

Critique

Deepening Discipleship  Developing Discernment

Youth Culture and Growing Up

THE INVENTION OF ADOLESCENCE, THE LOSS OF A COHERENT
SELF IN YOUNG PEOPLE, THE ROLE PARENTS PLAY, AND A BIBLICAL
PERSPECTIVE.

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It is impossible to think about “growing up” in modern America without considering the role of the “youth culture” which every young person—even those who do not attend public school—is confronted by and must deal with. It is impossible to be so isolated that we are untouched by the surrounding culture. Nor should we wish to be—as we are called to be salt and light in a very confused and broken world. Popular culture deserves neither uncritical acceptance nor knee jerk rejection, but thoughtful critique.

There is not one monolithic youth culture that defines all young people. Popular youth culture embraces a diversity of sub-cultures or “tribes” such as skaters, druggies, snobs, band geeks, Satanists, Jesus freaks, techno-goths, computer dweebs, blacks, Latinos, and white trash. Groups distinguish themselves by dress, style, music, body modification practices, race, ethnicity, and language.¹ Most adults can’t tell the difference, which is why in the aftermath of Columbine, many unfairly associated all high school students who wear black with violence, drugs and even Satanism.

My generation has erected obstacles in front of the next generations—making the process of growing up much more difficult than it need be. We have bequeathed them a huge national debt, an uncertain economic future, a global environmental catastrophe, a corrupt political system, leaders whose lack of integrity invites cynicism, messed up families, and too often, churches that are out of touch with their lives. And we have left them to their peers and the media to figure everything out.

In his book *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Thomas Hines makes the uncomfortable observation that the

baby boomers, “seem to have moved, without skipping a beat, from blaming our parents for the ills of society to blaming our children. We want them to embody virtues we only rarely practice. We want them to eschew habits we’ve never managed to break. Their transgressions aren’t their own. They send us the unwelcome, rarely voiced message that we, the adults, have failed.”²

If we care about our children, their friends, and the whole shape of the next generation, it is essential for us to try to understand the world they are growing up

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in, and to dialogue with them about it. We must know them as individuals and friends whom we care about, listen to, learn from and respect.

Attitudes Toward Young People

Adults tend to idolize, envy, exploit, condescend to, fear and blame youth today. Evidence that youth is idolized and envied can be seen everywhere. Riley Weston, the writer on the Warner Brothers series *Felicity* was fired when it was learned that she was 32, not 19 years old.³ WB teen programs are extremely popular among 25 to 54 year olds.⁴ An article in *Seventeen* magazine on mothers and daughters begins: “She gave birth to you, changed your diapers, taught you how to use scissors—so what’s up with her suddenly flirting with your boyfriend and borrowing your clothes?”⁵ Ever younger women are having cosmetic surgery to hide

evidence of aging. A 21 year old college student says, “I’m going to say I’m 21 until I’m 30...What’s the advantage of being older? Your health declines, your husband leaves you for another woman and you can’t find a job.”⁶

But youth are also exploited. A baby boomer writes: “My generation turned adolescence into a commodity that could be sold worldwide by 45-year-old executives at Nike or Warner Bros. To that extent we control youth.”⁷

The word teenager was first used in a marketing context⁸ in 1941. Teenagers were defined by their shared experience (high school), being young, open to new things and most important, easy to sell to. *Time* writes, “The youth market is highly attractive to advertisers because young people spend a lot of money, are impressionable and are forming habits that may last a lifetime.”⁹

Hines gives a vivid example of large-scale commercial exploitation. He writes, “Creators of youth fashion, such as Nike, go so far as to send scouts to the ghetto to take pictures of what young people are wearing on the streets and writing on the walls. Nike seeks to reflect the latest sensibilities, both in its products and its advertising. The company feeds the imagery right back to those who created it, offering them something they cannot afford as a way of affirming themselves.”¹⁰ In contrast to the 1960’s rebellion which was against the materialism and consumerism of the adult world, today’s youth culture and its forms of rebellion have been co-opted by the adult commercial establishment.

