

**DRAFT for the forthcoming *Joy: A Guide to Youth Ministry*.
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Purpose

Finding Joy in Life Direction

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You have undoubtedly noticed that teenagers come to dread a particular question that adults ask with increased frequency and intensity the closer they come to the end of their high school careers: “What are you doing after graduation?” Even graduation ceremonies seem to rush through any celebration of accomplishment toward giving advice about “what’s next.” I (Steve) recently spoke at one of these ceremonies. I told the students that perhaps the well-meaning comments adults make evoke different meanings for them:

“I’m proud of you” sounds like “Don’t ever disappoint us.”

“You’ve worked hard” is heard as “You think high school was hard? Just wait till college, military, and work!”

“You can be anything you want to be” feels like a warning: “You can be anything—as long as you remain the best.”

“You did it!” acts like a demand: “And . . . you . . . must . . . keep . . . doing it. You can never stop or rest.”

What surprised me were the visceral responses I heard from the student section—groans, nods, and wide-eyed stares at each other. Somehow I managed to name the elephant in the commencement room, and perhaps the teenagers were happy that an adult saw it too. It makes us wonder if we adults spend more time asking teenagers about their life’s purpose without considering their life’s joy. Emphasizing purpose without joy seems to put teenagers into pressure cookers that they all feel deeply.

What if we were to ask teenagers instead “What brings you joy?” This question is not a typical conversation starter with youths—or anyone, for that matter. In fact rather than launching a conversation, it is more likely to elicit blank stares or verbal fumbling. We don’t think it’s because people don’t have an answer. It’s just hard to name. It’s a challenging question, especially if you cannot articulate what matters to you.

One way for young people to understand what matters at a practical level is for them to identify a purpose in their life. We are not necessarily talking about their grand, existential purpose in life (though we will talk more about this below); we are referring to an actual and achievable goal or aim that informs how one lives, how one spends their time, and what one believes in. So if you ask “Got joy?” we would respond, “Got purpose?”

For clarity let’s make sure we are clear on the difference between happiness and joy. Happiness is well recognized for being a pleasant or positive feeling in response to something that occurred. We feel

<p>Joy = feeling + reflection</p>	<p>happy because we experienced something or something came to mind that we deem good.</p>
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Joy is a bit more complicated, as it is more than an emotional response. Joy involves a “cognitive appraisal” (that’s geek-speak for when we reflect on an experience that moves us). It is a positive feeling that involves conscious or unconscious reflection on what matters. As a result one can experience joy not only in experiences that bring happiness but also in the face of suffering or loss. For instance a teenager might feel disappointment

over not making a team but still be able to find joy that a friend made the team instead. In this case joy involves reflection or reframing.

Understanding that joy combines both feeling and reflection helps us appreciate Paul's reminder to the Jesus followers in Rome: "And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom. 5:3-4). Through the lens of happiness, this statement sounds dreadful, depressing, even masochistic. Feelings alone will make us flee this moment. Through the perspective of joy, Christians' beliefs frame a richer picture where feelings are not the end but the beginning of a transformative moment. If our hearts are broken, might we become more compassionate? If we are hurt by someone, might it teach us to forgive? If we are disappointed, might it teach us to be even more diligent? Christians are more than naive spiritual optimists. But hope and joy are rooted in the gospel of love, grace, and redemption.

As you might guess, joy doesn't usually come naturally, but we can cultivate it—on purpose. It takes practice. Just as we work out and train our bodies at a gym, we can train and cultivate "joy muscles." Now the religious things we do in and through our faith communities start to make more sense. Prayer, worship, participating in other spiritual disciplines and Christian community are forms of working out—they are exercises that enable us to see things more clearly and consistently through the eyes of Christ. In this way our interpretive responses become more natural—like a golfer who has perfected her swing, the birdwatcher who knows where to look, or the artist who instinctively grabs the right brush. Our joy muscles or instincts know what to do, where to look, and how to reflect.

Even though the goal is for joy to become natural, it doesn't always come naturally. It takes discipline, time, and consistency for it to become a habit. Young people are starting to learn discipline, navigate time, and establish habits, so it is up to adults to help them by establishing a frame that allows them to grow in joy. Joy, then, is no longer an abstract or isolated idea but becomes part of our everyday practice, thinking, and

outlook. Thus #joyonpurpose is like a life-hashtag (mantra) that shows up in our choices, our relationships, and our aspirations.

