

## **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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# GRACE, REPENTANCE, AND COMMITMENT: YOUTH INITIATION IN CARE AND FORMATION

James W. Fowler

## INTRODUCTION: THE CRY FOR INITIATION AND OUR FRAGMENTED CULTURE



In this third lecture we come to what seem to be for many of us the most difficult challenges in ministry with youth in the present era. Here I want to explore with you some reflections and directions in relation to grace, repentance, and commitment. I will build on our theological work in the trinitarian frame. Especially I will ask you to keep in mind the work we did on the providence of God, or as I called it, the *praxis* of God. I will want to work further with the doctrines of vocation and covenant faithfulness that came to expression in that presentation. For me the shape of God's *praxis*, through many long lines of convergent faithfulness, invites us to see God's work in relation to an *ecology of vocation and grace*.

In this final lecture I want to give special attention to the role of grace in empowering and leading youth into Christian commitment, the awakening to vocation, and their entering into the disciplines and privileges of Christian community.

But first, some framing work: Malidoma Some, a medicine man of the Dagara tribe from Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), West Africa, says American youth and their parents have lost their connection to the earth, to real community, and to the knowledge of their life purpose. We need, he says, to be initiated.<sup>3</sup> Some writes about his own tribal initiation:

Initiation in my tribe is a six-week journey into the magical world. It begins when families walk their young ones to the outskirts of the village and surrender them to the wilderness. The young ones walk into the bush naked and scared, a condition necessary for the ritual remem-

bering. Throughout the ordeal there is no food except what can be found in the bush.

Early in my initiation I was told to sit in front of a tree and to gaze at it. The hot tropical sun broiled me, ants bit me, and I was blinded by sweat. Every so often an elder would come and check on me. The experience was painful and boring, but it all culminated in a vision in which the tree disappeared and I saw a tree woman emerge from it. She was as familiar as a mother or some sacred caretaker. Whoever she was, the reunion was very emotional, and the experience ended with me hugging that tree and weeping.

Later in my initiation I was told to leap into the light hole, a fantastic circle of light created out of a cowhide that looked like a magical wheel leading downward into an unimaginable world. Jumping into that light hole was terribly frightening. I descended like a parachuter on a free fall while trying to hold on to a "light wire," as the elders instructed me. One of us never made it back. The world I was able to perceive after I stopped falling was most phantasmagoric and scary. Especially frightening was my own invisibility, for although I knew I was there, I could see everything else except me. When I was pulled out of that place, I realized how boundlessly enhanced my vision had become. What is important about exercises like these is that they weakened my resistance to the dream world and the supernatural to the point where I was able to consciously journey into an underworld that is only acceptable in the West as a fairy tale. The underworld is the place where one encounters one's own identity prior to being born into a community of humans. It is the ideal place for remembering one's energetic identity as well as one's life project.

One returns from the underworld with something that serves as the "first medicine," a kind of reference book that you return to whenever you feel the need to refresh your memory of what you are doing here on earth. How it's made accessible to the initiate is part of a secret tightly held by the tribal elders . . . . The return to the village is like returning to the human world. It's warm, comforting, loving, and relaxing. Everybody knows that you know, and so you dance your knowledge in front of the whole village . . . . This welcoming must be massive, not like a simple ceremony of giving a diploma, but a recognizable, whole-hearted embrace and valuing of the initiates' power to contribute to the community. In other words, this last stage must make the returning men and women want to maintain the pride of their community.<sup>4</sup>

It is doubtful that people like us, who have undergone western education and who have lived in our pluralistic, secular culture, can genuinely recreate rites of passage for youth with anything approximating the power and transforming capacity Some describes. As the Jungian teacher Robert Johnson might say, "Our minds have undergone the separation of matter and spirit, therefore we are no longer capable of the alchemy of transform-

ing initiation." Or as Max Weber, the sociologist of religion, put it, "We have experienced the disenchantment of the world." And we Protestants—and especially we Presbyterians—have been at the forefront of the religious side of modernization and, inadvertently, of secularization.

