

The 1998 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Growing Up Postmodern: Imitating Christ in the Age of "Whatever"

Introduction

Descartes is history. That's the conclusion of postmodernity. Foundational truth is out, relativity is in. Trace it to Hiroshima, the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Challenger explosion. Technology is not the panacea we thought it would be. Trace it to Watergate, liposuction, spin doctors. Truth is not an objective reality anymore. Trace it to institutional differentiation, Baskin Robbins, cable TV. Choice can paralyze as well as liberate.

Nobody knows this better than the young people whose coming of age coincides with the turn of the millennium. They live in a world where microchips are obsolete every eighteen months, information is instantaneous, and parents change on weekends. The one constant in the postmodern adolescent's experience is upheaval. Truth changes daily. The signature quality of adolescence is no longer lawlessness, but awelessness. Go ahead, youth say to the church. Impress me. When everything is true, nothing is true. Whatever.

It's true that we live in a world that considers truth too relative to specify. The comics brought us mutant "X-Men" and now "X-Women"; consumer thinking brought us X-brands and X-spouses; pop culture brought us X-Files and Generation X. The letter "X" is having a banner decade, labeling "whatever" we don't have the time or the inclination to explain.

Maybe the word "whatever" found its way into the contemporary adolescent vocabulary because "X" describes precisely the Truth they seek. In the early church, the Greek letter "X" (chi) referred to Jesus Christ. This generation of young people is neither the first nor the last in search of "X." Paul recognized this quest in the Athenians, who went as far as to erect an altar to "an unknown god":

What you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . . The One who is Lord of heaven and earth. . . made all nations. . . so that they would search for God. . . . God will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom God has appointed, and of this we are assured because God raised him from the dead. (Acts 17:23-31)

We all seek "X," God's Truth beyond relativity. We are here because we are called to imitate and obey and proclaim this Truth to all who worship unknown gods. The Truth is out there, for young people and for us.

May you find grace to peruse the "X-Files" of your own life in the days ahead, as we grope for "X" together. Though, indeed, he is not far from each of us.

Godspeed,
Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

1998 Lectures

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“Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?” As Asked by Young People

Martin E. Marty

*...yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things
and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are
all things and through whom we exist... (I Corinthians 8:5-6)*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw the worst of modernity in the mad rationality of Hitler's Germany. The so-called gods of Teutonic mythology and the modern lords of military-mounted totalitarianism claimed the total loyalty of the people and demonized “the Other” — the Jew, the homosexual, the dissident. Imprisoned and ultimately to be killed by the Nazis a month before World War II ended, this still young theologian, pastor, confirmation teacher (who “had a way with the young people”) had time to muse.

He wrote poetry on the theme “Who am I?” But he also had to ask, in that secular “world come of age” that he saw around him and in the religious varieties he met in prison, a question that had haunted him for years: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”

Young people today ask that same question, though not in the face of executioners and prisoners. They may not pose the “Jesus Christ” question as startlingly as Bonhoeffer did, and his confirmands in the Germany of the 1930s did not recognize its force as he did. They had lives to live, radios to listen to, comic books to read, parents against whom to rebel, and Hitler Youth Movements to respond to or, at some hazard, to reject. Theirs had been a high humanist tradition. Jesus Christ was privileged by tradition, but they could take him for granted in the back-at-home piety or when the Führer preached about Christ. Yes, Bonhoeffer was posing that question out of their circumstances and for their good. He did not say Christ “for me” but Christ “for us,” as we must.

The standard theme in books written on Jesus and on Christology in the post-modern era seems to be that we are not going to agree on Jesus Christ “for us” and

all that phrase implies. The authors present *their* Jesus, *their* Christ, and they tell how they came to scholarly conclusions about him. Many of their books are historically and literarily refined and helpful along the way.

Most of them know that in premodern eras, from the early church until a couple of centuries ago, who Jesus Christ was was determined pretty much by credal and confessional formulation. Dogma, doctrine, the magisterium, systematic theology, and biblical scholarship spoke. Acquiescent laity received the message, perhaps dimly, through preaching and catechesis. But what they did not know, they could find out by asking. Not that ancient creeds and statements like the one from the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) were simple to comprehend. They dealt with realities about the divine and the human that resist clear definition and cannot be definitively grasped. Yet, these creeds could speak with some precision.

