When reading the new edition of *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (2004), by Mark DeVries, it is helpful to know ahead of time just what this book offers, and what it does not. DeVries has been involved in youth ministry for over twenty-five years: as an Associate Pastor for Youth and Their Families, as founder of Youth Ministry Architects, and as a sought-after lecturer and teacher. All that to say, DeVries knows the subject of youth ministry well, and it is youth ministry that is a primary concern of this book.

DeVries spends the first few chapters diagnosing what he sees as the “crisis” in youth ministry: the way youth ministry has been done has not been “effective in leading our young people to mature Christian adulthood” (26). In short, DeVries believes much youth ministry leads kids away from taking responsibility for their own spiritual life (28) by isolating kids from mature Christian adults (39-43), with the result that young people are relationally, cognitively, and morally stunted (48-53). The corrective to this crisis is to re-establish the “generational threads that used to weave their way into the fabric of growing up” by “connecting our kids to nurturing relationships that will last after they complete their teenage years” (56).

DeVries then spends the next few chapters discussing the positive and negative aspects of the nuclear family. DeVries certainly believes parents are crucial in the growth of young people toward Christ-likeness. He goes so far as to claim “Parents play a role second only to that of the Holy Spirit in building the spiritual foundation of their children’s lives” (68). Yet, he does not mince words in asserting that many Christian parents are just too spiritually immature, too harried by the busyness of life, or too affected by contemporary culture to navigate alone the task of raising their children toward being mature Christian adults (73-78).

It is here, then, that DeVries extols the benefits of what he sees is the key for growing children toward being “complete in Christ”: the extended family of the church (83-95, 116). Most significantly, DeVries believes that an extended Christian family can help to overcome deficiencies found in many homes—particularly non-traditional homes (119-29). DeVries also makes his case that an extended Christian family is essential for young people to mature in their faith by
providing avenues for them to own their faith (135-43) and to become responsible members of the larger Christian community of faith (146-56).

All of these benefits are good things. Yet, it is at this point in the book that an undercurrent of philosophy-of-ministry tension comes bursting to the surface. DeVries is clear in articulating this tension; it is found in the critical process of determining whether one is functioning in the context of a family-ministry model or a youth-ministry model (175). It is here that one also really gets a sense of what this book is not about.

Ultimately, this book is not about family-based youth ministry in the sense of equipping parents to be the primary disciple-makers of their children. Rather, this book is about extended-family-based youth ministry, in the sense of creating an environment where “the church takes the responsibility” of “moving students to maturity in Christ, accessing as much as possible the family and the extended family of the church” (175, emphasis added). As DeVries readily admits, this distinction is “subtle yet significant” (175).

The real value of this edition of Family-Based Youth Ministry is the same as the previous edition; it casts a vision for involving youth in the life of the church as members of a faith-family. Certainly, this volume adds to the conversation about the importance of family-based ministry. One gets the sense in reading this book that the conversation surrounding family-based ministry (youth and otherwise) has changed since it was originally published, and one is left to wonder whether DeVries’ work will speak as loudly in church-culture today, as it did in 1994.

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Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus is the result of research conducted by Mark Yaconelli, the creator and co-director of the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project. From 2000 until 2003, he gathered a group of leaders from 13 exemplary churches and 10 denominations in the United States. These churches ranged from conservative evangelical to liberal Protestants to Roman Catholic. He does not give a description of these churches and does not define “exemplary.” Leaders were trained to “explore a different way of sharing Jesus’ message of love with young people” (27). This book is his reflection on what happened in these churches.

Yaconelli has made several insightful observations about youth ministry with which we can agree. He tells youth leaders, “We cannot hope to touch the hearts of youth if we have lost our own spiritual rooting” (20). He identifies a key problem in most churches today when he declares we spend so much time “doing church” that we do not have time just to spend with God. His purpose in writing the book is summarized by this quote, “We have to give ourselves permission to pray, to listen to people, and to be humble and willing to wait on the Holy Spirit to lead the way. How can we share God if we’re too busy to be with God? How can we love kids if we aren’t present to them?” (21).