At the same time, however, youth are acting out their hunger for initiation and incorporation into adulthood and into meaningful group identity through a wide variety of ad hoc patterns of ritualization. Many of these occur without relation to Christian community or tradition. Many of them occur without involvement or leadership from elders. Today the most serious and intense rites of passage and trials leading to group membership seem to be those shaped by local or national youth gangs. These initiations often involve candidates' committing dangerous and criminal acts, designed to prove their mettle and to fuse them into the fellowship of those who have taken a life, committed a felony by stealing a car, or shown a resolute willingness to inflict pain and terror on others through violent beating, rape, or robbery. In contrast to the seriousness and power of gang initiations, the incorporative rituals of most fraternities and sororities have become playful but trivial, shallow, and relatively meaningless affairs.

What are we learning about how to engage in rites of Christian initiation for youth that have both integrity and power? In an earlier lecture I referred to the revivalist paradigm of religious experience and commitment to Christ that has exerted such pervasive influence in American Protestantism. Are there ways that we can reclaim rites of Christian initiation for youth that have both integrity and power? Can we learn again to touch the lives of adolescents, bringing them moments of special opening to the Spirit, and inspiring them to respond to the call of Christ to new being and vocation? These are the questions I want to work with in this presentation.

I will begin with what may seem to some a strange starting point. I want to work with you for a bit on a rich doctrine of grace that could provide a useful framework for re-examining our ministries in youth evangelism and Christian initiation. I will paint for you, in necessarily broad strokes, the heart of John Wesley's practical theology of God's grace. Then I will draw some of its implications for how we might assess, and perhaps reshape, some of the ways we are working to bring youth to Christian commitment, and to an awakening to their vocations in Christ.

## THE MOVEMENTS OF GRACE: TOWARD A *VIA SALUTIS*

For Wesley, there is one overall grace of God. However, that grace and love of God meets us and addresses us at our points of need. Just as change and dynamism are central parts of our lives and experiences as humans, so the grace and love of God meet us and move us according to our need and readiness. Wesley believed in and taught that there is a dynamic relationship between *justification* and *sanctification*. Justification is the work

of God's grace that brings us to our senses, leads us to repentance, and enables us to accept God's offer of forgiveness. Sanctification is the work of grace in us that empowers us to give up all that blocks us from the call of Christ, and to commit ourselves in discipleship to Christ. It sets us on the path toward the fullness of holiness or perfection in grace. That, in short, is Wesley's teaching about the work of grace in us. We will spell it out more fully as we go. Let's see why it might be important for ministry with youth. Wesley sees five major expressions and experiences of grace:

- Prevenient Grace
- Awakening or Convicting Grace
- Justifying Grace
- Rebirth
- Sanctifying Grace

*Prevenient Grace:* This aspect of grace is universal. It is the grace of God surrounding us—and all people. This explains the rootage of conscience in all people. For Wesley, the prevenient work of God's grace explains why, as Paul says in Romans 2:14, Gentiles and others who do not possess the law "do instinctively what the law requires . . . . They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my Gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all." Wesley's doctrine of prevenient grace bears a resemblance to Karl Rahner's teaching about the "anonymous Christian." Prevenient grace enables persons who do not know God to open their hearts toward God; it prepares hearts for the address of the Word of God. Prevenient grace can stir a restless hunger, an empty longing. Perhaps the burgeoning interest in spirituality in its myriad forms in our society at present is a manifestation of this aspect of prevenient grace. This is grace creating divine dissatisfaction with the ways we are living, a hunger for a truer faith.

*Awakening or Convicting Grace:* This is the work of God's grace that enables us to stand entertaining the possibility that God has hopes for us that are not being fulfilled. It moves us to recognize that God has a calling for us that we need to answer. It disturbs us into the recognition that God intends us for more and better than we are living. This is the work of God's grace that gives us the strength to bear recognizing our sin. Attending to this voice of grace can lead us to recognize the shallowness of our living. It can open our eyes to our entrapment in a "kitsch as kitsch can" spirituality. It can give us eyes to see and hearts to acknowledge the destructiveness of aspects of the ways we are living. In awakening grace the Spirit of God signals a call to change: to change where we rest our hearts and place our trust; to change the depth at which we are fishing for life's meanings and satisfactions; to change the directions of our loves and of the investment of our best energies.

Awakening grace empowers us to recognize our distance—and maybe our alienation—from God. It enables us to feel our emptiness and moral impoverishment. Insistently, it calls us to turn toward God's love in repentance. Awakening or convicting grace presents to us the need to reject our present manner of life and to open ourselves to where God may lead us in Jesus Christ. It can make us aware of the canyon between our present ways of living and the vision of faithfulness and partnership God has for us. Convicting grace helps us unmask the tawdry faces of our false gods; it helps us weigh the quality of our idols. We see the destructive power of our addictions and our attachments to false values and passions. It draws us with soul hunger to respond to the love of God in Christ.

