

## **The 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture** "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry"

### Introduction

I am honored to introduce the first volume of the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, presented in Daytona Beach, FL, and Princeton, NJ, in the spring of 1996 by James W. Fowler, Robin Maas, and Robert Wuthnow. The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original research on youth and the church. As part of a new venture in ministry sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, the Institute for Youth Ministry they describe a shift occurring in the churches thinking about youth and ministry. Instead of ghettoizing youth into clubs apart from the congregation, the church's mission with youth views young people as integral to the total mission of the church, and youth ministry as a theological task which is not only about youth ministry, but about youth's ministry as well.

The 1996 lectures, titled "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry," address mainline churches who have suffered grievous losses in their attempts to address teens. These losses come at a time when public institutions are calling attention to the important role churches play in adolescent development. Churches agree: We believe we have something to contribute to youth in the person of Jesus Christ-and therefore Jesus Christ, not age-level education, pastoral counseling, or recreational programs, must be the starting point for youth ministry.

We asked each of our lecturers to approach this theme from the perspective of their own disciplines. James Fowler posits a new shape for youth ministry that recognizes nuances of human development; Robin Maas uses biblical exegesis to redefine the spiritual journey of youth and the adults who mentor them; and Robert Wuthnow analyzes the sociological significance of service learning trends for the church's ministry with teenagers. Together they point to a new direction for ministry with young people.

We approach this direction humbly and with hope. We know that the church's renewal depends not on the church of tomorrow, but the church of today-a church in which youth can be integral missionaries to their elders and world. May this volume challenge and nourish the ministry God has laid before you.

Godspeed,

Kenda Creasy Dean  
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

## **1996 Lectures**

Robin Maas

“Christ and the Adolescent: Piper or Prophet?”

“Christ and the Adolescent: A Decision for Love”

“Christ and the Adolescent: Written in Stone”

James W. Fowler

“Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith”

“Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God”

“Grace, Repentance, and Commitment: Youth Initiation in Care and Formation”

Robert Wuthnow

“Youth and Culture in American Society: The Social Context of Ministry to Teenagers”

“Religious Upbringing: Does It Matter and, If So, What Matters?”

“Unto the Least of These: Youth and the Ministry of Caring”

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# CHRIST AND THE ADOLESCENT: PIPER OR PROPHET?

Robin Maas



here is a legend, told now as a charming nursery tale, that must chill the heart of every parent who reads it to her children. It is a story of seduction and enchantment, a story in which

children disappear—*forever*. You know the tale I mean. It comes to us in the form of a long narrative poem by Robert Browning—*The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (1842). Most children today probably encounter bowdlerized versions—retellings which may try to mitigate the horror. (One such “retelling” asserts that all the adults of Hamelin—and not just the city fathers—were greedy and ungrateful, implying that these parents deserved to lose their children.) What you may not know is that the legend is rooted in an actual historical event, recorded by some ancient, unknown hand on the city walls of Hamelin, Germany.

Something awful happened in Hamelin. We shall probably never know precisely how it happened or why. But it did happen and that, I believe, is why this story is at the same time so strangely fascinating and repulsive. The writing is on the wall. *It happened.*

Just what does the writing say? That on July 22 of the year 1284<sup>1</sup>, some 130 children were led out of town by a “Pied Piper” and were lost in (not on) Koppen Hill. Some believe the Piper was an agent of a Bishop Olmutz who, in the late thirteenth century, drew many of



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Hamelin's youth to Moravia, where they were permanently resettled. Others claim that the children were kidnapped by landowners to replace serfs who had died in recent epidemics. A more elaborate theory proposes that the children of Hamelin suffered from the purple fungus ergot, which grows on rye grain during rainy seasons. Anyone who consumed the contaminated grain was likely to be afflicted with severe muscle spasms and hallucinations. The poison acted to constrict blood vessels, causing burning sensations in the victim's hands and feet which could be relieved by strenuous physical activity, such as dancing; hence, the hiring of musicians, such as the Piper, to play for the afflicted so that they might dance.