We do want our youth “to be with God” and to experience his presence. The methods in this book, however, are subjective, mystical, and lack the authority of the Word of God. One of Yaconelli’s main approaches is to have the youth listen as the leader reads a passage of Scripture several times. As the passage is read, they listen for a word or phrase that “shimmers” or “sticks,” and then share how they feel this applies to their life of faith. At this point, there is danger of the Bible becoming completely subjective and open to any idea. When Satan tempted Christ, he quoted Scripture but out of context. Christ responded with a hermeneutically correct, “It is written” (Matt 4:4). As followers of Christ, we are responsible not simply to respond to Scripture based on our feelings but to interpret the Word of God rightly (2 Tim 2:15).

The author relates how attending a retreat led by an Episcopal priest who emphasized silence, prayer, and imagination impacted his life. Many of these exercises, he claims, were part of an ancient and forgotten contemplative prayer tradition within the Christian church. When calling the church to change how we minister to youth, however, we must have a solid Scriptural founda-
tion—not just a few testimonies that tell how Ignatius Loyola would have done it.

The book references Christian Smith’s landmark research in Soul Searching. This research clearly reveals parents as the most important influence in their adolescents’ lives. Yet Contemplative Youth Ministry fails to mention the importance of parents in the life of youth. How does the contemplative method involve parents in the spiritual development of their children?

Yaconelli seems to believe that what youth need is to “find the God within them.” He appears to decry having either Scripture or church leaders as an authoritative voice in the lives of youth. They are simply to “experience Jesus” for themselves. He gives several examples in Scripture of people “experiencing Jesus,” but ignores the fact that most of the teaching of Jesus is drawn upon the authority of the Old Testament. Jesus told His disciples that they were foolish because they did not believe all that the prophets had spoken and then, “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

Yaconelli implies that Christ would not come where the church gathers today but would be out where the people are. There is some truth in this. Yet the Bible also affirms that it was Jesus’ custom to attend synagogue as well (Luke 14:6), and we must never forget that it is the church for whom Christ died. Yaconelli frequently says that Jesus expects nothing from us; while there is a measure of truth in this, Jesus says, “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). In addition, the Great Commission describes his expectation for followers of Jesus.

The book appears to be pessimistic towards preaching or what he calls “word-heavy youth ministry.” Several times in the Gospels, however, we read that Jesus “preached” and Romans 10:14 asks how people can hear without a preacher. All of this seems rather “word-heavy.” The gospel must be proclaimed and reflected in the way we live. He is correct when he says we need to slow down, spend undisturbed time with God, and commune with him. In authentic communion with God, however, the Holy Spirit works through the Word of God to transform our inner being so that we desire to serve him in the world to the glory of our Savior.

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When God Shows Up, A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America by Mark Senter III is an appealing read that shows how youth ministry developed in America from the early nineteenth century through the first decade of the twenty-first century. The book provides an excellent overview of the movement and is written in an engaging style. Senter uses the metaphor of “jazz” to propose that Protestant youth have often improvised their styles of ministry. Like jazz, he says, youth ministry “has proven to endure, has distinctive structures, has fit into the culture of the day, and has attracted an outstanding cast of leaders” (2). He uses this structure to present the history of youth ministry. He argues that youth ministry practices go through fifty-year cycles of rise and decline; he then presents four such cycles, from the antebellum period through the late twentieth century.

A book of this size cannot cover everything, and there are gaps in the history of youth ministry that the author acknowledges are not covered. Many African-American congregations taught their youth to be involved and to lead. Their involvement included both spiritual and political components. This important aspect of the history of youth ministry needs to be developed further. Another gap is in the impact of women such as Mrs. Marshall Roberts and Lucretia Boyd on young women. Camps are also a major part of youth ministry history. Attending a Youth for Christ summer camp conference with thousands of other teens in the mid-1950s, I saw firsthand the impact that program had on youth.

