



## Thinking Ourselves Outward from God

**T**n my first lecture I suggested that our common goal in youth ministry is to help youth grow “big and tall and straight and strong.” We want to guide and protect them as they grow. This is a challenge. Young people do not want to be formed by adults. Youth may think that by pulling back from adults, they will be free to form themselves. They are unaware that there is no such thing as not being formed. Popular culture is ever ready to form the young after its own image.

Some parents, for a variety of reasons, are failing at parenting and lack the strong, positive relationship with their children that would enable them to help their children. This problem is evident in a popular song by Tracy Bonham. In the song, a daughter has left home to make her fortune. She is miserably unhappy, but cannot admit this to her mother. She calls home “just to say hello.” In her head, however, she is screaming, “I’m starving, I’m crying, I’m bleeding to death,” but into the phone she says, “Everything’s fine.” She asks about her father, but doesn’t talk to him. Only after she hangs up can she say, “I miss you, I love you.”

The depiction of alienation between parents and children has been encouraged by some strands in modern psychology and is widely presumed throughout the culture. Adolescents and their parents often have lives apart, all doing their own thing. While some moments of tension between parents and teens may be acceptable, we must keep in mind that the goal of working through an unbreakable family relationship is reunion-return-reintegration into one another’s trust and love and into the sharing of our lives. Parents and children both need this. We deserve families if we think that tension, even alienation, between parents and children should lead to permanent withdrawal.

Youth ministers may find themselves standing in the breach. Because your first responsibility is to the teens, it may be tempting to side with them against their parents, in effect becoming parental surrogates. This is dangerous business, as the movie *Dead Poets Society* pointed out. At the same time, you inevitably stand in a special relationship to youth. As ministers your special responsibility is to share with them the joys and the strength of life with God. In this regard, you stand not as surrogate parents, but as godparents, who traditionally are responsible for children’s religious education. In this lecture I will suggest ways the Christian tradition may help you to

guide the religious lives of children and youth.

I have titled this lecture “Thinking Ourselves Outward from God.” How many people do you know who think themselves outward from God? What does that mean? In the phrase “thinking ourselves outward from” I refer to that set of attitudes and behavior patterns that are so internalized we believe them to exercise decisive control over our personalities. For example: 1) we understand what it is to think ourselves outward from our family dynamics—what happened to us as children makes a deep and lasting impression on us; it schools us in patterns of interaction and response that may become habitual; 2) we understand what it is to think ourselves outward from gender—the way our parents reacted to our being a girl or being a boy has had lasting effects on how we understand what it is to be a man or a woman, or, alternately, men and women are wired in certain ways, and these reactions, interests, and habits of mind and reflection make up our personalities; 3) we understand what it is to think ourselves outward from race—racial minorities are the victims of the dominant culture and are psychologically scarred by the mistrust and scorn of the powerful; 4) we understand what it is to think ourselves outward from our nationality—Americans believe in freedom of opportunity, justice for the underdog, the free market of ideas and products; or 5) we may even begin to understand what it is to think ourselves outward from the perspective of popular culture—we have Attention Deficit Disorder because of the sound-bite culture, or, we have difficulty maintaining attachments because of the disposable culture, or, we are made petulant by the entitlement culture that invents needs designed to evoke perpetual craving.

These things we can understand. But what does it mean to think ourselves outward from God?

First, let us be clear that there is no one beginning. Second, there is no one Christian vision of God to think ourselves outward from. I will suggest three possible starting points, each having a variety of spins on it: the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of God, and the doctrine of redemption. To be theologically user-friendly, let us begin with God the Father—or the erstwhile God the Father, who created the world and all that is therein, the seas, the dry land, the moon and stars, the birds of the air and fish of the sea, and us. Now this confession of God the Father is not simply a datum, a piece of information that we store away. It is an active contributor to how we understand ourselves. We are creatures. If God created the world, with us as its stewards, the world and us with it belongs to God. As the author of Psalm 100 put it, “Know that the Lord is God! It is he that made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.” This verse tells us a lot about our theological identity. What does it mean to be stewards and not owners of property, as our consumer society would have us think? How are we to think about ourselves if we do not belong to ourselves but to God? What does it mean to live believing that

our bodies are not our own, and that no one else's body could belong to us either? How do we take care of teeth, eyes, muscles, and genitalia that in one sense belong to us, but in another sense belong to God?

