

Debunking myths ABOUT adolescence

Using a long lens to look backwards and forwards

“IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN A GROUSE WITH THE MIDDLE-AGED THAT ‘YOUTH ISN’T WHAT IT WAS IN OUR YOUNG DAYS.’ TODAY THEY ARE DEAD RIGHT. YOUTH IS NOT WHAT IT WAS EVEN TWENTY YEARS AGO. NOR WILL IT EVER BE THE SAME AGAIN. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE CHANGING MORE RAPIDLY THAN EVER BEFORE.”¹

Except for “grouse,” this sentiment could have been written today. It sounds contemporary, modern, and familiar—especially the part about how much youth has changed over the past twenty years. But this sentiment was not written yesterday. It was written more than sixty years ago in the popular magazine *Picture Post*.

Besides grouching about teen clothing (girls in jeans), the article also bemoaned the acceleration of puberty, escapist entertainment, and a laundry list of bad attitudes and behaviors. And that’s just in the first few paragraphs.

This is interesting because many current parenting books imply that in previous eras youth were respectful, well-behaved, courteous, mature, neat, grown-up, settled down, and basically all-around wonderful.

This myth of ‘the properly mature and wonderful adolescent’ is, I believe, a direct outgrowth of an even more wide-sweeping and insidious myth: the myth of ‘the recently invented and culturally constructed adolescent.’ If you’ve read any youth ministry, adolescent development, educational, or parenting books written in the past thirty years, you’re likely to be familiar with this myth. It says that adolescence is a recent social and cultural construct resulting from industrial advancements, economic shifts, and expanded compulsory education. It usually goes something like this: Before the twentieth century, adolescence wasn’t part of the life cycle. For most of history, people moved directly from childhood into adulthood. There was no in-between stage. Until the modern era of high schools and technology, teenagers were responsible, respectful, and mature.

For some people, these unsourced and presumptive facts carry little weight. But for others—especially parents and youth workers—there are significant implications of these ‘facts.’ For example:

- If adolescence is new, resulting from cultural and societal norms, then it would suggest that we are dealing with an unnatural stage of life with questionable inherent purpose, value, and meaning.
- If teenagers used to be responsible and respectful family members only in the days *before* adolescence existed, what hope is there today for healthy relationships between teens and parents?
- If people used to jump directly from childhood into adulthood, engaging in all the corresponding adult behaviors—maturing, getting married, settling down, getting a job, ‘adulthood’—is there any hope for today’s teens (who *aren’t* jumping directly from childhood into adulthood) to have a normal, healthy, and satisfying life?
- If the passage through adolescence today is unnaturally keeping our teenagers from reaching the physical, emotional, and social maturity they ought to be experiencing, can they embrace and journey into a vibrant and fruitful life of following Jesus at this age?

But what if this premise were wrong? What if the foundational ‘facts’ upon which we’ve built much of our parenting and ministry structures are based on errant historiography? What if we are being guided by misguided theories? What if we are worried and alarmed by misinformed fears?

In fact, history reveals a very different reality from the one we’ve been taught. Adolescence has long been recognised and referred to as a distinct stage of life, and adolescents themselves have long been the subject of artists, educators, policy makers, parents, and preachers.

Ages of man

Throughout history, the most common trope for discussing human development was known as the Ages of Man. Different experts included anywhere between three and twelve distinct stages of development. In every case, there was a stage between childhood and adulthood known as adolescence or youth. People believed that the typical characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors of this life stage were caused by the following: planets, months, seasons, natural elements, and bodily humors (blood, bile, and phlegm). In other words, this age was directly influenced by nature, so it was viewed as a natural stage of life.

As early as the fourth-century BC, Aristotle described youth—those between the age of discretion and full adulthood—as lacking self-control, hating to be mocked or slighted, having strong sensual passions, hoping and expecting to do great things, wanting to spend as much time as possible with friends, doing things to excess, and thinking they know everything (*The Art of Rhetoric*).

