The Juvenilization of American Christianity

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To my students at Huntington University

who remind me every day of the value of youth ministry
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It’s Sunday morning. Let’s visit a typical middle-class American church. As we walk into the main worship area, notice that people are dressed less formally than they will be when they go to work on Monday morning. You can’t tell just by looking at them, but quite a few did not grow up in this particular church or even in this denomination. Some ended up here only after shopping around for a church. They chose this one not because of its denominational affiliation, but because its worship services and other activities helped them feel connected to God and to other people. Church members will happily tell you all about their faith and its important role in their lives. But ask them to explain their church’s beliefs and how they differ from those of other churches, and you might get an awkward silence.

During worship, the congregation sings top-forty-style songs addressed to God and heavily peppered with the words “I,” “you,” and “love.” In the sermon, the pastor may talk about “falling in love with Jesus.” With or without the romantic analogy, the preacher will spend a lot of time on the topic of God’s love. Even in theologically conservative churches, you won’t hear much about guilt, suffering, or judgment. Some pastors will describe the life of faith as a “search” or a “journey” and imply that constant restlessness is the mark of authentic spirituality. A member of the congregation may tell the story of his or her faith journey during the public worship service. Even in Protestant denominations long noted for their suspicion of idolatry, you can count on seeing some visual, dramatic, or even entertaining element in the worship service. It might be a musical performance, a dramatic presentation or film clip, or maybe an elaborate liturgy
designed to appeal to the senses. It could even be just a vivid story or use of humor in the sermon. Ask the regulars, and they’ll gladly tell you their favorite parts of the church service, just like they can tell you about their favorite movies, music, or television shows. Even if the church officially frowns on combining entertainment and worship, its members still tend to behave like spectators.

Although it might not happen on the week you visit, if you return often enough, you will hear someone praise young people as models of what every Christian should be. Their idealism will be contrasted with adult cynicism. Their zeal for evangelism or social justice will be contrasted with adult apathy. Their constant searching will be contrasted with adult stagnation. On rare occasions, young people will be criticized — but almost in the next breath, the speaker will be sure to say something like, “not all young people are like that” or “adults are really to blame.” Again and again you will hear the “passion” and “authenticity” of youth lauded as the gold standard of Christian spirituality.

On your way out of the worship service, don’t forget to check out the church’s other offerings. Most likely, some Christian products such as CDs, books, or t-shirts are for sale. Even if the church itself is not much into merchandising, it’s a safe bet that its most committed members purchase and use Christian products at home. They may spend precious vacation days attending Christian camps or conferences. They also contribute to at least one specialized Christian organization outside their congregation. Whether they are passionate about politics, international relief, or marriage enrichment, they can find an organization that captures their imagination and responds to their needs.

In part because of this intense competition from other Christian organizations, this local church probably offers quite a variety of programs. Especially in larger churches, specialized ministries cater to specific types of people, such as children, single parents, young couples, senior citizens, or recovering alcoholics. While some of these activities will emphasize traditional religious activities like prayer, Christian education, and service, others will focus on fun and socializing. The church probably offers some kind of “small group” ministry. Although no two small groups are exactly alike, all involve face-to-face encounters with fellow believers in an informal, intimate setting. Such groups provide a sense of belonging and a place to form supportive friendships. Whether in small groups or other venues, the church will be concerned to educate its members in the faith. But teachers and students alike look with suspicion on anything that smacks of
indoctrination. Rather, leaders are supposed to encourage people to “dis-
cover” the truth or “decide for themselves” what to believe. Lecturing and
rote memorization are out. Informal discussions are in. At their best these
sessions make the truth come alive in people’s personal experience. At
other times, participants wonder if they are only pooling their ignorance.

The church is concerned about mission, but in a way that its members
might describe as “relational” or “incarnational.” Church people pride
themselves on emphasizing “people not programs” and want their activi-
ties to benefit others holistically, including their bodies and relationships,
not just their souls. For example, when it comes to evangelism, members
will be quick to tell you that they no longer use aggressive tactics and
canned gospel presentations. They prefer to build friendships, serve others,
or just live a good life that will speak louder than words. In some churches,
leaders try to build an intergenerational, inter-racial family. In others, they
target a specific type of person, such as middle-class suburban baby boom-
ers, often making use of the principle of “like attracts like.” Both types of
leaders intentionally shape church life to attract and serve the people they
want to reach. The church also sponsors an annual “mission trip” in which
congregation members travel (often overseas) and spend a week or more
in Christian service. Most likely someone in the church has protested,
marched, written letters, or otherwise engaged in religiously motivated po-
litical activism. The church may or may not officially encourage its mem-
bers toward particular political causes and activities, but it almost cer-
tainly provides a place where its more politically inclined members can
recruit others. In all of this activity, congregation members believe them-
selves to be just as important as the paid church staff. Most likely their pas-
tor agrees, and urges his congregants to take more ownership of the
church’s programs.

Sometime during the week, there will be special activities for the
youth of the congregation. Even in congregations of otherwise meager re-
sources, a full-time youth minister often plans and leads these activities.
The youth minister dreams of evangelizing the youth of the community or
mobilizing the youth of the church for social action. But the majority of
the youth group members are children of church members, and most of
the church’s youth activities revolve around making or keeping these
young people Christian. Some parents even see the youth group as a con-
venient place to turn over the responsibility for Christianizing their off-
spring to a competent, paid professional. Attend a youth group meeting,
and you will find more pop music, more spiritual searching, more refer-
ences to romantic spirituality, more fun, more informality — more of every-thing that you saw on Sunday morning.

Of course, no real congregation looks exactly like this composite portrait, and some may only show a few of these traits. But dig a bit deeper into the life of churches that don’t fit the pattern and you will find that their members are agonizing or arguing over what they need to do to appeal to “the young people” and to remain viable as a faith community. This perceived need to adapt to constant cultural change is itself yet another element of the new shape of American Christianity.

The Juvenilization of American Christianity

Fifty or sixty years ago, these now-commonplace elements of American church life were rare. What happened? Beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, Christian teenagers and youth leaders staged a quiet revolution in American church life which can properly be called the *juvenilization* of American Christianity. Juvenilization is the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages. It begins with the praiseworthy goal of adapting the faith to appeal to the young. But it sometimes ends badly, with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith.

Like other revolutions, juvenilization swept away both good and bad elements in church life. Youth ministries brought necessary and beneficial reforms to the churches, but they also made Christians more suspicious of authorities and traditions. They revitalized individual Christian lives, Christian organizations, and even whole denominations. In 1950, many American churches promoted a more serious, mature faith than they do today. But ironically, those same churches also often had less of a grip on people’s lives. By personalizing Christianity and creatively blending it with elements of popular culture ranging from rock music to political protests, youth ministries helped ensure the ongoing vitality of Christianity in America. But these same ministries also sometimes pandered to the consumerism, self-centeredness, and even outright immaturity of American believers. For good or ill, American Christianity would never be the same.

Ask about any dramatic change in American society over the last fifty years and most people will point to the 1960s, but we need to back up to the 1930s to really understand the origins of juvenilization. At that time, Christians concerned about young people thought they were taking drastic
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measures to save the world. Between 1930 and 1950, Americans got blasted by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. Many wondered if America and its “way of life” would survive. Many also worried that it might be impossible to grow up as a good Christian and good American in such a world of crisis. Concerned Christians launched dozens of new youth organizations in this period in the hopes of protecting young people from the evil effects of these crises and mobilizing them to make a difference in a dangerous world.

At the same time, the 1940s and 1950s saw the birth of the “teenager.” Unlike the more diverse “youth” of previous eras, teenagers all went to high school and all participated in a national youth culture increasingly dominated by the same music, TV shows, movies, products and cultural beliefs. Of course not every young person fit this pattern, but enough did to reshape both the teenage experience of growing up and adult perceptions of that process.

It was in the 1950s that youth and youth culture hit the American mainstream in a big way. Although it may seem that the teenagers of the twenty-first century bear little resemblance to those of the 1950s, crucial similarities remain in the structure of adolescent life and its relationship to the church. The upheavals of the 1960s certainly intensified the process of juvenilization and expanded its reach so that it touched more and more believers and their churches, but the mechanisms by which teenagers influenced church life were already well established. It was probably in the 1960s that adolescent versions of Christianity began to make serious inroads among adult Christians. Yet this happened because both adults and teenagers reacted to the traumas and opportunities of the 1960s using patterns of thinking and behaving they had come to accept during the previous decade. Even today, American churches still respond to youth culture using a range of options they developed during the 1950s.

The story of juvenilization is a story not of a sinister plot or a noble crusade, but of unintended consequences and unquestioned assumptions. Even the “leaders” of juvenilization did not always realize what they were doing. In some ways, juvenilization was a byproduct of noble goals. In the years immediately following World War II, youth leaders set out to save America and the world by saving young people. Some dreamed of a youth-led crusade for Christian social reform; others saw a youth revival as the key to saving America from moral collapse. For their part, young people tried to figure out ways to be good Christians and make a difference in the world while still fitting in with their peers and having fun.
Youth groups proved to be key laboratories of religious innovation, because church leaders needed to compete for teenage loyalty against an increasingly powerful and pervasive youth culture. At the same time, these groups also functioned as social spaces in which to quarantine and contain change. Although cultural phenomena like pop music or racial integration might not yet be welcome in the church, adults sometimes permitted them in youth groups. Some adults intentionally used youth groups as a “back door” into the church; others hoped that threatening practices would stay in quarantine. In practice, adult fears usually faded, and what worked in youth group was eventually accepted in the church as a whole.

Youth culture and the desire to pass on the faith to younger generations are not the only engines driving juvenilization. Since the 1960s, the life experiences and cultural expectations of adulthood have also changed. Older cultural conceptions of adulthood encouraged responsibility, self-denial, and service of others. In the first half of the twentieth century, most people clearly entered adulthood in their teens or early twenties by virtue of getting married, getting a job, and having children. More recently, the passage to adulthood has been delayed and rendered more subjective for most middle-class Americans. In this new “psychological adulthood,” the individual’s “needs and wants” expand and his or her “obligations and attachments” contract. The seven deadly sins have been redefined: “pride has become self esteem . . . lust has become sexuality . . . envy is now channeled into initiative and incentive . . . sloth has become leisure.” Of course, most adults still value virtue and deplore vice. But they also increasingly view life as an unending journey of self-development. And the contemporary landscape through which they journey has many paths that can end in self-centeredness or even narcissism. In short, at least some traits that should be included in Christian maturity have been decoupled from adulthood in post-1960s America, and this change has encouraged juvenilization in churches. Indeed, it is likely that the juvenilization of American Christianity and the emergence of the new immature adulthood have mutually reinforced one another.¹

To give one example, consumerism and juvenilization reinforce one another. People who know who they are, who think carefully about purchases, and who exercise self-control are harder to persuade to buy products they don’t really need. In contrast, impulsive people who are searching for a sense of identity, who are looking to salve their emotional pain, who desperately crave the approval of others, and who have lots of discretionary income (or are willing to spend as if they do) make ideal consumers. In
other words, encouraging people to settle into some of the worst traits of adolescence is good for business. Not all businesses and advertisers operate on this basis, but enough do to encourage the cult of youth and discourage people from growing up. Considerable evidence suggests that consumers can see through these techniques and resist them to some extent. But immersed as we all are in the culture of adolescence, it becomes increasingly hard to embrace the self-denial and character formation necessary to achieve what used to be called mature adulthood.²

This book is about how and why this process of juvenilization got started, what keeps it going, and how it has benefited and hurt each of the major streams of Christianity in America. It is not about beating up on young people or youth ministers. Youth ministries are a necessary and valuable tool for the Christianization of young people in modern societies, and to be effective in that task, these organizations need godly, trained leaders. I hope that youth ministry leaders will be stronger and more faithful to their callings as a result of what they read in these pages.