One form of this creation-based theology, rather crudely stated, is the self-congratulatory phrase, "God don't make no junk." While on one level of course it is true that it is not God's style to make junk, this phrase leaves something to be desired. Surely the psalmist turns a better phrase with "O, Lord, our Lord, how majestic is thy name in all the earth...When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and stars which thou hast established; what is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou doest care for him?" The psalmist has used the doctrine of creation to cultivate an attitude of humility and awe.

Thinking ourselves outward from our creatureliness is to have a theological foundation for what today we might call a lifestyle. How do we live lightly on God's earth? This is a challenge. We are so encased in packaging and surrounded by disposable goods. We each create mounds and mounds of trash, some of it not easily disposed of. We are automobile- and airplane-dependent. We are unable to extricate ourselves from using up more than our fair share of the earth's resources, yet we should praise God that the nuclear threat has melted into the environmental crisis for now. We should praise God that we no longer need stage air raid drills, like the ones we had when I was a child. We can take youngsters into the park or along the road to clean up trash, singing, "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof; the world and they that dwell therein." So, creation is an easy place to begin helping the young to think themselves outward from God. Let us press on to another possible starting point for living into a godly identity.

Genesis teaches that we are created in the image of God. This has always been something of a puzzle. The Jewish and Christian traditions never considered that this means we physically resemble God. Christians often interpreted being in the image of God as being created for goodness and happiness in God. Our likeness to God is mutilated by falling into evil.

A variant on this theology is that our likeness to God is in our most exalted capacity, the ability to think. The old ad for the United Negro College Fund employed this theology in its slogan "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." The misuse of the mind dishonors God, who created it for good purpose. Reflecting the divine image in this way carries with it responsibility for using it judiciously. The millennial issue of the *New York Times* carried an item titled "Treatment for Brain Makeovers." It was an article about the possibility of creating Viagra for the brain: medication that would enable us to avoid emotional pain and to be in a perpetual state of "happiness." Suppose we could take a pill that would alleviate grief at the death of a loved one, or the emotional trauma of violence and injury. Should we alter gene chemistry so that we cre-

ate only perfect and beautiful babies? How can our being creatures of God guide us in making these important decisions? I would love to hear a youth group talk with biochemists about the morality of their work as both the scientists and the youth pray the psalms together. How are we to use our minds so that our work glorifies God and honors who we are in God?

St. Augustine made this Genesis theme a central pillar of psychology. By his day, the understanding of the God in whose image we are created was clearly trinitarian. We know the one God as three identities: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Augustine put forward a radically trinitarian identity for Christians. He argued that a coherent personality integrates our mental and emotional capacities as wholesomely as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together as one God. Understanding ourselves as homologues of the Trinity is not only a way to hold our inner life together. Augustine taught that being in the divine image also defines us in terms of divine goodness, wisdom, and righteousness.

The spiritual life, according to Augustine, is the gradual discovery of one's spiritual likeness to God, a gradual discovery of one's dignity. As we uncover the ways in which we reflect the trinity of God in our mental and emotional capacities, we grow into the substance of God's goodness, wisdom, and righteousness. Therefore, growth in self-understanding is also transformation into the beauty that is God's goodness. In this theology, thinking well and loving well both serve to actualize our likeness to God.

Is it possible for youth to think themselves outward from the Trinity? What would such a theological identity say about the source of our self-esteem and how it is protected? We are special because we reflect the beauty of God—not because, as Fred Rogers taught us, “you’re the most important person in the whole wide world.” That is a dangerous theology to raise children on. Theologically speaking, our specialness lies in the dignity of our likeness to the flawless union of the Father, Son, and Spirit working together for the salvation of the world. We actualize this similarity when our understanding, love, and desire are in concert toward uplifted ends. So the doctrine of God is an important way to help youngsters think themselves outward from God.

Now, let us move on to the doctrine of redemption. I suspect that many of the teens you work with do not much dwell on their sins. Perhaps they seek release from being too tall or too short, or too homely or clumsy or fat or whatever. Our culture has shifted from construing ourselves as sinners to seeing ourselves as victims of circumstance or more pernicious threats to our well-being. We prefer to boast self-confidence, and fear the deforming revolt against potential of guilt.

Our skittishness about sin—especially sin and children—reflects a larger secular trend. Christian teaching on the redemption of the world from sin and death by the Lord Jesus sounds a little hokey today. We prefer self-confidence and encouragement.