This last explanation is a particularly poignant and intriguing one, since ergot is the source of the modern drug lysergic acid diethylamide, or LSD—the poison of choice for many of today's youth.<sup>2</sup>

Another even more interesting hypothesis connects the legend to the bizarre and infamous children's crusade, which occurred in the year 1212. Close to a hundred thousand youth—most of them boys around the age of twelve—set off from both France and Germany to recapture Jerusalem from the Muslims by entirely peaceful means. Against all reason, rejecting all adult pleas to the contrary, these idealistic but deluded and ignorant children—led by other idealistic, ignorant, and deluded children and accompanied by a motley crew of both well- and ill-intentioned adults—set off to put right what the adult crusaders had got wrong.

While the majority of clergy and almost all other adults looked askance at the project and tried to dissuade the young idealists, there were some, including the father of the boy who led one of the German contingents, who found either personal or professional advantage in encouraging the unlikely project. The lad who led the French contingent claimed that Jesus himself appeared to him and handed him a letter commanding him to organize the crusade. One popular explanation of what really might have happened proposes that the boy was duped by an ambitious and unscrupulous priest, pretending to be the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

At any rate, there was no stopping them once the ball got rolling; and, in the end, many thousands of them perished or disappeared. Of the lost, those who did not die from cold, exhaustion, and starvation en route to the Mediterranean either perished at sea or were sold into slavery and prostitution in North Africa. The lucky ones straggled home, bitterly disillusioned.

Whatever happened in Hamelin, the fact remains, the young are always easy targets, especially when somebody comes along who will protest adult incompetence and injustice, make great music, and hold out the utopian promise of a perfect world—somebody like the Pied Piper.

A plague of vermin has a choke-hold on the town of Hamelin. Destroyers of both public and private peace, these countless rats, harbingers of deadly plagues, fought the dogs and killed the cats,

And bit the babies in the cradles,  
 And ate the cheeses out of the vats  
 And licked the soup from the cook's own ladles,  
 Split open the kegs of salted sprats,  
 Made nests inside men's Sunday hats  
 And even spoiled the women's chats  
 By drowning their speaking  
 With shrieking and squeaking  
 In fifty different sharps and flats.<sup>4</sup>

The beleaguered citizens of Hamelin are ready to throw their ineffective government out of office when an improbable savior suddenly appears. The poet Browning describes him as a tall, thin, ethereal character, swarthy but beardless, and quaintly garbed in a brightly colored, long robe—half yellow, half red—hence, the designation “pied.” He claims to be an expert “terminator,” a professional rescuer; and so the politicians, desperate for any kind of a solution, hire this strange-looking fellow. Besides, his resume looks good:

“Please your honours,” said he, “I’m able,  
 By means of a secret charm, to draw  
 All creatures living beneath the sun,  
 That creep or swim or fly or run,  
 After me so as you never saw!  
 And I chiefly use my charm  
 On creatures that do people harm.”

Of course it will cost. They promise him a thousand guilders to do the job, and then watch with astonishment as the Piper pipes thousands of rats out of town, leading them to their doom as they plunge, like lemmings, into the river Weser.

You remember the rest. Freed of the plague of rats, the mayor reneges on his promise and offers the Piper only fifty guilders in place of the original thousand. The Piper, a man not to be trifled with, gets his revenge. He changes his tune, and this time it is the youngest citizens of Hamelin who dance after him in droves, only to be swallowed up, not by a river, but by a magic mountain, wherein the Piper promised a veritable garden of delights. None are left to tell the tale except a single child, a little lame boy who could not keep up the pace and was left to his lonely fate in a town full of grown-ups:

It's dull in my town since my playmates left!  
 I can't forget that I'm bereft  
 Of all the pleasant sights they see,  
 Which the Piper also promised me;  
 For he led us, he said, to a joyous land,  
 Joining the town and just at hand,  
 Where the waters gushed and the fruit trees grew,  
 And flowers put forth a fairer hue,  
 And everything was strange and new.

The sparrows were brighter than peacocks here,  
 And their dogs outran our fallow deer,  
 And honey-bees had lost their stings,  
 And horses were born with eagle's wings;  
 And just as I became assured  
 My lame foot would be speedily cured,  
 The music stopped and I stood still,  
 And found myself outside the Hill,  
 Left alone against my will  
 To go now limping as before,  
 And never hear of that country more!"

