# RESILIENCE, THEOLOGY, AND THE EDIFICATION OF YOUTH: ARE WE MISSING A PERSPECTIVE

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## Introduction

Commonly youth ministry pays attention to the literature on at-risk youth. Popular books describe youth as hurt or in need of particular techniques that will aid in rescuing them from adversity. Youth ministry's theological perspectives tend to discuss the influence of sin and the sinful world and how to combat it with programmatic interventions such as prayer, daily devotions, small accountability groups, and recommended behavioral changes. These approaches tend to come at the young person with a mind to fix problematic issues. As time moves on and new issues arise, more literature emerges using the same fix-it paradigm. The more we know about adolescent difficulties the more we push to fix them. As adolescent issues change, we discover new problems and apply the fix it paradigm again using new language. Although this is well intended and healing is an important element of Christian ministry, we may be moving too quickly to fix problems rather than looking for what God might be doing in the adolescent's experience of adversity. Taking the time to look for what God is doing before trying to address the discomfort, takes a lot of self control and possibly a new perspective on the part of the youth minister or leader. It requires patience in the face of sometimes emotionally intense situations. Especially in light of the scholarly literature on resilience, that the youth minister ought to look for the good work of God within the adolescent's experience of adversity, then enter into that work with God naming His goodness and discipling the teen toward profound dependence on God leading to a Christian resilience for life. In our practical theological perspectives of youth ministry, we are not so predisposed to think in these terms today. If we are able to see the development of resilience as the act of God equipping people with the power to overcome we will find a world

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of opportunities to see God and partner with Him in the discipleship of teens. The social science literature on resilience pays attention to and respects the capacities of the one experiencing adversity. This presupposition may come from the notion that humans are on a positive evolutionary trajectory. For some teens, "survival of the fittest" rises up in the form of resilience and moves them forward when others succumb. Maybe secular researchers value all human experiences, good and bad, as positive contributions to the personal construction of values. Whatever the presuppositions may be that fuel the research on resilience, what is certain is that a growing body of research confirms that people develop resilience in their lives. Researchers are taking a closer look at the kinds of skills people learn from living through adversity rather than escaping it and they are finding some interesting things. Theologically speaking, God is at work in the world drawing people to Himself by the power of the Spirit within difficult circumstances. The Old and New Testaments testify to the fact that God tends to reveal Himself in and through adversity among the saved and unsaved. Secular research might be observing the work of God in the lives of people. As the secular world presses into understanding resilience and considers ways to embrace the good in adversity, we, in our principled attempts to fix hurt teens, may be removing opportunities for them to build Christian character. Below we will define resilience and sample the literature as it applies to psychopathology, biology, education, and family studies. With this in hand we will reflect on theological concerns regarding resilience and conclude with recommendations for the field of youth ministry.

**Resilience Defined**

We know someone is resilient when a person has come through a trying time and has risen to the top. More accurately, Kimberly Gordon Rouse defines resilience as "the ability to thrive, mature and increase competence in the face of adverse circumstances or obstacles" (2001, p. 461). It is very important to clarify that resilience is tied to the notion that adverse circumstances could have produced more negative outcomes but because of some particular mechanism(s) the negative outcomes were mitigated. Stevenson and Zimmerman define resiliency as "the process of overcoming the negative effects of risk exposure, coping successfully with traumatic experiences, and avoiding the negative trajectories associated with risk" (2004, p. 399). Odin Hjemdal et. al. describe resilience as "the protective factors, processes, and mechanisms that, despite experiences with stressors shown to carry significant risk for developing pathology, contribute to a good outcome" (2006, p. 84). Masten and Powell identify resilience as "patterns of

positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity" (Luthar 2003, p. 4). These definitions suggest that resilience is an interaction effect and not an achieved state; it is more complex than "Life stinks but I'm ok. I must be resilient." Masten and Powell state "Technically, to call a person resilient would be improper in diagnostic terminology because resilience is a description of a general pattern, whereas diagnosis occurs when the individual is matched to the pattern. It might be more appropriate to say that 'This person has a resilient pattern' or 'This person shows the features of resilience'" (Luthar, 2003 p. 4). Therefore, it is problematic simply to say a person is resilient especially based on a single circumstance. Resilience is not a static and sustainable descriptor of a person but rather describes a person's set of responses to particular adversity in a given period of their life. They may or may not find resilience in the next season depending on the circumstances; however, the person has experienced resilience, building capacities that can be applied to mitigate new adverse circumstances. It doesn't guarantee success for the next circumstance but it does provide mitigating capacities. Generally, resilience is not only an observed outcome or product of adversity but is birthed in the process of adversity. Olsson et al. in their article "Adolescent resilience: A concept analysis" (2003) observe two foci 1) a closer look at the outcomes of resilience given a particular risk setting and 2) a closer look at protective mechanisms used in the process of resilience while in the risk setting. They write, "Each focus provides a useful perspective on resilience during adolescence, emphasizing the different elements of the construct, and suggesting different approaches to measurement" (p. 2). Studying both the outcomes and the process by which people deal with adversity gives us a better picture of what is taking place. It is not enough to think of resilience as merely resistance to bad things.Throughout this article the term "adversity" is used. In the resilience literature, and in this article we recognize that adversity brought on by personal decision is distinctly different from adversity brought on by others or circumstances beyond one's control. Although these different types of adversity can look similar and may both be happening at the same time, resilience literature focuses at the latter. Adaptation is also a term used in the discussion of resilience. Adaptation is often associated with Darwinian thought in which, simplistically stated, two forces, the self and environment, impact each other and the fittest survive because of some advantage they have developed. This conversation is often conducted in terms of those species living "at the top of the chain" whereas resilience literature speaks of adversity among those not necessarily at the top, but anyone. Resilience researchers are paying attention to the power of any person to

