

Lutheran Mission Matters



Volume XXVII, No. 2 (Issue 55) November 2019

Raising Eutychus: A Model for Youth Ministry (Acts 20:7–12)

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Abstract: In Acts 20:7–12, when the apostle Paul raises the youth, Eutychus, from the dead, we have an opportunity to consider this miracle allegorically. If God can restore “the chief of sinners” (Paul) from spiritual death and use him to revive Eutychus after people had pronounced him dead, then He can certainly use us to revive spiritually the youth of this generation, no matter how bleak the situation may appear.

Multiple studies on youth ministry have highlighted the fact that forty to fifty percent of youth drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school. Around half of them may return to church after they get married and have children, but that still leaves a large percentage who eventually abandon the faith. Even more alarming is the notion by Ken Ham et al., in their book, *Already Gone*, that Lutheran youth are already “lost” in their hearts and minds in elementary, middle, and high school—not in college as many assume.¹ In order to reverse these trends, the apostle Paul, in his raising Eutychus from the dead, provides a model for effective youth ministry. The model includes the following: making youth ministry a priority, modeling humility, identifying with youth, being an advocate for youth, recognizing youth as an essential part of the Body of Christ, and preventing spiritual slumber.

Making Youth Ministry a Priority

Acts 20:10 begins with the words, “But Paul went down,” implying that Paul descended from the place where he was preaching in order to minister to Eutychus. By interrupting his preaching to tend to Eutychus, Paul demonstrates how we are to make youth a priority, especially when it comes to their spiritual health. As C. F. W. Walther once told his seminary class, “You cannot use your time to better advantage than by



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serving well the young people of the congregation.”² Youth ministry ought to be a priority of every church body and its congregations, as well as of each individual church member.

Modeling Humility

Paul demonstrates the humility we are to have in ministering to our youth when he ministered to Eutychus. The Greek word *epépesen* (translated “bent over”), used in the phrase *katabás dé o Paúlos epépesen autói* (but Paul went down and bent over him), brings to mind similar gestures made by Elijah when he ministered to the widow of Zarephath’s son (1 Kgs 17:21–22) and by Elisha when he ministered to the widow of Shunam’s son (2 Kgs 4:34). The only other place *epépesen* appears in this exact grammatical form and nuance of meaning is in the parable of the prodigal son at the reunion between the father and his younger son (Lk 15:20). In this particular context, *epépesen* can be translated “he threw himself on him” and implies a loss of dignity, since dignified people are not supposed to hurl themselves at others, especially a father of a rebellious son. Similarly, we are to minister to our youth in a spirit of humility. As Philippians 2:3–4 says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”³ Some of the ways we can ensure this spirit of humility is through (1) servanthood, (2) vulnerability, (3) commitment, (4) affirming God’s call, and (5) remembering our time in history.

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1. Servanthood

Romans 12:1–2 encourages us to be servants of all, including our youth, as St. Paul through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” Based on the mercies of God available to believers in Christ, the Apostle appeals to Christians to surrender themselves to God as living sacrifices. Essential to ministry with our youth through servanthood, and in keeping with living a Spirit-controlled and Word-filled life, is the need for daily renewing the mind in the truths of God’s Word, along with being in regular worship and group Bible study.

2. Vulnerability

On a practical level, one way we can demonstrate humility to our youth is to share some of the similar struggles that we had when we were their age, e.g., getting cut from the basketball team, failing algebra class, being turned down by your big crush. And while we don't have to go into detail about our sins, the more vulnerable we are in confessing our need for a Savior, the less our youth will hide from us, as they in turn confess their own struggles. A visible way of doing this is by being in regular worship with our youth, as together we confess that we are sinners in need of a Savior and receive Christ's forgiveness in the words of Absolution, the message of the Gospel, and in the Lord's Supper. As a role model, it's important to remind our youth not to imitate us in our sins, but to follow us as we follow Christ (cf. 1 Cor 11:1).

