



The 2004 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Longing for God: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church

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.

The theme for the 2004 lectures is “Longing for God: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church.” Young people long for God and for a church that embodies the passion of God who was willing to die for them. In their search, young people too often come to the church, find it wanting, and move on. Many believe this youthful quest suggests that the time is ripe for renewal in the whole church, not just in youth ministry. Can we foster revival that is grounded in the passion of Christ rather than in the perceived needs and preferences of each generation?

The 2004 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture provide a theologically grounded and forward-thinking conversation about what it means to be the church with and for young people today. Rather than proposing a cookie-cutter model for what the church should be, they provoke significant theological reflection on the nature of ministry and the church.

May these lectures feed your mind and renew your passion for ministry.

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2004 Lectures

Kenda Creasy Dean

The Problem with Passion: Or, Why the Church of
Mel Gibson Is Doing Just Fine
Somebody Save Me: Passion, Salvation, and the Smallville Effect

Roland Martinson

Engaging the Quest: Encountering Youth and God in Their Longing
Life and Faith Walking: Joining Youth and God in What Matters

Evelyn L. Parker

Who in the World Am I?
Turning the World Upside Down:
The Holy Spirit, Rage, and Righteousness

Douglas M. Strong

A Holy Passion and a Holy Temper: Spiritual Renewal Movements as
Empowerment for Today's Youth
Sanctified Eccentricity: Spiritual Renewal Movements as a
Challenge for Today's Church



The Problem with Passion: Or, Why the Church of Mel Gibson Is Doing Just Fine¹ • *Kenda Creasy Dean*

In case you missed the memo, thanks to the theological maelstrom surrounding Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), Hollywood has already written God into its twenty-first-century storyline. *Bruce Almighty* (2003) spurred thousands of calls to "God's" cell phone number (in one market outside Atlanta, the number actually rang into a Christian ministry); a year later, *Saved*—marketed as a comedy about Christian high school students that "challenges religion but never questions faith"—helped Christian high school students question their faith over the summer of 2004. And for those still renting *Dogma* (1999), check out the promotional copy for *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* (2002), now available on DVD:

The Power of Christ impales you! The second coming is upon us, and Jesus has returned to earth. But before he can get down to the serious business of judging the living and the dead, he has to contend with an army of vampires that can walk in the daylight. Combining Kung-Fu action with biblical prophecy...the film teams the Savior with Mexican wrestling hero El Santos against mythological horrors and science gone mad, and also manages to address contemporary sexual politics. And did we mention that it's a musical?²

The similarities, thankfully, are few, but this much merits mention. Instead of reverting to the usual Hollywood script casting God as a generic, kindly cosmic magician, the filmmakers of *The Passion of the Christ* and *Jesus Christ,*

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Vampire Hunter focused unswervingly on Jesus and unflinchingly connected the Christ's passion(s)—variously defined—with the salvation of humankind.

Maybe we should ask ourselves why so many mainline Protestants are reluctant to go and do likewise. The word “passion” comes from the Greek *pathos*, “to suffer.” The word's original meaning had less to do with pain than with vulnerability, for passion meant to submit, to undergo an experience, to be completely affected or overcome by another. The Greeks, therefore, viewed the passions as dangerous, unseemly for humans, and unthinkable for the gods who, by definition, could not be vulnerable. But Jews and Christians acknowledged another kind of God—a passionate God—who allowed the divine self to be moved by God's beloved and who chose to remain passive in the face of death. Yet God's suffering, or *pathos*, was born out of God's concern for God's beloved. Although the early Christians shared the Greek suspicion of human passions, they also viewed the suffering love of God as the source of human redemption and the means by which our selfish passions could be transformed into self-giving love. In Christian tradition, therefore, passion did not emerge primarily from suffering, but from *love*—the love God gives and the love God longs to be returned.³ The life, death, and resurrection, or “passion,” of Christ is good news not because Jesus suffers but because Jesus *loves* with such wild, passionate hope that even death on a cross cannot stop his determination to win us.

