



The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture

Community

- 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.

With its traditional emphasis on group activities, youth ministry cries out for reflection on the meaning of Christian community. How will we create a cohesive community among the youth in our congregations? What do we do when exclusive cliques threaten the health of the youth ministry? How will we engage young people with the wider faith community and with the communities in which we live? Should we try to draw adolescent loners into the youth group? What tools can we offer young people as they engage with other faith communities or communities from other nations?

Theological reflection on community is foundational for addressing these questions faithfully. The 2007 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture provide such reflection. Rather than offering simple steps for building community in your youth group, these lectures use the lenses of friendship, moral formation, reconciliation, and the African Christian concept of communal salvation to shed light on the meaning of Christian community and how it relates to ministry with the young.

- 2007 Lectures

Michael Battle

Is Anyone (Even the Devil) Irreconcilable?
Practicing Reconciliation in a violent World

Stanley Hauerwas

Carving Stone, or, Learning to Speak Christian
Why did Jesus Have to Die?: An Attempt to Cross the Barrier of Age

David J. Wood

The Recovery and the Promise of Friendship
The Promise of Friendship and Practice of Ministry



Practicing Reconciliation in a Violent World • MICHAEL BATTLE

My reflections paint a picture of what inhabiting God looks like, especially for Christians in the so-called developed world who may not be aware of seemingly irreconcilable differences occurring on a global scale. The current tensions between conservatives and liberals, Muslims and Christians, the rich and the poor, those of color and those called white, women and men, and homosexuals and heterosexuals cannot simply be resolved from a consensus of ideas—for such a consensus will never occur—but from inhabiting spiritual practices focused on God’s life revealed in Christ.

Of course, we need not have such a global perspective to get at the problem of irreconcilable differences. In other words, there are conflicting definitions of the word “Christian.” Are you Catholic, Protestant, fundamentalist, evangelical, liberal, orthodox, neo-orthodox, conservative, radical, emergent, Black, biblical, progressive? My argument is that we cannot solve irreconcilable differences on our own. We need to inhabit God, even practice God’s presence, to reconcile anything. The following story may illustrate my point:

Some centuries ago, the Pope decided that all the Jews had to leave the Vatican. Naturally there was a big uproar from the Jewish community. So the Pope made a deal. He would have a religious debate with a member of the Jewish community. If the Jew won, the Jews could stay. If the Pope won, the Jews would have to leave.

The Jews realized that they had no choice. So they picked a middle-aged man named Moishe to represent them. Moishe asked for one addition to the debate. To make it more interesting, neither side would be allowed to talk. The Pope agreed.

The day of the great debate came. Moishe and the Pope sat opposite each other for a long time before the Pope raised his hand and showed three fingers. After several moments of reflection, Moishe looked back at him and raised one finger.

The Pope thought about Moishe’s response and then waved his fingers in a circle around his head. Looking a little angry, Moishe pointed to the ground where he sat. The Pope, appearing a little frustrated, pulled out a wafer and a glass of wine. With little thought, Moishe pulled out an apple.

The Pope stood up and said, “I give up. This man is too good. The Jews can stay.”

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An hour later, the cardinals were all around the Pope asking him about what had happened. The Pope said: “First I held up three fingers to represent the Trinity. He responded by holding up one finger to remind me that there was still one God common to both our religions. Then I waved my finger around me to show him that God was all around us. He responded by pointing to the ground and showing that God was also right here with us. I pulled out the wine and the wafer to show that God absolves us from our sins. He pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He had an answer for everything. What could I do?”

Meanwhile, the Jewish community had crowded around Moishe. “What happened?” they asked. “Well,” said Moishe, “First he said to me that the Jews had three days to get out of here. I told him that not one of us was leaving. Then he told me that this whole city would be cleared of Jews. I let him know that we were staying right here.”

“And then?” asked a woman.

“I don’t know,” said Moishe. “He took out his lunch and I took out mine.”

That joke illustrates one of the most ignored truths about reconciliation: each of us sees through a lens constructed from the events and lessons of our own lives. Our own perspective often prevents us from listening to each other and actually hearing what another person believes or feels. Maybe that seems obvious to you, but in my own experience, this is one of the sources of our deep misunderstandings and our unwillingness to reconcile with each other. If you’ll humor me for a bit, I’ll show you biblically how much difference your own lens can make.

