Meeting Them Where They Are—
Thoughts on Adolescent Development

By Jeb Egbert

Jesus had an uncanny knack of meeting and dealing with people at their point of greatest need. Often this took the form of healing a disease or infirmity. In some cases, it meant resurrecting someone from the dead. In every case, the end result of Jesus' interventions was to reveal himself. Ultimately, he did not come to perform miracles of physical healing but to redeem humanity. *Jesus* is the way. *Jesus* is the door. *Jesus* is life.

Perhaps the greatest example of meeting us (humanity) at our point of need is Jesus' willingness (in the words of the apostle Paul) to "make himself nothing" by taking on the form of a servant and be "made in human likeness" (Phil 2:7). Jesus is the Eternal Son of God who has taken on human flesh, the one who is fully God from eternity, now also fully human. Jesus is God come down to live a life like that of his creation. In Jesus, God has met us fully where we are.

Just before returning to the Father, Jesus invited his disciples to do as he had done while he walked on the earth—"make disciples" (Matt 28:19). Jesus extends the same invitation to all of us today. As part of his disciple-making strategy, Jesus met people where they were. Jesus went to them. For example, he met Peter and Andrew by the Sea of Galilee where they were casting their nets (Matt 4:18). He did the same with James and John (vv. 21-22).

Our challenge today is to do as Jesus did—to make disciples of Jesus by seeking out people "where they are"—meeting them at their point of need—and then inviting them to become disciples (followers) of Jesus.

In response to this challenge, we seek to understand people: who they are, how they are "wired"— what their needs truly are. As we assess the "harvest field" that humanity represents, here's what we discover: As pointed out by George Barna, the majority of people who become disciples of Jesus in our culture, do so before the age of 18. Young people are a particularly "ripe" field for harvest, and youth ministry is a particularly fruitful way to advance Jesus' disciplemaking cause.

The purpose of this article is to help us understand adolescents—their "points of need"—from the perspective of their physical, social, and cognitive development. Understanding where young people are in stages of development will help us be more effective in meeting youth "where they are." In this article we will examine youth development and discuss implications for both the family and the church.

Adolescent development

Adolescence, as a distinct area of study, propelled into literature on the basis of a work entitled "Adolescence: Its Psychology" by G. Stanley Hall, in 1904. He wrote a book entitled *Adolescence* in 1916, in which he argued that adolescence was a unique period of the life-span. Hall concluded that adolescence was, by its very nature, a time of tumultuous change, characterized by what he called "antithetic impulses." Examples include over-activity versus sluggishness; euphoria and despondence; selfishness and altruism. He proclaimed it a time of *Sturm und Drang* (storm and stress).[1] This tumult is a function of the remarkable physical, social, and cognitive changes that occur during this period of time, often viewed as beginning around age 11 and lasting until age 19, although more recent research suggests that adolescence can continue into the early 20s.

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[1] G. S. Hall, *Adolescence* (New York: Appleton, 1904).

Whereas in historical times the transition between childhood and adulthood was a function of the requirements of the family with respect to survival, the last several generations have come to see adolescence as a transitional span of time, devoted to the development of children into responsible adults. In other words, in many historical cultures, the transition from childhood to adulthood was a function of need, and accordingly, was abrupt. Now this transitional period may be as long as a decade as adolescents go through a number of activities, not the least of which is college, to prepare them for adulthood.

Domains of development through adolescence

Authors point out that adolescence is marked by the most profound changes since infancy. These changes occur on a physical, social and cognitive level.

Physical changes

Ah, the onset of puberty. Remarkable physical growth spurts often occur during early adolescence. For girls, the onset of menarche (the beginning of menstrual periods) coupled with the transitional physical development of their bodies from pre-adolescent youngsters to young women is dramatic and often traumatic. For boys, almost ridiculous physical growth can occur seemingly overnight. Shoulders broaden, voices begin to change, and body hair grows. Girls tend to grow at a rate that is about two years in advance of their male counterparts.

Towards the end of early adolescence (around age 14), it is conceivable that both boys and girls are capable of reproduction. Whereas in many societies 100 years ago it was not unusual for adolescents in their mid teens to get married, now there is often a one- to two-decade gap between the time when procreation *can* occur and when it *does* occur.[2] Our society has responded to this not so much by teaching our young people to abstain from sex outside of marriage, which is the biblical model, but to advocate "safe" or "protected" sex as they experiment with this enormously challenging issue.

