

The End of Youth Ministry?

Why Parents Don't Really
Care about Youth Groups
and What Youth Workers
Should Do about It

ANDREW ROOT

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Baker Academic

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Warning for the Reader! (Read before Using)

As you pick up this book and page through it, a good question is, *What is this?* I'll be the first to admit that it's weird. I've written it in the first person, as a story that I, Andrew Root, am going through. And in a real way, I am. Writing this book has forced me to think in new ways, connecting new thoughts to my earlier projects. In no small way, this book is the outworking of the implications of my *Faith Formation in a Secular Age*. It even offers a vision for how I think attention to the good life and the practices of faith connect to place-sharing and the theology of the cross, both of which my earlier thoughts rest on so squarely.

That said, the story that unfolds below is a parable, a kind of thought experiment. The best way to say it is that this book is written in the spirit of the Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. All of my works have more than a hint of Kierkegaardian influence. Like Kierkegaard, who Karl Barth called “the melancholy Dane,” I sometimes feel like I could be called a “melancholy Minnesotan.” Perhaps both Kierkegaard and I have spent far too much time in snowdrifts and bone-chilling winds to see the world in any other way than through the crucifixion. So with Kierkegaardian irony, you'll be surprised to discover that this book is fundamentally about *joy*. It sketches out how I see joy as central to ministry, and how I see joy in the resurrection as essential to a theology of the cross.

But in this book I go further in my Kierkegaardian directions than I have before, taking on the Dane's style, using stories that mix factual occurrences and made-up characters to articulate larger points about reality. For half a second I even thought of using a Kierkegaardian pseudonym (Crash Adams

would have been cool), but I resisted the temptation. So instead I'm calling the protagonist of the tale ahead Andrew. The character Andrew is on a nine-month journey to figure out what youth ministry is for. Just as Kierkegaard's two characters Judge Vilhelm and A in *Either/Or* serve as a way for the philosopher to push forward new ideas, so my characters do as well.

In homage to Kierkegaard I have nicknamed my sage youth worker J—which stands for Janna. But because she's the creation of my own imagination (and the many conversations with youth workers I've learned from), I've called her J also because she is part of my own consciousness (my middle initial is J). In a sense, J is a real youth worker—I've met many like J across the globe—but the overall arc of her story is for the sake of the parable. As a matter of fact, almost everything in these pages happened, just not quite in the order or with the direct existential immediacy that is relayed here.

That said, I did interview some parents for this book. These interviews show up in the middle chapters. So while the whole of the book is a Kierkegaardian parable, it does draw directly from real conversations that inspired each of the stories of the parents I relay. I've changed their names and circumstances, both because I promised to and to fit the parable. So in the end these interviews are more illustrative than scientific, more like a screenwriter doing a drive-along than a sociologist or political scientist honing question protocols. I ask the reader to judge them on the merit of the cultural philosophical ideas they illustrate, rather than on the scientific precision they provide.

Let me offer one final word about the mechanics of the book: *maybe* I've watched too much TV and am too influenced by flashback techniques of storytelling in *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Westworld*, or *This Is Us*, but I've decided to use flashbacks as well. Eventually, we get to the present and stay there for the second half of the book. It's rare to read a theology and ministry book that is told as a storied parable, much less one that uses flashbacks. So enjoy!

Preface

It's never a good thing to be spotted crying on an airplane. In those tight confines, it's best to be steady—neither too high nor too low. But I couldn't help it. I'd just finished a beautiful and convicting film called *The Florida Project*, about a little girl named Moonee living in a dark shadow cast by Disney World. Moonee and her mother live on the throwaway material of the tourism giant, having nothing but the scraps of those living the “good life”—for a week or two—in the Magic Kingdom. Moonee and her mom's only option is to call home a two-star motel made for, but now discarded by, tourists. She has nowhere to play except the busy highways laced with strip malls and next to a helicopter pad that promises visitors majestic views of Orlando. They are poor and overlooked, locked out of The Happiest Place on Earth.

The movie ends in the most shockingly beautiful and heart-wrenching way, which I won't give away. The ending starkly communicates that some have to live in these desperate kinds of situations not necessarily because others are coldhearted or don't care but because their own imaginations of the good life support or concede to pushing others to the edges. It's as if the movie says that some get to throw things away and others have to live off the throwaway; some get to bathe in happiness and others get the dirty water.

When the credits rolled, I cried not only because it was beautifully sad but more so because I knew white Protestant youth ministry has overlooked, or looked past, children living in economic and cultural crisis. Kids like Moonee have been as invisible to white Protestant youth ministry as they have been to the larger culture.

It seems fair to say that white American Protestant congregation-based youth ministry is mostly a middle-class phenomenon (its funding, resources, speakers, and ideas come from this demographic). And in turn, it seems fair

to say that American Protestant congregation-based youth ministry is in crisis, not sure of what it is really for, feeling at this moment somewhat directionless.

To face this challenge, this book takes a fundamentally different approach than most other youth ministry books. It focuses not on how to do youth ministry but rather on why to do it at all. It asks the reader to wrestle with this most fundamental question.

This is a big question. Any “why” question tends to be large. So, to begin answering the why of youth ministry, this book focuses most directly on parents, examining how their conceptions of a good life affect their children and, in turn, affect youth ministry. For decades now, we’ve added “family” to youth ministry, often calling ourselves “youth and family ministry.” Yet often when we ask the most fundamental questions of “why” in youth ministry, we stick with youth. In no way will young people be ignored in this book, yet as we explore what youth ministry is for, we’ll also think about the ways parents’ conceptions of the good life direct their children’s lives, and how youth ministry often gets pushed off balance because of this.