After they spoke, there was authority to enforce what was heard. In the sixteenth century a would-be Unitarian physician named Servetus questioned the divinity of Jesus. John Calvin stood by, as virtually any of the main Reformers would have, while Servetus, a heretic, was executed.

Of course, an understanding of who Jesus was came not only through dogma and authority. We should never underestimate the values and virtues of preaching and prayer, baptism and communion, and piety and instruction that pass from one generation to another. The existence of the Christian church, one or two billion strong, shows that something went on that helped people answer “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” If anything written here seems to be denigrating them or the legacy they left, such demeaning was not intended. Once again, we are not speaking about whether different times were better or worse, but only saying that they were different.

The postmodern young can live much of their lives without having Jesus stand in their way at all. Public education, television, radio, film, CDs, and other instruments of culture tend to be silent about Jesus. For churchgoers and participants in Christian education and youth ministry, there is more. But otherwise, the signals about who Christ is are blocked or ignored. The church seeks to change that.

The last thing that we would expect of the young is that they achieve what the scholars have not done: to sort out all the signals to come up with a definitive and universal answer to the question. Statistics reveal that the market for serious theology numbers about 12,000 people in our culture of 270,000,000. This means that most clergy are not troubling themselves with formal answers to the formal questions as posed by formal scholars. Nor should we expect precision in the answers the young semiheretics might come up with, especially in a postmodern time when few know how to define heresy, and the smart ones know how to avoid heresy trials.

Winston Churchill used to tell the story of a man who risked his life to save a drowning boy. He rescued him and, gasping for breath as he turned the boy over to his mother, heard her snap: "Where's Johnny's cap?" "Where's Johnny's cap?" here would mean: you got the young to take seriously the question of Jesus Christ, but neither you nor they settled once and for all how the divine and human meet in Jesus, how Jesus "fits in" to the Trinity. How God "the Father" as God and Jesus Christ as "the Lord" can be kept before us without our falling into ditheism, two-god worship. We are content to have Johnny alive, ready to swim again, or to learn how to, even if capless.

So what question should we ask? The one this forum asked has to do with one decisive element: "Growing Up Postmodern" as it relates to "Imitating Christ in the Age of 'Whatever.'" Few will stay with the quest and the response if they do not come to see Jesus as not merely an extraordinary ordinary human. It is not likely that many will imitate him instead of some other hero or heroine if they do not have some experience of him as savior, redeemer, and healer. But that is for another day. Our topic has to do with imitation and discipleship.

Choosing to follow or, in some languages, recognizing that one was chosen to follow is not an isolated act by eccentrics in a culture that does not recognize what they are doing. It is one thing to imitate Christ in Albania or Manchuria or Tibet and another to do so in Albany or Manchester or Toronto. In the United States, the late modern and postmodern conjunctions have plenty of room for Jesus Christ to emerge, when one bothers to ask or to notice.

"Who is Jesus Christ for the American people today?" In late modern America, the way to find that out is to take a poll. A dozen years ago the Princeton Religion Research Center, the Gallup poll, undertook such a survey. Its findings are published in *Who Do Americans Say That I Am?* (Westminster Press, 1986). The survey has all the limits such inquiries do, as admitted by George Gallup Jr., coauthor with George O'Connell. It is hard to refine questions appropriate to such an inquiry, and one may (and must) regard some responses with some suspicion. Yet, certain bold outlines stand out. The young enter postmodernity in the midst of a public where among the so-called gods Jesus remains a cherished and privileged subject for worship, devotion, and following.

It is tempting to go into great detail in reporting on such a survey, but sampling is in order here. We find that 91 percent believe that Christ lived, and that 70 percent say something like "Christ was God." (Paul says that only once, in Romans 9; but we'll let that pass.) He was "just a religious leader" to only 11 percent. A few responded either "don't know" or "Christ didn't live," but he is still the figure for most to confront. Among those who do not believe that Jesus is divine, 20 percent wish they could believe, 36 percent have no opinion, and 44 percent don't think it

would make a great deal of difference.