Adolescents do not want to suffer. But they do desperately want to love something *worthy* of suffering, and to be so loved. If developmental theorist Erik H. Erikson is right, that what young people need most to develop during adolescence is the strength of having something “to die for,”⁴ then adolescents instinctively search for passion. Whether they discover the true source of passion—whether they ever connect their desire for love with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ or with the church at all, for that matter—depends on whether the church bears witness to a more reliable love than those available in popular culture. And that, of course, depends on whether the church practices the passion we preach.

The adolescent quest for passion reveals a theological aneurysm in mainline Protestantism in the early twentieth century: *We are facing a crisis of passion, a crisis that guts Christian theology of its very core, not to mention its lifeblood for adolescents.*⁵ Teenagers are quick to point out the oxymoron in passionless Christianity, quick to smell danger in suppressing their emotional range, quick to question faith that fails to register on the Richter scale, and quick to abandon a church that accommodates such paltry piety. Not only

does a church without passion deform Christian theology, it extinguishes the fire behind Christian practice as well. In short, without passion, Christian faith collapses—and young people seldom invest in the road to extinction.

Just What Is the Problem with Passion?

We are not the first Christians, of course, to have a problem with passion. In John's vision recorded in Revelation, the angel rebukes the church of Laodaeia:

“I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth. For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Rev. 3:15–17)

Passion is an ambiguous muse; after all, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela both won passionate followings, but so did Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. Clearly, passion can be co-opted by evil as well as won by God. Passion mingles will with desire, and since young people routinely possess extravagant quantities of both, society—the church included—has long considered passion too risky, really, to allow much less to encourage, even when the passion involved was God's. The theological direction of religious education in the twentieth-century mainline church was to *lessen*—not heighten—Christianity's emphasis on atonement, where the story of Christ's Passion traditionally resides, particularly where young people were concerned. Progressives like G. Stanley Hall, Edwin Starbuck, George Albert Coe, and even John Dewey significantly shaped thinking about religious education and adolescence in mainline denominations in the early twentieth century.⁶ Dedicated to ousting any lingering shred of nineteenth-century revivalism, liberal theologians sympathetic to educational reform for youth seldom viewed salvation as an act of sacrifice (or even as an act of God, for that matter). To those primarily responsible for shaping the mainline Protestant church's theological agenda with young people in the early twentieth century, the cross's primary benefit was to inspire humans to get along.⁷

Yet something crucial was lost in this defensive posture against passion. True love, as every teenager knows, is always worth dying for. Passion is the truest love there is, a love worthy of sacrifice, a love so rare, so life-changing

that it is the stuff of legends. It is Jack and Rose in *Titanic*. It is Mufasa and Simba in *The Lion King*. It is Sam and Frodo in *Lord of the Rings*. Passion is “to die for.” For Christians, acts of passion seek self-giving, not self-fulfillment; they enact love in light of the cross, not in light of therapeutic consumerism. Holy love looks foolish; by the standards of consumer culture, it *is* foolish. Mel Gibson’s own faith grows out of twelfth-century developments in atonement theory that condensed divine passion into Jesus’ suffering during Holy Week. But the history of Christian thought includes many who viewed the entire Christ-event as the manifestation of God’s passion: a divine posture *culminating* in death on the cross, not synonymous with it.⁸

Hypothesis #1: Excess as the Problem with Passion

If passion represents the “to die for” core of Christianity, the problem with passion must go beyond passion itself. Maybe the problem with passion is simply excess—young people simply have too much of it. This would not be difficult to prove; witness MTV’s “Spring Break” telecasts, Britney Spears’ publicity antics, *American Idol*’s nail-biting final performances. Adolescent passions are alive and well and are as happily exploited by popular culture as they are manipulated by religious affections. After all, wasn’t that the problem with Mel Gibson’s *Passion*—that there was just *more* of it than was really necessary?

Our concern is well founded. Take, for example, Ayat Akras, the seventeen-year-old Palestinian high school senior who wrote in her suicide letter that she was tired of men doing nothing to further the holy cause of *jihadi*. So she strapped explosives to herself and headed for a supermarket in Jerusalem, where she detonated the bomb in her backpack. In addition to killing herself, Ayat Akras killed two guards and a Jewish girl her own age.