An important point as you wade into this book: because congregation-based youth ministry remains mainly a middle-class phenomenon, I’ll locate my story there, introducing you to youth workers and parents living in this cultural milieu. I do this because my goal in seeking to answer what youth ministry is for is to challenge some of the misguided conceptions of a good life embedded in this middle-class milieu, to which youth ministry has sought to respond and by which it has too often been unhelpfully captured. My hope is that examining and challenging the middle-class conceptions of the good life will open up imaginative space that not only frees middle-class young people and parents for a new vision of God’s calling, but also directs youth ministry as a whole to young people like Moonee, living on the edges, who too often are casualties of our shared misguided conceptions. So I’ll challenge what youth ministry is for by directing my cultural critique (and reconception) at congregation-based youth ministry that often, particularly in middle-class settings, contends that “youth ministry” equals only “youth group.”

We have a big job ahead of us in youth ministry. Our modern lives are now going so fast that a common middle-class response has been to *slow down* young people’s growing up, delaying things like dating and driving, which just a few decades ago were common in early teen years. As I’ll show, this slowdown has caused youth ministry to be rudderless, leading many to feel unsure what it is really for. Through the parable that you’re about to read, I’ll offer a diagnosis of the challenges we face—and have been unclear about—and then provide a new way to think about what youth ministry can be for.

I'll assert that youth ministry is for joy. I'll contend that only if youth ministry is for joy can we avoid the traps that have led to a cultural slowdown and our misguided conception of a good life—namely, the need for recognized identity and the goal of happiness. These cultural pursuits have made youth ministry just another activity, and one that can't match the importance of piano lessons, test prep, soccer, volleyball, and debate club. The moral dimension, exploring what's a good life, becomes central in this book. I believe this book is unique among ministry texts for fronting a moral philosophy. I've moved into this moral philosophy because Charles Taylor's thought has become important for me in understanding why youth ministry feels, at times, aimless. I'll be applying Taylor's moral philosophy directly to youth ministry. This book, then, will offer a vision for how youth ministry can be reimagined in a time when young peoples' schedules are being overmanaged. As strange as it may seem, making youth ministry for joy may just be the answer.



Truth be told, I never would have stumbled into these thoughts without the work of the Theology of Joy and the Good Life project at the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale Divinity School, funded by the John Templeton Foundation. This project has been more than an inspiration; it is the fruit of many conversations at the meetings and consultations, in which I've been fortunate enough to participate, that have directly affected the ideas. I've served on two boards within the grant and have learned much. A look at my footnotes will reveal that I've been influenced at multiple points by the findings and research of the grant. The grant produced hundreds of papers, essays, and lectures. I've read most of them, allowing them to mold my imagination. I'm overwhelmed with thanks to Skip Masback for inviting me into the project. Skip particularly advocated for part of the project to focus on young people and youth ministry. Skip has been a champion for youth ministry and youth workers. Over the past six years, he has become a good friend. There is almost no one I enjoy talking with more than Skip. His passion for youth ministry and Yale Divinity School is contagious. It was Skip who commissioned me to write this book for the grant. His encouragement and inspiration have meant so much.

I'd also like to thank the grant's primary investigator, Miroslav Volf. Miroslav and I enjoyed some very rich conversations over the grant period, and his help on the ideas in this book are clear. Others from the Center have become good friends. I'm thankful for the support and wisdom of Sarah F. Farmer and Angela Gorrell. Ryan McAnnally-Linz, the managing director, was kind enough to read the first half of the manuscript, offering very helpful feedback. Drew Collins also read the first half, offering helpful insights on David Foster

Wallace. Drew and I had more than one good night of eating, drinking, and laughing at grant meetings.

Over three springs, the Joy and Adolescent Faith and Flourishing group of the grant met in some beautiful places. We joked that Skip was trying to hit all the destinations of the Beach Boys' song "Kokomo." We made it to Key Largo and Bermuda before the grant was finished. My wife, Kara, called these trips "scholar spring break." Yet what made them so great was less the location and more the people. I offer thanks to David White, Almeda Wright, Caroline Ainsworth, Mark Berner, Fred Edie, Mark Gornik, Dave Rahn, Rodger Nishioka, Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, Pam King, and Kenda Dean for support and inspiration. Additional gratitude goes to Kenda, who took the time to read the whole manuscript and offered wonderfully insightful feedback. Kenda deserves thanks for so much in my academic life.

Trusted and beloved friends David Wood, Blair Bertrand, Wes Ellis, Abigail Rusert, Jon Wasson, Bård Eirik Hallesby Norheim, and Mike King were kind enough to read through the manuscript. These people both understand the trajectory of my previous work and are some of the best readers I know. Their feedback was excellent, and I'm thankful for their important friendship. I'd like also to thank Nancy Lee Gauche for her friendship and brilliance in our mutual work at Luther Seminary. Working again with Baker Academic, particularly Bob Hosack and Eric Salo, has been an amazing gift. They, in every way, made this book better.

Finally, as usual, I need to thank Kara Root for wading through the whole manuscript, editing it for public exposure. She always asks the best questions. Her astute mind and able editing have been an amazing gift to the projects I've been blessed to share.

One

Toward a Journey to Joy

LATE MARCH

There's a palpable feeling of connectedness and warmth. I'm sitting in a youth group gathering, but not really. There are as many adults, and even children, as adolescents. I sit in the corner just soaking it in, trying hard to put my finger on what I'm experiencing. I'd heard about this supposed youth group, or whatever it is, and its youth pastor, Janna, from a friend. Janna, or J as all her friends call her (a nickname that has stuck since she was a first-year camp counselor), was nice enough to invite me to this weekly gathering.

I've been on a journey for the past six months, and now, in early spring, with winter slowly melting away and the days growing longer, all my trails have led here. I've been teaching and training youth workers and writing about youth ministry for over fifteen years. And yet six months ago I had an encounter that made me question what youth ministry is really for. I realized I was not sure how I'd answer if I were given a fill-in-the-blank question, "Youth ministry is for _____."

This realization brought a sinking feeling that would send anyone searching either for an answer or for a new vocation. I chose the former. Now, six months into my search, I am sitting in this nondescript church fellowship hall. The warmth and connection bring up a sense of anticipation, like I am close to receiving the key I've been looking for.