Overcoming the Bad Habit of Personal Religion

There are certain assumptions that the church gives us in terms of understanding spirituality as a practiced revelation. These assumptions facilitate our training in the divine mystery of the church that I mentioned before, that we know the self through the other. Such divine knowledge is practiced. For example, in order to recognize angelic presence, the late Alexander Schmemmann, a distinguished Orthodox priest and teacher, once told a group of students why he believed Christians have to practice the revelation of angels. When he was a young man living in Paris, he was traveling on the metro one day with his fiancée. They were very much in love and bound up only in each other. The train stopped, and an elderly and very ugly woman got on. She was dressed in the uniform of the Salvation Army, and she came and sat near them, to their disgust. The young lovers in Paris began to whisper to each other in Russian, exclaiming to the other about the grossness and ugliness of the old woman. The train came to a stop. The old woman got up, and as she passed the two young people, she said to them in perfect Russian: “I wasn’t always ugly!” That person, insisted Father Schmemmann, was an angel of God. She brought the shock of revelation, the shock that was needed for him to see that what was there was much, much more than an ugly old woman. Next time he would be able to look at an unattractive person in a self-effacing, uninterfering way. It takes practice, however, to spot angelic presences, just as it takes practice to recognize God. But practice alone is not enough, unless one has a great threshold for living in the paradox of practicing being surprised.¹ We need both spiritual practices and community in order to have a vibrant Christian spirituality.

What is needed in contemporary forms of Christian spirituality are communal practices of God’s presence that inform how a person moves beyond Western definitions of spirituality that are often self-contained with little understanding of relationality. To move spiritual discourse beyond a Western infatuation with self is a most difficult task because the impetus to be spiritual in Western cultures comes from the so-called personal or subjective sphere. For example, the dominant question in our Bible Belt is: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?” But how many times is a Western person asked: “Do you have a communal relationship with Jesus?” Especially, how many times are they asked this question with

the same soteriological or salvific impact as the previous question? In other words, does a communal relationship with Jesus matter just as much as a personal relationship with Jesus in matters of salvation? I would be so bold as to answer no, not really—that Western Christian conceptions of salvation are normally confined to one's own personal relationship with Jesus. Therefore, Christian spirituality is usually about one's own personal journey.

My task, however, is to show how Christian spirituality is personal only to the extent that it is practiced communally. Personal spirituality is recognizable and intelligible only to the extent that it is relational and relates fully to one's neighbor. And who is one's neighbor? The answer to this question is only discovered, as taught by Jesus, through practices of hospitality and sacrifice. In other words, Jesus teaches a specific kind of spirituality through the story of the Good Samaritan, which is that one cannot know who is neighborly unless such a relationship is demonstrated through practices such as rescuing and feeding the dying. In the same way of practicing being good neighbors, so too must we discover the obvious definition of Christian spirituality through spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, confession, and reconciliation in which we recognize God's presence on earth as it is in heaven. In other words, Christian spirituality is obvious in its practices. One sees it in its demonstration in the same way that one understands the truth of the joke: What do you get when you cross a river and stream? Wet feet. So, how do you know someone is a Christian? Well, they act like one.

The Seduction of a Technological Culture

The scene is a familiar one today. A child sits in front of the television watching afternoon cartoons or playing a video game. His entire body and mind are focused on the activity, as if nothing else existed. His mom comes into the room and asks him if he's done his homework or tells him that dinner is ready. No response. The boy doesn't even hear his mother. The atmosphere with which he has surrounded himself is whatever fiction is on the television or embedded in the video game. That's his reality. That's what holds his focus. Whatever else may be going on in the room, the house, the neighborhood, or anywhere else is inconsequential.

Children aren't the only ones who focus their attention this way. Adults, too, sit for hours in front of the television today. Both adults and children spend hours in front of computer screens surfing the Internet. For good or for bad, technology has become a focal point in our culture, one that often takes us away from more interactive and communal foci. We're focused on something that demands very little from us. It's easier to zap something in the microwave or pick up a prepared dinner on the way home from work, and let the family sit in front of the television for dinner, than it is to plan a meal, shop for the food, cook it, and take the time to sit down together and talk.

The merits (and demerits) of this kind of living have been explored by sociologists, psychologists, and others and will continue to be discussed for years to come. My concern isn't about whether they are good or evil in and of themselves; this isn't the place to argue that. But it is clear that, as a culture, we've put things such as television viewing, video games, and other activities that require little from us at the center of our lives. We're getting used to being passive, to skipping activities that ask effort or commitment from us. Reconciliation—which is hard work, hard work that is active and that threatens to challenge and change our worldview—seems too difficult to many people. It's easier just to stay in the house, turn on the television or the computer, and let the world present itself to us in ways that don't require a response.

The rewards, however, of sitting passively in front of the TV are proportional to the effort put in. The same is true of the rewards of inhabiting reconciliation.

