



Call Forwarding: Putting Vocation in the Present Tense with Youth

Introduction: Guiding Questions, Starting Assumptions

The focus of these lectures¹ in the 2002 Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry is vocation—a topic many would never even associate with youth or youth ministry, because its taken-for-granted, secular connections with careers and professions make it sound like something for their futures only. Vocation—it sounds so big, so lofty as the term points to the intersection between human strivings for authentic, meaningful lives, and the purposes of God for God’s creation. Vocation, in the words of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, is “finding a purpose for your life that is part of the purposes of God.”² That sounds like something requiring older age, more experience, and a greater certainty of faith than most people associate with youth.

Vacation—now that sounds like something one would go to St. Simon Island in January to address in relation to youth and youth ministry! As our family prepared to take a short trip during the holidays, one of my twin five-year-old sons who had been listening to months of dinner table conversations on the subject of youth ministry and vocation, asked as we packed our bags, “Mama, are we going on a vocation now?” It’s a lovely question, really, and one that I hope we can work with together through this series of lectures. The question, “Are we going on a vocation now?” can be asked equally by youth and by those who minister with youth. Perhaps with youth, the question sounds more like this: “Are we going on a vocation *now?*” with emphasis on the time when vocation exists. In the case of youth

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ministers (particularly in the way youth ministry is structured in many Presbyterian and other mainline churches), the question takes a different stress: “Are we going on a *vocation* now?” with emphasis on the nature of this work as a bona fide Christian vocation. Same question, different emphases. My plan, therefore, is to focus this first lecture on Christian theological understandings of vocation and the vocations of young people. The second lecture will continue the focus on the vocation of youth as I turn to consider the calling of persons engaged in ministry with youth.

I am guided in my reflections in both lectures by two questions that seem to me to be of enormous importance for the church in ministry with young people today. First, what vocations do youth in the United States claim for themselves in a post-September 11, post-Columbine High School world in which the economy is in a recession and we are, once again, a nation at war? And second, what vocations do the contemporary church and culture in the United States hold out for youth?

Changes in the Understanding of Vocation within Christian Theology

These questions contain within them certain tensions reflective of the complex history of the doctrine of vocation across the breadth of Christian tradition. For example, at various times, Christians have emphasized Christian vocation or calling as a marker of special status—and used the concept to legitimate power hierarchies in the church. Gradually the church came to emphasize the role-related notions of vocation, identifying vocation with a particular position of authority or office in the church. By the Middle Ages, this notion of vocation as a call to a position set apart from others was so thoroughly ensconced that the very word “vocation” now became restricted to priests or persons in a monastic order. Priests and monastics had vocations. Other Christians did not. I want to notice the way this narrowed and hierarchical understanding of vocation has walked its way right into contemporary youth ministry in the church (again, especially as it is structured in many Presbyterian and mainline churches), where those in ministry with youth have a “job” as a lay staff member or an associate pastor, but they certainly are not considered to have a “vocation”—otherwise, it would be practiced by more heads of staff/senior pastors! But that is the subject of the next lecture. Suffice it to say that this view of vocation emphasizes its separative function.

Alternatively, however, Christians also have viewed vocation or calling as the great leveler, a status common to all and received through baptism. In



the Reformed tradition, the call is the personal confirmation of being part of God's chosen people, called to witness and service. In the face of the medieval church's narrowing notion of vocation, one of the most significant contributions of the Reformation to Christian theology was its recovery of the idea of the "priesthood of all believers," and the idea that in all walks of life, not only as monastics or ordained persons, Christians may live out the call from God. In recent times, this perspective has become somewhat imbalanced through the tendency to conflate vocation with work or career, an imbalance appropriately critiqued by many feminist and third-world theologians as elitist or as potentially sanctifying the unjust structuring of labor.