Or, consider “the American Taliban” John Walker Lindh. Lindh grew up in a tolerant, multicultural community near San Francisco, played basketball in the driveway, listened to hip hop and rap music. He was deeply interested in religion; he converted to Islam at age fifteen after reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* for a high school assignment.

Local Islamic teachers—youth ministers, if you will—mentored him and encouraged his newfound faith. After graduation, Lindh traveled to Yemen to study the Koran. The rest of the story is history: he wound up a self-confessed *jihadi* in an al-Qaeda training camp in Afghanistan. In the war against terror-

ism following 9/11, CIA agents discovered Lindh among Taliban prisoners of war, brought him home, and charged him with ten counts of treason. In order to avoid life in prison, in the summer of 2002 Lindh confessed to carrying two grenades and supplying services to the Taliban. He is serving two ten-year prison sentences. He is twenty-two years old.

Now, before we criticize Ayat Akras and John Walker Lindh for the moral and theological incomprehensibility of their actions, perhaps we should remember that we could tell their stories as a triumph for youth ministry. Significant adult mentors during Lindh's late teens, for example, ushered him into practicing faith communities and confirmed his intuition that faith that mattered entailed a radical way of life. Religion became deeply important to these young people in ways parents and pastors usually hope for. It influenced their lifestyles and vocational decisions. Ayat Akras and John Walker Lindh were not casual disciples. They were more than willing to suffer for their faith; as *jihadi* they were willing to die for it. In short, they discovered what every teenager is hard-wired to seek: an object they deemed worthy of their passion and invested their all in it.

What fascinated Americans about John Walker Lindh, I think, was less our shock over his Al-Qaeda connections than our inescapable sense that we knew this young man. Didn't he grow up down the street from us? How do we connect the dots between the gentle teenager who played basketball in the driveway and Abdul Hamid, the *jihadi* with a tangled mass of dark hair and an affected Arab accent who came home to charges of treason? Lindh grew up in what is arguably the most tolerant place in the United States. He attended an elite alternative high school that encouraged students to design their own curriculum. Rather than raising him in a particular faith, his parents allowed him to choose his own ideological boundaries—and he did, with a vengeance. He did not just convert to Islam; he became a disciple of the most radical, most exacting, most oppressive form of Islam in the Middle East.

So upon closer inspection, the dots do connect, and rather predictably: If adolescents search for something and someone to whom they can pledge their troth, the object of this devotion must be worthy of their lives, nothing less. When Søren Kierkegaard was John Walker Lindh's age in 1835, he wrote in his journal:

What I really need is to get clear about what I must do, not what I must know....The crucial thing is to find a truth which is truth *for*

me, and to find *the idea for which I am willing to live and die*. Of what use would it be for me to discover a so-called objective truth...of what use would it be to me to be able to formulate the meaning of Christianity...if it had no deeper meaning *for me and my life*.⁹

Passion asks something of young people; in fact, it asks *everything* of them. This is precisely what makes us nervous. And we are not alone. Only once in Scripture does the word “passion” apply to Jesus—the rest of the time it applies to us, and we are warned to be careful. “I appeal to you, my friends, as strangers and refugees in this world!” wrote Peter to his followers, who were at high risk for being thrown to the lions. “Do not give in to bodily passions, which are always at war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11–12).

Inexperience is an investor’s worst enemy, and young people do not always invest their passions wisely. The landscape of human experience is littered with the consequences of “looking for love in all the wrong places,” the relics of to-die-for faith placed in the hands of too-small gods who would not or could not die for us. Yet if the Hebrew Scriptures exhorted the faithful to “choose life” (Deut. 30:19), Jesus taught that choosing life requires losing it for his sake (Matt. 10:39, Luke 17:33). If commitment to Jesus Christ is not, ultimately, a life-and-death investment, then young people will invest their God-given passion elsewhere.

Hypothesis #2: Indifference as the Problem with Passion

Of course, maybe you are thinking, “But I don’t have Ayat Akras or John Walker Lindh in my youth group. The kids in my youth group don’t seem to be passionate about *anything*. I can’t get them to care about each other, let alone God. From where I sit, the problem with passion is not that teenagers have too much of it, but that they have too *little* of it—especially when it comes to faith.”

