

COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TOWARD THEOLOGY OF YOUTH MINISTRY: HOW TO UNDERSTAND THEOLOGY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Dr. Young Woon Lee¹

INTRODUCTION

Many scholars in the field of Christian education have recently used the term and the concept of youth ministry theology in the United States, but the same cannot be said regarding ministry involving youth among Asian countries, particularly Korea.

This article introduces and explores the use of terminologies related to youth ministry theology in order to assist youth pastors, youth workers, and youth leaders to nurture their youths in their respective Asian countries. This article also provides foundations for youth workers in developing their own theology of youth ministry in an Asian church.

UNDERSTANDING OF TERMINOLOGIES RELATED TO THEOLOGY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Theology

Jack L. Seymour and Donald E. Miller (1990), in their book *Theological Approach to Christian Education*, define theology as reflection by the people of God within the community of faith, seeking to understand and respond to what it means to be accepted, sent, and called by God into the brokenness of the world (p. 24).

According to Klaus Issler (2001), theology is the study of God—who God is and what He has provided for His creation, both now and

¹Dr. Young Woon Lee is Associate Professor of Christian Education at Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology and an ordained minister. Dr. Lee is the founder and director of Korea Educational Ministries (KEM/<http://www.ceducational.com>, which helps pastors and church leaders develop educational ministries in their churches with a broader educational perspective. KEM also provides teacher training, ministry consultation, and cyber-church aids for local church pastors.

forever. For Warren Benson (1987), “theology denotes a system of beliefs about God, human nature, the world, the church, and other related topics formulated to enable Christians to comprehend and make sense of their faith”(pp.17-18). Benson believes that theology has answered such questions as: What is the nature of humankind? What is the purpose for living? Kenda Creasy Dean (2001) sees theology as human reflection on who God is and how God works in the world. He defines *historical theology* as reflection on the historic texts of the Christian faith, such as the Bible, doctrinal documents, creeds, and confessions, *systematic theology* as reflection on general themes found throughout Christian tradition, especially church teachings, i.e., doctrines; and *practical theology* as reflection on how God works in Christian action, in order to set forth norms and strategies for practices that faithfully participate in God’s transformation of the church and the world.

Theology is thus the study of God, who and what God is, and of God’s work as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Youth

In numerous cases youth, adolescents, teenagers, high school students, and young people are used interchangeably as terms to describe the students of a particular age group. Ratcliff and Davies (1991) define adolescents as “individuals between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, basically the teenage years” (p. 1). They define youth by age group. Jonathan C. Grenz (2001) identifies youth as individuals in junior high and high school (7th to 12th grades). In some communities, (and churches), middle school students are considered youth. Typically youth are between the ages of twelve and eighteen. “These individuals might attend church or not attend church” (p. 9). Grenz expands the age from twelve rather than thirteen.

Borgman (1997) uses the terms youth, adolescents, teenagers, and young people interchangeably referring to that age group between childhood and adulthood. Most of what is written in his book, *When Kumbaya Is Not Enough: A Practical Theology for Youth Ministry*, considers junior high through college students with particular focus on teenagers in their high school years (p. x).

Kenda Creasy Dean (2001) describes a youth as any young person between the onset of puberty and fully individuated adulthood.

Interestingly, Chap Clark (2001) employs the term adolescence instead of youth, and distinguishes “adolescence as the period from puberty to adulthood or maturity” (p. 44). Based on this concept of youth by age rather than school period, he expands the range of youth, which is getting wider than in the past (see the two figures below). Clark points out “the changes in the timing of the process of adolescence” (p. 51).

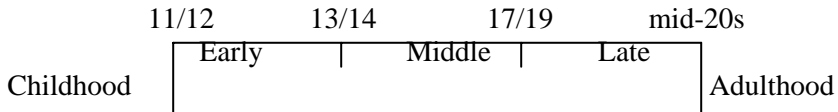


Figure 1. Tightrope of adolescence (p. 50)

Clark also points out the remarkable fact that the adolescent journey has significantly lengthened over the years (Figure 2).

Years	Age entering Adolescence/puberty	Age entering Adulthood
Pre-1900	14	16/18
1960-1970	13	18/19
2000	11/12	mid to late 20s

Figure 2. The changing face of adolescence (p. 52)

In both Korea and America, youth ministry commonly refers to junior high and senior high students. Thus, the operational definition of youth adopted in this article includes individuals attending junior and senior high school. In America, generally, junior high means the seventh and eighth grades while senior high refers to the ninth through twelfth grades. Korean, however, divides into middle school instead of junior high, which includes seventh through ninth grades, and high school, which involves tenth through twelfth grades.