Because of his physical imperfection, he misses out on the delicious paradise promised by the Piper, where everything would be "strange and new"—a place that sounds remarkably like that wonderful "holy mountain" envisioned by the prophet, where "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and lion and the fatling together—where the nursing will play over the viper's den without risk of harm, and where nothing can hurt or destroy us—*ever*. (Isa. 11)

This bereft and damaged child, who knows he is not perfect, is the only one of his generation fated to remain behind in the mundane and bourgeois little hamlet filled with anguished adults who, try as they might to find him, cannot pay the Piper what they owe and whose beautiful children, bound for an unearthly paradise, are lost to them *forever*.

Browning appends a word of advice at the conclusion to this cautionary tale:

So, Willy, let me and you be wipers  
 Of scores out with all men—especially pipers;  
 And whether they pipe us free from rats or from mice,  
 If we've promised them aught, let us keep our promise.<sup>5</sup>

I suspect that those of you who are full-time youth ministers may feel a profound empathy for the Piper. Perhaps you even envy him. You, too, may feel manipulated by ungrateful adults who, for a pittance, want you to keep their children out of mischief and out of their hair, who expect you to work miracles by ridding the local environment of all its toxic elements, but who certainly do not wish you, in any sense of the word, to work miracles with their children.

You, too, may have fantasized about a showdown with the senior pastor or the parish council about craven compromises and fundamental injustices in the running of the youth program; and you have probably dreamed of having 130 teenagers hanging on your every word, taking what you have to offer with utmost seriousness and showing up, without fail, for every meticulously planned meeting and event your program has to offer.

Perhaps you'd give anything for that "secret charm" and, like the Piper, you'd chiefly use it "on creatures that do people [*especially young people*] harm."

You, too, may be ready to pipe a different tune—because it's easy to be seduced, even when you're not so young. So be warned! The Piper remains a dangerous man, not just for the young but also for those who minister to them.

But take heart. There is another historical figure who, though he shares many of the Piper's exotic and engaging qualities, offers a model of spiritual leadership that will lead neither you nor the young astray.

A voice cries:

In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
 Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.  
 Every valley shall be lifted up,  
 and every mountain and hill be made low;  
 The uneven ground shall become level,  
 and the rough places a plain.  
 And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
 and all flesh shall see it together;  
 for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Isa. 40:3-5)

This voice, urgent, piercing, insistent, penetrates hearts and either stirs or shakes them. The sound of this voice is not seductive, but it is compelling. We cannot ignore it, for it speaks words of both warning and promise. It is the voice, not of the Piper, who says, "I can deliver you—and the goods," but of the prophet, whose role it is to prepare us for reality, who says, "It's time. Get ready. He's coming."

The young listen to this voice with excitement, the old perhaps with fresh hope, the powerful with suspicion, the wicked with disdain or despair. But it is a sound, a message, that cannot be shut out: Wake up! Put your house in order! All your bills are falling due—*it's time to pay the Piper!* Yes, something wonderful awaits those who are faithful to the God of Israel, but first there is something you must do. And it will not be fun. You will not go dancing to this task.

The people who first listened to this voice had some sense of what he was talking about. The prophet told them not only what to expect, but what to do about it: Clear a path, a straight level path, a *highway* for your God. He is going to come barreling through in a way that cannot be mistaken for anything but what it is meant to be. The glory of the Lord carries with it beauty, terror, and power—the power to move mountains, to level them, if need be, and the will to lift up whatever has sunk into the depths. Is this the path to paradise? And if it is, do we want to be on it? Do we want our kids on it?

This is not a route that leads through the land of good grades, high SAT scores, careers, babies, and minivans. The prophet is talking about *God*. *God* is coming, and our little dreams, our modest hopes and plans, may all come to naught. The voice that makes this radical claim is a voice crying out about the transformation of a wasteland, the restructuring of an entire landscape. *God* is coming, and nothing will ever again be the same. Everything

will be strange, and everything will be new.

This voice, the one that urges us to hurry up, to get ready, to prepare a highway for our God, is always the voice of the prophet—the one through whom the Lord speaks. Although these words first appear in the Book of Isaiah, Christians have learned to associate them with the voice of a prophet named John, who did indeed announce the coming of God.

