

The background of the book cover features a dark, textured surface resembling a topographic map with numerous white contour lines. Several yellow 'X' marks are scattered across the map, particularly around the central lantern. A close-up photograph of a person's hand is visible at the top right, holding a vintage-style oil lantern by its handle. The lantern is lit, with a bright orange flame and a pool of liquid at the base. The light from the lantern illuminates the surrounding area on the map.

Editor

TIM McKNIGHT

NAVIGATING

STUDENT MINISTRY

CHARTING YOUR COURSE
FOR THE JOURNEY

“Student ministry is one of the great untapped mission fields in North America, and for that matter, the world. Making disciples of this vast harvest field will be essential for the life and vitality of the church in the twenty first century. Doing it well is what *Navigating Student Ministry* is all about. This is the book those who want to reach teenagers for Christ have long needed. Now it is here! Dive in and reap its fruit.”

—**Daniel L. Akin**, president, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“My friend, Tim McKnight, has produced another must-have book! *Navigating Student Ministry* is relevant, practical, and helpful for everyone interested in reaching and mobilizing students with the gospel. These are ministry helps from practitioners with years of experience. I highly recommend this book.”

—**Shane Pruitt**, national next gen director,
North American Mission Board

“As I read through Tim McKnight’s new book, I can conclude he is an artist. He turned a blank canvas into a work of art. First, he sketched out objects on the canvas. Those objects are the concepts and content areas of student ministry. The table of contents in the new book reveals the artistic way all those elements are laid out. Then, he picked up the pallet to choose the colors that would fill those objects. Those colors are the authors. The colors are vibrant and beautiful because they represent some of the most valuable thought leaders in student ministry today. The finished art, *Navigating Student Ministry*, will be required reading in my student ministry courses. That is the strongest recommendation I can give to a book.”

—**Richard Ross**, professor of student ministry,
Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Student ministry is a key, kingdom-influencing element in life of the local church. *Navigating Student Ministry* addresses vital areas of this important work. I would encourage anyone in or pursuing ministry with students to read it and be reminded of the important task that lies before us of reaching the culture for Christ at this critical crossroad of life.”

—**Todd Sanders**, Falls Creek program director,
Oklahoma Baptists

“The gospel—knowing it, living it, sharing it, and equipping teens to do the same—is at center stage in this comprehensive and culturally relevant guide to leading students. *Navigating Student Ministry* rightly portrays evangelism and discipleship as vital and intertwined components of any youth program (as I often say: ‘If you want them to grow, you have to get them to go’) and outlines practical steps for implementing both. I highly recommend this book to every up-and-coming student minister and any student-ministry veteran who could use a refresher or a course correction.”

—**Greg Stier**, founder, Dare 2 Share Ministries

“I’m passionate about longevity in youth ministry because I believe youth ministry is healthier when its leaders last. By compiling the thoughts of many lead thinkers in youth ministry, *Navigating Student Ministry* helps to lay a solid foundation that will lead to healthier and more seasoned youth pastors.”

—**Chris Trent**, next gen catalyst,
Georgia Baptist Mission Board

NAVIGATING STUDENT MINISTRY

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FOR THE JOURNEY

Editor

TIM McKNIGHT



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To the student ministers of the future preparing for ministry and to the student ministry veterans faithfully serving in churches.

Therefore, since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every hindrance and the sin that so easily ensnares us. Let us run with endurance the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Heb 12:1–2

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FOREWORD

Thirty-five years is a long time to do anything. It's staggering to think that's how long I've been in student ministry. If I were calculating this in dog years, I would be 245 years old. But as so many youth pastors will attest, doing ministry with and among teenagers can have two simultaneously dazzling effects: it can age you while at the same time keeping you young. If I were to sum up in simplistic terms the crux of ministering to students in America right now, it would be a combination of these two realities. We need the wisdom and insight that only decades of mistakes and missteps and hard-won battles can teach us, while at the same time pulling energy from a veritable fountain of youth, since we all know you have to be in really great shape or drink copious amounts of caffeine to keep up with a roomful of adolescents.

That's what Tim does here in *Navigating Student Ministry*. He doesn't so much attempt to "balance" the requirements that one would need to faithfully disciple teenagers as much as he "harmonizes" the various elements necessary for the task. And make no mistake, it is a task, to be sure. But it's a joyful task, more like an adventure than a tedious job. More akin to figuring out an intricate plot to a compelling movie while you're watching it than studying formulas in a classroom to regurgitate on a test. If you've ever so much as volunteered for a youth event at your church, you know that serving kids takes equal amounts of courage, humor, patience, toughness, tenderness,

theology, and tenacity with a splash of luck and a dash of risk . . . all fueled by the Holy Spirit.

Tim marks out an approach to student ministry that is remarkably harmonized. He refuses to get caught up in the (needless) debate on whether evangelism or discipleship is more important and shows how, theologically and practically, they are two sides of the same coin. He avoids trite and shallow formulas for reaching lost students as well as for teaching Christian kids. Instead, he approaches the adventure of student ministry more circumspectly; namely from a doctrinal framework that centers all ministry activity around the good news of the gospel and the local church. Even the order of the chapters and the subject matter makes total sense, as you can see from even a cursory glimpse at the table of contents and chapter titles. Simply put, it's a brilliant approach to a subject that so many books and blogs and conferences have attempted to tackle.