Youth Ministry

Mark Senter (1987) perceives youth ministry as “adults whose primary desire is to disciple students in their Christian faith” (p. 202). According to this definition, youth ministry is not bound by particular

contexts. It could occur as an agency of the local church or denomination, or it could even occur outside such institutions or entities. On the other hand, McKenzie (1997) defines youth ministry as “the intentional ministry of the church established for junior high and high school aged persons” (p. 10). Ronald D. Martinson (1988) characterizes youth ministry as (1) worship, (2) witness, (3) teaching, (4) communion, and (5) service. David Ng (1984) stresses that youth ministry is not about merely fellowship, maintenance, entertainment, and protection; rather, it focuses on *discipleship* (p. 14). Nishioka (2003) echoes Ng when he stated that youth ministry is discipleship by taking up the cross and following Jesus Christ (p. 43).

Lamport (1996) explains that “youth ministry is the purposive, determined, and persistent quest by both natural and supernatural means to expose, transmit, or otherwise share with adolescents God’s message of good news, which is central to the Christian faith. Its ultimate end is to cultivate a life transformation of youth by the power of the Holy Spirit that they might be conformed to the revealed will of God as expressed in Scripture, and chiefly in the person of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ” (p. 62).

Some mission-minded people observe youth ministry as a mission of a church, especially a bi-cultural mission, because many youths are in a bi-cultural environment at home and at church, and are caught in between a traditional culture (parents’ culture) and their culture (i.e., the western culture). Thus, youth ministry in this context must be bi-cultural. Because youths are changing continually, youth ministry must also evolve and develop to meet the growing needs of today’s young people.

In some countries, youth ministry is misunderstood as church activities, events, or programs provided for youth. Unfortunate as it may seem, for many years youth ministry has been envisioned as a means to provide a safe play ground (so that youth may stay out of trouble). Therefore, although few would be willing to admit it, the basic philosophy behind youth ministry was to keep young people busy and safe (i.e., babysit them) while adults do their “religious things.” This view was common among pastors and even many youth workers themselves. In short, the first key criterion on which a youth pastor was judged was based on how many students he could hold in a church without disturbing the adult ministry.

HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE USE OF THE TERM “THEOLOGY” IN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION AND IN YOUTH MINISTRY

Christian Education

In 1847, Horace Bushnell (1802-1876) wrote an epochal book for the theology of Christian education, *Christian Nurture*, in order to stand against the revivalism movement, which emphasized conversion over nurture. Bushnell is seen as the “father of modern religious education²” (Gangel & Benson, 1987, p. 277) from the evangelical side while simultaneously seen as the “American Schleiermacher” and the “father of American liberalism” from the liberal side (Inbody, p. 15). Bushnell was the first and the most creative theologian³ from the New England Puritan tradition during the nineteenth century. Even though, Bushnell did not use the term “theology of Christian education,” he is known as the first Christian education theologian in the Christian education arena. In many ways, Bushnell’s writing served as the historical turning point from a non-academic period to an academic era.

In 1959, Paul Tillich first began using the term “a theology of education” (chapter 11) in his book, *Theology of Culture*. Following Tillich’s use of this term, Nels Ferre in 1967 became the first scholar to use the term “theology for Christian education” by writing a book, *A Theology for Christian Education*. The book in its entirety dealt with a theology for Christian education. Ferre attempted to integrate educational theory and systematic theology for Christian education, which also included topics such as methodological considerations and a theology for Christian education.

Lawrence O. Richards used a different term “theology of Christian education” in his 1975 book, *A Theology of Christian Education*. Furthermore, Randolph Crump Miller (1992, 1995) introduced many terms and concepts of religious education.⁴ In his book, *Empirical*

²During Bushnell’s life, nobody used the term Christian education.

³Bushnell introduced his theology of religious education with his famous thesis “the child is to grow up a Christian and never know himself as being otherwise” in his book, *Christian Nurture*. The central idea of his Christian nurture theology was that the children of believers were to be considered as different from the children of unbelievers.

⁴Generally speaking, the term “Christian education” is used mostly by evangelicals while “religious education” is used predominantly by the liberal side of the Christian community.

Theology: A Handbook, based on a background of radical empiricism, pragmatism, and pluralism. Miller observed the beginnings of John Locke's empirical theology and other early empirical philosophies. In the introduction to his book *Theologies of Religious Education*, he categorizes a number of varying educational theologies into three major groups: church theologies, philosophical theologies, and special theologies. Miller puts all traditional theologies into church theology—Reformed theology, Thomistic theology, Evangelical theology, and Orthodox theology. Miller's identification with the philosophical theologies included process theology, empirical theology, and existential theology. Lastly, special theologies, otherwise known as modern theologies, included feminist theology, kerygmatic theology, narrative theology, liberation theology, black theology, and ecological theology. Miller's division seems to follow and chronicle the theologies in order of development.