Sometimes Christian theology has amplified the "visibility" of the call, seeing it as a visible manifestation of Christ's justifying and sanctifying work in the believer's life. Other voices have emphasized the "invisibility" of Christian vocation, linking it to a notion that only God knows the identities of those whom God has elected for salvation, which cannot necessarily be seen or known through any particular outward manifestation. Similarly, sometimes the individual person's choice-making capacity is emphasized, and at other times it is muted in the face of a strong claim for God's freedom.

What do these historical theological questions with all their shifts in meaning have to do with the call of youth today? Everything!!—because how one understands the Christian concept of vocation will shape whether and how we do ministry with youth as persons who *have* a calling and who, out of their identity as called ones, *issue a call* to the church and the world.

I therefore turn now to talk about the call of youth in terms of three particular aspects of a Christian understanding of vocation: identity, the communal nature of Christian vocation, and solidarity. In so doing, I am also making three particular theological claims about youth, each woven throughout the three aspects of vocation I am addressing: (1) Youth are called *as the young people they are*—i.e., Christian youth have life-purposes that exist within the purposes of God not in spite of their young age but because of it. (2) The vocation of youth in the church and in the world places young people in a distinctively prophetic role that is necessary to the life and transformation of the church. (3) The calling of youth by God is a call for young people to offer their gifts on behalf of others, even and especially as those gifts continue to take shape in young people.

Vocation and Identity

We live in a time when the term *vocation* has been thoroughly secularized and stripped of its theological meaning: there is a tendency to associate

vocation with career or profession—events that generally take place in future-time for youth. The problem with this future orientation is the way it trivializes the present meanings of what youth do with their lives, what they have to offer, as it to say that their only real significance is what they will become, and not who and what they already are now.

Of course there *is* a strong future orientation to the Christian idea of vocation: to be called is to be drawn toward something different than where and how one already lives. Paul and other New Testament letter writers speak of “the hope to which [God] has called you” (Ephesians 1:18), or name the believers “you who are called to be saints” (Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2). Vocation has a future face as it directs the lives of believers toward the fulfillment of God’s desires for the creation, a fulfillment that is not known or experienced fully now and that therefore is still future. Vocation bears an eschatological fingerprint.

The future-related aspect of vocation in no way excludes youth, however, from being called by God. Churches whose primary orientation toward youth is to see them as a pool of “future members or leaders” fail to grasp the present and immediate quality that operates within and alongside the future element in Christian understandings of vocation. The idea of “being called” by God sometimes appears in Paul’s writings as a shorthand way to refer to a person’s initial encounter with the invitation to walk in the way of Jesus, as Paul puts it, “when you were called” or “at the time you were called” (1 Corinthians 7:17-24). In that sense, vocation as the “call from God” is something that every Christian receives through baptism, through which we “put on a new identity in Christ,” one which has present-day consequences in the life of the believer. Adults, children, and youth receive a new identity in Christ through their calling. Paul’s linguistic way of conveying this link between the call and identity is to use the Greek term *klesis*, or call as a *name*. He refers to the Christians in Corinth as *oi kletoi*, those who are called. Being called becomes their name, their identity. In fact, the very word used for church in the New Testament, *ecclesia*, literally means “the called-out ones.”

Brueggemann once remarked that sooner or later all questions of identity become questions of vocation.³ The question of who we are eventually becomes a question about human purpose, a question of *whose* we are; a question of why it should even matter *that* we are. Most of us are well aware of adolescence as a time of identity formation, to use Erik Erikson’s terminology, or, in the language of contemporary scholarship on adolescence, we recognize this as a time when adolescent’s subjectivity is constructed.



