

The background of the cover is a dark blue architectural blueprint. It features white lines forming a grid and various geometric shapes, including a large L-shaped structure with a hatched interior. Text on the blueprint includes 'PH1.10 PH1', '200', and '210'.

duffy robbins

BUILDING A YOUTH MINISTRY THAT BUILDS DISCIPLES

A Small Book About a Big Idea

ZONDERVAN

Building a Youth Ministry That Builds Disciples
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Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Robbins, Duffy.

Building a youth ministry that builds disciples : a small book about a big idea / Duffy Robbins.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-67030-8 (softcover)

1. Church work with youth. 2. Church work with teenagers. 3. Discipling (Christianity) 4. Christian youth—Religious life. 5. Christian teenagers—Religious life. I. Title.

BV4447.R625 2011

259⁷.23—dc23

2011043946

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Cover design: IMAGO

Interior design: David Conn

Printed in the United States of America

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CHAPTER 1

TARZAN CHRISTIANITY

When I was a little boy, one of my favorite television heroes was Tarzan: King of the Jungle. My youthful imagination was stirred by the sight of this powerful man raised by animals in the thickest jungle. He slept in the mother of all tree houses, hundreds of feet above the jungle floor, and was always clad in his signature leopard-skin tankini. My favorite part of every show was when Tarzan—one part Superman, one part Samson, and one part Curious George on steroids—would grab a tree vine and swing from treetop to treetop as the whole jungle came alive with the sound of his trademark yell, which he did sometimes to communicate with the animals, and sometimes because the leopard-skin deal would get caught up in the vine.

It was an awesome image: Tarzan weaving his way from vine to vine, going bungee before bungee was cool. How amazing—and how convenient—that there was always a vine right where he needed it, one that was the right length and secure at the top yet somehow loose enough to release from the tree with the slightest tug.

Frankly, even as a young boy I used to wonder about that.

As I'd walk through the woods behind our house and look up at the treetops, I was certain it would take more than a quick pull to launch those vines. I wondered what might happen if Tarzan were swinging through the woods behind *my* house. First of all, I suspected he might get scuffed up a bit if he wore the leopard-skin outfit back there. There were some serious stickers. And he might get poison ivy on areas of his body that would make vine swinging more difficult—or at least less comfortable. But even more important, what about the vines? What if they weren't long enough, or what if they were too long? Plus, most of the vines behind my house

were wrapped pretty securely around the trees—how would that affect my hero?

I imagined how sad it would be to see Tarzan swing down on a vine that was too long, only to crash to the jungle floor with a thud. Or what if he miscalculated and chose a vine that was too short? One can only imagine the blur of flailing flesh and leopard skin as Tarzan realizes Vine A won't allow him to swing to Tree B. Or how gruesome would it be if Tarzan were to swing all the way to the edge of the jungle and simply run out of trees? Imagine: Tarzan swings through the jungle...first to one tree...then another...then another...then another...until all of a sudden, he comes to a clearing. No trees. No vines. Just a small group of animals gawking at a “king” whose crown is seriously broken. Not a pretty thought.

And yet, it's precisely that thought that animates this book you're now holding.

WHAT IS THIS THING CALLED “YOUTH MINISTRY”—AND WHY DO WE DO IT?

When many of us think of youth ministry, we can almost imagine in our mind's eye a generation of teenagers “swinging” from Sunday night to Sunday night, youth meeting to youth meeting, coffee house to small group, Young Life club to Campaigner Camp, retreat to festival, summer camp to mission trip. We imagine great excitement in the air, an ever-growing number of students coming to youth group, and youth programs getting larger and gaining momentum.¹ In this grand vision, it would be easy to suppose that our job as club leaders, Sunday school teachers, and youth workers is simply to supply and supervise these treetop moments, to see that vines are loosed and ready, cut and cleared in neat lengths that maximize the ride. But, in fact, the greater task for those of us in youth ministry is to prepare our students for life in the clearing, for those times when the treetops give way and leave them feeling uncertain about what to grab onto. They must also be ready for those other times when the jungle of life gets too dense, when the excitement diminishes and the difficulty of finding the trail increases, when the Christian life becomes more about walking step to step than swinging from treetop to treetop.

This book is born of the concern that our current view of youth ministry leads us as leaders—paid and volunteer alike—to see ourselves as program planners, people who work with determination and creativity to create Disney-like jungle experiences that maximize the thrills and emphasize the treetops of the spiritual life. The problem with this contemporary approach to youth ministry is that it often breeds students who are ripe for a classic case of “crash and burn”—a plunging blur of leopard skin, colorful Bible cover, and Christian T-shirt.