Let me say that personally, Tim McKnight is one of my closest friends. He's a trusted brother in Christ with whom I have shared many meals and conversations. He's a soul winner. He preaches the gospel in his church and he shares the gospel one-on-one with people. He teaches classes about youth ministry at Anderson University, but he also disciplines his own teenagers in his home alongside his wife. This is a man who models ministry. The words in this book reflect the life that Tim leads on Tuesday afternoons, not just Sunday mornings.

I began preaching to teenagers when I was a teenager. Now as I approach the ripe young age of fifty, I glance around my house and see my own teenage sons and a dozen of their friends laughing, eating (how do they eat so much?), wrestling on my wife's new couch, and making more noise than a political debate on cable TV. And yet they wind up on the back porch, circled up with their Bibles and their notebooks, singing worship songs and praying for each other and for their lost friends at their schools. And right there in

that moment, I realize that technology and culture and politics have changed so many things from just thirty years ago when I was a student—while at the same time so many things have remained the same. They love being together. They crave community. They want to belong to a family. They are not hostile toward faith; they just won’t tolerate hypocrisy or weak, superficial religiosity. They need moms and dads (biological and spiritual) to care about them and model life with Christ for them. They respond to love, correction, coaching, and compassion. They don’t run away from theology.

They’re not impossible to reach. They’re not a lost generation or a lost cause. For those of us who love them and feel called to teach them how to follow Jesus, we just need a helpful resource from a tested and trusted voice to guide us. Tim McKnight is that voice and this book is that resource. I commend it to you with great enthusiasm and a third cup of coffee because I have to keep up with these kids somehow.

Clayton King
Founder and President, Crossroads Camps and Conferences
Pastor at Newspring Church, Anderson, South Carolina
Author and Evangelist

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Thanks to Chris Thompson, who asked me if I had any ideas for a manuscript while he met with our faculty at our annual retreat for the College of Christian Studies at Anderson University. As my contact with B&H Academic, he helped me turn an outline for a student ministry textbook into a book contract. Thanks, Chris!

Michael Duduit, my boss, friend, and the dean of the Clamp Divinity School and College of Christian Studies at Anderson University, offered consistent encouragement throughout this project. He is also a great supporter of student ministry and shares our vision of equipping men and women called to student ministry to reach the next generation.

Thanks to each contributor who agreed to write chapters for this project. You wrote, finished, and submitted your work in the middle of a global pandemic. You balanced teaching and serving in your ministries during this trying time with finishing these chapters. I am thankful for your hard work!

Thanks to my wife, Angela, and children, Noah, Micah, Karissa, and MaryAnna. I thank God for the blessing that you are to me and for the love you show. It is an honor to be your husband and father. God is so good to bless me with such a great family!

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I am nothing without You. Thank You for Your grace, mercy, and love!

INTRODUCTION

Preparing for Your Journey

• TIM McKNIGHT •

I sat on the floor of the auditorium that we affectionately named “the big red bedroom” and stared at the map and protractor the sergeant had just issued me.¹ I was a second lieutenant in the United States Army and a student at the United States Army Chaplain Center and School’s Officer Basic Course. We would complete the first phase of our training in a week with a field exercise at Fort Dix, New Jersey. There, we would conduct day and night land navigation, low- and high-crawl drills, night infiltration exercises, and, the highlight of the week, the gas chamber. On this day, they began teaching us the skills we needed to conduct land navigation so we’d be prepared to take the map, protractor, and compass and navigate through various points throughout Fort Dix.

It was the first time I had used one of the army’s topographical six-digit grid maps. There were lines and numbers all over the map.

¹ The auditorium derived its name from the fact that it had red brick walls and was the site of numerous briefings in which we had to fight falling asleep after waking up at four in the morning and hiking five miles with a fifty-pound pack.

There was a key on the side designed to serve as a guide, but it was hard for me to interpret. I was not sure how to make sense of it all. I worried I wouldn't be able to know where I was or where I needed to go using only the map, terrain reference points, and the army-issued compass.

Fortunately, I was not alone. Seeing my confusion, two veteran officers patiently explained to me how to use my protractor, map, and compass to navigate in the field. They taught me all the vital information I needed to know about the map, so I could use it to pinpoint where I was and how to get to where I was going. Without those two officers, I am not sure I could have completed the mission.

A Youth Pastor without a Map

I wish I had had such veteran advice three years earlier as I sat in my office at my new church. Located only a quarter-mile from the college I attended at the time, the church had called me to serve as their new student pastor. I was twenty-one years old with no experience. I had previously served as a counselor and program director at an interdenominational youth camp, but I had no ministry experience in the local church.

I did not know where to start or where to go with the student ministry. I had no idea how to relate to parents of teenagers. I felt nervous talking with them because I had never raised a teenager. In fact, I had only recently been a teenager myself! This was only one of the many problems I faced. I did not even know where to begin in discipling the students. How would I pick the topics for our Bible studies? What material(s) would I use? How does adolescent development relate to how I would teach middle school and high school students? How would I relate to the staff? Could they tell that I was absolutely clueless about what I was doing?