Because of the interpretive aspect of joy, we need to know what matters and how we make sense of the world. No doubt we offer young people the frame of faith—the gospel narrative; the story of crucifixion and resurrection; life, death, and new life; our basis for hope. But in a teen’s daily life experiences of brains bursting with growth, bodies bursting with hormones, and buddies bursting or bruising

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friendships, such abstract and lofty ideals of faith are often too far afield to make a difference. But when faith gets applied or translated into a practical, achievable purpose that has more immediate implications for how a young person lives or plans their days, weeks, and months, then having a purpose can provide a more immediate and practical sense of what matters. In the following section, we discuss specifically what we mean by this kind of purpose.

Joy on Purpose

The title of this chapter has two meanings. Not only can we be purposeful about cultivating joy (#joyonpurpose meaning number 1), but also young people can experience more joy when they have a purpose (#joyonpurpose meaning number 2). Youth purpose is actually a burgeoning area of study within developmental psychology.¹ Research clearly reveals that having a sense of purpose is associated with higher

1 People leading this research include William Damon, the director of the Center on Adolescence at Stanford University; Kendall Cotton Bronk at Claremont Graduate School; and Ben Houltberg at the Thrive Center for Human Development at Fuller Theological Seminary.

grades, good health, and greater sense of well-being.² As my (Pam's) fourteen-year-old would say, purpose is "lit"! But it's important to note that not all life goals have such benefits. In particular purpose refers to a "stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self."³ We point out four specific points in this definition. A purpose is

1. stable and long-lasting;
2. intended to accomplish something;
3. meaningful and relevant to an individual young person; and
4. constructive and contributes in a socially meaningful manner.

Purpose Is Stable and Enduring.

This does not mean that it is lifelong, especially in the case of an adolescent, but that the purpose has a meaning significant enough to endure mild fluctuations of interest or obstacles. For something to count as a purpose for young people, it has to be compelling enough to keep them committed, even in the face of challenges or distractions. Interests might change and be more fleeting, but purposes captivate and are longer lasting.

Purpose Involves a Specific Aim to Accomplish Something.

We are not just talking about having a sense of meaning in life; a purpose actually involves a goal of achieving something tangible. When asking youths about their purpose in life, kids give a variety of answers. Some have no idea. Some may say something general like "to glorify God," and others will describe something more specific such as raising awareness of global poverty levels or raising money to provide water

2 See K. C. Bronk, *Purpose in Life: A Component of Optimal Youth Development* (New York: Springer, 2013).

3 W. Damon, *Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 33.

wells for African children. The most effective and transformative purposes are those that are more concrete and attainable.

Purpose Is Meaningful and Relevant to an Individual Young Person.

Accordingly the goal aligns with the youth's interests and abilities. Purposes arise out of emerging lifelong desires. Although adolescents often do not know their vocation or calling, they have some awareness, or with some encouragement and affirmation can become aware, of their deep yearnings. For example a young person who is passionate about cooking might pursue a purpose involving nutrition or food. Whether or not this becomes a vocation only time will tell, but it still reveals something meaningful to them.

Purpose Is Constructive and Contributes to the World beyond the Young Person.

Damon describes this kind of purpose as "noble purpose."⁴ Goals or aims that do not further the social good at some level do not count as a purpose. So in the latter example, a young person passionate about cooking and food might work to provide meals for the homeless in their community or raise money for an international organization that plants nutritious indigenous crops.

Attempting to tie this all together, we suggest that pursuing a purpose is living out what matters. To take another example, Audrey, an extremely gifted runner, has a deep desire to help kids in poverty. Given her interest in running and connections with local schools and track clubs, she develops a specific purpose: to send shoes to children in developing nations. She finds an organization that will distribute shoes in Africa, and she leverages her connections and has other teens donate used athletic shoes that she collects, cleans, and gives to the

4 William Damon, *Noble Purpose: The Joy of Living a Meaningful Life* (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2003).

organization that ships and distributes them. Based on Audrey's interests and capacities, she identified a specific and actionable goal that she could work toward.