This book is a work of history in the service of faithful Christian ministry. It tells the story of a key period in recent church history that continues to significantly shape American Christians, their churches, and to a lesser extent even American society itself. For example, when post-Christian Americans describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and pursue a “faith journey” characterized by mix-and-match spirituality, they are displaying the effects of juvenilization. My hope is that by understanding where we have come from and how we got here, we might be able to choose the best paths forward.

This book is not a manual for how to eliminate juvenilization. Indeed, it might prove impossible to shut down this process, even if we thought it worth the risks to do so. After all, without youth ministries and their adaptive appeals to youth, the churches would not have many of the loyal and productive members that they have today. Yet it may be impossible to appeal to American youth without also letting adolescent spirituality into the church. Indeed, after fifty or more years of juvenilization, adolescent spirituality powerfully shapes the religious identities of many adults. So churches that ignore adolescent spirituality will have as much trouble communicating effectively to adults as they do to teenagers.

Instead of holding out false hope for completely reversing the process, I hope to equip the reader to recognize the dynamics and effects of juvenilization. Understanding how and why youth organizations digest youth culture and send its nutrients (and sometimes its poisons) into the
body of Christ will help all of us make wise decisions about how to work for the health of the church. At the very least, I hope that all of us will think carefully about which aspects of adolescent spirituality deserve to be championed and which need to be restrained.

From what I have said so far, it might sound like juvenilization is a uniform process that produces the same effects everywhere. That is not true. Some churches seem less dominated by adolescent spirituality than others — but they often pay a price for bucking the trend. During the key decade of the 1950s, each church tradition, and even each youth organization within a tradition, created a different version of adolescent Christianity. Each organization brought its own beliefs and practices to bear on the shared problem of getting young people to pay attention to their faith and do something about it. Some spiritual goals fit better than others with the desires of different 1950s teenagers. The combination of adolescent preferences, adult priorities, and environmental constraints created different paths of juvenilization.

By tracing these paths we will be able to identify the consequences of particular choices about how to shape youth ministry. Although youth leaders have tended to believe they can take on a wide range of tasks and priorities, the reality is that youth ministry is limited by many factors external and internal to the church. Those who attempt to do everything usually fail to do much of anything. On the other hand, those who “succeed” in one realm by narrow specialization often leave significant gaps in the spiritual and moral formation of their young people. The repeated cries for “holistic” or “integrated” youth ministry over the last fifty years testify to just how hard it is to comprehensively form young Christians in the faith. They also hint at one of the underlying causes of spotty Christian formation: disunity among adults.

What Is “Adolescent Christianity”?

Adolescent Christianity is any way of understanding, experiencing, or practicing the Christian faith that conforms to the patterns of adolescence in American culture. I am well aware that the tangled web of beliefs, practices, and experiences that we call “adolescence” is itself a product of human cultures and changes over time. Attempts to define a universal set of traits that apply to every adolescent are always gross generalizations that betray cultural biases. One reason juvenilization is so powerful and decep-
tively difficult to manage is that adults are constantly investigating, debating, and misreading the supposed “nature” of adolescents. Juvenilization is also driven by actual changes in the lives of young people, not just adult perceptions. So no matter how the experience of adolescence changes, churches will eventually conform to that new set of adolescent traits.

A reliable body of social science research has identified some common aspects of adolescent development in American society. And though some of the traits we ascribe to adolescents have changed over time, beneath these particulars lie some foundational realities that have remained relatively stable. Adolescents are people in a particular developmental life stage, who occupy particular positions in the social and economic structures of society, and whose lives provide important raw materials for creating meaning in American culture. Each of these aspects of adolescence shapes the process of juvenilization in the church, so each deserves some explanation.

Adolescence as a Developmental Life Stage

Adolescents are people who are going through a particular developmental stage which begins about the time of puberty. I say “about the time of puberty” because the biological changes associated with puberty are not the only markers of entry to this life stage. Someone who turns thirteen, enters high school, starts dating, or even just dresses a particular way will be perceived as an adolescent whatever the status of his or her biological development. Nevertheless, physical development powerfully influences this life stage. Physical changes make adolescents self-conscious and concerned about their bodies. They begin to rival or even surpass adults in their physical strength, energy, and coordination. At some point during adolescence, the individual becomes capable of reproduction and begins to view herself, and be viewed by others, as a potential romantic or sexual partner. Adolescents spend much time and energy thinking about, discussing, and pursuing such relationships. Especially in early adolescence, romantic relationships serve primarily to help the individual achieve status among his peers and feel good about himself.

Adolescent spirituality favors physical activity, touch, and other bodily ways of expressing faith. Adolescent Christians are concerned about how their faith relates to their sexuality and their romantic relationships. They want to experience a “personal relationship with God” and like the idea of “falling in love” with Jesus.
Introduction

Cognitively, adolescents are growing in their ability to think abstractly. They can now begin to grapple with concepts like love, truth, or justice. Since these ideals seem fresh and new to them, adolescents sometimes display an excitement about them which is rarer among older people. They also have a new ability to perceive the contradictions and hypocrisies of adult society, but may be unable to process this new knowledge charitably and responsibly. Some may respond with cynicism or apathy, while others will be tempted to believe that simply identifying and protesting against problems will easily solve them. Adolescent Christians sometimes throw themselves into projects that reflect their high ideals. Unlike many adults, they assume that positive change is both possible and desirable. They ask tough questions and shake up adults in ways that can be creative and energizing. They value discovering the truth for themselves more than receiving the wisdom of others. On the other hand, they sometimes fall prey to misdirected zeal in their excitement over a new cause, and they may not have the staying power of an adult. They can get frustrated when their simple solutions seem to fail, often blaming adults or the church.

Adults influenced by adolescent Christianity romanticize the supposed idealism and zeal of youth and try to force each other to conform to those patterns. Adolescent Christians blame someone else for the world’s problems and seldom recognize their own role in evil social systems. In an ironic twist, some adults influenced by juvenilization blame teenagers for society’s problems. Adolescent Christians spend their energy denouncing evils and staging symbolic protests rather than engaging in the less glamorous work that can lead to long-term change.

Socially, the influence of friends grows relative to the influence of parents during adolescence. Adolescents lean heavily on a few close friends who provide companionship and a sense of emotional security, advice, and acceptance. These groups of friends tend to be similar in age, race, economic status, school achievement, and pop-culture tastes. Through these relationships young people learn what is “normal” and what is “weird,” and how to behave in relationships so that people will like them and treat them well.

Adolescent Christians seek out intimate, nurturing groups of friends who will support their faith journey. They care more about the quality of their religious friendships than about truth. Adolescent Christians are most comfortable around believers who are just like them, and they may have a hard time widening their circle of friendship. Some can become obsessively conformist in their religious beliefs or behaviors, while others pride them-
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selves on their self-conscious rebellion against the crowd — although they often need a group of friends with whom to share their rebellion!

Another reason for the power of friends in the lives of adolescents is that friends play a key role in the process of identity formation. Adolescents want to know who they are and how they compare with others. Questions like “what sort of person am I?” or “who will be my closest friends or my romantic partner?” or “what will I do with my life?” or “what do I believe?” take on a new importance. Adolescents might not consciously ask themselves these questions, but they form the subtext of personal relationships. Because they are experimenting with new beliefs, behaviors, and self-images, adolescents tend to have a less stable sense of self than the typical adult. Adolescents tend to think everyone is watching them and can become obsessed with what others might think of them. They fantasize about being the hero in their personal life story of romance and adventure. Older adolescents sometimes go through a period of intense questioning in which they may wholly or partially reject the beliefs and sense of self they have built up so far in their lives. Because they are absorbed in the crucial developmental task of identity formation, adolescents can sometimes seem narcissistic.

Adolescent Christians are preoccupied with self-exploration and personal transformation. They want to personalize their faith and use it as a resource in identity development. They want to know how their faith can help them with important life decisions like marriage and career. Adults affected by juvenilization will glorify spiritual searching and look suspiciously on believers who have “settled” beliefs and habits. Because juvenilized Christians are still figuring out who they will be, they are free to experiment with new ways to live out their faith. They may see themselves as potential heroes in the drama of redemption. On the other hand, without a settled sense of identity, they find it hard to make strong commitments to particular beliefs, people, or religious institutions. Indeed, they may see institutions and commitments as impediments to personal spiritual growth. Even if they like church, such Christians are tempted to see it as a tool for personal fulfillment.

Emotionally, adolescents tend to experience higher highs and lower lows than adults. They feel strong emotions toward things that seem trivial in the eyes of adults, but which loom very large in their world. Some also experience more frequent emotional changes than adults and less ability to control their behavior in the midst of those changes. Yet contrary to much that has been written about adolescence, it is not always a time of “storm
and stress.” Conflict with parents does often increase, and emotional swings or even depression can occur, but most adolescents’ lives are not characterized by dramatic external rebellion or damaging internal turmoil. Most develop in a relatively peaceful manner.

Adolescent Christians see the faith as incomplete unless it is affecting them emotionally. They are less likely than adults to settle for a faith that offers only a dutiful adherence to particular doctrines, rules, or institutions. On the other hand, they have a hard time keeping religious commitments when their emotions are not cooperating. They are drawn to religious practices that produce emotional highs and sometimes assume that experiencing strong feelings is the same thing as spiritual authenticity. They may be tempted to believe that God’s main role in their lives is to help them feel better or to heal their emotional pain. Juvenilized adults agree that a main purpose of Christianity is to help them feel better about their problems.