generate an atypical positive response to adversity regardless of their ability to dominate others in the evolutionary "survival of the fittest" sense. In spite of this, I suspect that Darwinian thought may be shaping theoretical perspectives on resilience more than is often acknowledged. Although the term "adaptation" may cause some concerns due to its Darwinian heritage, the term is used carefully in the literature on resilienceIn sum, resilience is best described as protective factors, mechanisms, and processes one employs in the face of adversity that lead to the expected negative outcomes being unusually mitigated. A person is not resilient but may employ protective skills in adverse situations which builds their capacity for resilience in the immediate adversity and equips them to express resilience in future adversity. Resilience is observed when atypical helpful perspectives and behaviors are generated in both the immediate handling of adversity (process) as well as providing pro-social personal skills that continue in the individual's life.

**Studying Resilience**

Resilience research evolved out of work done by Norman Garmezy on children of schizophrenics (1971, 1974 and work done by Michael Rutter (1979) and others in the field of psychiatry and family therapy. Ann Masten had been working with children of parents with schizophrenia observing their ability to process the difficulties of that context. By 1990 Masten, Garmezy and Best co-authored Resilience and development: Contributions from the study of children who overcome adversity. Suniya Luthar is also a seminal researcher in the field. Her work on inner-city ninth graders who maintained socially competent behavior while living in particularly adverse circumstances was particularly helpful (Luthar, 1991) . Researchers were finding a subset of young people living in particularly disadvantaged or adverse situations who were actually quite high functioning in society. Where one might expect more risk behavior, these subjects were actually quite pro-social. As the resilience literature grew the complexity of analysis grew with it. Various disciplines began researching narrower contexts and particular pro-social outcomes and responses. Medicine, education, psychology, family studies, and social work all began to pay attention to various levels of resilience, each with their own concerns. This broadening of the field also confounded it with diverse data sets and definitions and offered diverse recommendations for interventions. Although this broadening of the discussion made it confusing, it reflects an important fact: resilience , as a construct, appears in many aspects of life. The breadth of research indicates that what researchers have labeled resilience is a fundamental human capacity. As a Christian with a robust view of the Imago Dei,

such an innate human capacity makes sense. If we are able to see the breadth of contexts for which resilience is observed, we may be observing the ways in which God is equipping people for all of life. What follows is a brief sample of the literature on resilience so that the reader can gain an appreciation of the breadth of that research and recognize some of its important themes.

**Multidimensionality of Resilience**

Researchers of resilience are interested in identifying the degree to which one person responds more positively than others in similar circumstances. But how do they define "positive" and are their definitions restricted to a single dimension, such as emotional response? One of the difficulties of measuring resilience is its multidimensionality. Since so many factors are present in a moment of adversity and since adolescents may be in various stages of development it is naïve for one to look at a few factors to determine if resilience is forming. Can one appear resilient by way of emotional control when in fact the person has actually developed an unhealthy disassociation? How one appears, for example emotionally controlled, during a particular adverse event does not necessarily mean they are being resilient (Glantz & Johnson, 1999). One approach to this problem of how to measure resilience is to focus on the responses of a adolescent within a particular context. For example, an adolescent may find herself in a family system where divorce has just been announced. She will have significant familial relationships redefined, eating and sleeping patterns rearranged, etc. Any adolescent in this situation will evidence emotional distress according to his or her developmental capacities and this may actually be a good thing. Showing emotional distress does not necessarily indicate lack of resilience or that the individual is moving on a non-resilient trajectory. Luthar (1991) suggests that although adolescents may be in emotional distress, they may also be exercising positive levels of competency, particularly emotional expression. Emotional distress may be an indicator of adversity but not necessarily a lack of resilience. To take another example, when a teen experiences abuse, he or she may respond with suppression of emotion and appear quite controlled. Even though this adolescent may appear resilient he or she is in fact adding to the complexity of the adversity and possibly adding to the difficulty in finding resilience. Researchers also focus on analyzing adverse contexts. When looking at contexts, it is important to make the adverse context the independent variable. In other words, it would be inappropriate to compare resilience in young people from intact families with the resilience of those from divorced families. The differences between contexts produce many rival hypotheses and