My husband and I finally broke down and got cell phones for Christmas. One of the features I am still getting used to is “call forwarding”—the one where you can take a call that was dialed to one number and automatically send it somewhere else. We need to do a little call forwarding in the church, forwarding the call from youth’s future to where it can reach them in the present, getting the call into the present tense with youth. God directs it there, and then we in the church act like this giant switchboard that puts all young people into “call waiting”—sorry, you can’t take that call until you are at least a young adult. But God’s call is not a future career for which one makes preparations. It is a way of life now. Yes, youth are going on a vocation *now*, not just when they reach adulthood. And in fact, their youthful age lends uniqueness to how they enact the call. In the language of Karl Barth,

To the concept of the vocation in which the calling of God already finds man there belongs the clear and definite element of his age.... That the young person is still relatively without experience means that he is not in such danger of already being the slave of habit, chained to a routine and therefore traditionalistic, sophisticated, relativistic or sceptical. He should be capable of a certain independence, of a fruitful astonishment, of a measure of faith.... He should not be the victim of boredom because everything is so familiar. The thought of impotence in the face of a blind fate should be far from him. He is also lacking in materials to make a picture of himself, to think out his particular role and to learn it off—notions which he might be tempted to make normative for his future.... Will he see and grasp his opportunity?⁴

So the *age* of youth, the very youthfulness of youth, offers a unique opportunity for Christian vocation, even for one like Karl Barth, from whom we might not expect writings that advocate for youth!

Earlier I mentioned that one problem we in the church face when trying to speak meaningfully about vocation today concerns the stripping away of theological meanings in the concept of vocation, equating vocation with career, job, or profession. Certainly this is a problem for youth too. But the secularized use of the term *vocation* may actually be less problematic for youth in terms of its conflation with job or career as a future event than it is in terms of its *underlying assumption that vocation is a personal and individual achievement*. Among the more articulate and helpful voices in contemporary theological discussions of vocation, Dr. James Fowler, professor at Emory University and director of the Center for Ethics in Public

Policy and the Professions, has suggested that “our most serious modern heresy [is] the individualistic assumption that we are or can be self-grounded persons. This assumption means believing that we have within us—and are totally responsible for generating from within us—all the resources out of which to create a fulfilled and self-actualized life.”⁵ What Fowler rightly addresses here is the tendency for persons to believe that we “write our own lives.” This is the myth of the great American self-made person, is it not? Don’t we simply make up our minds and act? Don’t we shape our own destinies and act as full agents of our own lives. Christians claim, in contrast, that with the call *God* re-writes our lives; that we have new lives formed and reformed as the story of Christ begins to take shape in us. Paul writes about vocation as the work of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 12). As such, it is not something youth or adults can “achieve.” Nor is it static, a matter of “been there, done that.” Vocation is something that God’s Spirit works and reworks in persons. As Fowler puts it, “Vocation, seen as a call to partnership with God on behalf of the neighbor, constitutes a far more fruitful way to look at the question of our specialness, our giftedness, and our possibilities of excellence.”⁶ In other words, in our vocations it is not only we who are active but also God who acts in us to make it possible for our lives to join with the life of God for the world.

That is a rather countercultural perspective to North American social norms that proclaims persons live in a meritocracy (that is, achieving all things because we merit them through our abilities, skills, and so on) in which persons take charge of their own destinies in planful ways. Of course, not everyone in this society buys into the myth of the meritocracy. I have a hunch that a fair amount of the low self esteem and depression experienced by so many youth, especially girls and youth of color in the United States, comes from the stark recognition by these young people that they themselves do not possess all the necessary resources to construct a meaningful and fulfilling life—nor does the culture offer them such resources. For these and other youth, the Christian meaning of vocation, of being called, offers hope because it says that identity and worth come from who we are in God—“the called ones”—and not in the narrow, circumscribed identities offered by the world. James, an African American teen I worked with in chemical dependency treatment some years ago, put it well when he described the “counter-identity” his faith provided over and against the negative identity given by society: “The world tells me I am a nobody, good for nothing but hate. If I listen to that long enough, I use drugs because I can’t stand who I am. Now that I’m sober, I take who I am from who God says I am, not who



society lets me be as a black man—and so I know I am somebody.” Such an identity is neither achieved nor “decided upon.” It is the work of the Spirit, and as such it is a gift.