An article in the *Tribune* reflects on the co-opting of rebellion: “Video games like *Doom*, a favorite of the two (Columbine

killers) and *Wolfenstein #3D* are reviewed in daily papers and glossy popular magazines. Tattoos, pierced tongues and Extreme sports sell soda. Rebellious teens don't look any different from what's being featured on MTV and ESPN (sports network) or even on sitcoms. It gets harder to break the boundaries, to distinguish oneself, to rebel from the mainstream, when alternative culture has become the dominant one."¹¹

This situation gives Christian young people a tremendous opportunity to be an authentic, attractive "counterculture." (What this could look like, and how it could be done, is the kind of inter-generational discussion that should be going on in our churches.)

I have asked high schoolers and college students if they like being called adolescents or teenagers. Invariably, the answer is no. They say the labels are condescending, imply immaturity and stereotype all people in their teens as unreliable, unpredictable, and unable to handle responsibility. They feel that being classified as adolescents or teenagers gives adults justification for not taking them and their ideas seriously. They resent statements like "you're just going through a stage...when you're older, you'll see things our way."

I completely sympathize with these reactions. A *New York Times* article described "the American teenager" as a new "Frankenstein-ian creature...a bored, restless young person with the emotions of a child in the body of an adult."¹² Commonly, the words "adolescents" or "teenagers" refer to a class of people who are uninterested in, and incapable of handling much of anything in life except for sex, social life and shopping.

A friend of mine taught a class in "teen issues" and at the end of the class, she asked for the students' evaluation. One young man complained: "This was meant to be a class in 'teen issues,' but all we talked about was sex! I am struggling with a whole lot of other things—like school, politics, friendship, money, religion, and work... I have to make decisions in all these areas. Aren't they 'teen issues?' I was hoping to get some help thinking about them."

While adults pay less attention to individual young people, their fear and disapproval of "teenagers" as a class has increased. A proliferation of contradictory laws communicate adult fear and disapproval. Nighttime youth curfews have been revived in many cities, even though most juvenile crimes are minor, and 83% of them are committed outside of curfew

hours (mostly right after school gets out).¹³ Yet many states are requiring youth as young as eleven to be prosecuted as adults for a growing variety of crimes.¹⁴

In the aftermath of school shootings, schools have understandably tightened security. But all kids, not just the dangerous ones, are hurt by a growing atmosphere of mistrust. Many express the feeling that no one really cares for them as individuals. Coaches and some teachers are often mentioned as the only exceptions.

In *The Rise & Fall of the American Teenager*, Hines summarizes our culture's contradictory beliefs about young people

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today: "They should be free to become themselves. They need many years of training and study. They know more about the future than adults do. They know hardly anything at all. They ought to know the value of a dollar. They should be protected from the world of work. They are frail, vulnerable creatures. They are children. They are sex fiends. They are the death of culture. They are the hope of us all."

He calls this a "teenage mystique: a seductive but damaging way of understanding young people. This mystique encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems. Such a pessimistic view of the young can easily lead adults to feel that they are powerless to help young people make better lives for themselves. Thus, the teenage mystique can serve as an excuse for elders to neglect the coming generation and, ultimately, to see their worst fears realized."¹⁵

The Invention of Adolescence

The truth is, young people have not always been viewed the way they are today. Compared with young people in 1900 and before, young people today spend much more time in school than working. They are essentially consumers rather than producers.

In the past, a wide age range of people worked, played, learned, and worshiped together. But young people today tend to interact with adults only in professional, formal, or controlled contexts.

These profound changes in the social and economic relationship between youth and adults began in the 19th century, when industrialization removed work from the home.

At the same time, new ideas were formed about human development. Spearheaded by the psychologist G. Stanley Hall in 1904, a host of "experts" popularized a concept of adolescence that saw sexual maturation as the most significant, defining thing that happens to young people. For the first time "adolescence" was defined as a period of terrible storm and stress, of "inner turmoil" that rendered young people vulnerable, awkward and even incapacitated.

These social scientists believed that in order for the transition to adulthood to happen successfully, "adolescents" needed to be institutionally segregated with peers and protected from adult responsibilities and concerns. Sexual maturation was believed to be so all-encompassing and draining that young people couldn't deal with anything else. To help them maneuver this stressful period, a whole array of adult-sponsored youth organizations and institutions were established, the age-graded high school being the most important.

