

CRITIQUE OF  
**MODERN**  
YOUTH MINISTRY

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canonpress  
Moscow, Idaho



Published by Canon Press  
P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843  
800.488.2034 | www.canonpress.com

Christopher Schlect, *Critique of Modern Youth Ministry*.  
Copyright © 1995, 2007 Christopher Schlect.  
Second Edition.

Cover design by Rachel Hoffmann.  
Interior design by Laura Storm.  
Printed in the United States of America.

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Schlect, Christopher.  
Critique of modern youth ministry / Christopher Schlect. -- 2nd ed.  
p. cm.  
ISBN-13: 978-1-885767-03-5 (booklet)  
ISBN-10: 1-885767-03-X (booklet)  
1. Church work with youth. I. Title.  
BV4447.S283 2007  
259'.23--dc22

2007007250

09 10 11 12 13 14 15 16

21 20 19 18 17 16 15

# INTRODUCTION

It was in connection with my own employment as a fresh-out-of-college youth minister that I first began to question whether or not my work was biblically sanctioned. I realized that I and others in positions like mine, though with good intentions, were providing a facility for fathers to abdicate their parental responsibilities. I thus made the long-term focus of my ministry to work myself out of a job and to get older men—especially fathers—to do what I was doing. Though providential circumstances cut short my time as a “youth minister” in the proper sense, I have continued working regularly with youth.

I am convinced that young people have a far greater capacity for spiritual and social maturity than we tend to give them credit for, and parents have been given the responsibility to see that this capacity is realized. The church today does not expect what it ought to from children and their parents, and this can be attributed at least in part to a

flawed concept of youth ministry. This need not, and should not, be so. What follows is a discussion of the reasons behind this problem and a presentation of biblical solutions.

# CRITIQUE

## **Dawn of the Generation Gap**

Just 150 years ago, societal circumstances coupled with evolutionary theory drastically shifted our attitude toward time. Before the mid-1800s, time was arranged according to significant events. The chronology of European history, for example, was seen in terms of ruling families: the Stuarts, Hapsburgs, Bourbons, etc. Today, by contrast, we speak of the fifties, sixties, and seventies.

Before the nineteenth century, the phrases “on time,” “ahead of time,” and “behind time” meant nothing. Then the Industrial Revolution forced time upon us. Railroads ran on schedules and factories paid hourly wages rather than performance-based wages. In 1884, representatives from twenty-five nations met in Washington, D.C., settled on Greenwich, England as the prime meridian, fixed the exact length of a day (for the first time in world history) and divided the globe into twenty-four time zones. We have been carrying Father Time on our shoulders ever since.

This new spotlight on time, though beneficial in many respects, shone in areas it shouldn't have, particularly in a new stress on individual age. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, birthdays were neither mentioned nor celebrated. Age wasn't even included in the 1850 census—it simply wasn't considered to be important. It wasn't uncommon to graduate from a university at age seventeen, or age twenty-eight, or any age in between. Students matured at their own rates. What's more, there was no impetus to segregate based on maturity level; the one-room schoolhouse was the norm. Even in social gatherings, children, who were considered to be miniature adults, mingled with people much older than themselves.

Horace Mann changed this first in the classroom by fastening students to a fixed learning pace. Consistent with the onset of evolutionary thinking, progress had become synonymous with the passage of time. For the first time ever, students were segregated by age. Based on some dubious demographic norm, they would be judged “ahead” or “behind” their peer group. “Normal” was an arbitrary standard superimposed upon the wealth of data that indicates wide disparity between rates of maturation.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Granville Stanley Hall was championing his “recapitulation theory.” Using social applications of Darwin's work in Biology, Hall suggested that individuals evolve through the same stages through which human history has evolved. “The child repeats the race,” he wrote, “This is a great biological law.”<sup>1</sup> Hall associated infants and toddlers with pre-savage periods of human history; he consequently counselled parents

<sup>1</sup>Cited in R.J. Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education* (Nutley: The Craig Press, 1963), 124.