

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture †

Sharing Not Only the Gospel, But Also Our Lives

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 online 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 2009 lectures is “Sharing Not Only the Gospel, but Also Our Lives,” from 1 Thessalonians 2:8. Youth leaders in today’s church can easily speak Paul’s words to believers in Thessalonica, written two thousand years ago. “So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.” The 2009 lectures address this passage through discussion of relational youth ministry, the transcendence of God, and the question of what gospel, “which Jesus” will we share.

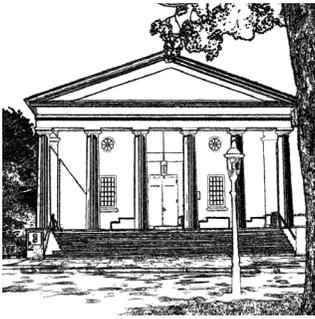
2009 Lectures

Andrew Root

From an Incarnational Model of Ministry to Being Ministers of the Incarnate One OR Justin Versus Jan
Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry

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Which Jesus Shall We Teach?



From an Incarnational Model of Ministry to Being Ministers of the Incarnate One OR Justin Versus Jan † Andrew Root

We had just finished singing some worship song now forgotten when the leader of our meeting picked up his Bible and turned to the first chapter of the Gospel of John. Gathered at the first of our youth ministry leader training meetings of the year, we all scampered to grab a last handful of junk food before he began.

After reading the first chapter of John, the leaders of the meeting began to teach us the significance of the incarnation as it relates to youth ministry. I secretly began to rank who could be most incarnational. My eyes admittedly focused on Justin. He was young, energetic, funny, and kids seemed drawn to him like a magnet. “That guy is *incarnational*,” I thought. At the bottom of my list was Jan. She was in her early fifties, had four children, no time for TV, and dressed like she was in her eighties. *Being incarnational will be hard for her*, I thought.

Over the course of the year a strange thing happened. Justin remained outgoing, funny, constantly available, and magnetic. But Jan quickly accelerated herself up my (stupid) list and therefore destroyed it. I watched as Jan laughed, cried, prayed, and cared for so many young people. She was still older than Justin, less informed about pop culture, as well as less available and definitely less hip. But she was clearly more *incarnational*; she had a beautifully rich way of sharing who she was with adolescents. And she invited them to share themselves in the fullness of their suffering and joy. Jan bore each adolescent’s story that she was privileged to know. Their realities seemed to affect her, to draw her into their situations so fully that she invested in them.

Justin was often too busy talking to listen, too wild to allow for moments of mutual care, understanding, and support. Justin could go into a school and attract kids to an event, but Jan could open her person to adolescents and invite them to be cared for in the love of Christ that she represented in her presence.

I began to realize that being incarnational had nothing to do with relational magnetism, as though being incarnational meant you could draw adolescents to yourself like movie stars attract paparazzi. The incarnation was about something different. It was about a God that so loved the world that God entered the world in the humanity of God’s Son to be with and for those in the world, so that they might be with God (and therefore have salvation). To be incarnational in youth ministry has little to do with magnetism, little to do with your ability to attract adolescents with your aura of “cool.” But it has everything to do with gently entering the lives of adolescents as we invite them to enter our own. It has everything to do with place-sharing.

Place-Sharing Vs. Influence

Ray Anderson in his significant (but unfortunately rarely read book) *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* calls the reader to move beyond considering the “incarnation as a theme, but [to instead consider] the incarnate One.”¹ Unfortunately, youth ministry has not heeded Anderson’s plea. In the last sixty years or so we have tended to see the incarnation as

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theme. In a changing world in which tight communal and familial structures gave way to rapid mobility, loss of traditionally centered communities, and the rise of individualism, youth ministry has seen the incarnation as an advantageous theme to give explanation (and justification) for a model of ministry that seeks to meet young people in their own world, in their own space and culture. The incarnation has been justification for making relationships the central activity of youth ministry.² Incarnational youth ministry often lives in the theme that just as God left one world to enter another, so adults leave their own world to be in the world of young people. This theme of leaving one world and entering another “earns the adult the right of the young person listening to their message.”³

Now, this was more than a needed (and helpful) transition that sought to missionally address a changing world. But it came with a problem, a problem that few of us have directly shaken ourselves free from. The problem is that when the incarnation is considered as a theme it quickly turns into a function, a way of functioning. Justin understands the theme of behaving incarnationally; he now goes into the local junior high and functions incarnationally. As if he were going to a 1970s theme party, he puts on his incarnational ministry garb, seeking to function as an outgoing relational magnet. And we often hear or say things like, “I’m trying to be incarnational. We need a leader who can be incarnational.” The function of our ministry is to be incarnational.” When the incarnation becomes a theme it runs the danger of becoming something disconnected from the one, from the person, who is incarnate.⁴ As a functional theme the relational quality of the incarnation quickly gets molded into a “tool,” a tool of influence.⁵