Historians speak of the "invention" rather than the "discovery" of adolescence, because the new views were not based on actual observation of youth behavior, but on new psychological theories. Prior to the late 19th century, the changes in size, sexual maturity and intellectual capability associated with the teen years were viewed as milestones of progress toward competent adulthood, rather than a cause for crisis and alarm.

In fact, young men and women were handling a great deal more responsibility without suffering the dire consequences psychologists predicted. They were pioneers, entrepreneurs, soldiers, cowboys, miners, sailors, schoolteachers and physicians. Only a few were full-time students, living at home, devoting years to preparing for the future.¹⁶

Since the 1950's, adults have provided young people with money and leisure, and created a huge electronic entertainment industry that is committed to sustaining and expanding the "youth culture." It is obviously in the best interest of this multi-billion dollar industry to keep as many people in a state of so-called "adolescence" for as long as possible, i.e., segregated from the adult world and assaulted with the message

that sex, popularity, fashion and consumption are the only things that matter.

Age Segregation

Adults are much less likely to idolize and envy, exploit, fear, blame and condescend to “adolescents” as a group, if they have genuine friendships with individual young people. In the book *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence*, Patricia Hersch writes:

Every morning, “all over the country the pattern is the same, the gathering up of young people, the leaving of adults to separate worlds, not to be brought together again until evening...Around 3:00 in the afternoon...the middle and high school buses return...most kids come home to an empty house.”

“Nobody is paying much attention to individual adolescents, but everyone is hysterical about the aggregate...half of all America’s adolescents are at some risk for serious problems. Theories abound on how to manage them, fix them, and improve them, as if they were products off an assembly line...but the piecemeal attempts to mend, motivate, or rescue them obscure the larger reality: We don’t know them.”

“A clear picture of adolescents, of even our own children, eludes us—not necessarily because they are rebelling, or avoiding or evading us. It is because we aren’t there. Not just parents, but any adults...adolescents are growing up with no adults around, a deficit of attention, and no discussion about whether it matters at all. The dramatic separation from the adult world creates a milieu for growing up that adults categorically cannot understand because their absence causes it.”

A separate youth culture could not exist at all if it were not for this “dramatic separation of young people from the adult world.” As Hersch writes, “More than a group of peers, (this tribe) becomes in isolation a society “with its own values, ethics, rules, world view, rites of passage, worries, joys and momentum. It becomes teacher, adviser, entertainer, challenger, nurturer, inspirer, and sometimes destroyer.”¹⁷

Strands of Youth Culture

The following outline of the characteristics of youth culture is far from complete, and is skewed toward the negative, however I don’t believe youth culture is all bad. There is an enormous amount of creativity in films, music, and fashion, and young peo-

ple have a great deal to teach their elders about friendship: about loyalty and faithfulness to friends, about the time commitment needed to build friendships. Many provide for each other what they are not getting from adults by sticking together through thick and thin, and helping each other through crises, often in costly ways.

Consumerism

Young people work primarily in the service industry, at what Douglas Coupland calls “McJobs” (menial, futureless, considered a “good job” by those who have never held one). But few teenagers contribute anything to the needs of the family, or even to their own educations. Teenage consumers spend about \$100 billion a year, just on things for themselves¹⁸. Two thirds of this comes from their own earnings and the rest from their

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parents. Busy, guilt-ridden parents willingly give their teenagers what they want, which is easier than giving them time.

A high school junior in my son’s class wrote in their school paper: “there is a cross-generational bond which unites us as the youth of America. Reluctantly, I admit that our bond is our mutual belief in the ethic of mass consumption. We love our malls. We trust our stuff. And so, together, we are lost.”¹⁹ Of course, not everyone realizes their “lostness” as he put it. Like adults, most are distracted from thinking very deeply about the effects of the consumer culture.

Sex-saturation

Teen movies, television, magazines, and some music, are obsessed with sex. They assault us with the message that this is the main thing teenagers are interested in. But the picture they give is what the *New York Times Magazine* calls a “fantasy version of youth, complete with witty comebacks and enormous sexual confidence.”²⁰

Attitudes toward sex have changed quite dramatically since the 1960’s, when sexual liberation was associated with rebellion against the emptiness, triviality and moralism of the 1950’s. There was a quasi-religious, reverent attitude attached to it.

