

GIVING UP GIMMICKS

RECLAIMING



YOUTH



MINISTRY

FROM AN

ENTERTAINMENT CULTURE

"THE BEST BIBLICAL GUIDANCE WE COULD EVER HOPE TO RECEIVE."

—MICHAEL CARD, AWARD-WINNING SINGER, SONGWRITER, AND AUTHOR

BRIAN H. COSBY

For more than a generation now we have sought to attract and entertain our precious youth rather than nurture them by grace. The majority have responded by turning their backs on the church. Brian Cosby has listened to their heart and is offering us the best biblical guidance we could ever hope to receive.

—**Michael Card**, Award-winning Singer, Songwriter, and Author

For decades the church has allowed the tail to wag the dog in regard to youth ministry. We have attempted to find the answer to every problem facing teenagers by flooding money into bigger and flashier programs. The results of our efforts speak for themselves. I am thankful that Brian Cosby steps forward in *Giving Up Gimmicks* and does something that has been unheard of: marrying solid biblical theology to youth ministry methodology. If you are concerned on any level about seeing young people in your church build a faith that will last, then I highly recommend this book to you.

—**Danny Mitchell**, Youth and Family Ministries Consultant and Associate Pastor of Discipleship and Youth, New City Fellowship, Chattanooga, Tennessee

John Williamson Nevin once critiqued Charles Grandison Finney's revivalism by distinguishing Finney's "system of the [anxious] bench" with historical Protestantism's "system of the catechism." One philosophy of ministry looks for quick results while the other looks for gradual, sustained growth. One is based on ingenious methods while the other is based on God's methods. As a former youth pastor, I know that most models of American youth ministry are systems of the bench and are not saturated with the Word, sacraments, and prayer. Yet these are precisely the anchors that the souls of our youth

need. These are precisely what Brian Cosby calls us back to. I thank God for this book.

—**Daniel R. Hyde**, Pastor, Oceanside United Reformed Church

The percentage of students walking away from the church after high school is staggering. This book not only identifies the “whys” but gives applicable, biblical ways for the church and youth leaders to address this challenge head-on. I would recommend this as a must read for anyone concerned about the next generation.

—**Jay Shaw**, Youth Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Structuring a modern youth ministry by following the contours of Scripture and keeping the body of Christ at the epicenter? What a novel idea! Yet this is just what Brian Cosby has done. And the result is radical and refreshing because the Bible remains cutting-edge in every culture. If you want true success in your ministry, here is the thought-through operational blueprint.

—**R. Kent Hughes**, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

If you are serious about making a lasting impact in the lives of your youth and preparing them for the long haul of life, *Giving up Gimmicks* is a must read. Brian Cosby understands how the ordinary means of grace change young people, draw them closer to Christ, and build a foundation that will last.

—**Rod Culbertson**, Associate Professor of Practical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina

Brian Cosby believes that youth ministry should be based on the same means of grace that nurture the whole church.

This book contains good theology that reflects his conviction that strong biblical doctrine will grip and transform the lives of youth (and others). So don't read this volume just as a handbook on how to minister to others—you will find yourself challenged and strengthened by reading it! I commend him for writing it, and recommend it to youth workers and others for their personal growth as well as effective ministry.

—**Joseph Martin**, Professor of Biblical Studies and Ministries, Belhaven University, Jackson, Mississippi

In *Giving Up Gimmicks*, Cosby boldly reminds the church of her God-given responsibility (and privilege) to minister to our youth on God's terms. The means of grace—Word, sacraments, and prayer—are the verdant pastures where our Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, feeds and nourishes his flock . . . youth included! In these pages, therefore, Cosby provides us with something exceedingly rare, namely, a clear, cogent, and compelling articulation of biblical youth ministry! I warmly commend this book.

—**Jon Payne**, Minister, Grace Presbyterian Church; Lecturer, RTS Atlanta

In our entertainment culture in which the church often looks like the world in order to draw the world into the church, Brian Cosby offers us a much-needed word about the identity, purpose, and strategy of effective, God-centered youth ministry. A pleasure to read, this book brims over with winsome anecdotes, gospel-driven applications, and passionate pleas to recover biblical understandings on Holy Scripture, sacraments, spiritual discipline, and Christlike community. For those who desire the gospel of Jesus Christ to permeate the lives of a new generation, this book is a must-read.