*Justifying Grace:* Justifying grace in Wesley's teaching is related, experientially, to the time of rock-bottom disillusionment and sense of failure he underwent after his disastrous mission to Georgia in his mid-thirties. On shipboard returning to England in the winter of 1738, Wesley faced the depressing realization of the bankruptcy of all his efforts at finding favor with God through his disciplines, his acts of service and mercy, his attendance on the sacraments. In short, he had to face the shipwreck of his entire strategy of works righteousness. Moreover he had to recognize the rootage of much of his personal and official holiness in his need to control others and to live up to the expectations installed deeply in his stringent superego. He faced the realization that his will was bound up in stratagems of earning and seeking to insure God's love through his rigorous good works. He experienced embarrassment, futility, and despair.

God's justifying grace met Wesley through the sensitive and persistent ministry of Peter Bohler, a Moravian theologian and pastor. Bohler dealt with Wesley's resistances to God's offer of grace with the witness of the Bible, the witness of reason, the strength of the great Moravian hymns, the testimony of those who had experienced the warming of their hearts, and the fellowship of prayer.

Such rock-bottom times as this are the points in any of our lives when we truly become candidates for the astonishing gift of God's grace. Its power comes with the discovery that God loves us and claims us to the core. This is not because of what we do or what we have produced, but because God honors and loves us without condition. Justifying grace brings the release that comes when we really understand and feel deep in our emotional center that all the energy we have tied up in efforts of self-making or self-remaking can be redirected.

And, if we are *real sinners*—that is, if we carry on patterns of life that oppress or injure others, if we exploit or demean other persons or groups, or if we use our places of leadership and privilege to aggrandize ourselves, or to meet the needs of our own starved and ambitious egos—justifying grace comes like a love letter that tells us God wants to claim us, to confirm us, and will sustain us in the fearful changes we have to make. God's justifying grace promises God's presence through the radical surgery our lives

require. We feel the force of the revelation that *we can be forgiven*. The good news is that we are *known and loved to our very depths*. *The patterns of our personhood that bring offense to God and debase the image of God in us can be removed from us and we can get a fresh start.*

Here I think I disagree with Robin Maas in her third lecture, where she declared that real change and repentance are not brought about by grace, but rather by prophetic judgment and condemnation of the false and evil patterns of our lives. For Wesley, it is precisely the work of awakening and convicting grace that prepares hardened or oblivious hearts and gives ears to hear and hearts to respond to prophetic judgments and the demand for change.

Through the work of justifying grace, we see the unbelievable possibility that before God we can stop our posturing. Justifying grace surrounds us with God's offer of *mercy and healing for our empty, perverse, or broken hearts*. *We can find a new foundation for our motives and our living*. In Jesus Christ we meet the embodiment of this life-opening grace. In Christian community, justifying faith empowers us, on some days, to be Christ's priests to each other.

*Rebirth*: Here grace enables us to embrace the justifying grace offered to us in Christ. In this moment we say Yes! In this movement we determine to give up the patterns of life we have been living and turn in a new direction, shaping a new way of living and being. This may appropriately be called being "born again." But notice how it is positioned for Wesley. It comes in the larger sequence of the movements of the work of grace in our hearts and lives, and of our responses to the work of grace. Grace always has the initiative—from the surrounding influence of prevenient grace, to the initiatives of God in Christ in justifying grace. *But in each movement we must respond*. *In Wesley's theology, God's grace and our responsibility are always interrelated*. The first makes the second possible, but the second—our response, our responsibility—is necessary for our justification, for our rebirth, and for our ongoing growth in faith in sanctification.