Many of the major statements in the book are unsupported by cited sources. The author appears to want the reader to accept his conclusions and interpretation of the events concerning the movement—but occasionally he does not cite sufficient sources for the reader to
weigh the historical evidences. A few examples are as follows:

- The claim is made that the youth rallies led by Percy Crawford and Jack Wyrtzen were made up of about fifty percent adults. No source is mentioned for this claim, and having personally attended some of these rallies in the mid-fifties this was not my experience.

- Senter says that Jack Wyrtzen did not attend an organizational meeting for Youth for Christ held in Winona Lake, Indiana in 1945 because he “distrusted structures other than his own” (265). This may be true, but where does this information come from? And how do we know that this was Wyrtzen’s reason for not attending?

- It is claimed that the response of the Son City rallies were “far more effective than Youth for Christ rallies had been” (269). Again, no proof is cited.

- Senter suggests that Southern Baptists did not widely employ youth ministers until the 1970s (208). Having served two Southern Baptist churches as a minister of youth in the 1960s and having been part of a Southern Baptist organization of youth ministers with more than one hundred members during that time, I must question that claim.

The epilogue includes a section titled “So Where Do We Go from Here?” Senter asks ten questions that grew out of his research into the history of youth ministry. He is concerned that we avoid the mistakes of the past. Here is a sample: “Youth ministry in America totally misses close to three-quarters of the adolescent population in America. How will Protestant youth ministry change to meet that challenge?” (312)

These questions are important to consider as we look to the past to inform the future. The one question I do not understand is number 10: “Where does youth ministry find its theological grounding?” (313). No matter how much youth ministry must change, the theological foundation must always be the Word of God. Despite these concerns, this book provides an important and engaging contribution to our understanding of Protestant youth ministry in America and a guide for the future.

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The premise for Mark Oestreicher’s book, Youth Ministry 3.0, is that youth workers need to change (19). Oestreicher introduces the problem by referencing recent studies, which found that teens were leaving the church shortly after high school (24). By mentioning these studies and not further developing a need for the gospel, one is left with an unspoken implication that youth ministry is about head count.

Although Oestreicher made numerous unsubstantiated claims about the early stages of the youth ministry movement (45, 47, 48, 50), his reliance on scholars such as Mark Senter, Jon Savage, and Kenda Dean enables him to present a very brief yet accurate depiction of the rise and reason for youth ministry. This depiction would have been strengthened by the use of primary sources and by citing some of the bolder claims he proposed. The historical synopsis provided a single side of the double-sided coin of youth ministry.

Oestreicher describes the 1970s as an epochal shift in how we do youth ministry (54). He credits Youth Specialties’ founders Mike Yaconelli and Wayne Rice with much of the work that promulgated this shift. It is interesting to note that Wayne Rice has recently released books entitled Generation to Generation and Reinventing Youth Ministry (Again) in which Rice places the role and function of parents at the top of the priority list—a stark contrast to Oestreicher’s position and to the early days of Youth Specialties. Oestreicher gives the topic of parents less than a page of text and even less credibility (107). Oestreicher states that as much as parents are important, he is writing of something “larger and broader” (107). He claims that most family-based ministries have done nothing else than add programs (107), yet Oestreicher’s proposition is no different. He encourages his readers to do more for youth (94-95, 110) while at the same time suggesting programs to be cut (97).

Oestreicher’s theological foundations are quite con-
fusing at times. He claims that the experience of teenagers is what links them to God (102) and seems not to recognize that faith comes through hearing, not experience (Rom 10:17). Oestreicher admits that the experiences will come and go depending on the youth culture (88), but never mentions the one thing that is constant in all people’s lives—the gospel.

Amidst the confusing theology, one of the most unfortunate aspects of the text was the manner in which Oestreicher presented the motivation for change. Oestreicher did not turn to Scripture, but instead presented a model he gleaned from what he himself calls a new-age business book (109). It is this model he encourages his readers to adopt in regards to the movement from where they are to where they need to be. It is this model that Kenda Dean suggests the reader to “baptize” in order to promote effective change (13).

