

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Indispensable Necessity of Doctrinally Rich Young Adult Ministry

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1



I've worked within student ministry in some capacity for 12 years. If junior highers smell like body spray and if high schoolers can smell fear, then young adults (YAs) have a nose for inauthenticity. They see right through the smoke machine and lights. They quickly pick up on lack of depth. And they know on first whiff whether the "answer" you just gave to the question that's plagued them or their friend's faith (or is sitting at the bottom of their lack thereof) is worthy of consideration or if you're just grasping at straws. They pull no punches, and they are awesome for it!

If I could encourage those attempting to reach or minister to college-age people toward one thing besides knowing their Bibles and enjoying God, it would be this: you and your ministry must be doctrinally robust. Your acquaintance with the issues YAs raise, and even more importantly, your familiarity with the answers from Scripture and Christian tradition, are indispensable in engaging GenZ 18- to 20-somethings. Whether it's the unsaved skeptic, the new believer, or the mature believer, there will be no fruitful ministry among GenZ college students and young adults apart from deep, rich, and robust doctrine.

Evangelistic and Apologetic Need

As Derek Rishmawy, himself a campus minister, has said in regard to reaching GenZ college students, "Nerdy theology really does matter for evangelism. Doctrineless evangelism simply will not work." Amen. The universities where YAs live lack no robust

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics

secular doctrine that refutes Christianity. Bart Erdman does not pull any punches, and neither should we. Young adults need to know the church has sufficient and coherent answers to their theological questions, and we who pastor them should be ready to offer those answers ([1 Peter 3:15](#)).

The Need for Adult Answers to Adult Lives

2

Young adults face new life stages and challenges. They have questions about dating, marriage, finance, politics, culture, and more. They often no longer rely on their parents or tradition for answers. They need deep, robust, and coherent doctrine that addresses the complexities and hardships of life. You might get away with shooting from the hip in youth group, but young adults will suss out a run-of-the-mill answer in a heartbeat. Not only this, but as a generation coming of age amid heightened turbulence (American political context, COVID) and lack of solidity (social media), they long for rootedness and concreteness. A concreteness only deep doctrine can provide. YAs need mature doctrine so they can mature into adulthood ([Hebrews 5:11-14](#)).

The Discipleship Need

Many, if not most, YAs have no clue robust theology even exists. They rarely read theological books and haven't sat under good preaching and teaching. I pick up on this when some of the YAs in my church don't understand the need for church membership, the significance of baptism, the habit of tithing, and so on. YAs, mature or immature, need good doctrine that will instruct them in how they ought to live and stir them up to taste the depths of the knowledge of God so that they might be further formed into his image ([2 Corinthians 3:18](#)).

Resources

So, if pastors or volunteers or parents want to effectively engage and disciple young adults, they must equip themselves in knowing, presenting, and defending “what accords with sound doctrine” ([Titus 2:1](#), Cf. [Titus 1:9](#); [1 Timothy 1:10](#)). And we will become so by not only going deep in our Bibles, but going wide in our familiarity with solid Christian theology and growing in our ability to wield it for the good of those young people we long to reach and disciple.

So, as one step toward this, what should one be reading/doing to prepare for ministering to college agers?

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Historical Theology

YAs don't need new answers. They need age-old answers applied to contemporary phrasing of age-old questions. And thankfully for us, the Christian tradition is in no small part the history of answering the most foundational questions humans have ever wondered about. Metaphysics, morality—these are the same questions GenZ has, though staged somewhat differently.

Pick a (preferably not from this century) systematic theology or theologian and dedicate yourself to ingesting it/them. Go slow and let the sound theology seep into your bones. Recognize how the answers given centuries ago are the answers needed today, just with your own presentation.

And let the 21-year-old know where you're getting these answers from. This will not only give you the next most solid foundation outside of Scripture with which to grapple with the questions young adults have, but it will also provide a rootedness to the young adult asking as they see this isn't something thought up last week.

You can't go wrong with Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*. Or, if four volumes is understandably a bit much for a first bite, Louis Berkhof's one-volume *Systematic Theology* is a great place to start. For a modern presentation, look at John Frame's.

Biblical Anthropology

You knew you needed to read in this area. And you knew why. If YAs have questions about anything, it is about our bodies. What are they? Am I my body, or am I inside of it? Do bodies matter? How much do they matter? How do we know they matter more than what my mind says? Speaking of, what's a mind? These are just the snowflakes of the iceberg.

But these questions aren't theoretical. YAs have these questions because they have friends whose lives hang in the balance of these questions, or so it seems to them. These are live questions for YAs because they deal with *lives*. That is why they matter to YAs, and they should matter to you because those very lives might walk into your campus or church young adult group.

But you don't just need to know what you think about LGBTQ+, the goodness of the material body, God's design for marriage and family, abortion, assisted suicide, and the like. You need to know why you know. And you need to know and be able to explain why the Christian answer is not only true, but also the most beautiful and genuinely good option in the marketplace.

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Here's a starter pack:

- *The Genesis of Gender: A Christian Theory*, Abigail Favale
- *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Alistair MacIntyre
- *Begotten or Made?: Human Procreation and Medical Technique*, Oliver O'Donovan
- *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*, Francis A. Schaeffer

4

Miscellaneous Apologetics

We must also be familiar with the various topics that YAs are likely to ask questions about. Especially for those YAs going to college, they are interacting with peers and professors who operate from a different worldview. This raises a range of questions for YAs, most of which can be categorized into a broader field that we would do well to engage. This will require us to know the best arguments of the other side. Doing so enables us to gather our own compelling and sound answers, while also being able to formulate our own questions for those worldviews to reveal their inadequacies. A few general areas in which to be well read are

- Exclusivity of Christianity as the one true religion, and the claims of the main world religions
- The authority and trustworthiness of the Bible and what makes it different from other religious texts
- The relationship of Christianity to science
- Epistemology (how do humans know what they know?)
- Old Testament “problem passages” (God’s commanding violence, allowances for slavery, presence of polygamy, etc.).

Write

Finally, consider writing as you read. Writing solidifies ideas in your mind and heart. It helps you synthesize the large amounts of information you take in through books. There are countless ways of doing this. I (Dan) have a running doctrinal statement along with documents on theological topics that I add to and tweak as I read new theological material. I try to keep the writing short (100-200 words) but carefully written. Writing will make you more confident and clear when you are in an off-the-cuff conversation with a YA on a theologically dense or apologetically precarious topic.

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Conclusion

Take heart, God is pursuing YAs in this generation as he has in every generation before. He formed them and knows the hurdles they have to faith in his gospel and greater growth in it. He has many people in this generation ([Acts 18:10](#)) and is more than capable of saving them. His arm is never too short. And be encouraged, while he is not dependent on you, he wants to use you to reach them. So pray for them, go on fast food runs or coffee shop meet-ups with them, hear them out for hours at a time if needed, and arm yourself with robust doctrine so that when they ask their questions or the questions of their friends, you are ready to give a sound response.



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