Adolescence and Social Structure

Adolescents occupy a dependent and highly regulated place in the social and economic structures of society. Almost everywhere they go, adolescents are subordinate to adults. Adults group them together in schools and other age-segregated environments in an attempt to regulate them and train them to be good adults. But by bringing them together, adults create the opportunity for young people to form their own peer cultures with distinctive dress codes, slang, behaviors, and moral norms. These “youth cultures” often put a premium on character qualities and behaviors which oppose adult expectations for youth. Age-segregated environments also tend to constrict the life vision of adolescents. They spend much time focusing on the narrow and sometimes even selfish range of concerns that go along with adolescent development, to the neglect of the “outside” world. For example, the social hierarchy of the high school and one’s place in it holds some power to shape the happiness or unhappiness of every adolescent. A student who gets identified with the football players or cheerleaders really does have a different life experience than one pigeonholed with the “geeks.” Although most young people chafe against this stereotyping, they care about such markers of social status. Adults want the schools to form good citizens, but these environments are even more effective at creating good shoppers, gossips, romantic partners, and sports fans.
Adolescent Christians insist that their faith adapt to their social world. They want to know how their faith can make a difference in their daily social interactions at home, school, and work. They are impatient with a faith that offers only abstractions and no personal life applications. On the other hand, this intense need to apply the faith has a downside, because the adolescent world is sometimes so isolated from “real life.” Even fervent adolescent Christians always keep one eye on how their religious activities and relationships help or hurt their status in the claustrophobic world of the high school. And many are only superficially interested, if at all, in how their faith impacts others outside their narrow world.

The powerful place of the high school in the structure of adolescent lives puts pressure on churches. Except for students at Christian schools (and sometimes even for them), faith is pushed into the realm of extracurricular activities. Youth groups must compete against an appealing array of sports teams, clubs, dances, and other adult-sponsored activities. Although experts regularly scold parents for not caring better for their children, the structures of adolescent life teach parents to leave the educating to the teachers, sports training to the coaches, and spiritual development to the youth ministers. Christian youth leaders find themselves under incredible pressure to make a significant impact on young lives using only a few hours a week.

Economically, adolescents are restricted to low-level, part-time employment. Those who favor this arrangement claim society is protecting young people and making sure they get an education that will prepare them for better jobs later. More suspicious observers wonder who really benefits from keeping young people out of the full-time labor force. Perhaps young, part-time workers are easier to control than older workers and can be paid less. Or perhaps we keep adolescents out of the labor force to artificially open up more jobs for older workers. Although it is not at all clear that the current work and school arrangements are in the best interests of teenagers, especially those who will not be going to college, there is little will to change the system.

Meanwhile, the economic growth of the last fifty years has meant that more families have not needed to rely on their children’s income to survive, and many even have surplus income to spend on their children. In addition, adolescents are not typically supporting a family of their own. As a result, adolescents have enough spending money that whole industries have arisen to sell them products and experiences. During the 1950s, enterprising adults began to create and market products and entertainment just
for teenagers. Today, to be a teenager is to be bombarded by up to 3,000 advertising messages a day designed to play on desires for popularity, fun, domination of others, and sexual fulfillment. Christianity must compete effectively in the smorgasbord of sensuality that is the youth market.

Adolescent Christians expect their faith to be fun and entertaining. They want the church to make use of the latest music, technology, and cultural trends. Some revel in a completely parallel Christian youth subculture, complete with its own music, celebrities, and clothing, all modeled on the offerings of the wider popular culture. Adolescent Christians construct their religious identities through consumption of products and experiences. Because these can be expensive, youth groups and the juvenilization they bring are primarily phenomena of the white middle class, although as more people get a share of the “American dream,” juvenilization spreads to their churches as well. Juvenilization is also a middle-class phenomenon because middle-class parents worry that their children will “fall” into lower economic classes through poor life choices. So middle-class adults are more than willing to pay for youth groups that provide appealing Christian alternatives to more risky, lower-class ways of having fun.

Adolescents occupy an ambiguous legal and social status — and this “in-between” life stage lasts a long time. Today adolescence begins earlier and ends later than it did 100 years ago. In 1900, young women did not get their first menstrual period until they were 15 or 16; today the average age is 12.5. In 1900, most teenagers were in the work force, not in school. For most of the twentieth century, some combination of full employment, marriage, and the birth of a first child marked the transition to adulthood. As more and more people have delayed these life transitions, full adulthood has receded into the distant future for most teenagers.

In addition, there seems to be little consensus regarding when a person becomes an adult. Students graduate from high school by age eighteen, but in some ways that does not make them full adults. They can vote and die for their country at eighteen, but in many states they still may not drink alcohol. The legal system sometimes treats juvenile offenders according to different rules than adults; at other times, juveniles are tried as adults. Earlier puberty and later “settling down” has made it harder and harder for adolescents to maintain sexual purity. In addition, the lengthening of adolescence has made this life stage seem semi-permanent, a place to settle in, not a place to quickly pass through on the way to adulthood.

Adolescent Christians don’t expect to be adults for a long time, so they don’t particularly care if their Christianity prepares them for adult-
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hood. They tend to be much more aware of their religious “rights” than their religious responsibilities. Meanwhile, the churches have a hard time spanning the chasm between childhood and adulthood. Many churches have high school youth groups, but few have viable ministries to college students or working young adults. Even though high school graduation is not an effective rite of passage to adulthood, church structures assume that it is.

A certain number of young people “drop out” or rebel significantly against the constraints imposed upon them by society. Young members of street gangs, radical political groups, or religious cults see themselves as rejecting the surrounding society and ignoring its demands that they join the economic and political “establishment.” In reality, these groups and their members depend in one way or another on the larger society for their daily bread either by crime, family support, or subsistence employment. These youth subcultures gather around shared music, slang, modes of dress, and sense of community. They want to shock “normal” people and repudiate mainstream institutions and values — so much so that some Marxist and postmodern scholars in the 1980s wistfully looked to these groups as a sort of new proletariat and debated the political meanings of their hairstyles and piercings. In fact, these alternative lifestyles are almost always temporary and generate little political clout. For some, their participation in radical youth subcultures ends tragically, with imprisonment or even premature death. In other cases, participants eventually rejoin “normal life,” hold down jobs, and raise families, although they may do these things with a countercultural style. As they are temporary and economically derivative, extreme youth subcultures should be viewed as part of the larger social structure, not something separate from it. They may well function as “safety valves” that allow a certain amount of youthful unrest to be dissipated. These groups also take up the slack when young people find themselves in conflict with or abandoned by families, schools, employers, and other institutions that should be helping them.

Few adolescent Christians come from the ranks of gangs or other extreme subcultures. The structures of youth ministry, born among the middle class, have little appeal in these alternative worlds. In addition, middle-class parents have little desire to see their children hanging out with these scary characters. Those who do minister to these groups must do so using different strategies and often separate structures not closely connected to middle-class congregations. On the other hand, the dress, slang, and music of extreme youth subcultures are often attractive to middle-class kids. So
the most aggressively juvenilizing youth ministers try to use some of these subcultural styles, while trying to purge them of their more offensive content. Even in the most conformist, middle-class, white youth group, you will find at least metaphoric talk of rebellion against the status quo. Often adolescent Christians dream of rebelling against the system, and dread turning out just like their parents. They create churches that often settle for symbolic rebellion rather than substantive social change.

**Adolescence and Culture**

The developmental and structural elements of adolescence provide raw materials for meaning making. For example, adults assign threatening meanings to the physical changes that come with puberty. Girls are now potential sexual deviants. Boys are now potential criminals. Why not reverse these stereotypes? After all, more boys than girls are sexually active, and have been for at least a century. But the facts rarely get in the way of a powerful cultural belief. Adults spend a lot of time talking about whether young people are basically good or bad, idealistic or apathetic, spiritual or secular, and so on.

Adolescence is a life stage perfectly suited to be a screen upon which adults can project their worst fears and highest hopes. In the lives of teenagers, adults think they are getting a first glimpse at the future of their society and its institutions. Do adolescents seem to be embracing the values and behaviors we want them to embrace? All is well. Are they dropping out and forming their own deviant subcultures? Our society must be fundamentally flawed. And often, the next step is, “We have the solution to the crisis, and you must support our organization before it is too late.” Because adults readily accept extreme, unsubstantiated pronouncements about young people, almost any program of juvenilization can be sold to a church so long as leaders push the right buttons.

Adolescent churches are more likely to conform to the supposed needs or desires of young people than they are to shoulder the more difficult task of spiritually forming the young. Indeed, in adolescent churches, leaders use talk about the preferences of “young people today” as a ploy to avoid the conflict that would result if adults talked openly about their opposing visions for the Christian life. At other times, adults use cultural beliefs about youth as an excuse to delegate their problems and disagreements to the next generation.
The structures of adolescence also provide grist for the mill of meaning making. For example, in the 1930s, thousands of young people were unemployed due to the Great Depression, so adults discovered a problem group they called “out of school youth.” Suddenly adults decided that all teenagers needed to get a high school diploma in order to become good citizens and productive workers. In earlier, more prosperous decades, when industries needed more unskilled workers, fewer adults cared whether young people were in school or in the factory.

The meanings adults read into the lives of young people take on the power to shape the experience of adolescence itself. For example, once adults decided that every teenager needed a high school diploma, students who did not earn one were stigmatized as “dropouts.” Those who stayed in school found themselves subjected to a curriculum that was often far removed from the realities of their lives and did little to provide the skills they would need upon graduation. Instead of aspiring to become adults, many settled into the new and exciting youth culture developing among their peers at school. Although adults often complain about the misbehavior of the young, these behaviors are logical outcomes of the contradictory messages adult society has been sending them. Adolescent behavior often reflects the actual, lived values of society, not just its ideals.

In addition, adolescence as a grab bag of meanings has come to shape even the experience of being an adult in American culture. Americans are ambivalent about whether they want to grow up or not. On the one hand, most high school students want to be treated like adults, and many demand full adult privileges regarding alcohol use, sex, and other behaviors. On the other hand, many college students do not consider themselves adults. Developmental psychologists have even identified a new life stage they call “emerging adulthood” as a way to acknowledge that even many college graduates do not see themselves as adults. They have many years left of their youthful searching and self-development. One reason for this confusion about adult status is that the very idea of becoming an adult has taken on negative connotations. As a result, many young adults find the forced transitions to adult status that may come with full-time employment, marriage, or childbirth to be emotionally traumatic. Many Americans don’t like to think of themselves as adults, because it implies that the good part of their lives may be over. Advertisers recognize this fact and market products with the promise that they will perpetuate the buyer’s youthfulness.

Individual adolescent development, the social structures that house
adolescents, and the cultural beliefs that we assign to them constantly influence each other. Because this three-way relationship is so complex and powerful, juvenilization is hard to recognize and even harder to influence. With everything moving at once, it can be hard to find a secure place to stand, take a breath, and make wise choices. Misunderstanding this dynamic interaction or neglecting one of its elements leads to bad decisions about how to adapt the Christian faith to the needs of rising generations.

