

The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

An Unexpected Prophet: What the 21st-Century Church Can Learn from Youth Ministry

Introduction

Youth ministry is not just about youth. It's about ministry, period. By its very nature, adolescence embodies, sometimes acutely, fundamental concerns about being human: Who am I? Whom can I trust? What does it mean to be in communion with others? As a result, youth ministry invites transformation for the entire church and not for youth alone. As we look for ways to renew the church in Christ's name, we can't afford to overlook a prophet in our hometown: ministry for, by, and with the young people among us.

The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture have significant implications for ministry with youth, but they are no less important for the church at large. Kenda Creasy Dean suggests that youth ministry is the point at which Christians should reclaim a theology of desire—not for the sake of youth ministry, but for the sake of the church. Dean then posits that the postmodern crisis of fidelity calls the contemporary church to reclaim holy friendship as central to the life of faith.

Jürgen Moltmann reflects on Jacob's struggle with God at the Brook Jabbok, on his own journey to faith as a young prisoner-of-war, and on prayer as watchful expectation. He calls Christians to watch for the hidden "yes" in the suffered "no" of God. Moltmann also addresses how one becomes a "true" theologian, exploring the personal side of theology and its existential depths.

Cynthia Rigby unpacks the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity for youth ministry and for the church and demonstrates how this doctrine can help us understand the mystery of our friendships with God and with one another. She then looks at the doctrine of the incarnation from the perspective of young people seeking relevance for today and arrives at timeless truths for all God's people.

Eugene Rivers calls the church to move from a ministry of church maintenance to a ministry of true reconciliation and justice. He challenges us to listen to those beyond our comfort zone that we might serve as faithful witnesses to Christ in the new millennium.

May you find these lectures to be unexpected prophets, calling you to new understandings and new forms of ministry.

Faithfully yours,

Amy Scott Vaughn
Director of Leadership Development
Institute for Youth Ministry

1999 Lectures

Kenda Creasy Dean
Holding On to Our Kisses: The Hormonal Theology of Adolescence
The Sacrament of One Another: Practicing Fidelity through Holy Friendship

Jürgen Moltmann
Praying and Watching
What Is a Theologian?

Cynthia L. Rigby
More Than a Mystery: The Practical Implications of the Trinity in Ministry with Youth
More Than a Hero: The Practical Implications of the Incarnation in Ministry with Youth

Eugene Rivers
Youth Ministry for the World in Which We Live
New Wineskins, New Models, and Visions for a New Century

MORE THAN A HERO: THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE INCARNATION IN MINISTRY WITH YOUTH

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... Without him, not one thing came into being

And the Word became flesh and lived among us....

John 1: 1, 3b,14a; NRSV

HERO-LESS

A youth minister went into her youth meeting, program in hand and ready to go. The games were over, the opening prayer was said, and she took a deep breath, preparing to ask the provocative opening question:

“Who are your heroes?”

Her question was greeted with bored expressions. There was no clue that thinking was going on behind the eyes.

“We don’t have heroes,” someone finally said. Several others grunted in agreement

“Great,” the youth minister thought, *now* what do I do with them for the next hour?

According to George Barna, in his book *Baby Busters*,

Busters have no heroes. The most commonly mentioned names are recycled heroes from years past, individuals to whom comparatively few Busters really relate. Although there are plenty of teen idols and other young entertainment or sports heroes who represent their generation, none of those individuals carries the mantle of trust and credibility of his or her peers.¹

Busters, again defined as those who were born between the years 1965 and 1981 are often characterized as being deeply skeptical, “pessimistic about the future.”

(Barna, p. 35) While the rebel Boomers of the 1960s believed that they could create a better future than those in positions of authority, many Busters today question whether building a better world is even possible. While the Boomers of the '60s believed in democracy as a means to uphold and promote human life, Busters don't trust any institution to really care about people.

We are about production, Busters understand. We are about getting what we can from others. And others are about getting what they can from us. The trick is to give enough to get what you need but not more than you have to.