Over the next hour, three people—a man in his fifties, a woman in her early thirties, a boy in tenth grade—get up and tell stories. Their stories all are in response to the same text and prompt. The text is Matthew 19:16–30, the story

of the rich young ruler, and the prompt is, “Tell about a time when the good was a difficult or confusing surprise.” Music, laughter, tears, and friendship encase the stories as much as the four walls of the fellowship hall. It’s beautiful, an example of a youth ministry that is much more than an adolescent religious holding pen. It’s something unique I haven’t experienced before. But this alone isn’t the key I’ve been searching for over the past six months.

With the last fifteen minutes, J comes forward and laces these three stories together, drawing people deeper into the text, teaching on it through these three stories of faith and witness. She focuses in on the rich young ruler calling Jesus “good” and Jesus telling him that only God is good. She then invites the room to gather into groups of three or four, making sure each group has at least one young person and one not-so-young person. In these groups they end the night by praying for one another.

As people slowly prepare to depart, I wait awkwardly at the back of the room. J and I have agreed to talk afterward. When nearly everyone has gone and J is able to take a breath, she motions me to a table. To my surprise a young woman joins her. As we sit J says, “This is Lorena. She’s in twelfth grade.” I’m not sure why Lorena has joined us, but I’m happy to meet her.

I start with the obvious, asking, “What made you think of this kind of gathering?”

J starts somewhere else, needing to give me context. “About two years ago I was days from quitting or, more likely, being fired. It was miserable. I was just a few years out of college, and my only youth ministry experience was a summer at camp. I was pretty good at the whole counselor thing, so I thought, *No problem. Youth ministry in a church is just being a camp counselor year-round.* I’d been the chief counselor of fun that summer. And so this church seemed like a perfect fit. The church wanted someone who’d create events and an overall program that kids would find fun. I knew it was deeper than just entertainment. The idea was that if young people were having fun, then they’d have positive feelings about church and stick around.”

“I could see that,” I say.

“But nine months into it, it started eating me up,” J continues. “I mean, it’s one thing to be the chief counselor of fun for a week, then reboot with totally different kids for another week. But how do you do that in the day-to-day of church life? I knew things weren’t going well. And the more I tried to make things fun, the more energy left the youth ministry and me.”

“So what happened?” I ask.

“Well, a few people on the personnel committee started hinting that things weren’t working, and my senior pastor took some steps to both encourage me and hold me accountable. But they all just kept coming back to fun: ‘Teach

them the Bible in a fun way,’ ‘Connect with them and have fun,’ ‘Make church a fun experience for my ninth-grade son.’ As if fun were freedom instead of a chain around my whole body.”

Intrigued, I ask again, “So what happened?”

“*She* did,” J says, pointing to Lorena.

Surprised by the response, but now clear on why Lorena is sitting with us, I inquire of the teen, “What did you do?”

With a cutting, dry sense of humor that makes her seem older than twelfth grade, Lorena responds, “Oh, I just got some fluid around my heart and almost died.”

I can only hold my breath.

J then says, with equal measures of sincerity and sarcasm that nevertheless reveal a deep truth, “Having a kid in your ministry fighting for her life after some freak infection—*that* will change things for the chief counselor of fun pretty quickly. That will make youth ministry for something very different than just fun.”

Without realizing it, J has referenced the phrase that I’ve been journeying to answer. My heartbeat quickens. I had not anticipated that I’d ask this question so early in our conversation, yet here it is. “If youth ministry isn’t for fun—because you watched Lorena almost die—then what is youth ministry for?”

J and Lorena look at each other and smile. Then Lorena says with bright eyes, “Joy.”

I let this odd response run over me. It isn’t quite computing. I’m not aware in the moment that it’s indeed the key for which I’ve been searching. Instead, I’m only confused. *Youth ministry is for joy*, I say silently to myself with incredulity. Over the past fifteen years of teaching and writing, I’ve focused on the cross and the experience of suffering. And here it is again—Lorena almost died, and J nearly burned out. But when they answer what youth ministry is for, J and Lorena don’t say *support* or *commiseration* but, oddly, *joy*.

What does joy have to do with the cross? More concretely, what does joy have to do with youth ministry? These questions push me further into confusion. Yet I’m aware that throughout this journey moments of confusion have been the birth pains of new insight. So, like swimming with a current, I don’t fight the confusion but let it have me. As I do, I flash back to early fall.

I can feel, even taste, the sensations of school being back in session, the still-warm weather reminding me of the summer now over, and the trees showing no signs of change. I’m arriving at a youth ministry conference, the place this intellectual and vocational journey began. There’s a young man. I can clearly see his face. But I can’t remember his name.

Two

Don't Waste Your Life

Youth Ministry and the Good Life

SEPTEMBER

I'm bad with names. I think it was Graham. But while his name escapes me, his statement shook me. Something about it moved me. What was behind the force of emotion, I wasn't sure. It just caught me. Now snared, I couldn't tell if I agreed or disagreed with what Graham said. In those moments when we feel like a statement, perspective, or idea unexpectedly hits us, we often go primal. So I started to size Graham up, planting him in categories I shouldn't have, wondering if he was more conservative or liberal than I was, if he was brilliant or an idiot, a friend or looking for a fight. But even with my primal Sorting Hat to protect me, I couldn't shake it.

Graham, this young youth worker I had just met, told me over coffee at a youth ministry conference that, for him, "youth ministry is for helping kids not waste their lives."

It felt like such an odd statement. *Not waste their lives?* I repeated it in my head. It just seemed weird.

Aware of my internal reaction, I tried to hide the skepticism that had entered my nervous system. I worked hard to keep my face from contorting like I had just tasted something icky. I decided my best option to keep this from happening was to freeze. So as if I were a cold stone statue, I shamefully sized Graham up, trying to discern where this odd statement was coming from.

Without much of a reaction from me, Graham had to pick up our conversation. His face showed that he worried his statement didn't connect, not realizing it had done the opposite. So he asked, "What do *you* think youth ministry is for?"

Unfreezing my body and shaking the Sorting Hat from my head, I found myself saying, "God."

Reading Graham's face, I now assumed that he had put on his own Sorting Hat.