3. Commitment

Youth ministry is challenging, requiring significant commitment to the task and benefiting from constant prayer. Just as Paul was fully committed to the well-being of Eutychus, any decision to leave youth ministry should be considered just as carefully and prayerfully as entering it. The case of John Mark found in Acts 13 offers hope for anyone who has forsaken his call to youth ministry or plans to do so. Through maturity and the encouragement of his cousin, Barnabas, the Holy Spirit was able to mold John Mark into a champion of the Early Church. He eventually became a beloved companion to Paul, who had once rejected him (2 Tm 4:11); and the Colossian saints were asked to be receptive to him (Col 4:10). The same Holy Spirit can restore dropouts to be champions in youth ministry, as they grow and mature in the faith.

4. Affirming God's Call

While there are numerous joys in youth ministry, there are also challenges that can cause the weak-hearted to give up in despair. Hence, when making the solemn promise to serve the youth of their congregation in the rite of installation, church workers include the essential addendum, "with the help of God," thereby humbly acknowledging their dependence upon the One who called them to this task. Through prayer and devotion, we who minister with youth—ordained, commissioned, or lay—should regularly affirm that the Holy Spirit has led them into youth ministry. In addition, the affirmation of the local congregation can reassure that God is with and for us in our ministry with youth. Those who have received a public call by the church to youth ministry can look to their call document as a visible reminder of the blessing found in Hebrews 13:20–21: "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that

which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

5. Recognizing Our Time in History

The story of Esther accentuates our own unique time on this earth when her Uncle Mordecai says to her, “who knows for such a time as this one have you been born?” (Est 4:14). If Esther had been born years earlier, she would have been “old and gray.” On the other hand, had she been born years later, she would have been just a child. But in God’s providence, Esther had been born at such a time in history so that, as a young woman, she was able to win King Xerxes’ beauty contest. Consequently, she was able to use her position as queen to thwart Haman’s plan to destroy God’s people. Similarly, God has raised us up to have an impact on young lives during our lifetimes while we have been blessed with the maturity and health to do so.

Identifying with Youth

After bending over Eutychus, Paul embraced him in his arms. The Greek words *kai sumperilabón*, translated “and taking him in his arms,” parallels the raising of dead youths by Elijah and Elisha, as well as the welcoming of the prodigal son’s father. Elijah stretched himself over the widow of Zarephath’s son three times (1 Kgs 17:20); Elisha lay on the widow of Shunamite’s son in such a way that his mouth was on his mouth, his eyes on his eyes, and his hands on his hands (2 Kgs 4:34); and the father of the prodigal son “ran and embraced and kissed him” (Lk 15:20). Correspondingly, we can identify with today’s youth in our (1) communication style, (2) love, (3) sympathy, (4) commonalities, and (5) authenticity.

1. Communication Style

Just as Paul embraced Eutychus at his level, so those who minister to youth should attempt to identify with them at their level, so that they do not come across as intruders into their world or as looking down upon them as their superior. As 1 Peter 5:3 advises, “All of you, clothe yourself with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’” Or as Paul described his means to “win as many as possible”: “I have become all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22). We may not be as demonstrative as Elijah, Elisha, the father of the prodigal son, or St. Paul, but we can

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seek to identify with our youth in the style in which we communicate with them. Our facial expressions, eye signals, mouth movements, hand gestures, positions of our arms and legs, and posture can make a huge difference in how we are received or not received by our youth.

2. Love

First Corinthians 13 describes the loving characteristics that we demonstrate when identifying with the youth to whom we are ministering: “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. . . .” This chapter in the Bible, commonly referred to as “the great love chapter,” begins with the verse, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” To paraphrase this verse in terms of youth ministry: “If you are cool, trendy, hip, and know all the latest theories on youth ministry, but have not love, then your actions may speak so loudly that your youth cannot hear you.” When Jesus wept over the death of His friend Lazarus, the people marveled, saying, “see how he loved him” (Jn 11:36). May the love we have for our youth similarly cause people to marvel.

3. Sympathy

In our ministry with youth, we are to avoid two extremes when ministering to their needs. One extreme is to choose not to get involved in their lives, like the Levite and the priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan, who, when they saw the man who was beaten and robbed on the road to Jericho, passed by on the other side (cf. Lk 10:30–32). The other extreme is to become so involved in our youths’ lives that we end up overidentifying with their feelings and characteristics to the point that we become just as overwhelmed as they are. We are to draw our strength by clinging to the cross of Jesus, while showing empathy to the youth to whom we are ministering. Together, we invite them to join us in looking to the cross of Christ as a sure anchor in life’s storms.