These questions raced through my head as I stared at the blank computer screen. I wanted to call someone experienced in student ministry and get some advice, but the town was so small that our church was one of the few that could afford to hire a student minister. There was no other student minister I could call! There were no veteran ministers there to give me advice. I was a young college senior who had answered a call to ministry. I had a heart to reach students with the gospel. I was starting on what should be an exciting journey, but I did not feel the excitement. I felt afraid and alone. I did not want to fail the Lord, the church, the parents, or the students, but I didn't know what to do. I was lost.

A Map for Youth Ministry

Perhaps you can relate to this story. Maybe you are an adult volunteer who loves the Lord and loves students, but you do not know where to start with student ministry. You might be a college or seminary student taking your first class in student ministry. Maybe you are a pastor who wants to help your church develop a student ministry and bought this book to get information on where to start. Or it could be you are reading this as a veteran student minister who purchased this book as a resource to share with your student ministry team.

Wherever you are in navigating this journey of student ministry, you will find this book helpful. It contains advice from veteran academics and practitioners in student ministry who have more than one hundred years of combined experience. Just as the two officers from my army days aided me, the advice from the student ministry experts in this book can help you successfully navigate student ministry. They wrote each chapter from their unique perspectives and within their areas of expertise. You may choose to read this book in sequence or read chapters on specific topics of interest. Either way,

consider this book a resource (or map!) you can carry with you on your student ministry expedition.

Where We're Going

Because the Bible is God's Word and our authority regarding all matters of faith and life—including student ministry—the first chapter focuses on biblical foundations for student ministry. After discussing biblical revelation and authority, chapter one examines Scripture's emphasis on parents and the community of faith sharing the responsibility of discipling the next generation. It gives advice on establishing hermeneutical and theological foundations for students.

Chapter two includes a conversation of the call to student ministry. It explores the biblical foundation for the concept of calling. This is followed by a discussion about how individuals can discern if they are called to ministry. This chapter emphasizes the importance of internal and external confirmations of one's call to ministry. It concludes with an examination of the qualifications for ministry.

Our discussion then transitions to the life of the student minister in chapter three. This chapter focuses on the student minister's holistic health—including spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional health—and presents best practices for promoting health in each of those areas.

One way that student ministers relieve stress is by delegating ministry to others. The fourth chapter offers guidance for creating a plan to develop leaders in the student ministry. This plan includes practical steps for delegating tasks, releasing responsibility, and developing leaders who in turn reproduce themselves. The goal is to help student ministers equip a growing group of adult and student leaders to share ministry.

Chapter five touches on leadership in describing the student minister's relationship with the student ministry team. It includes a conversation about spiritual gifts and how each member of the church is called to serve a function in the body of Christ. It describes how student ministers should work with the congregation, staff and church leaders, parents, adult leaders, and student leaders to fulfill their mission.

We then shift our focus from the student ministry to the students. Chapter six provides helpful information regarding adolescent development such as the physical and mental changes students are experiencing, how family and peers influence their development, and some practical steps youth ministries can take to help teens navigate these changes and challenges.

Chapter seven defines the terms *culture* and *subculture* and explores the cultural norms of teenagers around the world. It offers guidance on how youth ministries can use the knowledge of youth culture to reach students for Christ.

Chapter eight explores the relationship between student ministry and the family, and it unpacks how the family relates to redemption's biblical metanarrative. It proposes that the family is the appropriate context for discipleship and offers invaluable instruction on how youth ministries can support and supplement the family's role in discipleship.

In chapter nine, the dialogue shifts from the family to the practical application of student ministry. We explore how evangelism relates to student ministry. This chapter unpacks how students must understand what biblical evangelism is, and it presents practical steps to help students know how to do it.

As evangelism and discipleship are the two sides of the same coin, it follows that a discussion of evangelism should be followed by one

on discipleship. Chapter ten studies Jesus's command to make disciples and then explains what disciple-making is and how it's done.

The final chapters of the book begin a transition into the future. In chapter eleven, we discuss the relationship between student ministry and technology. This chapter explores the question of whether introducing technology into the student ministry will benefit or harm students. It includes a conversation regarding the relationship between identity, technology, and intimacy in students' lives along with suggestions for implementing technology in the student ministry strategy.

Chapter twelve predicts that student ministry's future will involve addressing weaknesses in current student ministry by emphasizing relationships regarding salvation, biblical teaching, and mobilizing students for missions. In light of these predictions, chapter twelve then provides student ministers with the means for evaluating their current student ministry strategy so they're equipped to make the changes necessary to engage what the future will bring.

Our concluding chapter outlines student ministry philosophy and strategy development. It explains the philosophy's elements of mission, core values, vision, and strategy. The chapter describes how student ministers can use each chapter in this book to help develop their strategy. It also reviews how the student minister, parents, adult leaders, and student leaders relate to the plan.

Two appendices then follow. The first appendix explores how catechism classes and other age-organized ministries throughout church history offer a strong precedent for age-organized gatherings of youth in the church. This discussion counters critics of student ministry who argue that youth's age-organized classes are a recent innovation in the church. The second appendix discusses the relationship between student ministry and parachurch ministries. It describes how parachurch ministries can help student ministers grow

student leaders who can then help them implement their student ministry strategy in the church.