This young man was all about getting ready for God. He embodies readiness for God in much the same way Mary does. Each one was bringing something *to light*. In the darkness of Mary's womb, the light was taking flesh. Through this very young woman, "the true light that enlightens every [living soul] was coming into the world." (Jn. 1:9) She neither piped nor prophesied. She was the instrument through which God blew, not the Piper, but the flawless pipe.

John does not bear the light within, but points beyond himself toward the light. John's words, his works, his life all testify to the light that is coming into the world. (Jn. 1:7) The prophet is always herald, witness, guide. His words, his works, his *person* all bear witness to a reality that is beyond him, to something, Someone, *else*. Any power he exercises is borrowed, derivative. His role, first and always, is to speak the truth and in this way to warn, console, prepare. It is the prophet John the Baptizer—and not the mysterious Piper—who best serves as a model for youth ministers. Where the Piper enchants, the prophet prods and pokes. He is follower first, leading only where he is led. His testimony, because it is true, compels but cannot coerce.

What do we know about John? First, that he was kin to Jesus, son of a priest and a very pious but previously barren woman. Like so many great figures in biblical history, the circumstances of his birth mark him out as a special gift from God. The angel Gabriel tells John's father, Zechariah, that his son will drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will not need these intoxicants because he will be filled, *inebriated*, with the Holy Spirit—even from his mother's womb where the as-yet-unborn prophet recognizes the presence of the Messiah and leaps for joy. (Lk. 1:44)

The Spirit has bestowed upon this child a special mission. John, says the angel, is coming to

turn many of the sons of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared. (Lk. 1:16-17)

Can it possibly be that your own calling mirrors that of this new Elijah? Do we find in John's commission a clue to an authentically prophetic ministry with the young?

... in the spirit and power of Elijah. . .

The child's name, chosen by Elizabeth in obedience to the angel Gabriel and in defiance of family tradition, means "Yahweh has shown



favor." The God of Israel loves his people. He takes pity on them and sends them prophets. John is the last of these remarkable gifts from God to his people. He comes when things are in a desperate state. He is Israel's last chance—to change.

Those of us who read the Gospels centuries later would like to think that we would have heeded the preaching of this remarkable young man. We would have recognized him as the true messenger of God. Maybe. Maybe not. Mark's account suggests he was on the eccentric side. He camped out in that very same wilderness the prophet Isaiah had said would have to be transformed—leveled—for the highway of God. Like his spiritual predecessor Elijah, John wore a (camel's) hair garment, with a big leather belt. He ate bugs sweetened with honey. (Mk. 1:6-7) John, descended from a line of priests, was irritatingly noisy and odd—as odd in his own way as that other strange messenger of God, Elijah.

I think of Elijah as the prototypical Hebraic prophet: a morose loner, cranky, eccentric, irascible, "meddling." A seasoned "smiter," his word "burned like a torch." (Sir. 48:1) Using curses as his favorite weapon, he could call down fire and famine. He did indeed attack injustice; but his driving passion was combating idolatry—the vicious practices associated with the loathsome worship of Baal.

By John's day, nearly nine centuries later, Elijah was an ancient memory—a symbol loaded with Messianic significance, with hope. At the appointed time, it is written, Elijah will be the one "to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the heart of the father to the son, and to restore the tribes of Jacob." (Sir. 48:11)

In Malachi we see another instance of how the association of John with Elijah's spirit comes to be made: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (Mal. 4:5-6)

John, who like Elisha now wears the mantle of Elijah, is sent to tell Israel—and us—what to expect and what to do before that great and terrible day when we stand revealed for what we really are in the light that is Christ. John as the new Elijah is sent to *turn hearts*—to turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. And there is, we should recognize, only one way to turn hearts—and that is through repentance.

That is why John comes preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance is the hard, not-so-fun work of spiritual path-clearing or moral roadwork. It is a heart-turning, stomach-churning, mind-burning experience which actually changes people; and contrary to popular and current Christian opinion, forgiveness is not offered prior to repentance.

It is not enough, as you probably know, to be a show-stopping preacher. Strong words seize our attention—for as long as their sound

lingers in the air. Real change requires a death; and that is what baptism is—even the baptism of repentance is a slayer; and what we expect to find in the wake of dying is grief. And tears. These are the real change agents. The prophet always demands change; and this demand, though often experienced as harsh, is rooted in compassion; for the unpleasant dousing we receive in the baptism of repentance is a painful but effective way of staying out of hot water.