—**Christian George**, International Speaker, Author

The “traditional” approach to youth ministry has treated youth like autonomous individuals unrelated to their families or the church. The youth of the church are first and foremost members of the church, “covenant children” as they’ve come to be called, because they are members of Christian families. Youth ministry, then, if properly done, is family-centered and church-centered. It trusts that God works through families and through the ordinary ministry of the church. Finally, we have in Brian Cosby’s *Giving Up Gimmicks* an approach that does justice to the family and the church, while providing practical helps for youth workers.

—**Terry Johnson**, Senior Minister, Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia

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BRIAN H. COSBY



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To Doug, Tim, and Norm:

wise mentors, faithful friends,
and champions of the means of grace

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FOREWORD

ALMOST ALL OF US are aware of the encouraging and inspiring accounts of Daniel (Belteshazzar), Hananiah (Shadrach), Mishael (Meshach), and Azariah (Abednego) found in the book of Daniel. In 605 BC these four youths were suddenly and unceremoniously uprooted from their families, their country, and all familiar surroundings by a conquering pagan empire known in history as Babylon, ruled by the notorious King Nebuchadnezzar. They were then submitted to an assimilation process designed to culturally revolutionize their lives socially, religiously, and politically to make them royal servants of the king and his imperial designs. These four youths were assigned pagan names, enrolled in a pagan international school, and placed under an inflexible curriculum encompassing religion, philosophy, and every sphere of life, even one's diet, supervised by a royal official from the king's cabinet.

The first six chapters of Daniel reveal their courageous yet thoughtful and faithful commitment both to their God and to his glory. They were bold without arrogance, and they were humble without reticence. They became a significant lifestyle statement for the glory of God and an asset for the general welfare of the king and his empire, as well as a vibrant witness of the transforming power of God's grace before the watching world. Even more, they established an encouraging testimony to the exiled people of God in Babylon. Their influence and impact were demonstrated repeatedly by their courage to be



faithful to the Lord their God in worship and witness, while simultaneously becoming an instrument of God's providence in the lives of believers and God's common grace in the lives of unbelievers. They stood the test of fidelity to God-centered worship by refusing to participate in a royal diet supplied by pagan-worship sacrifice. Furthermore, their unflinching trust in God's providence was visibly demonstrated by their refusal to worship the king's idolatrous image to the point of being cast into a "fiery furnace." Their faithfulness and God's deliverance not only penetrated a pagan empire but was ultimately used as a vital part of God's work of grace in the conversion of Nebuchadnezzar himself. These four youths became ambassadors of the King of kings to a hostile king in the context of a rampaging imperial kingdom. Furthermore, their witness continued through multiple dynasties and even another conquering empire, the Medo-Persians under King Cyrus.

Interestingly, all four of these youths were, at the time of their exile into bondage, the same age as the teenagers who populate our junior high youth groups. Would it not be appropriate for you and me to ask ourselves a searching question? What would the teenagers in our youth groups do if they also were uprooted by a pagan and/or atheistic conquering nation and sent into a sophisticated effort to transform their life view and lifestyle? Without wanting to become too controversial, I would like to ask another question: aren't our covenant children who are heading into today's institutions of learning also being challenged by a pagan, secular world and life view that denies the claims of Christianity—sometimes intellectually and many times with mockery—and seeks to transform the way they have been taught to think and live in their homes and churches? How do we prepare them for such adversity so they do not simply survive but thrive, and like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego become salt and light in the midst of darkness?

I am convinced the answer to how our covenant youth will respond to the inevitable challenges of atheistic secularism and neo-paganism will normally be determined by what has already been invested in their lives. This gospel evangelism and disciple-making will enable them to face what the evil one intends to be a life catastrophe and transform it into a moment of growth in the grace and knowledge of Christ our Lord. The unassailable fact is that people do not become at the moment of adversity something different from what they are. At the moment of trial we do what have become the habits of our hearts. The habits of the hearts of our covenant youth are divinely designed to be nurtured in their families, their extended families, and their church families as the gospel of grace first calls them to Christ evangelistically and then equips them to live for the preeminence of Christ consistently in days of prosperity and/or adversity.

