

Youth Ministry and Theological Shorthand: Living Amongst the Fragments of a Coherent Theology

Bailey, David

Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2019. 260 pages. \$31.00

In his book *Youth Ministry and Theological Shorthand: Living Amongst the Fragments of a Coherent Theology*, David Bailey poses some insightful questions about theological education and the way that it translates into the practice of youth ministry. Bailey's research explores the phenomenon of what he calls "theological shorthand": theological concepts that have become distilled into popular youth ministry catchphrases but have grown untethered from the larger Christian narrative. Bailey's book is unique among youth ministry literature in that it centers not on the youth themselves or how to minister to them but on the youth ministers and their own theology. This makes it relevant for a wider audience, as it includes theological educators in its scope as well as practitioners and youth ministry educators. For youth ministers, it provides an opportunity to reflect on and deepen the theology that grounds their own ministry. For theological educators, it shows how their work translates into ministry contexts – and invites them to consider how they might equip their students to think theologically about ministry.

Through his interviews with youth pastors, Bailey identifies common phrases such as *relationships* (in the "relational youth ministry" trend), *like Jesus, being there*, and *time and journey* as examples of theological shorthand. These shorthand concepts represent the theology that undergirds and resources the work of youth ministry practitioners – they see themselves as imitating Jesus through "being there" for young people. Bailey acknowledges that this theology seems to be enough of a foundation to "[fuel] long-term sacrificial ministry" (7). Yet he also sees it lacking in depth and believes it could be stronger with a theological reframe. Bailey peruses resource guides in *Youthworker* journal as well as popular worship songs of the past decade, analyzing the fragments of theology they contain. He shows how the vast tradition behind those summary fragments is lost to practitioners who – although they use the language – often cannot articulate the theological nuance of what it means to be "like Jesus" or to "journey with" young people.

Bailey finds this theological shorthand problematic insofar as it becomes untethered from the deeper well of theology that it references, and becomes its own free-floating, shallow theology. However, Bailey also sees theological shorthand as an opportunity; he acknowledges that these shorthand phrases function as "icons of epistemology," as windows onto the larger theological tradition that invite us to explore more deeply the theology that undergirds and resources our ministry. His solution for fleshing out the

shorthand is the practice of “theodramatic dialogical reflection” – that is, *identifying* the fragments of theology, *interpreting* their usage, and “*dialogically reflect[ing]* upon the language via differing theological views” (176). Bailey attempts to model this process through the structure of his book: he identifies the theological shorthand fragments used by youth ministers, explores what they mean by them, and uses those fragments as openings into a discussion of Kevin Vanhoozer’s Trinitarian theology – which Bailey believes is robust enough to ground the work of youth ministry in a way that theological shorthand cannot. The most substantial theological reframe for Bailey seems to be from the idea of youth ministers being “like Jesus” – a theological fragment that “reduces the imitation of Christ to its Xerox potential” (135) – to a theology of participation in the divine theodrama. Bailey observes that youth ministers who spoke about being “like Jesus” by “being there” for young people felt that it was primarily their own responsibility to model Jesus to their youth (140). However, he sees that this individualistic mindset over-emphasizes the youth minister’s own effort to imitate Jesus, and it fails to account for the ongoing work of God and the support of the church. The theological shift to *participation* in God’s mission rather than *imitation*, Bailey believes, can reframe their work in a healthier way.

One of Bailey’s interesting claims is that the phenomenon of theological shorthand stems partly from the fact that youth ministers are more influenced by youth ministry literature than they are by their own faith traditions or even by the Bible. As he points out in his discussion of *Youthworker’s* resource guides, the youth ministry guild’s attempt to be ecumenical leads contributors to paint in broad theological strokes, creating a widespread youth ministry language of theological shorthand. Although this observation is not the focal point of his argument, the ecumenism of the youth ministry guild – a fascinating phenomenon I would like to see explored in more detail – troubles Bailey’s argument for a more “coherent theology.” Although he acknowledges that the Christian story takes on “diverse accents and radically altered interpretations,” he insists that there remains a “roughly consistent Christian narrative” and “roughly coherent theology” (225). The rough coherence he envisions, however, is apparently not the ecumenical version of the gospel that loosely gathers various theological viewpoints under the umbrella of theological shorthand on which most Christians can agree. That kind of coherence, he believes, leads to “plastic hermeneutics” and free-styling interpretation. This raises the question: how can we achieve theological coherence among theological diversity without embracing theological shorthand? Or is coherence perhaps not the right goal?

Bailey’s work raises important questions about how theological educators can better resource practitioners entering the field. But while it raises those questions, his emphasis on orthodox Trinitarian theology does not serve as a satisfactory answer. At the end of the book, I find myself wondering about Bailey’s primary goal: is it to put forth a new theological foundation for youth ministry, or is it to address the problem of theological shorthand by equipping practitioners with the tool of theodramatic dialogical reflection? If it is the former, the theology he proposes will not solve the problem of theological shorthand that he has identified. As Pete Ward notes in the foreword, any theology that is taught in seminaries or that makes its way into the youth ministry literature is likely to become theological shorthand – including the theologies of “participation” and “communicative action” that Bailey puts forth. His Trinitarian solution to

the problem of theological shorthand, if it catches on in the youth ministry literature, is doomed to repeat the cycle he critiques by becoming shorthand itself. Thus, the solution cannot be in a better, deeper, or more orthodox theology, but only in the practice of theodramatic dialogical reflection he identifies.

However, if the latter goal drives his work, concluding with theology falls short of achieving it. Rather than exploring pedagogies and methods by which theological educators can teach this practice to youth ministers, Bailey models the practice of theodramatic dialogical reflection by his own (monologic) theological reflection on the Trinity. His desire for coherence leads him to avoid the true dialogue for which he calls. Although he does explore the positions of other theologians with whom he disagrees, he ultimately casts his own theology as normative for youth ministry practitioners. This move is appropriate for the former goal (a new theological foundation) but not for the latter (the practice of theological reflection) because Bailey's conclusion implicitly encourages the consumption of another's theology rather than a critical reflection on one's own. But should the goal of theodramatic dialogical reflection be coherent theology – or should it be true dialogue? Bailey sees theological shorthand as an opportunity to “guide, educate, and illuminate” (177), but I see it as an opportunity for ecumenical dialogue that – although messy and even incoherent and inconclusive at times – can be mutually enriching and edifying.

Bailey's work on theological shorthand is both illuminating and thought-provoking, but ultimately, the promising solution of theodramatic dialogical reflection is left hanging. In the final chapters of this book, I would have loved to see Bailey explore this practice in greater depth, showing readers how to facilitate it and demonstrating through qualitative research how it can spark rich conversation among youth ministry practitioners.

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