If you’re reading this book, it’s probably because, like me, you love seeing teenagers grow up in their faith and mature into disciples who will follow Jesus faithfully throughout their lives. You’ve put up with bad food, loud music, loud human beings, late nights, awkward conversations, ungrateful parents, and countless other inconveniences precisely because you know, as I do, that growing teenagers into disciples is not just a possibility, but a unique and holy privilege. And, like me, I’ll bet you’ve also discovered that it’s a great adventure and a wild, fun ride. Because every now and then—in the midst of the bad food, loud music, loud human beings, late nights, awkward conversations, ungrateful parents, and countless other inconveniences—you get to see God.

But that’s why I know you’re concerned, as I am, because you’re aware that when these students leave our youth groups, they won’t always have the luxury of swinging from one treetop experience to the next. What will happen to them then? What will happen when they find themselves out there in the jungle of everyday life with all of its risks and dangers? Will their faith survive, or will it crash and burn in a blur of doubt, disillusion, and distraction?

I fear that in failing to ask such questions, we may be compromising God’s mandate for the church and his call for those of us who serve him as youth workers. And, most of all, I’m concerned that in our discomfort with these kinds of questions, we may be planting in our youth programs the seeds of *Tarzan Christianity*.

IS THERE LIFE AFTER TREETOPS?

To be sure, it is God who begins the “good work” in the teenagers we work with, and it is God who will see it through to “completion”

(Philippians 1:6). But we youth workers must recognize that our task is not simply to get teenage Tarzans to jump into the jungle; we need to help them land, stand, and keep walking with Christ on a daily basis. The mission of effective youth ministry is not getting young people to “swing from the trees”; it’s helping them cling to the Vine (John 15:5).

Any number of factors can short-circuit this important work. But ultimately, the key to preventing a nasty fall is maintaining a consistent balance in the way we do youth ministry—to recognize that we’re not trying to build *swingers*, but *clingers*. Our mission is to build in students a faith that will last, a commitment that endures in the highest treetop moments and in the heart of the darkest jungle.

So let’s begin with some diagnosis. What is it about so much of contemporary youth ministry that breeds Tarzan Christianity? What confusions about our own identity as youth workers keep us from understanding our role in this grace adventure? Where do we fall short in building long-term faith? What follows are some of the most common errors of imbalance.²

Imbalance 1: Too Much Arrival, Not Enough Survival

The Christian life is a marathon. It’s never been about speed; it’s always been about distance. It’s not about how *fast* our young people grow; it’s about how *far* our young people grow.

Let’s be clear: *Arrival* is a very good thing. There’s no greater satisfaction than being there when a young person you’ve been praying for, talking with, and walking with finally comes to that point where she wants to surrender her life to Christ. Who doesn’t get excited about a birth announcement? Jesus said that even the angels rejoice when only one sinner repents (Luke 15:10). But nowhere in Scripture are we called to *make converts*; only God can *make converts*. Our mandate as youth workers is to *make disciples* (Matthew 28:19; 2 Timothy 2:2).

After all these years, I still haven’t gotten over the wonder of seeing kids step forward (or say a prayer, or raise a hand, or make a decision, or quietly commit) to follow Christ. But at its core, our commission to make disciples means more than just leading kids to accept Christ as Savior. *Pressing onward* in the faith is more important than *coming forward* in a meeting. *Arrival* is good; *survival* is better.

Research from the Barna Group of Ventura, California, shows that most young people who show strong levels of spiritual activity during the teen years tend to pull back from active participation in the Christian faith during their young adult years. Sadly, many of them never return. Indeed, the Barna Group concludes that as many as 6 out of every 10 twentysomethings who were involved in a church during their teen years will fail to maintain their active spirituality during their years of emerging adulthood. “The research shows that, compared to older adults, twentysomethings have significantly lower levels of church attendance, time spent alone studying and reading the Bible, volunteering to help churches, donations to churches, Sunday school and small group involvement, and use of Christian media (including television, radio and magazines).”³

Perhaps the most troubling of these findings is that 61 percent of twentysomethings who’d been church-ed during their teen years are now spiritually disengaged (i.e., not actively attending church, reading the Bible, or praying). Only 20 percent of these young adults maintain a level of spiritual activity in their twenties that is consistent with their involvement in high school.⁴ If this sounds a little grim, consider the results of the 2009 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, which prompted top political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell to comment, “Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate (30 to 40 percent have no religion today, versus 5 to 10 percent a generation ago).”⁵ These results correspond to Rainer Research studies that show about 70 percent of U.S. youth drop out of church between the ages of 18 and 22.⁶

Others suggest the picture isn’t quite so dire.⁷ Baylor University sociologist Rodney Stark contends, “Young people have always been less likely to attend [church] than are older people.... A bit later in life when they have married, and especially after children arrive, they become more regular [church] attendees. This happens in every generation.”⁸ Indeed, Stark’s conclusions are similar to those of another sociologist, Bradley Wright. In his book *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You’ve Been Told*, Wright remarks that the grave warning about young people leaving the church is nothing more than “one of the myths” of contemporary Christianity.⁹ But

all of us who love teenagers and care about nurturing in them a long-term commitment would agree that if we want to encourage in our students a faith that does not fail or fade, we need to focus on strategies that encourage survival, not just arrival.

