Thomas Bergler is looking a lot like the Edward Gibbon of youth ministry, even without a powdered wig. When Gibbon wrote his epic on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, he made good use of primary sources, not a given in his day. When Bergler wrote his “epic” history of American youth ministry (1930s—1960s), he dug through piles of primary sources, including speeches given at rallies, letters written by youth, and all sorts of archival material.

However, historical detail is not what made Gibbon famous or what put Bergler’s book on the cover of Christianity Today. Gibbon became known for critiquing the church of his day (specifically its doctrine of miracles and revelation) with effulgent prose and mordant irony. Bergler’s history also turns out to be a critique of the present-day church, though his writing style is more journalistic—spare and clear, but also laced with irony.

His thesis is this: from the 1930s the American church has undergone a process he calls juvenilization. Today, we are looking at mature or advanced stages of juvenilization, if that makes sense. Even if it doesn’t make sense, I have to use the term. Thanks to Tom, the term juvenilization has become lingua franca for youth ministry discussions.

The term has punch, though it is a bit slippery for the tongue and even the brain. As a concise conceptual definition, juvenilization is the process by which the “beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents” become adopted by the whole church. He says the process starts with a commendable motive—to make Christian faith appealing to the young. But it often ends badly, “with both youth and adults embracing immature versions of the faith.”

The slipperiness comes when we turn to concrete examples. Romantic spirituality, short-term mission trips, rock music, political marches and casual dress are some of the sundry phenomena that get pegged as being juvenile. The amazing thing is that he manages to work all these phenomena into a persuasive narrative.

We can begin at the end of the story. There is a loose but wide consensus today that the contemporary American church is often too contemporary—to too focused on entertainment, too tied to business models, too inclined toward feel-good spirituality; in a word, too self-absorbed, and correspondingly distracted from the sacrificial love and obedience that are supposed
to come from faith in Christ, and too little able to foster commitments that endure, including a commitment to the church qua institution. The question is: How did it happen?

In Bergler’s account, it all started in the first half of the last century. The traumas of the Great Depression, World War II and the Cold War negated prior assumptions about progress, but not desires for progress. Many people supposed that “youth held the key to saving civilization,” and they “opened their wallets to fund new youth organizations.” The stage was now set, with new parachurch groups and old denominational offices both pinning their hopes and pitching their sights on adolescents.

Different branches of Christianity brought different theologies and strategies to the endeavor, and Bergler traces the fortunes of four groups: evangelicals, mainliners (particularly Methodists), Catholics, and African American churches. Each effort went awry in its own special way.

Evangelicals were the most energetic in adapting to culture. They took their central tenet, a personal relationship with Jesus, and cast it as a romantic relationship that thrived on good feelings more than costly discipleship. They took holiness and modified it by devising Christian versions of pop culture that did not run counter to culture but along the same lines, just a little more slowly.

Progressive Protestants took their main aim, working for justice, and thrust it upon youth, saying: You can change the world! They overestimated both the number of youth eager to join social causes and the capacity of those who did to stick with it. To swell youthful idealism, they portrayed the institutional church as being slow and out of step. That message did stick.

African American youth “accomplished great things and defeated great evils” by combining traditional spirituality with nonviolent social action. What’s not to praise? Though powerful, the synthesis proved fragile. Youth who had less zeal for protest felt less at home in the church. Youth who had more zeal felt they could leave this home and take the movement with them. For them, the community protest group replaced the church.

The Roman Catholic story also sounded promising at first. Between 1945 and 1965, the institutions of church, family and school were working in sync to shape religious identity. Catholic youth teachers were among the first to warn against consumerism and other features of American culture. However, these warnings made the teachers sound suspect, maybe un-American. Most Catholic youth and their families wanted to join mainstream culture, not oppose it; they wanted to join even if it meant leaving the church. Catholic economic doctrine sounded too much like Communism. Catholic doctrine in general sounded too much like indoctrination, not a