Maybe you are right. In his book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* sociologist Christian Smith reports the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, the largest study of religious practices among American youth to date.¹⁰ The study, which surveyed 3,200 American teenagers by phone and interviewed more than 250 in face-to-face conversation, reports good news: adolescents are not hostile toward religion. In fact, for the most part, teenagers’ attitudes toward religion mirror those of their parents (which may or may not be something to celebrate). And

the reason teenagers are not hostile to religion? *Because they have no reason to be.* According to the vast majority of teenagers interviewed for this study, religion is simply not a big deal—it is, in Smith’s words, simply “part of the furniture” of their lives.¹¹

To be clear: American adolescents believe in God; up to 85% claim a religious identity of some sort. More than half (55%) say they have made a personal commitment to “live life for God.” More than half of all mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic young people surveyed say they attend a religious youth group—and if we only consider young people who attend religious services, the number of teenagers attending religious youth groups jumps to 84%. In other words, American teenagers *assume* God. God is not a problem for them, and in fact, more than half say that religion is very important. But does it *really make a difference*? In their interviews, researchers tried to ascertain, “Are you any different because of your faith? Does religion make a difference in the way you live your life? In the decisions you make? In the friends you keep? What can you tell me about what you believe? What influences your sense of right and wrong? Does religion really make a difference?”

The early reports from the National Study of Youth and Religion described the adolescent posture toward religion—like that of their parents—as one of “benign positive regard.” This conclusion was based on a number of perceptions on the part of young people regarding religion:

FINDING #1: Religion is wallpaper—it’s just sort of there. American teenagers take religion for granted and assume it operates in the background of their lives—doing whatever it does (they are not exactly sure what). Statistically, of course, religion *does* influence young people’s behavior, significantly. Social science research is nearly unanimous in reporting positive benefits of adolescent religious affiliation. Religiously engaged teenagers participate in less risky behavior, do better in school, have better relationships with their families, and engage in more pro-social activities like volunteering in the community than do teenagers who are not religiously active.¹² So what accounts for the discrepancy between these studies and the perception of the teenagers interviewed in this study?

Four possibilities seem plausible. First, since youth presume they are autonomous and self-directed (a characteristic underscored by this study), admitting that *anything* influences them other than their own judgment—including a positive influence like religious faith—is often anathema to teenagers. Second, most teenagers seem to assume a “hands-off” policy on

God's part when it comes to everyday life. God is "on call" in case of crisis, but otherwise seems to simply watch over creation from afar. This theological position allows teenagers to accord God a measure of theoretical importance as the creator, without requiring them to invoke God's presence (or explain God's absence) in daily life. A third possibility is that the gap between social science statistics indicating religion's influence on young people and adolescents' own self-perceptions might simply be explained practically: teenagers involved in religious activities have fewer opportunities to get in trouble. But for our purposes, a fourth explanation needs to be included as well: positive social behavior is not the same thing as religious commitment. "Being a good kid" does not necessarily translate into faith, and young people are correct to distinguish the two.

FINDING #2: Cluelessness is normal when it comes to your faith. The majority of American teenagers are incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. This was true for teenagers who attended church frequently as well as for those who did not. American adolescents' religious vocabulary tends to consist of one word—God. Furthermore, the more teenagers identify themselves as mainline Protestant or Roman Catholic, the more difficulty they had using religious categories of any kind, including talking about Jesus.

FINDING #3: Thou shalt not discuss—or diss—thy neighbor's religion. The majority of American teenagers consider it taboo to discuss religion in public, especially if that discussion elevates one religion above others. American teenagers, regardless of religious affiliation, seem to have adopted a careful, ambiguous "inclusiveness" toward other religions, at least when discussing religion with people outside of their own "tribe." To teenagers, all religions are created equal. Young people have enormous difficulty identifying, or even acknowledging, normative religious beliefs, and the possibility of divine judgment for anything short of a capital offense is a carefully avoided topic of public conversation.

FINDING #4: Everything else comes first. A no-brainer for youth ministers: *Religion operates in a social-structurally weak position with American teenagers.* In other words, given a choice between church and school, media, friends, or other social opportunities, everything else comes first.