The chapters in this book as well as the appendices are written by student ministry veterans who are voices of wisdom and encouragement, and they can help you navigate student ministry in your respective context. If you listen to these voices and apply what they tell you, it will help you on your journey.

Are you ready to start? Let's go!



1

Biblical and Theological Foundations for Student Ministry

• TIM McKNIGHT •

I looked down at the luminescent dashes and digits of my army-issued lensatic compass. Rain clouds obscured the moonlight, and it started to drizzle on our heads. My group consisted of students at the Army Chaplain's School and Center conducting a night land-navigation course they needed to pass in order to graduate. We had completed the day land-navigation course earlier that afternoon. Now our task consisted of using a map, compass, and a list of bearings to find five license plates nailed to five trees somewhere in the vast forest at Fort Dix, New Jersey.

In the daytime, we had found that even if we strayed somewhat from the compass bearing, we might arrive closely enough to the

tree to still see the license plate nailed to it. Night navigation was not so forgiving. We did not have the benefit of seeing the plate from a distance if we strayed off course. To avoid missing the license plate, we had to frequently check our compasses. The term we used for checking the compass frequently was “checking your azimuth.” It was imperative that we check our azimuth frequently to stay on course during the night land-navigation exercise.

Biblical Foundations for Student Ministry

Checking our azimuth reminds me of the role that God’s Word plays in student ministry. Before I would rely on my azimuth to point me to the desired destination, I had to be confident in my compass. Was it accurate and reliable? Was it calibrated to true north? Could I consider my compass trustworthy?

Before we turn to Scripture as our authority and foundation for student ministry, we must first believe that the Bible is reliable, trustworthy, and authoritative. Why should we consider the Bible our authority in the Christian life and student ministry? How do we know that Scripture is trustworthy? We must first answer such questions before we will consider Scripture our authority for student ministry and a foundation upon which we can build such ministry. These questions relate to the realm that theologians call “the revelation and authority of Scripture.”

Biblical Revelation and Authority

The Bible is authoritative because it is the Word of God. In Paul’s letter to Timothy, he wrote, “All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete,

equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17). The Greek word for “inspired” in this passage is *theopneustos*. It means “God-breathed.” Paul claimed that the Holy Spirit breathed out the words of Scripture through the biblical authors. Church historian Geoffrey Bromiley wrote the following in regard to how the early church fathers saw the relationship between the inspiration and authority of Scripture:

As the Word of God given by the Spirit of God, Scripture had for the Fathers the status of a primary authority in the life, teaching, and mission of the church. Deriving from God and enshrining the truth of God, it had indeed the authority of God himself. This applied to the Old Testament in virtue of its prophetic testimony to the Christ who was still to come. It applied to the New Testament in virtue of its apostolic witness to the Christ who had already come in fulfillment of the promises.¹

Through Scripture, God reveals who he is, through the Old Testament, culminating in the miraculous incarnation of Jesus in the New Testament. He unfolds his plan to redeem humankind from the beginning of creation in Genesis to the return of Christ in Revelation. The written Word introduces the incarnate Word through the witnesses of the Gospels. We see the good news of the gospel regarding the life, death, resurrection, ascension, and second coming of Jesus Christ in the words of the New Testament. Only through the Bible can we begin to learn who God is and how we might be reconciled to him through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “The Church Fathers and Holy Scripture,” in *Scripture and Truth*, eds. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 207.

Because Scripture is God’s Word, it bears his authority. If we follow Jesus Christ as Lord, we will seek to apply his Word to our lives. Christ-followers should submit to Scripture in all matters of faith and life. The Bible is the source of authority for believers. As such, all ministries of the church, including student ministry, are founded on the authority of Scripture.²

Although the Word of God is more than a compass, the Bible does provide direction for believers and churches. If we are going to navigate student ministry well, we must look to our compass to guide us in the right direction. With that in mind, what is the biblical foundation for student ministry?

Foundations in Deuteronomy

Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. Deut 6:4–9

This passage of Scripture begins with the *Shema*, Israel’s declaration of faith, which identified Israelites as God’s chosen people and differentiated them from their surrounding polytheistic neighbors. In reciting the *Shema*, the people of Israel acknowledged the sovereignty of Yahweh over their lives. Through this confession, they remembered

² For an excellent discussion of revelation and authority, see D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992); and Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Revelation and the Bible: Contemporary Evangelical Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1958).

who God is and the ways he sovereignly worked on their behalf. In turn, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Moses charged them to love God for who he is and for what he has done.

Regarding this passage, Michael McGarry, in his book *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, writes, “God’s people ought to be marked by love: love of God that is so life-transforming others are loved more than oneself. In the same way that Israel embraced the Shema as their identity marker, Christians live according to the gospel of grace.”³ There is a biblical foundation for student ministry in the call of this passage for parents and the faith community to help students love God with their hearts and souls.

Moses admonished the assembly of Israelites to teach the accounts he shared with them regarding God’s faithful provision on behalf of the people of Israel to the next generation. Notably, he called for Hebrew parents to teach their children who God is and what he has done with the goal of their loving God and placing their faith in him.⁴ The responsibilities and goals of teaching given to parents in this passage make clear that a biblical student

³ Michael McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 2019), 22–23.