It is always the prophet's responsibility to tell people this, especially young people who today scarcely know what sin is and whose culpability is perhaps mitigated by adult unwillingness to reveal this truth to them. Better they be smitten by the torch of John's word now than—sooner or later—to meet their Lord unprepared. How foolish we are when we think the young will reject outright a righteous rebuke when many of them are yearning for precisely this sign of love—for this prophetic witness to their worth.

**. . . to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just . . .**

The prophet John the Baptizer makes a dramatic appearance in the church lectionary during the season of Advent; and just as Advent signifies a special time of preparation in the church calendar, adolescence represents a special time of preparation in the life cycle of each individual. For the teenager, there is light just over the horizon. The teen calls this light "freedom" and equates it with adulthood. But while the light is in sight, the teen still needs a lot of adult guidance in preparing for adult responsibilities. High schools and colleges are places where youth prepare themselves for the adult responsibilities our society has identified as necessary for personal success.

The church has the responsibility for preparing youth for something much more momentous, however. Like John, the light to which we bear witness is Christ himself. We bear the heavy responsibility of announcing his coming to youth, of convincing them that he is indeed on the way, and that they can and must do something about it. We must do this, so that they have the chance to *change*.

The kind of change we most often expect from youth is the kind of change we call "development." It is change that is *bound* to come, so to speak, and the issue is how well each individual will navigate the shoals of certain types of necessary change. But that's not the only kind of change you, as youth ministers, need to be concerned about. The kind of change John the Baptist is asking for is personal moral conversion. It can happen when you're fifteen, five, or fifty. And while I imagine you think often about certain changes you would like to see effected in your youth, including moral change, you may not have thought much about your role in terms of bringing them to repentance—to *tears*—as a way of preparing them to meet Christ, the Lord of the Universe who is asking to be Lord of their hearts.

A great deal of energy is expended by youth leaders and program developers in the interest of social justice. Certain aspects of American society, our culture, and "the establishment" are regularly excoriated for perpetrating injustices. This is fine as far as it goes. But we must be careful that we adults are not sending our kids off on fruitless and dangerous crusades for which they remain spiritually under-equipped. It is a form of adult exploitation to train our youth to sniff out these corporate moral failures from miles away while allowing them to remain blissfully ignorant of their personal moral failings because we have forgotten, or choose not to remember, that the prophets confronted individual sinners as well as nations.

We may all deeply regret the injuries suffered by those who occupy the lower social and economic rungs of the ladder; but the wounds that actually bring us to *tears of repentance* are those for which we recognize our own personal culpability—when the person we've hurt has a face and a name.

We know John the Baptist did not neglect the larger moral horizon in which he lived; it was one of his favorite sermon topics. But he baptized people one by one. To each one who came to him he said, "Own up to your sins, name them, repent, be cleansed in the waters of baptism—and *change your ways*. If you have been dishonest, hypocritical, selfish, a cheat, indifferent to the poor, *change your behavior*."

We religious professionals hear that, and we think about the complacent and comfortable-but-faceless adults who, although they sit in the pews of our churches, remain indifferent to human suffering and go on consuming this world's goods as if there were no tomorrow. Think again.

Remember, the new Elijah was to turn hearts, in particular the hearts of fathers and children. The human family is the nursery of virtue *and vice*, and anyone who has spent more than ten sessions with a therapist has been forced to recognize how many bruises on the heart first appear in disappointing and destructive struggles with family members. *I remember—you remember—how anxious you were as a youth to be rid of your tiresome siblings, your meddling mother, your embarrassingly inept or overbearing father. I said, you said, when I am grown up, when I am married, when I am a parent, I will not be like that . . . .* If I could just get away from this mess, I could be happy—I could even be good! You and I—because we expected our families and our world to be perfect—were easy bait for the Piper.

So what are we saying—that the youth minister's job is simply to whip up a lot of adolescent guilt and remorse, to make the girls cry and the boys blush with shame? By no means! Back to John.

