



The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Community

- Introduction

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

With its traditional emphasis on group activities, youth ministry cries out for reflection on the meaning of Christian community. How will we create a cohesive community among the youth in our congregations? What do we do when exclusive cliques threaten the health of the youth ministry? How will we engage young people with the wider faith community and with the communities in which we live? Should we try to draw adolescent loners into the youth group? What tools can we offer young people as they engage with other faith communities or communities from other nations?

Theological reflection on community is foundational for addressing these questions faithfully. The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture provide such reflection. Rather than offering simple steps for building community in your youth group, these lectures use the lenses of friendship, moral formation, reconciliation, and the African Christian concept of communal salvation to shed light on the meaning of Christian community and how it relates to ministry with the young.

- 2007 Lectures

Michael Battle

Is Anyone (Even the Devil) Irreconcilable?
Practicing Reconciliation in a violent World

Stanley Hauerwas

Carving Stone, or, Learning to Speak Christian
Why did Jesus Have to Die?: An Attempt to Cross the Barrier of Age

David J. Wood

The Recovery and the Promise of Friendship
The Promise of Friendship and Practice of Ministry



Why Did Jesus Have to Die?: An Attempt to Cross the Barrier of Age • STANLEY HAUERWAS

On Being Young and Being Christian

I lecture and write often, but I am not sure how to write to those our society identifies as the young or adolescents. I do not know who you are and I am a bit frightened by that unknown. The last band I knew was U2 and I only knew them because they were the last group introduced to me by my son before he “grew up.” I do not know what you read or the movies you see. So I do not know how to “connect” with you.

Moreover, I think it is disgusting for an older guy to try to show he can be “with it.” I do not want to be “with it.” I quit teaching freshmen when I taught at the University of Notre Dame. I did so because I simply found it demeaning to try to convince eighteen-year-olds that they ought to take God seriously. Eighteen-year-old people in our society simply lack the resources to take God seriously—by a resource I mean having noticed that before you know it, you are going to be dead.

Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosopher, has suggested that one of the worst things our society does to the young is to tell them they ought to be happy. MacIntyre thinks that if you are happy, particularly when you are young, you are probably deeply self-deceived. Your appropriate stance is to be miserable. What a terrible time to be young. Shorn of any clear account for what it means to grow up, you are forced to make up your own lives. But you know that any life you make up is not a life you will want to live.

I do not necessarily want this lecture to make you miserable, but I hope that at least some of what I say may help illumine why you are miserable. Indeed I do not want this lecture to be “memorable” for you, particularly if “memorable” means you will think the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry* was a “wonderful” experience. I went to church summer camp once when I was growing up in Texas. I remember the highlight of the camp was on the last night to watch the sun go down from a mountain—well, a hill (it was Texas)—while we sang “Kumbaya.” This was an attempt to give us a “mountain-top experience” that we could identify with being or becoming a Christian. About the last thing I would want is for you to have such an experience here. I do not want to make Christianity easy. I want to make it hard.

Stanley Hauerwas is the Gilbert T. Rowe Professor of Theological Ethics at Duke Divinity School and the author of *Matthew: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (2006) and *The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God* (2007). This lecture appeared in the Lent 2006 issue of *The Cresset*. It is printed here with permission of the publisher.

I assume most of you are here because you think you are Christians, but it is not at all clear to me that the Christianity that has made you Christians is Christianity. For example:

- How many of you worship in a church with an American flag? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.
- How many worship in a church in which the Fourth of July is celebrated? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.
- How many of you worship in a church that recognizes Thanksgiving? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.
- How many of you worship in a church that celebrates January 1 as the “New Year”? I am sorry to tell you that your salvation is in doubt.
- How many of you worship in a church that recognizes “Mother’s Day”? I am sorry to tell you your salvation is in doubt.

I am not making these claims because I want to shock you. I do not want you to leave the Forum on Youth Ministry thinking that you have heard some really strange ideas here that have made you think. It is appropriate that you might believe you are here to make you think because you have been told that is what universities are supposed to do, that is, to make you think. That is, universities are places where you are educated to make up your own mind. That is not what I am trying to do. Indeed I do not think most of you have minds worth making up. You need to be trained before you can begin thinking. So I have not made the claims above to shock you, but rather to put you in a position to discover how odd being a Christian makes you.