Not only do we see the onset of physical changes during early adolescence, we also see what Hall referred to as the introduction of "raging hormones." These hormonal changes invite moodiness.

Finally, in terms of physical development, recent neurological research has shown that significant brain development in the prefrontal area that is critical for impulse control is taking place.[3] Further, "teens' brains are not completely developed until late in adolescence. Specifically, studies suggest that the connections between neurons affecting emotional, physical and mental abilities are incomplete."[4]

The rather natural consequence of all this bodily change is a feeling of awkwardness bordering on inadequacy. Boys are sometimes referred to as being "all arms and legs." Girls can feel like they never measure up when compared to friends and teenage media icons. The onset of skin changes can exacerbate these feelings. All this leads to a preoccupation with self.

Social-emotional changes

Erik Erikson is credited with identifying what are called the Eight Stages of Development, which focus on social-emotional development of humans over the period of a lifetime. According to Erikson, each stage is regarded as a "psychosocial crisis" that arises and demands resolution before the next stage can be satisfactorily negotiated.[5]

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[2] Juliana M. Taymons, National Institute of Corrections, Longmont, Colorado, November, 1995.
[3] C. Chen and S. Farruggia, *Culture and Adolescent Development,* 2002.
[4] Angela Huebner, Virginia Cooperative Extension, March 2000.
[5] E. H. Erikson, *Identity Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

Two of those stages are particularly relevant to the adolescent. The first occurs during pre-adolescence and is called Latency, "Industry versus Inferiority" or the "Competence" stage. Here the child learns to master the more formal skills of life: 1) relating with peers according to rules, 2) progressing from free play to play that may be elaborately structured by rules and may demand formal teamwork, and 3) mastering social studies, reading and arithmetic. According to Erikson, healthy resolution of this stage leads to the next stage, in which adolescents begin to seriously contemplate the issue of personal identity.

It is essential that the adolescent discover the pleasure of being productive and the need to succeed. It is at this point when goal-setting has more meaning. Homework becomes a necessity, as does the self-discipline to complete it. Adolescents improve their abilities to use speech to express themselves as vocabularies expand. Erikson points out that this is a socially decisive stage, as teens see themselves as competent as they work through their various projects and begin to develop a positive sense of self.

The second stage for adolescents is called the "Identity versus Role Confusion" stage, in which the focus is determining a sense of self. This can typically begin at the age of 11 or 12 and continue through the end of adolescence. There is a preoccupation with appearance. If a hero is to come upon the scene, he or she will often do so at this stage. During this stage a heavy dependence on peers occurs.

Cognitive changes

Jean Piaget had a great deal to do with how cognitive changes throughout adolescence are categorized. His studies of human cognitive development help us to understand the process of intellectual growth. Piaget realized that a child's mind was not simply a miniature version of the adult.

The stage of cognitive development that precedes adolescence Piaget referred to as the "Concrete Operational Stage," which is characterized by thinking that is absolute, dogmatic and generally unable to deal with abstractions.[6] This stage typically occurs between the ages of 7 and 12. An example of this is the response a pre-teen gave her pediatrician who asked, "What brought you here today?" The sincere response: "the bus."

Early adolescence is characterized by what Piaget called "the Stage of Formal Operations." During this stage, there is a reduced dependence on objects or imagery for thinking through problems and situations. As adolescents mature, they are able to think about abstract concepts such as faith or philosophy. They have the capacity to be aware of what they are thinking. Some refer to this as "self-talk," the internal language used to reason through situations and control impulses and emotions.[7]

It is during adolescence that the ability to begin to see cause and effect comes into play. Consequences for actions help create a more responsible and thoughtful decision-making process, where invoked. One who has entered the formal operational stage is able to think through and test hypotheses.

Impact of changes on adolescent behavior

As a result of these cataclysmic changes that often occur in a period of a half a decade, there are behavioral outcomes that can be perplexing to parents, educators and those involved in youth ministry. We must understand that the nature of adolescence can lead teens on an emotional roller coaster. One author borrowed from Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities* to summarize adolescence: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

One impact of these changes on behavior is that, at a relatively early stage in adolescent development,

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[6] J. Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).
[7] Taymons, page 2.2.

the desire for independence and autonomy becomes an issue. While this is a natural part of the continuum that God ordained in moving a child from being completely dependent on his or her physical parents to becoming independent of them, it often is disturbing and can easily be misinterpreted by loving parents. A corollary to the need for independence is the increased need for privacy. Part of this has to do with the adolescent's coping with the many physical changes that are occurring. As they look in the mirror, they see numerous changes taking place, a number of which aren't particularly ideal from their perspective. They may become self-absorbed during this early stage.