⁴ Regarding Moses’s admonishment to parents, Old Testament scholar J. A. Thompson writes, “The demand of love toward God implies all other demands, and the disposition of love toward God implies the disposition both to obey his commandments and to impart these to the children of the following generations, so as to maintain an attitude of love and obedience among the people of God from age to age (7a, 20ff). The book of Deuteronomy attaches a special importance to this task of teaching the family (4:9b; 6:20–25; 11:19). But the demands of Yahweh’s covenant are to be the subject of conversation at all times in the home, by the way, by night and by day. Israel is to *teach them diligently, talk of them constantly, bind them as a sign* on various parts of the body, and *write them*. God’s love and his covenant demands were to be the central and absorbing interest of a man’s whole life.” J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1974), 123.

ministry must involve parents as the primary disciplers of their students. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 clearly teaches that parents are primarily responsible to lead the next generation to love God, remember him, and keep his commandments. Biblical student ministry must, therefore, involve parents.

Biblical student ministry also involves the church, student pastors, and adult student leaders. Moses spoke those words of admonishment to the entire faith assembly of Israel, not just to parents. The entire faith body of Israel carried the responsibility of passing on a love for God and his commandments to the next generation. The Levites, leaders in the faith community, helped parents to teach their children the commands of Yahweh. The people of faith shared in their responsibility to raise children of faith.

Such an admonishment to the community of faith in Moses's time provides a biblical foundation for the conviction that the church is responsible for helping parents teach their students to love God and keep his commandments. Pastors, student pastors, and adult student leaders should come alongside parents and help them to disciple their students. Some students in our churches do not have parents who believe in God and follow Christ. Adults in the church are responsible to teach those students to love God and follow his Word.⁵ Like the Levites, church leaders, including student ministers, should shepherd their students through teaching the Word of God and nurturing them in the faith.

These words from Moses to parents and the faith community of Israel regarding passing on a love for God and faith in Yahweh to Israel's covenant children help lay a biblical foundation for student

⁵ I chose here to focus on Deuteronomy; however, there are also examples from the New Testament in Titus 2 and Ephesians 4 that refer to the role of adults in the church in discipling younger believers.

ministry. They call families and the family of God to raise children who love the Lord and keep his commandments. As Christ-followers, however, we know that this covenant will foreshadow a new covenant that Jesus Christ will establish.

Foundations in Matthew

The eleven disciples traveled to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped, but some doubted. Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Matt 28:16–20

People place great weight upon their last words spoken at the end of their time on this earth. Jesus is no different. In this passage of Scripture, he met the disciples back where his ministry began in Galilee. During this last meeting with them, Jesus fulfilled the promise he made to them when they started following Him, “Follow me,’ he told them, ‘and I will make you fish for people” (Matt 4:19). His final words to them showed them what he meant by this promise.

First, in this passage, we see that the Great Commission is based on the authority of Jesus Christ (28:18). Jesus is the sovereign Lord through whom all things were created (John 1:1–4; Col 1:16–17). As Lord of all heaven and earth, Jesus’s authority extends over the object of this command—his disciples, which include students, parents, and church leaders. The Great Commission given to the disciples on that day still applies to every Christ-follower today.

The scope of the Great Commission also relates to student ministry. It calls Christ-followers to make disciples of *panta ta ethne*—“all nations” (Matt 28:19). Jesus wants his followers to reach

people from every ethnic group and every generation with the gospel. Students across the world fit easily within this scope. According to the United Nations Population Fund, there are 1.8 billion people who are between ten and twenty-four years old.⁶ This comprises 23 percent of the world's population. These students need to hear the life-changing gospel and become followers of Jesus Christ.

There is only one imperative in this command from Jesus: "make disciples." The words we translate as "go," "baptizing," and "teaching" are all participles in the original language. A rough translation of the imperative and participles in the passage would read "as you are going," "make disciples," "baptizing," and "teaching."⁷ The point is this: Christ-followers are to make disciples as they are going about their daily life. While they are at work, school, or home, or are performing tasks in their communities, Jesus calls them to make disciples. Disciple-making should be a part of their everyday lives. For the purpose of our focus, parents should disciple their students as they are going about their daily and weekly routines. Student pastors and church leaders should come alongside families and help them disciple their teenagers. If there are any teens who do not have believing parents, then the student ministers and leaders in the church must evangelize and disciple them.

⁶ United Nations Population Fund, "Adolescent and Youth Demographics: A Brief Overview," accessed October 17, 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/One%20pager%20on%20youth%20demographics%20GF.pdf>.

⁷ For reference to the commentaries, I used to study this passage. For more commentary, I recommend Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary, vol. 22, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992); D. A. Carson, *Matthew* in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984); R. T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

This focus on the church relates to Jesus's mention of baptism in his description of the disciple-making process in this passage. Baptism implies that the individual has already become a disciple through repentance and faith. A peer, parent, or student ministry leader shared the gospel with the student, and he or she began, through repentance and faith, the life of a disciple. The next step for this new believer is to make his or her faith in Christ public by following Christ's example and being baptized. As one who maintains believer's baptism, I hold that baptism unites the new disciple into the local church. In their public profession of faith through baptism, Christ-followers are identifying with a local congregation. The congregation, in turn, is affirming this believer's confession of faith as legitimate and commits to helping the new believer grow in Christ as the scriptural phrase in the first sentence of the next paragraph shows.