That's not to say outreach is unimportant. Obviously, the church is called to give witness to Jesus (Acts 1:8). Those who pit "discipleship" against "evangelism" seem to have forgotten that evangelism is the first stage in the process of discipleship. No one has ever been discipled who was not first evangelized. Walk around the youth ministry neighborhood for a little while, and you'll probably meet folks who might be described as "discipleship snobs"—youth workers who talk about evangelism and outreach as if they were lower life-forms of youth ministry: "I don't have time to mess around with kids who aren't interested in doing something radical for Jesus! I didn't get into ministry so I could do fun and games." Fair enough. Most of us didn't. I understand that some kids are drawn to the deep. But about five minutes of immersion in adolescent culture demonstrates that many other teenagers are drawn to the shallow. And some of those kids *fear* the deep.

The value of fun and games, laser tag, lock-ins, crazy relays, stupid pet tricks, and Quidditch matches is that they provide us a context in which we can build relationships with teenagers. And like copper for electricity, relationships are the conductors through which we bring Light to kids living in darkness. We mustn't forget that discipleship happens in relationship, and relationships won't happen if we don't meet kids on their terms.

Standing on the beach one day, Jesus looked squarely into Peter's eyes and said, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people" (Luke 5:10). We can't be absolutely sure what Peter thought about that word picture. But we can be relatively sure that, as a fisherman, Peter knew it takes two things to catch fish: (1) patience, and (2) a net. Whether we like it or not, fishing for teenagers will always involve both. Fish don't report to the boat. It takes a lure. It takes bait. It takes a net.

Now, granted, some kids are self-aware enough to acknowledge the deep longings of their soul, thoughtful enough to consider their need for God, and honest enough to see beyond the blinders that

our culture has placed on them. For these kids, a simple invitation to learn habits of prayer and communion may be all the bait it takes. To be sure, there is something powerfully attractive and deeply moving about the invitation to know God.

The problem is that ever since the garden (Genesis 3:8-9), human beings—particularly *adolescent* human beings—have demonstrated a profound ability to ignore those longings and hide from the very God whose invitation promises a place where hungers are fed, thirsts are quenched, and souls are satisfied (Isaiah 55:1-6; see also Romans 1:18-23).¹⁰ There's a word for people in fishing boats who don't use nets or bait; they're called *passengers*. To do discipleship without evangelism is to do farming without sowing seeds. A wise farmer understands the importance of adding a little manure to the seed. A wise fisherman understands the importance of adding bait to the hook. (Deadliest Catch 3:16). And sometimes, for some teenagers, what smells like lightweight spiritual manure to those of us who want to go deeper is actually bait for those who are swimming in a very shallow culture.

Arrival is important. Nothing happens without arrival.

On the other hand, no fisherman in his right mind continues to catch fish without giving some thought to how he'll preserve them and keep them fresh. Otherwise, all he has to show for his labor at the end of the day is a big boat filled with smelly, dead fish. Big catch? Big deal.

The problem is that catching fish is more exhilarating than scaling them, cleaning them, and preserving them. Evangelism generates greater excitement and bigger numbers than discipleship and nurture do.

There is always more excitement in arrival than there is in survival. When guests first arrive at your home for a visit, there are hugs and kisses and animated conversations. Who wouldn't want to focus their efforts on that end of the equation? But after a few days of sharing the bathroom and cleaning up someone else's mess, we begin the mundane work of life in shared community. That's not quite as exhilarating.

So much of our youth ministry effort is focused on helping young people to "become Christians" that we've lost sight of our central

God-given mandate to build them into disciples, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19-20). Surveys of church young people indicate that we’re doing a better job of getting them to *show up* than helping them to *grow up*.