the researcher cannot draw conclusions about resilience because the contexts may be more determinative. Such cross-context comparisons are also risky because it would be a mistake to assume that intact families are more likely to produce resilience in children than families that have experienced divorce.For all the researcher knows, the opposite may be true (more on this later). Simply put, the context is an independent variable and the factors of resilience in the sample are the dependent variable that the research is attempting to measure. For example, given that children of severely depressed parents tend to be 8 times more likely to experience depression themselves studying highly functional, non-depressed (competent) children living with chronically depressed parents would provide data on resilience. A detailed analysis of the risk context and a detailed analysis of the responses reveal nuanced data sets revealing the character of resilience in some. Depending on the context, researchers can measure discrete risk and it can be indexed more directly than composite risk indices. But both discrete and composite risk have been studied.Ann Masten at the University of Minnesota heads Project Competency and in partnership with other scholars and students, studies the multidimensionality of competency in children. Intellectual and emotional competencies, personal history, parenting and socioeconomic advantages all contribute to one's competency and one's ability to exercise resilience. Not only might one look at each of these factors as contributors but each factor builds on the others and they evolve together. The attention here is on those capacities that contribute to resilience. One might also look at factors that counter resilience. Masten and Powell put it this way: "In childhood, antisocial behavior appears to undermine academic achievement, which in turn, appears to contribute to later problems in multiple competence domains and internal well-being - an apparent cascade effect "( Luthar, 2003 p. 6). From this we see that multiple factors contribute to or reduce the opportunity for resilience.Risk tallies can rank various risk factors and correlate these with behavioral outcomes, but before we conclude that once the bad domino falls it just produces bad things, there is more to the story. Masten and Powell observed that "homeless children with few or no other risk factors often are much better behaved than other at-risk peers participating in school and homes" (Luthar, 2003 p. 8). Another example looks at Cambodian youth that have suffered much violence in their homeland. "Many long term symptoms of trauma are understandable from this group; however, although some gave in to suicide, others are getting along quite well with impressive competencies across several domains" (Luthar, 2003 p. 9). In an attempt to organize the analysis of the multidimensionality of resilience, Suniya Luthar's seminal work

(1991) noted that resilient young people demonstrated the ability to protect their vulnerability from the adversity and the ability to ompensate for negative influences of that adversity. Luthar used four personality variables to measure resilience: intelligence, locus of control, social skills, and ego development (1991, p. 601). Her findings indicated that "various aspects of personality were found to be involved in protective vulnerability and compensatory processes modifying in different ways, the effects of life stresses" (1991, p. 610). Internal locus of control is the belief that personal control of one's life is possible, and the resulting assertiveness is key in the development of competence or resilience. The opposite of locus of control is learned helplessness where coping mechanisms are thwarted. Second, social skills such as expressiveness and interpersonal skills contributed to competence as well. On the issue of intelligence, rather than having a protective effect ("I'm smart so I can weather this storm"), "intelligence was involved as a vulnerability mechanism. At low stress levels, intelligence was positively related to competence for school grades as well as classroom assertiveness. When stress was high, ... the intelligent children appeared to lose their advantage and demonstrated competence levels more similar to those of less intelligent children" (1991, p. 611). In short, intelligence does not necessarily contribute to resilience. Ego development demonstrated dynamics similar to those of internal locus of control in which ego development helped the person feel some sense of control or the impression that they could actually participate in making their life situation different. Here we see two specific components that contribute to resilience by protecting vulnerability and providing compensatory skills: internal sense of control (with ego development) and having interpersonal social skills. Intelligence was not a strong factor. It would be a mistake to say that "smart people" have better capacities for resilience. In summary, multifaceted interactions within common contexts of adversity reveal that two domains within an adolescent create the possibility for resilience: having some sense of internal control (internal assets) and expressive interpersonal social skills (external assets).

**The Physical Body**

The field of medicine pays attention to resilience as well. Neurobiology and clinical psychiatry have developed similar definitions of and concern for resilience. This field, however, has a completely different research methodology focusing on the effects of the sympathetic nervous system and hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical (HPA) system and how they are involved in stress response and resilience (Ozbay et al. 2007). Before you

conclude that I've left the ballpark, interesting associations were discovered between physical and social interactions leading to resilience. Ozbay et. al., found that social support networks have an impact on the biochemical response to stress in the case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They tested the notion that, "for social support to increase stress resilience, it should enhance the ability to optimize the neurochemical stress response" (Ozbay 2007: 36). The authors note that there are different types of social support needed for different stages of life. In a sample of childhood sexual abuse survivors, a combination of self-esteem support and appraisal support was critical in preventing the onset of PTSD. The authors highlight the effects of social isolation and state that "the evidence suggests chronic stress and lack of social support increases cardiac risk" (Ozbay, 2007, p. 36). In summary, low social support has been associated with higher levels of negative physiological effects. In addition, the authors assert that social support has been demonstrated to be a key factor increasing the likelihood of recovery in patients with depression. In short, external or social forces have been shown to contribute to the development of resilience, even in this case in which biochemical responses to stress were studied.Even neurobiology researchers are valuing social interaction as a partner in the healing and development of the physical body. This is nothing new; however, the kind of interaction studied here is not simply "positive people help sick people heal" but positive social interaction specifically directed at one's disposition toward stress can actually alter biochemical responses to stress fostering resilience. A person can develop greater neurobiological resources (physical resilience) based on deliberate social interactions directed at ones disposition (personal resilience) creating assets that were not there before the illness. As Christians we have said that people are whole beings with profound interactions between the physical, personal, spiritual, social, etc. But have we stopped at "positive Christian people help Christian sick people heal" (getting them back to where they were) when we need to take it a step further? And, more importantly, do we have an eye for resilience that is more theologically rich?