Under these terms, Busters have become part of our institutionalized system. Again, they do not entertain grandiose expectations for changing it. Instead, they concentrate on what it is they can get out of it, learning to protect themselves from being "eaten up" in the process.

Consider the sitcoms of the Busters as opposed to those of the Boomers. When I was a kid, in the peak of the Boomer years, television featured shows like *Father Knows Best*, *That Girl*, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Six Million Dollar Man* and *Charlie's Angels*. These shows were about "heroes"—fathers whom children went to for advice; working single women making it happen for themselves; men who should have died in accidents who wind up getting bionic legs and becoming better, stronger, and faster than before; gorgeous women with long, polished nails who hop fences in four-inch heels and corner the bad guys. My favorite Boomer sitcom is *Mash*, where well-intentioned doctors in the Korean war try to put human life back together. These were our heroes—those who respected the system because the system was basically good and it wouldn't let them down if they tried their very hardest. Those who were not cynical about the world, but who did something to make a difference in and for the world. Those who gave advice to and rescued folks who did not cooperate with the basically good infrastructure. Or those like Hawk-Eye Pierce, who critiqued the structure but always found ways to stay a part of it by bending the rules. Note that these Boomer sitcoms were often focused on individuals or small groups of individuals. Not only did Boomers believe that we, together, can make a difference, but that *I* can make a difference.

Look at popular sitcoms today, by contrast, and at what they tell us about our heroes. *The Simpsons*, featuring Bart, an obnoxious, underachieving young person with no shame. Or *Friends*, a top-rated show that hints that we'd rather have friends than heroes or success. *Cheers* features people who are underachievers but who love to go to a place "where everybody knows your name." *Seinfeld*, for a time the number-one-ranked show, communicates that it is OK to be going after what is going to make you feel good in life, or at least it's OK not to feel shame about doing what keeps you comfortable. Its last episode was really scary. Jerry, Elaine, Kramer, and George were all sent to jail for their apathy—and they didn't care.

Perhaps this is what it is to be a hero in our culture these days: to not feel shame about one's apathy. To not be a hypocrite, thinking that we can really make a difference. To be loyal to our friends, hoping that they will provide us with some degree of security.

JESUS AND THE BOOMERS

Is Jesus associated with the heroes of the Boomers? Is Jesus a kind of Superman, breaking into our reality to rescue us? Snatching us up, like Lois Lane, just as disaster is about to strike?

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord? That he died on the cross to save us from our sins? I don't mean to be disrespectful when I ask you, and myself: do we think of Jesus as the guy who jumps in the way of the bullets that are supposed to hit us, taking the hits for us so that we don't have to, managing to endure the attack by being resurrected from the dead? Is *The Matrix* a Boomers' movie?

Or perhaps we, like some Boomers, think of Jesus as being that cooperative member of the status quo, doing what he has to do to make things happen. Managing the disciples, submitting to the will of his boss, working hard for us, his family. Go into any bookstore named Logos and take a stroll through the business section. There you will see books on how Jesus is the best businessman that ever lived, a real wiz at people skills, a model for us to emulate if we want to succeed. Jesus is our hero, replacing us on the cross. Showing us what to do to make it in the world.

This is the understanding of Jesus as hero that the Busters reject.

JESUS AND THE BUSTERS

In a poignant popular song written by Eric Bazilian, Busters communicate what they think of the Boomers' "hero Jesus" and what they wonder about God:

If God had a name, what would it be?
and would you call it to his face if you were faced with him in
all his glory?
what would you ask if you had just one question?

Yeah, yeah—God is great
Yeah, yeah—God is good
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah....

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on a bus, trying to make his way home....

If God had a face, what would it look like?
and would you want to see if seeing meant that you would
have to believe
in things like heaven and in Jesus and the saints and all the
prophets and....

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?

Just a stranger on a bus, trying to make his way home...²

Hey, wait just a minute. . . a slob? There are those kids again, trying to pull God down to our level.

