

# A RADICAL CHRISTOLOGY for a RADICAL YOUTH MINISTRY

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In the troubled aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, we wonder: What will the future hold for the emerging generation? This is an appropriate time to reflect on the core issues of life, including how we shape and nurture the worldviews of youth. Although most of this essay was written months prior to September 11, 2001, the “new world order” following this date gives an urgency and poignancy to the following reflections.

Youth ministry has received the reputation that it consists of fun and games with a “youth talk” and a prayer thrown in to legitimize it in the church. This reputation is not completely unfounded, but it is changing as youth ministry itself develops and matures and now deals with the harsh reality of life in the 21st century. This does not imply that the enjoyment of hearty play and good humor have no part in Christian ministry. Youth ministry will and should continue to include music, dancing, laughter, games, humor, eating and drinking, even in the midst of difficult times. But youth ministers are taking their fun and their ministries more seriously these days.

I applaud the trend of the past few years where we have seen an increasing emphasis on developing and articulating a theology of youth ministry.<sup>0</sup> Most of the theologies have been necessarily general in order to market widely and apply generically. My conviction as an Anabaptist is that our perspective of the Christian life has a growing relevance in the present context of global violence. My present concern is that the voice of Anabaptist theology has not been articulated often or heard widely in the field of youth ministry.

The Anabaptist spiritual tradition has a unique claim to a theology of youth ministry. I believe that the Radical Reformation of the sixteenth century was in many respects a “youth movement.” History has often made its leaders appear older than they were, while their own contemporaries often despised their youth.<sup>1</sup> I believe that the Anabaptist spiritual tradition also has a unique and significant voice in the contemporary milieu of postmodernism within which youth ministry finds itself, because of its inherent distrust of creedal Christianity, and because of its willingness to embrace, and even push, the radical margins of Christian theology and ecclesiology.

I would like to begin by looking at one central element of Christian theology: our view of Christ. A Christology is not only central for Anabaptists, but also for evangelicals and for all Christians. Christology (belief about the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ) is very important in shaping a theology for youth leadership. How we view Christ makes all the difference in the world for

how we approach youth ministry. What I want to present is an Anabaptist Christology that is foundational for youth ministry, indeed all ministry. This essay does not pretend to be a complete theology or an exhaustive guide; it is a starting point.

Now all Christians would claim to be “Christ centered” in their doctrine and approach to ministry, but not all Christians mean the same thing by the term.<sup>2</sup> There are a number of different views of Jesus Christ, but I would like to contrast two of them: the creedal substitutionary view (the one held by most mainstream evangelicals) and the radical ethical view (confessed by most Anabaptist-Mennonites). This comparison will illustrate how our view of Christ could influence everything we do in youth ministry.

**The “Creedal Substitutionary View”** is based on the creeds from the 4th and 5th centuries and on Reformation theology. By digressing from these, I am not implying that the creeds or Reformation based theology are necessarily wrong or worthless, I just don’t think they went far enough or present a holistic enough picture, especially not for the present postmodern situation. They arose out of a very particular time in European history and are based on the “Christendom” model that most Anabaptists reject.<sup>3</sup> The creeds go directly from “born of the virgin Mary” to “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” There is no mention of the life and teachings of Christ or the exemplary and ethical dimensions of his death. Evangelical or “Reformation” theology rediscovered the Scriptural teaching of Christ’s substitutionary death; that

“Jesus died for our sins”, i.e. that the consequence for human sin is death, Christ took our place (became our substitute) once and for all, taking our consequences, experiencing capital punishment on our behalf. This is the message of salvation that has been preached for the past 500 years. I am not now dismissing this theology, but it needs to be recognized for its particularity of origins, its incompleteness and for its limitations as a model for ministry.

The creedal substitutionary view of Christ leaves us with a model for ministry that will prove inadequate in the long term. As a model for ministry, this theology gives much power to the minister. If we follow the logic of this Christology, the youth minister might be seen a substitute for the youth, the mediator of their individualized salvation. Consider the following caricature: The minister teaches them, preaches to them, counsels them, speaks up on their behalf to the adult congregation (or to whatever societal institutions we may be involved with), plans activities for them, “leads them to the Lord” (invites them to faith in Christ), prays for them, etc. It yields a model for ministry that is quite dependent on one leader, minister or adult worker. Many denominations and organizations have worked, and continue to work very efficiently, with this model. In fact in many ways this model is much more efficient and less messy, because the lines of authority and responsibility are very clear. For centuries, wonderful leaders (in all the good senses of the word: godly, outgoing, confident, skilled, etc.) have worked with this model, but it has some inherent and increasing flaws.