Commenting on Christian Smith’s massive National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR),¹¹ Kenda Creasy Dean puts it like this:

We have successfully convinced teenagers that religious participation is for moral formation and for making nice people, which may explain why American adolescents harbor no ill will toward religion. Many of them say they will bring their own children to church in the future (a dubious prediction statistically). Yet these young people possess no real commitment to or excitement about religious faith. Teenagers tend to approach religious participation, like music and sports, as an extracurricular activity: a good well-rounded thing to do, but unnecessary for an integrated life.¹²

Our task in youth ministry is not just helping young people to become Christians; it’s helping young people to *be* the Christians they’ve *become*. There is nothing wrong with cookouts, ski trips, movie nights, and bowling parties that draw big crowds. But when it’s all said and done, we dare not focus so much on getting kids to arrive that we neglect the hard, less glamorous work of helping them survive.

Imbalance 2: Too Much Childish, Not Enough Childlike

It’s too bad that real life is not a flannelgraph. It would be so much easier if we could reduce all of the hassles, temptations, and questions of life to a few cut-out felt figures. But real life doesn’t always match the Sunday school simplicity of four or five figures clinging to a flannel background. Maybe it’s our tendency to oversimplify that breeds an unfortunate percentage of teenage “Tarzan Christians” who come away from their spiritual “highs” beating their chests and swinging through the treetops, but who too often end up lost, demoralized, and defeated down on the jungle floor.

Surely at the heart of this oversimplification is the tendency of the church in general, and youth ministry in particular, to nurture in our students what the late pastoral theologian and counselor David Seamands referred to as a “childish faith.”¹³

It’s a jungle out there. We chop a path for our children around some of life’s hardest questions during their younger years, and rightly so. But there comes a point at which the questions and dangers of the adolescent jungle are too many and too thick. All of a sudden our teenagers discover that the flannelgraph didn’t tell the whole story. Doubt is a predictable part of adolescence. Some of our students make it through this thick undergrowth of questions with their faith intact and strengthened. Others end up losing the trail.

It’s this part of the adolescent safari that we might think of when reading those familiar words of the apostle Paul: “When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me” (1 Corinthians 13:11). What Paul seems to be saying is that spiritual maturity involves giving up a *childish* faith that believes in easy answers, while still holding tight to a *childlike* faith that trusts the Father even when there doesn’t seem to be any answer. Helping kids put away childish reasoning means nothing less and nothing more than helping them forge a path through the jungle, a path marked not by simple, easy half-truths, but by durable, biblical hard-truths.

That doesn’t mean we should ever attempt to explain away the wonder and mystery of God. What it *does* mean is that we help the students in our youth group come to grips with the fact that life doesn’t always look like the flannelgraph.

Notice in the chart on the next page the differences between “childish faith” and “childlike faith.”

Childish Faith	Childlike Faith
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Good Christians don’t have pain and disappointments.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God uses our pain and disappointment to make us better Christians.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “God helps those who help themselves.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God can only begin to help those who admit their own helplessness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “God always answers prayer.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sometimes God answers with “No” or “Wait.”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Faith will help us always understand what God is doing.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith will help us stand under God’s sovereignty even when we don’t have a clue what God is doing.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The closer we get to God, the more perfect we become.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The closer we get to God, the more aware we become of our own sinfulness.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Mature Christians don’t struggle with the tough questions of struggle and doubt.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mature Christians can wrestle honestly with tough questions because we trust that God has the answers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Good Christians are always strong.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Our strength is found in admitting our weakness.

Perhaps if we were to nurture in our young people something more than a childish faith, they’d find that faith to be more relevant when they’re no longer children. Tarzan Christianity happens when we root students in a nice, clean, childish, flannelgraph faith instead of the childlike trusting faith to which Scripture calls us (Matthew 19:13-14).

Durable faith is always bred in the context of honest struggle with tough questions. So why do we sometimes find ourselves protecting our students from such questions? Because, as one writer describes it, growing young faith is like throwing rocks in a pond.¹⁴ We know that hard questions and difficult conversations can break the stillness and serenity of unquestioned belief, and we realize that

can cause waves that rock the boat of teenage faith. Or perhaps we've unconsciously bought into the false promise: "Blessed are those who make no waves, for they shall not suddenly find themselves in way over their heads in deep places."

Most of us have learned, sometimes through costly experience, that the ripples and waves of uncomfortable questions can move us to new places, places of deeper faith and closer intimacy with God. We rob our students of the joy of these faith discoveries when we try to keep them in the flat water of shallow belief. Tarzan Christianity is what happens when we shrink the faith down to flannelgraph questions, bumper-sticker-sized answers, and media-shaped simplicity. If we want to build in students a faith that lasts, we must move them from a faith that is childish to a faith that is childlike.