***Telos*: The Place #joyonpurpose Takes Us**

A critique of what we have presented up to this point may be that all this talk of joy and purpose sounds like self-absorption. As Christians the gospel calls us toward God and toward each other. Sanctification makes us both more holy and more human. We believe that we find purpose and joy as we move toward God and one another and become more fully who God created us to be. To emphasize this point, we add one other aspect of joy and purpose to our understanding that frames the panoramic picture we hope you will see. One way of understanding what matters is to draw on that biblical concept of *telos*. *Telos* is Greek for "purpose" or "goal" and conveys a sense of ultimacy. Theology uses it to refer to God's purposes or goal for humankind. So human *telos* refers to God's intention or goal for humanity.

As a developmental psychologist, when I (Pam) think about the point of human development or wondering what people are growing or maturing toward, I often ask what is the goal or purpose of human development from God's perspective.⁵ We Christians often default to important but esoteric statements like "glorifying God" or "loving God and loving others." These theological phrases can be inspirational, but they rarely help Jesus followers in their everyday lives. We hope these guidelines on purpose can help you encourage young people you know to identify a specific purpose that points them toward a meaningful way to glorify God in their lives.

Let's explore what this might mean by considering the four elements of purpose. Stable and long-lasting purpose reminds us that

5 See J. O. Balswick, P. E. King, and K. S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Theological Perspectives on Development*. 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

the things we do that matter can have a developmental trajectory that grows with us. Purpose takes time, coaching, development. Through this pursuit one finds her or his unique voice and contribution. As Christians we recognize this process as sanctification. Drawing on the doctrine of the image of God, we become like Christ, which means following Jesus into the unique creations that God has created us to be (Ps. 139), to use the gifts God has given each of us (1 Cor. 12–14). Thus the Christian view of *telos* as conformity to Christ does not mean uniformity to Christ. We are each called to become like Christ as our unique selves.

Purpose with a goal or aim to accomplish something shows us that our efforts point to something about the way we make sense of ourselves, God, and the world. Achievements along the way do not always come easily or predictably. Instead they evoke internal and external challenges that transform and expand our view of self, God, and others. The Bible tells us that Jesus is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15). Becoming more like Jesus is part of our goal (or *telos*) and a means of glorifying God. This work inspires us to live into who God sees us to be, while also trusting that God promises to complete the good work God has started in us (Phil. 1:6).

Purpose, now, becomes meaningful and relevant. It draws from something deeper in people where, no matter the work or even the outcome, working toward their purpose is “worth it.” In seeking to understand adolescent spirituality, Smith and Denton observe that young people’s views of the world shape the way they see meaning in their decisions.⁶ Those who believe we live in a “morally insignificant universe” see moral commitments, decisions, obligations, and actions as having little impact beyond their own lives. On the other hand, those who hold to a “morally significant universe” see their lives connected with something bigger where their actions affect others beyond themselves. They identify a *telos* where their lived lives contribute to an

6 C. Smith and M. L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

ultimate goal. The Christian narrative's *telos* frames for young people what matters in a meaningful context and trajectory.

Purpose is constructive and contributes in a socially meaningful manner. Our pursuit of what really matters is more than a self-focused exercise; it expands people's view of how their efforts connect with others' efforts and challenges around them. Purpose becomes no longer atomized but finds its context in a larger narrative that connects people with something bigger than themselves. For Christians this means that purpose becomes about more than "me"; it also becomes about "we." Humans grow toward their ultimate purpose, becoming more Christ-like as their unique selves and contributing to the greater world. Figure 1 illustrates this threefold sense of *telos*—that involves becoming more like Christ as one is uniquely suited and as one discovers a meaningful contribution to the world around them.

This threefold *telos* depicts a way that a young person can understand a sense of purpose. Pursuing a purpose should always take Christians deeper into discipleship—it should always draw us further into the ways—the character and actions—of Christ. A young person's