From the fullness of biblical truth revealed in the New Testament, it is abundantly clear that Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were trophies of the gospel of grace, who became both instruments and witnesses to the power of that gospel of grace. The untold story hinted in the names they had been given by their parents was about the role of their families and of the precursor of the local church that was established by regional teaching centers (later giving birth to synagogues during the Babylonian captivity itself). The family and “church,” working in concert, had prepared them for moments of trial, adversity, and decision. These extraordinary young men of God were the products of God’s grace, which we can biblically assume had been applied with some consistency as they were raised in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

The gospel of grace produces extraordinary testimonies of grace by the regular and prayerful administration of the ordinary means of grace such as the preaching and teaching

of God's Word, the fellowship of God's people, and the gathered worship of the covenant community, all bathed in the communion of the saints and the regular employment of intercessory prayer. The family, equipped by the church through the means of grace and the church extending the family's ministry with the means of grace, produces men and women of God who will live imperfectly yet intentionally to the praise of the glory of his grace.

You are about to begin a much-needed journey in the pages of this book. The journey will outline how we can reclaim the intentional ministry of the gospel of grace through the means of grace in the lives of families, all enhanced by a ministry to the youth of the covenant and then through them to the world by employing God's ordained means of grace, which the world calls foolishness but out of which God makes saved sinners "strong and courageous" as well as "humble and loving."

The coming generation is ready for us to bring them to Christ through the gospel by the means ordained from Christ, so they are enabled and empowered to live for the preeminence of Christ with courage and boldness that despise arrogance and with humility and compassion that embrace the strength of the Lord. Your journey begins now.

Harry L. Reeder III
Senior Pastor, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

PREFACE

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK is to give youth pastors, youth leaders, and parents a guide on how to lead a gospel-rich youth ministry that incorporates the means of grace—Word, prayer, sacraments, service, and community—into the content of the ministry as well as its methodology. Much of the material in this book has been hammered out “on the field” over the last decade or so of working with youth in various ministry contexts. But this book is certainly not the product of one person. Many have helped shaped my approach to youth ministry, especially Norm Dunkin at Carriage Lane Presbyterian Church in Peachtree City, Georgia. In fact, it was he who first asked me to write this book.

Giving Up Gimmicks: Reclaiming Youth Ministry from an Entertainment Culture is not designed to be an exhaustive manual, but rather an approach to leading and nurturing teenagers by ushering them unto the green pastures of God’s transformative grace. All too often, youth programs have turned to entertainment-driven models of ministry in order to bring in the most youth as possible to the local church. Success has become the name of the church-growth game. The devastating effects, however, are seen not only in the number of youth leaving the church after high school, but also in a spiritually and theologically shallow worldview among many American teenagers. The irony is that these same teens actually *want* to

grow and learn hard truths. They want to know how to think about suffering, how to pray, and why Jesus had to die.

American youth also have a deep desire to be known and loved. They want truly intimate relationships that are committed, safe, and glorifying to God. They want to experience grace in community and grace in the gospel. Moralism won't cut it. Just being a nicer person hasn't saved anybody, and it surely won't cultivate a teen's relationship and communion with Christ. Teens need to know that they are far more sinful than they would ever imagine. But, through faith alone in Christ alone, they are far more accepted and loved than they would ever dream.

After explaining some of the trends in youth culture, I examine the theology and support for the means of grace and then take the reader through each of the "means"—providing both biblical understanding and practical advice on incorporating them into a model of youth ministry. I conclude the book with a chapter on how to impart this vision to others and how to build a ministry team that is committed to fostering the means of grace in their own lives as well as the lives of youth.

May God grant a modern Reformation of youth ministry across America that seeks faithfulness over success, the Word over entertainment, and God's glory over our own.



WHY ENTERTAINMENT HASN'T WORKED

“ARE YOU GOING TO spank your kids?” was the first question. As I stumbled for an adequate answer, “Of course!” fumbled out. I didn’t have any children at the time, but the room was packed with young examiners probing areas I usually didn’t talk about. But I wanted to make a good first impression.

I was being interviewed for a youth pastor position at Carriage Lane Presbyterian Church in Peachtree City, Georgia. I had already completed a phone interview and written questionnaire, and now I was visiting the church for a three-day *thorough* interview process with the search committee, the Session of elders, and now the students.

After a barrage of random (and I mean *random!*) questions came my way, one teenager finally raised his hand in the back of the room. “Are you going to hold us to high standards?” A little shocked and wanting him to clarify, I asked him to repeat his question. “Will you challenge us as our youth pastor?” he said with greater intention. I was both stunned and delighted.

In preparation for the series of interviews, I had been reading every book I could get my hands on relating to youth



ministry, including the well-known *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry* by Doug Fields, former youth pastor at Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California.¹ Although I had already been a youth pastor for several years before this interview, I felt like I needed to brush up on the “how-tos” of youth ministry.