The function of being incarnational easily slides into seeking to influence young people toward the ends we want for them (e.g., to confess Christ, to stay in the congregation, to avoid drinking, to be service-oriented), all of which are good things. But these good things, because they are instrumental functions based in a theme, can, ironically, quickly make results or effects more important than the relationship itself. In other words, they can make the relationship serve the functional end. So now the relationship functions as a tool that gets kids to do, believe, or behave in a certain way. Because the incarnation is a theme that turns into a function, the relational core (the relationship to the young person) becomes instrumentalized. The relationship becomes an instrument; your relationship with the young person has an agenda, has an end that you are using the relationship to reach. Then it is not necessarily the young person’s humanity that matters, but where your relationship and ministry is taking the young person. The relationship is only as important as the results it achieves. The relationship only matters as a tool to get to another end, which exists outside the relationship itself.

So ministry becomes about getting the depressed girl, through your relationship, over her depression, or the doubting boy, through your relationship, past his perplexed searching to belief. And of course, if she doesn’t get better or he can’t get through his doubt, then because your relationship has become a “tool” you are justified in abandoning these kids for others easier to influence (you have limited resources after all, limited tools). Your job is to influence kids through your relationship, and these kids are too stubborn (more truly too hurting) to be influenced. When the incarnation becomes a functional theme then it isn’t the broken and beautiful humanity of the adolescent that matters but their ability to decide, choose, and behave. Relationship isn’t the heart of ministry, but the best tool for ministry. Ministry becomes about making kids better (or into something, even something Christian), not joining them in their broken and yearning humanity.

But the incarnate one (to take the shift Anderson calls us to) has become human, truly human. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spilled a great amount of ink in asserting that incarnation was not about a function, therefore it wasn’t about a theme, but was about a person, about relationship (*Stellvertretung*). It is about God in God’s fullness sharing our place, being our representative by being completely with and for us, by being our place-sharer.⁶ While we continue to seek to move beyond our humanity, God becomes human, Bonhoeffer uttered.⁷ The incarnation is about God, it is about the incarnate one, Jesus Christ, sharing our place, representing us and loving us by fully sharing our humanity so that we might be in relationship with God, not beyond, over, or around our broken humanity but within it.⁸ The incarnation, then, isn’t bound in the idea of a theme, but in the encounter of a person. God acts for our salvation, for our restored community with God, not through functions

and tools, but by sharing our place, by becoming the God of an insignificant people (Israel), by being born from a poverty-stricken, morally suspicious girl, by being overcome by death and tragedy in the cross, by going all the way to hell, so now those places of Godforsaken brokenness (deep depression and deep doubt) become places where the incarnate one is found, places where we are called to join God not for a function but for the purpose of being with and being for.

To follow the incarnate one is to do as Jan did: to embrace *our* frail and fragile humanity as we turn toward young people. It is to see our relationships with young people not as tools to get us to other ends, but as ends in themselves, to act with and for them from the core of our yearning humanity. Ministry is not about getting kids right, but joining them in their humanity; it is not about confessing Christ outside or beyond our relationship with them, but within it, within its questions, fears, and yearnings. To follow the incarnate one in youth ministry is to see our relationships with young people as the invitation to share their place, to open our humanity to them as we invite them to open theirs to us, and thus to claim the presence and continued activity of the one who has truly become human for us. This is what Jan did!

Incarnational ministry then isn't a theme, but a reality; it is not a function but a person. The relationships at the center of incarnational ministry are not the road to some other place, but the destination itself, for in our action of encountering each other, through our broken and beautiful humanity, we concretely encounter God (I'll leave the ramifications of this for my next lecture).⁹

But all of this can only be true if the incarnate one, Jesus, is still moving and active in the world, still a person to be encountered within our relationships one to another. Ironically, when the incarnation becomes just a theme and the youth worker's relationship to young people a tool for influence, we don't need a living and active God, we need only an exemplar to serve as a model. But to assert that God through Jesus is encountered in and through our relationships is to confess a God who remains dynamically active in the world.

Who Versus How

In my sophomore year at a Christian college my religion professor posed a provocative question to the class. He asked us, now a half semester through learning the basics of theology, when we were feeling confident, "Where is Jesus' body buried? If we wanted to visit his gravesite, where would we go?" The class paused; no hands shot up. Everyone was silent in deep contemplation. Many of us had just finished taking a semester of classes on the history and geography of the Holy Land. I thought to myself, *It has to be somewhere in Jerusalem, right?*

After a significant silence, the professor shook his head and said, "The Christian faith is the Christian faith because we believe that there is no tomb, or at least, there is no body in it. We believe Jesus is alive, you idiots!" (Okay, he didn't say the "you idiots" part, but that's how we all felt.)