If we are going to be reconciling people, we must find ways to make reconciliation part of the atmosphere in which we live, in much the same way that television, video games, and fast food become part of the reality of many peoples' lives. We have to seek reconciliation, just as the psalmist seeks God. "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you" (Psalm 63:1). But to do that will be countercultural.

Albert Borgmann, Regents Professor of Philosophy at the University of Montana, explains why Christians need to be

countercultural in a technological age. In an interview published in 2003 in *The Christian Century*, Borgmann explored his own research on technology and its effect on culture today by asking the question, do we control technology or does technology control us?² Borgmann concluded that technology has the upper hand right now. With less effort than ever before (we don't even have to get up to change the channel on the TV anymore), technology takes care of all our needs and provides increasingly high levels of comfort. We don't have to interact with one another or with the objects in our world very much. And technology is so pervasive today that few people can resist its allure.

Consequently people today spend more time doing solitary activities—watching TV, working or playing on a computer, grabbing a quick meal from a fast-food place—and less time interacting with others. This has become the atmosphere in which most of us live today. No longer do storytelling, reading, spending time in silence, and engaging in activities that nurture friendships take up so much of our time. Reconciliation, a communal activity, is another activity that slips off our radar screen in a society that discourages community.

Borgmann doesn't blame technology for the problem. We are the source of the difficulty. But we have allowed ourselves to be mesmerized into thinking of technology as the solution to every problem or concern. We think that technology, not people, should be able to feed the starving and heal the sick. Borgmann believes that the inducements of a technological culture have imperceptibly moved to colonize individualistic worldviews in the Western world. The notion that the individual alone is the best judge of what the good life is makes it difficult for most of us to imagine what the common or collective good life might be. Individualism today makes it hard to even imagine what use the church could be, much less practice being the church.

What those of us who want to be reconciling individuals must do is resist the allure of individualistic thinking. In a very real way, getting out from behind the television or computer screen and having dinner with the family or going to play tennis with a friend is a step toward becoming a reconciling person. We need to learn to place reasonable boundaries around our individual desires and seek to create a society and a church that looks for the good of the whole. We need to engage in activities that ask more of us than television and computer games do. If TV is the focal point in our life and we never ask more of ourselves than the effort required to watch TV, we won't be able to develop the skills we need to be reconcilers.

Borgmann speaks of thresholds and the amount of effort it takes to cross one. The greater the effort required, the greater the reward. Watching television or playing video games requires very little effort and offers little in the way of rewards. High threshold activities are the ones we need to engage in. We don't have to exert ourselves physically or face danger for the threshold to be considered high; sitting down to a communal meal is an example of an activity that has a high threshold. But the high threshold does demand more effort from us. Eating with the family requires more attention and focus than eating alone in front of the television set. But the reward, for our souls, is proportionate to the effort put in.

Jesus says: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High" (Luke 6:35). In an individualistic culture, Jesus' promise doesn't look like much of a reward for lending and expecting nothing in return. We want interest on what we've lent. Jesus teaches, however, that until we learn to seek the higher rewards—the ones that include everyone, rather than just one person—no one is truly rewarded. Jesus invites us to cross the highest thresholds, the ones that result in the common good, rather than wrapping ourselves up in momentary comfort or distraction.

Reconciliation asks us to change our focal point in the same way, from an individualistic one to one that recognizes the common good. Obviously, we're not being socialized to do that. Much of Christian spirituality today speaks to the individual without concern for the community. What is required of those of us who want to be reconcilers is to attend to the community as a whole and to cultivate a spirituality that is active, practical, and tangible. As Mother Teresa said, "Give them Jesus."

This requires effort. We can't be reconcilers or facilitate reconciliation in our homes, communities, and world without

learning the practices and living them first for ourselves. But the rewards for recognizing this, and for becoming reconcilers, are three. First, we will discover how extraordinary what we are doing—particularly in church—really is. Instead of watching television, we decide to practice the presence of God, and we begin to see how amazing worship really is. Our gatherings become filled with grace in a way we didn't recognize before. Second, we can become leaders in reshaping the focal points in our own culture today. We can become proponents of nonviolence instead of war, of equal distribution of wealth and resources. Third, as people who open themselves to the world at large, we begin to understand ourselves as lifelong students of God. We learn humility. And when all these things come together—an intelligent understanding of the patterns of contemporary society and confidence in God as a part of the very atmosphere in which we live and breathe—then we can hope that we are one step closer to the Kingdom of God.

Instead of being like a pack of dogs in a fight, forgetting who we are kin to and easily turning on each other, we are called to transcend our nature. Through Isaiah's vision, we learn to embody the memory of God, instead of our own mistaken images of the world. All this requires creativity. The fable of the Rabbit and Lion illustrates this point.