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4. Commonalities

One of the comforts of Jesus' incarnation is that "we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb 4:15). Jesus knows what it's like to be human in this fallen world, because He's been here before. Likewise, youth workers can identify with their youth, because at one time they were also youths. In addition, even though we may be from different generations, there are commonalities we share as human beings that can serve as bridges to any gaps that may exist. No matter what their age, people are seeking the answers to life's big questions: Who am I? Where am I from? Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? Where am I going?, as well as the "smaller" questions: Why don't I have a girlfriend (or boyfriend)? or Why don't my parents understand me?

5. Authenticity

Youth leaders are to lead their youth to trust that Jesus meets them right where they are, loves them as they are, and desires to be a part of their lives right now—not when they become as cool, holy, and amazing as their leaders. Consequently, the more hip, cool, holy, or amazing that we present ourselves, the more distant our youth will tend to feel from us. By living and sharing our faith in an authentic way, even though we may not necessarily be considered "cool and hip" by society's standards, we are demonstrating to our youth that the Lord isn't just a trend but "an ever-present help in trouble" (Ps 46:1). It can be something as simple as praying for God's blessing on a meal in a public place, such as a fast-food restaurant.

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Being an Advocate for Youth

While Paul was ministering to the lifeless Eutychus, he could have focused only on Eutychus. Instead, he addressed the crowd by saying, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him" (Acts 20:10). Paul's addressing the crowd parallels the Lord's raising of Jairus's daughter, that is, before He tells her to arise, He says to the mourners, "Why are making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping" (Lk 8:52). Similarly, the prodigal son's father told his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet" (Lk 15:22).

From our allegorical perspective, while others may have been caught up in Eutychus' fall, the height from which he fell, and the horrible sight of his lifeless body, Paul saw beyond this. He saw a life that his Savior had died for, as well as the potential of that young life. Eutychus should be given another chance to live, just as he, Paul, was given another chance on the road to Damascus. In application, we are to be an advocate for today's youth to those who would question their value in God's Kingdom as well as in the local church. Not only are we to keep the Eighth Commandment by speaking well of our youth and putting the best construction on things, we are to keep in mind that the Holy Spirit is working in their lives just as He is at work in our own life. As Paul writes in Philippians 1:6, "being sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." An effective way to do this is to look for evidence of the Holy Spirit's working in the lives of Lutheran youth in their love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (cf. Gal 5:22–23) and help them to see and verbally affirm this evidence. Just as the father of the prodigal son continued to search for his lost son, we are to continue to hold out hope for the "lost sheep" of today's youth. In summary, don't give up on your Eutychus!

Recognizing Youth as an Essential Part of the Body of Christ

After raising Eutychus from the dead, we are told that "Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten" (Acts 20:11a). While "breaking bread" may refer to the Lord's Supper (cf. also v. 7, where St. Luke writes, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread"), it can include table fellowship, especially since Paul ended up talking all night long (cf. v. 12). We can assume that Eutychus was part of this table fellowship. And given the fact that he had just been miraculously raised from the dead, he might have been the guest of honor, similar to the prodigal son (cf. Lk 15:23–24). For like the prodigal son, Eutychus was considered lost to the world, but now had been given new life. Therefore, as the prodigal son's father exclaimed, "Let us eat and celebrate!" (Lk 15:23). The local church can recognize their youth as being an essential part of the Body of Christ (1) in its teaching, (2) in its fellowship, and (3) by integrating youth in the life of the congregation.

1. Teaching the Value of Youth in the Body

The local church should communicate to its members the significance of youth ministry in its teachings from God's Word. For example, the Bible not only teaches that there is neither male nor female, Greek or Jew, slave or free, when it comes to redemption in Christ (cf. Gal 5:28), it also tells us that there is neither young or old when it comes to our need for a Savior. David, in his penitential psalm, acknowledges that he was conceived in sin (Ps 51:5); while still in Elizabeth's womb, John the Baptist leaped at the voice of the Mother of the Lord (Lk 1:44); Jesus was indignant when

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people tried to prevent Him from blessing the little children being brought to Him, saying, “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Jn 10:14); and, when commissioning the disciples, Jesus tells them to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). “All nations” includes youth from infancy. In addition, the apostle Paul advises Timothy, “Let no one despise you for your youth” (1 Tm 4:12).