The rest of the long weekend his statement kept haunting me: *Youth ministry is for helping young people not waste their lives*. Could that be true? I had to concede: it is an amazing fact that we are the kind of animals—the only animals—who can waste our lives. Deer or even dogs don't seem capable of this kind of misuse. Of course, it's such a waste for a young healthy dog to be put down because we haven't heeded Bob Barker's pleas and had our pets spayed and neutered, controlling the pet population. But we'd never blame this on the pet, contending that Max the beagle had wasted his life. We'd never be tempted to judge poor Max for the shame of wasting his days.

But this is not true with human beings. For us it is more than possible. It's an always lurking threat that one of us, or maybe a whole society of us, will waste our lives. The possibility that we're wasting our lives can awaken us in a cold sweat in the middle of the night. Regardless of period or place in human history, it has always been possible for a human life to be misdirected and therefore mis-lived. There seems to be nothing more tragic than to recognize a life squandered. Midlife can be a crisis because halfway through we wonder if we've missed life. Nothing seems to haunt us, especially us late modern people, more than the thought of wasting our *own* lives and living in regret.

I was starting to think Graham had a point. Yet later that same day I met a college student. (I do remember her name; it was Kathryn.) Kathryn told me that she was a youth ministry major on the cusp of graduation. She was conflicted about going to seminary and wanted to talk. She asked me earnestly, with a stab of panic, "How do I know if God wants me to go to seminary? I'd just hate to miss what I'm supposed to do with my life."

To be human is to sense—is to deeply *believe*—that there is a direction to our lives, that there is indeed a *good* way to live and, in turn, a real possibility of missing it. That's what led Kathryn to want to talk. To assume that a life can be wasted is to admit that there is a bad way, a way in opposition

to the good way. To not waste your life is to live a good life. We don't hold deer and dogs accountable for wasting their lives, because their way of living is bound not in visions of the good but in instinct. A goose flies south not in a direct quest for the good but because it's instinctual. It may be good for the goose to fly south, but it is not a quest for the good that fuels the goose's motivation.

Human beings, on the other hand, are always directly pursuing some kind of good, deciding to move south because it seems good, because it opens the possibility of living a good life, and therefore welcoming other goods. For a human being, the good of moving south promises more goods like leisure, or time with family, or experiences in nature, or less income tax, or more lucrative employment, or more enjoyable weather, or more meaningful work—or maybe all of these goods in different measure.¹

Of course, unlike a goose, a human being knows that a move south will also cost her something. She'll have to give up things in her old city that made her life good. She'll have to say goodbye to (the goods of) old friends and her favorite restaurant. She'll miss the changing seasons and leave her church community. But although she'll grieve the loss of these goods, she'll let go, because she senses that she is moving toward a better life (“a gooder life,” to talk like a four-year-old).² She leaves one constellation of goods for another because she senses (even wagers) that these other goods are better; they give her a real possibility of living a good life, a full or fuller life,³ ultimately a life

1. “When Taylor argues that there is an inescapably ‘moral’ dimension to human subjectivity, he is not saying that all human agents must be concerned with the welfare of others. His claim is that recognizable human agency involves some grasp, however inchoate or inarticulate, of the contrast between mere life and good life. It is the loss of this sense that Taylor relates to an identity crisis.” Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002), 94.

2. “Taylor is convinced that an orientation to the good is not something that we can do without because the direction of our lives is not static; in fact it is more properly understood in terms of ‘becoming.’ Analogously, the good that orients us is also something not fully realized. The good that orients us and indicates the direction of our lives is something of a heuristic. Thus, my understanding of the good has to be woven into my developing understanding of my life as an unfolding story, a narrative. Simply put, the shape of this good stands in relation to the unfolding narrative of our life. As a heuristic, the good can be ‘some action, or motive, or style, which is seen as qualitatively superior.’” Brian J. Braman, *Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 38.

3. James McEvory explains, through Taylor, what I mean by fullness: “A fundamental claim about human existence . . . concerns what Taylor calls ‘fullness,’ by which he means that we humans live in relation to some place, activity, or condition in which lies a fullness; in relation to which ‘life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be.’” *Leaving Christendom for God: Church-World Dialogue in a Secular Age* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 6, citing Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 5.

that is flourishing.⁴ She leaves the good of Ohio because she believes her life will flourish, will be fuller, in Florida.⁵

So we human beings fly south never out of pure instinct, but rather because we have an explicit or implicit sense of the good.⁶ It is toward a good that we're moved.⁷ And this means, whether expressed or unexpressed, that we want to live a good life, and we desperately don't want to waste it. Every human being wants to taste the good life.⁸ Every parent wants their child's life to go well, wants their child to flourish. Maybe Graham was right, maybe youth ministry is for helping kids not waste their lives. Or to say it more positively, youth ministry is for helping young people live a good life; youth ministry is to help young people flourish.

Yet, to be honest, once I shifted his statement toward the positive, from *not wasting* to *flourishing*, I quickly got a stomachache. It was like sucking down a candy-cane milkshake. The first few sips were amazing but were quickly replaced by a sweet, sugary overload, leaving me more repelled than satisfied. I found myself refuting myself by returning to my awkward response to Graham. When he asked me what I thought youth ministry was for, I said, "God" (*duh*). But now I wondered if my stupidity didn't have a point. Why would you need God to *not* waste your life? Can't you flourish without God?⁹ Aren't many people doing just this? To see youth ministry as ultimately for flourishing would seem to make it little more than a form of group therapy or life coaching for teens.

As I talked with Kathryn, the youth ministry major, about seminary, she triggered these concerns in me. With the same earnestness, but now more confidence, she said, "Plus, youth ministry is so *hard*. I experienced that in my

4. Miroslav Volf defines *flourishing*, saying, "The good life consists not merely in succeeding in one or another endeavor we undertake, whether small or large, but in living into our human and personal fullness—that, in a word, is a flourishing life." *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), ix.

