



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.

Amy Scott Vaughn
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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

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A Holy Passion and a Holy Temper: Spiritual Renewal Movements as Empowerment for Today's Youth • Douglas M. Strong

Passion. What associations come to your mind with this word? A compelling emotion? An intense feeling? A fondness or enthusiasm for something? A strong sexual desire? In today's common usage, the term seems to imply that people can have a passion for just about anything; I may be passionate about environmental issues or passionate about maintaining my running regimen. The word is often applied rather indiscriminately, referring to any nondescript sentiment. People say, for example, that they have a passion for chocolate, which seems to be followed closely by a passion for the South Beach diet—or, incoherently, with a passion for both of them at the same time. A recent lead article in the *Washington Post* described people who said they had a “passion for Bingo.” If we have a passion for everything, doesn't that diminish the significance of the expression. Filmmaker Oliver Stone boasted in a recent interview that he could “take the most boring subject and make it gripping.”¹ The topic of passion is also very popular in business lingo. Leadership guru Jim Collins writes in his bestseller *Good to Great*, that an effective leader “can't manufacture passion or motivate people to feel passionate. You can only *discover* what ignites your passion and the passions of those around you.”²

Youth certainly know how to live passionately. For them, passion means living their lives radically, even outrageously—going to the limits, living life with abandon. This intensity for living helps to explain the popularity of activities that entail ever increasing levels of energy, such as Xtreme sports. Youth today often have a passion for basketball, for playing video games, or, most typically, for their friendships. And, of course, among youth there is

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always the passion associated with their newly awakened sexuality. Just a couple of weeks ago, a particularly thoughtful thirteen-year-old boy from my youth group instant messaged me, insisting that we needed to get together immediately. “What’s up?” I asked. Brad stated emphatically that he couldn’t write about his problem electronically and he definitely wasn’t going to tell me over the phone. When we met the next day at the baseball field, Brad spoke sheepishly: “I’m not going to go to church anymore.” Why? “Because I can’t get sex out of my head. It’s there all the time. I can’t look at the girls in the youth group without thinking sexual thoughts. I’m such a hypocrite. I just can’t face any of the other kids. And I certainly can’t face God.” I asked him, “How long has this been going on?” “Oh, about six months. And it seems like it came out of nowhere.” “Have there been any changes to your body in the last six months?” “Well, yeah, a lot,” he responded with a bewildered look on his face. “But what does that have to do with my thoughts?” And so, I explained to him about the normal effects of the onset of puberty. Relieved that he wasn’t a sexual pervert, Brad decided he could go back to church—and to God. For youth, their strong sexual desire is often their first and most common understanding of the word “passion.”

Brad’s situation worked out well, but all of us who work with youth have a story about a kid with uncontrolled sexual passion. When I was a youth pastor, one of the brightest and seemingly most mature members of my youth group was a girl named Jennifer. My fiancée and I, along with another youth counselor, had disciplined Jennifer for several years, and we were looking forward to her upcoming high school graduation, along with all of her grand goals for adult life. Then, on our wedding day, as my new wife and I were welcoming our guests, Jennifer walked up to us, with red eyes, to tell us in a trembling voice that something was very wrong. That day, Jennifer found out she was pregnant. Youth sure have a great sense of timing. I’m not quite sure what I said to Jennifer, but I can tell you, based on my experience, that the receiving line at one’s wedding is not an effective place to do pastoral counseling.

As I learned that day, even our most promising youth may be expressing their passion in a somewhat misguided form. Interestingly, the sexual connotations of the word “passion” that are so prevalent today did not come into the English language until 1588 when, in the play *Titus Andronicus*, William Shakespeare first introduced an erotic undertone to the term. (Why doesn’t it surprise us that it was Shakespeare?) The original English expression was derived from the Latin word “*passio*,” referring to the sufferings of Jesus,

and, for several centuries before Shakespeare, the term “passion” was used exclusively as an idiom of Christian theology, related to Christ’s agonies on the cross. The recent Mel Gibson film, *The Passion of the Christ*, has reminded us of this original application of the word, yet many people are still confused about the differing understandings of the term.