Forty-two percent were ready to say that “Jesus was divine in the sense that he was in fact God living among men,” and 275 said he was “divine in the sense that while he was only a man, he was uniquely called by God to reveal God’s purpose in the world.” About 17 percent had lesser descriptions of divinity in him, and 14 percent had no opinion. But in the age of “whatever,” Jesus is still clearly the “Whomever” with whom to reckon on the divine/human frontier.

How important to you is belief that Christ was “fully God and fully human?” Fifty-eight percent of the general public said it was “very important,” and 23 percent said it was “fairly important.” Gallup did not ask the very young, but 53 percent of the eighteen to twenty-nine year olds and 55 percent of the thirty to forty-nine year olds said “very important,” and, successively, 27 percent and 25 percent of those two age cohorts said it was “fairly important.” Add “not very important” and “not important” and you get 17 percent of the public and 18 percent of the eighteen to twenty-nine year olds. So “Whoever” Christ is is important in the “whatever” era — as it became to those to whom Paul and his contemporaries addressed the question for the very first time in their cultures.

Do you consider yourself to be a Christian? Here again, following Jesus, which is part of being a Christian, is a privileged role. In the general public, 81 percent named themselves after him, 785 of the eighteen to twenty-four year olds called themselves Christian.

What is important among the ways to try to follow Jesus? Forty-eight percent said “obeying the Ten Commandments,” 44 percent replied “forgiving those who have wronged you”; 34 percent “putting others’ needs before your own”; and 31 percent “living in such a way as to draw others to Jesus.” There were eleven other answers to this question. The fewest, 10 percent, thought that following Jesus meant “working for social justice,” or “becoming involved in community activities,” and next was 14 percent, who said “receiving Holy Communion.” Not all the implications of imitating Christ have been worked out in such a sample.

For the “imitating Christ” questions we have this: *How hard have you tried to follow the example of Jesus — if at all?* In the general public 12 percent said they had made the “greatest possible” effort; 33 percent said they had made “considerable” effort; 34 percent said “some.” The figures for eighteen to twenty-four year olds in the three categories were 4 percent, 28 percent, and 44 percent. It is quite possible that such an answer would have been given by postadolescents at any time; it may also be due to cultural changes and some recession of the Jesus figure or the notion of following anybody. Thus, among those sixty-five and older, the figures are 28 percent, 36 percent, and 23 percent.

This forum is not dedicated chiefly to intellectual inquiries about what is

known by a postmodern public about Jesus, though that question relates to the others. So, we will give only passing notice to three questions: *Who delivered the Sermon on the Mount?* (42 percent knew it was Jesus, 24 percent gave a wrong answer, and 34 percent wisely owned up to the fact that they did not know); *Can you name the four Gospels?* (46 percent could, 43 percent “don’t know”); and *Where was Jesus born?* The carols in the postmodern mall must have done their work: 70 percent knew that the answer was Bethlehem. Since cognition and imitation have a lot to do with each other, youth ministry will continue to pay attention to knowledge issues. But our prime concern has to do with imitating this “one Lord” among the many lords, with discipleship and following him as the one “through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” That Pauline line has something to do with what it means for the 81 percent to say they are Christian.

Who is Jesus Christ for us today? If one had asked that question among the people of Corinth or Rome when Paul was writing, the answer might have been not 81 percent but .81 percent or .081 percent. What the respondents in the two eras would have had in common, as they would not have in premodern, western worlds, or in their segment apart in denominationalized modern times, is this: who Jesus Christ as Lord was had to be determined among many altars and shrines, many banners and advertisements, many pitches and preachments, among the so-called gods and the many gods and lords.

How refined must their understanding of Jesus as “divine and human” be for young people in postmodern times in order for them to take a decisive turn and see him as the “one Lord” to follow?