5. Alasdair MacIntyre supports this: "We learn what our common good is, and indeed what our own individual goods are, not primarily and never only by theoretical reflection, but in everyday shared activities and the evaluations of alternatives that those activities impose." *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 136. He adds, "So humans are goal-directed in virtue of their recognition of goods specific to their nature to be achieved" (23).

6. The whole of Charles Taylor's philosophical anthropology is to make this point. From his dissertation and first book (*Explanation of Behaviour*) on shortcomings of behaviorism to *The Language Animal* nearly fifty years later, he has been making this very point.

7. We are "moral, believing animals," to quote Christian Smith. See *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

8. See Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 2013), for more on the ranking of goods.

9. The fact that it is now assumed possible to have a flourishing or good life without God is the story that Charles Taylor seeks to tell in *A Secular Age*.

practicum class this fall. I volunteered at a church by my school.” I paused, looking for clarification on what she meant by “hard.” Kathryn continued, “I mean, families are so busy, and parents seem to prioritize so many things above church.” I nodded, which gave her confidence to continue, so she leaned in harder to her point. “I don’t blame them. In high school, gymnastics was so important to me, and I always missed church during our final meet season in March and April. So sometimes I wonder if I’d have an impact on more young people by being a coach. At least you’re not begging them to come and pushing them to be passionate about something they’re not.” I nodded my head quickly, affirming that she was onto something important.

I was now feeling torn. Watching Kathryn wrestle with these questions clearly showed that she was desperate to not waste her life. She was comparing goods, probing for what it means to live a good life. At the same time, Kathryn revealed that this quest for a good life can be met by all sorts of means, and for many—even this youth ministry major—church is not judged to be the highest good in embracing a flourishing life. Youth ministry is nice but not an essential component in having a life that’s going well.

Sitting with Kathryn, I started to ask myself new questions, like, *If we’re to assume that youth ministry is for helping young people live a good life, to flourish, then what makes youth ministry different from gymnastics or an after-school program or AAU basketball? And can youth ministry really compete with these activities in the game of flourishing?* Kathryn didn’t think so. I thought she might be right. Do we really naively assume parents would choose youth group, a mission trip, or confirmation over nationals, first chair, or a state championship?

I’d assume most parents, let alone young people, wouldn’t, and Kathryn knew it for sure, making her wonder if she’d be more impactful (and flourish more in her own vocation) if she pivoted into coaching instead of youth ministry. Walking the halls of the conference convention center, I realized that to see whether Kathryn’s and my assumptions were true, I’d need to think more closely about activities like gymnastics, after-school programs, and AAU basketball, seeing how these activities play their part in producing a presumed good life (a life not wasted) for young people.

Competing for the Good

As I said above, I believe that all parents (with only the most grotesque exceptions) want what is best (or good) for their children (as Jesus said in Luke 11:11–12, “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a

snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?”). Ask any parent and they’ll say that the reason they invest a lot of time and money in any of their kids’ activities is for the sake of flourishing. In an economically challenged family, a parent works two jobs, exhausting herself, because she wants her children to flourish—to have full stomachs and freedom to play their sports and to make it to college someday.

Parents believe that ballet, piano, hockey, and debate provide their children with goods to flourish. The goods of making friends, developing skills, learning hard work, staying active, finding their passion, and being happy become the motivation for a parent to get up at 6:00 a.m. on a Saturday and drive the carpool. This parent is up, coffee in hand, because she, too, wants to live a good life. She wants to be a good parent. And a *good* middle-class parent, who is living a good life, gets her kids involved in a menu of activities so that they might flourish and she might feel good about being a good mom.

But as I said above, human beings not only seek to live a good life now but also have a deeply intuitive sense that flourishing is something to seek. It’s a quest, an aim—there is always a future dynamic to it. Wasting our lives is such a huge fear because we not only can waste present moments and opportunities but also worry that such opportunities will never come again. Missing these opportunities, we can get stuck in a rut, which means a wasted future. And, of course, we don’t know exactly when these opportunities to enter the currents of a good life will arise (we often don’t even know in the middle of them!). But we do know that it is a deep shame to miss your opportunity and be cursed with regret—which is why Kathryn wanted to talk in the first place.

So parents drive the carpool at 6:00 a.m. not only so their kids can have the goods of friends, skills, confidence, and fun now, but also so they can flourish in the future. Ballet, hockey, and traveling boys’ choir, it’s believed, place young people on a certain path that promises flourishing in the future. It’s worth fighting and paying for your kids to be on the AAA team or have a renowned coach because not only can parents take some pride in their kid’s achievement (giving him a sense of his own flourishing) but, as a higher good, parents can feel like they have opened doors and set their kid up to flourish in the future. They have made it possible for their kid to have a good life (maybe even a great life) by going to a top college on scholarship, meeting the right people, and playing in the NHL.

If youth ministry is for helping kids not waste their lives, if we even contend that youth ministry is to help young people flourish, then it appears that youth ministry has lost. The cultural goods have been set up against youth ministry. Anyone running a confirmation program senses this.

Confirmation is an interesting case study because, at least in some traditions, it remains an activity that demands commitment, while also having

a clear end point that provides a symbolic marker of accomplishment. In other words, in most confirmation programs, if you want to be confirmed on Confirmation Sunday, you *have to* show up, go on the retreat, and write a faith statement. To receive the good of being confirmed, you have to meet even a minimal bar of commitment.¹⁰

The Confirmation Case Study

Most parents in churches with confirmation programs want their kids to participate and be confirmed. Confirmation remains a good. But because we are finite beings with limited time and energy, goods must always be tacitly ranked.¹¹ No human being can escape the necessity of this ranking. Some goods are better, more valuable than others—why else would a human being from Ohio relocate to Florida? What makes some goods more valuable is our perception that these goods more directly help us in our quest to live a full life.¹² It would be good to live in Hawaii, but the taxes and a Christmas flight back to Ohio are way more costly; therefore it feels better—gooder—to live in Florida. Often, when it comes to parents' decisions about their children, the goods that promise flourishing in the future are weighted more than those that might support, but not drive us into, future horizons of living a full and good life.