A Vision for Spiritual Maturity

Why should anyone care about juvenilization? Early in my college teaching career, I asked a group of my students, “What does a mature Christian look like?” They disliked the question and resisted answering it. “I don’t think we ever arrive in our spiritual growth.” “We’re not supposed to judge one another.” “No one is perfect in this life.” Sadly, these evangelical college students did not believe that Christian maturity was either attainable or desirable. The churches that had nurtured these young people well enough to get them to pursue a Christian college education had not managed to inspire them with a biblical vision of spiritual maturity.

Neither the life stage of adolescence nor individual young people are ultimately to blame for creating an immature faith. Adolescents have good developmental reasons for at least sometimes thinking and acting in an immature fashion. But it is harder to explain why adults feel free to neglect the character traits of Christian maturity. Of course, we must also celebrate the fact that some very good things have come from injecting more “youth” into American Christianity. And it is important to recognize that not everything that a culture labels as “adult” is necessarily a good reflection of Christian maturity.

Still, unchecked juvenilization does tend to undermine Christian maturity over time. Only by learning from the victories and defeats of the past can we hope to achieve spiritual maturity in our individual lives and in the corporate lives of our churches. And only intergenerational communities of people devoted to mature Christianity can build seawalls high enough to hold back the tide of juvenilization that has now risen high enough to threaten all of us.
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All politics today is youth politics.  
_The Doom of Youth, 1932_

No part of the population is affected more vitally or occupies a more essential position in time of war or world crisis than youth.  
_A Program of Action for American Youth, 1939_

Youth ministry as we know it today, with its power to shape the future of American Christianity, was born in an hour of world crisis. As the traumas of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War followed each other in quick succession, people started to speak of a “crisis of civilization.” They had reason to fear that their children might see the end of economic prosperity, democracy, and religious freedom.

Young people seemed to be both key actors in the international political drama and especially vulnerable victims of the times. So an amazingly broad spectrum of leaders both inside and outside the churches proclaimed that youth held the key to saving civilization. Most Americans not only nodded their heads in agreement, they opened their wallets to fund new youth organizations.

By capitalizing on fears about youth and the crisis of civilization, Christian youth leaders and young people were able to launch some much-needed reforms in their churches. Young people pioneered racial integration, created new and exciting methods of evangelism, and gained a new-
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found sense of their own political power. These changes were at first restricted to youth environments, but they would eventually reshape the lives of adults as well. Although they may not have single-handedly saved civilization, the Christian youth leaders of this era did help thousands of young people become stronger, more active Christians who made a difference in their society.

Youth leaders believed they were catching the wave of the future and channeling the innate power of young people. They were also building one of the engines that would drive juvenilization in subsequent decades. In a world of impending doom, who could argue against doing whatever it took to Christianize and mobilize the young saviors of the world?

The Crisis of Civilization and the “Youth Problem”

The Great Depression and World War II created significant suffering and new temptations for young people, but adults too easily assumed a close connection between these problems and the possible shipwreck of their civilization. For one thing, unemployment hit young people hard. As of 1936, an estimated 4.7 million Americans between the ages of 16 and 24 were unemployed. This number represented about one-third of all the unemployed in the country. In 1932 a railroad policeman in El Paso estimated that he saw 200 transients come through each day, at least half of whom were under twenty-five years old. The problem of indigent youth took on a threatening racial and sexual significance with the arrest of the Scottsboro boys in 1931. This widely publicized incident happened among the swarms of young people who were wandering from city to city by catching illegal rides on freight trains. Two young white girls accused nine African Americans of raping them. Although the boys were convicted, years later it would become clear that the accusations were false. African American and white parents had radically different interpretations of the case, but all found it deeply troubling.1

Adults responded to the threat of unemployed, unsupervised young people by pushing them all to go to high school. Ironically, this new expectation that most teenagers should go to high school made the dropout problem seem worse than it had before.2 In their dreams about the possible benefits of a high school education, most adults chose to ignore the way that they were using schools as a place to warehouse young people and keep them off the streets.
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But keeping kids in school was not enough. Adults also worried that unemployed young people would get in trouble during their leisure time. One 1942 curriculum designed to lead high school students through a study of the youth problem contained the following exercise: “Study the life of the French nobility during the 75 years preceding the French revolution. Was there a fruitful and creative use of leisure?” In hindsight it seems ridiculous to think that the young men hanging out on street corners or the young women trying to pick up soldiers would somehow lead America down the path of bloody political revolution. But at the time no one batted an eye at such outrageous ideas.

To be fair, anything seemed possible in a world in which a tyrant like Hitler could rise to power with the help of a fanatical youth movement. Many feared that communists or fascists could manipulate unemployed, idealistic young Americans just as easily. The Student Strikes for Peace in 1934 and 1935 and youth marches on Washington organized by the American Youth Congress seemed to confirm these fears. Some believed the AYC was a “communist front” and viewed its activities with alarm. President Roosevelt addressed the young people who marched on Washington and scolded them for listening to political extremists. The American Communist Party was at its zenith of strength during the Great Depression, so fears about it were not entirely unfounded.

Whether or not young Americans were about to sign on with the communists or fascists, many adults insisted that something drastic had to be done to properly direct the political power of youth. Literature on the “youth problem” proliferated with titles like How Fare American Youth?; Youth a World Problem; The Lost Generation: A Portrait of American Youth Today; Christian Youth and the Economic Problem and even Doom of Youth. Adult fears about the fate of America came to rest squarely on the shoulders of young people.

Preaching the Youth Problem

Christian youth leaders seized the day and proclaimed that they held the key to saving youth and civilization. In the process, they also convinced themselves of the political power and apocalyptic significance of young people. Mainline Protestants proclaimed that the world was doomed unless Christian young people would devote themselves to social action. Participants in the 1935 national youth conference of the Methodist Episcopal
Church, South, heard talks with titles like “The Church and the World Crisis” and “Youth and World Trends.” In the latter address, Dr. Ivan Lee Holt described conditions in Europe and Asia where he had seen “armies of fighting youth who are willing to give their lives in mad devotion to the cruel policies of dictators.” Like many adults of the era, Holt used these young people as a double warning to Americans. On the one hand, American youth needed to be careful not to be duped by demagogues. At the same time, they should imitate the intense devotion of Communist and Hitler youth. Many in attendance assumed that young people would lead the way in transforming the world, and that the rest of the church might need to scramble to keep up. As Sterling F. Wheeler, a senior at Southern Methodist University, put it in his speech at the same conference, “youth today realizes that the Church offers the greatest promise, youth stands ready and eager to live faithfully, fight courageously, yes, to die for the Church if need be. But youth is not willing to sit idly by and do nothing in the face of world crises!”

Evangelical Protestants insisted that only mass evangelization of young people could save the world from destruction. At the founding convention of Youth for Christ International in 1945, Rev. Torrey Johnson warned that if they failed in their task of world evangelization, “we who are here will be held responsible for the greatest tragedy in human history — we are headed either for a definite turning toward God or the greatest calamity ever to strike the human race.” He called for an all-out evangelistic effort directed at postwar Germany to prevent that country from going Communist. He reassured the delegates that “if Hitler could make the youth in a nation move with his program, God, by the Holy Spirit, ought to be able to get the same youth into a program of His kind and it has to be done.” The secret to saving the world, Johnson insisted, was to “challenge young people with the job that needs to be done around the world.”

African American Baptists used the specter of angry young men to argue that adults needed to get rid of segregation and discrimination before it was too late. In 1934 George E. Haynes, Executive Secretary of the Federal Council of Churches Department of Race Relations, addressed the National Baptist Convention on the topic “The Crisis Confronting the American Negro and the Negro Churches.” Integral to his diagnosis of the crisis was his concern that “our young people will no longer accept the soft pabulum” they had traditionally been fed in church. Instead, they were becoming increasingly open to communist propaganda. Un-
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less the church led society in offering real-world solutions to the economic crisis, chaos and tyranny might overtake America. Sounding a similar note in 1945, William H. Jernagin, President of the Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress, warned that “Johnnie G.I.” would not put up with the old injustices. He proposed a comprehensive program of reform that included anti-lynching legislation, voting rights, and federal employment regulations.⁸

Roman Catholic Bishop James Kearney gave an especially revealing speech in 1937. While participating in a radio panel on the potentially boring topic of “The Organization of a Youth Program,” he felt the need to give an electrifying warning. “We are blind to what is happening around us if we do not see that we live in a truly critical and crucial age in which changes are being brought about that will control course and direction to ensuing generations — or perhaps even centuries,” he said. Kearney articulated what many Americans felt when he described a future offering two contrasting paths. One led to “liberty, economic security, and human dignity,” the other to “state control and regimented slavery in the economic, social and spiritual order.” What would decide the outcome? His answer was clear: “the character of the ensuing age will be determined by the philosophy of life which we give to the young people of this present generation.” Kearney drew a parallel between adolescence and the crisis of the age. The young person faced the “hottest stage” in the warfare of life “when he is assailed by a tumultuous confederacy of lawless passions and desires; and it is in that awful crisis, that period on which, like a pivot, may hang his triumph or defeat, he needs all the aids of religion.”⁹

The battle for the future of civilization became quite literally the battle for the souls and bodies of youth. One reason young people acquired such symbolic power during the crisis years was that the potential, peril, and confusion of adolescence seemed to parallel the distress of American civilization. Whatever the truth behind such sentiments, many Americans heard these messages and started to agree.

Christian Youth Work Gains Public Influence

Through their relentless campaigning, Christian youth leaders influenced the public conversation about the youth problem. The American Council on Education established the American Youth Commission in 1935 to
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study the problems of youth in light of the “long-continued world crisis.” In 1939, the AYC issued a report that included praise for the role of religion in solving the youth problem: “for moral action, there is only one rational basis, namely, the conviction of our accountability to the Power that gave us being. The brotherhood of man is an idle dream unless there is a recognition of the fatherhood of God.” The report went on to observe: “it is significant that every attack by contemporary tyrannical governments on human rights has begun with an assault on religion.” Although the economic needs of youth had to be tackled, the report concluded that “a program for strengthening the nation that looks to youth and to the future will in itself be a source of vitality and of spiritual strength even though physical accomplishments are still to come.” In other words, youth programs could at least protect youth and teach them good values, even if they couldn’t solve the problem of unemployment. The report called for an all-out effort to help youth, because “national survival” hung in the balance. Even this non-sectarian panel of youth experts believed that religion would play a crucial role in saving the nation by saving its youth.

The reports of the American Youth Commission were widely quoted by those concerned about the youth problem and prompted the establishment of the National Youth Administration. The NYA tried to provide job skills and political indoctrination for young people who were out of work, while keeping them off the streets and out of trouble. Compared to other New Deal departments, the NYA never accomplished much and its programs remained tiny. The better-known Civilian Conservation Corps impacted more young people. But whatever their scope, the very existence of such programs confirmed that at the highest levels, Americans saw the “youth problem” as important.