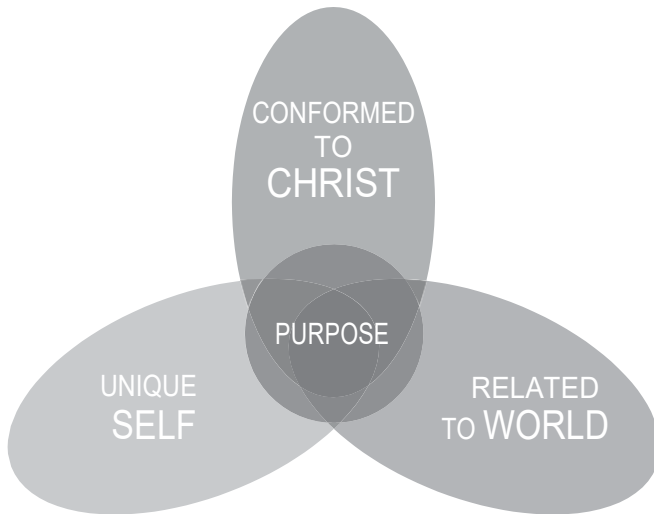


Figure 1: Purpose in light of a threefold sense of *telos*

purpose should always be consistent with their passions and personality. It should delight them and motivate them—not be drudgery or a dreary duty. Lastly a purpose is not just about bettering oneself or becoming more oneself; it is not just self-serving or about personal satisfaction. Rather it is about service to others, contributing and making a difference.

So How Do You Get Purpose?

Given that purpose is “lit”—such a promising source of joy—how does a young person get purpose? Dr. Belle Liang and her colleagues at Boston College agreed that purpose sounded great for kids, but they were suspicious. Sure, this is fantastic, they thought—for those who have the luxury of having and pursuing a noble purpose. But what about kids from less privileged backgrounds? What about kids who might be more oriented toward surviving than thriving? In short they looked at purpose among ten less advantaged youths in a College Bound program and found that they also described having purpose in their lives.⁷

In their study the researchers identified four interrelated themes around the development of purpose. Conveniently they all start with *p*. They are known as the four P’s of purpose: (1) people, (2) prosocial benefits, (3) propensity, and (4) passion.

People

The young people in the study described the way adults in their lives, like parents, teachers, and coaches, played an important role in inspiring, affirming, and supporting them in finding and refining their purpose. For example one youth described how their mentor noticed them

7 B. Liang, A. White, A. M. DeSilva Mousseau, A. Hass, L. Knight, D. Berado, and T. J. Lund, “The Four P’s of Purpose among College Bound Students: People, Propensity, Passion, Prosocial Benefits,” *Journal of Positive Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2017): 281–94.

in a group of thirty kids and suggested that the student be placed in an honors program. In another study a boy talked about how an adult from a church would drive him to worship band practice so he could pursue his passion of leading worship.

Prosocial Benefits

The youths in this study were motivated to pursue their purpose because it benefited others. In the case of this study, youths talked about helping various family members. For example, one student talked about wanting to be able to help his mom buy a house. Another said, "I know there's a lot of kids that really need help, but they don't know where to go for it. So I want to be that person to help them."⁸

Propensity

Students' explanations also included their excelling in competencies and skills important for attaining their purpose. In addition youths were aware that they had personalities suited to their particular purpose. For example one student described why she had what it takes to become a nurse practitioner by elaborating on several personal qualities: "I definitely am a good student academically . . . school's very important to me. I'm very outgoing. I like to try new things, meet new people, very kind and caring, determined and ambitious about my goals and my future."⁹

Passion

In addition these kids had a passion for what they were pursuing. They deeply enjoyed the activities associated with it. Their deep interest in the area propelled and sustained their commitment to it. One student explained that she wanted to be a child psychologist "cause I'm really

8 Liang et al., 6.

9 Liang et al., 8.

interested in how the mind works and how kids develop.”¹⁰ She realized that there were many children in the world in need of help—including a childhood friend—and she decided she wanted to make a difference for such children.

These four themes break into two major dimensions: influences on purpose (i.e., capability and motivation) and sources of such influences (i.e., intrinsic and extrinsic). These categories are not intended to capture opposites but rather to identify resources that shape purpose. In particular purpose is shaped by capability and motivation, which in turn can be intrinsic or extrinsic. For example people are an external resource, whereas propensity is an internal resource. Being motivated by benefiting another person (e.g., prosocial benefits) is an external motivator. Passion is an internal motivator.

Young People, Their Faith, and Their #joyonpurpose

When youths live and serve out of an authentic and meaningful expression of themselves, they experience the significance of their own passions and their effectiveness, and this is deeply empowering. When kids have an identifiable sense of purpose that they can effectively pursue, they gain a clear and immediate sense of what matters. This becomes an excellent frame for joy! In the ebb and flow of life—decisions, friendships, emotions, wins and losses, highs and lows—they will have a frame through which to view these experiences. A lived purpose incorporates beliefs, values, hopes, desires, and passions; offers a more immediate reference for interpreting emotions and what matters; and ultimately enables kids to thrive and experience joy.

