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STUDENT
MINISTRY
BY THE BOOK

*Biblical Foundations
of Student Ministry*

ED NEWTON *and* R. SCOTT PACE

HEATH A. THOMAS, *Editor*



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

Student Ministry by the Book

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Published by B&H Academic

Nashville, Tennessee

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ISBN: 978-1-4627-9129-3

Dewey Decimal Classification: 251

Subject Heading: PREACHING \ PASTORAL THEOLOGY \ SERMONS

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Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 • 24 23 22 21 20 19

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*To youth leaders,
the students they serve, and
for the raising up of a generation
that will reach the world for Christ!*



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Acknowledgments

To a Savior that saved me, parents who raised me, mentors who invested in me, a wife who believed in me, children who blessed me, and a church who walks with me, I'm nothing without you!
—Dr. Ed Newton

I had the awesome privilege of growing up in a Christian home. We were the typical “every time the doors were open” church family, so youth ministry was a big part of my teenage years. I considered my youth pastor a personal friend. He was fun, exhibited godly character, and always made sure we had a great time. Many of my closest friends as a teenager were from our youth group, and I have countless stories of lock-in escapes, camp pranks, and general church mischief that we instigated. But, while these youth ministry memories are sentimental (and embarrassing!), they are also haunting. I was as involved as any student could have been, but I don't have any specific recollection of personal discipleship or spiritual growth that I could directly attribute to my youth ministry experience.

Sadly my testimony is not uncommon. To be fair, my attention during my teenage years was more focused on social interests than spiritual interests. But, at the same time, our success as student leaders must be measured by our faithfulness to cultivate a culture of discipleship and to provide opportunities for spiritual growth that has been largely absent in student ministries. While I regret the deficiencies of my youth ministry experience, God providentially used

them as the impetus for my initial calling into student ministry, my passion to disciple teenagers, and my desire to see a youth ministry reformation of sorts. As a result, they also serve as the genesis for this book.

Ed and I first discussed partnering together on this project because we share this same burden for students and the ministries designed to reach them. He is a supremely gifted youth speaker because of his ability to convey solid biblical truth in a real, relevant, and relatable way for students. In addition, his personal experience as a youth pastor, combined with his investment in teenagers and partnerships with student ministries across the country, gives him a unique perspective that offers invaluable insights into current trends and contemporary needs in the world of youth ministry. I'm grateful for his friendship in life, his collaboration on this project, and his partnership in ministry for the sake of the gospel!

I am also thankful for others who have had a profound impact on my understanding of student ministry. The formal training I received from seminary professors like Ken Coley and others was invaluable and taught me the "ins and outs" of leading a student ministry. (They also entrusted me as a young youth pastor with their own children!) Other practitioners and student ministry leaders like Andy Harrison and Todd Sanders have also been influential in my ministry to students. Thanks, guys, for opportunities to serve with you and for the spiritual insights and practical skills you have modeled and shared along the way!

My passion for student ministry is also the result of the families and students I've had the privilege to serve through the years. I'm not sure I would have ever made it without the love, wisdom, and patient support of the Listers, Bowmans, Schofieldes, Mullaneyes, Yarbbers, Cramers, and Barbers! You were the "dream team" of parents! Of course, the students themselves have been the greatest reward.

I've watched God work in your lives and use you in ways beyond what we could have ever prayed or imagined. I'm honored to be a part of your story. "You are [my] glory and joy!" (1 Thess 2:19–20).

To the leadership of Oklahoma Baptist University and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, thank you for your support and encouragement as you empower your faculty to expand our influence for the sake of Christ. To my colleagues at both institutions, you have been an inspiration, and you continually challenge me to grow as a scholar and a practitioner. In particular, to my friend and dean at OBU, Heath Thomas, thanks for your friendship, leadership, and for the privilege of contributing to this groundbreaking series. And, of course, thanks to the superb team at B&H Academic that makes writing such a joy!

Most of all, I'm grateful for my wife, Dana, who not only selflessly supported me in my years as a full-time youth pastor but has continuously encouraged and enabled me to invest in the next generation. As we've now entered into the world of raising our own teenagers, I'm grateful for how the Lord will use what we have learned through our years together in student ministry. I pray that our children—Gracelyn, Tyler, Tessa, and Cassie—will grow into faithful disciples through their teenage years. May God use them as part of a generation that ushers in his kingdom through humble obedience and devotion to Christ, and may we be faithful to teach them!