*Sanctifying Grace*: "Be ye therefore *perfect*, even as your Father in heaven is *perfect*." The Greek New Testament term translated as "perfect" is *telios*. It is not to be taken as meaning just blamelessness or moral perfection. Rather, it means *whole, complete, realized, or fulfilled*. It means that grace calls us to an ongoing, lifetime process of growth in grace with God and with others in Christian community. Justification does not instantly make us whole or complete. Rebirth does not make us whole or complete. These gifts of God's grace bring about sufficient transformation in our wills, our directions, our "teachability," that we are set on a pilgrimage with God and our neighbors that leads toward growth in fulfilling our calling to be in partnership with God. We take on the lifelong call to walk the walk of day-by-day, prayerful reliance upon the grace of God, resulting in a growing friendship with God. We begin the process of redirecting our wills and our desires so that they participate more fully in the desires that God has for us and for



the world. This is the path of a synergy—a co-mingling and transformation—of our human capacities with the Spirit and purposes of God. This is growth in covenant faithfulness, directed toward the human communities we are part of, and toward the vision God has for a commonwealth of love and justice. Sanctification is not a state or a stage we reach. It is a dynamic, growing, and vital partnership in the Spirit in which the power of God's grace becomes more and more the central motive in our lives.

## THE VOICES OF GRACE AND MINISTRY WITH YOUTH

I invite you now to think with me for a few moments about some of the implications of this way of understanding the power and witness of God's grace for our ministries with youth.

1. This way of understanding God's grace locates the initiative and power of our ministries with youth in the love and grace of God. Before we approach any youth in the name of Christ, God's prevenient grace already surrounds her or him. The nudge, the lure, the hope of being known and loved by the power that has called them into life glows like a spark in the tinder of even the hardest and most wounded hearts. A neglectful or abusing world has to do terrible things over a long period of time if it wants totally to expunge that inarticulate hope, that animal faith, that says I want to be loved, I want to be cherished, I am a special creature willed by the universe, and I hunger for the touch of God's love. In our ministries with youth, God is the one who goes before us, sustaining that hope, empowering and amplifying our reaching out in the name of Christ.

2. Notice that awakening or convicting grace doesn't condemn. This means that it does not collude with shaming approaches to evangelization, nor does it reduce youth ministry to conventional moral development or moralization. But it does loosen the scales of ignorance or self-deception on youth's eyes. With your teaching and witness, it can enable them to see and acknowledge to themselves, before God, that they are committed to values and involved in patterns of behavior that put them in opposition to the way God wants them to live. They can recognize places of emptiness in their lives where they could be filled. They may be involved in addictions to substances, to behaviors, to dependence on others, or to sex, that stand between them and a truer selfhood in God. Awakening grace allows them to begin to see the bondage in the very lack of boundaries they think they love. Awakening or convicting grace empowers us with a disclosure of God's love and power to heal us, so that we can stand to admit to ourselves and God what it is in our lives that needs to be healed.

Many years ago a Jesuit spiritual director, Fr. Bob Doherty, helped me understand that our times of desolation in prayer—the painful times of facing what God wants to heal in our lives—are often more spiritually

important than our times of consolation. As Robin Maas unfolds the drama of Jesus's responses to the "rich young man," and as he sorrowfully turns away from Jesus, it occurs to me that we see the bad news that is part of the good news for this young man—that God wants more for him—and from him—than his observance of the law. Not all sadness or depression in youth should be avoided or medicated. We and they need to "chew and eat" our desolation. In the economy of God, our honest desolation is one of the expressions of the work of grace.

3. The parable of the prodigal son shows us something of the relation between convicting and justifying grace. Wallowing among the husks that the pigs ate, feeling his hunger and facing his shame about whoring around and squandering his inheritance, the young man "comes to himself." He faces his situation, owns his need for forgiveness, determines to repent, and asks for forgiveness. He acknowledges his deep yearning to return home. This is the work of convicting grace. Justifying grace finds its model in his having the courage to return home in repentance and to ask his father—and his father's God—for forgiveness. We see God's justifying grace at work when the meeting he dreaded with the waiting father is made a joyful reunion and celebration. In justifying grace youth's repentance opens the way for their embrace in the love of God in Christ. And their lives come under new management, with new horizons and new purposes—a new birth.

4. As we think about the movement in grace that is rebirth in relation to youth, we must keep something important in mind. For youth, the experience of the moments or movements of grace that we have been tracing is likely to be happening for the first time. The first experience of the cycle of grace is not likely to be the last such experience—it is not supposed to be. In fact, in every new stage or transition point in our faith, we need a recapitulation of grace in all these movements again. But as the first experience of being met in infinite love at their points of need, youths' first life-changing embrace in God's grace has fundamental importance. Here their claiming of a calling in God occurs. Rebirth takes the form of declaring themselves to be God's boy or girl, God's young woman or young man. Rebirth means embracing discipleship to Christ; it means committing themselves to finding that purpose for their lives that is part of the purposes of God. It means taking on the disciplines and practices that are part of becoming a committed partner in the work of God.