**Education**

Educators for some time now have realized that their effectiveness in the classroom is very dependent on external risk factors, many of which are beyond their apparent responsibility or control. Since it is well known that children who eat well have a better chance to learn, schools have paid more attention to offering not only lunch but also breakfast. And taking it a step further, there is pressure to offer more healthy options in school cafeterias. All this shows the extent to which the education system tries to influence

non-academic factors that have direct impact on academic success. Similarly, schools recognize that negative family contexts have a profound influence on the academic success of youth. In response, educators have increased contact with parents encouraging learning spaces in the home and encouraging family accountability systems for homework. In all these attempts, educators are recognizing that they cannot directly address adverse family systems or economic issues that impact food choices made outside the school. Rather than trying to fix problems they cannot reach, educators have focused on fostering resilience in youth as a way to contribute to their academic success. Furlong et. al. provide us with a glimpse of how the education system tries to foster resilience. (2009) They use the Resilience Youth Development Module (RDYM) and the California Healthy Kids Survey to assess aspects of youth's positive social-emotional condition within the schools. They assessed internal assets such as self-efficacy, empathy, problem solving, self-awareness and external assets such as caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation in various communities (Furlong et. al., 2009, p. 37). In this discussion the authors used a resiliency instrument to find static components that contribute to more successful academic scores. Although this is an ongoing work and there may be challenges to their methodology, they are identifying significant components of resilience similar to Luthar's work mentioned above, such as: internal locus of control (Luthar) and self-efficacy and self-awareness (Furlong); interpersonal social skills (Luthar) and caring relationships, meaningful participation in communities (Furlong). A key difference between these researchers lay with Luthar's concern for fluid multidimensionality in contrast with Furlong's desire to identify static components. Robert Pianta and Daniel Walsh (1998) suggest that resilience cannot be captured by sending children through a program to "get it." Resilience is not a product of a program or merely a set of learned skills (1998, p. 407). What they discovered was that resilience happens in more holistic, natural, and long term efforts fostered in larger systems in the community. In short, the multidimensionality of resilience makes it problematic to prescribe a programmatic, formal educational approach to fostering resilience. The field of education has a lot at stake in the fostering of resilience for academic success but may remain handcuffed by its particular school context. They will likely continue to depend on other influences in the lives of youth to foster resilience leading to educational success. Youth leaders are positioned very well to step into this role if they have an eye for fostering resilience. Without deliberate attention to fostering resilience, youth leaders are minimizing their impact on the lives of youth, in this case, academic success.

**Family**

Family systems play a significant role in fostering resilience among their members. Like the studies in education and in agreement with Luthar's multidimensionality, Dale Hawley (2000), suggests that it is easy to characterize resilience as a static construct because studies done among families look at a static moment within the family's lifespan. However, Hawley suggests the static picture to be inadequate and that family resilience ought to be conceptualized as a "developmental pathway." Even though his metaphor of a path is a helpful contribution, Hawley struggles to name characteristics along the path without sounding static in his description (2000, pp. 108-109). More practically speaking, The National Network for Family Resiliency (NNFR) headquartered at North Carolina State University has learned that resilient families have the following characteristics: commitment, cohesion, adaptability, communication, spirituality, connectedness, and resource management. Under these points, the NNFR offers sixteen suggestions for fostering resilience within the family system, some of which are forgiveness, encouragement, communicate honestly and with genuine affection, plan for improvement in one or more areas of your life, and celebrate special occasions (Matthews, 2003, p. 2). The general direction of these recommendations may oversimplify the multidimensional complexity of resilience as applied to families but they offer practical interventions that will foster resilience within the family system. Interestingly, the NNFR and Matthews have identified characteristics that can be quite theologically rich and applicable to ministry contexts. If youth ministry has any engagement with families, youth leaders with an eye for resilience would be wise to foster these characteristics in families so that the youth in their ministries will be more likely to exhibit resilience during adolescence and beyond.