In the early 1500s, the morality play *The World and the Child* journeyed through the Ages of Man. As the main character advanced through the different life stages, he was given new names. He was called Infans up to age seven, Wanton to age fourteen, and then Lust and Liking as he entered adolescence—a name he kept until age

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twenty-one when he became Manhood. However, it took him a number of years to finally settle down into full maturity with a job, home, family, and social responsibilities. Surprise: extended adolescence and emerging adulthood was a real thing, even way back then.

These are just a few of countless examples of how people have historically understood and explained adolescence as part of human growth and development.

Parents and teens—a historical generation gap

Parents are perhaps some of the hardest hit by the ‘adolescence is new’ narrative, and can feel frustrated, helpless, and even hopeless in the face of today’s daunting and defeatist rhetoric. But this, too, is not a new thing.

In 1616, parents were given advice on how to instruct their children during each specific stage of life, including the stage that began at age fourteen. According to the experts, if parents weren’t fully invested and involved during this stage, then all their hard parenting work of previous years would go up in smoke, and all the years to follow would be “poor,

foolish, and miserable.” Adolescence, they said, is “full of strength, courage, activity, easily drawn to liberty, pleasure, and licentiousness.” Parents, they said, are responsible for guarding and guiding their children on the road to full adulthood.²

In 1636, parents were warned that “as soon as [their daughters] touch the teens,” they will want to make their own decisions and take control of their own life.³ In other words, be ready for teens to push against boundaries and pursue autonomy.

And in 1699, a father said of his adolescent daughter’s interest in boys: “She has wearied me out ever since she came into her teens.”⁴

400 years of youth ministry

Though the vocational role of youth pastor may have a short history, pastors and other adults have long been involved in the lives of youth, preaching about the cares and worries of the ‘rising generation,’ warning youth directly about making wise choices, and challenging parents and apprenticeship masters to do all they can to make sure adolescents understand and embrace a life of faith during these important and formative years.

In 1655, Simon Ford said this about the church’s youth: the pride of people in this present time is so great that “as soon as they are gotten into their teens (as we say), they think they are too old or too great to be catechised!”⁵ One pastor lamented that youth thought sermons were boring, preferring to stay up late carousing on Saturdays and sleeping in on Sundays.⁶ Another pastor worried that those in their teens were the ones most likely to forget God as a result of youth pleasures and lusts.⁷

Still, preachers believed that adolescents could understand and embrace the gospel and a genuine life of following Christ. After describing his own misspent youth until the age of nineteen, Samuel Pomfret said to a crowd of young people: “I see there

be many of you that are just entering the teens; well, hear it for your good, you are in the possession of a jewel which some here would give the whole world for if they had it, supposing they had their eyes opened to see the cheats of sin and youthful pleasures.”⁸

Even without organised youth ministries, many pastors and clergy preached and wrote specifically for adolescents, and many adults invested in the lives of those same teenagers. Most interesting of all is a letter sent by Thomas Bray from England to the churches in Maryland. He’d visited the region in 1699, and in his follow-up communication he wrote about youth more than any other single topic. Specifically, he recommended that youth (those past the age of thirteen but not yet twenty-one) gather together on Sunday afternoons in what he called “Catechetical Societies,” either at the church or in some other generic location. He believed if the young people could be together and away from the larger gathering of parents and adults, they’d be more committed and likely to show up. He recommended that a trained clergy be present to teach and answer questions that came up. Most telling of all, he encouraged a trained musician to lead the groups in lively songs using the “new tunes” included in an updated Psalter. He believed this focus on good music would be a draw for the youth and would “charm them into constant attendance.” He admitted that this strategy would “catch them by guile,” but because of St. Paul’s biblical example, it would be “an innocent and un sinful pious fraud.”⁹

Thus did the power of worship music make its youth group debut—more than 300 years ago.

So what?

