

*Being Young* breaks new ground in understanding young people of the ancient world. Paul Kelly's exploratory approach to exegeting the term "youth" in the Bible is brilliant and refreshing. His thoughtful insights and engaging commentary make this book a profound and unexpected pleasure.

—Mark W. Cannister, Chair, Department of Biblical Studies and Christian Ministries, Gordon College

*Being Young* proposes a "neaniskology" crafted through Kelly's careful study of biblical references to all things youth. He distinguishes between surety and well-informed supposition in his interpretation of the text as he proposes inferences for his youth theology. Personal examples add authenticity and relevance to this conversation about the role of the Church in her ministry with young people. Kelly has given us a compelling read that will inspire dialogue about youth ministry in both academic and ministry settings.

—Karen E. Jones, PhD, Department of Christian Thought and Practice, Graduate Programs in Christian Ministry, Veritas Youth Theology Institute Director, Huntington University

I am part of that stream of the Church that considers the Bible the foundation for all we are, believe, and do. This certainly includes ministry to and with teenagers. That makes Paul Kelly's new book, *Being Young: A Biblical Theology of Youth*, an important work. Upon arrival, this book becomes the definitive work regarding the Bible's view of those we call teenagers. Kelly's hermeneutical principles are rock solid, as is his handling of Hebrew and Greek terms related to youth. At the same time, not a single page of the book is stuffy or overly academic. Kelly continually uses engaging stories about real teenagers and real student ministries to amplify his treatment of biblical passages. The final chapter alone is worth the price of the book. Kelly presents separate challenges to senior pastors and church leaders, student pastors, parents, and *neaniskoi* (the biblical terms for teenagers). If God's people embrace those challenges, we will see an entire generation rise up to live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission for the rest of their lives.

—Richard Ross, PhD, Professor of Student Ministry, Southwestern Seminary

Dr. Kelly takes us back to the grandest story of them all—the Scripture—to show us how adolescents think about God and how God thinks about adolescents... Besides the expert and sometimes technical and compelling treatment of various Bible stories, what comes through in the book is the unrelenting love that Dr. Kelly has for teenagers and for the God to whom he points them. Dr. Kelly proposes that God designed adolescents to be treated as adults in training, developing the critical thought and resilient faith that comes in part by trial and error—just like the "youths" in the Bible.

—Dr. R. Allen Jackson, Professor of Youth Education and Collegiate Ministry, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Senior Pastor, Dunwoody Baptist Church

As a youth worker, I long to understand both teens and Scripture better in order to more effectively disciple teens. By exploring what the Bible says about youth, Paul Kelly's *Being Young: a Biblical Theology of Youth* has helped me do just that. I'm confident it will help you do the same.

—Jen Bradbury, Minister of Youth & Family at Atonement Lutheran Church and author of books including *The Jesus Gap*

I've worked with and under Dr. Paul Kelly, and there's no one I know who is smarter or more passionate about the discipleship of youth in the world today. I feel Dr. Kelly's work will be a classic in the Christian education of youth discipline. For learners and practitioners interested in a biblical understanding of adolescence, this is a masterpiece. Dr. Kelly weaves his theological interpretation of youth development with good sound psychological and educational research. Though Dr. Kelly's work speaks primarily from God's revelation, his conclusions give excellent applicable advice on how we can expect more and get more from this important segment of society. Youth ministry is the ministry of the entire church. I'm inspired through Dr. Kelly's work to do my part to partner with my own church in youth discipleship.

—Leroy Gainey, PhD, JM, Frost Senior Professor of Educational Leadership, Gateway Seminary, SBC

This seminal work of Professor Kelly, which draws for us a biblical and theological portrait of youth, has come to save youth ministry from being overwhelmed by social science concepts. Many placed the call for such an urgent need to “re-base” youth ministry, but few answered it. Kelly's approach stands tall among the responses so far. He rightly provides the theology with which the social sciences can be engaged for a healthily balanced youth ministry. The usefulness of this work will, of course, go beyond the U.S. to Africa and beyond.

—Ebenezer Hagan, Director of Youth Ministries The Church of Pentecost, Ghana

Surprisingly there doesn't seem to be much resource regarding a theology of youth, which makes Paul Kelly's book not only unique but significant as well. *Being Young: A Theology of Youth* delves into the Old and New Testament designations for “youth,” with examples from the lives of biblical characters. It gives a balanced view of the *neaniskoi*, acknowledging their folly but affirming their status and potential. Paul Kelly's work further encourages us to develop a theology of youth based on the Bible. It ends with practical tips for pastors, church leaders, youth pastors, parents of youth, and the youth themselves. This is definitely a textbook we can use in our youth ministry classes.