The Vocation of Youth as Communally Shaped: For Good and for Ill

There is yet another side to this issue of how vocation and identity take shape in relation to youth in ways not of their own doing. It has to do with the way traditional scholarship on adolescence generally fails to take account of the power of social and cultural forces to construct and constrict the identities and vocations of youth. These perspectives tend to treat youth as persons who are totally free to choose/construct an identity, exerting an unencumbered and unlimited agency. As Foucault, Henry Giroux, Cornell West, and other cultural theorists help us to understand, even the shapes that adolescent bodies take in a particular time reflect the values and norms of those with the power to put forward a particular shape as the ideal. The thinness of Twiggy in the '60s or the looks touted by their contemporary counterparts like Britney Spears are not just “their” bodies but are expressions of social norms about what a female body should be like.

Let me offer another example. In one five-year period spanning the late 1970s and early 1980s there were more persons completing graduate degrees in business than in the entire three previous decades.⁷ One might wish to believe that all these people were simply exerting their individual agency and choosing to make careers in areas needing MBA degrees. Most of them would probably say that they “chose” a career in business. What is clear, however, is that in any given historical and cultural contexts, particular options are ratified and legitimated by the culture, while others are negatively sanctioned in a way that has real power over people’s actions. Choice making and agency take place within a particular social and cultural context that highlights certain options for some youth more than others. And so another aspect of my earlier assertion that vocation is not of our own making is this cultural one: Contexts and communities have a powerful capacity to shape personhood, and while young people can resist the effects of this construction, they cannot stand completely free of it.

It is not my intention here to suggest that the shaping power of cultures and communities is necessarily all bad, or to somehow set up an opposition between God and human culture and society. I am far too steeped in reformed theology for that, believing with Calvin and others that God’s freedom is such that God can and does work through human institutions and

cultures, even while the reality of sin requires us to critique the limits of these human creations and to be wary of baptizing *any* form of human structure or government as divinely appointed. Instead, I am saying that the kinds of structures and communities a person participates in matter a great deal because of the formative power of these on identity and vocation.

For youth, participation in a mentoring community of faith could constitute the church as one of the communities shaping their identity. Imagine the possibilities of a community in which experienced adult guides accompany young people on their walks of faith. What would it be like if youth, adults of all ages, and children really experienced the church as a community engaging together in Christian practices of service, prayer and worship, hospitality, confession and forgiveness, stewardship, and care of neighbor, so that each person there is being formed and transformed by the community of Christ? What if youth identity took shape in a community supportive of the vocations of youth? That is a very positive vision.

But what happens when the identity and vocation a society legitimates for its youth is primarily a negative one? Mike Males explores this question when he suggests that in our contemporary context, the identities and vocations of youth take shape largely out of adult projections onto youth of adult fears and anxieties.⁸ He notes, for example, that in the constant litany about the problems and rates of teen pregnancy in North America, the presence and involvement of adults is obscured. Males claims that most teen pregnancies involve a father of legal adult age.⁹ He goes on to suggest this same kind of projection of adult fears and anxieties about their own drug use, violence and aggression, racism, etc. leads adults to construct an overall negative identity for youth. Adults then fear youth and believe that they must find ways to control the younger generation.

A recent public television production of *Frontline*, titled “The Merchants of Cool” is illustrative of this theory.¹⁰ It focused on youth as a target group among marketers. In one segment some of the marketing gurus from big corporations trying to garner the teen market display their understandings of youth and their methods of operating to “get a leg up” on their competitors. The video segment shows these marketers giving attention to youth, even going into their rooms to learn about what they wear, what they do with their leisure time and their incomes, and what they value. All of this goes on film, which the marketers then dissect and turn into what they hope will be the next hot trend to capture teen purchasing power. Another segment shows marketers characterizing youth as “all about sex.” What constructions of adolescent identity are operating here? These marketing professionals



have no problems exploiting the sexual awakening of adolescence to the point of constructing the adolescent only in terms of sex. And to what vocation does the culture of corporate capitalism invite youth? What these video segments illustrate so well is the extent to which the primary vocation of all of us in the United States—and, increasingly under global capitalism, around the world—is that of the consumer, for which adolescence has become the primary training ground. Recognizing the power of social and cultural forces to construct the vocation of youth sets some important limits on how one responds to the question, “what vocations do youth claim for themselves in a post-September 11, post-Columbine high school world?” It becomes plain that young people simultaneously choose and yet do not choose who and what they are in the world.