As adults (especially ministry leaders and parents), we want this for our young people. The challenge comes in how we might create environments to teach and encourage joy on purpose.

10 Liang et al., 8.

See Purpose Framed in Faith as a Joy Booster.

No doubt purpose is not the only resource of joy available to youth, but it is an especially effective source of joy, because pursuing a purpose concentrates important joy boosters in a young person's life. Purpose framed through faith serves as a means for activating young people's ideals in their daily living—translating beliefs and values into actions with an enduring commitment. Purpose framed through faith equips young people to identify and pursue that purpose by helping them develop (1) an awareness of what's important—one's beliefs and values; (2) a social network of people that are aligned with one's purpose; and (3) a sense of transcendence or being a part of something bigger. In this way purpose serves as a joy booster by providing young people with clarity about what matters to them, a community of like-minded people, and a deeper connection to God.

Encourage Purposeful Choices to Help Young People Discover Their Values and Beliefs.

Although purpose does not require clearly articulating one's complete worldview or writing their own personal rule of life, it can serve as the

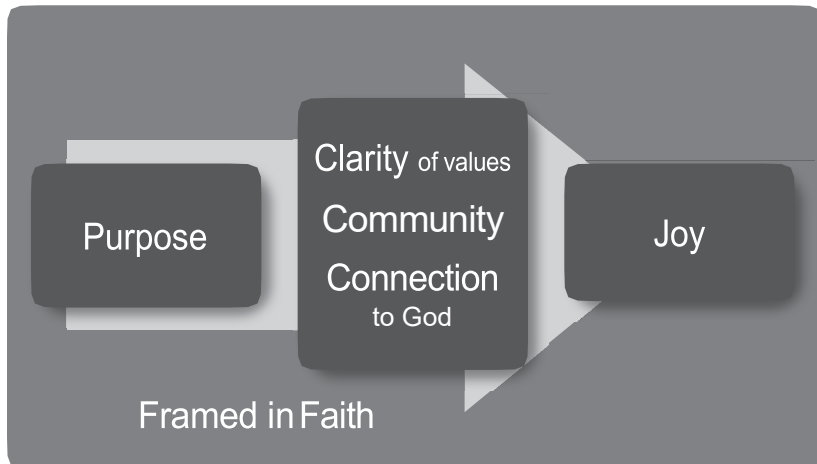


Figure 2: Purpose framed through faith

way a young person puts a stake in the ground on what matters to her or him. Purpose consolidates and activates what is significant to young people. This puts a whole new spin on their choices and schedules as they discover that they cannot do or be everything and that making a choice often means saying yes to one thing and no to another. Do I stand with my friend and endanger my popularity? Do I go to church even though I have tons of homework? Do I volunteer or search for a job that pays something? Do I risk getting involved or not? Certainly young people will make good and bad choices along the way. If adults can see their choices beyond goodness/badness and instead use these opportunities to talk with young people about what really matters to them, these events can turn into meaning-making moments.

Leverage Purpose for Connection and Support.

Research shows that youths who pursue a purpose end up with high levels of social capital.¹¹ The activities in which youths participate in order to carry out their purpose engage them with adults and peers who hold similar interests. This results in increased opportunities to be surrounded by positive peer and adult influences. Additionally individuals who share deeply held interests increase the chances of having meaningful and highly trusting relationships. Thus pursuing a purpose is a great way to make really positive and strong friendships and be surrounded by supportive and caring adults.

There is something significant to consider here. Often in congregations we group people by age and/or gender. Might it be even more

11 Social capital refers to benefits that a person has access to through relationships. In this case, several studies have demonstrated that pursuing purpose connects youth to like-minded and supportive adults and peers. See Belle Liang and S. G. Ketcham, "Emerging Adults' Perceptions of Their Faith-Related Purpose," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2017); doi:10.1037/rel0000116. For further information on social capital and religion, see Pamela E. King and James L. Furrow, "Religion as a Resource for Positive Youth Development: Religion, Social Capital, and Moral Outcomes," *Developmental Psychology* 40 (2004): 703–13.

effective to group people based on their purposeful interests? What if the artists in the congregation met to encourage each other's projects? What if the businesspeople joined with business majors to talk about faith, ethics, entrepreneurialism, or the triple bottom line? What if teachers gathered to explore pedagogy? What if those who have particular interests in race relations, homelessness, or immigration gathered to implement next practical steps? What if all these groups shared their conversations with the whole community? Purpose could be a more compelling force by joining people by similar passions rather than by demographics.