Now a common attitude is noncha-

lance—“it’s just sex, what’s the big deal?”

One 17 year-old told me that she and most of her girl friends don’t like sex very much, but it’s a whole lot easier than talking. There’s been a similar change in attitude toward drugs. In the 1960’s, students took drugs to expand their consciousness. Starting in the 1970’s, they reported taking drugs primarily to dull their pain and relieve their boredom.²¹

For most kids, this kind of nonchalance covers a lot of anxiety and pain. With the loss of a widely shared cultural consensus about sexual behavior and morality, and with all kinds of contradictory messages from the culture, media, teachers, parents, and peers, it should not be surprising that sex is now a huge source of anxiety for many girls and boys.

One of the scariest attitude changes is a growing sense that adolescent boys are entitled to sex. A Rhode Island Rape Center study of 1700 6th and 9th graders found 65% of boys and 57% of girls believed it acceptable for a male to force a female to have sex if they’ve been dating for 6 months.²²

Christians who teach that God wants girls and women to be generally “submissive” (particularly to men) seriously misrepresent the Bible’s teaching, and do not prepare them for those times when they must be firmly and stubbornly unsubmitive.

Alienation from Education and Learning

In teen movies and television—school is virtually always viewed as negative. Teachers and school administrators are losers—boring, ridiculous or malevolent. Thankfully, there are wonderful exceptions, but for many young people, school does not provide a positive learning or social environment.

Hines challenges the contemporary monolithic pattern of education, which forces “all young people to spend their teens simply waiting for adulthood.” Many would do better dropping in and out of work and school. For those whose abilities and interests suit them for long years of education, work opportunities should be coordinated with schooling. These suggestions come out of his insight that it is “difficult for teenagers to imagine themselves living useful lives. They are offered few immediate and meaningful ways to test their new-found powers, to feel needed, to be essential members of a community.”²³ Looking at the social history of youth

should encourage us to think creatively about new possibilities for our time and the future.

Violence

I'll just make one observation here. Jackson Katz and Sut Jhally have argued and documented the fact that violence in our culture is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon. They write: "The fact that violence—whether of the spectacular kind represented in the school shootings or the more routine murder, assault, and rape—is an overwhelmingly male phenomenon should indicate to us that gender is a vital factor, perhaps the vital factor."²⁴

In a powerful educational film called *Tough Guise: Media Images & the Crisis in Masculinity*, Katz and Jhally persuasively document the equation of violence with manhood and masculinity in our culture. They argue that since the shooters at Columbine were victimized by the dominant system of masculinity at their school, they took their revenge with weapons—the great equalizers.

Katz and Jhally challenge us with the "crying need for a national conversation about what it means to be a man, since cultural definitions of manhood and masculinity are ever-shifting and are particularly volatile in the contemporary era."²⁵

Growing Fascination with Spirituality

There is a hunger for the transcendent unseen world to give us power, guidance, meaning and mystery, and to assure us that we are more than just bodies. Wicca is growing faster among teenage girls than any other group. It is very much in reaction against "traditional" religion, especially Christianity—which they see as anti-woman, environmentally irresponsible, and spiritually dead.²⁶

These are challenges we must take seriously, if the Church is to meet the spiritual needs of young people with true religion, the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Loss of Identity

Those who construct the youth culture are not motivated by the desire to see young people grow morally, spiritually, intellectually or psychologically. The entertainment and fashion industries are fueled by immense economic interests. They need the youth culture for their very existence and have everything to gain by keeping young people in "adolescent/teenage"

mode, isolated from the adult world, and looking to the media to know what to care about, what to buy and how to live.

"Adolescence" has been understood as a unique time, when young people find and solidify a sense of personal identity in relation to, but separate from their parents. Now, the very idea and hope of finding a coherent identity or "self" is being undermined by postmodern academics, but also by changing mores and popular culture.

For example, the fragmentation of life—family breakdown and mobility, the idolatry of "diversity," a dizzying array of "lifestyle choices," a world without bound-

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aries created by technology and the media—all these things undermine the idea and experience of a coherent self.