We even offer false encouragement, with phrases like, "You can be whatever you want to be." We want youth to feel secure enough to try new things and to stretch themselves. Yet glib encouragement may be cruel. And it avoids needed conversation about our real limits that should bring relief from the rigors of overachieving. In my previous lecture I suggested that old-fashioned lecturing and moralizing with youth on the model of Proverbs may well fall on deaf ears. Now I am adding the note that confronting youngsters with their sinfulness and inadequacies before God is also a hard sell. Such an approach is quite out of line in today's climate.

Nevertheless, as Christians we still feel compelled to ask whether we ought not approach the young with the idea of redemption, even if we are not sure why, or how, to pull it off. There are many ways of understanding redemption. In presenting the young for baptism, or dedicating them to God in a public ceremony, we are imposing on them a weighty identity. There are many ways of articulating baptism. Let us begin with Paul of Tarsus, whose theology is responsible for the Christian doctrine of redemption.

Paul's great insight was that in Jesus Christ, specifically in Christ's death, God has gathered the pagan world into Israel, making it his own treasure. The Gentiles have become children of Abraham, along with the Jews. They who were far off have become intimate with God, able to locate themselves in the creator of heaven and earth. Gentiles have been co-opted as God's people by God. The core of their identity no longer lies in the noble family they were born into, or in the shame of slavery. The core of their identity now lies in a belonging, an identity to which they contributed nothing. They belong to the God of Israel because of God's decision. Paul develops this theology in Galatians and I Corinthians. People are "special" for this reason and not for anything to do with their accomplishments.

There is another slant on this, as Ephesians makes clear. Being co-opted into the people of God creates a new community of peace that one must take into account because it has changed who one is. By bringing Jews and Gentiles, that is, people at loggerheads with one another, together, God has, as the author put it, released everyone from the passions of the flesh. (Ephesians 2:3) What does this mean? I think that in drawing enemies together as one community in Christ's death, the wall of hostility that our insecurities build up to protect us has been cast down stone by stone.

Working out our private little wars can never accomplish what God has accomplished by leveling us in Christ. It is from the perspective of our union with one another in Christ that one may see—and, God willing, let go of—the pointlessness and the danger of trying to work out all our hurts alone. We waste an enormous energy trying to satisfy our insecurities, our hurts, and our fears of one another. We always fail, for they are stronger than we are. Further, since we have already been vindicated in Christ, seeking to do so on our own would, again, like wasting our minds

and abusing our bodies, dishonor God.

What must we do then to be saved? We must acknowledge this truth about ourselves in God. For many of us, only when we stand in the solution can we admit the foolishness of having attempted to settle the score ourselves. Paul realized it is necessary not only to acknowledge this truth inwardly and by faith. It is also necessary to do so publicly. The Christian way of taking account of God's action is baptism. So it is to this day. In baptism we acknowledge whom we have been made by God. This is the baptismal identity that we reclaim everyday—in service, in prayer, and especially at the table of the Lord.

Those churches that engage in pedobaptism are committing a grave act. Children are a captive audience. We can do with them as we please. And what we please to do is nothing less than to have them taken up into the divine drama of the salvation of the cosmos. Yet rarely do we explain to them what we have done to them. I always hope to hear an infant cry out just as the water comes pouring down. It is a last cry for freedom from God. Nevertheless, this freedom we will not grant. We will have the child be a member of the crucified and risen Lord sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. We insist on conscripting this innocent life into the glory of God. We ask no one's permission. We simply impose this godly identity on the unsuspecting babe. Then afterward, all smiles and kisses, we say, "Behold a child of God," perhaps only vaguely aware of what has happened.

Yet on top of being made in the image of God, we have layers of theological identity so that these children are hemmed in by God's work and God's being on all sides. I have been suggesting that whether we start from the doctrine of creation (our being created in the image of God) or from our having been lifted up, co-opted into the drama of salvation, even into the very being of God, each of these entry points into a Christian theological identity provides a different self than does the modern secular understanding that we create ourselves, that we are our own persons. We are so enmeshed in the ideology of autonomy that it is difficult to see any alternative. But I believe that an identity given to us by God is stronger than the selves we create for ourselves.

It is not a history of suffering that can engender cultivated rage as a way of life. It is a positive identity. Just as there are several ways of talking about our godly identity beginning with creation, there are several ways of talking about baptism. One is that in baptism we have been adopted as God's own children. There is another "take" on baptismal identity. In baptism the Holy Spirit has grafted the Christian into the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Incarnation is best understood if we take off the glasses of modern individualism that we wear. The Incarnation happened to one man, but an important principle of the Hellenic mind-set is the unity of humankind. God consolidates himself with all

human beings at the Incarnation. In baptism, we are joined in solidarity with God's having joined himself to us. In that, humanity is lifted up to God. The traditional collect for the feast of the Incarnation reads:

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

For youth, this can suggest that our dignity does not derive from the respect people show us. Let us compare this with the secular self-esteem movement. At least in its popular version, it seems to be predicated on the basic notion that a person must feel accepted and secure in order to try hard. This makes perfect sense. Nobody wants to step out into shark-infested waters. Nevertheless, the safety that needs to be provided seems to require external reinforcement.