In its earlier meaning, this underlying sense of *suffering* passion did not connote a passive subjection to pain, or an impotent endurance of evil. Rather, the Middle English and Latin sense of passion implied an active as well as a receptive power. The concept of “passion” referred both to the actual physical suffering of Jesus and to the fervent devotion of Jesus’ life to God’s reign of righteousness. Thus, both for Jesus and for those of us who follow him, passion means not simply to be acted upon but also to be affected, changed, and transformed by the lives of others. To be passionate is to be open, accessible, vulnerable. Passion, then, refers to the capacity to go outside of ourselves—to affect others and to be affected by others—and thus represents the proactive experience of *agape*, the self-giving love of God. In 1 John 4:8, we read: “God is *gape*”; that is, God is self-giving, suffering passion.

I want to rehabilitate the concept of passion for use in the everyday life of the church, to talk about a positive type of passion, and the search for a passionate faith. Our youth are looking for a church with enthusiasm for the Good News, a church that demonstrates a zealotry for the things of God, that expresses a longing for God and God’s commonwealth shared in a vigorous and vital way—an Xtreme rendering of the Gospel.

This pursuit is not new. Throughout the centuries, each new generation of Christians has desired a passionate church, called by different names but consistently described as a place where young people—and all people—can experience spiritual renewal, regeneration, the new birth, the new creation, and a new life in Christ. In the eighteenth century, the pietist leader Count von Zinzendorf proclaimed: “I have but one passion—it is He [Christ], it is He alone. The world is the field, and the field is the world; and henceforth that country shall be home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ.” In Zinzendorf’s era, and until very recently, Christians would have described the quest for a passionate church as the thirst for revival through the conversion of people to Jesus.

I contend that revival is possible even today, even in the mainline churches. The contemporary Christian musician Steven Curtis Chapman refers to this revival of the work of God as our “one consuming passion, a magnificent

obsession” in his song “Magnificent Obsession.” A spiritual renewal of the church, a true revival, is indeed possible, and it begins with the lived experience of people, especially youth. It is their stories that I want to tell, and I’m going to begin with four vignettes of vital faith, of four youth—Matt, David, Loren, and Laura—all of whom longed for God and found a passionate faith and therefore helped to become the instigators of a passionate church.

Matt

Like many privileged, upper middle class suburban kids, Matt experimented with alcohol and pot; in his case, his substance abuse began in the seventh grade. In his own words, “by the time I was a junior in high school, I was drinking daily and almost always had some form of drug in my possession.” His grades plummeted, and his circle of friends deteriorated into little more than a group of people with whom to do drugs.

When Matt’s parents decided to go for a week on a trip to Europe, they asked an acquaintance named Kathy to look out for him. Basically, though, he was on his own. On Sunday morning, Matt was awakened by a knock on his door. It was Rob, a high school classmate who Matt knew in passing. “Hi, Matt. Kathy asked me to come by and see if you would come to church with me.” Matt was so impressed by Rob’s courage, he went to church with him that morning, to youth group that evening and, ultimately, on a retreat a couple weeks later.

Matt writes that he “felt accepted right from the start. The youth pastor and other youth took a genuine interest in me. More importantly, they seemed genuine with each other. They demonstrated a concern and a love for each other that was [qualitatively] different from my long-term friends who had now just become partying buddies. In addition, they all seemed to have their sights set on more important things than just themselves.” Like Jesus, the church youth group members were emptying themselves of all but love. And Matt’s remarkable transformation was so impressive that it led many other youth and adults in that church to new commitments to Christ.³

David

As a product of upscale suburban privilege, Matt found himself lost in a world of entitlement. By contrast, David, my second profiled youth, was raised in poverty in urban America and knew early on that his life was on the edge, not in the center. When he was five years old, his parents divorced. For

many years, David writes: “I grew up a scared, lonely child. I wanted peace. I wanted love. My father left when I was six, and I didn’t see him at all during my adolescence. My mother was seldom home to attend to our needs. I felt neglected.”

As a result of the divorce, David was sent to counseling. At age eight, the counselor recommended that he attend a Christian summer camp designed for children who came from “broken homes.” At the camp, he enjoyed his time spent with people who seemed to care.