Because theirs had been some of the most persuasive voices proclaiming the youth problem and offering solutions, Christian youth leaders gained new power to influence public policy and new respect in society at large. Catholic educator George Johnson played a prominent role in the American Youth Commission. African American Christian educator Mary McLeod Bethune served as the Director of the Division of Negro Affairs for the National Youth Administration. NYA staff member Charles Taussig courted Protestant youth organizations and hoped to start a “democratic education” program in churches to indoctrinate youth in the politics of the New Deal. Even fundamentalist leaders like Jack Wyrtzen could wield political influence at times. When a local mili-
tary officer refused to release his men to attend Wyrtzen’s Saturday night youth rally in New York City, a quick appeal up the chain of command straightened things out. The Hearst newspapers and several national news magazines portrayed the fledgling Youth for Christ movement as a potential answer to the problem of wartime juvenile delinquency. On one occasion, President Truman praised Youth for Christ as just what America needed.\textsuperscript{15}

Christian leaders did more than just revel in their newfound respect. Across the spectrum of American churches, concerned leaders founded new youth organizations between 1930 and 1945. The National Council of Churches put new efforts into their United Christian Youth Movement. Mainline Protestant denominations founded new youth ministries or reorganized their national youth programs with an eye toward youthful social action. Evangelical Protestants founded new interdenominational youth organizations like Youth for Christ and Young Life, which used innovative methods to evangelize the young. Roman Catholics founded the Catholic Youth Organization, Young Christian Workers, and Young Christian Students. They also created a Youth Department in the National Catholic Welfare Conference. African American Christians did not found new organizations, but their efforts to help young people garnered new support from both church members and outsiders as a result of national concerns about the youth problem. Not since the late nineteenth century had there been so many new Christian youth programs. Considering the scarcity of resources during the Great Depression and the national mobilization for World War II, it is amazing that so much time, effort, and money went into Christian youth work.

Christian leaders agreed that they needed to solve the “youth problem” if the nation was to survive its “crisis of civilization.” But they did not agree on how best to protect young people from evil influences or mobilize them to save the world. The powerful drive to save the world created space for a rich variety of religious innovations. Young people and their leaders found themselves able to ignore their critics and do things they had never done before. Some actively tried to rebuild America using Christian economic and political principles. Others tirelessly preached the gospel so that young people would be converted to Christ. Still others tried to provide recreational and educational programs for young people in order to turn them into productive citizens. These innovations strengthened the churches and convinced both adults and young people that youth really were politically powerful.
Youth Building a Christian Social Order

Mainline Protestant youth leaders like those who ran the Methodist Youth Department dreamed of mobilizing young people to build a “Christian social order.” In the early 1930s, Blaine Kirkpatrick and Owen Geer took over the Youth Department of the main northern branch of Methodism. According to their plan, each local youth fellowship would elect officers and establish committees on devotional life, world evangelism, social service, and recreation. Adults would serve as advisors whose role was to help young people discover the truth for themselves and become solid democratic citizens and leaders. A popular manual promised that through their discussions, committee meetings, group projects, and wholesome recreation Methodist youth would not only “win folks to Christ” but also “help build a Christian social order.”

Aware that local church youth clubs might struggle to create a “Christian social order” on their own, Kirkpatrick and Geer also organized the National Conference of Methodist Youth in 1934. Since they believed young Methodists could play a key role in the crisis of civilization, it seemed natural to them to create an organization modeled on a legislative assembly. They intended this group to be a “democratic” organization that would serve as the voice of Methodist youth, and they hoped that this voice would be politically progressive. The 1,000 college students and teenagers elected each year to the conference more than fulfilled their leaders’ expectations. They endorsed the Student Strike for Peace, raised money to help carry the Hamilton-Reynolds case against compulsory ROTC training to the Supreme Court, and adopted resolutions containing statements like “we denounce our present capitalistic system.” They also protested racial segregation at major denominational conferences. Many young Methodists pledged themselves not to participate in any war declared by the United States. Their ideal was one of “Christian citizenship” that put loyalty to the ideals of Jesus above loyalty to the state. They deplored both the capitalist greed and the virulent nationalism that were pushing the world toward war.

Such successes are all the more striking in light of the strong opposition these pioneers faced. Alarmed by what seemed to be a rising tide of communist-inspired activism, some church members pressured the Methodist Board of Education to fire Kirkpatrick and Geer in 1936. Young Methodists strongly protested this action, as did The Christian Century, the leading voice of liberal Protestantism. Although the young officers of the
National Conference of Methodist Youth did not sever their relationship with the denominational Youth Department, relations were strained for some years.¹⁸

But conservative opposition did not dampen youthful enthusiasm. The young Methodists who attended national conferences became even more active in the late 1930s and early 1940s. They lobbied against the draft, made national news by writing an open letter to President Roosevelt denouncing his support for the war in Europe, and disrupted the Methodist General Conference in 1940 by passing out handbills denouncing guest speaker Senator Martin Dies as a pro-war legislator. Some young Methodists even refused to register for the draft, while others accepted conscientious-objector status.¹⁹

Young Methodists were also very active in the cause of racial justice. When the northern and southern Methodist churches reunited in 1940, members of the National Conference of Methodist Youth lobbied denominational leaders asking them to create an integrated governing structure for the new denomination. Unfortunately, the church retained the segregated Central Jurisdiction for its African American congregations. Members of one Methodist Youth Fellowship in Dallas successfully pressured local officials to build a new black high school. Others raised money for the relief of interned Japanese Americans and spent part of their summer vacation providing services to victims of internment. In the summer of 1945, teenagers at one Methodist youth camp in Iowa reportedly treated their two Japanese American campers as “heroes.” Regional youth leaders integrated their summer camps by inviting African Americans in at least token numbers during the war. Even in the Deep South, young whites protested the exclusion of black Methodists from their camp facilities.²⁰ These interracial and anti-war activities were extremely countercultural and demonstrated the power of national youth conferences and regional camps to foster a vision for social reform among young Methodists.

This rising tide of youthful activism caused politically progressive Methodists, both young and old, to see young people as a natural opposition party in church and society. In 1941 Herman Will exhorted his fellow delegates to the National Conference of the Methodist Youth Fellowship to become a “democratic” and “creative” force in church and society. By “creative,” he meant that they “should break new ground where institutional boards and commissions often bound by red tape and conservatism dare not venture.” Young Methodists learned to see themselves as potential leaders. A Catholic bishop who was an adult convert from Methodism...
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complained in the 1950s that as a young Methodist he had been taught to expect to exert influence as a leader in society, whereas Catholic young people did not seem to get that message.\(^{21}\)

At the end of the war, many socially concerned Methodists were confident that youth would take the lead in their church’s bold plan for postwar reform. Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam helped launch a church-wide campaign for social reform labeled the “Crusade for a New World Order.” At a Methodist youth conference in 1946, renowned liberal Dr. Kirby Page told the attendees that if they could just educate 1 million Methodists to support “world government” and oppose the arms race with Russia, they could sway the entire church, and the church could influence the United States government. Page delivered this stirring exhortation at a Methodist camp in Fayetteville, Arkansas, which had just that year agreed to feed and house a black conference speaker even though white young people had been demanding a change in the camp’s policy since 1938.\(^{22}\) Perhaps swaying the Methodist church might be hard enough, never mind creating a “new world order.” Despite ongoing opposition from social and political conservatives, Methodist reformers interpreted their successful national youth conferences of the 1930s and 1940s as clear evidence that they stood on the cusp of a dramatic Christian transformation of society that would begin with the young.

Saving the World by Launching a Youth Revival

On Memorial Day 1945, some 70,000 people gathered at Soldier Field for a “Victory Rally” sponsored by Chicagoland Youth for Christ. Organizers provided an exciting spectacle that combined intense evangelistic fervor with staunch patriotism. The event began with a posting of the American and Christian flags by a color guard of local high school ROTC cadets. A choir of 2,500 young people provided music. Four hundred nurses marched in the form of a giant cross. Servicemen and their families received recognition in the form of a twelve-foot gold star. Sergeant Bert Frizen testified to the need for Christian faith among young soldiers. Champion runner Gil Dodds ran an exhibition lap before testifying to the crowd that “running is only a hobby. My mission is teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Finally, Percy Crawford, fundamentalist youth ministry pioneer, preached an evangelistic message and asked for a show of hands of those who wanted to accept Jesus Christ as savior. One pastor in attendance crowed that the event
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“out-colossalized the movies.” Youth for Christ president Torrey Johnson later recalled that on that May afternoon in 1945 more war bonds were sold than at any other single gathering held during the war. Just days after this event, Johnson wired Rev. Martin Niemoller in Germany to offer Youth for Christ’s services to bring Nazi youth back to Christ.23

Youth for Christ had its roots in the independent efforts of a new generation of fundamentalist preachers like Jack Wyrtzen in New York and Torrey Johnson in Chicago. These men raised money with the help of local businessmen and rented public auditoriums in downtown areas. The typical Saturday night youth rally featured a live radio broadcast, upbeat music that mimicked the crooner and big-band styles of the day, brief “testimonies” by recent converts, and short, fervent sermons tied to current events.24

This mix of entertainment, evangelism, and patriotism sounded just the right note during the fearful days of World War II. On weekend evenings during the war, the streets of many cities filled with a crowd of soldiers and local youths all searching for a good time. YFC rallies adapted to the mobility and emotional needs created by wartime conditions more effectively than traditional Sunday schools and youth meetings. Both participants and sympathetic outsiders stressed YFC as the answer to wartime restlessness and danger. One sailor converted at a rally told reporters,

I have felt almost adrift, with no sense of security. I don’t want to get caught in the current of vice. I need something to stabilize me and in my new faith in Christ, I have found it.25

But in the eyes of YFC enthusiasts, the conversions at these rallies did more than just keep young people out of trouble. They also contributed to the war effort. The souvenir program for the 1944 Chicago Victory Rally told the story of Kenneth Kirby, another young sailor who had made a point of witnessing to “every man on board” his ship. No doubt readers felt a pang of both grief and excitement when they read that “faithful to that task, sailor Kirby went down with 165 others when his destroyer sank recently. Some of them are in Glory tonight because of his testimony.”26