One of the great difficulties with being a Christian in a country like America—allegedly a Christian country—is that our familiarity with “Christianity” has made it difficult for us to read or hear Scripture. For example, consider how “Mother’s Day” makes it hard to comprehend the plain sense of some of the stories of Jesus. In Mark 3:31–35, we find Jesus surrounded by a crowd. His mother and brothers were having trouble getting through the crowd to be with Jesus. Somebody in the crowd tells him that his mom cannot get through the mass of people to be near him, which elicits from Jesus the rhetorical question, “Who are my mother and brothers?” This he answered noting, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Even more forcefully Jesus says in Luke 14:26: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.” When you celebrate “Mother’s Day,” the only thing to do with texts like these is “explain them,” which usually means Jesus could not have meant what he plainly says.

Of course the presumption that Christianity is a family-friendly faith is a small change perversion of the gospel when compared to the use of faith in God to underwrite American pretensions that we are a Christian nation possessing righteousness other nations lack. Consider, for example, this report from *The Washington Times*.

President Bush joined more than 100 parishioners at a seaside church yesterday in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance during services, a defiant dig at a recent San Francisco ruling on the pledge’s “under God” phrase. In the middle of the morning service at St. Ann’s Episcopal Church, Chaplain M.L. Agnew Jr. departed from the regular program and asked the congregation to stand and say the pledge to the U.S. flag. The pledge has become a constant fixture of Mr. Bush’s public appearances since a panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit ruled that the phrase “under God” made public-school recitation of the pledge unconstitutional. He (President Bush) led children in the pledge during a Fourth of July stop in which the reciters all but shouted out “under God.” Mr. Bush, who often talks of his faith in God and the role it plays in his stewardship of the country, has called the court’s decision “ridiculous” and “out of step with the traditions and history of America.” The pledge of Allegiance is not a part of any Episcopal liturgy, nor is its recitation a common custom, a church theologian (the Reverend Kendall Harmon) told *The Washington Times*.¹

When you have the President of the United States claiming that the “God” of the Pledge of Allegiance is the God Christians worship, you know you have a problem. The Christian God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Trinity

is not some further specification of the generalized god affirmed in the pledge, but the Trinity is the only God worthy of worship. The Christian pledge is not the Pledge of Allegiance, but rather is called the Apostles' Creed. That a church service, that a priest in that service, would include the Pledge of Allegiance is a sure sign that Christians no longer know how to recognize idolatry. The "Christianity" represented by St. Ann's Episcopal Church in Maine is not, in fact, Christian.

A harsh judgment to be sure, but one that needs to be made if we are to recover faithful Christian practice. I am not calling into question President Bush's sincerity. I am convinced he is a very serious Christian. The problem is not his sincerity. The problem is that the Christianity about which he is sincere is not shaped by the gospel. Unfortunately, he is not unique, but rather is but one instance of the general failure of the church in America to be the church. That the church has failed to be faithful is, of course, why I suggested that your salvation—as well as mine—is in doubt.

Why Love Is Not the Answer

One of the difficulties for anyone trying to figure out what it might mean to be a Christian in America is that our very familiarity with Christianity has made it difficult to hear what is read to us Sunday after Sunday from the Bible. For example, I suspect that many of you, when you are talking with friends about what life might be about, might say what makes you a Christian is a "personal relationship with Jesus." Such a relation, you might suggest, is about trying to be a loving person. You might even suggest that Christians are meant to love one another because our sins have been forgiven.

There is no question that love between the persons of the Trinity is at the very heart of the Christian faith, but I think nothing is more destructive to the Christian faith than the current identification of Christianity with love. If God wants us to be more loving, why do you need Jesus to tell us that? If Christianity is about the forgiveness of our sins, then why did Jesus have to die? If God is all about love, why go through the trouble of being this man, Jesus? Why did God not just tell us through an appropriate spokesman (it could have been Jesus) that God wants us to love one another? God, in such a faith, becomes that great OK who tells us we are OK and therefore, we are taught we should tell one another we are OK. But if Jesus is the proclamation of the great OK, why would anyone have bothered putting him to death? There must have been some terrible failure in communication.