What one can observe in these video segments is described by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as the “reproduction of culture.”¹¹ In this endless cycle, corporate capitalism’s advertisers artificially create desires in young people that they, the corporations, are then uniquely in the position to satisfy as youth become consumers of the goods they desire. The cycle neatly disguises the power relations in this arrangement, whereby advertisers set the terms for what is desirable, and teens-qua-consumers remain dependent for their sense of value/worth on their ability to consume the right goods. Even their modes of resistance to cultural domination—body piercing, tattoos, ethnic dress, rap and hip hop music—become co-opted and marketed back to them as necessary items for consumption/purchase in order to have an appropriate youth-outside-the-mainstream display of identity. In a culture dominated and shaped by the market, is it any surprise that the primary vocation offered to youth is that of consumer?

Recognizing the potentially negative or harmful role of culture and community in relation to youth can be difficult right now. Community is an “in” concept, lavishly celebrated as the panacea to all the ills of Western individualism. In recent years, I have been happy about the turn in theology to affirm the communal and relational character of God, and to understand the educative, transformational power of Christian community. With Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, and others focusing on participation in the practices of faith as the way young people take on Christian identity and vocation, I can affirm in a general sense that this faith and this calling are probably “more caught than taught.”¹² At the same time, in some of the discussions their works generate concerning participation in the practices of communities, and of theology focused in and around community, there is a certain naiveté—as if none of these communities or theologies exists in captivity to

the cultures through which they are expressed; as if these communities are all equally well equipped to be adequate mentors of Christian faith practices; as if the needs and interests of marginalized persons will be automatically protected by communities rather than subsumed into them. What I have tried to show here is that for young people, Christian vocation takes shape in communal and cultural contexts with multiple and sometimes competing interests. Communities and cultural contexts may operate in oppressive and/or liberative ways in relation to youth.

An example of the power of Christian community to shape the personhood of young people and their vocations in a liberative, positive way may be seen in the kind of community described by writer Anne Lamott in her wonderful book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. The chapter is called “Why I Make Sam Go to Church:”

You might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks, and if you were to ask, this is what I would say. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by nearly seventy-five pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want—which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy—are people with a deep sense of spirituality. They are people in community, who pray, or practice their faith... They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle; they are part of something beautiful...Our funky little church is filled with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying...That is why I make Sam go to church.¹³

Lamott “makes her son go to church” because she wants him to be around others who embody the Christian calling, recognizing the power of such a community to shape the vocation and identity of her son toward something bigger than he can construct from within himself alone. Faith communities are powerful forces in the shaping of human identity and vocation.

We cannot afford, then, to be naïve about the communal shaping of vocation among youth: to be sure, it can happen in richly meaningful ways where communities of faith invite youth to walk in the way of Jesus. At the same time, though, the wider culture, defined and dominated by consumer capitalism, is also at work to construct the identities of youth in the image of its gods, and we in the church cannot afford to ignore youth’s prophetic



acts of resistance that invite us all to another way. The call to Christian faith and life has always been a call to an alternative reality and an alternative community, an alternative way of making meaning to the ways offered by the world; an alternative based not in amassing security through possessions or control but on risking everything for the sake of God and neighbor. It is that aspect of the call of youth to which I finally turn.