When David turned eleven, his life “went down a very destructive course. In my pre-teen and teenage years, I lived a dual life. I was a good, obedient student and a polite kid. At the same time, I was smoking marijuana and drinking beer with regularity. From the time I was eleven to the time I was fifteen I liked to be seen drunk and high. When I was not seen, when I was alone, I felt invisible. I was often lonely and full of fear. Sadness and anxiety were normal feelings for me when I was by myself.”

“One night after a party, I was lying on my bed. My mother was not home; she was never home. I was alone, drunk and high. I felt as I usually did after partying: lonely. But in my loneliness, I recalled a verse I had learned seven years before at the summer camp: ‘whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap’ (Galatians 6:7 KJV). That night, in the midst of being drunk and high, I cried out to the only one I knew could help me. I cried out to Jesus. In my room, with no one else around, I cried, ‘Jesus, help me!’”

The next day I called the camp, the place where I learned the verse. I went to the people who taught me the Scriptures and offered me the love of God, so that I could learn how to live this new life I had asked Jesus to help me live.

My conversion experience changed the trajectory of my life. I am the first child of my family to finish an undergraduate degree. I am on my way to spiritual, relational, emotional, and psychological wholeness, and I owe this to my relationship with Jesus.”⁴

Loren

Our third vignette deals with Loren. When he was a pre-adolescent, Loren’s family moved to a new community in rural Connecticut. Feeling the need to fit in with his peers, Loren joined a clique of youth who were, in his words, “very corrupt,” and he quickly “learned their ways.” Then, unexpectedly, at the age of twelve, Loren developed an incapacitating case of asthma, so severe that he had to sit up for a large part of every night. At times, he “could not lie down at all for six or seven days altogether.” By the time he was

thirteen, these continual bouts of physical pain caused Loren to go into a serious depression—what he referred to as “many months of sorrow.” “I soon felt myself in the dark without a guide.” None of his supposed friends could or would help him. During this time, he had an occasion to look in the Bible for encouragement, but it “was like a sealed book, so mysterious I couldn’t understand it.” Loren describes this period of his life as a time of “despair” and “hopelessness.” And so, at the age of fourteen, he “resolved to end my wretched life...I loaded a gun and withdrew” to the woods that weren’t far from the house. Thankfully, Loren was too agitated to follow through with the suicide.

About this time, Loren accepted his cousin’s invitation to go with him to a religious meeting. The Methodist preacher at the meeting drew an analogy between the sickness of a person who had an unrelenting illness and the hurting inner core of every person. Loren understood this analogy from personal experience. Jesus, the speaker said, was like the medicine that relieves our suffering, healing our souls. Loren realized that a relationship with Jesus promised wholeness for his brokenness. Yet, he still faced a “strong temptation to end [his] life.” Just then, Loren latched on to a group of new friends, other youth who were searching for and finding faith just as he was. They encouraged Loren and walked with him, until he came to believe. One day, Loren opened his life to God, and “the burden vanished from my mind as perceptibly as a hundred pound weight falling from [my] shoulder; my soul flowed out in love to God, to his ways,...to his people, and to all mankind.” “I...went outdoors and...everything I cast my eyes upon seemed to be speaking forth the praise of the Almighty. It appeared more like a new world than anything I can compare it to.” Soon, Loren joined the church and became active in a youth group where they “watched over one another in love.”⁵

Laura

The fourth testimony comes from Laura. Laura was raised in a relatively prosperous, nominally religious family. In her own words, she came to think of herself as the “center of the world.” Laura alternated between, on the one hand, a sort of smug self-sufficiency due to her privilege, and, on the other hand, a tendency—common among young women in a patriarchal society—to become wrought up in internal self-doubt. Meanwhile, she had a small glimpse of the brutal inequities experienced by people of color in American society. One day, Laura happened to walk by a group of white boys who was taunting an elderly African American man with racial epithets. Despicably,

several adult white men “were standing near” and rather than reprimanding the boys, they “only laughed instead.” Though disgusted by such racist incidents, Laura did not realize that the insidiousness of white superiority was affecting her own attitudes as well.

When she was thirteen, Laura went to a small cell group meeting at a relative’s house. A girl who was just a bit older than Laura shared her faith experience with the group and prayed for the other youth who were there. What the other girl said, “took deep hold on my mind,” Laura wrote later, “and I resolved to seek” God. At the time, Laura described herself as a “discouraged and despairing soul.” In her self-doubt, she asked herself, “Is it possible that he who created this beautiful world can notice a girl like me?”