FINDING #5: Religion is useful as a self-actualizing booster shot. *American youth instinctively suppose that religion exists to help people be and do what they want.* American teenagers view religion as the great Self-Actualizer,

adhering to an instrumentalist view of religion. In other words, religion is useful insofar as it helps me “be all that I want to be.” For these youth, religion does not serve as an external tradition or authority in their lives, it does not make compelling claims or demands on them, and it does not challenge them to grow or change in ways they do not want to. Religion, according to these teenagers, does maintain a close connection to morality for American youth, but not because they view religion as a source of morality. Religion is not necessary to being moral; when asked the origins of their moral standards, most teenagers said, “Me.” Therefore, religion is useful to the degree that it bolsters the “morality of me.”

FINDING #6: Going to church doesn’t mean you know what Christianity is about. It cannot be assumed that churchgoing teens are hearing and/or understanding the Christian gospel.¹³ In other words, even young people who regularly attend church have little recognition of religion’s meaning in their lives, little or no theological language to articulate faith, and little or no ability to discern the moral and theological teachings of their traditions. In fact, young people who attend church are likely to express beliefs that are either explicitly not part of the Christian canon or that contradict historical teachings of Christianity. The study plaintively concludes: “Despite their instinctive individualism, American teens are eminently teachable. And they desperately need teaching.”¹⁴

Sociological research, of course, does not propose to set ecclesial policy. But Christians should hear in the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion an alarming indictment of religious formation generally, and of Christian education in mainline Protestant traditions specifically. Those teenagers who belong to sectarian religious groups that cannot afford to take their religious identity for granted—Mormons, Hindus, and Buddhists, for example—were more likely to believe that religion profoundly impacted their lives, to possess a more sophisticated theological vocabulary than their peers, to discuss faith publicly, to chose church-related activities over other social opportunities, to trace moral decisions to their faith, and to possess a coherent understanding of their theological tradition.¹⁵ At the same time, two groups of Christian young people—white mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic young people—were consistently the least likely to acknowledge religion’s impact on their lives. In theological terms, these young people represent the most spiritually at-risk youth in America.

Beyond “Benign Positive Regard”: Toeholds to Holiness

Passion and benign positive regard are poles apart, and the mainline Protestant church should think twice before cheering the fact that young people are not hostile to religion. It is easy to avoid hostility when nothing is at stake. “Generation X” Christians—faithful young adults who, by world and social science standards, can still fairly be called “youth”¹⁶—often stand at the vanguard of critiquing the mainstream church for substituting “benign positive regard” for “passion.” In small but vocal numbers, these young people increasingly create their own communities of faith in an effort to practice Christianity in communities marked by vulnerability to one another and to God. Here is how one such community, “Kenosis,” describes itself on its Web site:

- We are deeply passionate about worship.
- We are passionate about being naked before our maker.
- We desire authenticity in our relationships with God and with each other.
- We want to let down the walls, and speak from our hearts. We come to the One who created us.
- There is no excuse for anything that is less than real.
- We want to be vulnerable, and to worship in spirit and in truth.
- We do not say that we have achieved this level of authenticity. Far from it. But this is our heart’s desire.¹⁷

In their plea for a passionate church, these young people are calling for a kind of Christian community reminiscent of the church of Acts and sympathetic to the early church’s efforts to combat enculturation. Whereas the young people at “Kenosis” seek authenticity as the *sine qua non* of a passionate church, young people in the sixth century (particularly in the east) sought *apathaeia*—the ironic (by today’s standards) name John Climacus gave to the antidote for an enculturated church.¹⁸ *Apatheia* literally means the “absence of *pathos*.” Western writers tended to prefer the term “dispassion” or “detachment,” but the means to purification was the same. *Apatheia* (which is about as far from contemporary apathy as one can get) is holy passion, a state in which the believer “burns” with desire for God and neighbor.¹⁹ *Apatheia* is the result of “detachment” from lesser passions that left us free to desire God and others with focused, undistracted energy. According to the sixth-century solitary John Climacus, human passions were God-given impulses that had been distorted by sin and were therefore prone to wandering off after the wrong

things. *Apatheia* provided the spiritual realignment necessary for the believer to detach her human passions from unworthy objects and focus her every longing, full-throttle on the passion of God.