Young people continually exposed to such stories learned that their conversion and witnessing for Christ would not only provide a sense of inner peace but might also play a role in America’s war effort. They also may have learned, by implication, that a death in service of country could be viewed as a sort of Christian martyrdom.
YFC leaders saw themselves as the solution to the wartime problem of “juvenile delinquency.” Reporters once asked Johnson what Youth for Christ could have done for the university sophomore in Chicago who had recently been arrested for burglaries and murder. In reply, he told them the story of Perry Jackman, a thirteen-year-old from Salt Lake City. One Saturday night Perry, with a gun in his pocket, approached a young woman with the intention of robbing her. Instead, with “God-given courage” she invited Perry to the Youth for Christ rally. They rode the streetcar together to the rally, and while there, Perry was converted.27

By the end of the war, about 1 million teenagers gathered every Saturday night in 900 churches and auditoriums across the country for Youth for Christ rallies. Overseas, military servicemen started their own rallies and discovered a taste for Christian service that would lead some of them to found missionary, humanitarian, and evangelistic organizations in the postwar era. Chief among these was the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, whose leader got his start as a preacher for Youth for Christ.28

The leaders of Youth for Christ did not think they were just providing a wholesome alternative for young people on Saturday night. They planned to solve the world’s problems by evangelizing youth. Torrey Johnson, the newly elected president of Youth for Christ International, presented his vision for the group in two sermons delivered at its 1945 youth convention. Johnson believed that YFC rallies held the key to saving the world because “after all, who are the people that are saved in revivals? The answer is — YOUNG PEOPLE!” Yet his vision went beyond the youth of America. YFC needed to reach Germany with the gospel, because a communist postwar Germany would “directly affect us.”29 He exhorted evangelical teenagers to solve the crisis by devoting themselves to world evangelization. “America cannot survive another twenty-five years like the last . . . If we have another lost generation . . . America is sunk,” he warned. He blamed the failure to reach the “lost generation” of the 1920s on the adults of the inter-war years: “all you older friends, get this: It’s your fault that we have to speak simply to our young people, and I’ll tell you why. It’s because our young people have been betrayed by the generation that went before.” Although they had failed to pass on the faith before, they must not fail now, because “fellows that were out in the hell of Guadalcanal and through the thick of the invasion of Normandy and on the Anzio beachhead — they are the boys that will rule this country. We have to reach them for Christ, or God help us.”30 According to Johnson and his fellow Youth for Christ leaders, an army of teenage evangelists could rebuild the world.
and root out evil political systems. No doubt the young people present felt a heightened sense of their own significance in God’s plan for saving the world.

Although most of the public attention generated by the massive Youth for Christ rallies was positive, a few voices questioned the political leanings of the movement. Harold Fey of the Christian Century observed that at YFC rallies, “the war is presented as a holy crusade” and “the service of Christ and the military service of country are equated.” He worried that many of the financial backers of the movement were “theologically and socially conservative business men” and even quoted one such supporter who liked the fact that YFC provided an alternative to “the social gospel kind of preaching.” Less careful critics assumed that YFC was a front for right-wing politics. They noted ominously that conservative newspaper baron William Randolph Hearst gave the movement extensive coverage. Even worse, fascist sympathizer and fundamentalist preacher Gerald L. K. Smith, who had been recently charged with sedition, had publicly endorsed the movement. At one point, the Christian Century tried to rein in the escalating accusations by publishing an article, “Has Youth for Christ Gone Fascist?” The author recalled that from the beginning some had feared the movement might be “a cloak to cover the efforts of a group of fascist-minded business men to capture the mind of American young people for their own purposes.” But such charges had never been proven. Recently, plans to establish a Youth for Christ rally on the south side of Chicago in a heavily black neighborhood had prompted cries of “Jim Crow Christianity” in some quarters, much to the dismay of the black church leaders involved in the planning. In response to the uproar, the author offered a cautious defense of the movement, admitting that since its leaders were “little concerned with the social or ethical bearing of the Christian life” they might blunder into alliances with groups who would try to exploit their mass appeal. He concluded that so far the group had not been drawn into such unholy political alliances, but implied that socially progressive Christians should keep an eye on the group.31

When asked to comment on these allegations, Torrey Johnson insisted that YFC had no ties with William Randolph Hearst or Gerald L. K. Smith and that they wanted nothing to do with “anyone with a political axe to grind” because their movement was “100% religious.” Early promotional materials for the movement insisted that it was “inter-church, non-political, and non-sectarian.” One brochure even claimed that the overwhelmingly white movement was “inter-racial.” In fairness, even one of

31
YFC’s critics had to admit that “at every YFC meeting I have attended, I have noticed a few Negro members.” It seems ridiculous in hindsight to see Youth for Christ as fascist, but then again, the Methodist Youth Fellowship was not communist, either. These feverish accusations on all sides vividly demonstrate the political significance many Americans read into youth groups during the crisis years. On the other hand, it was naïve and somewhat misleading of Johnson and other YFC leaders to claim political neutrality when their rallies dripped with patriotism and rang with calls to save the world from political disaster and the nation from moral corruption.

Youth for Christ leaders considered their movement a success against the crisis of civilization. They modernized revivalism, won respect in the secular press, and appealed to young people by combining entertainment, an appealing spirituality, and the powerful language linking youth and the crisis of civilization. It remained to be seen whether their appealing combination of youth-friendly revivalism and American patriotism would produce the army of young evangelists needed to save the world.

Saving America by Making It More Catholic

Roman Catholic youth leaders were sure that their church could solve the youth problem and save the world. But they could not agree on whether to save America by keeping youth Catholic, by making them better Americans, or by mobilizing them to create a society based on Catholic social teaching.

The traditional approach had been to create separate youth institutions to form young Catholics in distinctive ways of thinking and living. One of the main purposes of Catholic schools had always been to form strong Catholic identities so that young people would grow up resistant to the influences of Protestant (or secular) America. As Bishop Kearney put it, the most crucial task of youth work was to give young people the right “philosophy of life,” by which he meant a Catholic philosophy of life. In the 1930s, many Catholics believed that Catholic schools should be their first choice for forming their children. Pope Pius XI’s 1929 encyclical *The Christian Education of Youth* had insisted that only the Church and the family could provide the type of education that could produce a good society. The 1917 code of canon law had commanded Catholic parents to send their children to Catholic schools.

Although many Catholic parents in the United States took this obliga-
tion seriously, Catholic elementary school attendance typically outpaced high school attendance. Even though the number of pupils in Catholic high schools rose 54 percent between 1934 and 1945, the majority of young Catholics still attended public high schools, or none at all. Yet throughout this period high school attendance was on the rise, meaning that more and more young Catholics breathed the spiritually harmful atmosphere of the public high school. Believing that the “youth problem” demanded a vigorous and innovative response, Catholic clergy, educators, and parents began exploring ways to spiritually influence young Catholics who did not take the preferred path of Catholic schooling.  

The leaders of the National Catholic Welfare Conference seized the moment and began planning a national youth program that would protect and care for young Catholics not covered by the Catholic school system. The NCWC had been created by the American bishops during World War I to coordinate Catholic social, political, and humanitarian efforts. The organization had pioneered lay leadership by forming National Councils of Catholic Men and Women. In 1934, at the urging of papal delegate Amleto Giovanni Cicognani, these lay councils convened meetings to discuss the improvement of Catholic youth programs.

Over the next few years, these conferences combined extreme rhetoric about youth and crisis with recommendations for recreational programs and a dose of spirituality. In an address to the National Council of Catholic Women, Bishop Joseph Rummel warned of the urgent need for effective youth programs by noting that “at no time in the history of human experiences was there manifest such a vying and striving for the possession of the mind, the heart and the brawn of youth as is almost universally in evidence today.” But it seemed that this historic crisis was to be met with the same old recreational programs. As part of “The Call to Youth” radio broadcasts sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Women in 1938, Anne Hoolley outlined a four-fold program providing opportunities to “play, create, think, and pray.” She insisted that “if we could supply these, there would be no talk of a lost generation, no mournful head shaking over the outcome of youth.” By providing activities like “dramatics or music or painting or one of the crafts,” leaders would be satisfying deep human needs and saving civilization.

In 1940, the National Catholic Welfare Conference established a Youth Department, headed by Rev. Vincent Mooney, CSC. Both Mooney and his successor, Rev. Paul Tanner, tried to build a network of diocesan youth directors and support them with resources to improve Catholic youth work.
They also dreamed of establishing a system of youth councils that would begin at the parish level and culminate in a National Council of Catholic Youth. But unlike the National Conference of Methodist Youth, Tanner hoped these councils would have a pro-war, anti-communist influence. He wrote that the “possibilities of a Christian peace” depended upon American Catholics and that “upon articulate, informed youth groups depends the formation of popular American Catholic opinion.” Tanner urged his fellow youth leaders to keep up the good fight against subversive youth groups with their “pacifistic disloyalty to God and country” and replaced them with the American majority values of “religion, filial piety, humility.”

Nothing much came of these efforts during the war, but they laid the foundation for the postwar emergence of a model of Catholic youth work that emphasized purity, piety, and patriotism.

Many Catholic leaders of the 1930s and 1940s claimed to possess a definitive Christian blueprint for social reform — and a mandate from the pope to put it into action. Emboldened by the desperate needs of their nation, they dreamed of reforming society along the lines of what they called “Catholic social teaching.” The Catholic answer to social ills received renewed attention with the promulgation of Quadragesimo Anno in 1931. Following Pius XI’s direction in this encyclical, progressive Catholics condemned communism, fascism, and unrestrained capitalism alike. In place of these they preached economic cooperation between labor and management to be achieved via the “living wage” and other social welfare measures. Even as they criticized inequity in America and supported labor unions, many Catholic activists also insisted that papal social teachings and true American values were fully compatible, usually without explaining just how the two fit together. The pope also created a new term, “Catholic action,” to describe his ideal of lay activism in which committed Catholics, working in close cooperation with the clergy, would re-Christianize society. American Catholics of all stripes seized on this label and applied it to their activities.

But the mere existence of a Catholic social blueprint and a stirring ideal of “Catholic action” did not eliminate all questions of how to solve the “youth problem” and save America. Some, like Bishop Bernard Sheil of Chicago, tried to take Catholic youth work into the mainstream by creating agencies designed to benefit the entire community. In 1930 he founded the Catholic Youth Organization in direct response to his experience as a chaplain for young offenders in the Cook County Jail. The CYO worked to keep kids off the streets using boxing tournaments, community recreation
centers, and vocational schools. Sheil also promoted Catholic social teaching by adding the Sheil School of Social Studies and a Social Services Department to the CYO. His strategy was to offer the resources of the church to the public as a solution to the crisis of youth unemployment and crime. He insisted that “youth is not a problem” but realized that working-class Catholic boys were especially well represented among unemployed and delinquent youth. He presented Catholic recreational activities as providing political help to the nation by protecting young Americans from the communists. He even claimed that boxing had brought many young men back to the sacraments. Teaching boys moral and democratic values through sports was a way to establish American middle-class credentials for a Catholic population still viewed with suspicion by the Protestants who ran the country at the time. His portrayal of the CYO boys as “America’s team,” drawn from every race and religious background, reflected his fond hope that Catholics could be full partners in American society without losing their distinctiveness.