What's so frustrating about leading a confirmation program (or any youth ministry activity that calls for commitment) is that confirmation remains a good. Confirmation hasn't been rejected as evil or even meaningless. This gives the

10. This is what Kathryn was feeling. A Barna study reports, "Comparing responses of youth pastors in the 2013 study with today's research, Barna found that major ministry challenges had dramatically changed in three years. Although kids' busy schedules remain the top concern, slightly fewer leaders mention it today (74%) than in 2013 (86%). Lack of interest from parents (34% vs. 41% 2013) and the breakdown of families (24% vs. 31% 2013) are also a bit less pressing than three years ago. However, the percentage of youth pastors who say they are taxed by a need for adult volunteers has increased; in 2013, about one in five youth pastors expressed that the lack of adult volunteers was the main challenge facing their ministry (22%), compared to about three in 10 today (29%)." Barna Group, *The State of Youth Ministry: How Churches Reach Today's Teens—and What Parents Think about It* (Ventura, CA: Barna, 2016), 33.

11. Taylor makes this point with his discussion of hypergoods (i.e., goods that are more important than others and that become the standard by which all goods are judged). To say that goods must be ranked is not to fall into rational choice theory but is to assume that all evaluation is done for a moral horizon, for the sake of living a better, *gooder*, life.

12. "One of the problems for individuals in the modern world is that, according to Taylor, we face a wider array of different goods." Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12. Abbey continues, "The term 'strong evaluation' captures Taylor's belief that individuals rank some of their desires, or the goods that they desire, as qualitatively higher or more worthy than others. The term refers, therefore, to distinctions of worth that individuals make regarding their desires or the objects of their desires" (17).

youth worker a sense that confirmation has value—a positive valuation in the intuitive ranking of goods.¹³ But while confirmation is still a good, its ranking has slid. This is exasperating. Parents are committed enough to add it to the list of activities, even willing to come to a September meeting and pledge their commitment. *It would be really good, they think, for Theresa to be confirmed.* This is something they want. But when the good of confirmation collides with other goods, like the need for piano practice, a hockey tournament, a Thursday morning test, or even a night off before a big swim meet, confirmation is relativized as less important. Better (gooder!) to not go to confirmation so you're ready for the test or rested for the meet. The test and meet are intuitively ranked as higher goods. They are activities that deliver more important goods today. But what gives them even more weight is their perceived ability to provide essential goods for living a good life tomorrow—like producing the social capital and work ethic needed to get into a good college and make a good living.

Of course, a higher-ranking good would not experience the same evaluation, and therefore fate, as confirmation. Sleep, or study of the Bible, is not as *good* and therefore as necessary as a playoff game or big concert. And because of our cultural ranking of goods, it is very rare (and becoming more so) for a parent to say no to a championship game because “we have church.” Even rarer is for parents to assert that their son will need to skip Tuesday night's late practice so he's rested and ready for confirmation. (That's almost laughable, which shows how intrinsic this ranking of goods is within us; even devoted Christians and church professionals would giggle at the thought.)

Spiritual engagement and religious ritual are still regarded as good, but parents (again, often intuitively) have to ask themselves, “Is it a higher good than seeing my daughter happily engaged on the court, or gaining confidence and pride by mastering the piano?” And, just as powerfully, “Do I feel like a better parent, like I'm closer to a good life, if my kid is happy, passionate, confident, and skilled?”

But even if the parent were to go countercultural and rank the goods of confirmation and basketball as equal, believing that confirmation provides

13. Charles Taylor explores this ranking of good: “The man who flees seeks a good, safety. But we condemn him: he ought to have stood. For there is a higher good, the safety of the polis, which was here at stake. The judgment involves ranking goods, hence ranking motivations (since these are defined by their consummations, which is what we are calling ‘goods’ in this context). It is because this involves ranking motivations that speak of it as strong evaluation. It means that we are not taking our de facto desires as the ultimate in justification, but are going beyond that to their worth. We are evaluating not just objects in the light of our desires, but also the desires themselves. Hence strong evaluation has also been called ‘second order’ evaluation.” *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 166. We will get back to strong evaluation later in the book.

connections, character development, hope, and faith, she'd still have to contend with the ranking of goods next to the horizon of the future. She'd wonder whether skipping a violin lesson or basketball practice in order to attend a confirmation class would hurt her child's opportunities to get into a good college and therefore live a good life in the future. To add to this, what if her child is meant to be a professional musician or basketball player? These are highly esteemed vocations, promising to deliver a full life.

So each parent has to ask, "Is my kid flourishing more (feeling like her life is going well) when she is learning about the Small Catechism or jubilantly jumping on a pile of teammates after winning a tournament? Where is she happier? And what would a good life for my child even look like if I chose confirmation over hockey or the piano recital? How does spiritual engagement and a religious tradition prepare my child for a flourishing life more than playing in the Pee Wee A Regional Two championship game?" The marks of flourishing today and tomorrow seem so much clearer next to a Pee Wee championship than confirmation.

The Big Feel

A big task for parents, then, in an overly scheduled middle-class America where there are more opportunities than time, is to rank these activities.¹⁴ And this ranking of activities happens not through committee hearings or even some equation. It is seldom a directly rational, calculated decision at all.¹⁵ Yet because the decision is made for the sake of goods—to live a good life—it is, fundamentally, a *moral* decision.¹⁶ In other words, pouring more energy, time,

14. It would take a whole other book to explore why over the past few generations we've shifted from the good of young people having free space and time to an overly scheduled existence, leaving some to push back against the perceived good of overscheduling with a competing good, like free-range kids, that tries to return to the good of childhood space, freedom, and roaming. See Lenore Skenazy's book *Free-Range Kids* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

15. James Davison Hunter adds, "Needless to say, children and adults alike rarely relate to moral cultures as full-blown ethical systems. Who has time to master the intricacies of philosophical traditions and their evolution? Most people are too busy, pressed by the practical realities of daily life, to reflect much on how their personal opinions are shaped by larger cultural influences. Yet moral culture still frames their lives. More often than not these moral cultures exist for people as perhaps crudely formed assumptions about what is true and false; what is right and wrong; what is honest and corrupt and so on. Yet, however crudely formed in our minds, however inarticulate we may be about them, our personal grasp of these assumptions relates back to larger moral traditions or styles of moral reasoning in the culture." *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age without Good and Evil* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 25.