Laura’s parents’ arid and unemotional religion did not help her. They actively discouraged her from going to the cell group. Laura began to “distrust all religion.” Maybe religious belief “was all a farce.” She feared that she had “groped [her] way in midnight darkness, trying to find the true way, when there was none.” Was there no one to relieve her anxiety?

Like Loren, Laura found that Jesus was her healer, and once she received that understanding, she was dramatically converted. It was the defining moment of her life. “O, how changed the scene!...O, what a leveling of all nations of the earth was this [spiritual] baptism.” At the same moment as her conversion, Laura recognized that she “had been prejudiced” against the migrant workers who frequently walked past her house; she admitted that she “was afraid of them.” “But now every soul seemed so precious.” Laura now understood that migrant workers, African Americans, and all who were different from her were subjects of God’s love, just as she was. Not surprisingly, Laura committed her life to work for the civil rights of African Americans.⁶

Each of these four youth had a powerful conversion to Christ, but I’ve withheld part of their stories. Matt and David are living, breathing young people of today. As we speak, Matt’s conversion is being lived out as a volunteer youth group counselor and, in spite of his young age, as a lay leader in his mainline church. David’s faith experience has led him to seminary, while coordinating anti-racism workshops for the Mennonite Central Committee. Loren and Laura, on the other hand, lived two hundred years ago, in the early nineteenth century. Loren is my shorthand for Lorenzo—Lorenzo Dow. After his conversion, Lorenzo went on to become one of the most effective—and eccentric—of nineteenth-century preachers. Laura is Laura Smith

Haviland, whose Christian commitment later led her to assist fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad and to establish one of the first schools in America where blacks and whites were educated together. Though the historical circumstances of these four young people were vastly different from one another, their spiritual experiences had a remarkable correspondence. Whether privileged or marginalized, whether from the nineteenth century or the twenty-first century, youth go through similar tensions and anxieties. They also experience a commonly understood spiritual transformation. For these four youth and countless others like them, God has become their “one consuming passion.”

The central reality for each of these young people was the immediacy of the power of God through the Holy Spirit—a present experience of God. Roger Fink and Rodney Stark, in their study of growing Christian movements, report that thriving churches are always indicated by a vital sense of God’s presence. Immediate access to God means that their faith is vibrant, often ecstatic. For Lorenzo, his “soul flowed out in love to God, to his people, and to all mankind....It appeared like a new world.”⁷ According to David, “with the presence of the Holy Spirit in my life, I did not feel alone any more.” As the renowned preacher Charles Finney wrote, regarding his 1821 conversion, God’s Spirit descended “like a wave of electricity....Indeed, it seemed to come in waves and waves of liquid love....It seemed like the very breath of God.”⁸

What has been little noticed is that, throughout American religious history, church renewal and spiritual revitalization have come by way of youth. Youth yearn for their own spiritual regeneration and, by their example (as we saw in Matt’s experience), youth also are the ones who lead the way to a spiritually revived and regenerated church.

Take, for instance, the first Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, under the spiritual guidance of the renowned Reformed theologian Jonathan Edwards and via the catalytic proclamation of the itinerant revivalist George Whitefield (who was only twenty-six when his preaching initiated the Awakening). The importance of young converts has not been sufficiently mentioned in historical accounts of the period, though it is a prominent theme in the primary documents. Statistically minded modern historians have provided hard evidence that young people were especially affected by the Awakening. In Andover, Massachusetts, 60 percent of revival converts were between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four. In five Connecticut River towns,

the mean age of all converts was 21.7, which meant that a large percentage must have been in their teens. Consistent with these findings, the preacher Samuel Allis of Somers highlighted the “rising generation” as having experienced God’s “outpouring” in a “more general and remarkable manner” than those who were older. Edwards noted that the work of the revival was “almost wholly upon a new Generation.”⁹

The second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century also began chiefly with the youth, as we saw with the conversion narratives of Lorenzo Dow and Laura Smith Haviland. Typical of this period was Jarena Lee, one of the earliest African American women itinerants. She came to Christ as a teenager and almost immediately began preaching—eventually to massive biracial congregations.¹⁰ The best-known revivalist of the period was Charles Finney. Though Finney’s own conversion was not until he was twenty-nine years old, most of his converts were younger. And during this era, the new innovative revival technique known as the camp meeting was designed particularly to appeal to the social needs of young people, and they came in droves.¹¹