5. From the standpoint of sanctifying grace, our young person has taken a decisive step toward shaping her or his will in accordance with the will of God. She or he has made a first self-responsible commitment to follow Christ. Ministry with youth needs to offer support, teaching, modeling, and concrete opportunities for risky service that make a genuine difference in the world and in youths' lives.

Sanctifying grace begins a lifelong process in the clarification and concentration of one's gifts and ambitions, one's drives and passions.

## INITIATION AND COMMITMENT: ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Let us revisit the beginnings of this talk, returning to the powerful description Malidoma Some gave us of his experience of initiation. Like John Fowles's enigmatic novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, this presentation really has two endings. The first reflects—muses might be the right word—on what it would mean in youth ministry to develop an approach that works to claim for today's youth some of the power and transforming capacity of traditional rites of passage from other cultures, or from our own tradition, the Rites for the Christian Initiation of Adults. I invite you to consider the elements we might try to build into that potentially powerful and life-changing process.

### Ending I: Elements of a Contemporary Initiation for Youth

1. **Liminal Displacement/Significant Renunciations:** In Some's account of his initiation, the parents' taking the candidate to the edge of the village to enter the bush, naked and without food, marked the movement across the *limin*, the boundary between the structured existence of every day and the place of openness to the underworld—the antistructure. In liminal displacement, initiates find themselves in a time out of time, in a place that is noplacement. Removed from the reassurances of regular schedules and familiar routines, and sometimes experiencing sensory deprivation, the youths come open to dreams, visions, moments of terror and transcendence. Jesus' forty days in the wilderness after his baptism by John involved him in liminal displacement.

To go into the antistructure is to turn away from much that makes life pleasant, predictable, and "in control." One may vastly decrease normal food intake through fasting or entering settings where food is not readily available. For youth who depend on the TV or reading, or on tapes and radio to fill the space around them, the requirement of long periods of silence, or of being without a screen or book, becomes an invitation to new adventures in self-exploration and solitude. A redirecting of attention and energy, a new quality of attending and being with oneself and the Spirit, brings the possibility for intensified attention to whatever one receives as teaching, and to whatever images or reading may be provided. "As it is written, no one lives by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the Father."

2. **Intense Engagement:** One may be assigned repetitious tasks to carry out, or be directed to meditate on a tree, a stone, a distant mountain, or on a cross or flame. One may be given a prayer or mantra to repeat. For Some, the focused meditation on the tree and the leap into the "lighthole" opened up times of intense engagement and the kind of set focusing of attention that allowed surprising visitants from the underworld. This suggests teaching forms of meditative prayer, or Ignatian methods of contem-

plative prayer with Scriptures, where the young person is no longer operating on the basis of predigested meanings, but instead works directly with the text, and in the power of the Spirit, and experiences it becoming the word of God for her or him. The intense engagement might involve learning to fall deeply into the depths of a text, armed only with imagination and receptiveness, and trusting radically in the promise of the gift of God's spirit.

**3. Serious Instruction/Practice of New Disciplines:** During the initiation experience, usually after solitary times of visitation and breakthrough, there are hours devoted to the most serious instruction. Everyone involved knows that they engage in serious business. Solemn and authoritative instruction touches and interprets the experiences one is having, and prepares the way for disclosing the most treasured teachings of one's group. When Some talks about the "first medicine" he received from the elders, one thinks of the disclosure of the meanings of the Decalog, the prologue to John's Gospel, or receiving teaching about cosmology and creation in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity, or the radical faith expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. This speaks of learning adult materials, treasured and kept sacred by the elders.

Already we have mentioned fasting, the relinquishing of media and books, and receiving instruction in meditation or contemplative prayer with Scripture. This brings the phase of incorporating these new practices into ongoing patterns and disciplines of learning and service. This will require support and accountability.

**4. "Close Conversations"/Genuine Decisions:** While being supported and sustained by the work of a group, there need to be places for private, personal, and confidential conversations with a trusted counselor or elder—a friend in faith. This is to provide a partner whose listening and accompaniment can help youth articulate and integrate the work of the Spirit in them. This should include non-manipulative, heartfelt prayer together.