Although the prophet profoundly disturbs people, he also gives them hope, because he tells them the truth—not the false hope of a paradise without pain, but the real hope of conversion, of *personal change*. This is how the two-edged sword of truth works. It cuts to the bone; but truth is a surgeon, not a slayer. It is the axe laid to the root of the tree. It removes only

that which is dying or already dead.

John gave his hearers hope because he told them there was something they could *do* to change themselves. He said: *You can do something now that will make this future encounter with the Lord a "fruitful" one.* And what he asked of those who wanted to prepare themselves was nothing heroic. It was doable. "Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance . . . . Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none. And whoever has food should do likewise." (Lk. 3:8, 11) Nothing here about tramping off to liberate the Holy Land or being burned at the stake. Just the cheerful, unresenting performance of duty, simple kindness to the neighbor, the generous impulse unhesitatingly indulged.

Youth ministers are in a unique position to confront youth on immediate problems of personal morality, as well as trying to sensitize them to macro- and long-term issues of social justice. This is where you have a golden opportunity to "turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just." Turning the hearts of the young should begin with the place where their hearts are most vulnerable: the home, first, and then the school. These are places where personal accountability, courage, self-restraint and self-respect, honesty, and generosity are either nurtured or starved to death. These are the places where kids are not only vulnerable but where they are powerful as well, where *they* can hurt and destroy. These are the places where teenagers can most effectively begin to produce the kind of fruit that will testify to their repentance.

Youth ministers, insofar as they are prophets and not pipers, can say what a parent wants to say but is often afraid to say. You can offer warnings that will be heard where voiced parental forebodings are ignored. You can witness to the coming of Christ not simply as a consoling personal encounter, but as an *acutely clarifying event*, first in your own life and then in theirs. Don't be surprised if this opportunity is not immediately embraced. Some kids would rather be swallowed up by a magic mountain than exposed to the light—especially if they are sinning and lack the courage or even the concepts and the language to acknowledge this.

The coming of God in the flesh *to our flesh* is a time when the light gets turned on. When the light gets turned on we can see *everything*, including the things we'd rather not see. When the light gets turned on, other people see things we'd rather not have them see. That's the thing about light: It's ruthless, because it reveals *whatever* is there, roadkill and all.

**to turn many of the Sons of Israel to the Lord their God  
... to make ready for the Lord a people prepared**

When we have done what we can, when we have told youth the truth about what to expect and what they can do right now, right where they live, to prepare for the coming of God, when we have instructed the disobedient in the wisdom of the just, when we have exhorted them to turn their hearts, with tears of repentance, back to their families and schoolmates,

then we will have done much to prepare them to confront what is wrong in our imperfect world, without their being tempted to give up on it in despair or disgust when the changes they want to see happen are slow in coming, or do not come at all.

When we have done all this, and if we have not tried to co-opt immature youth by enlisting them prematurely in our own pet adult crusades, we will have “made ready for the Lord a [young] people prepared.” They will be prepared for whatever grand and challenging new missions the real rescuer, the master piper, has destined this particular generation. When we have done all this, we will have done as much as we can *properly* do.

That you will often “pipe” in your ministry to those who will not dance is to be expected. Jesus himself complains that he and John both have come to a generation who will not hear, no matter what kind of tune the piper plays. (Matt. 11:16-18) That you will sometimes be plagued with faith-threatening doubts about the Lord and the claims you make for him is also to be expected. John himself did not escape these doubts (Matt. 11:2-6); and no doubt, the Lord will answer you as he answered John: “*What changes have you seen? What evidence of the Spirit is at work in the lives of those you serve? . . . Wisdom is justified by her deeds.*” (Matt. 11:4-6, 19) Neither of these problems need defeat you. But there is something else that could.

Several years ago, while on a trip to Peru, I met a Jesuit priest involved in youth work. He said something very interesting and very important about his work which I have never forgotten, and which has provided the seed for what I am saying here. Youth work, he said, is very appealing because young people are so responsive, so appreciative, and so easily idolize their leaders. The great temptation of the youth leader, therefore, is to say: “*Come to me, come to me.*” What they should be saying, of course is, “*Go to him, go to him.*”

Because the kind of people who tend to be drawn to youth ministry are usually caring, compassionate, and idealistic, they can easily fall into the trap of trying to be pipers instead of prophets—they can be seduced into thinking that they have what these kids really need, that they are personally responsible for saving them from themselves.