To assist in this process of spiritual realignment, the church developed practices that, over time, came to assume a pattern that still lies at the heart of Christian formation—and that, for the most part, were completely unrecognized by the teenagers interviewed for the National Study of Youth and Religion. Intended for “layering” rather than accomplishment, these practices are designed to hold “benign positive regard” at bay as Christians seek to imitate the Passion of Christ:

1) *Practices of purgation* pry our fingers loose from old attachments that impede our ability to fully receive God’s grace. These spiritual disciplines focus on “letting go” of sinful passions that misshape the self and, as a result, have historically been viewed as the starting point in the life of faith. Designed to hold the pagan world at bay, practices of purgation help the new believer learn to distinguish herself from the surrounding pagan culture. As a result, practices of purgation often seem literal and radical because they imitate Christ extrinsically, often in such acts as fasting, selling worldly possessions, changing physical appearance, cutting off destructive friendships, and changing career paths. The governing assumption behind practices of purgation is that only a radical act can denounce evil and dislodge human passions from their sinful objects, so we will be free to invest these passions in God.

2) *Practices of illumination* help Christians learn to live together as a community that practices passion. If practices of purgation underscore Christianity’s distinctiveness, practices of illumination underscore Christianity’s openness, for they are designed to help the believer recognize God in unexpected, even mundane places: in our food, our homes, our neighbors, even the stranger on our path. As a result, practices of illumination serve as small footholds for holiness, teaching us to sacrifice for one another through acts like almsgiving, hospitality, and spiritual friendship that train us for a lifetime of faithfulness together with other Christians. Benedict’s famous Rule offers a prime example. Benedict taught his monks (who were frequently teenagers) to develop daily habits of work and play, as well as bodily habits like sleeping arrangements that would not bother your roommate, clothing and footwear adapted to the local climate, and proper body positions in worship. Benedict believed that the disciplined repetition of such acts would almost

subliminally shape beliefs as well, as the believer learned to imitate Christ intrinsically, and not just externally.

3) *Practices of unity* are not truly human practices at all; rather, they are postures of radical receptiveness before God that invite God to practice *in us*, rather than the other way around. These practices serve as acts of communion, which is why sacraments, marriage, and ordination number among them—human acts in which we become one with God, not because we are doing God’s work but because God is at work in us. Traditionally, practices of unity are reserved for the most mature Christians, since true union with God depends on a lifetime *habitus* that simplifies our lives, purifies our faith, bathes us in prayer, and leads us to silent awe and responsiveness before God. Even though adolescents seldom experience union with God in these practices—teenagers seldom marry or become ordained, for instance—these practices are not wasted on the young, either. As young people participate in these practices “from a distance,” they begin to “waken” to faith, as these practices begin to form connective tissue between embodied human life and the mystery of God.²⁰ In the material forms of air and water, bread and wine, practices of unity sweep adolescents into the resurrected Body of Christ as Christ allows himself to become part of the teenager’s molecular makeup. Sacramental practices provide teenagers with ritual forms of “willed passivity”—*pathos*—that introduces them to the passion of God, a love that both transcends them and resides within them.

The Real Problem with Passion: Sin

What the early Christians knew, and what young people intuit, is that the problem with passion is neither that young people have too much of it, nor that they have too little of it. The problem with passion is not passion at all; it is *sin*. Adolescents, like the rest of us, love the wrong things. Sin causes youth, causes us, to invest our God-given passion—the desire that leads us to God—in the wrong things. When we reduce passion to enthusiasm—a word originating in the Greek “God in us,” but that common usage quickly coopted as “hype”—passion becomes a problem of methodology, an issue of how we do ministry. If we can just whip up enough passion, if we just preach with PowerPoint, if we just sing the right songs, we will have a community of passion.

