to Cam that Jesus was with us now in the Holy Spirit and that we would see Jesus face-to-face when God called us to heaven. He, with a supernatural focus in his eyes, then asked, "Will I see Adam and Eve in heaven?" (Pretty impressive for a three-year-old.) Lauren and I discussed and told Cam that, indeed, God appeared to forgive Adam and Eve's sin in Genesis 3. Cam replied, "I'm not going to eat that apple. I not eat from that tree." I told Cam that everyone "eats from the tree" and disobeys God; that's why Jesus came. Cam ended this conversation by saying, "Jesus died on cross, Jesus died my sins." The next morning, Cam passed into God's kingdom.

While the pain of losing a child is inconceivable, what an incredible comfort my wife and I have in knowing that our son professed faith in Jesus and his work on the cross—the day before his death.

My wife and I can live with the certain hope of our reunion with Cam in heaven. While I have had a passion for proclamation of the gospel of salvation since the seventh grade, never has its beauty and power been so real or palpable as the day we said good-bye to Cam.

In discussing the gospel of salvation, I refer to the message that God sent Jesus into the world to live perfectly and die on a cross for sinners, and rise again for their eternal life, in order that those who receive Christ by faith may live eternally in heaven with God. The gospel of salvation points to the historic, complete, atoning work of Jesus and the mandate to spread this word of good news.

The proclamation of the gospel of salvation constitutes one of the most pivotal functions of youth ministry. So often in youth ministry, we can become enchanted with good, but not ultimate, matters. Missional living, social justice, and Christian community all represent wonderful things that I desire students in my ministry to embrace. At the same time, we never should neglect the essential duty and blessed opportunity of making students aware of their need for salvation and offering Jesus as the certain comfort and solution to the only A-list problem life presents: What will happen to people when they die?

When we approach ministry to youth with this biblical clarity, the stakes are raised and our vocation takes on substantial meaning. Our work involves the eternal condition of the souls of the precious students whom God has shared with us. Regardless of the impression society may have of a youth minister, we know that we engage in serious business each day. We may visit amusement parks, play lots of Frisbee, and send thousands of texts per month, but do not be mistaken: when a youth worker or volunteer focuses on the gospel of salvation, his or her time addresses the single most critical matter in any person's life.

Ministry to youth with the gospel at the center means we frequently take the opportunity to proclaim the good news of salvation through Christ. We pray fervently that the Holy Spirit will work in the hearts of our students. We equip volunteer leaders and

students to share the gospel in their world. We go out into the world—including our cities and foreign lands—and proclaim Christ by word and deed.

## **The Gospel and Grace**

While I finished high school with a developed theology for the gospel of salvation, I had no concept of the gospel of grace. My general theology revolved around accepting Jesus for salvation, sharing Christ with others, and then trying really, really hard for God out of my own strength, using Jesus as my role model. In fact, even though I started following Jesus in the third grade, I had to look up the definition of “grace” in a dictionary, while writing a paper during my third year of college at Wake Forest.<sup>2</sup>

My personal theology translated into a life of performance—an exhausting treadmill. As a senior in high school, I took five AP classes, taught myself an additional AP course, attended eight swim practices per week, wrote for the newspaper staff, served on the state board of the Key Club, and held offices as vice president of the student body and vice president of the Honor Society. College was no different. I finished Wake Forest (often referred to as “Work Forest”) as a double major in three years, while starting a *de facto* nonprofit. I completed a master’s degree during my fourth year.

No one would be surprised to discover that this exhausting pace wreaked havoc on my mental health. While teaching in inner-city Charlotte during my first year out of graduate school, I started to have problems with short-term memory. I lost my keys daily and often forgot my train of thought midsentence. Then I experienced trouble sleeping. The problem escalated when a phobic dread of returning to the school would set in as soon as I left the campus each evening.

I scheduled a meeting with my pastor, Mark Upton, of Hope Community Church, to discuss my turmoil. Mark informed me

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<sup>2</sup>I think I should note that my youth ministers talked about unconditional love a great deal; the words simply did not land in my heart until my early twenties.

that I had two major problems. First, he said that the catalogue of symptoms I described sounded like the precursors of a nervous breakdown. He said that I needed to consult a physician and seriously consider resigning from my job.

The second issue, he said, was that I did not know the gospel of grace. He did not doubt my salvation or sincerity as a follower of Jesus. He told me these words that changed my life forever:

The gospel is rest. The gospel means Jesus carries the burden of your life. The gospel means you will never have to prove yourself again, because Jesus has proven you on the cross.