Aren't we concerned that if we start talking about God being a friend and Jesus being a slob youth will lose their respect for God? After all, God is the sovereign Creator of the universe. And if Jesus was there with God, as it tells us in John 1, then Jesus is *not* a "stranger on the bus," but the God of all creation.

We better be very careful, we tell ourselves, before we let our youth talk about God as their friend or Jesus as their buddy. As though they are in control of God!

Is there a way to talk about God as friend, to confirm that God is really one of us, without compromising on who God is? This is exactly where the doctrine of the incarnation comes into play.

ONE OF US: SOME HISTORY

Let me give you a little history on where the doctrine of the incarnation came from, and then I'll tell you why it matters so much for us in our lives of faith.

Almost a hundred years after our Cappadocian friends met to discuss the Trinity, there was another meeting in a place called Chalcedon. The year was 451. The agenda was very focused. The big question was what it meant to say that Jesus Christ was *both* human and divine.

There were two schools of thought. One was the Antiochian school, the other the Alexandrian school. The Antiochian school argued that Jesus was fifty percent human and fifty percent divine. And this settled all kinds of problems in their minds. It helped them explain some of the things we read about in the New Testament. When Jesus cried at Lazarus's tomb in John 11:35, they said: "Well *that's* the human side!" When he turned the water into wine. W-e-l-l. . . *that's* the divine side! When he struggled with the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. . . human! When he made the blind to see and the lame to walk. . . divine! When he cried out on the cross: "My God, my God. . . why hast Thou forsaken me!" Which side? Why, the human, of course!

By separating the human side of Jesus Christ from the divine side, the

Antiochenes could explain how it is that Jesus suffered on the cross without saying that God suffered. They were a bit worried about saying that God suffered because of their belief that God is unchanging. If God does not *change*, they wondered, then how can God *suffer*? Isn't *suffering* about being affected? And if we are affected by things, aren't we *changing*? (They got around this problem by compartmentalizing the humanity and the divinity. Do we ever do this, when we think about who Jesus Christ is?)

Meanwhile, the Alexandrians were far from satisfied. "Are you out of your minds?" they asked the Antiochenes, in so many words. "Jesus doesn't have a split personality!" The Alexandrians thought that Jesus Christ was both human and divine, but they didn't think you could put the human and the divine in separate compartments. Instead, they thought that Jesus' humanity affected his divinity and that Jesus' divinity affected his humanity. They thought the attributes of each were shared by the other, so that the human Jesus was omnipotent and the divine Jesus knew what it was to be a human being on this earth.

The Antiochenes had something to say to about that. "You accuse us of splitting the person of Christ by putting the humanity and the divinity in separate compartments. But look what you do! You mingle the two together in such a way that you portray Jesus as neither human nor divine. Jesus seems to be halfway between human and divine, a *tertium quid*, a super power-ranger rather than the God who became one of us! (Well, they didn't actually say "super power-ranger." But think about it. Do we ever think of Jesus in this way? As a *sort of* human being who is really God, who hovers above the rest of us? If we think of Jesus in this way, are we really believing that "the Word became flesh"? That God is "one of us," in Jesus Christ?)

In a remarkable political as well as theological move, the facilitators of the Council of Chalcedon decided that both the Alexandrians and the Antiochenes were right about some things and wrong about others. "Yes" to the Alexandrian side: the humanity and the divinity cannot be separated or compartmentalized. But "Yes," too, on the Antiochian side: the humanity and the divinity are *not* mingled or mixed together in a way that makes Jesus a supercreature halfway between humans and God. Jesus Christ is "fully human, fully divine, one person in two natures, without confusion and without change, without separation and without division."³

THE BOTTOM LINE

How does this history help us understand who Jesus is and bring who Jesus is to youth in our context?

I once had a close friend who heard me talking about "fully human and fully divine," and she said to me, quite candidly, "Cindy, I just don't think any of this mat-

ters. Who cares whether we really think of Jesus as divine or not, as long as we communicate his message of love? Who cares whether or not he was really human or not? Maybe he was just God in disguise, telling us how to live our lives. Either way, it doesn't make much difference as long as we get the message that we need to love each other."