When this happens, what the trade calls “burn out” is not far behind. The distressingly rapid turnover of people in youth ministry has much to do with failing to be content simply with *witnessing* to the light. We are not the light. Youth ministers who cast themselves in the role of piper are not entirely unlike those well-intentioned but naive adults who accompanied the brave but deluded child crusaders on their impossible journey over the Alps. And what a burned-out youth minister often leaves in her wake are disappointed, sometimes disillusioned young crusaders.

So hear, all ye who are burned out, the words of the prophet to his disciples: “*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” (Jn. 1:29) Behold, the one who can remove the impossible burden from your

weary shoulders by relieving you of your illusions.

*Look!* says John the Baptizer, to those who are searching, *there* is the one you should follow—not me. John admits he didn't know who the great one who would be coming after him would be. That he now recognizes Jesus as God's own anointed is due to the visible manifestation of the Spirit. The same Spirit with which John is filled descended on the Lord like a dove when John baptized his cousin; and because he has seen this revelation with his own eyes, he can say with authority, "*He is the one—follow him.*"

When Jesus inaugurates his own ministry and quickly gains a following, this news is communicated to John the Baptizer by his disciples: "Rabbi, the one who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you testified, here he is baptizing and everyone is coming to *him.*" Instead of feeling threatened by this development, John replies,

You yourselves bear me witness, that I said I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. He must increase, but I must decrease. (Jn. 3:28-30)

*He must increase, I must decrease.* These words should be engraved on the heart of every youth minister. We must never forget that the children of God are meant to walk in the light. If we are not the light, then when the light appears the ones we love must be on their way—on his way.

This, of course, is the hard part of being a youth minister, but also the best part. It is closely related to the understanding that we are not the light but only witness to it. If we are in fact faithful and effective in witnessing to the light, then sooner or later, the young people we work with are going to go after it. And if we are like John, this is when we will feel most rewarded, when our joy will be "full."

Here is the true measure of John's greatness as a spiritual leader. He knows when to let go; he knows that if he is true to his calling, he will indeed diminish in importance to his disciples. They will be increasingly attracted, not by him and his radical witness, but by the radiant beauty—the *light*—to which his radical witness points. He cannot hang on to the wonderful young people who follow him for a while. To be true to his calling he must constantly point beyond himself to something more. Something better. *Someone Else.*

How hard this is! It is so good to be needed, so good to be adored—or at least appreciated! But for this John was born, for this he leapt in his mother's womb, foreswore strong drink, wore camel's hair, and ate bugs—not to pipe his followers into an earthly paradise, but to help each person prepare a way, a broad and beckoning highway, over which the Lord may pass, into her life, into his heart.

The valleys that must be filled, the mountains that have to be leveled, the rough country that must be smoothed over, are apt metaphors for our own inner terrain. This is where the serious road work of repentance

has to begin. It is an equally apt description of the unfinished state of adolescence—peaks of exhilaration, valleys of despair, rough and rugged ways of thinking, speaking, acting—a real wilderness of confusion and rebellion.

Into this rough and not-yet-ready place comes the prophet, the new Elijah, looking a little rough and ragged himself, but filled with unshakable faith in the truth of God's promise to deliver—both us and the goods; filled with a healthy fear of God's wrath and an immense hope in God's mercy; filled with a hatred of sin and the injustices that are its inevitable fruits; and filled with boundless compassion for the sinner. *Filled to the brim* because he is inebriated with the Spirit, who blows his own tune, who never fails to enchant. This new Elijah is not someone who will have to go looking for young listeners. They will come flocking—because they are looking for the light. And they are ready to do something about it. ●

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#### NOTES

1 This date is supplied by the *World Book* entry on Hamelin. The poem by Robert Browning gives the date as July 22, 1376.

2 Gloria Skurzynski, *What Happened in Hamelin*. New York: Four Winds Press, 1979, p. 176.

3 See George Zabriskie Gray, *The Children's Crusade: A History*. New York: William Morrow & Co., 1972.

4 Robert Browning, *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. London and New York: Frederick Warne & Co., no date, pp. 6-11.

5 Browning, p. 47.