



## 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



## The Recovery and the Promise of Friendship • DAVID J. WOOD

---

### **Toward the Recovery of Friendship as a Form of Christian Love**

Let me begin with a word of genuine appreciation for your ministries with youth. I do not say this with any condescension the way the typical person responds on an airplane when they learn I am a pastor: “I really respect that.” Which always communicates the unspoken “I didn’t know any thinking person really did that for a living.”

Rather, my words of appreciation are spoken as someone who knows both youth and ministry—as a pastor of many youth over the years and now as a father of two seventeen-year-old sons and a twenty-year-old daughter. I have never been more aware of the critical importance of those who count it their ministry to know, engage, love, mentor, and befriend youth. Given the cultural conditions we are in, your work, your skills, your calling have never been more crucial and more challenging.

In his book *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that we are no longer living in a time of solids but of flows and liquids.<sup>1</sup> The glaciers of tradition—which take millennia to form—are melting before our eyes: 90 percent of the 3,900 square miles of ice shelves that existed in 1906 (and at least three thousand years before that), where the Arctic explorer Robert Peary first surveyed the region, are now gone. By the year 2040, the region will be mostly water.<sup>2</sup> This is a sign and a symbol of the times in which we live. It’s not just a sea change; the sea itself is changing. Polar bears are not the only ones who should be nervous.

David Lyon, in his book *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, identifies two principal conditions that are altering the cultural seas of everyday life: the development and diffusion of communication and information technology, and the growth of consumerism.<sup>3</sup>

He elaborates, “These in turn both depend upon and stimulate global flows of communication, cultural codes, wealth and power.” My way of putting it is that we are living in an age of conspicuous consumption, anonymous information, and promiscuous communication. The central thesis of Lyon’s book is:

The postmodern places question marks over older, modern assumptions about authority, and it foregrounds questions of identity. It does so because at a profound social level, time and space, the very matrix of human social life, are undergoing radical restructuring.”<sup>4</sup>

Now, back to my parenting and your ministries. Any parent in this day and age can tell you the truth of Lyon’s claims.

---

David J. Wood serves on the staff of the Fund for Theological Education as the coordinator of the Lily Endowment’s Transition-into-Ministry Programs. Wood is writing a book on the critical connection between the practice of friendship and the well-lived pastoral life, in which a version of these lectures will appear. The book will be published by Brazos Press.

Monitoring and mediating our children's use of technological devices constitutes a central moral task of parenting. It is the nexus of negotiation in every household and goes far beyond how much time is spent in front of one screen or another. PSPs, Xboxes, iPods, cell phones, TV, computers—except for the TV, none of these screens were operational in my adolescence. Even the TV was a miniature version of today's multichannel options. Any parents paying attention are working hard to keep their children from being swept up and away in the flows of technology. One could say that parents are working overtime to keep their children and their households incarnational, that is, grounded in the world of time, space, and bodies. This helps to explain why parents are willing to expend so much extra effort to involve their children in sports, music, dance—anything that will result in a full-bodied engagement. Technology presents a hyperreality, a high-definition reality that, on the face of it, is far more captivating than setting the table and having a slow meal with relaxed and meaningful conversation followed by a little communal dishwashing.

The temptation to what Marshall McLuhan called “the discarnate life” is hard to resist.<sup>5</sup> Who doesn't want to move at the speed of light? It is in light of these conditions that the deep relevance of your work comes to the foreground. So much of your work involves building relationships that are face-to-face, centered in time and space, in a community characterized by friendship. At the heart of your work is friendship and at the heart of friendship is the love that makes the time and space of our lives sacred and holy.

Jesus inducted his disciples in this kind of work long ago.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father (John 15:12–15).

These words are a pinnacle moment in John. They are spoken in the final hours of conversation between Jesus and the disciples, when he is seeking to prepare them for the days to come. The love he calls them to and into is the greatest love—the love of friendship. The entire Gospel of John unfolds this love. It is the gospel of the beloved disciple. It is the gospel of the good shepherd “who lays down his life for his sheep.” It is the gospel of footwashing—the act that transforms both servanthood and friendship.