The primary religious phenomenon for early nineteenth-century revivalists was the overwhelming grace of God as experienced in regeneration. As we hear in the words of a favorite nineteenth-century hymn: “What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul.” This was a love that one could feel and know and participate in, creating a spirituality based on relationality. The nineteenth-century gospel message promoted connectedness with God and with one another. To know God was to be transformed, so that the vital, intimate relationship with Jesus modeled an intimate relationship with others. This inclusive fellowship was evident in the ecstasy of the camp meeting, where, at least initially, gender, race, and class barriers were dismantled at the altar. Such overturning of socially constructed distinctions offered participants a glimpse of God’s new creation—a model of personal and social transformation.¹²

As American society exited the nineteenth century and entered into the twentieth, during another period of American revivalism, a psychologist named Edwin Starbuck wrote a demographic study of religious conversion. He confirmed that Christian transformation typically occurs with teenagers. According to Starbuck, in 1897, the average age of females who experienced religious conversion was 13.6; for males, it was 15.7. A full twenty percent of Protestant males had their conversion at the age of fifteen.¹³

Similarly, in the late 1960s and 1970s, the Jesus People and the charismatic movement drew primarily from the youth counterculture of the day.¹⁴ At the end of that period, in 1979, V. Bailey Gillespie found, similar to Starbuck's findings eighty years earlier, that the average age of conversion in America was sixteen.¹⁵

Anecdotal evidence points to similar conclusions today; that is, contemporary teenagers are markedly open to transformational faith experiences. Throughout American church history, Christian conversion has been particularly intense among young people, and they lead the way to a more comprehensive revival. Are we on the verge of another period of religious Awakening, with youth as the frontrunners?

From the historical data regarding American youth during the various religious revivals, we are able to learn three things. First, evidence demonstrates that converted youth were in fact the ones who led the adults, and thus the whole church, to conversion. From one town in Massachusetts during the first Great Awakening came the report: "This visible Reformation among the *young people* was (under God) a Means of stirring up many *middle-aged* and *elder* Persons to think more seriously about their Souls, and what they should do to be saved."¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, writing "some thoughts concerning the revival," concluded that "the work has been chiefly amongst those that are young.... And indeed, it has commonly been so, when God has begun any great work for the revival of his church; he has taken the young people, and has cast off the old and stiff-necked generation." According to Edwards, "the old generation...would not hearken to the earnest repeated warnings of the prophet Jeremiah; but he had greater success among the young people."¹⁷

So, historically, revival has begun with the conversion of youth. Undoubtedly, a stress on youth conversion is still warranted if we have hope for spiritual renewal. But is the church interested in encouraging this impulse for spiritual revitalization?

Often, the mainline church is too quick to dismiss the concept of revival and conversion among young people. What are the objections? We hear that emphasizing conversion is outdated, yet every study indicates that today's youth long for dramatic spiritual transformation as never before. We hear that invitations for conversion are emotionally manipulative. Perhaps, but there are many excellent examples of nonmanipulative evangelism. We hear that stressing conversion is too individualistic, yet, historically, it was the revivalistic-oriented churches that were most progressive in matters of social

reform agitation. We hear that the pleas for conversion are too formulaic and that they stress momentary decisions apart from long-term discipleship. This may have been true in past years, or even now among certain other conservative churches, but most mainline congregations have not heard a plea for conversion within their walls for two or three generations. We hear people declare that they have moved “beyond” their adolescent conversion and that conversion is no longer relevant for socially active Christians; yet, they had to have begun their religious journey somewhere. Indeed, when we read about the life story of religious activists, it usually includes the importance of a spiritual experience when they were young. In truth, we don’t need to move beyond conversion; we need to move beyond our self-satisfied cynicism. So, while I acknowledge these critiques, my chief interest is to lift up the commendable qualities of a conversionistic spirituality, because youth desire it and because their renewal will spur renewal for the whole church.