In their groundbreaking article, Chris Seay and Mark Driscoll critique it this way:

“...when we try to sell Jesus as a “personal savior” to a teen world that’s rapidly becoming holistic and community-based, we hear responses like, “I don’t need a personal savior.” That’s when the gospel becomes irrelevant - because God is no longer big enough. God isn’t lord over all anymore. He’s not involved in all that we are any longer...”

Historic Christianity - the entirety of God’s story - must take the lead in our minds and hearts in this new century. If it does, we’ll see some incredible things happen. But if we stick with a modern, Western Christianity, we’re going nowhere... It’s time to say, “No more.” It’s time to say, “The Gospel is everything - the whole story of God for whole people.” It’s time to tell the truth.”<sup>4</sup>

My presentation of the “Radical Ethical View” of Christ is the truth as I know it. I pray that it might impact our strategy and methodology for youth ministry. This view is rooted historically in the radical wing of the Reformation, and until recently, has been relegated to the fringes of theology, and its expressions limited to a few denominations in the Anabaptist Mennonite tradition. Today, its voice is being heard in many places and denominations, and it is becoming an increasingly relevant Christology for postmodern times. A youth ministry strategy based on this Christology will be **incarnational** and **communal** in character, demanding **total** commitment to the nonviolent way of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

## INCARNATIONAL (Philippians 2:5-8)

*Jesus not only came to die for our sins but first to be born and to live as a bodily human being, like us and with us.*

It was God, the Creator and Supreme Sovereign of the Universe who became a crying baby, born in a dumpster in a Bethlehem back alley. Jesus walked the streets, felt the feelings, cried the tears, shared the joy, drank the wine, ate the food, washed the feet, built the friendships, sailed the lakes. He was “with” us! God became human not only to die for our sins, but also to identify with us and to show us what it means to be truly human, and to show us what the Divine Image is like.

So how does the incarnation affect our approach to youth ministry? Jesus identifying with humanity invites young people to identify with him. “Jesus’ homelessness and rootlessness, his “illegitimate birth, his persecution by the system, his premature death - all of these are dimensions of his story that penetrate to the heart of the postmodern experience.”<sup>6</sup> Incarnational youth ministry meets youth on their level and on their terms. Too often as youth ministers we have operated by the “if we plan it they will come” philosophy. But as ministers “we are the visitors in their world” and we need to meet youth with respect and sensitivity.<sup>7</sup> This might necessitate an attitudinal change from going into situations and relationships as “answer people” and “rescuers” to going in as “partners in the struggle”.

An incarnational approach to youth ministry will accept youth where they are at as a legitimate, even sacred place to be. Much of the church continues to function in the same dualistic mode which the writers of the epistles were trying to counter.<sup>8</sup> Bodily, physical, sensual, sexual aspects of the human person are seen as secondary or

peripheral to the spiritual life at best. Thus youth, who are often consumed with their changing bodies and awakening sexual desires, are seen as secondary or peripheral participants in the church. But incarnational ministry embraces a sensual spirituality rather than negating the body. This does not mean that we teach a “whatever feels good to your body, do it” morality, but that we see bodily activities from eating to sport to sex as wonderful enjoyments within the biblical bounds of safety, purity, dignity and responsibility.

Youth ministry has focused on a relational approach to ministry for many years, but incarnational ministry goes one step further. It not only relates, it identifies and walks beside another on their journey in their world. “Incarnational theology means that God always comes to us through a person.”<sup>9</sup> Youth workers are “little Christs” walking with individual youth in the midst of their culture. Just as Old Testament prophets awaited the coming of the Messiah, God in Flesh, young people today await the embodiment of Love in significant others.

## COMMUNAL (Ephesians 2:14-22)

*Jesus came not only to save persons, but also to create a people. His bodily presence continues in the church today.*

Jesus was not a loner; he gathered around him a group of people, twelve he named disciples, but also other men and women who attended to his needs, both physical and spiritual. How does Jesus continue to have flesh and bone in this world?