2. Recognizing Youth in Fellowship

When it comes to “life together” in the local church, young and old meet in the waters of Holy Baptism, indicating “that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”⁴ Not only can adults join youth in the fellowship of the Altar by receiving Holy Communion, they can also join them in table fellowship, such as having lunch with them in their school’s cafeteria, inviting them “for a bite to eat” at a local restaurant, or hosting them for a meal at their home. Furthermore, the church’s fellowship hour before or after worship provides a regular opportunity for young and old to interact. Rather than relegating the church’s youth to the “kids’ table,” they should be invited to “move up to a higher place” (Lk 14:10) at the “adult table,” as honored brothers and sisters in the family of God.

3. Integration vs. Isolation/Separation

Just as we can assume that Eutychus took part in the breaking of the bread with Paul, ideally youth should be included in the church’s worship services, e.g., serving on the ushering team, working with the altar guild, being a greeter, playing an instrument, serving as an acolyte, crucifer, and banner bearer, assisting with the readings. In addition, youth can be assimilated into the life of the congregation by assisting with Sunday School and VBS, helping with food distribution, being appointed as youth representatives to the church council, as well as the other areas of the life in the local church in its mercy, witness, and life together. However, even though 1 Corinthians 12:22 reminds us that “the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,” oftentimes the youth are treated as if the other, i.e., older, parts of the Body of Christ don’t need them. Too many youths grow up attending church with their parents when they are little, but then they attend a separate “youth church” as they get older and never make the transition to attending “adult church” when they’re on their own. While some may follow this pattern by returning to worship with their little ones when they themselves become parents, others may never return. For this reason, *don’t lock the youth in the youth room!* We don’t need one!

Preventing Spiritual Slumber

After the meal, we read in Acts 20:11 that Paul conversed with the people of Troas all night long until daybreak. By raising Eutychus from the dead, he was given a platform to catechize his listeners in the truths of the Christian faith. Again, we can assume that Eutychus was an eager listener to Paul's teachings that night. While before he had slumbered when Paul taught, after being raised from the dead, he was motivated to gladly hear and learn from God's Word as Paul taught it until daybreak. While Scripture doesn't reveal the contents of Paul's teachings that night, the raising of Eutychus from the dead provided for him a golden opportunity to share with his listeners the hope of the resurrection in Jesus Christ. A similar example of teaching after an act of restoration can be found in the parable of prodigal son, when after welcoming his youngest son back home, the father explains to his eldest son, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found" (Lk 15:31–32).

Of course, there was always the danger that Eutychus could fall asleep again to his peril. Far worse, however, is the danger of our youth falling into a spiritual slumber and not being found ready when the Lord returns. Like a watchman on the wall, the Lutheran Church offers the following remedies to prevent such lethargy:

- **Correct catechesis.** Luther's Small Catechism offers to our youth a summary of the doctrines in the Bible. As Luther says, "The Catechism is an epitome and brief transcript of the entire scripture."⁵ Hence, the Catechism is something to grow into not grow out of.
- **A clear distinction between Law and Gospel.** By being taught to make a distinction between Law and Gospel when reading God's Word, Lutheran youth are being equipped to live out their lives in continual repentance this side of heaven.
- **An emphasis on the Word and Sacraments as God's Means of Grace.** Rather than looking to subjective feelings or "spiritual experiences" for evidence of their faith, our youth can look to the objective Word of God, daily remember their Baptism, and regularly partake of the Lord's Supper for the strengthening and preservation of their faith. Through God's Means of Grace, they can be confident that their sins are forgiven in Christ.
- **A love for the local church where God's Means of Grace can be found.** By emphasizing Christ's serving us through His Word and Sacraments in the Divine Service, youth are less inclined to see worship as a chore but rather as a time of receiving of God's gifts and responding in praise and worship. In hearing God's Word spoken and sung, and in receiving Holy Communion, they are assured that Christ is truly present with them and for them. By

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emphasizing the blessing of the local congregation as the place where the Means of Grace can be found, they are motivated to keep the Third Commandment by being in regular worship, as well as to follow the admonishment found in Hebrews 10:24–25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