Keep an Eye on Transcendence and Fasten Your Seatbelts.

Furthermore, pursuing a noble purpose as we have described in this chapter provides youth with the experience of connecting with something beyond themselves. For young people of faith, following a purpose is usually their faith in action—and then they experience their purpose as a part of something much bigger than themselves. For instance a young person's effort to care for animals at an animal shelter is part of their efforts at tending to God's creation. They can experience their actions as more significant than just acting on their affection for furry creatures but as part of God's work on earth. "When you know the story to which you belong, and when you know your role in that story, you have a profound sense of purpose. That is what we are invited into: The ultimate story—God's ongoing work in this world. When we find ourselves contributing to a greater story, we thrive."¹²

In addition when young people make a recognizable impact on the broader world around them, they are deeply affirmed and experience a sense of their own efficacy. When kids get a taste of their ability to make a difference, it enlivens and encourages them. Even if the impact is small and only affects their family, kids who recognize that

12 P. E. King, "The Reciprocating Self: Trinitarian and Christological Anthropologies of Being and Becoming," *Journal of Christianity and Psychology* 35, no. 3 (2016): 15–32.

they are contributing to someone or something beyond themselves realize that they are an active part of a world and reality that are bigger than themselves. Contribution and connection provide a sense of transcendence and continue to motivate young people to grow into thriving adults.

Whether for believers or for nonreligious youth, purpose serves to identify and activate one's values, engages young people in meaningful social networks, and allows youths to experience that they are part of something bigger. In this way purpose becomes a means to lived faith. It is a great means of exploring what matters. It often puts people on the pathway to vocation. In a world where so much is about competition and consumption, it's a great antidote to focusing and worrying about oneself and also a promising source of joy.

Creating Ecosystems for #joyonpurpose

As much as we adults are tempted to, we cannot pick our young people's purposes for them. They undertake this process, and it is our role to create environments and opportunities for them to discover and live into their purposes, which will bring them joy. Further if the Christian life is all about ensuring good behavior in our young, we short-circuit their process of discovering and embracing who they are as people created in the image of God, uniquely connected to something bigger than themselves, where their gifts, talents, and purposes can bless their communities and even the whole world. Adults are tempted to try to control this process, but it is better for them to create environments or ecosystems that allow young people to grow into their joy on purpose.

Know Christ . . . Know Your Purpose

The Apostle Paul makes a quite compelling appeal in his letter to the Philippian believers. In chapter 3 he admits that he wants to "know Christ" and seems to want his readers/listeners to join him in that pursuit. This concept of "knowing" (*ginōskō*) is closely connected with the

Hebrew word *yada* found in Psalm 46:10, which appeals to the reader to be still and “know” God. This “knowing” has a quality of bringing together theoretical understanding and the actual experience of something. “Knowing” forms the intersection.

Good learning theory recognizes that people are not blank slates ready to be filled with knowledge. Nor do people always live out what they know. Rather people sometimes have experiences that they can’t articulate. Or they live their way into understanding. This is important and, perhaps, a challenge to ministry leaders and parents. Adults default to giving their young people information. Are you sad? Read this Bible verse. Are you doubting? Read this book. Are you behaving badly? Listen to this sermon. This is not enough for young people, and it doesn’t seem to be enough for Paul, either. He is exhibit A for holding plenty of knowledge that was not transformative until he encountered the resurrected Christ. But that seems to have changed him forever. His purpose then became to know Christ in the fullest sense.

Content and Context: An Ecosystem for Knowing Christ

In light of Paul’s declared purpose, how might we cultivate such vision for our young people? While we can’t dictate their knowing or prescribe their purpose, we can create an ecosystem where knowing Christ and their purpose can grow. This ecosystem resides in the knowing intersection of knowledge and experience. We cultivate an ecosystem for knowing by being committed to excellent content embedded in nurturing contexts. By content and context, we mean the following.