One of the problems with the identification of Christianity with love is how such a view turns out to be anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic. The Jews and Catholics become identified with the law or dogma in contrast to Protestant Christians, who are about love. Such a view assumes that any form of faith that creates divisions must be retrograde because such a faith is not about being loving. Of course, when love becomes what Christianity is all about, we can make no sense of Jesus's death and resurrection.

For example, consider how the temptation narrative of Jesus in the fourth chapter of Luke must be read if Jesus is all about love. It is as if we think Jesus went out to find himself. Of course we are told that he "was driven out" to face the devil no less, but we know such language is "mythical." Such language was used to help us understand the spiritual struggle Jesus must have been going through, that is, he was confronting the existential nothingness of existence which was necessary for his ability to make an authentic choice about how he would live his life.

Returning from this desert, the disciples note he looks as if he has been through a very rough time. "Man, you look like you have been to hell and back," they might say. (No doubt they must have said something like this, for otherwise how do we explain the language of being tempted by the devil?) In response Jesus can be imagined to say, "You are right, I have had a rough forty days, but I have come to recognize what God wants from us. So I feel compelled to lay this big insight on you. I have come to realize that God, or whatever we call that we cannot explain, wants us to love one another. There, I have said it and I am glad I did."

Ask yourself, if that is what Jesus is all about—that is, getting us to love one another—then why did everyone reject

him? They did so, I think, because when Jesus was told by the devil that he would be given the power to turn stones to bread, he refused; when Jesus was offered authority over all the kingdoms of this world, he refused; when he was offered the possibility he would not die, he refused. Note that Jesus was offered the means to feed the hungry, the authority to end war between peoples, and even the defeat of death itself. But he refused these goods. He did so because Jesus knows God's kingdom cannot be forced into existence using the means of the devil.

But note that Jesus' refusal to play the devil's game does not mean that the kingdom he proclaims is not political. Jesus' work is political, but the kingdom politics he represents is one that comes through the transformation of the world's understanding of how to achieve good results. Jesus refuses to use the violence of the world to achieve "peace." But that does not mean he is any less political or that he is not about the securing of peace. It is, therefore, not accidental that after the temptation narrative, we see Jesus in a synagogue on the sabbath reading from the scroll of Isaiah. The passage he reads says,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18–19).

After reading this Jesus sat down and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The offense is not that Jesus wanted his followers to be loving, but the offense is Jesus. Jesus is the politics of the new age, he is about the establishment of a kingdom, he is the one who has created a new time that gives us the time not only to care for the poor but to be poor. Jesus is the one who makes it possible to be nonviolent in a violent world. We should not be surprised that Jesus is the embodiment of such a politics. After all, Mary's song promised that the proud would have their imaginations "scattered," the powerful would be brought down from their thrones, the rich would be sent away empty, the lowly would be lifted up, and the hungry would be filled with good things. Is it any wonder that the world was not prepared to welcome this savior?

The Politics of Jesus

Jesus was put to death because he embodied a politics that threatened all worldly regimes based on the fear of death. It is quite instructive to read any of the crucifixion narratives from this point of view, but the account of Jesus' trial and crucifixion in the Gospel of John makes the political character of Jesus' work unavoidable. Consider, for example, how the arrest of Jesus makes clear the political character of Jesus' ministry. His arrest is often thought to represent the apolitical character of Jesus because he commands Peter to put away the sword Peter had used to cut off the ear of the priest's slave. To be sure Jesus rebukes Peter, but he does so because that is not the "cup" the father has given him. But the cup from which Jesus must drink is no less political for being nonviolent. Indeed Jesus' command to Peter is one of the clearest indications that Jesus' challenge to the powers of this age is not only political but also a transformation of what most mean by "politics."