- ***Simul Iustus et Peccator*** (“**simultaneously saint and sinner**”). By acknowledging that this side of heaven Christians must still struggle with a sinful nature, our youth are able to avoid being on a continuous emotional pendulum, swinging from the heights of self-righteous pride to the depths of despair over their wretched sinful condition. This teaching is especially important as teens struggle with making the transition to becoming adults. Confession and Absolution are critical in dealing with and providing comfort in this struggle.
- **The Table of Duties.** There is no reason for youth to agonize over their “big purpose” in life. The Table of Duties found in Luther’s Small Catechism offers our youth a guide for living out their Christian faith in all areas of life, no matter what their vocations or occupations. The Table of Duties offers biblical explanations for the various stations in life as follows: to bishops, pastors, and preachers; what the hearers owe to their pastors; of civil government; of subjects; to husbands; to wives; to parents; to children; to servants; hired men, and employees; to employers; to the young in general; to widows; to all in common.⁶
- **Theology of the Cross.** Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton in their book, *Toxic Faith*, contend that “More agnostics and atheists have been created by a false expectation of an easy life from God than any other false belief.”⁷ By teaching our youth to look to the cross to affirm their identity in Christ and identify with Him in their sufferings, rather than turning away from the Christian faith when troubles occur, they will be more prone to draw even closer to their Lord, as He in turn draws closer to them (cf. Jas 4:8), and to follow the words of 1 Peter 4:12–13: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.”
- **God’s inspired, inerrant Word.** First Timothy 3:16 tells us that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” By holding God’s Word sacred, we are equipping our youth to be like the wise man who built his house upon the rock by hearing and putting God’s Word into practice, so that when the

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storms of life come, our youth do not end up crashing and abandoning the Christian faith altogether (cf. Mt 7:24–27; Lk 6:46–49). Those who hold only to the fundamentals of God’s Word or reduce the Bible to the Gospel only are exposing our youth to a “pandora’s box of compromise” on the rest of God’s Holy Word. And if our youth are taught not to take all of God’s Word as being inspired, then why should they believe what it says about their salvation in Jesus Christ? Granted, Christ, not the Bible, is the foundation of our faith—but our only authoritative and infallible source of knowledge about Christ is Holy Scripture.

- **Christ-centeredness.** In the midst of all its activities, e.g., meetings, Bible studies, outreach and service events, retreats, mission trips, the overall purpose of youth ministry is to point our youth, and us with them, to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. St. John, near the end of his Gospel states, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30–31). Likewise, a church can minister to its youth in many different ways, but its heart and center should be Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and the Good News of our salvation in Him.

A church can minister to its youth in many different ways, but its heart and center should be Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, and the Good News of our salvation in Him.

Conclusion

Through His Means of Grace, God continues to raise and sustain the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. As Christians, all we have to do is look in the mirror for a prime example of this! However, there remain numerous youth who have yet, through grace, to be made alive in Christ. If God can make alive “the chief of sinners,” i.e., Paul, and use him to make alive Eutychus after others had pronounced him dead, then He can use us to restore the youth of this generation, no matter how bleak their situation may appear. Acts 20:12 tells us that people were greatly comforted when Paul raised Eutychus from the dead. Similarly, we can be a source of great comfort to family members and loved ones of our youth in our ministry with them. Subsequently, just as the father of the prodigal son celebrated and was made glad at the restoration of his son (cf. Luke 15:25–27, 31–32), so we can experience the joy of witnessing lost youth being found and reclaimed by Christ through the Gospel.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Ken Ham, Britt Beemer, and Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Quit Church and What You Can Do About It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 31–34.
- ² Terry Dittmer, *Lutheran Youth and Their Response to the Society They Live In: The Lutheran Fellowship Youth Poll, 1980–2013* (St. Louis, MO: Office of National Mission—Youth Ministry, The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, 2013), 2.
- ³ *ESV Outreach Bible* (Paperback, Graphite Design) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, Good News Publishers, 2007).
- ⁴ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis, MO: CPH, 1971), 17.
- ⁵ Martin Luther, “Catechisms Summaries of Bible Teaching,” selection 358 in *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald Plass, 8th ed. (St. Louis: CPH, 1986).
- ⁶ *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther’s Small Catechism*, 25–30.
- ⁷ Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *Toxic Faith: Experiencing Healing from Painful Spiritual Abuse* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 10.