To my beloved Savior and exalted King, Jesus Christ, may you receive the honor and glory for any fruit born by this labor of love given as an offering to you!

—Scott Pace

About the Library

The Hobbs College Library equips Christians with tools for growing in the faith and for effective ministry. The library trains its readers in three major areas: Bible, theology, and ministry. The series originates from the Herschel H. Hobbs College of Theology and Ministry at Oklahoma Baptist University, where biblical, orthodox, and practical education lies at its core. Training the next generation was important for the great Baptist statesman Dr. Herschel H. Hobbs, and the Hobbs College that bears his name fosters that same vision.

The Hobbs College Library: Biblical. Orthodox. Practical.

PART I.

DEFINING STUDENT MINISTRY

CHAPTER 1

Students' Identity in Our Culture

As the end of the semester approached, a young college student at a large secular university was sweating his grade in his most difficult course. So much was riding on his final exam—financial aid, athletic eligibility, social respect, and, on top of everything else, his parents' approval. He began to cram for the cumulative final, spending long hours attempting to learn a semester's worth of material in just a few short days. When the exam day finally arrived, he sat near the back of the class of 300-plus students and wrote feverishly for the entire two hours.

When the time expired, the professor instructed the students to put down their pens and turn in their papers. As students filled the aisles, placing their exams in a large stack on the professor's desk at the front of the classroom, the desperate student continued to write. After admonishing him several times, the professor finally threatened the student with a failing grade if he didn't stop and submit his exam. The student scribbled his last word and rushed to the front of the now empty classroom. His teacher informed him that there would be a letter-grade deduction for taking extra time. The student attempted to explain that he didn't have any margin for points off,

but his pleas fell on deaf ears. With desperation in his voice, the student appealed to his parents' and his own notoriety, inquiring, "Do you know who my parents are? Don't you know who I am?!" The professor would not be strong-armed by some veiled threat and exclaimed in response, "I don't know who you are, who your parents are, or anything else about you! Turn in your exam!"

As soon as he realized his professor didn't know him or anything about him, the student quickly flipped halfway through the stack of exams, deftly slid his paper into the middle of the stack, and slammed them back down on the desk. After all, if the professor didn't know who he was, he wouldn't be able to distinguish from which exam he needed to dock points. The student smiled, wished his professor a great summer, and quickly escaped through the classroom door!

It's funny how we can benefit from our anonymity, like the student in the story. The student capitalized on the fact his professor didn't know him. But being anonymous also has a dark side when it comes to our identities. More and more in the modern world, students either don't know who they are deep within, or they attempt to *hide* their true identity from others. In either case they darken their hearts and deceive themselves.

God has a different plan. God made us to know ourselves, to know one another, and to be known—to live in the light and to live in love. By contrast, teenagers today too often are not known and not loved by others. They feel at war with themselves and others, morphing through biological changes while they ride an emotional roller coaster in the midst of a social hurricane. Often they feel like aliens in their own changing bodies and turbulent emotions. If biological changes and emotional volatility are not enough, they're beginning to consider their future aspirations and melting under the

pressure of others' expectations. It's no wonder teenagers struggle with a basic question: Who am I?

Like symptoms of a deep sickness, the problem of not knowing oneself or being known by others expresses itself in intense and varied issues like suicide, confused sexual orientation, or gender dysphoria. But it actually manifests itself in more common examples like peer pressure, social acceptance, media preferences, habitual temptations, and personal behavior. The issue of identity impacts every aspect of a student's life!

Because of its foundational nature, student ministry must begin by helping teenagers understand their true identity and where it is found. But, in order to help them do this, we must first come to grips with the reality of who they are, who our world portrays them to be, and how God desires to work in the lives of students. Success in every job begins on the ground floor of knowing whom you're working with and what you're trying to accomplish. Student ministry is no different. Therefore, we must begin with understanding the truth about teenage identity.

Identity Confusion

In many ways our culture does not know how to define a teenager. There are so many different guidelines by which a student is measured. Obvious examples of this identity confusion abound. For instance, Hollywood determines the suitability of a film and restricts the age of its audience members based on subject matter, language, violence, and other content. Agencies recommend parental guidance (PG) for certain movies while other films stipulate a more specific line of demarcation such as PG-13. R-rated movies limit viewers based on their age and require them to be accompanied by a parent or guardian if they are not older than seventeen. Video games do the

same thing, and their purchase is age restricted based on some of the same factors. However, there is not a specific standard to determine these criteria or the corresponding age restrictions, revealing the subjectivity at work in these regulations.