This emphasis on spiritual growth relates to Jesus's admonition for disciple-makers, "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:20). Notice that he did not say, "teaching them everything I have commanded you." Disciple-making is not merely leading students to make a "decision" for Christ through the presentation of the gospel. It is not just an information dump of biblical knowledge and facts. It involves showing, through teaching and example, how to live the life of the disciple; how "to observe everything [he has] commanded" (28:20). In student ministry, we want parents, student ministers, adult leaders, and peers to instruct by teaching and to show by example how new believers should apply the Word of God to their lives and follow Jesus. Student ministry leaders must help parents disciple their students this way. For students who do not have believing parents, student ministers and adult leaders must act as spiritual parents of sorts and provide the teaching and example for these students to follow. We are not satisfied with

teenagers merely trusting in the grace of Jesus, but also helping them live in obedience to the commands of Jesus.

Darren DePaul, student ministry practitioner and author, is correct in his assertion, “Here is my basic, biblical assumption: *the primary role of the youth pastor and the student ministry in the local church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.*”⁸ We can only claim that we have made a disciple when we see the new believer, in turn, making disciples.⁹ At that point, we can say that we have taught them to observe Jesus’s commands—including the Great Commission.

The Great Commission’s call to make disciples applies to students in cultures around the globe. This call to disciple-making forms a foundation for student ministry that seeks to come alongside parents to help them lead their children to Christ and disciple them in hopes that they would learn the ways of Christ and join the church in the Great Commission’s work of making more disciples.

Foundations in 1 Corinthians

Although I am free from all and not anyone’s slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law—though I myself am not under the law—to win those under the law. To those who are without the law, like one without the law—though I am not without

⁸ Darren DePaul, “Making Disciples Who Make Disciples” in *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*, eds. Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 39.

⁹ Regarding the relationship between evangelism and discipleship, Craig Blomberg writes, “Evangelism must be holistic. If non-Christians are not hearing the Gospel and not being challenged to make a decision for Christ, then the church has disobeyed one part of Jesus’s commission. If new converts are not faithfully and lovingly nurtured in the whole counsel of God’s revelation, then the church has disobeyed the other part.” Blomberg, *Matthew*, 433.

God's law but under the law of Christ—to win those without the law. To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings. 1 Cor 9:19–23

In this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, we see a glimpse into his strategy of missions and evangelism. He was willing to build bridges to the people with whom he shared the gospel by adopting particular cultural characteristics through which he could communicate the gospel message. He never changed the message but expressed a willingness to change his methods to fit his cultural context. Missiologists call this method of using cultural characteristics as means through which one can communicate the “gospel contextualization.” Missiologist Daniel R. Sanchez writes:

Contextualization can be defined as making concepts and methods relevant to a historical situation. From this definition, missiological contextualization can be viewed as enabling the message of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ to become alive as it addresses the vital issues of a sociocultural context and transforms its worldview, its values, and its goals.¹⁰

We see a great example of contextualization in Paul's encounter with the philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens.¹¹ He engaged the group of philosophers who gathered there daily to share the good news of the resurrection with them. In his conversation with them, Paul made reference to an altar to an unknown god that stood on the

¹⁰ Daniel R. Sanchez, “Contextualization and the Missionary Endeavor,” in *Missiology*, ed. John Mark Terry (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2015), 281.

¹¹ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary, vol. 26, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 365–78.

grounds of Mars Hill (Acts 17:23). He used this religious symbol as a means to segue to a presentation about the God of Scripture. In addition to this cultural/religious reference, Paul also quoted from Greek philosophy to build a bridge for the gospel in his conversation with them (Acts 17:28). The apostle used both aspects from Greek culture (religious idols and Greek philosophy) to place the gospel into their context.

Notice that Paul did not advocate changing the message of the gospel, either in his letter to the church in Corinth or in his encounter with the philosophers in Athens. Through contextualization, he built bridges to the culture he engaged over which the gospel could travel. Although he quoted Greek philosophy in his encounter at the Areopagus, Paul did so to introduce the news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know he did not sacrifice the content of the gospel because of the philosophers' response to this aspect of the gospel. Regarding this response, Luke recorded, "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, 'We'd like to hear from you again about this'" (Acts 17:32).

This biblical model of contextualization forms a key foundation for student ministry. Students throughout the world have their own subcultures within their cultures. They possess their own language, dress, music, means of communication, etc. Student ministry exists as a means to follow Paul's example of adapting methods and means to carry the gospel to a particular culture. Student ministers and church leaders study teenage culture to build bridges over which the gospel can travel to that culture. Biblical student ministry does not change the message of the gospel to reach teenagers. It simply contextualizes the gospel, as Paul exercised and advocated, to reach students with the saving message of Jesus Christ. Regarding this focus on reaching teenagers with the good news of the gospel, Cameron Cole rightly asserts, "The proclamation of the gospel constitutes one of the most

pivotal functions of youth ministry.”¹² Biblical contextualization provides student ministry a means to proclaim the gospel in ways that students understand.