Human beings are no longer considered glorious images of God. We are not even considered persons in the enlightenment sense—the height of evolution, and capable of building a better human society. Pop culture reinforces the postmodern idea that we are only bodies, with diverse and changing desires.

Clothes and fashion no longer express the self, because there is no self. Instead, they construct the self. For example: picture a conversation between a mother and daughter about a dress. The Mother says "this dress just isn't me." The daughter replies, "But Mom, just think—with that dress, you could be somebody."

A new poll by Nickelodeon and *Time*, reports that among 12 to 14 year olds, the 3 most important factors in "fitting in" with peers at school, are (in this order) clothes, popularity, and being good looking.²⁷ Again, it's all about externals and image.

And, not surprisingly, national polls show a diminishing commitment to internal character virtues like honesty—which are essential for a strong sense of personal identity. In one survey of 236,000 young people, 25% to 40% of teens saw nothing wrong with cheating on exams,

stealing from employers, or keeping money that wasn't theirs. Two other surveys revealed that 65% to 75% of high school students admitted to cheating.

Significantly, the rationale for cheating is a response to the adult pressure to "succeed" at all costs. In that atmosphere, getting good grades is more important than being honest.²⁸ Again adults have a lot to answer for. Michael Josephson (in *Ethical Values, Attitudes, and Behaviors in American Schools*) rightly points out that the ethics of this generation are but an "amplified echo of the worst moral messages of their elders."²⁹

Postmodern academics and certain business interests may celebrate the loss of identity, but young people are flooding the offices of counselors—depressed and suicidal. They are escaping life's pressures and the pain of meaninglessness through alcohol, drugs, promiscuity, eating disorders, cutting, a whole array of addictions and other self-destructive behavior.

Absent Parents

Study after study shows that by and large, parents are very little help to their children in coping with the pressures of youth culture. Many kids start the day having breakfast alone or with younger siblings they are responsible for and then come home to an empty house after school. It is no accident that kids get into the most serious trouble between 3 and 6 pm, when they are alone at home (not late at night, when youth curfews kick in!).

When parents get home, they are too stressed, exhausted and distracted by their own problems to give their kids much attention. Also, they tend to believe that their children (especially teenagers) would rather be left alone.

With the wisdom of social history, Thomas Hines observes, "What contemporary Americans are attempting—providing a prolonged, protected period of childhood and youthful preparation for our offspring while both parents work outside the household—is novel. In the past, when both parents worked, their children did so as well. On farms, work and family life were essentially inseparable. And when schooling became the job of the young, it was usually supported by a nonworking mother maintaining a household that explicitly supported educational values... Our attempt to maintain an elaborate domestic life—with nobody

home—is an experiment that seems doomed to fail...”³⁰

If parents spend virtually no time with their children, then they cannot really know them or the world they inhabit, and can be very little help to them. Patricia Hersch writes: “The bottom line: we can lecture kids to our heart’s content but if they don’t care what we think, or there is no relationship between us that matters to them, or they think we are ignorant of the reality of their lives, they will not listen.”³¹

Parents Lack Moral Framework
The parent generation produced the consumer culture and invented the sexual revolution, and many are more captive to them than their kids are. In a 1994 article entitled “Youth Outlook,” a teenage girl asked, “If adults use sex to sell toiletries, why shouldn’t kids use it to sell themselves?”³²

Many parents either avoid the subject of teen sexuality or communicate double messages—discouraging early sexual activity (for health, not moral reasons), while handing out condoms. Others give sermons, but don’t really listen to their kids. Young people mainly learn about dating, sex and relationships from friends, television and movies—though they say they would rather learn from parents.³³ A developmental psychologist on staff at a large Boston evangelical church told me that many Christian parents bring their children to him and say “you tell them about sex.”

Many adults are afraid and intimidated by their teenage children, believing their kids aren’t interested in talking with them. They tend to leave the room (or the house) when their sons and daughters bring friends home. In tragic irony, young people interpret their parents’ withdrawal as a lack of interest in them.

The Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development found: “Young adolescents do not want to be left to their own devices. In national surveys and focus groups, America’s youth have given voice to serious longing. They want more regular contact with adults who care about and respect them.”³⁴

A 17 year-old told me that he felt he was expected to rebel against his parents. But he didn’t want to rebel. What he longed for more than anything in the world was a friendship with his dad (a respected Christian leader). The fact that he had to do all the initiating made him feel ashamed.

Christian parents, in their concern, often turn to the church, putting their hope in a youth pastor who will deal with their children. But too many church youth groups just duplicate the culture’s condescension toward young people. Rather than creatively involving them in real responsibilities, serious thought and service, the youth pastor’s job is limited to showing kids that they can have fun without sex, alcohol and drugs—communicating that entertainment and shopping are the only things young people are interested in and can handle.

An 18 year-old girl told me with disgust about “The Teen Bible” full of condescending stories about acne and peer pressure. She knew she was fully capable of reading the “real” Bible. Thankfully, there are youth groups that are much more constructive than what I’ve described.

On the positive side, surveys of young

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people indicate that those who have “involved, principled parents” are much more likely to share their parents’ values, and reject the destructive elements of the youth culture.³⁵ As Hines writes: “there is evidence that if parents do take a lively, though not defensive, interest in their children’s lives, their teens are less likely to commit crimes, use drugs, or become pregnant prematurely. For example, teenagers who have dinner with their families most nights are far less likely to get into trouble than those who do not.”³⁶

These findings should not be startling, but it seems that today we need the social sciences to tell us what should be obvious!

A Biblical Perspective

The Bible refers to infants, children, young men and women, adults, and the elderly. Each stage of life has its distinguishing experiences, and its particular glory (strengths) and vulnerabilities. But the Bible assumes an enormous amount of natural, casual interaction between all ages. And the Biblical writers frequently command the different generations to imitate the strengths and avoid the weaknesses of each other. In other words, we are all to be

models for each other, in positive and negative ways.

We live in a culture where most of life is lived with peers. Age segregation is so much a part of the fabric of life, even in the church, that we take it for granted and think it’s normal. In fact, it is a very recent historical phenomenon, and what began as age segregation, has for many, become age alienation.

When all ages rubbed shoulders together throughout the day, it was assumed that the young would quite naturally and unselfconsciously grow up into maturity through observing and relating to adults in many casual settings. Now we obsess about the importance of “role models” for our children and formalize mentoring programs because modeling no longer happens naturally in the course of day-to-day living.

Youth Defined

In O.T. Hebrew, the youth is described as one who “shakes off,” or shakes him or herself free.

Proverbs 20:29 says, “The glory of youths is their strength...” Clearly, the Bible does not share our culture’s view that young people are intrinsically weak, unstable, and incapacitated by raging hormones and the temptations of the shopping mall.

Paul assumes that young people are capable of turning from the destructive desires of youth and pursuing “justice, integrity, love and peace together with all who worship the Lord in singleness of mind” (2 Tim 2:22).

John wrote that the young people had conquered the evil one, were strong and full of the Word of God. (1 John 2:14). They were having a significant impact in the cosmic battle in the unseen world. This is heroism of the highest order.

The Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy to “let no one despise your youth” (1 Tim 4:11). The church needed Timothy’s gifts, wisdom and leadership, and he was not to feel intimidated by those who despised his youth.

The Apostle Peter announced the birth of the New Testament Church with Joel’s prophecy: The Holy Spirit was poured out, male and female slaves prophesied, the young saw visions and the old dreamed dreams. Young and old needed each other. We still do.

Vulnerability of youth

The vulnerability of youth is the combination of new freedom and power with a lack of experience in using it. In the process of “shaking free” young adults are exposed to many new voices, appeals, and invitations—both good and evil—and each must choose who to listen to, which path to take, and which community to belong to.

In the Biblical framework, parents are to raise children with this crucial time in mind. By their nurturing, teaching, friendship, discipline, and by the example and story of their lives, parents and all adults should be making wisdom, goodness and integrity beautiful and attractive to the young, showing evil to be unappealing. True safety and security is found not in total withdrawal from the world (including the youth culture), nor in lists of rules and regulations, permissions and prohibitions. True safety can only come from loving wisdom and goodness, which Proverbs equates with love and fear of the Lord.