16. Paul Bloom points to how deep this sense of the moral goes: "Even a pleasure such as the satisfaction of hunger is affected by concerns about essence and history, moral purity and moral defilement. There is always a depth to pleasure." *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like* (New York: Norton, 2010), 53.

and money into piano rather than confirmation just feels like the right thing to do. It feels so right that many parents don't even stop to imagine that there is a choice to be made. And, in turn, this *feels* depressing to youth workers, enough to make Kathryn wonder if she should do something else with her life.

The moral decisions that shape our actions and reveal our deepest-held goods are not cold, rational computations but most often reflexes. It's not that reason and rational evaluation don't play a part. We add up the costs all the time, counting the hours and dollars. But even this rationalizing gives us a feeling. Whatever decision we make has to *feel right*. That's what makes things so frustrating for Kathryn. If asked, most parents wouldn't come right out and say, "Oh, yeah, basketball and piano are *way* more important than confirmation." And yet, like a reflex, this is what they find themselves choosing. Most, if asked to really think through which activities are most important, would access some insulated, rational evaluative zone and admit church should be a priority.¹⁷

But this is not how people make decisions. We don't make moral evaluations in sanitized rational zones. Rather, we decide what is good by *feel* (I'm leaning on Jonathan Haidt's important work on how people make decisions).¹⁸ Parents choose piano over confirmation because it feels right, period. And that last sentence shouldn't be read as a pejorative statement of shaming, as if to say, "These evil parents are so shallow or corrupted by the world that they make moral decisions by feel." We *all* figure out what's right by feel.¹⁹

For example, imagine being on a cross-country flight. About halfway through, after a short snooze, you wake up to see that the man in the middle seat next to you has taken off his shoes and socks. You quickly realize that he's not only barefoot but has one foot on his knee and is cutting his toenails, unconcerned that the debris from discarded nails are flying all over your row. Most North Americans would assert that this is bad—dare I say, immoral.

17. For instance, we ask parents to say youth group is as important as their child's sport, but my argument is that this is exactly the evaluative-free zone that leads them to overreport the importance of youth ministry. The Barna study says, "In the constellation of non-school activities, Christian parents generally consider involvement in youth group to be of equal importance with extracurricular activities (55%), while three in ten say it is more important (8% much more, 22% somewhat more). In general, higher education levels correlate to a higher value on youth-group involvement." *State of Youth Ministry*, 30.

18. See Haidt's *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) and *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage, 2012) for more on this moral feel.

19. "Thus, even when we are inarticulate about the moral cultures we live in or operate by, when their principles, maxims, and habits are internalized deep in our consciousness, they act as moral compasses, providing the bearings by which we navigate the challenges of life. Far from a philosophical abstraction, moral culture guides our behavior, thinking, and expectations of others. Consciously or not, we refer to these compasses constantly, not only when we are confronted by moral dilemmas but in the rhythms of everyday life." Hunter, *Death of Character*, 25.

It is *never* a good—it never gives you a feeling of living a good life—to be sprinkled with some stranger's toenail clippings. When you get off the flight, you'll recap the incident in moral terms: "It just isn't right for someone to do that. It's so gross! I was totally repulsed. I mean, seriously, who does that! Why didn't the flight attendant stop him? That's just wrong!"

These are all deeply moral assertions ("it isn't right," "who does that," "that's just wrong"). But you're pushed into these moral assertions not through taking a philosophy class on moral reasoning or reading an article in the *Atlantic* on the capital costs of toenail litter, but rather because you feel repelled ("it's so gross," "I was totally repulsed"). You can only wonder, *Who does this?*—essentially asking, *What kind of person thinks it's right or good to cut their toenails on a flight?*—because through *feel* you are making judgments about what is good. It isn't right to cut your toenails on a flight, and the flight attendants should intervene, because such acts keep those in the toenail cutter's row from feeling like life is going well (from having an unreflective sense of things being good). You want someone to act, or end up acting yourself, because you *feel* a sense of moral violation.

All this toenail business is just to highlight that in very practical ways we're always making moral decisions, choosing what is right by *feel*. And this is what's so hard about leading confirmation. From some rational and emotion-free space, parents might reason that confirmation is just as important as ballet (or even more so). But they don't make these rankings here. They make them more intuitively as they *feel* dimly for the walls that shape a good life for themselves and their children.

If there is a concrete place where these decisions of ranking are made, a location where the *feel* gets practically implemented, for most parents it's through Google Calendar. Google Calendar is the place that both necessitates and allows for the ranking of goods through *feel*.

Say Hello to Our Overload: Google Calendar

What I mean is that parents *feel* their way into ranking their kids' activities through scheduling. They decide (better, they find themselves deciding) which activities are essential, and which are secondary and can be skipped, when schedules conflict. That's why it isn't helpful to ask parents which activities are more important in some hypothetical space disconnected from the *feel* of the weekly schedule. All these activities parents consider to be good (they provide ways for their child to live a good life now and in the future). But when there is a scheduling conflict, goods are quickly ranked.

Parents worry, as much as (probably more than) their kids, that their children will miss the opportunities to live a good life. Parents are under amazing pressure in our time not only to not waste their *own* lives but also to make sure their children don't either. To be in charge of the calendar, then, is to be responsible for ranking the goods and setting the trajectory for a life not wasted. So parents set the schedule by what feels right. This is an incredible amount of responsibility and pressure to place on mom's or dad's shoulders.

Parents of tweens and teens spend a lot of time feeling their way into which activities their children will partake in. There seems to be a never-ending multitude of sports, clubs, lessons, divisions, and tutors to choose from. But the pressure doesn't really stem from the menu of options. The tension is around how to schedule them all. And when it becomes clear that not all desired activities can be scheduled and some must be peeled off, which ones do we choose? Which ones are the *best* (the *goodest*) for our son or daughter?