Content refers to the curricular scope and sequence that have been developed to ensure theologically sound and developmentally appropriate teaching and learning. For ministry leaders this includes weekly programming, small group resources, and retreat materials that help young people understand the Christian narrative of which they are part. For parents this includes regular dialogue with your kids about life, faith, and the Christian story your family desires to live within. Great content invites students to connect their stories to God’s story. Great content

needs great teachers, and the best teaching starts with the learner in mind, as the teacher artfully evokes their imaginations and connects concepts with their experiences. As Christians we believe we have a great story. We need to be great storytellers! It is the responsibility of the ministry leader to faithfully tell this good story, which is rooted in the faithful teaching of Christianity's narrative theology.

The term *context* indicates relational environments that are safe and nurturing, which young people need. Like learning to be great teachers, adults must learn to be great environmentalists. Are the relational spaces at church, youth group, and home safe, nurturing spaces? Do our young people feel comfortable enough to share what they really feel, offer what they really think, ask their real questions, or doubt something they think they're supposed to believe? If content is about teaching the Christian narrative well, context is about creating space for young people to live into the Christian narrative through their thinking, doubting, feeling, and acting.

When adults prioritize content and context, they create an environment where it is possible for a young person to know Christ, pursue their purpose, and experience joy. This is good news to a young person.

Content and Context in Motion

Content and context assume something we have hinted at throughout this chapter. They assume that young people often discover their purpose more than deliberate on this pursuit. Purpose is rather abstract, and young people's shorter, less experienced lives affect how they reflect on their purpose. Still, as we have suggested, they have interests and passions and frequently choose what matters most to them. Adults who create environments that emphasize helpful, age-appropriate content and context provide space for young people to discover their purpose. Table 1 lays out a way to consider content and context for those ages twelve through their twenties.

Broadly speaking, table 1 reminds adults that because of human development, seeking purpose is "in motion." Thus parent and ministry

leaders must constantly be working to nurture the best environments (through content and context) to encourage young people to discover their purpose. Finally note—at the very bottom—that adults cannot attempt this from a distance. We are not fixing young people or ensuring that they grow. Any of our attempts to encourage our young people to know Christ and know their purpose invite us to reflect on our own knowing. We share in this attempt together, owning with them the beautiful and scary discoveries about God’s own calling on our lives.

Igniting Sparks in an Environment Full of Surprises

The late Peter Benson, former president of Search Institute, described youths as sparks waiting to be ignited. He challenged adults not to think of them as vessels waiting to be filled but rather sparks that deserve to be lit and fanned into major flames.¹³

From a Christian view, Benson’s words ring true and remind us, as adults, that one of the best things we can do for our young people is not to try to control their faith, their purpose, or their joy but to call out the sparks in their own lives. Young people need adults to do what they often cannot do for themselves: speak to their image-bearing-ness. Let’s catch them doing things right; let’s point out the qualities we see in them; let’s celebrate their talents; let’s join them in working through the brokenness they see around them; and let’s remind them that they are made in the image of God. They are good, they have value, and they have purpose.

Don’t let these thoughts on purpose end as aspirations. Make them happen—on purpose. We offer a fully scripted lesson that we hope you will find inspiring, that sets the stage for thinking about #joyonpurpose, and that provides the opportunity for young people to begin to identify their purpose. This exercise is based on the threefold understanding of *telos* presented above in figure 1. Feel free to copy the diagram

13 Peter L. Benson, *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008). Peter L. Benson, “Sparks: How Youth Thrive” (April 22, 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqzUHcW58Us>