Sheil’s model gained national recognition and prompted imitators. When he called these leaders together for a national conference in 1938, sixty-five dioceses sent 102 delegates. By 1940 the CYO claimed to be touching the lives of 250,000 young people annually. Forty summer day camps served 14,600 participants with a staff of 1,133 volunteers. In a show of cooperation typical of Sheil’s programs, employees of the Works Progress Administration, National Youth Administration, and Chicago Park District joined nuns, seminarians, and Catholic college students to staff these “vacation schools.” Many were held in city parks. Of course such cooperation limited the explicit religious content of the vacation schools; no longer did the youngsters learn to sing the mass as they had in the early days. On the other hand, Sheil did not soften his staunchly progressive political agenda. He publicly criticized the right-wing radio priest Father Charles Coughlin. He also denounced racism and the exploitation of labor. One conservative critic even accused him of being a communist.39

Sheil’s vision of an inclusive, politically progressive, yet distinctively Catholic youth-serving agency still seemed too compromising in the eyes of other Catholic activists. Since everyone in the 1930s claimed they were doing “Catholic action,” some leaders, like Monsignor Reynold Hillenbrand of the Chicago Archdiocese, started describing their youth organizations as “specialized Catholic action.” The leaders of this movement modeled their activities on those of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn in Belgium. Cardijn had created the “Young Christian Workers” as a Catholic alterna-
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tive to the heavily communist labor movements of Europe. The idea was for Catholic factory workers to meet in small groups called “cells” that would “observe” conditions in their neighborhoods and workplaces, “judge” those conditions in light of Catholic social teaching (often under the guidance of a priest advisor), and “act” together to improve their workplaces and neighborhoods. This process of “observe, judge, act” was called the “inquiry method.”

Leaders of the movement in the United States believed that the best hope lay not in creating a mass movement of Catholic youth, but rather in training and deploying an elite corps of what they liked to call “young apostles” who would transform society. The leaders of the Young Christian Workers also differed from other socially concerned Catholics like Sheil in that they took a more critical stance toward American society and its institutions. They were much more likely to see America as unchristian and in need of some serious reform.

The young Catholics who joined the Young Christian Workers in the 1930s and 1940s felt the excitement of participating in a world-changing movement. One early participant recalled:

I was attracted to the YCW by the people involved in it and by the potential for revolutionizing the face of the earth and therefore being involved in an important historical event which I anticipated as being immediate. (Oh, maybe it would take ten whole years to straighten things out!)

Whether it was through parochial schools, CYO boxing tournaments, Specialized Catholic Action, or parish youth councils, Catholics claimed to be able to fix America by saving its youth. World War II in particular provided a choice opportunity for Catholics, African Americans, and other “outsiders” to prove their loyalty and value to America. Young Catholics seemed to be mobilizing on every front to save America: on the battlefield, in the factories, and in their schools. Perhaps young people would lead Catholics from the margins to the center of American society.

Rebuking America for Its Failed Promises to Youth

Like other Christians, African American Baptists believed that young people might hold the key to saving civilization. At a regional youth gathering
in 1935, the Rev. W. H. Jernagin, president of the Sunday School and Baptist Training Union Congress, proclaimed that “young people can do more toward bringing the world back to God than all the other organizations or set-ups you might mention.”

Lethia Craig, president of the Women’s Auxiliary Convention of the National Baptist Convention, called for more extensive and efficient youth programs in the church using the following argument:

"Today as never before the nations of the world are realizing the importance of the training of youth. All are seeing that tomorrow’s world depends on today’s youth. The leaders of our great national organizations are realizing that the security of their power depends on what they put into the young people."

Stating explicitly what others left implicit, Craig argued that youth were a source of power.

Yet unlike their white counterparts, African American Baptists did not create new youth organizations during the crisis years. Instead of segregating young people into separate organizations, African American Baptists tended to integrate them into the life of the church. Rev. William H. Jernagin’s Baptist Training Union Congress drew adult and youth delegates to an annual conference for training in how to teach Sunday School and run youth programs. The local Baptist Training Union meeting typically took place on Sunday night and drew adults, teenagers, and children to a program of shared social activities and Bible lessons. The Women’s Auxiliary of the National Baptist Convention organized an age-graded program of clubs for children and youth, but at their national meetings, young women joined in common sessions with their elders. Besides Sunday School, the most common Baptist youth activity was a monthly “Youth Sunday” at which young people led the prayers, took up the offering, and sang in the choir. Preachers often used their sermons on Youth Sunday to exhort adults.

During the 1930s and 1940s, young African American Baptists shared a similar pattern of spiritual life with their elders and benefited from close interaction with adults.

Several factors account for the fact that black Baptist leaders tended to integrate young people into the life of the church rather than creating separate organizations. Limited resources, especially in small rural congregations, forced churches to offer a narrower range of program options. Yet even larger urban congregations did not build separate youth organiza-
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tions on the scale of their white counterparts. Separate youth organizations were less needed in the black community because families, churches, and schools cooperated more closely than they did in the white community. Many schools began the day with Bible reading and prayer. Preachers often addressed school assemblies. Educators intended the strict discipline and vigorous morality of the schools to impart confidence and ambition to young black people who faced a society intent on keeping them down. These dynamics proved especially powerful in middle-class urban congregations in which young people often interacted with their teachers both at school and in church. The Rev. Kelly Miller Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church in Nashville and noted civil rights leader, hinted at a deeper reason for the generational integration of the black church. In an address to Christian educators he complained that “too often we want our young people to be confined to certain categories. Indeed we wish to segregate them.” As victims of racial segregation, African American adults may have instinctively avoided the white model for age segregation.

Perhaps because they had personally suffered injustice, African American church leaders were even less likely than whites to blame young people for the problems of the world. W. H. Jernagin told gatherings of young people that “the fault is clearly with Age” and that “the militancy of Christ’s gospel appeals especially to young people.” He criticized adults for creating a nation in which “The Bill of Rights are a mere scrap of paper, for millions have not the right to work.” He insisted that “The primary duty of the Christian church is to deal with the problems of this world here and now.” He denounced the “hypocrisy and duplicity” of white clergy who occasionally talked about “brotherhood” but did little about it. The new social order that so many Christians sought would be “impossible without first a new Christian attitude towards races.” Although young people needed to take an active role, African American youth leaders believed that adults were clearly to blame and held the greatest responsibility to fix the world.

More often than their white counterparts, African American clergy combined both the spiritual consolations of “old time religion” and an aggressive priority on social justice. The struggle to balance these sometimes competing priorities shaped the lives of well-educated clergy who began their pastorates in the 1930s and 1940s. For example, as a young man in a sharecropping family, Rev. Wade Hampton McKinney underwent a conversion experience, and especially remembered the spiritual sung at his baptism which emphasized separation from “the world.” While in sem-
inary he suffered from doubts as he learned more theology, but the memory of his conversion sustained him. Over time he became increasingly concerned with social justice. During his first pastorate in Flint, Michigan, he aroused controversy within his church because he got involved in labor disputes.

In his second pastorate in Cleveland, McKinney combined the roles of social prophet, community organizer, and gospel preacher. He unambiguously preached that only spiritual regeneration could save individuals and society. Yet he also told white community leaders that rates of crime and infant mortality were higher in the black community because “they are the most exploited group of any in our city.” McKinney worked closely with Sylvester Williams of the Christian Community Center to help meet such needs. He also organized a junior church, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, a youth fellowship, and sports teams. He criticized the modern tendency to call youthful sins “adolescent impulses” but he also denounced Americans for promoting sexual vice and greed while fighting a war to save the world. Like many African American leaders, he predicted that victory in the war could not save America unless it led to racial justice. “No immoral or selfish civilization can endure in a moral universe,” he warned. He also saw youth as key to the crisis. After the dropping of the atomic bomb, he often preached that “the only power that can save us from our science is moral power. If we cannot persuade the children of the next two or three generations to open their hearts to this moral power, then our world is doomed.”

His efforts inspired many young men and women to pursue higher education and the Christian ministry. One young church member praised McKinney for being a wise counselor, an inspiring preacher, and most of all because “he stands for the right and fights courageously for the welfare of the Negroes of Cleveland.” Compared to white Protestants, African Americans found it easier to combine concern for social justice with traditional gospel preaching. But like their white counterparts, African American youth leaders tended to idealize young people and overestimate their political clout.

Saving the World by Saving Youth

In the name of saving civilization by saving young people, Christian youth leaders juvenilized Christian political action and social concern. From now on, young people would be held up as the ideal political activists, social re-
formers, and patriots. Each branch of American Christianity had a different plan for saving young people and civilization. Yet they all believed that the young had a natural idealism, boundless energy, and an innate tendency to devote themselves to important but unpopular causes. Youth leaders sometimes blamed adults and called on them to fix the world for the sake of young people. But most often, youth leaders and those they influenced got in the habit of thinking of youth, not adults, as the most important reformers in church and society.

The people who most often heard this message were the young Christians who participated in the many large youth gatherings of the era. These future leaders learned that youth would always be the most important political and social force in the world, and by implication, not to expect much from themselves or others once they reached adulthood. According to this line of thinking, if adults were to accomplish anything of value in the political realm, they needed to become more like young people. In point of fact, young people are rarely in a position of political and social power, so this way of thinking led to a skewed view of reality that could easily lead to discouragement or frustration.

In the heat of battle and seemingly on the verge of dramatic victories, Christian youth leaders of the 1930s and 1940s found it easy to ignore some otherwise pressing questions that linger to this day. Are young people the problem, or the solution? Are American youth ready to be saviors of the world, or do they need to be saved first? Are young people natural political progressives? Do they really have the power to change society? Do adults really want them to be politically powerful, or would we prefer them politically quiet? How can young people fix adult problems? Do young people really fit the images we have of them, or want the “savior” roles we often demand of them?

Such questions could be ignored in the 1930s and 1940s, because the crisis of civilization allowed little room for armchair theologizing. The politically exciting Christian youth gatherings of that era also seemed to prove that young people were poised to save the world. Christian youth leaders and the young people who followed them unleashed a new and powerful engine of change in the churches. From then on, almost any innovation could be justified in the name of saving young people. Who could worry about the long-term impact of youth work on the church when the fate of civilization hung in the balance?
We just like to live and have a good time. We’re not in a hurry to grow up and get all serious and morbid like older people.

“We Teenage Girls.” The March of Time newsreel, 1945

By the end of the 1940s, those committed to enlisting youth in the serious business of saving the world competed against the all-encompassing social world of the high school, the enticements of youthful consumerism, and even the temptations of drinking, sex, and crime that contemporaries lumped together under the label “juvenile delinquency.” A few youth leaders occasionally worried that providing entertaining programs for teenagers might have little to do with solving the world’s problems. But for the most part they banished such doubts and clung to their belief that young people were a powerful force that would reform the church and save the world.