"It would be good for Erik to go to confirmation, but not if it means missing a lesson with Mr. Sutton. He's one of the *best* piano teachers in the country, and Erik has a really *good* opportunity he can't miss. I'd *feel* terrible if we had to reschedule. I'd *feel* worse if we missed this opportunity to be one of Mr. Sutton's regulars." Or another parent might say, "It would be *good* for Amanda to go on the confirmation retreat—she'd make better friends, learn about the Bible, be more engaged spiritually, and feel more connected to church. But Saturday is volleyball tryouts, and she has a really *good* chance to make varsity as a freshman. I'd *feel* terrible if she missed the opportunity to make better friends, learn how to compete and work hard, stay active, and feel connected to her school. Plus"—and this is where even if the present goods of confirmation can somehow rival those of volleyball, the projection of future goods can't—"if she makes the team as a freshman, she might be on the road to a scholarship. That *feels* exciting, and I'd hate for her to miss that chance. I couldn't live with myself, I'd *feel* guilty, if we squandered this *good* opportunity."

And of course this is even more complicated, because many variables are involved. Some activities cost more in a sense of time and money, some are better for the mind and others for the body, and some your son is just plain more passionate about—which makes it more possible to feel that the investment is worth the cost. For instance, you may prefer that your kid go to confirmation, but he may hate it, especially if it means missing an activity he likes more. So you concede, because it is *no good* and *feels* terrible to fight with him every Wednesday night. The constant arguing keeps you both from feeling like life is going well.

So weighting the goods by feel, you choose piano over confirmation. Or, to contrast similar activities, you choose swimming over hockey (two activities

your daughter enjoys). You pick swimming over hockey because while they are about the same price, swimming is only three nights a week and fewer weekends. This allows time to do one night of karate and piano lessons, while still providing enough time to get homework done. “That feels right.” And to finalize the decision, “it’s what Jackie wants,” meaning she’ll be more committed to the activity, which will allow her the best chance to harvest the activity’s intrinsic goods, which will make the financial and time investment feel worth it.

But even after the decision, parents feel stuck and wonder, *Did we make the right choice, picking swimming over hockey?* Once this decision is made, there is no going back. *One winter without hockey and Jackie will never again have a chance to play on the AAA team. Does she really know what she’s picking? What if she changes her mind? What if she could have been a great player, and now we allowed her to miss that opportunity? What a waste! That would feel terrible!*

The pressure is so heavy because once the activities are ranked through their goods, we question if we’ve made the right decision, if our *feel* was right. What if lacrosse or Spanish lessons—no, wait, maybe Mandarin—would be better? Because these activities are to prepare young people not just for present but also future flourishing, the parent who makes these decisions is squeezed with pressure. And it feels at the time like acute pressure, because the parent isn’t just making a schedule but doing a moral act of ranking goods that have deep and long ramifications—the consequence of setting up children to flourish and keeping them from the dangers of a wasted life.

Yet what is interesting, and what gets us back again to confirmation, is that rarely do parents feel this same stuck anxiety when it comes to deciding between a youth group retreat and volleyball tryouts. They feel this when choosing between hockey and swimming, but often not hockey and church. This reality is what led Kathryn to consider other career options. It would be one thing if parents often came to youth workers conflicted, feeling stuck between the goods of basketball and confirmation. But this is rare. Most parents don’t feel anxiety, because the goods of basketball are assumed to so outstrip the goods of confirmation that it feels right to choose it (and rarely with any accompanying anxiety). When practice and confirmation conflict, it is obvious which to choose. It feels like an easy decision.

To say that a choice between hockey and swimming could cause anxiety and ignite worries about wasted opportunities (and with too many wasted opportunities, a wasted life) is to reveal further how much these are moral decisions. It reveals that parents are searching for a *right* way to live, for a full life for both themselves and their children. But then to say that there is no choice, no conflicted feelings, when choosing between the confirmation retreat

and volleyball, is to claim that for most parents confirmation is not essential in living a good life, not important in helping guard against a wasted life.²⁰

I had the sense that Graham was onto something after all. Both young people and their parents are seeking for ways to not waste their lives. But Kathryn, too, was right. When it came to assessing which goods would add up to a good and full life, church and youth group were consistently downgraded.

Conclusion

As I left the conference, I was stuck. If youth ministry was for helping young people not waste their lives, what did that mean? And how could youth ministry possibly compete with all these other activities? The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to agree with Graham: youth ministry should have something to say about a good life. But the issues raised by Kathryn kept me in limbo. It seemed unfair to pit youth ministry against all the other activities in young people's lives, making youth ministry a defeating vocation.

That's why I wasn't quite ready to abandon my own stupid answer: that youth ministry was about God. Whether Sunday-school-lame or theologically presumptuous, such a statement allows us to opt out of the cultural competition. Young people, and more directly their parents, might not see (or better yet, feel) youth ministry as a high good. But who cares? We're about God. Yet I knew that without more attention my statement about God would be just a theologically arrogant way to justify meaningless ministry. Still, all this talk about goods, feel, and wasted lives did make me wonder about God's action and if youth ministry had always found itself in this pernicious place next to parents' and young people's vision of the good life.

So when I got to the airport, I decided to call Wes.

20. There is another layer to this I can't dig into. This sense of moral decision also has something to do with our sense of time. Hockey, basketball, and the school play all seem sped up. If you don't hurry to their activities, you lose the chance to gain their goods. Church seems slower and more long-term. Its goods aren't connected to speed. We do hockey now because it calls for us committing now. Church will always be there. Church may slide into the category of a family reunion. Most parents would choose the basketball tournament over the reunion, because another reunion is coming and there is no time crunch to participate. But if grandma is sick, if there is a crisis of time, then it would be assumed to be better (gooder) to miss the tournament. I'm thankful to Mike King for pointing out this sense of judgment being made next to the feel of time. In the upcoming third volume of the *Ministry in a Secular Age* series, I go more deeply into this (Baker Academic, forthcoming).