They will get many signals. Magazines and newspapers have a fascination for “the new quest for the historical Jesus,” “the Jesus Seminar,” and other critical inquiries. These leave little intact about Jesus as Lord. What is interesting is that, during the half century of well-publicized, scientific, scholarly scrutinies, the number of people who, no doubt aware of the scholarly contentions that bracket out the divine, keep seeing Jesus as divine remains about as high as ever.

Paul Ricoeur once wrote that there were three ways to approach scriptural texts. One is historical, as the ones just referred to are. We can never know too much about the background of a text. The second, currently in vogue, is literary. The postmoderns “deconstruct” texts and tell us that there are no stable references behind words and lines. But it is the third approach that, alongside or in spite of the other two, reaches the people to whom Jesus is preached and taught. In Ricoeur’s words, this is “the world in front of the text.” How am I beckoned to entertain a different mode of existence in the light of what I hear when it is read to reach my mind and heart?

How much precision must there be in defining exactly what is at issue in Jesus?

James D.G. Dunn in *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Westminster Press, 1977) looked at all the ways early Christians confessed the faith, organized their communities, and, most of all, witnessed to Jesus Christ. Dunn relished the variety of answers but felt impelled to seek a “bottom line,” a basic memory-impression, a root confession of faith. What is distinctive in all the New Testament formulations? It is (notably italicized) “*the conviction that the historical figure, Jesus the Jew, is now an exalted being* — [that this Jesus is and continues to be the] *agent of God, supreme over all other claimants to the titles Lord and Son of God.*”

He adds that it is *Jesus* who is confessed, not his ideas, ideology, faith, or teaching. We talk not of the faith of Jesus but of faith *in* Jesus. When young people “imitate,” do they not cut through everything to come to this same basic point? Second, and this is good for postmodern witness, it is the *present* status of Jesus that is confessed. Not what he *was*, but what he *is*. So the historical figure of Jesus the human and the post-resurrection exalted figure encounters us here and now. Dunn adds that all this occurs differently in “different, particular situations.” No locale of the church came up with the terms of a confession to satisfy. If you would work with postmodern use, listen to what Dunn writes fully in the light of Christian witness:

The fact is, quite simply, that confessions framed in one context do not remain the same when that context changes. New situations call forth new confessions. A Christianity that ceases to develop new confessional language ceases to confess its faith to the contemporary world.

Dunn speaks to our youth when he adds that we should note the *simplicity* of the confessions and witness. “Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is Lord. *It is important that faith can be reduced to such simple assertions and slogans.*” If you can believe that as I, by quoting it favorably, do, you will be able to trace the ancestry of the Christian T-shirt to ancient Corinth.

It is worthwhile illustrating an example of what Dunn leaves as an agenda, as it is one that young people experience or will experience. This is especially the case among those who do not live a sheltered existence, who are surrounded by living examples of pluralism — namely young people important to them (or even not so) who do not believe in Jesus Christ, but who are “religious” or “spiritual” or “good.” In Lakeland’s text he describes one approach among many by which one believes in, follows, and acknowledges the Lordship of Jesus Christ and then does or does not engage in dialogue, efforts to interpret, or to convert. This is one of the more urgent questions for thoughtful young people who do not want to be wishy-washy, semi-committal, tolerant to the point of indifference, or simply relativist. In other words, not confessors at all.

We have before us the question of imitation. What do we see in the one who

is imitated, the exemplar? In the Middle Ages, the lexicons that set out to define the word from which come example and exemplar spoke of the *exemplum* or “a clearing in the woods.” Words like “excerpt” and “excise” are similar examples of “cutting out” or clearing.

The *exemplum*, the clearing in the woods, has three functions. First, it defines the woods. The woods are dark thickets, plotless obscurities. Then comes the clearing where the woods ends and another reality begins. Next, the clearing is the place where the light falls, and one can see clearly. Third, in the clearing there is cultivating — a cabin, some rows of corn, a cow tethered, a clothesline, and smoke coming from a chimney.