The character of Jesus' politics is manifest in his response to the high priest who questions Jesus about his teachings in John 18:19–24. That he is questioned by the high priest may suggest that his mission was "religious" rather than political, but such an account cannot be sustained for no other reason than Jesus' answer: "I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in the synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret.

Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.” Politics is speech and Jesus is at once the speech, the word of the Father, and the speaker. Nothing is hidden because the kingdom Jesus brings in his person is open to all.

Frustrated by Jesus’ response, the priests take Jesus to Pilate. There can be no ambiguity about the political challenge Jesus represents before Pilate. Pilate is Roman authority; he is an authority who has the power to determine whether those who appear before Roman governors live or die. Pilate obviously does not like the position in which he has been placed by those who bring Jesus before him. Jesus’ accusers, however, indicate Jesus is obviously guilty—otherwise why would they have Jesus appear before Pilate? But Pilate refuses to be bullied, so he examines Jesus.

He begins in an inquiring fashion: “They tell me that you are the King of Jews. Is that true?” Pilate’s question is obviously meant to see if Jesus is “political.” Jesus responds by asking if Pilate came up with such a view on his own or did others tell him such was the case. “I am not a Jew, am I?” replies Pilate. To which Jesus responds, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.” This is a response used often to deny that Jesus was political.

But note that Pilate understood what Jesus was saying. “So you are a king?” Pilate rightly saw that Jesus’ denial that his kingship was not of this world is not the denial that Jesus is king. No, Jesus denied that his kingdom was just another form of Rome. Jesus’ kingdom is not like other kingdoms of this world, but rather his kingdom is one that is an alternative to the kingdoms of this world. Jesus does not deny he is a king, but rather says, “You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” (John 18:37) Pilate responds the way the world must respond when so confronted, that is, with worldly cynicism: “What is truth?”

The truth, of course, is that the Father has sent his Son so that we—that is, the church—might be an alternative politics, a politics of truth, to that of the world. The world’s politics is based on violence, believed necessary given the absence of truth. It is kill or be killed. That is the politics that has been overwhelmed in Christ’s death and resurrection. A people have been created through the work of the Spirit to be an alternative politics to the politics of the lie—lies so blatant that we believe they must be true as otherwise they are so absurd—lies that lead us to believe that “peace” can be achieved through war.

In his *The Original Revolution*, John Howard Yoder helps us understand the political character of the salvation wrought in Christ.

The kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe the good news!” To repent is not to feel bad but to think differently. Protestantism, and perhaps especially evangelical Protestantism, in its concern for helping every individual to make his own authentic choice in full awareness and sincerity, is in constant danger of confusing the kingdom itself with the benefits of the kingdom. If anyone repents, if anyone turns around to follow Jesus in his new way of life, this will do something for the aimlessness of his life. It will do something for his loneliness by giving him fellowship. It will do something for his anxiety and guilt by giving him a good conscience. So the Bultmanns and the Grahams whose “evangelism” is to proclaim the offer of restored selfhood, liberation from anxiety and guilt, are not wrong. If anyone repents, it will do something for his intellectual confusion by giving him doctrinal meat to digest, a heritage to appreciate, and conscience about telling it all as it is. So “evangelicalism” with its concern for hallowed truth and reasoned communication is not wrong; it is right. If a man repents it will do something for his moral weakness by giving him the focus for wholesome self-discipline, it will keep him from immorality and get him to work on time. So the Peales and the Robertses who promise that God cares about helping me squeeze through the tight spots of life are not wrong; they have their place. But all this is not the Gospel.²

The gospel is the proclamation of a new age begun through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That gospel, moreover, has a form, a political form. It is embodied in a church that is required to be always ready to give

hospitality to the stranger. The gospel is a society in which difference is not denied but used for the discovery of goods in common. It is, as Yoder observes, a society called into being by Jesus who gave them a new way to live.