The culminating episode in the public ministry of Jesus—the seventh and final miraculous sign revealing Jesus as Messiah—is the raising of Lazarus. This episode brings to the foreground his friendship with Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Jesus receives word, “Lord, he whom you love is ill” (11:3). The narrator goes on to tell us that, “Though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed . . .” (11:5).

Jesus then reports to his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep” (11:11). It is interesting to note that this is the only place in the New Testament where Jesus refers to another individual (beyond the twelve) as “friend.” As Jesus approaches the tomb of his friend, in the company of the mourners, he weeps (11:35). This prompts those observing the scene to remark, “See how he loved him” (11:36).

He weeps with and for his friends. It is his friend Martha who professes for the first time in the Gospel of John the true identity of Jesus: “Yes Lord, I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God” (11:27). In John, the authorities pronounce the death sentence on Jesus not because of the disruption he brings to the commerce of the temple (as in the Synoptics). It is his raising of Lazarus from the dead that seals his fate (11:53).

On his way to Jerusalem for what would be the final week of his life, Jesus stops for a celebration dinner in the home of his friends—Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. While there, Mary anoints Jesus with oil and wipes his feet with her hair. This is the first of two footwashing occasions in John. The second is performed by Jesus himself upon his disciples. When the narrator brings us to the tomb where the body of Jesus has been laid, it is Mary who now weeps at the grave of a

friend. The bond of friendship is deeply intertwined in these pivotal episodes in the life of Jesus.

The narrative of love in John culminates in friendship. Gail O'Day writes, "For the first readers of John's Gospel, the link with friendship motifs helped to lay the groundwork for what John was teaching about the significance of Jesus' death." Jesus is never named "friend" in John—rather he embodies it in word and deed, perfectly. He confers friendship on his followers for them to embody in word and deed with each other.<sup>6</sup>

In the Gospel of John, Jesus makes his followers friends so that they might be friends and befriend the world. This prominence of friendship is not limited to John. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes, "Although rarely discussed explicitly, friendship is actually a prominent theme in the canonical compositions. But to recognize its prominence, readers need to grasp the connections that ancient readers would automatically make when they heard certain words and phrases."<sup>7</sup>

This lack of explicit reference in the New Testament to friendship should not lead to the conclusion that the earliest Christians rejected friendship-love (*philos*) and embraced a higher, more perfect form of love (*agape*). Much of the language of *koinonia* in the New Testament is the language of friendship: brothers, being of one spirit, having the same mind, being in one accord, and having all things in common. It was Aristotle who first talked of friendship's ultimate expression as "laying down one's life for one's friend."<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the evidence for the priority of friendship as a form of Christian love, friendship has not flourished as a theme in the history of Christian thought and certainly not in the contemporary situation. *Philos* has been trumped by *agape*. The so-called hierarchy of love has been stitched into the Christian imagination. The order of the priority of loves, from high to low, is *agape*, *philos*, and *eros*. Theological ethicist Helen Oppenheimer observes:

There is a kind of Christian slide away from friendship which is supposed to be a progression in love, but which humanly speaking is apt to be a progression in shallowness or even self-deception: a slide to a sort of 'fellowship' which is no more than camaraderie or civility; to the kind of 'love of neighbor' which has no enjoyment in it; to the assumption that a stranger is more valuable than an old acquaintance; and eventually to the tacit belief that the love of people who are relentlessly hostile is more 'Christian' and therefore more worthwhile than any of our other affections.<sup>9</sup>

So, why the neglect? Given the importance of friendship in the actual practice of ministry, and in youth ministry in particular, given its presence in scripture and in the life and teachings of Jesus, why has it lived such a shadowy existence in Christian thought and reflection? The reasons are legion and complex. Let me offer a few reflections on this neglect—especially in reference to our contemporary situation.