Whether he realizes it or not, Thomas Hines expresses well the wisdom of Proverbs. He argues that young people “should be treated as beginners—inexperienced people who aren’t fundamentally different from adults, but who, because they are dealing with so many new things in their lives, usually need more help, more attention, and more patience than those who have more experience.” (At the very time when we give them less...)

“In other words, we need to get rid of G.S. Hall’s discredited notion of the adolescent as incompetent, troubled, half-mad, and dangerous, along with the stereotype of ‘raging hormones’ that gives that old prejudice a pseudoscientific veneer...”

“Youth should be a time for learning that one’s decisions have consequences—although not necessarily irreversible ones. Young people should be encouraged to experiment...They should have the opportunity to try something new and unlikely—and fail at it—without being branded a failure for life...” The Book of Proverbs is very clear about this. Failure is an inevitable part of being human in a broken world. Learning how to fail without being destroyed is a crucial part of what wisdom is about. In the Bible, grace is what makes this possible—God’s grace towards us, and our grace towards each other.

Young Heroes

God’s view of young people couldn’t be farther from the idolatry, envy, exploitation, fear, blame and condescension of our culture. We learn from the Bible and subsequent history that young men and women are capable of making enormous contributions to the Kingdom of God and human society.

The boy David’s faith put the whole Israelite army to shame. God called the Prophet Jeremiah when he was young. He described himself as “only a boy.”

The young men Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were called to be leaders in the pagan court of the King of Babylon. It took incredible wisdom for them to know where to draw moral and religious lines, and courage to disobey the King’s decrees, knowing death was the punishment, and not knowing ahead of time that God would deliver them.

Mary was probably 14 or 15 when the

Young men and women are capable of making enormous contributions to the Kingdom of God and human society.

angel Gabriel asked her to bear the Son of God. In spite of her perplexity and fear, she said “yes” to God. Mary acted with heroic obedience and faith, not knowing whether her fiancé would believe her unlikely story, and knowing that stoning was the punishment for adultery.

In the early 1800’s, a huge spiritual awakening and missionary movement grew out of the prayer meetings of New England college students from Williams, Middlebury, Bowdoin and Amherst.

The book, *Lost Innocent Blood be Shed* tells the story of the French village, le Chambon, which under the leadership of its Protestant pastor, successfully hid thousands of Jewish children from the Nazis. The high school Bible study group was the communication center of the whole operation. Teenage boys and girls carried messages by bicycle to and from the farmers who hid the children. Not one child was lost.

Many consider the Birmingham Children’s March, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to have been the turning point in the 1960’s civil rights

struggle. Knowing the dangers, thousands of black school children marched, and were arrested, hosed and attacked by dogs. The “great deeds” of young children bear witness to the power of early formative moral influences, and to the truth of King’s conviction that “spiritual age is not chronological age.”³⁷

Cassie Bernall is the Christian teenager in Columbine who responded “Yes” when the gunman asked if she believed in God. Her mother Misty refers to the “unlikely martyrdom” of her daughter, because “she was just a teen,” who could be selfish and stubborn. Her mother has wisely resisted the hype that wants to turn Cassie into a “saint.” But the surprise so many have shown at her courage reveals condescension toward the young. Why are we surprised when a teenager acts heroically? Jesus gave children as models of greatness in the Kingdom of Heaven.

These are all heroes we know about, but heroism is not dependent on fame. God knows the heroic choices young people make, day-by-day, though no one else may be aware. And one day, what is hidden will be revealed.

I cannot end without giving thanks to God for his grace, mercy and forgiveness. Some folks, of all ages, have thrown themselves into the destructive elements of popular culture with gusto. Some sons and daughters aren’t ready to come home until their pockets are empty, they’re hungry and have nowhere else to go. But like the Father in the story of the Prodigal Son, God is watching, and runs down the driveway to embrace any son or daughter who “comes to themselves,” and returns home. With no guilt-tripping, or recriminations about the squandered money, the Father throws a party, and will not let his child “quit the family.” He reinstates us as sons and daughters ready to grow into adult responsibility. ■

~Mardi Keyes

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