Tyron Inbody (1992) states that empirical theology is a type of liberal theology and that "its historical roots are embedded in the Protestant revolt against tradition and institutional authority" (p.11). Inbody perceives that "all empirical theologians are naturalist in the sense that they believe this world alone is the locus of purpose and value . . . rational in the sense of that they appeal to autonomous individual or social experience in contrast to the formal external authority" (p. 11). Miller, nonetheless, sought to integrate empiricism and Christian education despite Inbody's sharp observation that empirical theology is deeply rooted in the liberal theological framework.

In 1996, Jeff Astely, Leslie J. Frances, and Colin Crowder edited an educational theology book entitled *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education*. Even though the editors of this book use different terms such as Christian formation or Christian education, they point out the Bible and the church as the bases for theological foundations. They, however, show their liberal perspectives on the theological approaches toward Christian education by the inclusion of liberation theology and feminist theology in their work, while no evangelical scholars accept these as aspects of their Christian education. The contributors of this book were identified as mainly liberal scholars in the field of religious education.

In 2001, Bert Roebben and Michael Warren edited *Religious Education as Practical Theology* in order to honor the Belgian religious educationalist, Herman Lombaerts. This book is a collection of essays

written by scholars from the Western cultural perspective, namely from Europe, the United States, and Australia. Editors of this book simply saw religious education as a practical theology. Despite what was claimed in their book, the co-authors failed to provide articles relevant to the so-called “practical” theology. Instead, it was disappointing that their writing was limited to theoretical and theological elements in relation to religious education. Even so, their act of defining religious education as a function of practical theology is notable in itself.

Youth Ministry

Borgman (1997) coined several new terms in developing theology for youth ministry: “contextualizing theology” for doing theology on young people’s turf; “theology of growth and development” for the universal goals of growth and development; “theology of pop culture and its art”; “theology of humor”; and “theology of music, theology of sexuality, theology with heart and hands” (pp. vii-viii).

In 2001, Kenda Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn edited the youth book, *Starting Right*, in order to help youth workers to think theologically about youth ministry. They warn about the danger of having a youth ministry that does not have a sound and solid theological foundation. They compare this ministry to no more than beach ministry—that is, ministry with young people whose foundations are feebly anchored in beach sand: “gangbusters one day, gone the next, this ministry just couldn’t weather storms of conflict or the wet blankets of indifference” (p. 15). Then, they explore the theological framework for youth ministry with “Repentance, Grace, Redemption, and Hope.” Further, Kenda Dean explores the theological view of human development as the changing face of adolescence, the theological use of culture as growing up postmodern, and the theological framework for youth ministry: repentance, grace, redemption, and hope.

ISSUES AMONG YOUTH MINISTRY SCHOLARS AND YOUTH WORKERS

Dean Borgman (1997), a professor of Christian education at Gordon Conwell, mentions a few areas of concern—e.g., differentiation between “a theology of youth” and “a theology of youth ministry,” the

possibility of use of theological terms for different fields in youth ministry, and encouragement for youth workers to become practical theologians.

Brogman states, “This book is not a theology of youth; it is a theology of youth ministry. . . . this work is not a popular theology of culture” (p. xi). He implies that he is trying to differentiate “theology of youth ministry” from “theology of youth.” According to his view, a theology of youth is a “theological reflection on the youth culture” (p. viii) whereas, “theology of youth ministry or of popular culture does think about God’s views and activity from within the youth culture and popular culture” (p. xi).

The second concern is the use of several new terms of theology such as theology of culture, theology of growth and development, theology of family and peers, theology of pop culture and its art, theology of humor, theology of music, theology of sexuality, and theology with heart and hands—i.e., living out the whole theology. Borgman defines contextualizing theology as “doing theology on young people’s turf.” He seems to have developed new terms for youth ministry theology. Due to his usage of multiple theologies, a question can be raised as to the applicability of the use of theological terms in other fields? In other words, can any field claim to be subjects of theology?

The third concern for Borgman is his strong encouragement of youth workers to become practical theologians:

You may not be a systematic, biblical, or historical theologian, but if you are reflecting seriously about God in your work you are already a practical or pastoral theologian. Your calling and work demand that you think carefully about God in reference to human growth and cultural dynamics. You are constantly seeing God in the lives of young friends. From this observation should come a theology of popular culture and youth ministries.