**The sexualization of intimacy.** Writing in 1960 on the importance of friendship and the need for its rehabilitation in thought and practice, C. S. Lewis writes, "It has actually become necessary in our time to rebut the theory that every firm and serious friendship is really homosexual ... those who cannot conceive of friendship as a substantive love but only as a disguise or elaboration of eros betray the fact that they have never had a friend."<sup>10</sup> The church, of course, has held out from the beginning for the possibility of a love and intimacy between individuals that did not require sexual expression in order to be full and complete. Part of the problem here is that we live in a time when intimacy inevitably signals sexual intimacy. What we lack is an imagination for an intimacy that is friendship. All of us have read the assertions by scholars that relationships of friendship in scripture are unstated instances of sexual intimacies: David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and Mary. Our imagination of what counts as genuine intimacy within and across genders is too narrow. If it is true that we live in a culture where all true intimacy is sexual, then it is not at all surprising that we live in a culture where both sex and friendship are in trouble.

**An overemphasis on marriage and family in the life of the church.** The identification of intimacy with sexual expression in the larger culture shows up in the life of the church in an identification of intimacy with marriage and family.

Browse the shelves of Christian literature in any bookstore and look for the literature on love. The volumes related to marriage and family eclipse the literature related to friendship. You will be hard-pressed to find any volumes on friendship. The so-called “love chapter,” I Corinthians 13, is an exhortation to love one another as members of the Body of Christ. And yet, where and when is this chapter most often read? In the context of the wedding service, as if it were, in essence, a celebration of conjugal love. Interestingly enough, the language of friendship rarely shows up in wedding services. With the lens of friendship, one can read that chapter and see it as an ode to friendship—the kind of friendship that is to characterize the community that is governed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We are well-schooled in the hazards of intimacy beyond marriage and family. I am thinking here particularly of those who serve as pastors. Years ago, Martin Marty wrote a column in *The Christian Century* in which he puzzled over the recent spate of headlines about clergy misconduct and suggested that all the remedial programs and safeguards being promoted to combat such misconduct fail to address what may be the leading cause of such behavior: “the reality of a friendless clergy.”<sup>11</sup> Compare the amount of time spent schooling pastors on the hazards of intimacy to the amount of time spent on exhorting them to the practice of friendship. The importance of bonding has been displaced by the necessity of boundaries. We have developed a thoroughgoing hermeneutic of suspicion when it comes to intimacy. This is not an argument against a healthy understanding of the importance of boundaries in the negotiation of the complex relational landscape of ministry. Rather, it is a call for a corresponding emphasis on the importance of friendship to one’s capacity to negotiate intimacy. One of the most hotly debated topics among pastors and those who educate them is whether pastors can have friends in their congregations. I think this is a debate that Jesus would have found troubling.

**An assumption that love blinds.** When you or I need to get the truth about our lives, it is necessary for us to entrust ourselves to someone who is essentially a stranger to our lives. Subjectivity inevitably distorts. No matter how much our friends may think they see and speak the truth, they cannot—by virtue of their intimate knowledge of us, they are disqualified from doing so. When we face personal problems, the objective, unrelated other becomes the most important conversation partner. In the world of therapy, friends are peripherals. Consequently, friendship is assigned to the realm of leisure and recreation and not to the realm of ethics and moral discernment. Friends are good to have around but not typically good for us. This, of course, would have been utterly inconceivable to the ancients, who thought it impossible to be good without good friends.

**An overidentification of the spiritual life with the solitary life.** The pull toward withdrawal has always been strong in Christian thought and practice. The ideal of the pure, unmediated, direct, one-on-one Divine/human relation is well founded in the Christian tradition. The ascetic ideal has had a strong hold on the Christian imagination from the earliest days. The Franciscans put it like this: “Wherever we are or wherever we walk, we have our all with us . . . the Lord alone, who created the soul is its friend and no one else.”<sup>12</sup> *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis has had a major influence on the understanding and practice of Christian piety. As McGuire writes: “The message of this powerful spiritual tract is that friends cannot be counted on to do anything except to distract each other from finding the only true friend—Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup> What we end up with is a spirituality that leaves little or no meaningful place for friendship in the practice of the spiritual life. But this cuts against the grain of the biblical story. Jesus spent an inordinate amount of time with others, especially his disciples. Furthermore, he called them to spend time with each other. Through the reading of the gospels, it becomes abundantly clear that their life together was to be the primary context for mediating the knowledge of his presence with them. It was their being with each other that was to be the occasion for learning to love. It was in their time together—washing one another’s feet, at the table breaking bread, in community sharing in prayer—that they were to recognize, again and again, the presence of Jesus in their midst. One does not have to dig deep in the New Testament or in Christian practice to deduce that Christianity has a positive view of time with others. Time with others is where and when revelation takes place. “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in your midst” (Matthew 18:20).