The Vocation of Youth as Prophetic Witness and Call to Solidarity

So much has changed since September 11, including how we make sense of the time of life we call adolescence. Unfortunately, I have had to spend a fair amount of time in airports since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. One of the most striking changes in my mind is that eighteen-year olds toting portable CD players, wearing baggy jeans with not-too-obviously-intentional rips in the knees, and playing Frisbee down the corridors of airports have now been replaced by eighteen-year olds carrying semi-automatic weapons, wearing army camouflage, and not playing anything. After decades of hearing Erik Erikson's perspective that adolescence in the modern era represents a kind of "moratorium" in the life cycle that works against premature commitments, many of us are forced to wonder: Is the identity this society constructs for teens adequate for our time, an identity of in-betweeness in which childhood remains in some small measure during this not-yet-complete transition to adulthood? Such an identity seems to deny the fragility of human life, the urgency of persons offering their gifts to the world while they still have life and breath to do that.

It is, I realize, a very white and middle-class Western question I am asking. I recall during my years as a mission coworker in the Philippines watching a young man of about fifteen or sixteen standing in the rain on the streets of Manila at the edge of a large area of land populated by the urban poor of that city. This young man was drawing the runoff water from the gutter into a makeshift bucket and pouring it over his head for a shower—once, twice, but the third bucket went not over his head but up to his lips as drinking water, the only drinking water to which he had access. For this young man and millions other like him, adolescence has never been a moratorium. Perhaps it is fair to say that for him and others like him, adolescence has never really existed, has never been able to have the layers of meaning constructing it in middle-class white U.S. society. The so-called sufferings of privileged adolescents in the American middle- and affluent classes quickly

pale in relation to youth like this one who never experience adolescence as we know it. How can we make sense of such complexities without trivializing one in light of the other?

We need not go looking for silver linings, falsely creating redemptive meanings out of senseless human suffering—in that respect, the events of September 11 are no exception. We cannot put a good spin on such horror. Even so, there may be new perspectives and transformed visions of everyday reality that result from the forced vulnerability brought on by such an event. One such opportunity comes to us if we are willing and able to look anew at the way American culture and church position adolescence and the gifts of adolescence as incomplete personhood and as-yet-undeveloped potential giftedness. It seems to me that one of the many challenges issued in the ashes of September 11 concerns whether those of us living in the United States will find in the loss and pain an excuse to retreat into isolationism, or use it as a means for achieving solidarity with youth of many cultures in our own nation and around the world for whom adolescence has never been a “moratorium,” and whose everyday lives are touched by violence.

Solidarity refers to the practice of standing with others, particularly with others unlike ourselves, identifying with them and their situation. It implies a relationship of connection amidst difference. It suggests that even though I may not share in a particular condition or situation in my own life (for example, economic poverty, constant exposure to violence), I can choose to “stand with” those who are so affected as a witness to God’s action in Christ of standing with the oppressed of the earth.

In contemporary theology, one frequently hears this word “solidarity” evoked in the works of various liberation theologians. Interestingly, though, in writings that preceded many of these liberation theologians, the twentieth-century Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth in his discussion of the Christian doctrine of vocation develops the link between Christian vocation and solidarity with neighbors. For Barth, vocation or calling directs Christians to understand their lives as signs and confirmations of what God has already done in Christ—namely the election, justification, and sanctification of humankind. In addition, though, the call directs Christians to represent humankind’s election in Jesus Christ to neighbors, treating persons outside the Christian community as those for whom the call awaits, thus being in a relationship of openness, responsibility, and solidarity with them.¹⁴ As feminist theologian Letty M. Russell helpfully interprets this doctrine, Christians are indeed “elected” by God—not for special status but for *service*.¹⁵ Vocation thereby positions Christians as people who are genuinely



for others, as God's self-offering in Christ manifested God for us.