Many believe that they are "on stage." Because of several converging factors already discussed, there is a sense that others are truly interested in them, how they look, what they say, how they dress.

Interestingly, many adolescents get privacy whether they want it or not. With more and more two-wage-earner parents, and more single-parent families, adolescents are often left on their own.

Because towards mid-adolescence there is a greater ability to see consequences of actions, teens wish to make more decisions for themselves. They are quite uncomfortable with what they perceive as "autocratic" parents "forcing" decisions on them.

As they move through early and middle adolescence, teens are beginning to come to grips with their own identities. "Who am I?" becomes an underlying question. And because of the need to sort this out, it is not uncommon to see adolescents push away from their parents and their parents' values. While this pushing away can be manifested in the form of rebellion, it often is not. It is simply a plea to "let me sort out who I am as an individual."

Up until this stage, a pre-adolescent is often introduced as the offspring of a parent. For example, "Let me introduce you to Tom Brandon's son" or "Jennifer Smith's daughter." In normal situations, especially where the nuclear family is still intact, they are accustomed to hearing that they are a "chip off the old block," or they look "just like their mom." That works for the pre-adolescent, but is borderline offensive during early to middle adolescence, when they begin to want to be seen as an individual.

Their need to be recognized and validated by their peer group also grows. Throughout early to mid adolescence, the importance of the peer group competes with the importance of the family. Teens develop interpersonal skills that they will use for the rest of their lives. Relationships are essential. Values of peers begin to be paramount. Parents can suffer whiplash when their little darlings, who just years earlier loved to be cuddled and hugged, now find themselves embarrassed by being in public with mom or dad.

Early on, these relationships are generally with same sex friends. By the mid teen years, relationships often include those of the opposite sex.

Around mid adolescence, a feeling of euphoric invulnerability can creep in. While physically dramatic growth is now behind them and they are beginning to have adult bodies, hormonal activity is at a peak, but, as pointed out earlier, cognitive skills have not fully developed. Often during mid adolescence, the ability to fully think through the consequences of behaviors is not present. Add to this tinderbox the reality that adolescents yearn for acceptance by their peers, and often appear to get that acceptance by doing something ridiculous for the purpose of recognition, and you have a recipe for disaster.

While on a micro level there is an increasing awareness of consequences of actions, it is still difficult for adolescents to grasp the "big picture." The inability to fully engage in what is called "systems thinking" often leads mid to late adolescents to look at the world through idealized eyes. Because of a lack of ability and experience, they may identify major social issues and just want to fix them. For example, an adolescent who sees an emotionally moving presentation on the slaughter of animals for the purpose of providing food may well become a vegetarian and urge others to do the same. Concurrently, they may view the inaction of adults around such issues as hypocrisy. The down side to this idealism is captured well in an article by the Columbia University College of Psychosocial and Social Develop-

ment: "As teens begin to mull over college, careers, and plans, the expectations and fantasies may clash with reality, leading to frustration and perhaps depression."[8]

Another challenge for adolescents is the reality of the future for them. Awareness of the future is a function of how soon that reality will hit, but as adolescents' transition from year to year in high school, the impending notion of career begins to weigh heavily. Contrast this to earlier adolescent thoughts of being a professional skater or actress—ideas that are not without merit, but often not thought completely through as to the investment of time and money required or the kind of lifestyle that such an occupation might bring.

Developmental tasks of the adolescent

It is instructive to be aware of the various stages of development for adolescents as well as the impact of those stages on behavior. Several authors have sought to identify important developmental tasks for adolescents to manage in order to successfully navigate through this crucial development period of their lives. Robert J. Havighurst has identified eight such tasks:

1. Achieve new and more mature relations with age mates of both sexes. The emphasis on mature relationships has to do with how functional (as opposed to dysfunctional) those relationships are. What kinds of outcomes are associated with the adolescent's friendships?