I had scoured the pages of countless books on youth games, ice breakers, and strategies to attract the largest number of youth to a church. The key theme that I found in many of these books envisioned a youth program that centered on making youth group as *entertainment*-driven as possible with a message on Jesus “slipped in” somewhere.

After I arrived in Peachtree City, I happened to sit in on a meeting of various youth pastors planning a big ecumenical weekend event. The first hour was spent talking about which “Christian magician” to invite. The group spent the next ten minutes selecting a speaker, who invariably needed to be “funny.” After hearing reports that all the youth who went to this event experienced a spiritual revival, I started questioning whether I should have supported it. But, it only took a week before those high-on-Jesus youth fell back into their same old patterns at school and indicated very little, if any, lasting effect.

THE GRADUATES' GREAT EXODUS

In his book, *Battle Cry for a Generation*, Ron Luce estimates that “88 percent of kids raised in Christian homes do not continue to follow the Lord after they graduate from high school.”² The drive to elevate experience over truth within a youth-group worship time has caused youth pastors to spend through the roof on fog machines, circulating lights, and artistic backgrounds. In the end, the show has left the teenager with some teary eyes and perhaps a newfound commitment that he or she will never sin again. But the next morning it's

all over, and they are left wanting something deeper, richer, and more satisfying.

The numbers are staggering for those leaving the church after high school, yet youth ministries across the nation continue to pack in more and more pizza parties and video games to keep youth coming back—thinking that somehow their lives will be changed.

Since that awkward and semi-nervous interview several years ago, I have witnessed an increasing interest in the Bible, theology, and prayer from students in my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, *and* those involved in either other churches or no church at all. They've seen how the American Dream has left their parents and the Baby Boomers empty and still dreaming. Entertainment simply hasn't provided meaning or answers to the ever-wandering hearts of America's youth.

Why haven't teens who were involved in youth group in high school stayed involved with a local church after graduating? There are many possible reasons, from wanting to experience the newfound freedom of being out of the house to being intimidated about meeting a host of new people.

Whatever reasons may be offered, one thing is clear: post-high-school teens are leaving the church because they have not been nurtured and established in the faith through a Christ-centered, means-of-grace ministry. In other words, America's youth not only *need* a ministry that seeks to communicate God's grace through the teaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, a life of prayer, gospel-motivated ministry, and grace-centered community—they actually *want* such a ministry.

YOUTH WANT THE CHALLENGE

In the spring of 2010, after receiving repeated e-mails and phone calls from students about the meaning of certain



words in the Greek language of the New Testament, I offered the possibility of teaching a basic Greek overview course that following summer. Hoping to attract ten to fifteen students, I knew I was being overly optimistic. But when the day came to begin, students filed into the large choir room—some of them even bringing their parents—until the place was packed! And then it hit me. These youth *want* to be challenged. They *want* to go deeper into God’s Word and to mine the riches found therein. They *want* to understand why Presbyterians baptize infants and how prayer “works.” They *want* to explore the development of the canon of Scripture and how to defend it at school.

This wave of interest in wanting to be challenged isn’t new, but it has become a central theme in Christian ministry, thanks in part to Alex and Brett Harris’s book, *Do Hard Things: A Teenage Rebellion Against Low Expectations*,³ and their supporting website, therebelution.com. The two have begun hosting multiple conferences and seminars across the nation, attracting teens of all stripes into supporting a vision that encourages youth to take initiatives, to ask the hard questions, and to think big for God. For many, such a plea is a wake-up call from the “I’m bored” youth phenomenon we see plastered all over Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. They are bored because they are living from one pleasure high to the next. They’re not encouraged to live out, for example, the content and method of ministry service.

As I was preparing some music for youth group one evening, an early-teenage girl walked up to me and told me that she was bored. I looked up and saw scores of youth throwing the football, talking, reading, and just hanging out. I looked back at her, hoping not to be too critical. So I paused for a moment. “You know, Lauren (not her real name), the team of youth leaders is preparing dessert for tonight in the kitchen. How about you go and ask how you might serve them.” Although

at first she wasn't thrilled with the idea, she later told me how much she enjoyed helping our leaders and how much they appreciated her willingness. For Lauren, that was when the realization set in that she *wanted* to be a part of something greater than herself.

Poll after poll has revealed that American teenagers' number one fear is being alone. These same polls also reveal that the second greatest fear (which leads to being alone) is rejection. The irony, of course, is that these same teenagers want to be different. Youth want to be known—blemishes, sin, and all—and told, "I'm going to love you and accept you *anyway!*" If we would but realize that this is the gospel message: you are more sinful than you would ever imagine and yet, through faith in Christ, you are more accepted and loved than you could ever dream.