Through the “body” of Christ, the church- a group of people not much more attractive and cohesive than the original disciples. Jesus not only brings reconciliation for the Divine human relationship as in the substitutionary view, but also much more radically, brings a vision for SHALOM in all relationships between humans.

So what does a communal model of youth ministry look like? I believe that youth ministry primarily belongs in the church. The church takes various forms, and each is part of the body: denominations, Christian organizations and institutions, families, households, spiritual friendships, etc. Each one helps to reflect the communal nature of the Christian life, but primarily I believe the church is represented by the local congregation. “Participation in God’s divine activity in all creation, is taught and learned in the local congregation.”<sup>10</sup>

For all the criticism we level against the local church, and for all the para church and community youth works that spring up because “the church is too stuck in a rut to catch the vision”- the church is still Jesus’ body, the primary agent of God’s healing and hope for the world. The local church offers an “alternative community, a narratable world in which human meaning can be discovered and lived out.”<sup>11</sup> The church offers a safe place (physically and spiritually) of belonging that alienated postmodern youth are longing for. Youth ministry is not a separate department in the church; it is at the core of what the church’s mission is all about. Youth are part

of an intergenerational community, and the best way to help youth grow in their faith is to facilitate their membership in that community of faith.

A “communal” youth minister is one who lives life together with others. It’s not a contemporary worship service that will draw youth to the church; it is meaningful relationships. When all else is plucked away and the rituals, sermons and songs seem dry, it is relationships that remain. People, especially the present generation of youth, want to belong. Although contemporary worship forms and innovative programs can help to build relationships among youth and adults, the energy of ministry should be put into facilitating relationships rather than changing structures or worship formats.

Often the question has been asked, how can we get young people more involved in the life of the congregation? Rather we should ask, how can we get adult members of the congregation to get more involved in the lives of the young? This is something that has been a strength of Mennonite communities of faith in the past. Churches were the focal points of rural communities, not only religiously, but socially, economically, politically and morally. With the shift of population to urban areas this sense of closeness and mutual care in the community are no longer natural features. Youth ministers must now work more intentionally to provide opportunities for intergenerational interaction and relationship. Facilitating one on one mentoring relationships and developing other intergenerational programs are necessary responses to this shift.

A communal approach to youth ministry must go beyond passing on the faith to the children of church members. The church is an outgoing, missional community; it does not exist for itself. Jesus came to redefine and expand the concepts of family and peoplehood to include people of all races, nations and cultures. The church should be the one place in society where barriers that exist elsewhere are irrelevant. These differences must be acknowledged and worked with, not ignored.

The church is a hospital with a universal health care system where all people can come for healing. Being a hospital means that youth ministries are hospitable and welcoming to all young people regardless of their race, culture, sexual orientation, religious background, psychological illness or any other thing that might separate them from others. The faith community exists not to judge and separate but to welcome and include as Christ welcomes and includes us in the spiritual family. Youth groups are one of the most common expressions of congregational youth ministry. A self analysis of group dynamics and hospitality might be in order for groups who seek to be truly welcoming and inclusive.

TOTAL (1 Peter 2:21-24)

*Jesus' death was not only sacrifice for our sin but also a model for us in how we should live.*

Jesus not only came to be our substitute, to die for us, to give us eternal life, but Jesus came to show us what God is like, and modeled for us in his life and in his

death what human beings should and can be like. “The cross cannot be reduced to an external transaction between Father and Son that atones for sin without affecting daily life. Nor should we reduce the cross to an emotional phenomenon. Although the cross may move us deeply, if it ends up leaving our worldly values and ethics intact, it has had no real impact in our lives.”<sup>12</sup> Jesus’ death is also an identification with the poor and suffering and it is an ethical and exemplary challenge. Our commitment to God and the nonviolent way of Christ is total, including emotional, social, ethical and spiritual dimensions.

The death of Jesus is a sacrifice for our sin, but it is also an example for how we should live. We are willing to give our lives for the cause of Christ. In the 1 Peter passage mentioned above and many times in the Gospels [e.g. Mark 8:34-38] Christ’s disciples are exhorted to “take up the cross” of suffering for his sake. This is why Mennonites, Quakers and an increasing number of Christians in other denominations will refuse to be involved in any violence, personal or international. Primary allegiance is to God’s realm and rule, not to any human government; and this allegiance is total.