But if we only concentrate on *how* we do ministry, the “to die for” core of Christianity becomes not the passion of Christ, but the parameters of our curriculum. And maybe you have noticed: most young people are not dying for

our curriculum. Passion is not about us; passion is about God, and that means the problem with passion is less a matter of methodology than theology. If there are “how” questions in youth ministry—and there are—then I suggest we start by asking them this way:

- How is it that Hamas and Al-Qaeda can capture the passion of bright, gifted adolescents with the promise of death, and the church cannot seem to do it with the promise of life?
- If John Walker Lindh or Ayat Akras had come to my church—or to your church, for that matter—how would they have experienced God there? Would they have found the God of Jesus Christ, a God who loves them enough to die for them, a God worthy of their passion? Or would they have found a handful of adolescents in the basement playing Chubby Bunny and Steven Curtis Chapman CDs?
- How is it that we have become embarrassed by passion—by its excess, its extravagance, its over-the-top unseemliness—so that passion seems impolitic, even for God?

Embarrassing Jesus

The question really isn't, “Does the passion of God embarrass us?” but “Do our passions embarrass God?” While I was a student at Wesley Theological Seminary, one of my theology professors, David Lowes Watson, urged us to begin every church committee meeting with this question: “Is what we are doing worthy of the death of our Lord?” Theologically, of course, the answer is no—nothing we do, good or bad, is worthy of the love God showed us in the life, death, and resurrection, or Passion, of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, perhaps it is worth asking what, if anything, is really at stake in ministry. If the church is not worthy of life and death—if Jesus is not worth dying for—then he is not worth living for either. Are we engaged in a life that is *worthy* of passion? Is our work with young people cheapening the death of our Lord? Are our ministries embarrassing Jesus?

Somewhere in our bones we know that if the church is going to make sense to adolescents—and if we hope to convince them that Christianity is worth the trouble—then our ministry must be predicated on passion: the Passion of Christ, the passion of adolescents, and the passion of faith made possible where these two forces intersect. The bottom line is this: A passionless church

will never address passionate youth. It is highly questionable whether a passionless church addresses anybody, or if it even is the church in the first place. Christianity requires passion, and youth know it. If the church offers less, they will rightly point to our Easter heritage and expose us for fraud, revealing youth ministry for what it has often become: a form of institutional life-support for a church fearing extinction.

But hear the good news: Jesus came to save those brimming with passion, and those with none, zealots and whiners, dogmatists and dodos of all ages who have forgotten that God has called us to be more than we have become. Passion puts “benign positive regard” in its place, for passion means something is at stake; *all* is at stake. God matters. Religion makes a difference. Jesus is to die for. Amen.

Notes

1. The themes presented in these lectures are elaborated in my book, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). I am grateful to the Princeton Theological Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry for allowing these themes to be presented here in lecture form.

2. Thanks to practical theologian Charles (Chip) Hardwick for pointing me to this film, available for \$14.28 at www.horrormovies.com.

3. As Jürgen Moltmann observed, Judeo-Christian history “associated passion with love out of freedom for others and those who were different, and taught an understanding of the meaning of *the suffering of love* from the history of the passion of Israel and of Christ.” See *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 270.

4. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), p. 233.

5. The phrase “mainline Protestant church” is increasingly problematic in the current ethos of fading denominationalism. When I use the term, I am referring to the largest, traditionally liberal Protestant denominations in the U.S. during the past century (e.g., United Methodists, Presbyterians [PCUSA], Lutherans [ELCA], Episcopalians, American Baptists, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ). Some of the assumptions here also apply to many American Catholics, and some smaller denominations (e.g., Nazarenes, Mennonites, Missouri Synod Lutheran) who may be more theologically conservative but whose demographic make-up is similar to the denominations listed above. These groups are “mainline” in the sense that their membership tends to describe themselves as mostly white and middle class, the social class that has traditionally wielded the most social power in the U.S. The use of the phrase “mainline church” in this study reflects denominational perspectives more than those of individual congregations. While individual congregations often hold views that vary greatly from “official” denominational stances, many (if not most) congregations in a denomination bear out the denominational imprint to a greater or lesser degree. Variations (not contradictions) in the denominational agenda are especially likely to occur in congregations where racial or cultural identity is at stake. For example, William Myers’ ethnographic research in youth ministry suggests that black mainline churches are likely to place preserving their racial identity (and therefore their unique cultural and educational perspectives) above denominational agendas in their presentation of the gospel (see William R. Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry* [New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991]). These mainline congregations may constitute exceptions to the historical and theological trends described here.