He gave them a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership—by drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not making the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationships between man and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the “enemy nation.”³

That is the politics begun in Christ. That is the “good news,” that is, we have been freed from the presumed necessities that we inflict on ourselves in the name of “peace,” a peace that too often turns out to be an order established and continued through violence. Is it any wonder that Jesus was despised and rejected? Is it any wonder when the church is faithful to Christ that she finds herself persecuted and condemned? Yet if such a church does not exist, the world has no alternative to the violence hidden in our fear of one another.

Resurrection

Some may say that with all the talk above about death I seem to have forgotten the resurrection. The Father raised Jesus from the dead. Surely that is what Christianity is about—securing eternal life. All the talk about the “politics of Jesus” fails to recognize that the work Jesus did was to make it possible for us to enjoy God forever. I certainly have no reason to deny that we have an eternal destiny made possible by Jesus’ good work, but too often I fear the stress on “eternal life” spiritualizes the work of Christ. As a result, the political character of Jesus’ resurrection is lost.

Too often I think Christians think about the resurrection in terms of a story told by Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard’s story begins by telling us about a prince riding through his field. The prince sees a peasant girl gathering the crops. She is beautiful and the prince falls instantly in love with her. However, he is a noble prince and does not want to overwhelm her with his power and riches, so he dresses in peasant clothes and goes to work side by side with her. Kierkegaard notes that what holds our attention as such a story is told is our curiosity about when the prince will show his true identity. We know the prince and the peasant girl will fall in love. After all, she is beautiful and he is noble so we know they will love one another. But we want to know when and how the prince will reveal to his beloved that she has fallen in love with the prince himself.

We let our imaginations run. Perhaps one day they share a lunch during which he tells her of his love. She confesses she also loves him and suddenly he rips back the peasant clothes and reveals the purple. Or perhaps he will wait until the wedding itself. They exchange vows at the end of which he tears away his rough clothes to reveal that through this marriage she has become the queen of the land. If we are really letting our imaginations run, we might think he waits until the wedding night itself.

Kierkegaard uses this story to suggest that we think the resurrection must be like a prince who has been hiding the purple under his rough clothes. The resurrection reveals the purple. However, Kierkegaard notes the only problem with so thinking of the resurrection is that Jesus has no purple under his flesh. Jesus is peasant clothes, flesh, all the way down. He is not playing at being a human. He is human all the way down. The resurrected Christ is the crucified Christ.

Only such a Christ, moreover, can save us. For Jesus is the Christ, being for us this particular man making possible a particular way of life that is an alternative to the world’s fear of one like Jesus. Christians have no fantasy that we may get out of life alive. Instead we have a savior who was in every way like us, yet also fully God. Jesus is not 50 percent God and 50 percent man. He is 100 percent God and 100 percent man, he is the incarnation making possible a way to live

that constitutes an alternative to all politics that are little less than conspiracies to deny death.

Such a savior does not promise that by being his follower we will be made safe. Rather, this savior offers to free us from our self-inflicted fears and anxieties. Jesus does so not by making our lives “more meaningful,” though we may discover our lives have renewed purpose, but by making us members of his body and blood so that we can share in the goods of a community that is an alternative to the world. Do not, thereby, be surprised that as followers of Christ you may be hated and rejected, but you have been given such wonderful work that I suspect you will hardly notice that you are so.

A Final Word to the Young

I have no way to know how you have heard or read what I have tried to say. I recognize that in some ways what you have heard is, as one of my graduate students once observed, a “completely different Christianity.” I have no interest in being different to be different. Instead, I hope you will find this account of the gospel compelling. People are dying to be part of an adventure that will give us a worthy task. I think the gospel is such an adventure. I hope what I have said at least gives you a glimpse of what a wonderful life you have been given through your baptism.

1. *Washington Times*, July 8, 2002.
2. John Howard Yoder, *The Original Revolution* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1972), 31–32.
3. *Ibid.*, 29.

* In the published version of this lecture, the author spoke of the “Duke Youth Academy.” Obviously when he delivered this lecture at Princeton, he changed the location accordingly and so have we for the purposes of this publication. Otherwise the lecture is unchanged from the published version.

© 2006 THEOLOGY TODAY ISSN 0040-5736