The real question for us in youth ministry is this: what significance, if any, does this corrected history of adolescence have for parents, preachers, and youth workers (beyond getting our facts straight

and speaking with sourced authority, both of which are always good and honorable)? That conversation needs to be happening, alongside the ongoing conversations about current trends, cultural shifts, and adolescent experience. Here are two takeaways uppermost in my mind:

Firstly, let’s all stop worrying about adolescence being a hopeless and unnavigable stage of life. Such a defeatist attitude is neither helpful nor biblical. It is a worldly and nihilistic response. We are not of the world; we are of heaven’s glory. We are not nihilists; we are spirit-filled children of the One who created all things. That same creator designed all the stages of human development in order to reflect his glory and his nature in all its fullness.

Secondly, let’s use a longer lens when looking both forwards and backwards. Like the writer of Hebrews, we should willingly and carefully look back through the pages of actual history (not just someone’s flattened version of it) to get a realistic picture of where we’ve come from. At the same time, we should joyfully and intentionally look forward into the coming years so that our youth ministries are not simply focused on getting our students through today, tomorrow, and this immediate school year, but instead are committed to developing disciples of Christ who will follow him for a lifetime.



Story: Crystal Kirgiss

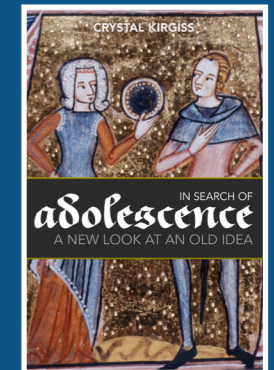
Crystal is a veteran youth worker from Indiana. She has a PhD from Purdue University and speaks to both students and adults on a variety of topics. She has written more than ten books on topics ranging from jazz music to youth ministry. Her most recent book is *In Search of Adolescence: A New Look at an Old Idea*. You can read more from Crystal at crystalkirgiss.com.

1. **“Leave Youth Alone!”** *Picture Post* (September 24th 1955).
2. **Anon**, *The Office of Christian Parents: Showing How Children Are to Be Governed Throughout All Ages and Times of Their Life* (London, 1616).
3. **Frances Meres**, *Witts Academy: A Treasury of Golden Sentences, Similes and Examples, Set Forth Chiefly for the Benefit of Young Scholars* (London, 1636).
4. **William Pinkethman**, *Love Without Interest* (London, 1699).
5. **Simon Ford**, *A Sermon of Catechizing* (London, 1655).
6. **Northbrook**, *A Treatise Wherein Dicing, Dancing, Vain Plays or Interludes With Other Idle Pastimes Commonly Used on the Sabbath Day, Are Reproved* (London, 1579).
7. **Matthew Mead**, *The Young Man’s Remembrance and Youth’s Best Choice* (London, 1700).
8. **Samuel Pomfret**, *A Sermon Preached to Young People* (London, 1698).
9. **Thomas Bray**, *A Circular Letter to the Clergy of Maryland* (London, 1700).

Take outs...

1. What assumptions have you made about adolescence that might need to be reviewed?
2. What are some of the challenges of the teen years? How can these be worked out for good?
3. What are some of the fantastic elements of the teen years? How can these be celebrated?
4. How can youth ministry be an investment that develops disciples for a lifetime?

BOOK REVIEW



Three years ago, I sat in a seminar where Crystal Kirgiss presented the idea that adolescence is an historical concept and not a modern construct. Her book *In Search of Adolescence* is reshaping the thinking of youth pastors and challenging the long-held beliefs we have had on the topic of adolescence. Through Crystal’s in-depth work we now see adolescence not as a social construct, or as a social problem to be solved, but as a phase of life designed by God. *In Search of Adolescence* has re-aligned my thinking on youth ministry, in particular how youth ministry is structured, how I teach, and, more importantly, how I work with and encourage parents. Any pastor serious about understanding and ministering to young people needs to read this book.

Gary Grut - National Team Leader of Baptist Youth Ministries