2. Achieve a masculine or feminine social role model. Especially given the fact that many children grow up in single-parent families, finding a way to plug them into healthy relationships of same-sex role models will help them to better understand the God-created differences between men and women. Society is working overtime to erode traditional norms associated with gender.

3. Accept one's physique and using the body effectively. This is not to imply that there isn't a need for today's adolescent to get out and exercise. This is not a suggestion to "let your body go and love yourself anyway." Rather, this point focuses on the fact that Madison Avenue paints an idealized picture of what a young person should look like. One need only to pop his or her head into an Abercrombie & Fitch clothing boutique to observe two things: All the adolescents in the photographs have sculpted bodies, and most are in sexually provocative poses. What's the inference to someone who wants to be seen as "with it"? "You have to look better than you currently do." Because of this, many adolescents develop an enduring inferiority complex about how they look. It is conceivable that King David, who didn't make the cut when Samuel was surveying the brothers to determine which one looked kingly, wouldn't be a good candidate for an Abercrombie & Fitch advertisement.

4. Achieve emotional independence of parents and other adults. This is especially difficult… for parents!

5. Prepare for marriage and family life. How critical it is that adolescents be immersed in an environment where they can observe healthy role models for potential family life. This need is pronounced if the child has grown up in a dysfunctional or abusive situation.

6. Prepare for an economic career. There is a tug-of-war tension between pushing children to succeed academically with the ultimate thought of preparing them for a career *and* letting them just be kids. The reality of the global economy is that there is an ever-growing need for technical skills that require a heavy investment in math and science. Some authors refer to a "first and third world" economy in Western cultures whereby those who have exceptional technical skills, whether in information technology, medical sciences or engineering (to name a few) will likely enjoy a robust

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[8] http://healthsciences.columbia.edu/texts/guide/ hmg08_0003.html

standard of living while those who are in the various service industries will be challenged to make ends meet due to an oversupply of moderately skilled workers. This challenge of how to balance a child's development for a career is difficult for parents, educators, and youth ministers alike.

7. Acquire a set of values and an ethical system as a guide to behavior. During early to mid adolescence, it is not uncommon for teens to "try on" different values. Often this stage is a time of experimentation. To the chagrin of parents and churches, traditional values may be cast off. But just as frequently, toward late adolescence the teens come full circle and adopts many of the values they grew up with, only now calling them their own.

8. Desire and achieve socially responsible behavior. Unfortunately, goofy irresponsible behavior during adolescence can have devastating and life-altering (and ending) consequences. An essential task is that adolescents arrive at the cusp of adulthood ready to participate as a mature, responsible citizen.[9]

Implications for the family

As the family comes to grip with children who enter adolescence, approaches to the parent/child relationship need to change. Several suggestions for navigating this phase of the family life cycle include:

1. Love them. Love needs to be the constant through all stages of development. While adolescence is a time of growing independence of the teen, parents can often react in two polarized ways that may not send a message of love. The first way is to continue to treat them as if they were preadolescents. Teens can be hypersensitive to "mandates" from parents. We may be familiar with teens who respond to edicts by saying, "You don't love me." This is a cry for a bit of freedom more than it is a genuine assessment about a lack of love. But the perception is that parents do not trust their children if they don't begin to allow them to make some decisions.

    One way to deal with this issue is to offer several acceptable alternatives and allow your teen to select from them. This gives the parent the comfort of knowing that any of the alternatives are okay, and gives the adolescent some sense of involvement in making the decision. And it is a way to say, "I trust you and I love you."

    At the other extreme during this period is the parent who feels that since their children yearn for independence they are *ready* for it. Allowing teens total autonomy to determine who their friends are and what they may or may not do can be a recipe for disaster. Giving them some latitude and distance is one thing. But we need to use care as parents that they demonstrate they can handle additional responsibility. We also need to find new ways to let them know we love them, as we don't want them to misinterpret the greater freedom that we are providing as a reduction in our interest in them.

2. Intentionally yet subliminally assist in value development. I have three teens, and one thing I've tried to do is to have a "father-son" or "father-daughter" night each month. This way, each of my kids gets some special time with me during the month. I have established a small budget and I let them choose what they want to do. It is amazing how open our conversations are when we spend time together in this way. I make sure that we have time to converse at each of these outings. In other words, simply going to a movie doesn't cut it (although we often include a movie in the evening), because we need to spend time in conversation. I try not to pry, but my general approach is to be a generous listener.

