

The Adolescent Journey
An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry
by Amy Jacober

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2011. 183 pages. \$18.00.

When I was given the privilege of reviewing a book authored by a friend, I jumped at the opportunity. Since I know Amy Jacober, I was interested in seeing if she would write with the voice of an academic or the voice of the former Young Life leader. In the end, she effectively balanced her perspectives, although I would say that this book is more meaningful to someone who is academically inclined. Certainly the content is true to the subtitle; the book is “an interdisciplinary approach to practical youth ministry.” Thus, Jacober intertwines theology, adolescent development, youth culture, and sociology in order to provide theoretical foundation to persons who minister to adolescents.

The thesis of the book is declared early and reinforced often: “What, for example, is the role (or birthright) of the youth minister?” As we’ll see in the pages that follow, the youth minister’s role at its heart is “*to join God in his work of reconciliation in the world*” (8, emphasis added). Jacober begins, for instance, with the biblical example of Jacob, who manages to talk his brother Esau into giving up his birthright in exchange for delicious meal (Genesis 25). The metaphorical use of the birthright warns youth ministers not to be “lured away from this birthright [of spreading God’s word] by the latest games, the newest music or DVD, counseling techniques, a bestselling curriculum, an evangelism program, social activism. The list could go on and on and on” (8). Jacober returns to this theme in her conclusion with a little tweaking. As she states, “Ultimately, conciliation is our work; reconciliation is God’s work” (155).

Jacober encourages youth ministers to be practical theologians, giving careful thought to the Person and ways of God, as well as to be informed about the psychosocial world (development

and culture) of students in communities across the country. In other words, practical theologians should be relevant to young people and true to the Scriptures (19). Theology is the language of God, and the psychosocial context is the language of the adolescent environment. To that end, Jacober spends an entire chapter (Chapter 2) describing practical theology as a Christ-centered approach. She argues that youth workers are called to nurture students—within the context and demands of their culture—through the transforming power of Jesus.

One of the strengths of the book is the organization of the material. Succinctly stated, the ministry of reconciliation is facilitated by three conditions:

1. Youth workers must be bilingual (able to correspond between social psychology and theology). In an interview with the publisher, Jacober further defines this bilingual approach, “We need first to be fluent theologically so that we may explain and encourage teens to live out difficult concepts in a way that is accessible. In short, we need to know and be able to talk about God and teens.”¹
2. A practical theology of youth ministry unites three strands of existence: the individual, the communal, and the eternal. “Individual” is described by adolescent development. “Communal” is captured in youth culture. “Eternal” involves the transcendent work of God, especially in reconciling humanity (adolescents) to God through the redeeming work of Christ.
3. A maturing adolescent is nurtured through the transformative power of Christ and the commingling virtues of love, justice, and mercy. Jacober demonstrates her passion for social justice in the detailed description (in Chapter 6) of the interplay between the “central virtues” of love, mercy, justice, and transformation.

If there is a weakness to the book, it might be that a reader could get lost in the technical explanations of theology. Chapter 2, “Practical Theology,” begins with my favorite illustration in the book, reciting the teenager national anthem that “adults are hypocrites” to highlight that theology breaks down in the eyes of students if they see a disconnect between the words and actions of grown-ups in their world, whether parent or youth worker (25). Then, Jacober summarizes three major shifts in culture that parallel the need for practical theology:

1. Christianity is no longer the normative force in contemporary society;
2. Advancement in social science research has brought about a need for new vocabulary and methodology to guide interdisciplinary dialogue;
3. Youth ministry is one of the peculiar contexts for practical theology.

Especially helpful is the supposition that Christianity is not the starting line in culture any more. Carefully and relevantly articulated theology bridges the gap between the “isms” offered in a youth culture that is media-driven, information saturated, and constantly connected. What follows, however, is a series of diagrams and dialogues that run the risk of losing the clarity of meaning

by melding the theories of several different writers into a diagram that builds over several pages. The takeaway of the chapter is that a youth minister must consider theology within the context of the situation in light of the responsibility for pastoral care, always keeping Christ at the center. However, Jacober's theology may remain too theoretical for some youth ministers to incorporate into their ministries, particularly those with short attention spans!

Jacober also mentions Erik Erikson's view of identity in a way that is insightful. She extends Erikson's notion of the "identity crisis" as the central issue of adolescence to the conjecture that the whole theological question of adolescence spins around identity. In an interview with the press, Jacober says, "Adolescents in general have not yet undergone this socialization, and they are intensely curious about life, faith, spirituality, making a difference in the world, family, sex, justice and just about any other topic you might consider."²

The chapter on adolescent development left me feeling like I was talking with a colleague about the students in our respective worlds. The vignette about parents who were desperately trying to figure out what was "normal" spoke to me as a parent and as a youth worker. Jacober's presentation of the holistic view of development—biological, sociological, and spiritual—also generated positive comments in reader reviews of the book, which suggests that others who have read the book have likewise profited.

A chapter on youth culture as the "second half of the psychosocial language required for a bilingual approach in forming a practical theology particular to adolescence" is equally helpful (77). Practical theology is by definition rooted in cultural context. Jacober stays true to her thesis, however, and does not digress into a summary of pop culture. Instead, she stays tethered to theology, citing James McClendon's supposition that God is both of culture and in culture, "the God of culture as well as the God of nature" (80–81). Jacober is optimistic in noting that millennials (the current generation of adolescents) are hopeful in spite of several studies that indicate that adults are increasingly removed from youth culture, resulting in an abandonment that endangers the ability for theology and/or compassion to break through.

As I mentioned earlier, I know Jacober to be highly concerned with engaging students with the spiritual imperative to be salt and light through social justice. For this reason, the lens she calls "central virtues" (love, mercy, and justice) is the focus of Chapter 6, which in my opinion is a clearer explanation of practical theology than the chapter on practical theology (Chapter 2). Jacober becomes very authentic as she writes of students trying to grasp the seemingly unanswerable questions in a complex world.

Yet, the directional, powerful, and unconditional love of God is not isolated from justice as the "central issue in the maturation of adolescents as they work out their place in association with others" (126). Mercy seems to be opposite of justice, yet shares the goals of mutual honor and restored relationships (127). Again, Jacober goes into more detail than the reader can appreciate, but the chapter comes back around to looking at biblical justice and biblical mercy as the path to transformation. The end result would be that the Christian community would take our cue from Je-

sus to reconcile the tension between love, justice, and mercy, hopefully modeling the connections between and across the virtues.

This difficult discussion is brought to conclusion by reminding the readers that “it is not our acts, our practices that bring transcendent change. It is God’s grace, defying human definitions of love, justice and mercy that transforms us” (144). It is also the neglected role of the youth minister to model both the love of God and transformative justice as seen in everyday circumstances (145).

Jacoer ends the book where she started. For me, the most powerful and valuable part of the book is the repeated thesis, restated again in the conclusion: “Practical theology always asks the question, ‘How may I best join God in his work of reconciliation in the world?’” (154). Although the book seems intended more for a scholarly audience than for local church or parachurch youth workers, the call is clear. We need to stop answering hard questions with platitudes or clichés and wrestle with the deeper things of God. Without serious consideration of theology, youth development, culture, and social justice, we will under challenge and abandon a generation of Christ followers who have unlimited promise.

Allen Jackson
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

Notes

1 <http://www.ivpress.com/media>

2 <http://www.ivpress.com/media>