In March 2010, the social networking site, Facebook, became the number one most-accessed Internet site in America, toppling the web giant Google for the first time in history. Why? I contend that young people in America (who account for the largest percentage of users) are starved for truly intimate relationships. Moreover, being "accepted" as a friend does wonders in fighting their continual fear of being rejected. Virtual relationships, therefore, have done nothing but appease a God-given appetite for true, grace-centered, intimate relationships.

BEING FAITHFUL OVER BEING SUCCESSFUL

If there's anything a youth pastor knows—even after only a few months in ministry—he knows that fatigue and feelings of burnout come with the task. The constant pressure from parents, youth, the Session, the senior pastor, and family can wear a minister out very quickly. Added to these stressors come the continual expectations of these people to meet certain number standards. The most frequent question that I



get as a youth pastor is, “How many?” It sometimes becomes a plague and burden—driving you to be either prideful (wow, I attracted a ton of youth tonight!) or full of despair (nobody came . . . and nobody will come next week either). It’s no wonder that the average youth minister stays in one location less than 18 months!⁴

Kent and Barbara Hughes, in *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome*, argue that it is always better to be faithful to the Lord than successful in ministry.⁵ In other words, as ministers in Christ’s church, our task is to plant and water the gospel of Jesus Christ—while *God* gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:7)! It is easy to become number-driven because it makes a minister “look good” (if a lot of youth come, of course). But God’s not after looks; he’s after hearts.

When you realize that our task is simply to be *faithful*, you will have an overwhelming sense of freedom and joy. But this begs the question: What does it mean to be faithful to God in youth ministry? I maintain that the “how to” of being faithful in youth ministry—indeed, in all ministry—is demonstrated through the means of grace: particularly, teaching the Bible, administering the sacraments, prayer, service, and community.

Striving to be faithful rather than being successful is essentially the same as what Paul calls “boast[ing] in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31). Our boast should be in the work of *God* who elects, calls, justifies, adopts, sanctifies, and glorifies (cf. Rom. 8:30). Our call is to boast in his powerful working in the lives of our youth. *But he has granted his church “means” to practically boast in the Lord.*

It might be appropriate to offer a word of caution at this point. If your ministry has not been led by an emphasis on the means of grace, implementing such a ministry will likely cause some of your members, leaders, and students to stop coming. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, however. As we

have seen, the lasting effects of our current youth ministry in America have left a void in churches in the twenty-somethings age group.

For some of you, this is old news and you might have picked up this book for additional support, encouragement, or an idea. If that is you, praise the Lord. But for others, this might be a new shift in how youth ministry is conducted at your church. I would suggest casting the overall vision—through speaking or writing—*before* launching a new approach to youth ministry at your church. Talk it over with your pastoral staff, your elders and deacons, or other mentors you have in ministry. Quick changes can lead to bitterness, resentment, and lack of understanding.

TOWARD A MEANS-OF-GRACE YOUTH MINISTRY

“Brian, doesn’t the program-driven, pizza-party-saturated youth minister know a lot about the teenage culture in America?” Most do. In fact, youth ministries have picked up on this teenage fear of being alone and have spent countless millions trying to fix their problem. Indeed, all sorts of “communities” are popping up to create a sense of belonging among teenage Christians. However, these communities so often are formed around special interest and hobby, not the gospel. Or, perhaps a more dangerous approach, they boast of a certain moral or social justice theme as their communal bond as a *substitute* for the gospel.

In the end, however, these program-focused models of youth ministry are no different from any other social club with moral principles. Youth need the means of grace that God has provided his church to supply both the content and the method of ministry. Not only is this the biblical model given by Christ and witnessed in the early church, but it remains, I believe, the most faithful and Christ-centered approach to youth ministry today.



The following chapters will seek to provide the reader with both the *content* of the means of grace as well as how to incorporate that content into a holistic means-of-grace *methodology*. The structure will follow the historical means—Word, sacraments, and prayer—with an additional two that have been incorporated over the years under the same heading: service (ministry) and community (discipleship). I have also included a final chapter on building a youth ministry team committed to the means of grace, and how to impart this vision to them and to the church as a whole.

It is my hope and prayer that, whether you are a minister, a youth volunteer, or a parent, you will find *Giving Up Gimmicks* to be a helpful guide to starting and continuing a vibrant and spiritually rich ministry with youth.