Thinking about God’s Word in a troubled world and considering what the gospel is saying to today’s youth culture is theological reflection. To ask what God is about in John’s or Maria’s or Yung Lee’s life is to do theology. As a youth minister, you are a practical theologian. You have insights needed in theological circles, and you are in need of consultations with others in your field. This book is intended to aid you in your theologizing” (pp. xi-xii).

In the introductory chapter, “Overview of Theology and Ministry,” Borgman also raises several issues. He sees that theological settings need to be based on the cultural context and communal dimension: First, theological style must be (1) compassionate, (2) narrative, (3) Christocentric, (4) God-inspired, and (5) incarnational model. Second,

for a theological process, theology and ministry need to be integrated as well as concerned about interdependence. Third, theological integrity must include (1) test of authenticity, (2) holistic exegesis, and (3) faithful hermeneutics. Fourth, theological perspectives must contain (1) personal stories, (2) critical perspectives, (3) socioeconomics of the community, and (4) deeper insight. Last, theology of Christian care needs to consider (1) human needs and family, (2) socialization and nurture, and (3) ministry of Christian care and empowerment (pp. xii-x).

Pete Ward (1999), in chapter two, "A Theology of Youth Ministry" in his book, *God at the Mall*, differentiates a theology of youth ministry from a theology of young people in the following manner:

There is a difference between a theology of youth ministry and a theology of young people. A theology of young people is based upon the insights, culture, and voices of particular group of young people. It is when groups of young people begin to speak of their encounter with God that a theology which is "indigenous" to them begins to emerge. A theology of youth ministry on the other hand seeks to demonstrate how our understanding of God shapes and influences the practice of youth ministry (p. 33).

Ward shows a new and an excellent youth ministry theology, by interpreting youth ministry as the "Mission of God" (p. 33). His youth ministry theology sees the Christian gospel as the story of a missionary God. He interprets several youth ministry issues with the theology of "mission of God" as youth ministry theology. Ward deals with such issues as (1) the incarnation and the cross, (2) redemption and repentance, (3) transcendence and immanence, (4) the hope of the kingdom, and (5) the work of the Holy Spirit as the various parts of the mission of God.

In his book, *Called to Care*, Doug Stevens (1985) seeks to connect a systematic theology toward a practical theology, and incarnation theology toward youth ministry theology. Stevens claims that the incarnation is the model for youth ministry. For him, the doctrine of "incarnation" is the theology of ministry. Under his interpretation of incarnation, Stevens specifies that gaining a more complete understanding of the nature of ministry, i.e., the incarnational model of youth ministry, needs to manifest involvement, appreciation, secret, healing, strategy, support, motive, and cost. He seems to interpret that youth ministry needs someone who is willing and able to become one of the youth, be with them, and finally to care for them.

Black Wesley (1991) raises only functional issues of youth ministry theology. Wesley sees that solid bedrock of biblical theology

is the foundation of youth ministry. Wesley claims that a theology for youth ministry must have the following theological building blocks as the key elements of a solid foundation for youth ministry: (1) a biblical focus, (2) grounded in God, (3) people rightly related to God, (4) the church as the basic unit of ministry, (5) recognition of developmental processes, (6) parents responsible for religious training, (7) youth leaders called to minister, (8) an understanding of God's call to specific ministry with youth, (9) youth involvement in ministry, and (10) purposeful youth ministry (pp. 13-19). For Wesley, theology of youth ministry is biblical theology.

Ronald. D. Martinson (1988) points out "the message" as the key foundation of youth ministry. He says that "a theological foundation for youth ministry can be grounded in the central message of the Scripture and the Christian faith (p. 19). For Martinson, this message can be issued forth in mission and ministry, because this message is empowered by God's life-giving life in Jesus Christ—i.e., the incarnation, the Living Word. The message, thus, needs to flow into mission (Mt 28:19-20), and mission needs to flow into ministry. Because of his perspective of youth ministry as worship, witness, teaching, communion, and service, "the message" must be the key foundation of theology of youth ministry.

Kenda Dean (2001), while criticizing the so-called "beach ministries" addresses the same issue—that is, questioning the function of youth ministry theology, namely "theological rocks." In order to develop a solid theology of youth ministry, Dean suggests four tasks of practical theological reflection: (1) Understand—what's going on? (2) Reflect—what are we doing? (3) Detect and Evaluate—how well are we doing it by God standards? (4) Project—how can we do it better? These four tasks must be recycled (pp. 26, 36-39).