Imbalance 3: Too Much Feel Good, Not Enough Think Well

Neil Postman's excellent book called *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was published back in the mid-80s. Now, nearly three decades later, the provocative statement he makes to open the book sounds almost prophetic. In drawing a distinction between two popular notions about what the future might be, he comments:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy. As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny "failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions." In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us. This book is about the possibility that Huxley, not Orwell, was right.¹⁵

The current climate in youth ministry only confirms Postman's alarm. The church in general, and youth ministry in particular, has demonstrated more of an appetite for goose bumps than for God's truth, more interest in how our young people *feel* than how they *think*, more enchantment with the latest *Nooma* video than the latest book.¹⁶ In short, we've become all heart and no head.

A personal experience comes to mind: Not long ago a youth leader approached me just prior to the last session of a weeklong camp. It had been a wonderful camp, and she said she knew the perfect way to finish out the week. "I have this song on my iPod called 'Thank You, Lord.' Why don't we play it for the kids in this last session?"

I was a little unclear about why she was suggesting this to me, since I had zero authority to make any decisions. So I encouraged her to talk to the folks in charge of the event.

And that's when she said, "Okay, I'll do that. But I think it would be really great. Every time I've played it at other camps, *everybody* cried..."

It was a totally sincere comment from a big-hearted leader who loves her students and wanted to maximize their experience during that week of camp. But the premise that lay behind her suggestion troubled me: If we can find a way to get all the kids crying, it must be a good programming idea. In other words, one of her criteria for evaluating a youth ministry idea was very simple: Does it make kids cry? Does it move them emotionally? If it does, it must be worthy.

Perhaps in this technological age we've come to desire the "human touch" so much that we now believe that any experience can be validated by its emotional impact—by its ability to "move" us. It's understandable that youth workers would think this way. Their constituents—the young people—have been taught to evaluate every experience by a simple question: Was it "good" or was it "boring"?

Perhaps another contributing factor is the overflow of educational theorists who seem embarrassed by the transfer of information—learning experts who've encouraged us to move away from teaching children facts, and identified the central task of the classroom as making all the students feel good about themselves.¹⁷ This attitude is reflected in the words of James Ferguson, a former principal of

Heritage High School in Littleton, Colorado, who said: “It is more important for me to have students know how to read a map than for them to have any one bit of information about that map. Rather than knowing where Nepal is, it’s more important that they know how to find Nepal.” (In an earlier quote, Ferguson had actually opined that students needn’t be able to find Florida. He later made the change to “Nepal,” presumably because Nepal seems so much more remote and therefore manifestly not as important.)¹⁸

The thrust of Ferguson’s comment seems quite clear: *It’s not important for students to learn specific facts.*

In his book *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can’t Read, Write, or Add*, author Charles Sykes goes on to report of Ferguson:

He specifically denied that high school students needed to be able to define either the Holocaust or World War II. When pressed, the educational leader would not even agree that a high school graduate should know something about the Great Depression. In one interview he implied that there was something unfair about singling out some historical landmarks as more important than others, a selection that was arbitrary, judgmental, and impertinent....In other words, students can be taught something called “map reading skills” or “geographical thinking.”¹⁹

It’s an interesting idea, and one that’s quite prominent in the way a lot of youth workers think about teaching Christian doctrine. Such thinking is reminiscent of C. S. Lewis’s comment about a conversation he once had with an old crusty R.A.F. officer. The officer complained that he had little need for Lewis’ discussions of theology and doctrine for he had *felt God’s presence* [emphasis added]: out alone in the desert at night, he’d sensed this mysterious, tremendous presence. Lewis’s reflections are insightful for today’s youth workers:

Now in a sense I quite agreed with that man. I think he had probably had a real experience of God in the desert. And when he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be

turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of colored paper. But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only colored paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would be a single isolated glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get to America.²⁰

In short, our affection for creating emotional experiences and giving our students “warm fuzzies,” coupled with our reluctance to teach biblical theology, is sending students to sea without any map. Our young people have become incapable of theological thinking because they don’t have any theology to think about. Their faith is all heart (what they’ve felt of that “mysterious, tremendous presence”) and not much head. And, as Paul warns us, it is this combination that leaves us as “infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching” (Ephesians 4:14).