Does it make a difference who we, and our youth, think Jesus is? Does it matter that we understand him to be both fully human and fully divine? Why does it matter who we think Jesus Christ is?

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

wars have been fought,
witches burned, and
Jewish people exterminated.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

Pacifists have turned the other cheek,
The hungry have been fed,
The value of all humanity has been upheld.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

people have been excommunicated,
and demons have been exorcised.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

women have been kept from ordination.
and women have been ordained.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

missionaries have gone out to the ends of the earth and told
people to be satisfied with their lot in life.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

missionaries have gone out to the ends of the earth and have
proclaimed God's redemption of the body as well as the soul.

In the name of Jesus Christ. . .

people have found encouragement
and people have been shamed;
people have been saved,
and people have been damned.

"All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever set sail
All the rulers that have ever ruled

All the kings that have ever reigned on this earth
 All put together
 Have not affected the life of human beings on this earth
 As much as this
 One solitary life."

But the effects of how we understand this man have not been
 unambiguous.

It makes a difference.⁴

Do you believe me? I mean, do you believe it makes a difference who we, and our youth, think Jesus is?

I think the first step in bringing the message of Jesus Christ to our youth is believing in it ourselves, so much so that we indwell it and grapple with it, never taking it for granted. Before we can talk to our youth about Jesus Christ, we need to ask ourselves, who do we believe Jesus Christ is, and why does it matter?

One day Jesus was with his disciples, and he turned to them and said: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said: "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (Matthew 16: 13)

And did Jesus turn to them and say: "Well. . . get out there and do something about that! Change their minds! Tell them the truth! Show them who I *really* am!" No. For some reason, Jesus didn't spend a lot of time on the "how to's" of ministry. What he did focus on was the *content* of our ministry, which is founded in our relationship to God through him.

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked the disciples. (v. 15) "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks us.

And Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (v. 16)

Peter would have gotten a gold star for that answer. In fact, Matthew tells us that Jesus turned and called Peter "blessed," saying, ". . . flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (v. 17)

One of the comic strips I have on the door to my office shows Jesus asking the disciples, "Who do *you* say that I am?" The disciples are all standing around, looking down sheepishly, the way you do when you are in a class and the teacher asks a question you can't answer. But there's one goody-two-shoes student who has his hand up. "I know! Call on me!" Can you guess who it is?

It's good old Peter. Actually, couldn't that precocious disciple also be you or me? Seminary professor Cynthia L. Rigby: "I know! Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, one person in two natures, without confusion and without change, without separation and without division. . . ." Suzie Snoot, youth minister: "I know,

I know. . . Jesus Christ is my Lord and personal Savior!” Irvin Icebreaker, youth volunteer: “I know, I know. . . Jesus Christ is the one who paid the price for my sins, so that I don’t have to!”

Wrong answers? Of course not. But you and I know that gold stars aren’t the point. And the story of Peter’s response to Jesus’ question goes on to show us that what we say about who Jesus is isn’t as important as what we mean when we say it.

After Peter answers, the text of Matthew 16 goes on to say that Jesus began speaking to the disciples, describing to them “that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” (v. 21) And Peter takes him aside and says, “No way! Remember, I had the right answer. Let me review the material for you. You are the Christ, the Son of the living God! That means you do not die. That means that nothing bad can happen to you!”

Peter might have had the right answer, but he had no idea what he was talking about. Do we know what we are talking about when we tell our youth who Jesus Christ is? When I say that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, do I know what I’m talking about and why it matters?

To say that Jesus Christ is at the same time both divine and human is to say that God is one of us in the person of Jesus Christ. It is to say that the Word, who existed in the beginning with God as the second person of the Trinity, actually put on real flesh and lived his life as a human being.