6. Cf. George Albert Coe, *The Religion of a Mature Mind* (Chicago: F. H. Revell, 1902) and G.

Stanley Hall's 1904 classic, *Adolescence* (Ayer Co. Publisher, reprint edition, 1970). John Dewey was a featured speaker at the first annual convention of the Religious Education Association in 1902, along with Francis E. Clark, founder of Christian Endeavor. See *Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the Religious Education Association* (Chicago: 1903), p. 11.

7. Leading the liberal charge at the turn of the twentieth century were educators like George Albert Coe, who viewed passion as a weakness, a sorry reminder of the blood, sweat, and tears evoked by manipulative revival preachers during the Second Great Awakening and its aftermath. Coe's early work prophesied that the serene educational methods of professional educators would replace passion with more reasonable emotions of a "mature mind." The result would be a "wholesome atmosphere" in the church and nation, and the emotions present would be "social emotions," which are "gentle and pervasive rather than explosive." In place of atonement, Coe heralded "salvation by education," in which the oddity of Christian life was replaced by a facile marriage of democracy and Christian charity. See George Albert Coe, *The Religion of a Mature Mind* (Chicago: F. H. Revell, 1902), p. 249ff. The exception to the mainline pattern of deemphasizing the cross tended to be among churches dedicated to preserving racial or cultural identity. Cf. William R. Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1991), p. 175.

8. Among those are John and Charles Wesley, whose soteriology substantially influences my thinking on this subject. John Wesley's sermons and "Notes on the New Testament" do not address passion as explicitly as the later theologians cited here; however, the passion of God as self-giving love is a frequent theme in Wesleyan hymnody, which is widely regarded as the de facto doctrinal summary of "the people called Methodist."

9. Cited by Roger Kimball, "What Did Kierkegaard Want?" *The New Criterion* (<http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/20/sept01/kierk.htm>), accessed April 6, 2004.

10. The results reported here have been further nuanced than the results reported in the oral presentation of these lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary, April 2004. This written account reflects further analysis undertaken, primarily by Christian Smith, since the original findings were reported.

11. See Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), forthcoming. Also, see www.youthandreligion.org for summary findings of the study in progress. Thanks to Melinda Denton, who first summarized these findings in January 2004, and whose language I have borrowed extensively, and to Christian Smith, for sharing an early draft of the book in order to nuance the points made in this lecture.

12. A number of studies converge on these points. For a review of the most recent literature, see Christian Smith and Robert Faris, "Religion and American Adolescent Delinquency, Risk Behaviors, and Constructive Social Activities," Research Report of the National Study of Youth and Religion, No. 1 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2002).

13. This is the language of the sociologists conducting the research, not mine.

14. Melinda Denton, unpublished report delivered to United Methodist youth ministers of the South Carolina Annual Conference, Myrtle Beach, South Carolina (January 18, 2004).

15. The interviews from Hindu and Buddhist young people are still being tabulated at the time of this writing. The results, thus far, show that teenagers for whom religion made the most difference were: Mormon youth, some evangelical Protestant youth, some African American Christian youth, other evangelical Protestant youth, mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic youth, and Jewish youth. It should be noted that many Jewish young people consider Judaism to be a cultural rather than a faith identity.

16. "Youth" is equated with junior high and high school students only in the United States; outside the United States, anyone under thirty (and often anyone who is unmarried) is typically considered a "youth." Social scientists have traditionally called young adults "adolescents" or "youth" since the 1950s. The category "young adult," popular among churches anxious to affirm older adolescents, is relatively recent and not widely used in social science literature.

17. www.kenosis.com. I am cautious about using the term “emerging church” to describe these developments in North America, since the epicenter of emerging churches is in the southern hemisphere, in particular Africa (see Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003]). The emerging church movement among North American young adults is best viewed as a critique of white middle-class Christianity in its dominant mainline and evangelical forms.

18. See John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982).

19. See Kallistos Ware, introduction to John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, Classics of Western Spirituality, trans. Colm Luibheid and Norman Russell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), p. 32.

20. Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), p. 21.