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[9] Robert J. Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education* (3d ed.; David McKay, 1972).

When my children were younger, I taught extensively. Now that they are in their teen years, I find myself moving down the "independence continuum" and coaching more. Rather than telling them what is right and wrong, I might create a scenario and ask them how they would handle it. When they provide a response, I might probe on what consequences may occur. In so doing, I'm trying to help them in the development of their own value development. I'm not *telling* them as much any more about what their values should be. I try to model values that I believe are healthy for them, and then create discussions where they begin to verbalize what their values are. I try to hit on all kinds of topics during these times together. We talk about relationships they have with members of the opposite sex, relationships they have with Jesus, issues they are facing at school, what their goals and dreams are. And through it all, I try to tell them that I love them. Sometimes I overtly tell them. Sometimes I hug them (though not too much in public). Sometimes I just listen to them.

3. Recognize the importance of relationships. It can be unnerving for parents to see their children begin to push away from the nuclear family and form strong relationships with peers. This is a very natural part of adolescent development. The key, from a parental perspective, is to continue to find time to maintain a strong relationship with your teen yourself. Because of the onset of moods caused by hormonal changes, the proverbial "quality time" may no longer be something that is scheduled. Rather, it involves parental availability when your teen "needs to chat." It means moving down the continuum from being a parent to being a friend.

    Since many of the developmental activities of adolescence involve peers, it is essential to know who those peers—and their parents—are. My middle son is an excellent drummer. He wanted to join a band. We asked him if he could bring the band over to the house, and when we saw and heard them, we had a hunch that their values were probably not aligned with ours. So we made an effort to have our son invite the band over to our house for practices. My wife occasionally made cookies or brownies, and I made an effort to listen to their music. I say "made an effort" because that is what it took. What was interesting is that after a while, we developed some good relationships with the band members. And, inevitably, the band broke up, and our son determined to move back into relationships where he felt "his" values weren't being compromised.

    The key here is that if *we* as parents have strong relationships with our teens, then guiding them through the relationships they develop with their friends, and identifying standards for those relationships, will often be less problematic than if we are still perceived as treating them the way they were treated when they were six years old.

    Another key is to identify older "big brothers" or "big sisters" who your teens admire, and who have the kinds of values that you support. I recommend that, as a parent, you have a "heart to heart" with that older teen or young adult, and let them know what you value and how much you would appreciate their helping you in sharing those values with your son or daughter as they spend time with them.

4. Consider starting a family tradition. Ideally, this tradition should begin when your teens are preadolescence. For our family, one of our traditions is Friday night meals. It is the end of the week. Everyone is tired, but we are also looking forward to the weekend. We have our finest meal of the week, and we use our best china. We create a bit of a more formal environment for dinner. I usually lead a discussion of something spiritual in nature. Thankfully, our teens (ages 18, 15 and 13) have not balked at this tradition.

5. Be intentional about a Christ-centered focus. Your example carries a lot of weight. Can your teens see that Christ is important in your life and in your decisions?

It is essential to consistently share the good news in our families. Our children get a steady diet of "bad news" as soon as they leave home. Depending on how much television they watch, they can get a pretty good stream of post-Christian culture in our homes as well.

As your teens move toward independence from you as a parent, help them see the need to perpetually depend on God. My wife and I intellectually accept the notion that our children are growing up. As such, we realize that they are far less dependent on us than they once were. We are trying to help them see that they don't become independent of parents only to become dependent on self, but rather more dependent on God. If we can help them with this foundation, it could have dramatic impact on their entire adult lives.

Implications for the church

An understanding of adolescent development has implications for the church. Here are some suggestions for how understanding adolescent development might affect our approach within congregations:

1. Don't assume that because they attend church they are believers. Sonlife ministries refer to two types of unbelievers: churched and unchurched. Interesting, isn't it? Perhaps most of us assume that since some of our teens are coming to church, they must be believers. They must have accepted Jesus Christ. We may mistake the look in their faces as "enduring to the end." What they may be doing is waiting for the first opportunity to leave the church.

   This is especially ironic when there are those who can't wait to engage in evangelistic activities on some far-away missionary trip. "If we can just share the gospel in Kenya," we might think, "then we will be responsive to Jesus' disciple-making call." But we have teens in our own congregations who have limited interest in the gospel.