The subjectivity of our culture in regard to a teenager's identity is also recognized in a lack of consistency regarding privileges that pertain to being an adult. For example, note the differing age requirements for various activities our culture links with adult responsibility: obtaining a driver's license in order to operate a vehicle (16), military enlistment (18), employment (15), the purchase of tobacco products (18), voting rights (18), tattoos and body piercings (16), and the purchase of alcohol (21). Note as well the fact that the criminal justice system often categorizes sixteen-year-olds as "adult" offenders in major crimes. In all of these cases, except in the case of purchasing and consuming alcohol, adult responsibility is given in the age range that people normally associate with the teenage years. This variance between teenage and "adult" responsibility reflects a fundamental uncertainty in our culture regarding teenagers' identity and qualification as "adult."¹

Some of the confusion stems from other forms of inconsistencies as well. Beyond the legalized age requirements, our culture seems to endorse "grown-up" behaviors in young teens like individual autonomy, social advocacy, and young entrepreneurship. But, at the same time, our society endorses "childish" behaviors in young adults that are irresponsible and immature. The concept of undefined adolescence has ultimately extended childhood by offering an excuse for naïve, reckless, and disobedient behavior.

¹ Some of these age restrictions may actually vary depending on the state, which only reinforces the point. Our culture is confused regarding the identity of teenagers and does not know how to classify them.

Regardless of where you may stand on these social issues, the absence of any specific demarcation of identity and responsibility clearly places teenagers in an undefined category. Adults have difficulty identifying teenagers, and teenagers have difficulty identifying themselves! The lack of objective criteria or defined expectations has resulted in widespread confusion throughout our culture regarding the identity of students. As a result, teenagers are left searching for something to define them and to help make sense of it all. Oftentimes they begin to claim an identity for themselves and devote their lives to living for a mirage that continually vanishes and never satisfies.

As youth leaders we cannot follow the blurred lines of how the world defines, and ultimately confuses, teenagers. Conforming to our culture's standards will only reinforce their lack of purpose and their license to live irresponsibly. This identity confusion, in the church and in our culture, has spawned an identity crisis among teenagers with monumental implications for us as student leaders.

Identity Crisis

Considering our culture's uncertainty regarding teenagers during a life stage permeated with confusion, it's not surprising that students have no idea how to define their identity. As a result, they have become infected with what we call the "FALSE identity" syndrome. Both Christians and non-Christians suffer from it as students define themselves according to these five primary aspects of their lives. This acronym stands for:

- **F**riends
- **A**ttitude
- **L**ooks
- **S**kills
- **E**xperience

It is important that we grasp each of these so that we can help our teenagers and ourselves!

Friends

Perhaps the most common source of a misplaced identity among students is their peers. Teenagers often define themselves by who their friends are and how many they have. For example, if students are connected with the popular or cool crowd at school, then they naturally view themselves as significant. Likewise, if they feel disconnected from the more recognizable names and faces around school, then oftentimes they will view themselves as a loser or a loner. While the Bible teaches us that God does not show favoritism or define us by our relationships with others (Gal 2:6), students frequently determine their identity by their friends and typically go well beyond a self-assessment by association.

Oftentimes students will begin to allow their peer groups to define them in more practical and formative ways. Teenagers can begin to adopt the personalities, preferences, and values of their peer groups as their own. When they do, they begin to view their life through a stereotyped social lens. So the identity of their preferred school clique becomes the adopted image to which they conform. Everything from their musical interests to their worldview begins to be shaped by their particular peer group and its social reputation.

Another relational way students commonly define themselves is by their boyfriend or girlfriend. Sometimes a lack of love and acceptance at home facilitates a desperate need to be accepted by someone else. The emotional and physical affirmation a boyfriend or girlfriend offers can become the security blanket for a student that quickly develops into a form of social codependency. Beyond the infatuation they can have for their significant other, they can easily be

deceived into viewing themselves based on their relationship status and their boyfriend or girlfriend's opinion of them.