As youth and their friends in faith evidence the work of God's spirit and grace in their lives, youth should be encouraged to make decisions about how they are going to respond to the call of God, and how they can make their responses part of the conduct of their lives.

**5. Ritual Incorporation/Welcome and Witness to the Community:** Part of the great power of Some's account of his initiation rites came in his narrative of return to the village. His people knew what he had experienced. When he danced his new meaning and understandings, therefore, it was both a confirmation of his learning and experiences, and a certification of the power of his suffering and growth, as well as a confirmation of the shared meanings and symbols that give his tribal group their identities and grounding in the world. Our own efforts at confirmation, at their best, bring about this double or two-way experience of sharing meanings and symbols with a new generation, and through them, experiencing them afresh ourselves.

## Ending II: Words of Encouragement and Admonition

My other ending involves a kind of farewell salute, summing up what I would most like to leave with youth ministers from my presentations and from some of those of others who spoke at our conference. Let me just offer a few words of elaboration on each of these briefly in closing.

First, I want to affirm the integrity and authority of your calling, and its grounding in the trinitarian *praxis* of God. There is no more important work in the world in which you could be engaged. In my second presentation I wrote about the *praxis* of God, and used the imagery of God's providence as operating in the world through long lines of convergent faithfulness. If we really trust this biblically grounded conviction, it means that the investment we make in helping youth find themselves and their vocations in God always has the potential and significance of becoming part of God's work in the world. We should never forget the reality that God uses us—and calls youth through us—for service in God's *praxis*. We may never see or know all or most of what God will choose to do through the formative investments we make in youth. But we should not give into despair, or to secular wonderings about whether the work of our callings is worthwhile. There is no work in the world that is more important.

Second, I want to reaffirm that the power and impact of our work really is grounded in the Spirit and power of God. We are surrounded and sustained by God's grace and spirit. We are called to the disciplines of care, creativity, and faithfulness. We are called to invest our love in the most generative ways possible. But the power and impact of our work—the moving and shaping of hearts and convictions—are the work of God's power and grace. You must live from radical trust in the grace and power of God surrounding and accompanying you and your youth. That is what the Wesleyan doctrine of the five movements of grace most fundamentally means.

I charge you—and declare you entitled—to create time and space in your life for prayer and for contemplative prayer with Scripture, for yourselves, and for the youth with whom you minister. In a culture where productivity is measured in quantity and motion, and where we depend on the strenuous mode of “busy, busy, busy” to certify our worth, we are called to the nurture and focus of a life of prayer. It is necessary for sustained faithfulness and creativity; it is necessary for grounding and orientation; it is necessary for spiritual authority and power, and for facing the powers and principalities that surround us.

For us Protestants, it is important that our ministries with youth address the right hemisphere of the brain, the imagination, and the body as elements in our spirituality. Words, words, words, words. We overburden the left hemisphere and its conceptual, interrogative abilities. We must learn to trust that the deep structures of faith and conviction are formed by music and poetry, by the kenesthetics and drama of ritual, and by the rhythm and texture of spoken prayer. Symbol, story, dance, and motion move and fund

and form the heart.

Finally, tolerate no trivialization of your work, status, or role. Just as the society is ambivalent about its youth—oscillating between love and hate for them, between hope and despair—so it is ambivalent about adults who find their calling in relation to befriending and leading young persons. Tolerate no condescension about the profound importance of your calling. At the same time, stay in touch with the whimsy and paradoxical playfulness of God. Remember the power that God finds in weakness, and the weakness God often discloses in power that is cut off from God. Be mindful of the paradox that leading from the margins can often be more impactful than efforts that come from the enmeshed center.

May the grace, mercy, and power of the trinitarian God bless and sustain you, and those with whom you serve, in the name of Christ. ●

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#### NOTES

1 Quoted from James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1984, p. 88.

2 *Stride Toward Freedom*, excerpted in James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986, pp. 437-438.

3 This and following narrative come from Malidoma Some, "In Context" in *Utne Reader*, July/August 1994, p. 67.

4 For a longer and fuller account of these experiences, see Malidoma Patrice Some, *Of Water and the Spirit: Ritual, Magic, and Initiation in the Life of an African Shaman*. New York: Viking Penguin Books, 1994, chs. 14-20, 26.