From the interviews conducted by the researchers for the National Study of Youth and Religion, sociologist Christian Smith noted that few American teenagers made reference to any kind of “historically central religious and theological ideas.”²¹ Even though “the vast majority of U.S. teenagers identify themselves as Christian” and identify themselves as regular practitioners of their religious faith,²² they seem to be essentially illiterate when it comes to the basic concepts of the Christian faith. Interviewers literally counted the number of times various key theological terms were used. Particular words, and their frequency of use, are noted on the following page:²³

-
- 47 personally sinning or being a sinner
 - 13 obeying God or the church
 - 12 religious repentance or repenting from wrongdoing
 - 9 expressing love for God
 - 8 righteousness, divine or human
 - 7 resurrection or rising again of Jesus
 - 6 giving glory to or glorifying God
 - 6 salvation
 - 5 resurrection of the dead on the Last Day
 - 5 keeping Sabbath (of 18 Jewish interviews)
 - 4 discipleship or being a religious disciple
 - 4 God as Trinity
 - 4 keeping Kosher (of 18 Jewish interviews)
 - 3 the grace of God
 - 3 the Bible as holy
 - 3 honoring God in life
 - 3 loving one's neighbor
 - 3 observing high holy days (of 18 Jewish interviews)
 - 2 God as holy or reflecting holiness
 - 2 the justice of God
 - 0 self-discipline
 - 0 working for social justice
 - 0 justification or being justified
 - 0 sanctification or being sanctified
-

Smith noted that when the teenagers did refer to *grace* in their interviews, it was usually in the context of the television show *Will and Grace*, not a reflection on God's grace. (Does that also count as a reference to free *will*?) While doctrinal understanding, of course, cannot be fully measured by word-use studies, it seems fair to say that our understanding of the basic tenets of Christian faith will be impaired if we don't have the language to talk about it. And American teenagers don't seem to have much of a vocabulary when talking about their faith.

Indeed, the NSYR research showed that among teenagers there is a widespread belief in what Smith called "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (MTD), a kind of vaguely religious Oprah-ism. It's *moralistic* because it conveys a vague sense of niceness; *therapeutic* because it's all about how it makes you feel; *and deism* because it points to a God who is impersonal, unattached, and generally uninvolved in the affairs of humans. The basic tenets of MTD, based on interviews with teenagers, are as follows:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.²⁴

Here's my summary of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism: *Barney goes to the Holy Land*.

Let me be clear: As a youth worker, I've seen the value of imaginative worship settings, cool videos, amazing media, powerful retreat experiences, passionate singing, and awesome mission projects. And I'm certainly aware that just spouting out doctrinal teachings in a classroom setting doesn't make them either memorable or worth remembering.²⁵ But where are Christian teenagers learning basic tenets of the Christian faith? And if they don't understand those basic truths or doctrines, as they've been articulated and embraced

by our brothers and sisters in Christ over 2,000 years, then how does that impact their long-term faith?

I'm concerned that too much of our teaching is reduced to what can fit in a dark room and be communicated by a worship band illuminated by stage lighting and well-placed candles. Some may read this as a cheap shot at those elements of ministry. It certainly isn't meant to be. It's simply a way of saying that real-life discipleship involves *both heart and head*. Clearly, experience is an important part of the faith journey. Psalm 34:8 reads, "Taste and see that the LORD is good," not "Read Calvin's *Institutes* and see that the LORD is good." But that reality needs to be counterbalanced by Paul's reminder that "Faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17).

A youth ministry that moves students beyond Tarzan Christianity will offer a balanced programming diet of experience *and teaching* (Matthew 22:29). As Jesus put it in John 4:24, "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit *and in truth*" [emphasis added].

Imbalance 4: Too Much "How To," Not Enough "How Come?"

Perhaps most troubling about the current state of youth ministry in North America is its infatuation with technique. Youth workers are far more concerned about *how* than *what or why*—technique is what captures the imagination, not *what* should we be doing or *why* are we doing it.

But *how* without *why* is empty and bankrupt. It's this same approach that assumes reading more books about *how* to have sex will breed deeper intimacy and greater sexual satisfaction. Any talk about love or commitment is understood as tedious and beside the point. Unfortunately, it's precisely this sort of thinking that's led to a culture in which marriages disintegrate with alarming frequency and sexual dissatisfaction seems far more the norm.

Of course, like everything else in Western culture, youth ministry in North America is market-driven. You don't have to play this game long to realize we've got to meet our students where they are—and good, innovative technique can help us do that better. But we want to be careful that the demands of the marketplace don't override the mandates of our calling as youth workers. Teachers with great communication skills can do more harm than good if they

aren't teaching the right information. Doctors who have a remarkable bedside manner and know all the latest injection techniques won't do much good if they don't bring the proper cure. Holistic healing requires an understanding of both *how* and *why*.

We all understand that youth ministry presents us with some pretty tough how-to questions. And how-to books are especially helpful when we already feel time-stressed and under-trained. Even full-time, paid, veteran youth workers can appreciate the value of having an arsenal of resources that speak to the how-to issues. As a youth worker, I've personally benefited from many of these products through the years. Heck, I've *written* a lot of these books! So there's no doubt in my mind that it's worthy and appropriate to develop, publish, and provide training in the area of technique. If I'm a builder and someone develops a better hammer that will help me drive nails more securely or a saw that helps me cut more sharply, then I want that tool. Tools and techniques are good.