If Jesus Christ is an exemplar for a young person in the dark thicket of post-modernity with its plotless obscurities, he becomes the definition for that young person’s life. Access to Jesus through the Gospels, the stories, and the neighbor represents light in the dark shadows. Knowing how he “cultivated” allows the young person a chance to grow. The Gallup poll gave some samples of what the late-modern public saw as exemplary: *What do you consider to be the most appealing character or personality trait in Jesus?* Forty-one percent said “love for humankind,” and 13 percent said “forgiveness.” Then, all less than 10 percent, followed “kindness,” “compassion,” “help/guidance,” “humility,” “knowledge/understanding,” “caring,” “teachings,” “promise of salvation,” and “everything about him is good.” Fewer than 5 percent answered with surprises such as “strength” and “healing,” and in the 1 percent and 2 percent range were “ethics,” “divinity,” “miracles,” and “hope.” The premodern pictures of Jesus as judge are not present. This may be too “soft” a picture of Jesus, but in a cruel world, starting with the exemplar of love may not be the worst thing to propagate among young people.

Young people show in survey after survey that they want to be “connected.” So, what do we do with this information? The Add Health people, reporting in *Reducing the Risk: Connections That Make a Difference in the Lives of Youth*, make connection the main theme of their findings. Youth may look as if they want to be disconnected from community and others; they may seem as if they want to escape into “virtual reality” and media-packaged and mall-related worlds. Yet, decisively, they would rather connect with parents and family, with school, and with friends.

A clue that comes with many versions of Christology but was not prime in premodern or modern discourse is Jesus as friend. This is a seldom-sounded (e.g., John 15:15) but constantly subthemed accent. However, in the very new translation and publication of Rudolf Schnackenburg’s *Freundschaft mit Jesus*, now, *The Friend We Have in Jesus* (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), the distinguished senior Wuerzburg scholar wrote with some sense of urgency, as he said:

In sickness and old age, I have striven to keep the feeling and experiential impact of Jesus Christ clearly in view, concerning myself especially with young people who are laboring to construct their own image of Jesus. I ask myself, "How can the figure of Jesus Christ become engaging — even fascinating — for the youth in our midst?"

Too bad he was not healthy enough, young enough, or English-speaking enough to be at this forum. Schnackenburg hurries past three prominent images of Jesus in our postmodern days: "The Revolutionary Jesus," "Jesus of the Essenes," and "Jesus: Crucified but Not Raised to New Life." He finds as many good reasons to dismiss these for youth as youth would. He focuses in his Part Two on "Jesus Our Friend — A Fascinating Portrait."

There are chapters on "The Gift of Friendship," "Friendship according to John and Paul," "Jesus As the Model for Humankind," "The Call for Decision," and "Jesus Our Friend." Those five chapters could provide an outline for a working out of what "imitating" and "exemplum" here might mean.

We who work with young people can begin to see the implications. That the human Jesus who is the exalted Lord, who commends himself to us and for us, today, as a "servant Lord," imparting and embodying what God means for us — that *this* Jesus is identified as a friend to be imitated is a strong clue. It must find some resonance among people who seek friends in a friendless world, who seek understanding in a universe that seems to be indifferent to the cries of the lonely. He does what friends can do. Admonish. Encourage. Give life for another.

Friendship is based on conversation. We tell a story, and our friends enter in. They have inquiries, and we have partial answers, each of which they correct or reframe out of their experience. Friendship is never a finished product. The Jesus who comes through story, proclamation, experience, and embodiment-in-other-friends cannot be captured in dogma books as people in premodern times thought he could be. Of course, the theologian, even the scholastic theologian, can be helpful by systematizing some of the stories and attributes we connect with Jesus. But few of these theologies match the Jesus Christ who, as the exalted human, is "available," is "at our disposal," who "changes" as we change in the postmodern flux of apparent contradictions.

A friend can say, "This time you went too far," or "Why are you so 'down' today?" or "Can I help you?" or "Confide in me," or "What's really bugging you?" or "Teach me." We have sung, in not the best of hymns, "What a friend we have in Jesus."

That image of Jesus as friend is but one of many possible clearings in the woods. It comes, he comes, as a definer, a light-bringer, and a call to cultivation for those who are "growing up postmodern." ❁