Rabbit and Lion

In many cultures, tales of “clever Rabbit” and “dumb Lion” abound. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke reminds us of such stories he heard growing up in rural South Africa where his grandmother and aunts delighted in telling him fables of Rabbit and Lion as they sat around the fire in the open-air makeshift “kitchen” called *xivava*. These fables consisted of various living characters drawn from humanity, animals, and nature in general, but Rabbit and Lion fables always occupied a special place. The point of the fables appeared simple: although Lion was big, strong, and powerful, he was not smart enough to match wits with Rabbit. Even the apparently weak and vulnerable, like Rabbit, have creative resources for moving conflicted situations to states of flourishing. These fables were told in animated and highly entertaining ways that always succeeded in providing moral formation for children growing up. One particular Rabbit and Lion fable—told in a variety of versions—has been extremely popular.

Lion has been traversing the length and breadth of the land searching for Rabbit. In a series of clever antics and tricks Rabbit has made a fool of Lion again and again. This has stripped Lion of every shred of dignity and respect among fellow animals, and Lion has become a pitiable laughing stock. Fuming with anger and frustration, Lion is now going for the “final solution.” He's going to get rid of Rabbit once and for all. After a whole day's search Lion's efforts bear fruit—quite by chance as Lion walks home he finds Rabbit feasting on a meal so scrumptious that he does not even notice Lion standing at the mouth of the cave.

“Aha! Got you! Today is the day when you die, little friend,” he growls as he carefully and slowly enters the cave so that Rabbit has no escape route.

In a typical flash of inspiration Rabbit shouts: “Lion, please be careful, the cave is about to collapse and kill us both. You are the strong one, please hold up the roof of the cave while I go and seek help.” Caught in the urgency of the situation, Lion springs onto his hind legs and holds up the roof with his front legs as Rabbit dashes out of the cave—never to return.

Most of us in the Western world think we have already figured out the moral of this story—that we should learn to be clever like the rabbit in matters of survival. But Maluleke, our African sage, teaches us Western children to go further and ask: is Rabbit such a noble a character after all? Is there nothing to be said for Lion's generosity in suspending a selfish desire for revenge in the light of what he believed to be a much more serious calamity? Is there no grace in cooperating with one's mortal enemy in times of crisis? What if the roof had indeed been collapsing? Would we not sing the praises of Lion, the unselfish one? Then Rabbit would have been exposed as selfish and small-minded. Lion holds the roof when Rabbit flies giggling away, enjoying the good life in some other corner of the world. That is to say, the moral

of the story is not without complexity. The “stupidity” of Lion is not without its redeeming qualities, nor is the inventive intelligence of Rabbit without its flaws.³

Our African sage Maluleke teaches us to have a “generosity of vision,” to see the giftedness of life itself. God will plant a vision in us of how to inhabit new heavens and a new earth. We will have to use our lateral thinking or our wisdom, however, to learn the lessons so that God’s lessons will stick and create new realities. We will have to live generously. Reconciliation is something that needs to be made and “orchestrated” through generous living.⁴

Herein is the great problem of being a Western Christian in what is now known as post-Christendom. It is that the episodic memory of being Christian often slips away without any chance of encapsulation. As Maggie Ross says in her book *Pillars of Flame*, many Western Christians no longer remember their baptisms and therefore need to be ordained out of this insecurity.⁵ We struggle with the meaning of being a Christian today without the skills and habits of living into such an identity that represents God’s reconciliation of the world. Dom Helder Camara explains, “Let no one be scandalized if I frequent those who are considered unworthy or sinful. Who is not a sinner? Let no one be alarmed if I am seen with compromised and dangerous people, on the left or the right. Let no one bind me to a group. My door, my heart, must be open to everyone, absolutely everyone”⁶ It is from such generosity that we finally imagine how to inhabit God.

1. See Alan Jones's astute discussion of Alexander Schmemmann in Alan Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 53–54.
2. Albert Borgmann, interview by David Wood, "Primetime: Albert Borgmann on Taming Technology," *The Christian Century*, August 23, 2003, 22.
3. Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, "Can Lions and Rabbits Reconcile? The South African TRC as an Instrument for Peace-Building," *The Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 2 (April 2001), 191.
4. *Ibid.*, 197.
5. Maggie Ross, *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood, and Spiritual Maturity* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), xxv.
6. Helder, Camara. *Into Your Hands, Lord.* trans. Robert R. Barr, Oak Park, Ill: Meyer Stone Books, 1987: 60.