For Barth, vocation is not merely a changed inner state but is manifested in various acts of liberation, which must be practiced over and over.¹⁶ Vocation thus has an explicitly public dimension to it, as a lived confirmation of what Christ has already done for the whole world, a continual offering and renewing of the gifts of the spirit for the world. Once again, though, Paul's articulation of Christian vocation, and various Reformed theologians interpreting him, claims that the "equipment" for living out the call, like the call itself, is not self-generated by the believer but comes from God's spirit who gives the gifts needed by the community.

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). These gifts are not private possessions or individual achievements to be capitalized on with the next career move. Instead, Paul says, these gifts "activated in everyone by God" are to be used for the good of the whole community.

What this common, public character of Christian vocation suggests about the call of youth is that youth, in order to be faithful to their vocations, need to be able to offer their gifts for the common good. It seems that in every crisis, in every war, in every moment of institutional transition, young people have played a prophetic role of calling the society to look at what the society preferred not to see. There are some scholars who believe that this historic role of youth as the "voice of dissent" and the social conscience of the culture has been eroded considerably, as social, political, economic, and religious instability exert a silencing effect on young people. Granted, it is far easier, far more comfortable for adults to live without the nagging voices of youth who notice problems and dare to ask why and who see hypocrisies and dare to challenge them. But when we do so, especially in the church, it is to our own peril.

Remember Jeremiah's call? "Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the LORD said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD'" (Jeremiah 1:4-8). As with the call of Jeremiah, the *prophetic vocation of*

youth in the church concerns the capacities of young people to call the church back to its mission and to envision anew for every new age the shape and character of Christian witness. Mark Yaconelli, my colleague in youth ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the director of our Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project (YMSP), is researching the ways in which the development of a team-based youth ministry built around spiritual practices (particularly those of contemplative prayer) reshapes the overall life and ministry of the church communities where it is happening. Mark describes the goal of such youth ministry as that of “doing good church with kids.” There are numerous examples from the YMSP in which the deep hungers of youth for God reshape the way of “doing church” in a particular place, as youth’s prophetic role and voice, the prophetic capacity of the yearnings and desires of youth, call the church to an alternative way, or as Russell puts it, subverts the church into being the church. That, I submit, is the special and prophetic function of the call of youth.

Are we going on a vocation *now*? Yes. God has already forwarded the call into the present tense for youth. Youth is unequivocally a time in which persons are called by God, and out of that calling they issue a special and prophetic call to the church and world. Youth are on a vocation now—and the question that remains, for our consideration in the next lecture, is how the vocation of ministry with youth calls us to uphold the vocations of youth themselves. 

NOTES

1. This essay and the one following originated as lectures delivered orally. I have decided for the most part to preserve the informal oral presentation style of their earlier incarnation. I am grateful for dialogue with participants at the Princeton Forum on Youth Ministry that contributed to the reworking of parts of these essays in some significant ways.

2. Walter Brueggemann, “Covenanting as Human Vocation,” *Interpretation* 33:2 (April 1979), p. 126.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 125.

4. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 3:4, trans. A. T. Mackay, T. H. L. Parker, Harold Knight, Henry A. Kennedy, and John Marks (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), pp. 607-612.

5. James Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), pp. 101-102.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

7. This comparative data was presented at the MBA Leadership Conference of 2000 by H. Allan Conway and C. Thomas Howard. To view their presentation, contact mba.roundtable@du.edu.

8. Mike A. Males, *Framing Youth: 10 Myths about the Next Generation* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1999), pp 15-17.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-194.



10. Frontline: *The Merchants of Cool*, WGBH Educational Foundation. Distributed by PBS VIDEO (Public Broadcasting Service, 1999).
11. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Bourdieu and J.C. Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1990).
12. For two examples of this recent turn to practices as a focus in how persons are formed and nurtured in faith, see Dorothy Bass, ed., *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc., 1998); also Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999). A new volume will be published in August 2002 concerned with youth and their practices of faith, called *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville: Upper Room Books).
13. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 99-105.
14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4:3b, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark LTD, 1962), p. 495.
15. Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp.164-166.
16. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4:3b, p. 664.