But far more important than the newest tool or technique is an understanding of what we're called to build. Hopefully, our commitment goes deeper than simply chaperoning, policing, organizing, feeding, programming, trip-planning, meeting-leading, and fornication-prevention. We do what we do to the glory of God—beyond what the youth group “market” demands of us, what our students or their parents expect of us, or what our congregations intend for us. Our commitment is to God. To move beyond Tarzan Christianity, we need youth ministry books, training, and resources that ask not just *how*, but also *what* and *why*. Otherwise, we'll waste time constructing higher, bigger tree houses and neglect our calling to build disciples.

IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE

These observations are incomplete. They deserve further attention and thought. But unless we address some of these concerns, we'll continue to see Tarzan Christians emerge from our youth programs. And it won't be for lack of screaming and swinging and swaying in the treetops; it will be because we haven't focused on the one abso-

lute key: helping students learn how to cling to the Vine as they journey through the thick jungle of real life.

Thanks for reading this book. Please believe me when I say that, in my mind, your commitment to Jesus and to ministry with teenagers is heroic. I pray that my words here will help you think more clearly about that ministry and about how, by God's grace, you can turn hope into a reality. We move beyond Tarzan Christianity when we begin to focus our efforts on building a youth ministry that builds disciples. I hope this small book will help you gain a better grasp of that big idea.

NOTES

1. According to Barna researchers, "teenagers are consistently among the most religiously active Americans, with nearly six out of every 10 teens engaged in some type of group spiritual activity in a typical week" (*"How Teenagers' Faith Practices Are Changing,"* The Barna Group, posted July 12, 2010, <http://barna.org/topics/teens-nextgen>). As just one example of this apparent momentum, consider "See You at the Pole." Involving more than 3 million teenagers nationally and internationally, this annual event centers around teenagers who gather at flagpoles on their respective school campuses each September to pray for their teachers, administrators, and peers. From its humble beginnings back in 1990 at a youth discipleship retreat weekend in Texas, to a massive movement that involves a growing number of teenagers just two decades later, SYTP has many of the earmarks of an impressive work of God.

2. This book assumes that most of us recognize that youth ministry can look very different—depending, of course, on where in the world one looks. The general concerns raised by this book focus on youth ministry as it's commonly practiced in a huge portion of Western culture. Having traveled extensively overseas, I am constantly amazed at how youth workers in New Zealand and Australia struggle with many of the same issues as do youth workers in South Africa or Denmark or South Carolina or Vancouver. No doubt, the global homogenization of adolescence has a lot to do with it. Surely, much of it has to do with the pervasive and wide-ranging effects of Western culture. Part of it probably stems from the fact that most of us read some of the same youth ministry resources. But suffice it to say, the concerns in this chapter are generalizations. There are many churches and parachurch ministries doing substantial and significant youth work—and, admittedly, the observations here are anecdotal and personal in nature. They are more suggestive than conclusive. The questions raised in this chapter are offered not so much to end the discussion as to start it.

3. “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” The Barna Group, posted September 11, 2006, <http://www.barna.org/teens-next-gen-articles>.
4. Ibid. David Kinnaman, the principal overseer of the research, comments, “There is considerable debate about whether the disengagement of twentysomethings is a lifestyle issue—that is, a predictable element in the progression of people’s development as they go through various family, occupational and chronological stages—or whether it is unique to this generation. While there is some truth to both explanations, this debate misses the point, which is that the current state of ministry to twentysomethings is woefully inadequate to address the spiritual needs of millions of young adults.”
5. Drew Dyck, “The Leavers: Young Doubters Exit the Church,” *Christianity Today*, November 2010, 40, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2010/november/27.40.html>.
6. Ibid., 42.
7. My friend Rick Lawrence, editor of *Group* magazine, calls warnings like these almost “apocalyptic” in tone, and I sympathize with his concerns. He cites findings like those of a 2002 Gallup survey that suggest a much lower number of about 20 percent of churched young people stop attending church regularly as they move into their twenties. There are several possible reasons for the discrepancies between the various studies: the definition of “*churched* youth,” the *faith commitment* of the youth surveyed (some studies survey Protestant youth, some Mormon youth, some Jewish youth, and some lump them all together), and the calculation used to determine *church involvement* of the young adults. (If a 22-year-old attends church once a month when she used to attend four times a month, has this young person disengaged or dropped out? And what if she pursues Christian fellowship from a source other than a local church?) For more discussion on these issues, see Tom Carpenter, “Busting the Drop Out Myth,” *Group*, March/April, 2007, <http://www.youthministry.com/?q=node/12450>; Rick Lawrence, “A Bridge Over Troubled Water,” *Group*, October 28, 2008, www.youthministry.com/bridge-over-troubled-water; and The Barna Group, “Most Twentysomethings Put Faith on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” posted September 11, 2006, <http://www.barna.org/topics/teens-nextgen>.
8. Dyck, “The Leavers,” 42.
9. Ibid.
10. Just as an example, in one international survey of teenagers across eight countries as diverse as India, Thailand, Australia, Cameroon, the United States, and Great Britain, about one-third of youth surveyed said they talked at least once monthly about spiritual issues such as the meaning of life, faith, God, and why we’re here on Earth. That means two-thirds of surveyed youth talk about spiritual