**Urban Youth**

I live and work in an urban environment. The north side of Chicago is ethnically, economically, and religiously diverse and we live in a high population density context. Here, stories of shootings not only leap off the pages of The Chicago Tribune but have happened outside my door. Needless to say, "fixing" urban issues can seem at best complex and at worst impossible. Quyen Tiet and David Huzinga, motivated by such an urban environment, explore resilience in terms of internal adaptation and external adaptation (2002) The authors were looking for a single construct of resilience and if such a construct could not be found, hoped to find a composite measure. Sampling just over 1,500 high risk youth, the researchers measured academic performance, self-esteem, absence or low levels of psychosocial skills, delinquent behavior,

drug use, and involvement with gangs. They found that youth who are involved in drugs, gangs and delinquent behaviors, on average, have a significantly higher self-esteem than the youth who have similar academic performance, but do not use drugs and are not involved in gangs or in delinquent activities. This is an interesting finding especially if self esteem is an important contributor to resilience. Looking more closely at the issue, the authors suggest that it is necessary to consider adjustment and antisocial behavior independently in a multivariate framework because they are different outcome constructs and therefore different predictors and mediating factors. In short, experience in a gang is not necessarily an automatic predictor of negative academic scores. Nor is it a predictor of low self-esteem. It is possible that gang activity fostered self-esteem and that academic success may be born out of a determination found in the context of a gang. Tiet and Huzinga present an interesting view of how urban youth develop resilience and cause us to look more closely at social relationships rather than stereotype gang life or urban life in general.

**The Research In Summary**

Recognizing the difficulties in the study of resilience, Olsson et. al. (2003) categorize the work of 19 researchers from various areas of interest representing over a decade of work. They identify resilience functioning according to 9 protective mechanisms functioning within two levels of resources: individual and social environmental. A sample of these protective mechanisms are: positive temperament, responsiveness to others, planning and decision making, developed language and reading, self efficacy and self esteem, foundational sense of self, hopefulness, enduring set of values, conviction and resolve, care within the family, close relationship with a caring adult, belief in the child, supportive peers, someone who believes the individual's stress, non-punitive responses, and belief in the values of a society. (Olsson, 2003, p. 5-6). Having named these personal and social skills, it is clear from the literature that we ought not to expect that a program will produce resilience in the lives of youth. Resilience is not a product of a program or formal educational process. It is fostered within the organic, ordinary experiences of adversity where people develop capacities for strength in the moment and hope for the future. Ann Masten, after much work with other researchers such as Suniya Luthar, has concluded that resilience arises out of "ordinary magic" (Masten, 2001). She believes that "human individuals are capable of astonishing resistance, coping, recovery and success in the face of adversity, equipped only with the usual human adaptational capabilities and resources..." (Luthar, 2003, p. 15). Resilience is an

"ordinary magic" that comes out of common human adaptation rather than rare or extreme events; it is grounded in one's personal history, family, social networks, possibly even biology. In short, resilience is a multidimensional engagement between a person, their social networks, and their adverse circumstance where previously developed and concurrently learned competencies lead to positive outcomes where more negative outcomes were very likely; this is magic. This magic draws attention from many fields such as psychology, education, family studies and even medicine. Researchers propose programs, static profiles of resilience, educational methodologies, or sets of social skills to be learned but many realize that a multidimensional reality like resilience cannot be simply produced by particular techniques. There is a magic in resilience that cannot be captured by a list of assets to be achieved like a checklist; it needs to be lived out from a common human experience. It is a choice to live into something uncommon to the circumstance. It is the capacity to overcome.

**A Caution**

Suniya Luthar et. al. suggest that, like the term "empowerment", "resilience" could gain a kind of shallow popularity resulting in a loss of the richness of diverse body of well researched work (2000). It has been ten years since this caution was voiced and, possibly beyond her expectations, we should honor that caution by spending time thinking theologically about what resilience is and its implications for youth ministry.

## Theology and Resilience

Youth ministry literature has recently spent much time understanding hurt youth. This is nothing new to youth ministry. The field has always fostered a dialogue between youth culture and Christian beliefs and behaviors. Our marriage to practical theology fosters this kind of dialogue between culture and adolescent belief and behavior. As in the past, a plethora of youth ministry books have appeared suggesting "new" kinds of youth ministry that will address the needs of today's youth. With the possible exception of Andrew Root's work (2007, 2009) practical theology tends to do just that, address the practical needs of youth. Such an approach may serve us to some extent but can fall into the "fix-it"(or "fix them") paradigm and actually find theological justification for doing so; however. it will not serve us well in finding the ordinary magic of resilience in the midst of adversity. Biblical and systematic theology might provide us with something that transcends the fix-it mode and fosters within us an appreciation for what God might be doing in the adversity adolescents face today. Appreciating this,

we may better equip students of youth ministry with an eye for fostering resilience when they get into ministry. Why a theological discussion of resilience in particular? Resilience researchers struggle to identify techniques that produce resilience. This indicates to me that something more is happening; something that is hard for the social sciences to measure empirically. When Masten says "magic" (2001), I wonder what theology could contribute to understanding this mysterious process. Could God be developing something in the lives of youth that pushes them beyond the normal outcomes of adversity? Is the ordinary magic of resilience God showing up in the decision making processes of kids, transforming adversity into blessing? So much of what researchers describe as resilience simply sounds like God's character throughout scripture and history. This alone might justify a theological voice in this conversation.