He explained that the same dynamic truth underlying my salvation—my need to rely on God for grace and God’s amazing generosity—extended to all facets of my life. Growing in Christ meant growing in the understanding of my powerlessness as a sinner and increasing in the practice of seeking God’s help for everything.

At the end of the meeting, we prayed about whether I should quit my job. Two days later I had a panic attack, which resulted in my inability to speak for four weeks or to read for eight weeks straight. Needless to say, I resigned. I spiraled into a deep depression for six months, but it was wonderful because I discovered freedom through the gospel like never before. God began to heal me through the message of his grace and love.

When we refer to the gospel of grace in this book, we refer to the good news that Jesus’s death on the cross does not simply seal sinners for eternal life in heaven (although it certainly does do that for those who trust him as Savior and Lord and repent of sin), but also extends to all areas of a Christian’s life. Consequently, sanctification involves a person becoming more like Christ—not only through daily repentance—but ultimately through the work of the Holy Spirit and through increased dependence on God’s grace in every category of life.

Perhaps the greatest flaw in youth ministry is the historic absence of the gospel of grace. Ministry to youth ordinarily has preached

salvation well. However, after students become believers, too often the dynamic shifts to one of moralism with the primary focus centering on sexual purity, underage drinking, and general “niceness.” Too often I encounter burned out former church kids who walked away from years in youth ministry with an understanding of Christianity as simply another avenue by which one can try to be a good person. The burden of performance broke their backs and damaged their faith. What a tragedy!

Good secular organizations, like the Boy Scouts, sports teams, and public schools, encourage moral performance and character building. Christian youth workers need to understand that our unique asset in seeing lives changed is the gospel of grace. When teenagers grasp that God loves them perfectly and permanently in spite of their sins, there is great hope of transformation. When a kid adopts a gospel rhythm of life, whereby he or she sees the need for God and depends on his grace, God can bring immeasurable healing, freedom, and fruit. The gospel of grace must appear over and over again in our teaching and discipleship of young people.

### **The Gospel and Redemption**

In 2006 I took a dozen students to New Orleans in the months following Hurricane Katrina. On the first evening, we drove into the Lower Ninth Ward, the area of most dire devastation from the epic storm. Silence and tears filled the van during the drive through the abandoned neighborhood. Neither the kids nor the adult leaders could fathom the destruction or the despair.

The next morning I attended the pastors’ meeting, where over sixty leaders from around the country received marching orders and offered fervent prayers. Our group was working alongside over twelve hundred adults and teenagers who had descended on the city for the sake of seeing New Orleans revived after the hurricane. As we drove to our work site, where we would be demolishing the moldy interior of a widow’s home, we called the homeowner. She had been relocated to a government nursing home in Oklahoma

after the storm and awaited volunteers to clear the moldy contents of her home, which had sat under seven feet of water during the storm. Her glee in hearing that help had arrived inspired our students.

As I entered the house that first morning, several students and I immediately vomited because of the appalling smell in the home, which had sat closed up for months with festering mold. The ministry called us to remove everything within the home until nothing remained but the concrete slab, the roof, and the studs. All furniture, carpet, Sheetrock, and insulation had to go, so that new construction could begin. The kids put on their masks and goggles and worked tirelessly in the oppressive summer heat for three days. Each morning and evening the kids would call the sweet widow to let her know of the progress. With each hour of work, the waste was removed and the offensive smell reduced until the final day when the odor had been eradicated.

The inspiring project broadened my understanding of the gospel. In response to their appreciation for Jesus, our students loved this elderly woman whom they talked to on the phone each day. Along with dozens of other groups in the neighborhood, our kids dove into the darkness and decay and brought light and life. They were witnessing God redeem this home, this woman's life, and this city.

The smell told the whole story. When we arrived, there was a smell of death and decay. Through this mission God made the home clean again. It was a tangible portrait of transformational work God does, not only in the hearts of his people, but also in the world. This service itself is not the gospel per se, but it reflected the broader redemption God is doing in the world through Christ. The students' response to the gospel, in serving this woman, bore witness to the eternal redemption that their Savior brings to lost and broken lives.

Scripture speaks of a total, cosmic work that flows out of the cross. In Ephesians 1, Paul tells of the will and purpose of God "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10). Paul writes again in Colossians 1 that God purposed

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