In youth ministry terms, how do we live out this total allegiance that goes beyond an inner mental ascent? Eliminating simulated war games from our list of youth activities might only be the starting point. A total youth ministry teaches, models and acts out a radical allegiance to the way of Christ that is both ethical and missional. This kind of youth ministry will include not only ethical teaching on the

values of sexual abstinence and nonviolent conflict resolution, but will include short and long term involvement with, and advocacy for, oppressed minorities in local and global communities. It might include nonviolent resistance to the economic, military, social or political practices and policies of the world. Youth are looking for a Gospel that will transform their lives and challenge them to make a difference in the world.

A total youth ministry will not only be concerned with short term mission adventures which are becoming very popular today, but will address the violence and injustice inherent in the western way of life. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York was an attack on the symbol of western economic dominance in the world. It has caused us to reflect, "What is it about our system of life that could arouse this kind of horrific anger leading to such extreme acts of violence?" What we buy and wear, where we buy it, how much we pay for it, the choices of vocation and entertainment, what we eat, how we transport ourselves to work and play... all these often thoughtless daily acts have repercussions around the globe. Young people are becoming increasingly aware of the forces of globalization. They want to make a difference. How are we as youth workers helping them to see all of life as an expression of their commitment to Christ?

## **CONCLUSION**

This document has intentionally not been a list of practical guidelines for youth ministry. My prayer is that it will have been a stimulus for reflection about how our core Anabaptist beliefs concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ shape our practice of youth ministry. May our relationships with youth be incarnational, our activities be inclusive and communal and our commitment to the way of Jesus total. This kind of ministry will bring hope and security to youth who are growing up in an increasingly deconstructing and destabilizing world.

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<sup>0</sup> A few examples not quoted in this essay are: Dean Borgman's When Kumbaya is not Enough: A Practical Theology of Youth Ministry, Hendrickson Publishers, 1997; Mark Yaconelli, "Youth Ministry: A Contemplative Approach" in Christian Century, April 21-28, 1999: 450-454; and most recently Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry, edited by Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark and Dave Rahn, Zondervan, 2001.

<sup>1</sup> Conrad Grebel, Felix Manz, Hans Denck were all young radical intellectuals who died before the age of 30 and are now revered as founders of the movement. See Brandt, Gareth. The Spirituality of Young Adulthood. Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Emmanuel & St. Chad, 1997, p.42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Lederach, Paul M. A Third Way. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1980, p.17-19.

<sup>3</sup> Weaver, Denny J. Anabaptist Theology in the Face of Postmodernity. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001, p. 119

<sup>4</sup> Driscoll, Mark and Chris Seay. "A Second Reformation is at Hand" in Youth Worker Journal, January/February 2000, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> The three main points outlining the "Radical Christology" are loosely based on and inspired by "The Anabaptist Vision" written by Harold S. Bender in 1944. There are a number of sources, including

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conversations and Bible studies with colleagues in Mennonite youth ministry, that are not quoted in this document, that have shaped the views I put forth here. A few recent sources have been: Beisecker-Mast, Susan and Gerald, editors. Anabaptists and Postmodernity. Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000. Sine, Tom. Mustard Seed vs. McWorld. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999. Weaver, Denny J. Anabaptist Theology in the Face of Postmodernity. Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ford, Kevin Graham. Jesus for a New Generation. Inter-Varsity Press, 1995, p. 228.

<sup>7</sup> Ward, Pete. God at the Mall. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999, p. 58.

<sup>8</sup> An example of this is found in 2 Timothy 4:1-14 where the writer condemns the extremists who are telling young leaders like Timothy to abstain from sex, certain foods and physical activity. Rather, continues the exhortation, be authentically young, but be examples to the church in how you live [v.12].

<sup>9</sup> Dean, Kenda Creasy and Ron Foster. The Godbearing Life. Upper Room Books, 1998, p. 37.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, Susanne. Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> Ford, p. 233.

<sup>12</sup> Webster, Douglas. A Passion for Christ. Zondervan, 1987, p. 160.