—Professor Anne De Jesus Ardina, Program Director and Faculty, Youth Studies and Christian Education, Alliance Graduate School, Manila, Philippines

# BEING YOUNG

A Biblical Theology of Youth

By Paul G. Kelly



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This book is dedicated to Lisa, who was my biggest supporter.





## FOREWORD

Please forgive the personal storyline threading throughout this introduction. It's the best way I know to describe my enthusiasm for *Being Young*.

I came to faith as a teenager without the benefit of being raised in a churchgoing home. Trusting Jesus during my high school years sturded the life foundation that has supported me for more than fifty years. It also shaped my professional direction, as the years have split evenly between the evangelistic mission of Youth for Christ and scholarly leadership development through Huntington University. These two career platforms were heart-welded by a singular, personal driving force: *how to make sense of my own formation as a Christ follower*. Story context matters, and it's not lost on me that my baptism into the family of God happened at the tail end of the Jesus Movement, however diluted this spiritual renewal may have been by the time it reached Peoria, Illinois. My friends and I leaned into life with God as young world-changers, confidently launching our bold faith at Richwoods High School. In the fall of 1971, I saw eighteen of my friends put their trust in Jesus Christ. Was my experience exceptional, an outlier needing an asterisk of explanation before dis-inclusion from the piles of youth ministry data to be studied for learning? Or was it reflective of God's normative intent?

Professional youth ministers were just cranking up during those days. I had no clue what course of study would help me prepare for my own future work with teenagers, so I asserted my individuated faith—opposing my dad's very practical counsel—and headed to a Christian college five hours east of home so I could major in something gloriously *impractical*: Bible and Religion.

The religious landscape I encountered during my early undergraduate days confused me. “Environmental Christians” were everywhere and, being a naïve, unchurched novice to Christianity, they bewildered me. Their version of faith tilted toward self-comfort rather than rocking the world. Comingling with them made me wonder if we were reading from the same Bible.

As the years passed and my dissonance remained unresolved, I became drawn to social science research, largely to understand the conditions that divert young people into significant influence as Christ-followers. I pursued empirical research through observation, surveys, interviews, and nerdy statistical analysis. This soon became a well-represented wing of youth ministry scholarship. We profs hoped to make contributions by understanding what was working and what could be improved upon. Our colleges and seminaries welcomed the marketable messaging they could leverage through these efforts. Youth ministry as an industry was growing, obsessed with providing “how to...” resources. Americans cherish *usefulness*, and, without enough theological reflection, youth ministry bent in this direction for a generation.

The kids have grown up and now lead churches everywhere. Do we prefer effectiveness over faithfulness? The answer to this distressingly accusatory question can be discerned easily enough; just track the way ministry leaders spend their time. Programmatic practicality chases short-sighted, measurable outcomes. I can’t decry this direction without regrettably confessing that I’ve been complicit in this shallowness. My own body of work for too many years tilted in support of unexamined implicit theological assumptions about youth ministry that have been misguided. Thankfully, there is an awakening among ministry leaders of all stripes that what matters most needs to matter most. If it’s not too late, I’m trying to jump on board.

Getting that off my chest cleared the way for me to suggest that this book by Paul Kelly is far more important than its topic, which, by the way, is absolutely fascinating. Paul reignited the eighteen-year-old instincts I used to refute my father’s insistence that, rather than major in Bible and Religion, I use college to prepare for a job that would pay the bills. Now a humble beneficiary of senior citizen wisdom, I’d like to amend my argument: *There’s nothing so practical as good theology*. Long overdue, Paul asks a question that simultaneously embarrasses and heartens old-timers like me: *Is there a theological framework about adolescence revealed in Scripture that ought to give shape to the way we practice youth ministry?*

There is. The careful scholarship of this book can slow our hurry into the next scheduled youth ministry activity. When we reflect about what has *always* mattered most for adolescents in God's Grand Design, we may veer with intentionality into the world of Christ-following leadership where faithfulness is proven enough to satisfy every lesser question. I'm grateful to be encouraged by this consequential work and pray it might free us all to think *with* God about purposefully engaging young people.

*Dave Rahn, PhD, Former Senior VP, Youth For Christ & Professor, Huntington University*