There are also Christian versions of the friendship identity issue. Some of our students struggle to maintain their walk when they're not around their church friends. Others become conceited and self-righteous because of their close relationships with other believers. While some aspects of social influence and association are formative and healthy, teenagers can begin to rely on others' faith and spiritual interests as the basis for their own identity. Regardless of the type or number of friends they have, their social status is never their true identity.

Attitude

So much of the teenage years is characterized by hormonal volatility and the resulting emotional instability. In addition to their unpredictable moods, students are discovering their own personalities through social interaction while also being influenced by the prevailing attitudes of arrogance, indifference, and defiance in our culture. This combustible blend of ingredients often produces an attitude eruption that students adopt as their identity. A teenager's attitude can become a persona that begins to dominate their lives and dictate their behavior. While Scripture affirms the significance of our attitude (Phil 2:5), our emotional disposition is never intended to be the defining aspect of our identity.

The culture's influence on a teenager's attitude can be devastating. Our society's elevation of the socially elite can make students feel inferior and become psychologically secluded. This sense of inadequacy can cause them to retreat to an emotional hideaway that manifests itself in a reclusive or passive persona. Our culture also promotes a dismissive and apathetic disposition that "doesn't give a rip" as it disregards others and denies any sense of personal

responsibility. This leads to an attitude of arrogance that resists authority and can develop into bullying behaviors.

Many teens today are also influenced by a sense of entitlement that believes they deserve—and therefore they demand—*everything*: from others' respect to unearned luxuries and economic or cultural opportunities. This privileged attitude degrades their peers and disrespects adults as they embrace their false identity and seize its destiny. Other students adopt an inflated ego as their identity based on our culture's principle that vulnerability and transparency reveal weaknesses that should not be exposed. But, because teenagers are experiencing so much inner turmoil, this persona becomes a façade that can cause them to emotionally implode.

Sadly, Christians can be guilty of some similar types of influences in our attempts to shape teenagers. For example, in our efforts to condemn the world and its unrighteous behavior, we may actually heap guilt and shame on our students who struggle with worldly habits or temptations. This may produce a withdrawn persona that begins to define them. Or, in our vigorous stance against sin, we can unintentionally promote an attitude of self-righteousness that encourages our teens to adopt an identity of superiority over others, although in a pious pharisaical guise. These spiritual personas are no different from the cultural attitudes; they are an image, not an identity. Our students must be rescued from the snare of defining themselves by their attitude.

Looks

We live in a shallow and superficial culture. An unhealthy emphasis on physical appearance and material possessions is nothing new. But, as part of the “selfie” generation, our students find themselves immersed in a world that is consumed with outward appearance. Technological advances like iPhones, laptops, and tablets as well as

apps like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter (among others!) feed a culture that prioritizes our egos, our appearances, and puts a premium on our looks. In light of this cultural force, it's not surprising then that so many of our teens get lured into the trap of defining themselves by their looks. Although this egocentric culture that evaluates others on the *outside* remains powerful, it stands in stark contrast to the biblical teaching that God evaluates us by the unseen person of the *heart* (1 Sam 16:7). Still, we must admit it is difficult for teens to see beyond their reflection in the mirror.

Students find their identity in their looks in a variety of ways. The most obvious factor is their physical appearance. Because of the drastic physical and biological changes teens experience, they commonly become self-conscious. Many of their struggles with self-perception stem from physical characteristics that a filter on an app can't change. Height, body type, skin color, or other personal features can foster some significant insecurities. Of course, those who fit the worldly picture of physical beauty aren't immune from this form of mistaken identity. In fact, they can be even more susceptible because they begin to define themselves by their superior good looks.

When students are not happy with their physical appearance, they may begin to change it as much as possible. Some become obsessed with working out and packing on the pounds, while others become consumed with starving themselves to shed them. Unhealthy extremes such as steroids, self-inflicted abuse, or eating disorders like anorexia or bulimia are all symptoms of a mistaken identity based on physical appearance. Some students attempt to distract people's attention away from their insecure physical features by expressing themselves with outrageous hair, body piercings, eccentric makeup, or other forms of appearance modification.

While they may not be able to substantially alter their physical body, students can manipulate other aspects of their looks to make themselves feel more comfortable or socially accepted. Style can become a defining element of their appearance as they begin to view themselves based on their fashion. This can be portrayed as “going for a certain look,” when in reality it becomes a personified image. Teens begin to view themselves through the social lens people associate with the type of clothes they wear. Whether that’s based on trendy brands and logos, styles particular with certain interests, or presenting themselves as “mature” through immodest and revealing apparel, students can mistakenly find their identity in their looks.