	Middle School Adolescent [ages 12–14]	High School Adolescent [ages 14–18]	Emerging Adult [ages 18–20s]
Content	<p>Learning the story of God Encourage questions of content by inviting them into the story.</p> <p>For example: What’s going on? What do you see? How would you feel? What’s cool? What’s strange?</p> <p>Great content here teaches them the Christian story and shows them how this narrative is unfolding; it is not random.</p> <p>Avoid moralism that reduces teaching to demanding behaviors. The goal is discovery, not behavior modification.</p>	<p>Practicing the story of God Encourage questions of congruency by inviting them to “walk out” the Christian story.</p> <p>For example: You believe in forgiveness; who do you need to forgive? What does compassion look like for the students in your school that are the least popular? Is generosity possible—and how—when you don’t feel like you have very much money?</p> <p>Great content here teaches them to consider how the story frames their life perspectives. It calls them to bring their believing and their living of faith closer together.</p> <p>Avoid giving quick answers. The best teaching here is patient and willing to let young people discover what following Jesus can mean, what it might cost them, and what they might discover.</p>	<p>Extrapolating the story of God Draw out questions of meaning.</p> <p>Often it is the emerging adult who now brings questions to the Christian narrative. With their lives now being more specialized and diverse, faith must be extrapolated. There is less a “right answer” and more a “faithful next step.”</p> <p>Great content here acknowledges nuance and offers room to challenge, doubt, and create new ways forward in their faith journeys.</p> <p>Avoid controlling the conversations. Curate their comments and learn to speak back to them what they are processing. Tap into biographies of people who have searched for purpose in their own lives. Ask how they resonate with stories, movies, or novels.</p>

	Middle School Adolescent [ages 12–14]	High School Adolescent [ages 14–18]	Emerging Adult [ages 18–20s]
Context	<p>Space to explore and experience</p> <p>1. Be sensitive to the development of middle school students and their need for space to learn, understand . . . and learn and understand!</p> <p>2. Recognize that play, fun, and adults who are interested in them make these spaces meaningful.</p>	<p>Space for honesty about fears and doubts</p> <p>1. There are few spaces where high schoolers feel like they can be their real selves. Encourage an accepting environment where they can ask honest questions and express real doubts. They need this space to make their faith their own.</p> <p>2. Create space where you can celebrate with them in the good times and walk with them in the hard times.</p>	<p>Space for dialogue and creativity</p> <p>1. Emerging adults need more than calls to conformity. The spaces they need will hold differing views, encourage thoughtful dialogue, and point them toward “third way” solutions.</p> <p>2. Create space that values their relational (often beyond church or home) rather than programmatic participation.</p>
Environment Killers	An uninteresting environment (faith/formation matters in daily life).	An unsafe environment (questioning faith is essential, expected, and encouraged).	An undynamic environment (their faith looks different from that of parents and needs community).
	For all of these periods, an environment not shared by others rarely nurtures faith and purpose. As adults, we are in this together. Learning and transformation is desired and expected by all, not just those we think we’re ministering to or parenting.		

Table 1: Content and Context Ecosystem for Young People

or make your own version that youths fill out to begin to identify their gifts and passions; the places and ways they enjoy making a difference; and how they feel God is calling them to be more like Jesus as a way of identifying their purpose. In addition have your teens or young adults identify five steps necessary to accomplishing their purpose—including what experiences they need to gain and what kind of support they need from friends, family, and other adults. You might even have them post a “WikiHow.” We recommend that, in the context of your youth group, individuals reevaluate their “purpose *telos*” annually, encouraging reflection on what gives joy. Of course groups can always support a social media campaign where young people, their families, and leaders tweet and post images about #joyonpurpose.

Conclusion

One of the amazing things about joy is that it is vitalizing. Joy is a virtue unto itself, but it also goes somewhere—toward our *telos*. It’s pointing us to a more profound way of being and living where purpose is the fuel for true joy. Joy gives us energy and motivation—it calls out reflection and so drives our purposes. Joy has an expanding effect that helps us to be more human and more holy as our purposes draw us toward one another. The more we pursue purpose, the more opportunity there is for joy. The more joy we experience, the more we are propelled to pursue our purpose. Pursuing a purpose is powerful. Please note that having a purpose is not the point. It is not only the content or aim of the purpose but also the pursuing or taking action that activates all the potential resources for joy. Pursuing purpose is a joy booster. When identified and followed thoughtfully, purpose prevents young people from defaulting to inspiring but abstract statements like glorifying God or loving God and loving others. A specific purpose enables youth to honor God in their everyday lives. Such a purpose equips young people to pursue something meaningful to themselves and the greater world. Since these purposes have more an ultimate *telos* that inspires

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our efforts and promotes joy, how might we think about “joy on purpose” not merely as an inspirational slogan but an ongoing declaration that gives traction to our everyday lives? Perhaps a modern-day prayer might be this: *Lord Jesus, may our everyday actions automatically tweet #joyonpurpose as we bless you, bless others, and are blessed ourselves. Amen.*