What this means is that God understands what it is to be frail. God understands what it is to be tired, because Jesus fell asleep on that boat and Jesus is God. God understands what it is to be sad and grieving because Jesus’ friend Lazarus died, and Jesus cried in his grief, and Jesus is God. God understands us when we don’t want to do God’s will because Jesus struggled with the will of the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus is God. God understands what it feels like to feel God’s absence because Jesus cried out on that cross: “My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me!” And Jesus is God.

Because Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, there is a link between humanity and God. This does not mean that we are God, but that we are joined to the very life of God because God has entered into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. Because Jesus Christ has entered into our human existence and has lived for us, has died for us, and has risen from the dead for us, our lives are “hidden with Christ in God.” In Jesus Christ, our sins have been forgiven and we are called to participation in the ministry of reconciliation. All of this hinges on the fact that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine, that the Word really became real flesh.

Because this idea that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully divine is a mystery, we sometimes try to simplify it by erring on one side or the other, thinking of

Jesus as *only human* or *only divine*. We might be worried when our youth talk about Jesus as their friend because we think they are forgetting that Jesus is divine as well as human. I was recently concerned about this myself, in relation to younger children, when I saw an advertisement for a “Jesus and me” doll—a doll that “looks like” Jesus, that kids can take wherever they go, so they can know Jesus is with them.

But I think a bigger problem for us is that we emphasize the divinity of Christ at the expense of his humanity. To do this is actually heretical. The heresy I’m accusing us of is called docetism. Docetism is in play when we think of Jesus as God in disguise, when we think to ourselves, “Those silly disciples! When are they going to realize who Jesus Christ is, underneath all of that skin? They just don’t get it!”

If we think of Jesus as “God in disguise,” not really and completely human, how can we make the claim that God really understands us? That God has entered into the human condition and redeemed it? If Jesus Christ is only God in disguise—a Clark Kent figure who at the last moment will zip into a phone booth and change into who he really is—we are without hope.

Evidence of our docetism is all around us. Think about Christmastime, when we sing in “Away in a Manger” these words: “...the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.” No crying? Why do we say he doesn’t cry? Perhaps because we know he is God, and God can’t cry. On some level, we tend to reason to ourselves that, if Jesus is God, the whole baby thing must be kind of a disguise. He must have been not just an ordinary baby. . . he must have been a “superbaby.” If we really believed in the incarnation, believing that Jesus is fully human as well as fully divine, we would instead sing: “The little Lord Jesus, much crying he makes.”

Or, think about this question: Is Jesus human now? Or was he just human temporarily? Was the second person of the Trinity sitting up in heaven somewhere, one day saying: “Oops! I must get down there and rescue those people! Here goes: Bethlehem...carpenter’s shop...time with the disciples...cross...resurrection...ascension...Whew! Now I can go back to being ‘just God,’ again!”

Do you see it? If we think that the incarnation was a thirty-three-year experiment⁵ rather than a revelation of Godself, if we think that the Word just put on flesh temporarily as a kind of disguise, we are missing out.

We don’t need a hero, we don’t need a God who puts on a disguise and infiltrates our reality only to rescue us. We need a God who is one of us, a God who understands us, a God who is with us, a God who has entered into relationship with us and who saves us because God is with us and for us. And this is who God in Jesus Christ is. When we pray in the name of Christ and lead our youth to pray in the name of Christ, we are not praying to one who has to think back 2000 years and remember what it was like to be a human being way back then.

We are praying to one who participates in reality with us now. One who understands us today. One who is resurrected in body and is still fully human and fully divine.

THIS I KNOW

In a nutshell, then, the doctrine of the incarnation is so important to us and to our youth because it communicates not only *what God did for us* but also *that God is for us*.

Maybe Busters speak for all of us when they say that they don't care about heroes. They have had enough heroes. Growing up surrounded by prosperous Boomers, they have had plenty of things done for them: they had a cushy house to grow up in, educational opportunities, computers, and pets.

What they are telling us is that they do not need us to do things for them, they do not need a God to do things for them. What they need is for someone to *be* for them. To stand with them. To advocate for them. Not to rescue them, but to believe in them enough to create a space for them to be themselves.