This is not a theological treatise so I will only begin the conversation. My theological method requires me to have a disposition of service and open-endedness where I do not provide propositional answers but rather conversation points that lead to appreciation of God and His work among us. If we understand that God is in the conversation with us, we may raise questions and possible ideas but the conversation will not end in a program or a mere practice but a call to pay attention to what God is doing, to be in wonder of Him, and to engage with Him wherever He may call us into the work. I come from a Calvinist background, and the initial thoughts I offer here are not intended to convince you about something. Rather, my hope is to become vulnerable and likely expose my weakness as you think through what I offer.

**Creation**

The breadth of the field indicates that resilience is an issue that has broad human implications and is happens under many human conditions. Resilience is a movement within a person to see and go beyond the negative impact of a circumstance. This might indicate that there may be something within our humanness that desires something more than negative circumstances offer. Of course, our journey empowers or disempowers this trajectory but the capacity to envision something greater than what is determined by adversity indicates that humans have some sense of what can be but is not present in the circumstance. Resilience researchers may be inadvertently distilling out the idealists in their sample but this may also be a witness to the created order and imago dei functioning within us. When we sense that things were not made to be this way, feel that we have a capacity to change circumstances and we do, we may be living out the God-given capacity to embrace the good of God's created order. It could be that being created in the image

of our Creator God motivates people to resilience. In my Calvinist tradition, Covenant theology is a meta-narrative lens that interprets all of history. It suggests that God has, throughout all time, provided promises to all of humanity ( for example the Adamic and Noahic covenants) and The People of God (Abraham, David, and Jesus) so that no one is without His promise. In these covenants God promises protection and providence but it is clear from history that protection doesn't mean escape from suffering and not all suffering was caused by sin. God's protection was with Israel in Babylon just as in Jerusalem and both places had their own set of good and bad times. God's protection was with Paul in jail. Could it be that covenant protection means the building of a capacity to endure adversity and remain faithful rather than looking to special locations, cities, kings, or kingdoms to find protection? One might suggest that this kind of profound protection is ultimately more powerful than merely sheltering from harm, though God does this too.

**Common Grace and Salvation**

The common human opportunity to choose well in the face of difficulty is evident in life and particularly in the resilience literature. Since resilience can be experienced by a wide variety of people in diverse situations, this leads me to think that a kind of common grace is functioning. In many ways, it is this common grace that sustains social order and the movement toward the common good. It is no wonder that people who express resilience in the face of adversity can be made heroes and heroines in our society; these become icons for prosocial behavior.esilience appears to have a redemptive witness in that it recognizes adverse realities and produces unanticipated positive outcomes. In this way it points to the salvation dynamic. I wish to be clear and not suggest that one spiritually saves oneself in the experience of resilience but something of a saving experience takes place and it happens at a profound human level. In my theology, naming Christ as Lord is a primary component of soteriology but the dynamic of resilience doesn't require this. In addition, there are interesting commonalities between resilience and the suffering of Christ and His atonement. It might be said that resilience is a two dimensional witness to the three dimensional reality in Christ's salvation. Or said another way, the development of resilience is a human approximation to what Christ does in salvation. Someone might suggest that because it is a human experience without the necessity of Christ being named in it, that it is bad, misleading, wrong or dismissable. I would rather suggest that, since it is happening and is powerful in the lives of people, we ought not to dismiss this as a witness to the need for ultimate salvation in Christ. The one

begs for the depth of the other. Resilience seems to me to be more poignant than experiences of providence or "divine coincidences" or circumstantial threat-aversion, all of which are experiences we used to facilitate evangelism in the past. Linking the gospel message with the resilience experience makes more sense of the reality of the Christian life than linking the gospel with a discussions of life after death or unusual miraculous events where the end game is my satisfaction. Helping the non-believer see the presence of Christ in their experience of resilience may be a powerful entry point for evangelism. Finally, much work has been done on theodicy, too much to outline here, but it is clear that our view of suffering predetermines how we understand adversity and, therefore, resilience. If we pay attention to Jesus Christ as the suffering savior we might begin to see opportunities in adversity as blessings from Christ and critical to living out our salvation. If our Christianity fosters a disposition of avoidance or escape, we miss the ordinary magic of resilience and stand vacant in the face of non-Christians equipped with a magic for handling adversity. The North American Christian tendency to avoid suffering by emphasizing happiness, comfort, freedom, and privilege has not served us or the gospel well.

**Biblical Theology**

Turning more closely to scripture, the New Testament Greek term hupomone, meaning to endure, to be steadfast (Vine, 1985) can be used as both a noun and a verb which best matches the definition of resilience observed in the research. Though it would take too much time to elucidate the many nuances and literary uses, of this term the following scriptures will suggest some of the ways this biblical term can be connected to resilience. In Luke's beatitudes Jesus declares that blessings are available to those that suffer various things. Rather than giving in to the common notion of the day that suffering is an indication of God's curse, Jesus declares the the opposite (Luke 6:20-22). For those who have entered salvation, the nature of resilience makes profound sense in our consciousness of God present in our lives (1 Peter 2:19). That consciousness comes not only in the declaration of our being in Christ but also in the discipleship of Christ-likeness. Regarding this, Jesus calls us to carry the cross and follow Him (Mark 8:34). In doing so we figuratively follow Him to the upper room, Gethsemane, Golgotha, and the resurrection but as Christians living in the twenty-first century, we ought to embrace the real journey of enduring suffering so as to somehow attain the resurrection ( Philippians 3:10-11; Hebrews 12:2-3; I Peter 2:20-23). The sacrament of communion calls us and reminds us that to identify ourselves as a community of believers in this very story of Christ's suffering, death, burial and resurrection

and to live this story in our resilience in the face of adversity. Following Christ will bring adversity but when resilience is present, it witnesses Christ's work in our lives (Philippians 1:18b-30; 2 Timothy 2).