The second learning gleaned from church history, in direct contrast to one of the objections just mentioned, is that youth conversion leads to social action. Conventional wisdom says that revivalistic Christianity neglects social reform, but this assumption is contrary to the historical record. In the eighteenth century, for example, Rev. Smithies at St. Giles church preached to the young people simultaneously on the need for spiritual awakening and their obligation to the poor.¹⁸ As we have seen, in the nineteenth century, Laura Smith Haviland’s conversion led her to a new understanding of multicultural relationships and caused her to spend her life challenging American racism. My own book *They Walked in the Spirit* traces the connection between personal faith commitments and social justice advocacy, such as the abolition of slavery and the women’s rights movement, through two centuries of American religious history.¹⁹

The third learning derived from the historical data is that youth are the ones who are most instrumental in encouraging other youth to convert. Young people in the first Great Awakening organized themselves into small groups (called “private companies”) for fellowship and mutual edification. In Jonathan Edwards’s congregation, the conversion of one young person usually resulted in the conversion of many more.²⁰ In the nineteenth century, Lorenzo Dow’s friends walked with him on his spiritual journey until he found peace. Laura Haviland’s spiritual change came through the testimony of another teenage girl. More recently, Matt was induced to come to church because of the courage of his classmate Rob.

What draws these young people to faith? According to a common psychological interpretation, based on the scholarship of William James and then, later, of Erik Erikson, youth are prone to an identity crisis stage that is often followed by a religious experience. James found that the message of spiritual rebirth had a particular appeal to young people because it accentuates and helps to interpret their crises of growth. He wrote: “Conversion is in its essence a normal adolescent phenomenon.” According to Erikson, the late teens and early twenties are a time when people are “painfully aware of the need for decisions...driven to choose new devotions and to discard old ones.” They are especially open to new views “which promise a new world perspective.”²¹

The identity crisis of adolescence can manifest itself in at least two forms—both of which are very self-focused. First, youth can be apathetic. Apathy actually describes a lack of passion. We see this in teenage boredom, lack of motivation, and experimentation with self-destructive, mind-numbing habits—as we saw in the testimonies of Matt and David. Apathy becomes a typical response when young people are suffering. It is a way of isolating themselves, of insulating their lives from pain. Interest in life is crippled. One withdraws into a cell, boxes oneself in, locks oneself up in order not to be exposed to suffering, and so life passes by. One really doesn’t live anymore but grows stiff in a living body. This can leave the young person melancholic and insensitive—incapable of sorrow but also incapable of love, because it is too painful to reach out. This is life without passion—without suffering and without fervent devotion to anything.

The second form in which adolescent identity crises become manifest is through misplaced or unholy passion. These strong emotions, such as lust, fear, alienation, anger, and despair—which were apparent in all four of the youth vignettes—are ways in which teenagers act out their personal ego needs for gratification, affection, affirmation, esteem, and success. Thus, similar to teenage apathy, the teenage expression of misdirected passion is strikingly self-centered.

In all of the youth testimonies, a spiritual transformation moved them from a self-focused lack of passion and/or misdirected passion to an other-centered holy passion. Holy passion is the opposite of unholy passion, and the conversion accounts of the four youth demonstrate the transition from one to the other. “Holy passion” is a phrase that I borrowed from an old hymn written by the Anglican poet George Croly: “Spirit of God, Descend Upon My

Heart.” The words of this hymn contain a prayer that God would “teach me to love thee, as thine angels love, one holy passion filling all my frame.” It is this holy passion that youth want and that the church needs.

What is holy passion? Practicing a holy passion will mean recovering the original understanding of “passion.” Holy passion is a passion that moves outside of ourselves, according to the old Latin meaning of the word that I mentioned earlier, going outside of oneself and affecting another person in self-giving love. Human existence becomes meaningful to the extent that we love and are loved. The more passionately we love life, the more intensively we experience the joy of life. The secret of life is very simple and yet sounds strange at the same time: the person who would keep one’s life will lose it and is already losing it. The one who risks one’s life and surrenders it, will gain it and is gaining it already. To give up one’s life means to go outside of oneself, to love, to expose oneself, and to spend oneself. In this passionate renunciation, one’s whole life becomes alive because it makes another life alive. Love makes life a passion, both a matter of fervent devotion and a readiness to suffer.