Oestreicher does point out that we need to first identify the heart of God and where God is already at work, and then join with the work already in progress (75). Oestreicher hits the nail on the head when he says that youth culture has splintered (88). Yet instead of trying to fix the splinter by developing youth ministry practices that are rooted in the gospel and in Scripture, Oestreicher suggests our approaches need to splinter more (88). It is difficult to see how such an approach can truly reflect God’s design for his church.

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Doug Fields has been the Pastor to Students at Saddleback Church in Southern California since 1992. Early in his book, Purpose Driven Youth Ministry, Fields identifies his goal for the book is to coach the reader “through a plan to build a healthy youth ministry that isn’t dependent on one great youth worker and won’t be destroyed when that person leaves” (17). Fields proceeds to describe the model that Saddleback has established and utilized for a number of years. Although Fields states that the goal is not to direct programs but to disciple students (18), he admits that purpose-driven youth ministry will have programs and structures which reflect the program’s purposes (17).

The first step, according to Fields, is to develop and communicate a purpose statement for the youth ministry (55-57). Fields suggests a clear purpose statement will assist the leader in making sense of the program, utilizing volunteers, and providing direction for the student’s spiritual maturity (56). He also adds that a purpose statement will attract followers (57). Following the purpose statement is the process of identifying the audience (87). Saddleback has designed a circular system to identify those individuals who are least committed to those who are most committed in the church (87). Fields has adjusted the circular diagram into a funnel in order to demonstrate that with the purpose-driven system, some students will drop out rather than move to the next level of commitment (92). My concern with this system and diagram is that instead of expecting all the students to deepen their relationship with Christ, there is an assumption that some supposed believers will drop out, while others move to the next level. Fields states that he has never experienced any opposition from the students to the circle of commitment (or funnel system) (93). Could this be because those who oppose the system have simply dropped out as predicted?

It is unfortunate that Fields feels compelled rather than excited to write a chapter on the subject of teamwork with parents (252). Fields concludes that the early years of youth ministry did not see parents or the home as significant (252). This is historically inaccurate. Individuals including Samuel Dike, Henry Cope, and others actively sought to include the parents and the home in the process of youth discipleship. Thankfully, Fields admits that “our role in a student’s spiritual development is helpful, but a parent’s role is crucial” (254).

Many good ideas can be gleaned from Fields’ suggestions and experience. Two components seem to be missing in his approach: (1) centeredness in the gospel, and (2) equipping of parents to sustain the spiritual development of the youth. Instead of developing a funnel where we sacrifice some for the sake of others, could the youth minister not develop a tunnel where every believer is expected to enter and to continue toward maturity in Christ?
In his introductory chapter, Mark Senter sets the backdrop in an attempt to frame the debate covered in the rest of the book. He does this by addressing fundamental questions involving ecclesiology, missiology, and anthropology. Senter maintains that local churches have adopted a parachurch character. He holds that this is in large part due to the seeker-sensitive and purpose-driven ministry strategies that are designed to evangelize adolescents. There can be no adequate discussion of youth ministry and its purpose without handling the issue of development, both physically and spiritually. Anthropologically, Senter discusses age appropriateness and spiritual awareness.

**Inclusive-Congregational:** Malan Nel, professor of youth ministry and Christian education in South Africa, sounds the timely call for churches to design a comprehensive approach that enmeshes youth in the larger congregation of believers. He accurately reports that historically the church and youth work have typically been autonomous. Nel is correct that the fragmentation of local congregations has weakened the overall discipleship process and has certainly affected adolescents in those congregations. The church must see adolescents as a part of the church now. Yet what Nel misses is the need to address adolescents culturally, and more specifically missiologically. Ultimately, what Nel proposes has been most recently observed in the family-integrated church movement in the last decade. This view seems to downplay adolescent developmental structures by swinging the discipleship pendulum to the opposite extreme, as noted in Wes Black’s response. In the end, can this model accurately be classified as youth ministry?