Who is going to be for them? What models do we have of such representation in our culture? Who is for us? How about politicians, they're supposed to represent us, right? OK. . . How about lawyers, then? Aren't they supposed to represent us? No? OK. . . how about doctors. . . aren't they supposed to really be for us? To care for us? Not always? How about ministers? professors? youth leaders?

While all of us have failed the Busters, God has not. In Jesus Christ—he who is fully human and fully divine—God does not only *do* things for us, but God *is* for us. Sure, God does plenty of things for us. God gives us this beautiful creation to live in. God dies for us on the cross, paying the penalty for sin and death. God rises again, promising us that we will be with him for all eternity.

But God wants to give us—including the Busters—much more than “fire insurance” from hell and promises of heaven.

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

We stand at a distance from the manger and say, “Thank you, Lord, for doing that for me.” We stand at a distance from the cross and say, “Thank you, God, for dying for me.” And God says, “But I wanted so much *more* for you than for you to reach out and take a gift.”


Perhaps a personal example will help make this point clearer. When I was a teenager, I went through a stage in which I sought to distance myself from family members. Pretty normal, but also pretty annoying. My strategy was simple: do everything by the book. If I was good, I figured, I could keep my distance. I wanted to avoid the close contact that getting yelled at involved. So I did my homework on

time, didn't fight with my brothers, acted polite. I was driving my parents crazy.

One evening, my mother cooked a great dinner with all of my favorite foods. After eating, I helped clear the table and said, mechanically, "Thank you, Mom, for doing that for me." Exit, stage left. But my mother couldn't stand it anymore. "Cynthia Lynn Rigby, you come back here right now," she yelled. "Stop thanking me for doing things. I am not 'doing things' for you! Don't you realize that you are a part of me?"

And there it is. God is not just "doing things" for us. God is for us. God cries out to us, on this day, saying: "I am, indeed, one of you. I have, indeed, become flesh and walk among you. I want to be closer to you—I am closer to you—than you in your thanksgivings can ever know.

"Please, please, don't think of me as a hero, for you will then continue to hold me at arm's length, merely thanking me for what I have done. I desire more than that for you. I have entered into your very life with you. I am knocking at your door and am not here just to deliver a pizza and go back home. I am here to enter into your home with you and to share a meal with you, and you with me.⁶ I am here to share your very life with you, to free you from the burden of your sins, not by replacing you, but by raising you up to be the person God created you to be."

Who needs a hero when one is claimed by a God like this? 

Study Guide Questions for Youth Leaders:

- (1) According to Rigby, why is it that today's youth do not have heroes? Do you agree with her analysis? Do you encourage your youth to have heroes? Why or why not?
- (2) How do the youth with whom you minister think of Jesus Christ? Is he a hero? Is he "fully human, fully divine"? Does it matter who they think Jesus Christ is? In what ways?
- (3) Would reflection on the doctrine of the incarnation help your youth understand their relationship with God and their relationships with one another? If not, why not? If so, how would you develop a program to enable your youth to reflect on who Jesus Christ is and how this matters to their lives?

Bible Study Idea:

Study John 1:1-18. Focus questions: What does it mean to say that the "Word became flesh"? (v. 14) Have we seen the Word's glory? What does it look like? What difference does it make to the way we live?

NOTES

1. According to George Barna in his book *Baby Busters*, Busters have no heroes. The most commonly mentioned names are recycled heroes from years past, individuals to whom comparatively few Busters really relate. Although there are plenty of teen idols and other young entertainment or sports heroes who represent their generation, none of those individuals carries the mantle of trust and credibility of his or her peers.
2. First verse of "One of Us," by Eric Bazilian, sung by Joan Osborne. Lyrics retrieved from the Internet at www.looksmart.com, <http://members.aol.com/drldeboer2htm/oou.htm>.
3. For more on the Chalcedonian decision, cf. J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).
4. Cynthia Rigby, 1997. Includes an excerpt, in quotes, by Anonymous.
5. I learned this way of formulating the question from one of my teachers, E. David Willis.
6. See Revelation 3:20.