On the other hand, one has to search long and hard for admonitions from Jesus to his disciples that they spend quality and extensive time apart from one another and alone in order to survive or thrive. In his final words to the disciples, Jesus urges them to gather in one place and await the Spirit. Indeed, in reading the New Testament, there is almost nothing of significance that happens in one's communion with God that does not happen in and through community. The first and enduring story of Christianity is a story of community—of what happens in and through being with others. The principal acts and rituals that establish a Christian's identity are profoundly personal and always communal: Eucharist, baptism, hearing the gospel. Even the central prayer Jesus teaches his disciples to pray is framed as a communal act: "Our Father . . ." When Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection, it is always in community. When one is absent from community, such as Thomas, the experience is one of unbelief and doubt. It is important to note that this time with others is almost never identified as time with one's family—with spouses, siblings, parents, or children. Often, when family is named in relation to the Christian life, it is identified as an impediment. Jesus' family come to take him away from his community of disciples. When the excuse is given by a would-be disciple that he must spend time with his family, Jesus seems entirely unsympathetic: "Let the dead bury the dead!" (Matthew 8:22). Indeed, the call to discipleship is identified with a call to leave one's family. But it is never a call to be alone or to leave one's friends. This is not an argument against solitude or its importance to our spiritual formation. It is a claim that without friendship, solitude too easily devolves into isolation and reinforces alienation. Friendship prevents solitude from becoming isolation.

These are tendencies that contribute to a neglect of friendship. They are not practices of resistance to friendship, they are practices of neglect. The result is that a whole dimension of our relational lives is left unnamed, unclaimed by love.

Let me conclude with one more story of friendship from the Gospel of John. It comes from John 21:15–19. Jesus has caught up with his disciples, who have gone fishing in the wake of his resurrection. They are reunited on the seashore of Galilee, where their journey began years earlier. As they are eating together, Jesus turns to Peter and asks, "Simon, son of John, do you love (*agapao*) me more than these?" Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love (*phileo*) you." A second time Jesus asks, "Simon son of John, do you love (*agapao*) me?" And a second time Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love (*phileo*) you." Then, again, Jesus asks Peter to declare his love—but this time, Jesus does not use *agapao* for the word love, but *phileo*—the love of friendship: "Simon, son of John, do you *phileo* me?" Peter replies, "Lord, you know all things, you know that I *phileo* you!" A common reading of this text is that Peter is not quite ready to rise to the level of love Jesus desires from him—that is, to the highest form of love, *agape*. Instead he can only profess a secondary, lesser form of love, *philos*. But given the context of *philos* in John as I previously discussed, as the greatest love that can be shown, it is highly possible that Peter was once again declaring his love as friend and yearning for the same from Jesus. In the end, Jesus meets Peter at the high ground of friendship. Is there a greater gift to offer or to be received in this life than the love of friendship?

This is the heart of your work and of the work of all Christian community.

1. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000).
2. Andrew Revkin, "After 3,000 Years, Arctic Ice Shelf Broke off Canadian Island, Scientists Find," *New York Times*, December 12, 2006.
3. David Lyon, *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2000), 11.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For an excellent discussion of this theme in Marshall McLuhan's thought, see Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55–64.
6. Gail R. O'Day, "Jesus as Friend in the Gospel of John," *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (April 2004): 144–57.
7. Luke Timothy Johnson, "Making Connections: The Material Expression of Friendship in the New Testament," *Interpretation* 58, no. 2 (April 2004): 158–71.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Helen Oppenheimer, *The Hope of Happiness: A Sketch for a Christian Humanism* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 133.
10. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1960), 91.
11. Martin Marty, "What Friends Are For," *The Christian Century* 109, no. 4 (1992): 987–88.
12. Quoted in Brian Patrick McGuire, *Friendship and Community: The Monastic Experience, 350–1250* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 413.
13. *Ibid.*