**Preparatory:** Wes Black of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary lays out a model that reclaims a more familiar understanding of local church youth ministry. The strength of Black’s proposed preparatory model is its focus on equipping adolescents for “the work of the ministry” both now and later. While the preparatory approach is intentionally separated from other segments of the congregation, it is intended to leverage the developmental strengths of adolescence. Black defines youth ministry as “everything a church does with, to, and for teenagers that builds them into becoming the church” (location 43). This approach demonstrates a firm commitment to the command of Ephesians 4:12. One additional strength of the preparatory approach is Black’s use of the laboratory metaphor that views local church youth ministry as the training ground for future church leadership.

**Missional:** The missional approach proposed by Chap Clark of Fuller Seminary does not seem to be appreciably different from the preparatory approach. It is most assuredly an inside-out strategy that is focused (like the preparatory approach) on equipping adolescents to be sent as missionaries to their peers and beyond. This approach seems to downplay the teaching dimension but must be evaluated on the strength of sending out adolescents to carry the message of the Gospel.

**Strategic:** Mark Senter’s strategic approach goes off the beaten path to stretch youth ministry in areas not often considered. In brief, he proposes youth ministry as church planting. What Senter describes is something supported by but disconnected from a local church. He calls youth ministers to leverage the leadership that they develop in their youth ministries to launch new churches. At present, North American church planting is replete with examples of youth ministers launching out to plant local church congregations and seeing many of their students join them, though this is not precisely what Senter proposes. Responses to Senter are consistent in cautioning youth ministers who might embrace such an approach. It undermines the family and is essentially unrealistic. It seems as though this approach may have been created solely for the sake of having a fourth view. That being said, it is right and good for churches to involve adolescents and their families in church planting.

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Over the past several years, local church youth ministry has come under fire. These critiques have questioned the validity and effectiveness of local church youth ministry and sometimes the very existence of youth ministers. In response, Wayne Rice declares “Youth ministry may not be perfect and may have a long way to go, but God didn’t make a mistake by calling the quarter-million-plus adults who are serving in church youth ministries right now” (location 57). Rice offers an insider’s look and recommendations for churches as he calls youth ministry leaders to step back and to evaluate the current landscape of their ministries. Although he spent a substantial number of years as leader of a parachurch youth ministry organization, Rice has much to offer local church youth ministers, springing from his commitment to the local church. His love for the church is obvious and contagious.

Rice writes narratively but offers adequate references to primary sources in support of his insights. As he unfolds his personal journey with Youth Specialties, his insights should evoke careful thought about current practices in local church youth ministry with a view to future effectiveness.

Rice introduces the need for reinvention by calling attention to the primacy of parents in their teenager’s discipleship. “Reinvented youth ministry ... has to begin by taking parents and families seriously” (1699). The Bible offers substantial admonishment for leaders to raise the level of priority in the area of family ministry. Rice does not provide an extensive handling of those biblical texts but he provides enough to establish that “the church and family are the most powerful and important institutions on the earth” (1720). Rice has a passion not only for partnership with parents but also for bonding teenagers to the multigenerational congregation of believers: “When youth groups function as alternatives to the church rather than a vital part of it, teenagers don’t experience what the church has to offer them” (1453). This is both consistent and accurate with the guidelines of Scripture. It affirms that local church youth ministry must be evaluated both in terms of building up families and in terms of building up the body of Christ.

As Rice deals with the priority of family in youth ministry, he reaffirms the need for youth ministers in the local church. He does not propose eradication of youth ministry strategies that include regular or seasonal activities for teenagers. He does however confront program-driven ideologies when he states that “the calling of youth pastor should carry with it an implied shepherding role that is much bigger than keeping a youth ministry program up and running” (1263).

The punch line of this book is rightly reserved for the final chapter where Rice asks the simple question, “Where is youth ministry headed now?” (1645). He suggests practical measures that will promote a youth and family ministry priority. As Rice turns the corner from narrative description to practical prescription, he seems to focus less on evangelism. This does not diminish the value of his suggestions, but it does call for a somewhat more comprehensive model of youth and family evangelism.

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