The book of Acts is an excellent narrative of resilience but the book of Job offers a particularly profound picture. When adversity hits, time and again, Job sustains his faith in God. The obvious response to the adversity was "curse God and die" but Job's resilience was growing out of his self awareness and honest expectations of God. As his friends challenged his integrity with different interpretations, Job remains steadfast. Within adversity Job seeks a dialogue with God where the only response from God is attention to creation and to God's character as trustworthy. Job responds by submitting to such revelation and to God's presence. The outcome is completely unexpected in light of his friends' perspectives and his wife's comment in chapter 2 verse 9. Job has built internal and external capacities for resilience (see Luthar above) – to overcome. God then grants him the right to act as a Priest/Redeemer in the forgiveness of others and in the receiving of further blessings. Finally, in Romans 5: 1-5 we read that the virtues perseverance, character, and hope are born through suffering. This is nothing less than resilience where in the face of suffering one emerges with unexpected positive outcomes. This text names virtues that are almost identical to some of the internal assets named in the resilience literature. The apostle Paul and the resilience researchers might have an interesting conversation in which Paul might be suggesting a faith trajectory or spiritual process whereby faith fosters resilience. I'm not sure if resilience authors would name this motivation as faith in Jesus but they have spoken of spirituality or inner locus of control or self efficacy as contributors to resilience. In sum, a biblical theology supports the notion that resilience in the face of adversity is profoundly Christ-like and expected in the life of the believer. Scripture assumes adversity will take place in the ordinary lives of believers and that living well through such adversity will testify to the presence and power of Christ in us. Though Romans 5 comes close to indicating a technique for fostering resilience, it, like the research on resilience, cannot speak of particular actions or skills that "produce" resilience. Both Christians and secular researchers struggle with the same problem: we want a technique to ensure the positive result but it simply is not possible. There is a magic in resilience that cannot be created in the life of another. That magic may be the person and work of Jesus Christ in the life of the person.

**Summary**

Youth leaders need to develop a disposition that can

embrace adversity in the lives of adolescents so that resilience can be appreciated and addressed theologically. Addressing resilience theologically will transform the "ordinary magic" of resilience into more than just a "two dimensional" expression of God's common grace. Instead, resilience will become woven into the lives of adolescents through whole-life discipleship and worship of Jesus for what He has done for them and who He is.

A person experiencing resilience testifies to something far more rich and powerful than the natural outcomes of adversity. Although adversity can produce negative results, it doesn't have to. We have learned a few things so far.

1. Resilience is a multidimensional construct coming out of and forming inner character capacities that would not have been developed without that adversity.

2. Some experience resilience where others do not, however, resilience is not limited to a particular kind of adversity or demographic. All could experience resilience, but not all do.

3. If resilience is learned or experienced once it does not mean it will be experienced again. Each adverse season provides another opportunity for the person to develop resilience.

4. Resilience is not simply a set of skills to be formally learned but is fostered in the milieu of adversity where inner capacities and external resources come together with the motivations and choices of the individual resulting in a more robust life pathway.

5. Resilience has characteristics or "protective mechanisms". Although there are different terms used for similar mechanisms, they can be summarized on two levels. a) Internal capacities such as self-awareness, self-efficacy, empowered problem solving, positive sense of future, honest assessment of self and situation, and forgiveness. b) External capacities such as caring and encouraging community, celebration of mile markers, accountable and reasonable plans to carry out. Theologically, resilience happens, and I suggest that this is God extending His grace to those in need. These two come together somehow but our theological conversations about how to help hurting adolescents tend to be shallower than the current secular research on resilience. In the desire to catch up and with the greater desire for adolescents to find theological expression of their resilience, we need to consider more transcendent theological language for resilience that will foster worship and discipleship in the lives of teens. Theological concepts like creation, covenants, and common grace may help us discuss the capacities of youth to express resilience in a more theologically rich way. A doctrine of salvation and a robust theology of suffering might help us embrace adversity for resilience. A closer look at the discipleship mandate of the gospels will open our eyes to embracing the suffering Jesus

Christ more than our mythical "happy Christian" as an authentically lived response to today's adverse realities. A closer look at the Acts of the Apostles and Job will provide us journeys we can learn from. Finally, Romans 5 offers us a picture of a resilience process. It avoids the programmatic "fix-it" approach and it actually identifies similar characteristics to those researchers of resilience are identifying in the lives of their research subjects.