The Biblical Metanarrative of the Gospel

The biblical metanarrative, or overarching story of the gospel, also forms a foundation for student ministry. This narrative delineates God’s mission of the redemption of humanity—the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. Regarding the metanarrative of Scripture, missiologist Christopher Wright writes:

This has often been presented as a four-point narrative: *creation, fall, redemption, and future hope*. This whole worldview is predicated on teleological monotheism: that is, the affirmation that there is one God at work in the universe and in human history, and that this God has a goal, a purpose, a mission that will ultimately be accomplished by the power of God’s Word and for the glory of God’s name. This is the mission of the biblical God.¹³

This metanarrative begins with Creation. God created human beings in his image (Gen 1:26–27). Men and women have inherent value because they bear the image of God (*imago Dei*). Teenagers as well are image-bearers. Like every human being, God creates teenagers “remarkably and wondrously” in their mothers’ wombs

¹² Cameron Cole, “The Gospel at the Heart of All Things,” in *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry*, eds. Cameron Cole and Jon Nielson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 33.

¹³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 64.

(Ps 139:14). God creates every human being to have a relationship with him.

Human beings' problem is the fall. Adam and Eve disobeyed God because they wanted to be like him (Genesis 3). The fall brought death to creation and the human race. As a result of the fall, every human being is also born with a sin nature (Rom 5:12–21). Left in our sin, humans are dead spiritually, followers of Satan, and under God's wrath (Eph 2:1–3). By nature, we want to rebel against the God who created us. In our sin, we justly deserve God's eternal condemnation and punishment; therefore, apart from Christ, we would suffer eternal punishment for our sin (Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:9).

However, God does not leave humans in their sin but provides a way of redemption through his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine (John 1:1–14). God sent Christ to live a perfect life in our place that we could not live and to die a death in our place that we deserve (Matt 5:17–20; Heb 4:15; 1 John 2:1–2). He sent Jesus to save people from all over the world from their sins (John 3:16; 1 John 2:1–2). Jesus paid the ransom for the sins of those who would believe in him through his blood shed on the cross (Matt 20:28; Acts 20:28; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13–14). On the cross, Jesus willingly and lovingly bore the wrath of God for our sin on our behalf (Isa 53:10–11; Gal 3:13). God satisfied his demand for justice over our sin by sacrificing his only Son in our place (Rom 3:21–26). After Jesus's death, his followers buried him in a tomb. He rose from the dead, showing that he was whom he claimed to be—God in flesh (Matt 12:28–40; Rom 1:1–4; 1 Cor 15:12–19). Christ then ascended into heaven, where he intercedes to the Father on behalf of the saints (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:23–28). Jesus left his followers to share the message of his life and work to people around them and make disciples (the Great Commission). Now, Jesus's message is that anyone who

repents of their sins and trusts in him as Lord will experience salvation, redemption, forgiveness of their sins (Rom 10:9–13), and eternal life. These followers of Jesus also look forward to his return.

The final part of the metanarrative is the consummation of the kingdom. Jesus Christ will return to earth to raise the dead, both righteous (to glorified bodies; 2 Cor 15:2) and unrighteous, for the final judgment. At the judgment, Jesus Christ will hold everyone to account for their lives. People who know Christ by following him through repentance and faith will receive their eternal reward for the faithful lives they lived, enter into the joy of their salvation, and reign with him over a new heaven and a new earth (Matt 25:23; 1 Cor 3:14; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Tim 4:8; Rev 5:9–10; 7:15–17; 21:1–5; 22:3). Regarding the resurrected dead who are not Christ-followers, the Bible states that, during the judgment, they are thrown into the lake of fire, a place of eternal suffering, along with Death, Hades, and Satan (Rev 20:10–15). At the consummation of his kingdom, Christ raises his church to reign with him forever and vanquishes evil.

Students, along with every human being, play a part in this meta-narrative of the gospel. They are created in the image of God and to have a relationship with him. Like everyone else, students bear a sin nature that leads them to worship themselves rather than God and places them at enmity with him. Christ lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death in place of teenagers. Any student who repents and believes in the Lord Jesus Christ can become one of his followers. As Christ-followers, students can look forward to the hope that Christ will return, raise them from the dead with glorified bodies, reclaim his church, vanquish evil and death, and live eternally in relationship with them as they reign over a new heaven and a new earth. In short, students need to hear the gospel and how the metanarrative of God's redemptive work in Scripture relates to their lives.

Summarizing the Biblical Foundations for Student Ministry

The Bible provides a foundation for the existence and practice of student ministry. God's covenant with the people of Israel in the Old Testament admonishes parents and Israel's faith community to pass on faith in God and knowledge of his character and work to the next generation. The Great Commission admonishes Christ-followers, including parents and church leaders, to make disciples of all peoples, including teenagers, who live with trust in and obedience to Jesus. Paul's words and example regarding contextualization of the gospel provide biblical support for student ministry. Finally, the metanarrative of the gospel throughout the Bible applies to students as it helps them see their place within the rescue story of God.

Hermeneutical and Theological Foundations for Student Ministry

Having established some of the biblical foundations for student ministry, it is essential that we also establish our student ministries upon a sound interpretation of Scripture and sound theology. Biblical interpretation and theology form the principles upon which we build our student ministry. If either is weak, we will develop unhealthy or unbiblical student ministries.