matters with their friends less than once a month. Of course, one could draw the conclusion that it's just not cool to talk about such matters in adolescent conversation. But it's also fair to suggest that if there were a wide-ranging awareness of spiritual hunger, it would be cooler to talk about it. Researchers go on to report that "the frequency of these conversations varied considerably across the participating countries. For example, only 19% of youth surveyed in Australia said they talk about the meaning of life with friends at least monthly, compared to 49% of youth in Cameroon. And 53% of Australian youth surveyed said they 'never' talk with friends about God or faith, compared to 10% of youth surveyed in Cameroon." When asked if they have conversations with friends about God or faith, 44 percent of the American teenagers said they happen at least once a month. But almost a quarter of that same group reported that those conversations "never happen." While nearly two-thirds of youth indicated that they'd spoken with their parents at least a few times in the past year about the parents' beliefs and faith, those conversations seemed pretty infrequent. "Only 24% indicate that they have these conversations at least once a month, and only 12% indicate that they have these conversations weekly" (Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, Peter L. Benson, Peter C. Scales, Lisa Kimball, and Pamela Ebstyne King, *With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People Experience and Think About Spiritual Development*, The Search Institute, 2008, 16). All of this is to say, clearly, if youth workers want to reach a broad cross section of kids, there will be times when our conversation and programming will need to reach beyond "spiritual issues." Otherwise, we'll leave a lot of fish in the water.

11. See Christian Smith and Melissa Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2005). The National Study of Youth and Religion surveyed more than 3,300 American teenagers from July 2002 to March 2003. It purports to be "the largest, most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality conducted" (p. 7) up to that time.

12. Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2010), 6.

13. David Seamands, *Putting Away Childish Things* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983).

14. Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1998), 161.

15. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Books, 1985).

16. In June of each year, the Creation Festival hosts the nation's largest Christian music festival in a beautiful mountain valley near Mt. Union, PA. It is a wonderful three-day event with over 50,000 in attendance in recent years. Each year, as a part of the festival, a rather large store sold books, music, and other merchandise.

But a few years ago, the managers of the store chose not to stock anything but music. When asked about this change in the merchandise, an assistant manager responded, “We couldn’t get anybody to buy the books.” The illustration is offered here not as an indictment of the Creation Festival as much as an warning to a church that won’t listen to truth unless it’s recorded in song or spoken in homily.

17. For a provocative study of this idea, see Charles Sykes’ *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can’t Read, Write, or Add* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1995).

18. *Ibid.*, 3.

19. *Ibid.* The late Richard John Neuhaus cites a relevant comment made by the Catholic novelist Walker Percy back in 1990, as he responded to yet another attack on the narrow-mindedness and dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Percy wrote, “These issues could be debated, as indeed they often are, but here’s how it appears to one novelist. If such attacks continue and are successful, the result will be pleasing mainly to the secular liberal establishment, who are in fact calling the shots, and destructive and divisive to the Catholic people. This novelist can only observe that if the magisterium and the sacramental orthodoxy of the Church are compromised in the name of ‘creative pluralism’ or suchlike, *there may be a lot of hugging and kissing and good feeling going on, but there won’t be any Catholic novelists around. For these odd fellows are turned on precisely by these claims of the Church, breathtaking in their singularity and exclusivity, i.e., the magisterium and the Eucharist, and how these have endured with the people of God through these kinds of thicks and thins for two thousand years* [emphasis mine]. And they will endure despite these chic brush-offs of ‘Rome.’ Get rid of ‘Rome’ and what will be left in the end is California” (*First Things*, October 1999, p. 99).

20. Walter Hooper, ed., *The Business of Heaven* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1984), 226.

21. Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 167.

22. *Ibid.*, 68.

23. *Ibid.*, 167.

24. *Ibid.*, 162.

25. For a great discussion on this, see Dean, *Almost Christian*, 144–184.