Holy passion is not self-induced. The source of holy passion is the Holy One. It is derived from a passionate God. We take our bearings from the passion of God and, especially, from the life and death of Christ. In the passion of Christ, I perceive the pain of God and discover the pain of my own life. In the passion of Christ, I see the passion of God and discover again the passion of my own heart. In the words of Jürgen Moltmann:

If we were to live in a covenant with this passionate God, we would not become apathetic. Our whole life would be shaped by sympathy, by compassion. We would suffer with God’s suffering in the world, and rejoice with God’s rejoicing over the world. We would do both at the same time and with the highest intensity because we would love, and with the love of God we would go outside ourselves.²²

So, what would we expect to be the results of promoting a holy passion in youth—and in all of us? First, since holy passion is derived from a passionate, self-giving God, we can recognize that we have been accepted by God and can move from self-destructive attitudes and behavior patterns to a healthy sense of God-given self-esteem. Consequently, we experience a deep love for God—a consuming passion, a magnificent obsession. Then, this love *from* God and

love *for* God frees us up to be self-giving. We are also incorporated into a “new body of passionate believers.” But this body of believers becomes much more than just a mutually supportive fellowship group. Even more important than fellowship, Christ’s body is concerned with accountable discipleship, and when we speak of accountability and discipleship, we move to yet another level of challenge for the church.

Up to this point, I have discussed the concept of passion. Now I need to talk about another highly charged concept—our temper. In contemporary English language usage, the phrase “having a temper” refers to the tendency to become easily angered or irritable. But the original meaning of the word “temper” did not have negative connotation. According to this definition, a person’s “temper” actually designated someone’s frame of mind, someone’s disposition or mood, whether bad or good. The pietists of previous centuries often referred to this broader meaning of the word, and they used to speak a lot about the importance of having “holy tempers.” For them, the conversion process was decisive for long-term character formation, the development of right tempers. According to Jonathan Edwards, though the new birth experience was necessary, only habitual lifelong practice could prove the efficacy of conversion. This is the flip side of the experiential transformation of holy passion. If holy passion is characterized by dramatic change, a holy temper is characterized by daily, dogged discipline.

In order to have holy tempers it is necessary to practice a virtuous life, to live ethically by cultivating positive, life-affirming habits—as opposed to destructive habits. These good patterns of conduct include our engagement in a regular devotional life and works of mercy and justice. The passion of God will result in holy habits that indicate our love for God and our neighbor, practices that help us to grow in Christ and to love one another.

How do we encourage and embolden a holy passion and a holy temper in our youth? First, we need to *give youth a structure to respond to God*. What I am referring to is a framework within the regular youth agenda that provides them with frequent, specific opportunities to make spiritual commitments—both for repentance and for the empowerment to lead a sanctified life. In this cynical age, youth long to hear about, to respond to, and to participate in narratives of authentic Christian belief. Youth need signposts and milestones in their lives—calls to consecration that are followed up by their own testimonies of faith and by the testimonies of others, recalling the gracious love of God that they have experienced.

Second, such authentic belief will be present only when we *model genuine Christian community through mutual accountability*. This will be difficult in mainline congregations, which tend to be driven more by their programs than by their commitment to structures of discipleship. Youth today expect much more than programmed activities or a fun time; they long for meaningful, life-changing, godly relationships with peers and adult mentors.

Third, we must *offer youth experiences that push them beyond themselves*, a connection with the Other, a cognizance of and an empathy with those who suffer. Only when youth move outside of their comfort zones and learn to understand the pain of others will they begin to move forward as true disciples of the passionate, self-giving Christ.

Finally, and most importantly, we must *rely on the Holy Spirit*—the One who nourishes our soul and the souls of our youth. With such an understanding, let us listen once again to the words of this great hymn:

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart.
Wean it from earth, through
all its pulses move. Stoop to my weakness, mighty as Thou art. And
make me love Thee as I ought to love. Teach me to love Thee as
Thine angels love, one holy passion filling all my frame. The baptism
of the heav'n-descended Dove, my heart an altar and Thy love the
flame.

In the power of the Spirit, youth can learn to live life with a holy passion and a holy temper.

Notes

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19. Douglas M. Strong, *They Walked in the Spirit: Personal Faith and Social Action in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).
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