Hermeneutics and Student Ministry¹⁴

In his letter to the young pastor Timothy, the apostle Paul admonished, "Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a

¹⁴ The scope of this chapter does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of the subject of hermeneutics. An excellent resource to introduce youth leaders,

worker who doesn't need to be ashamed, correctly teaching the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). He stressed the importance of working hard to interpret Scripture rightly. Timothy's interpretation of Scripture would have a direct impact on his teaching and preaching, and the same is true for those ministering to students. Student ministers and leaders must possess keen hermeneutical skills and equip their parents, leaders, and students to develop a sound interpretation.

What does hermeneutics mean? Biblical hermeneutics refers to the exercise and discipline of biblical interpretation. Describing the components of hermeneutics, New Testament scholar Robert Stein writes, "These three components are the *Author*, the *Text*, and the *Reader*, or, as linguistics tend to say, the *Encoder*, the *Code*, and the *Decoder*."¹⁵ In hermeneutics, we ask: Who was the author of this book/passage of Scripture? What was the author's intent for writing the passage? When did the author write the book? What is the genre of the passage (historical, poetic, apocalyptic, prophetic, wisdom)? What does the passage mean? What is the linguistic structure of the passage? What are the keywords in the passage? How does this passage fit into the overall context of the book/Bible? Who was the audience for this passage? What was their context? What did the passage mean to its original audience? All of these questions relate to biblical hermeneutics.

Student ministries need student pastors who possess strong hermeneutical skills. If given the opportunity, ministers in student

parents, and students to biblical interpretation is Matt Rogers's and Donny Mathis's *Seven Arrows: Aiming Bible Readers in the Right Direction* (Spring Hill, TN: Rainer Publishing, 2017). An excellent introduction to hermeneutics for college and seminary students is Robert H. Stein's *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1994).

¹⁵ Stein, 18.

ministry should learn the biblical languages. They should study hermeneutics in a formal setting under teachers well versed in the discipline. Such student pastors will possess more tools to equip their adult leaders, parents, and students to become interpreters of the Bible who rightly divide God's Word.

Theology and Student Ministry

Hermeneutics is crucial because it focuses on the right interpretation of the revelation of God in Scripture. As mentioned previously, God reveals himself in the incarnate Word, who is Jesus Christ, and in God's written Word—the Bible. Theology focuses on the study of God. It involves using Scripture as our source of authority to understand who God is and what he does. The study of theology helps us to understand various aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This chapter's scope does not allow for an exhaustive treatment of every theological doctrine or facet related to student ministry.¹⁶ This section simply provides an overview of the various types of theology that student ministers may utilize to formulate a robust theological foundation for student ministry.

¹⁶ There are some excellent books on theology available to people involved in student ministry. For an introduction to biblical theology accessible to adult leaders and students, I recommend Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991). For an introduction to systematic theology, see Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1999). For systematic theologies written for college and seminary students, see Daniel Akin, *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2003); Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966); and Robert Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998).

Biblical theology concentrates on the progressive revelation of God throughout Scripture. Theologian Wayne Grudem defines biblical theology, stating, “Biblical theology gives special attention to the teachings of *individual authors and sections* of Scripture, and to the place of each teaching in the *historical development* of Scripture.”¹⁷ The focus of this discipline of theology is on doctrines within the context of a particular passage or book of Scripture. For example, biblical theologians might study how the doctrine of God develops in the book of Exodus. At the same time, biblical theology also looks at the metanarrative of Scripture and how doctrines progress through the Bible. Biblical theology lays the foundation for systematic theology.

Systematic theology categorizes theology by doctrine. It takes the doctrine first, then focuses on how the entire Bible relates to that particular doctrine. For example, systematic theologians might study the doctrine of sin and list passages from the Old and New Testament that relate to particular aspects of that doctrine. Systematic theology is helpful because its doctrinal focus allows Christians to see what the whole Bible teaches about a particular subject. There is a rich history of systematic theologians from which student ministers and leaders can draw to help them build a solid theological foundation for their ministries and their students.

Practical or pastoral theology has to do with how doctrine relates to the everyday lives of students and their families. Theologian Graeme Goldsworthy writes, “Pastoral theology occupies itself with the way the Word of God touches people where they are and in whatever condition they are. It is concerned with the practical

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 22.

application of the gospel to Christians in every aspect of their life.”¹⁸ Through such application of theology, student ministers help students and their families understand how the rich doctrines related to the gospel relate to their everyday lives. Pastoral theology helps ministers to shepherd their students through the hardships and challenges they face.¹⁹

Conclusion

There is a clear biblical foundation for student ministry involving parents and the faith community in both the Old and New Testaments. Biblical interpretation and robust background in theology are necessary for healthy student ministry. Hermeneutics and theology impact methodology. If the biblical and theological foundations of a student ministry are weak, that ministry will be unhealthy and will produce students who lack a firm foundation in doctrine. Lack of sound theology also leads to problematic methodology. It is like using a bad compass bearing during the land-navigation course. Failure to refer back to the compass will lead you to stray off course. On the other hand, when student ministers align with parents to help equip them to disciple their students with a strong biblical and theological grounding, student ministries will begin to produce students who graduate with a resolute faith that will carry them into college or a career. They refer back to their compass, the Word of God, and it keeps their ministries and lives on course.

¹⁸ Goldsworthy, *According to Plan*, 31.

¹⁹ For excellent resources related to pastoral theology, I recommend the Puritans. They are historically known as being physicians of the soul.