Skills

The teenage years can be a season of discovery as much as development. Students begin to discern their gifts and talents through their passions and interests. Their abilities can be multifaceted and can provide a sense of purpose. They can also discern their spiritual calling based on what God has gifted them to do. Those who struggle to identify any exceptional ability may begin to characterize themselves as less significant or even worthless. The Christian life is not about what we can do but what Christ has already done on our behalf and what he can accomplish through us (1 Cor 1:26–31; Phil 4:13).

A student’s skill set develops into a limiting liability when they become consumed with their abilities and begin to define themselves by them. Their artistic, academic, or athletic capability, if left unguarded, can become an idol that is only exposed when their defining attributes are suddenly disabled. When an athlete is injured, a straight-A student bombs an exam, or an artistic submission or tryout fails, you’ll often see students with misguided concepts of their identities completely unravel.

In addition, achievements in their areas of interests and talents can become the lens through which they view themselves. What they've accomplished, or what they haven't, can shape their image as a success or a failure. Accolades and adoration can artificially inflate teens' perspective of themselves while disappointments and failures can lead to personal disillusionment. These types of performance identity can also cause students to become egotistical, neurotic, or irrational in their behavior. But what students can or can't do does not define them.

Experience

Teenagers are frequently introduced to new experiences. Some of them are just initial opportunities to try something for the first time like playing for a school team or getting a job. Other times it's something they've waited for and anticipated, like driving a car or going on a senior high mission trip. New experiences can be some of the most formative aspects of their development, but they can't be misled into defining themselves by what they've done or haven't done. Sadly many teenagers are deceived into believing that their life experiences define who they are. But Scripture teaches us that our earthly accomplishments possess no eternal value and ultimately amount to a pile of worthless garbage (Phil 3:3–8).

This experiential form of mistaken identity can have some of the most devastating effects on teens. Many times the experiences they use to define themselves derive from curiosity, desires, or experimentation. Social drinking, pushing romantic boundaries, sexual encounters, and recreational drug use are commonly used to determine a student's identity. Some of the ugliest forms of bullying leverage this type of identity against teens with derogatory names associated with the experience. Students can even be labeled and derided for their lack of experience in these areas. So how far they

have been on a date, whether they've ever drunk or used drugs, and the illicit nature of what they've viewed or listened to all become experiential attributes that determine their identity.

Tragically, students can also identify themselves not by what they've done but by what's been done to them. Various forms of abuse can define students as victims or cause them to blame themselves for someone else's maliciousness. These wounds can become scars that haunt students with a disfigured perspective for the rest of their lives. These situations may not be easily discerned, but we must recognize that they are more common than we often acknowledge. We must provide students with a safe environment to dispel this mistaken identity and deliver them from its emotional bondage.

Other types of experiences can also lead to a misplaced identity. Students' upbringing can serve as their defining experience. Whether they come from a broken home or a traditional family, if they have overprotective parents or uninvolved parents, if their family is financially stable or financially struggling, or if they feel pressure to live up to their family's esteemed name or dysfunctional reputation, students' home life can naturally be misunderstood as their defining influence. But, regardless of the nature of their personal history or family situation, their past mistakes and failures, or their achievements and accolades, a student's identity is never defined by experience.

Conclusion

We have explored the powerful FALSE identities that mark the lives of teenagers (and maybe we've found that we have embraced one or more of them as well!). What we must understand is this: *a proper understanding of identity is critical, particularly in the context of student ministry.* Our culture's inability to accurately define a

teenager, combined with its influence on them to view themselves through false images and personas, leaves our students dazed and confused when it comes to this foundational truth. As a result, when our ministries fail to address the issue of identity, our attempts at spiritual depth and development ultimately become biblical “pep talks” that inspire virtues and values without ever penetrating their hearts and transforming their lives. Students can actually become more frustrated because their spiritual life and church involvement can develop into another masquerade that requires their best performance.

Therefore, we must be careful not to view students through these cultural lenses and reinforce their misplaced identities. Instead we must be diligent to help them understand where their true identity is found and how it impacts every aspect of their lives. This should be the ultimate goal of all of our ministry efforts: helping students find their identity in Christ. We can now turn our attention to a proper understanding of this truth and its implications.