2. Create a "wave of love." Why wave? The allegory is one of our kids being immersed within a sea of love. To create this kind of a culture requires congregations that get to know the youth within them by name and begin to express a high level of interest in them. Messages may need to be given about the need to follow Jesus' example and love *everyone* in our congregation. Jesus did not just spend time with the 12 disciples. He transcended what we would consider to be his "comfort zone" to engage the Samaritan woman at the well, the Roman centurion, Zacchaeus and others. Research shows that it takes about six or seven positive contacts with the gospel before it begins to penetrate. If this is the case, we should seek to have each teen be "touched" within our congregations six or seven times on every occasion when they attend.

3. Consider assigning a big brother or sister to follow up with the teen throughout the week. In our congregation, my children have several members who are in their twenties who have taken it upon themselves to stay in contact with them. This keeps my kids connected to the church, and because they are so relational, encourages them to remain connected to the body, if for no other reason, because they have a relational network.

4. Because early to mid adolescence is a time of questioning values, provide dialogue-based studies of foundational doctrinal issues for teen services. Consider asking them whether they believe God exists or not. If they say they do, ask why. If they say they have questions, help them feel comfortable and "safe" in exploring those questions. This kind of dialogue-based approach, if skillfully facilitated, will help them articulate their basic beliefs. The facilitator/ minister can guide them, offering scriptures as appropriate. Each of the fundamental doctrines can be handled in different studies in this format.

   While there is no guarantee that this approach will help the adolescent solidify his or her beliefs, it will guarantee that if they are present, they will at least be delved into. Adolescents generally don't prefer being lectured at. Especially at this time of their development, they do not automatically accept someone or even the Bible as the guiding authority. But when immersed in a culture where they are

asked to share their own beliefs with others, this type of iron-sharpening-iron can have a profound impact on belief development.

5.   Be intentional about supporting the family. The best place for youth ministry is within the family. Many children are growing up today with single parents who have to work extensively. Parents can use all the help they can get. It would be beneficial for youth ministers to talk with parents about *how* they can best support a Christ-centered focus within the family.

6.   Ensure there are activities for adolescents. Teens are relational. They especially enjoy meeting those outside of their normal group, as well as getting better acquainted with those inside their group. Consider sponsoring a district Discovery Weekend. Strongly promote your area's SEP camp. Consider opening your home as the pastor to all the teens in the church on a monthly basis, or finding someone who would be willing to do so.

7.   Identify where your teens are on the spiritual maturity continuum so that you can be intentional about helping with their development. Have the teens in your congregation come to know Jesus? How do you know? If they have, are they being built up in the Lord? Are they being equipped to share the gospel with others? Are they being empowered for ministry within the congregation? Are they being utilized in any way? One of the challenges here is that teens are just like adults when it comes to the level of commitment, which can make it frustrating for pastors. But when they contribute to a part of services, affirm their contributions and quickly see about getting them involved for additional ministry immediately thereafter.

8.   Continue to actively engage your youth up through the age of 25. George Barna has observed that when a teen hits the age of 18, the church often assumes that its job of "youth ministry" is complete. The assumption is that "they have learned everything that we can provide in a specialized manner, and now they are ready to join the adults." There are several problems with this approach. First, 18-year-olds who have continued with the church often have done so because of the special love and attention they have benefited from. When this is suddenly gone, it can be like the spiritual floor dropping out from beneath them. Second, when a teen reaches the age of 18, he or she is often off to college, where assumptions are challenged. They are taught to "think critically" about everything (including religion) that they have accepted." So the challenge is that the church often stops giving special attention to late adolescents at the time that all the values they have been taught by the church are being challenged. It is no wonder that many refer to the age of 18 to 25 as the "lost generation" of the church.

Conclusion

Youth ministry is about leading young people to the Lord, and when they accept him as their Savior, building them up in the nurture and admonition of Christ, equipping them for their own ministry and finally plugging them into ministry and perhaps into leadership. While the family is central to the process of leading adolescents (and preadolescents) to Jesus, the church has an important role as well. To be effective, we must know something about these young people that we are ministering to.

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Cor 9:19-23: "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (although I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings."

Paul learned enough about the people he was trying to share the gospel with so that he could meet them where they were, and thus be more effective. Adolescents are different than adults. We would do well to

learn more about them so that we might be more effective in helping them become vibrant and enthusiastic disciple-making disciples of Jesus Christ!

Additional reading

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