The dignity and self-esteem that come from God are qualitatively different. They are internal, built into the fiber of the soul, the way my father's hands, running over the covers, surrounded me with the knowledge that he would take care of me. God's having dignified human nature by becoming human is a nobility that is independent of the rewards and frustrations of the world. To depend on others for our self-esteem, or to need constantly to bolster our self-esteem, is a precarious undertaking. There will always be a wave coming at us to knock us down.

Dying and rising with Christ. Christian identity pivots on St. Paul's notion in Romans 6 that baptism is a participation in the death of Christ. Today our baptismal rites are so watered down, so devoid of the drama due them, that it is difficult to visualize what is happening. In Romans, Paul says that by being buried with him by baptism into his death we might walk in his life resurrected by the Father. His death, in which we participate through faith and baptism, leads us from the death of sin to a resurrected life of holiness and gratitude. Only by paying off our hurt and fear can we be free enough of their negative effects to be able to let go of harmful desires and activities and actually seek reconciliation with the community, our parents, our enemies, or ourselves.

In our day, we can better understand the complexities of our personalities and our relationships in psychological terms, but there are religious dimensions to these. It is difficult but necessary for us to talk about the dangerous emotions that rule our minds and bodies and bring us and others down: anger, jealousy, lust, greed, arrogance, pride, the need to control, the need to be liked, and so forth. Yet, these are the very weaknesses of our temperaments that hinder us in our common life and in our personal development.

This, I think, is what the author of Colossians meant by saying, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God." The weaknesses that plague you in this life have been put to death in your baptism. Even if they linger in you, they are now alien to you because they no longer belong to you. God has bought them from you in Christ.

And so Paul urges his audience: "Do not yield your members to sin [read bullying, revenge, intimidation, showing-off] as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no authority over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

That is to say, the baptized are urged to turn from sin not because it pleases God. God has bought the emotional origins of sin from them. Sin is no longer ego syntonic but ego alien. Christ has purchased our emotional suffering and now lives within the Christian, lending his power, his resurrected life as strength. We do not resist sin by our own strength or willpower, but by the strength of the new self, that is now ours.

With the rite of chrismation, the crossing of the newly baptized with oil, the Christian is sealed by the holiness of God, marked, set apart, anointed as God's own, forever. God comes to us through the material world, in water, food, oil, and ashes. He has met us in the physicality of our bodies in Jesus Christ, just as God accompanied me in Christ through my father's hands. Chrismation seals the baptized in Christ. Usually when I witness a baptism with chrismation, the minister quickly wipes the few drops of water and the tiny bit of oil off the baby as soon as possible. It looks like we are ashamed of the work of the Spirit, or that we are ashamed of God's working through material things (an old issue for Christians), or that we want to be rid of having been set apart for life with God. Too bad. We need to celebrate the power of God on our bodies through touch and taste.

Youth need the shield provided by the Holy Spirit; they need the anointing with oil that tells them who they are. The Orthodox anoint the eyes, the ears, the chest, the limbs; the whole body is consecrated with the oil of gladness. For we live to God not only with our minds, but also with our bodies. The young today need all the help God has to offer on this score. Who are we to withhold it from them?

The Christian is sanctified by the holiness of God. Baptism is wrought by the holiness of God that takes us into itself. For the young to grasp that they have been taken into the holiness of God means they must grasp that they have been given a great trust. They are, as Paul says in II Corinthians 5, ambassadors for Christ, entrusted with the message of reconciliation. There is perhaps no more noble opportunity or calling in life than love of enemies. Jesus saved those who sought his death. That is not a theological notion. It is a historical fact. The nobility of such a life has passed to us by our being grafted into Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Your task as ministers is to empower the young and their parents to live out of a true consciousness, to think themselves outward from God. Although they cannot articulate it, even when they resist it, the children want this. I believe they deserve it.

Let us pray.

Almighty and heavenly Father, you have blessed us with the joy and care of children. Give us calm strength and patient wisdom as we bring them up, that we may teach them to love whatever is just and true and good, following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. ▼▲