In one sense, it’s easy to see how youth leaders could have made this mistake. Although Americans felt intense jubilation at the end of World War II, their sense of relief gave way to renewed apprehension as they attempted to adjust to the idea of a potential nuclear war and a Cold War with no end in sight. Perhaps there was something new and different in their world, a perpetual “crisis of civilization” which could only be solved by shaping the next generation of Christian leaders. Many also feared a postwar economic depression. The outbursts of juvenile delinquency that many had blamed on wartime conditions seemed if anything to be waxing stronger after the war. With their imaginations held captive by such dramatic problems, Christian leaders assumed that the newly emerging middle-class youth culture was either a safe tool to use, or a trivial trend to ignore. For their part, young people pushed their
leaders to provide both exciting, entertaining experiences and ways to participate, at least symbolically, in world-saving crusades. Youth leaders set the stage for the juvenilization of Christianity by overestimating the political power of youth and underestimating the long-term effects of accommodating youth culture.

The Tip of the Iceberg: Juvenile Delinquents and “Bobby-Soxers”

Two stereotypes of troublesome young people grabbed headlines during the 1940s: juvenile delinquents and “bobby-soxers.” As with other youthful stereotypes, these images had some basis in fact. There was in fact a surge of youth crime, or at least heightened awareness of it, during the war, and there was a new and more visible girls’ culture. As often happens when adults observe teenage behavior they don’t like or understand, these new young people provoked much hand-wringing and even outrage. But in terms of the real experiences of young people, the juvenile delinquent and the bobby-soxer were but the tip of the iceberg. Beneath these often discussed but seldom understood stereotypes lay more foundational changes in the lives of a majority of young Americans that few adults truly recognized at the time.

Two newsreels of the 1940s illustrate what adults thought about juvenile delinquents and bobby-soxers. These newsreels appeared before feature films in theaters across the nation. Like most media products, these reports both reflected public opinion and helped to shape it. A newsreel entitled “Youth in Crisis” began by noting that many young men were being rejected by the military due to psychological problems. The narrator hinted that something must be deeply wrong with America if so many young men were mentally unfit to serve their country. The film went on to suggest that the psychological tensions of the war created race riots because young people “absorb the new spirit of violence and recklessness.” Mothers working in war industries supposedly produced a generation of “door key kids” living in “squalid trailer settlements.” Teenage boys turned to pornography, marijuana, alcohol, and property destruction as “abnormal outlets for their wartime excitement.” Other boys now earning a man’s wages were rebelling against their parents and staying out all night. Some young women became “victory girls” who believed it to be their patriotic duty to “deny nothing” to servicemen.
The film echoed the beliefs of many adults at the time when it speculated that boys and girls were getting into trouble because they longed to make some contribution to the war effort, but were thwarted by their age, gender, or both. The film preferred not to explore the possibility that these misbehaving teenagers were just taking advantage of looser supervision during the war to have some fun. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover appeared in the film, insisting that the “solution is in the home.” The newsreel also praised daycare centers, after-school programs, and “dry night clubs” or “teen canteens” set up using community funds and run by teenagers themselves.¹ The teenagers who organized their own “teen canteens” would supposedly learn democratic procedures even as they provided wholesome fun for their peers. When even teen recreational centers are touted as training grounds for democracy, the hopes for training young people to be political saviors have run way ahead of reality.

Christian youth leaders were quick to offer their services as a solution to these wartime problems. Young Life, a brand new evangelical Protestant youth organization founded by Jim Rayburn, presented its meetings as the solution to the “victory girl” phenomenon. The first issue of Young Life, published in 1944, promoted the movement using contrasting photographs. At the top of the page was a photograph reprinted from This Week magazine showing a teenage girl sitting at a bar with two soldiers. The caption read, “These girls come from good homes — they’re lonesome, need attention.” Below was a picture of teenagers at a Young Life club. The caption read “Young Life has the answer. These kids prove the falsity of ‘only sissies read the Bible.’”²

Young Life was not the only organization that tried to present itself as a “manly” Christian response to the challenges of the age. Lurking behind such language was the corresponding fear that Christian youth work (and Christian youth workers) might not be so powerful after all. But in the excitement of saving the world by saving Christian youth, most youth leaders ignored such thoughts.

In 1945, theatergoers were treated to yet another newsreel about youth, this one entitled “Teenage Girls.” As the film began, a girl sat at a conference table with a collection of white-coated scientists attempting to explain the mysterious values held by her species. “We just like to live and have a good time,” she said. “We’re not in a hurry to grow up and get all serious and morbid like older people.” In sharp contrast to the somber tone of earlier newreels like “Youth in Crisis,” this portrayal of female youth culture adopted an amused tone as it described fashions, music, slang,
slumber parties, excessive telephone use, and other traits of these young ladies who had recently been labeled “bobby-soxers.” Yet the final scene showed girls singing in a church choir as the narrator reassured the audience that “Youth’s boundless energy will in the end direct itself to worthy goals” if adults offered understanding and guidance.3

Although the film took note of recent efforts to design and market products to the bobby soxers, it called these girls “a product of wartime” and implied that it was all a passing fad. But these young women represented the wave of the future for middle-class youth cultures. Adults who agreed with this film portrayal saw teenagers as threatening only in the sense that they seemed preoccupied with trivial things and not serious enough about life. After almost fifteen years of hand wringing over the “youth problem,” adults could perhaps be excused for wanting to find teenage girls less threatening than “juvenile delinquents” or young political subversives. Yet in hindsight, it seems worth considering that the potentially powerful world inhabited by political “youth” was contracting into the trivial consumer lifestyles of “teenagers.”

The young people portrayed in “Youth in Crisis” and “Teenage Girls” captured adult imaginations, but deeper changes were also underway. In reality, the juvenile delinquency scare of the 1940s was a response to a temporary trend created by a combination of wartime social disruptions, media hype, and misleading crime statistics. But that wouldn’t stop juvenile delinquency from being a major concern for adults throughout the 1950s.4

More significant for the long-term history of youth and youth ministry were two institutions whose power was just beginning to be felt in the 1940s: the high school and youth consumerism. By 1940, for the first time ever, the majority of fourteen- to eighteen-year-old Americans attended high school. They spent more time with each other and less time with adults. Crowded together in age-segregated environments to learn how to be productive adults, young people instead began to create their own language, values, and styles, which sociologist Talcott Parsons would soon label “youth culture.” Youth cultures had come and gone before, but never before had young people from across the country shared so many of the same tastes and experiences. Their lives increasingly revolved around school activities, dating, music, and movies. Rural, poor, and minority youth participated less, but it was becoming harder to escape the power of youth cultures.

Since young people seemed to be increasingly different from their parents and finally had some spending money of their own, a few pioneers in
entertainment and other industries began intentionally marketing their products to teenagers. For example, in 1942 Frank Sinatra became one of the first true “teen idols” who attracted throngs of screaming and swooning bobby-soxer fans. The first teen magazine of the new era was *Seventeen*, launched in 1944. Its first editor, Helen Valentine, had already proven to the business world that college girls were worth some marketing attention, but it took several years before she could convince them to take high school girls just as seriously. Meanwhile, in 1945 a nineteen-year-old sales clerk named Eugene Gilbert noticed that shoe sales in his store increased dramatically when he changed the advertising approach to attract younger customers. Within two years he had an army of 300 teenagers on the streets interviewing their peers about their consumer preferences.

But like the makers of the film “Teenage Girls,” these youth marketing pioneers tried to reassure adults that the changes in teenagers’ lives were wholesome. For example, the early issues of *Seventeen* took a serious approach, including articles and editorials that exhorted young readers to get ready to build a better world in the postwar era and to participate in the upcoming presidential campaigns. The typical article also exhorted young girls to earn more privileges from their parents by behaving responsibly, not staying out too late, and maintaining sexual purity.

These early examples of youth consumerism also took place on a small scale and showed signs of being temporary. During the postwar consumer buying boom, the staff of *Seventeen* had to scramble to convince advertisers that teenage girls were still worth courting as a unique market. Advertisers were not the only ones who needed to be convinced that youth cultures were more than a passing fad. Since these emerging youth cultures could be dismissed not just as fads, but as *female* fads, Christian youth leaders held firm to their stereotypes of powerful, world changing young people. Yet the lives of the high school students who attended Christian youth groups were beginning to diverge more and more from those of the young adults who had recently made headlines as political activists and soldiers.

A shift in terminology both reflected and promoted these changes in the lives of young people. In the 1930s people talked about “youth” as a collective noun, and they talked about it as if it were a powerful force of nature. “Youth” also included a wide range of ages from older childhood through young adulthood. But in the 1940s, the term “teenagers” emerged to describe a narrower, age-defined group of thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds who all attended school, listened to the same music, bought the same...
products, and behaved in similar ways. “Youth” was a powerful force; “teenagers” were a sometimes irritating, sometimes amusing, but less often threatening group. Most Christian youth leaders missed the significance of the shift from powerful youth to trivial teenagers. So despite their successes at the time, these leaders did not lay a good foundation for dealing with later youth culture developments.

Reluctant Social Crusaders

Throughout the 1940s, mainline Protestant youth leaders like those who ran the Methodist Youth Department remained confident that youth would save the world in its time of “crisis” by devoting themselves to a crusade for a more Christian, politically progressive America. But they tended to ignore contrary evidence. The firing of Blaine Kirkpatrick and Owen Geer from the Youth Department in the 1930s demonstrated that powerful adults in the denomination did not approve of the Youth Department’s political agenda. Even worse, it seemed that not all young people would be easy recruits to the crusade for a new world order. If progressive Methodists were really right in their assumptions about “youth,” young people should have flocked to opportunities to make a difference and contribute to the war effort by building a better America. But in fact Methodist work camps and other opportunities to build a “Christian social order” mobilized far too few young people during the war.

As a result, Methodist Youth Department leaders gathered groups of young people to help them figure out how to recruit more youth for social service. Staff member Walter Towner began one of these meetings by noting that young people in the typical “small church out in the country” had not yet enlisted in the social reform crusade. One participant in the consultation noted with dismay that many young Methodists did not see the Jim Crow system of racial segregation as unchristian. Participants in these meetings debated several competing strategies, but in the end did nothing to change their fundamental methods for recruiting youth. Some called for more “indoctrination,” and argued that their strategy should be to recruit and train a smaller group of young Methodists to actively work on unpopular causes. Others insisted that since millions of young people were just waiting for an opportunity to serve, only practical obstacles stood in the way. Still others suggested that slogans and billboards might help, since these tools seemed to work well with war bonds and scrap drives. After vig-