Warren S. Benson (1987), in his article "A Theology of Youth Ministry," raises several issues on youth ministry theology. Using Mark Senter's "rationale for youth ministry," Benson raises the basic question of "theology or philosophy?" and relates theology to educational philosophy. For him, theology of youth ministry guides the educational philosophy; however, he sees the Scripture as the authoritative base, the incarnation as the model for youth ministry (pp. 16-28). Benson claims that youth workers need to keep the balance between theological content and praxis.

CONSIDERATION FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PERSONAL THEOLOGY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Since this article is to help youth workers in the Asian countries, many of above resources may not be helpful in developing their own theologies of youth ministry due to varying degrees of cultural and social components. This author seeks to provide a variety of elements of a theology of youth ministry that are applicable and adaptable in Asian culture. In Western culture, youth ministry is not often considered an outreach towards youth. Whereas Western scholars and youth workers tend to focus on discipleship and Christian life, the Asian contexts often interpret youth ministry as a major outreach ministry among youth groups.

Choice of Definition of Youth Ministry

Depending on the personal choice of definition of what youth ministry is, not only can youth ministry be changed, but also the theology of youth ministry may be changed. The following lists are possible items considering personal definition of youth ministry: fellowship, entertainment, maintenance, protection, teaching, training, education, edification, indoctrination, discipleship, outreach, evangelism, mission, religious socialization, enculturalization, transformation, nurture, helping to live a Christian life, and so on. Youth workers will need to exploit these key ideas to form and adapt their own youth ministry and theology by using the following resources in order to cultivate in-depth development.

Resources of Youth Ministry Theology

The following list contains helpful resources for the development of a personal theology of youth ministry:

- *The Bible as the final and ultimate authoritative foundation
- *Youth as the subjects of youth ministry
- *Human development as growing and changing (physically, socially, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually)
- *Culture as the context in which youth workers minister with youth
- *Church as the context in which youths will grow
- *Denominational doctrine and tradition

For instance, concerning this latter item, the author's denomination—i.e., Korean Evangelical Holiness Church—holds to the fourfold gospel: (1) Regeneration (Born Again), Jesus Christ as the Savior; (2) Holiness, Jesus Christ as the Sanctifier; (3) Healing, Jesus Christ as the Servant; and (4) Second Coming, Jesus as the Coming King.

Content of Youth Ministry Theology

As this article explored earlier, several scholars (Benson, 1986; Dunn, 1998; Ferre, 1968; Gangel, 1968; Issler, 2001; Pazmino, 1996) have selected a broad range of contents as the suitable topics for Christian education or youth ministry. Most of them, however, have followed an order of systematic theological framework. This author, thus, believes that the following contents are appropriate for youth ministry theology. However, these need to be also adapted to the youth's level of understanding:

- *God as Father and Creator
- *Jesus Christ as Savior and Redeemer
- *Holy Spirit as Comforter
- *Bible as Revelation and Living Word
- *Man as Sinner and God's People
- *Church and Christian Life
- *Eschatology as the Final Things
- *Denominational Doctrines

Areas/Types of Youth Ministry Theology

Even though the author of this article did not thoroughly explore the following areas of youth ministry theology due to the limitation of this journal, individual youth workers are strongly encouraged to examine the following areas of theologies, with the goal of assisting youths to be nurtured, developed, and disciplined in and through youth ministry. Besides traditional theology such as systematic theology, historical theology (church history), and biblical theology, the following areas need to be examined theologically.

- *Theology of culture—Christian interpretation of culture
- *Theology of Growth and Development—God's view on Growth
- *Theology of Family and Peers—Biblical perspective on family
- *Theology of Pop Culture—Christian view of pop culture

- *Theology of Humor—Sermon and communication with youth
- *Theology of sexuality—Sex and spirituality
- *Theology of sports—Christian perspective on sport activity
- *Theology of music—Christian music as well as secular pop music
- *Theology of activities—Fund raising, night of thanks, etc.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this article was twofold. The first purpose was the exploration of the terminologies and different understandings of youth ministry theology among Christian education scholars and youth workers. The second was to also provide several considerations for the development of a personal theology of youth ministry.

However, there are still some remaining issues involving youth ministry theology which this article did not explore, such as (1) mission issues—missiological views on youth ministry, bi-cultural issues in youth ministry, balance of theological content and praxis, issues of theology of family for youth ministry; (2) education issues—youth ministry as education or ministry; and (3) ministry issues—incarnation as the model for youth ministry. The author will leave these issues as suggestions for further study.

In conclusion, youth workers, as Dean Borgman points out, are not theologians but they can and must become exactly that. Thus, this article attempted to explore the theology of youth ministry in order to assist youth workers to see, think, and interpret all aspects of youth ministry through theological lenses.

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