## Implications for Youth Ministry

Youth ministry, as a field, ought to recognize its "fix-it" paradigm. It ought to revisit how it thinks about practical theology so that it embraces adversity rather than the tendency to focus on pragmatic success and the immediacy of a program that addresses a cultural ill and proceeds to fix-it. Youth leaders are in a powerful position to offer non-formal processes and pastoral care experiences that the education system, health care system, and family system cannot provide but so desperately need for their success. Youth leaders need to embrace the adversity youth face as an opportunity and a serious responsibility to foster the treasure of resilience that will have an impact on so many areas of their lives.

### Being Informed

Students ought to be reading the literature on resilience and become very familiar with the internal and external assets needed to foster resilience, recognizing that the leader is not the resource but rather partnering with the internal assets of the young person as they move through adversity. Youth ministry students ought to look for God's work and celebrate the development of resilience found in testimonies rather than celebrate the "solution" only.

### Internal and External Assets

The youth leader needs to be trained, not only to walk with or "pace" with adolescents (Dunn, 2001) in adversity but to speak into the lives of youth specific theological language that supports, even celebrates the internal characteristics or protective mechanisms of resilience. This means that students of youth ministry ought to be reading and discussing the theology of suffering and become familiar with the gospel's embrace of adversity. Students ought to reflect on their own stories of adversity and develop a robust awareness of God's presence, not as a "therapeutic deist" (Smith & Denton, 2009) but possibly more like a spiritual director who can help adolescents see God as the source for the internal capacities listed above.

The youth leader ought to be assessing his or her ministry context for external resources that foster resilience and deliberately

design these into the ministry. This means, students of youth ministry ought to be trained in more than one prescribed model for youth ministry and become diagnosticians of their contexts so they can become creative designers that serve and support God's work in their immediate context.

**Implications for Teaching Youth Ministry**

Appreciating the adversity- resilience dynamic, the youth leader needs to be taught in a different way. The kind of awareness and skills needed by the student of youth ministry no longer answers questions like "What facts do I know?" and "What practical thing will I do?" Instead, youth ministry students need to learn to ask, "What multidimensional dynamics do I need to keep in mind, like a diagnostician?" Knowing that an at-risk youth might be more acquainted with resilience, the youth minister might probe a hurt student for the strengths they have learned in the past and how might they partner in embracing that asset for the gospel and the future rather than limit attention to fixing the immediate problem. Youth ministers also must ask, "What personal capacities of self awareness and spiritual discernment do I have in the face of someone else's adversity?" If youth ministers are going to enter the contexts of adolescent adversity, appreciating the power of resilience, they must be willing to rest in the process and allow adversity to do its work in the lives of teens. They must learn to practice "fix it restraint." Third, youth ministers must learn to ask, "How might I be set free to design ways and means to foster resilience as a culture in the ministry?" If resilience has associations with specific external assets and these are cultural rather than programmatic, a youth minister would need to be deliberate about designing environments that foster the right external characteristics. For example, a youth minister could gather adolescent victims of divorce and discover what strengths they might have found in that process. The youth minister could then foster conversations among them that have theological richness and encourage them to name their self awareness, self efficacy, forgiveness, and hope for the future. Fourth, youth ministers need to realize that they are one contributor in the larger picture of the young person's resource pool. And, as a contributor to fostering resilience, their impact has incredible value across many levels of a student's life. Ignoring such a responsibility would be negligence at best.

Many have offered practical advice on how to avoid, escape or separate from others in difficult circumstances but here I propose that resilience literature and Scripture both embrace the value of adversity. We are to live within it until it has done its work. While so many youth ministry approaches look to fix or avoid adversity or

simply be practical in the moment, I propose a deliberately informed process of living along side youth within their adversity so that an ordinary magic generates extraordinary outcomes for the glory of God in Christ by the Spirit.

As a personal note, during final editing of this article I had a heart attack (not because of this article). Needless to say, this was traumatic and little did I know the systemic impact such an event has on a person. I was given a host of drugs, a stint was put into an artery, and a list of prescriptions and instructions followed but the work was not over. Rehabilitation required personal capacities to address my disposition toward stress, my attitude toward low activity during recovery, physical awareness of my own heart rate without instruments, and, in some cases, how to deal with drugs that cause bouts of depression that need to be managed. Where does one acquire such skills? Doctors and cardiac therapists realize these capacities are not found in a bottle but in creating dispositions within a person through a caring and encouraging community. Assessments were done on my family situation, work, social life, etc. From such a diagnostic position, therapeutic approaches not only addressed the present physical event but fostered resilience via relational resources for the future. In cardiac rehab, the nurses, therapists and doctors all make a point of creating positive and even humorous contexts for us to rehabilitate. This cannot be attributed to simply happy therapists enjoying their job. They are fostering resilience in us by encouraging dispositions of self awareness; empowerment in each moment realizing that "today is your day to find strength within"; and the sense that the future remains a positive picture. They are deliberately doing their job by building resilience capacities within us. Will youth workers do the same?

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