Bonhoeffer believed that all theology, ministry, and faith begins with the question, "*Who?*" Who are you? Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? Who is this one who heals? Who teaches with authority? Who is this?

In the same way Bonhoeffer believed that the question "*How?*" was the question of disobedience. How is God present in Jesus? How is Jesus divine and human? How do I have faith in Jesus? How can I be good? The problem with a "*How?*" question is that even if you get a "right" answer, there's no need for me to encounter the living person of Jesus Christ; in the *how* Jesus can just remain a theme, an example, a logo, for my functioning. The *how* costs me nothing.

"*Who?*" is the better question because "*Who?*" is a question of encounter. It assumes a relationship; it's a question that assumes that Jesus Christ is still living and moving in our world, continuing in ministry, encountering our person with his own person. "*Who?*" is about a relationship with Jesus Christ as living and still active in the world.

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The question “*How?*” on the other hand, is absent from encounter; it doesn’t need a living Jesus, just a theme. It’s simply a theoretical and functional question. “*How?*” can be solved on a blackboard and then walked away from. But “*Who?*” demands change and transformation. Encountering the “*Who?*” of Jesus Christ, encountering his living person, makes Jesus Christ more than a logo for our religion but a living person who encounters our own person (this is the “relational” in an incarnational ministry that follows the incarnate one, *not* a youth worker’s magnetic ability to draw adolescents to herself, but the living, moving Christ in the world *who* desires relationship with us).¹⁰

When the incarnation is a theme for youth ministry we find ourselves in the land of the *How*. We find ourselves discussing the incarnation as a functional tool: “The incarnation is *how* God did ministry, so this is how we do youth ministry,” or “This is how Jesus did it, so this is how we should do it,” rather than, “We go to *whom* Jesus calls us,” or “We follow the one *who* gave his life for others.” There is a great difference, as I hope you can see, in the *who* versus the *how*, for even in these questions you can feel the stiltedness of the *how* and relational energy of the *who*. Or to put it another way, when relational youth ministry is about how it easily slides into instrumental influence (e.g., *How* can we get kids to this or that?). Yet, doing youth ministry from the *who* of a living Jesus demands that we be place-sharers, for we confess that this Jesus *is* living and is *now* sharing our place.

Or to push this further, when we practice relational or incarnational youth ministry in the *who*, we enter deeply into theology. We search to discover who God is, who God is calling us to be, and to whom we are called to go. When we fall into practicing youth ministry in the *how*, we become programmers or service providers, seeking to find the best model, angle, idea, or event that matches some idealized frozen form or theme of *how* to do ministry.

In doing relational or incarnational ministry in the *how* we can so easily ignore or not be aware of the deep suffering of the adolescents around us. We become too busy conforming to a pattern, trying to master a function, rather than being led by the living God into the deep suffering and joy of adolescents. Or to put it even more pointedly, when we use the incarnation as a theme (a *how*) for youth ministry, our focus is almost always on *how* concerns (for example, *How* can we get adolescents to participate in our event? *How* can we get them to go to camp? *How* can we get them to behave or believe?). Instead we should see the incarnation as the living presence of God, the incarnate one, who is found sharing our place, who is empowering us through the Spirit to be with and for adolescents, to share their place, to participate in the continued activity of God.

The incarnation then is the invitation to join God as God enters the lives of adolescents, seeking to discover and support the distinct *who* that they are in their suffering and joy.

The distinction between the *who* and the *how* was the difference I saw between Jan and Justin. Justin knew *how* to be incarnational; he knew *how* to be funny, outgoing, and attractive. Justin knew *how* to get youth to admire him and want to be around him; Justin knew *how* to do relational ministry in the theme of the incarnation. But his knowing *how* had little to do with the incarnate one, with the incarnation of the living God *who* seeks to come to near us in the weakness and brokenness of God’s own humanity and in so doing share our place.

It was Jan who understood the *who* of the incarnation. Jan understood that the incarnation means that God is with and for us. And God calls us to be with and for adolescents. What Justin couldn’t do is exactly what Jan could do—meet adolescents as a *who*, as a fragile person *who* was brave enough to not hide herself behind the *how* of techniques and models of youth ministry and to walk toward adolescents as she followed the living Christ. She never tried to be anything other than *who* she was, and in so being, never asked adolescents to be anything other than *who* they were. Jan was committed to the notion that somewhere in this meeting of *who’s*, the encounter with Jesus Christ—the *Who*—would occur.

What I mean, and what I hope I have shown, is that doing relational youth ministry as how is doing it as influence. But to do relational youth ministry in the *who* is to do it as place-sharing. It is to affirm that God has shared our place, that God is near to our humanity, that God in Jesus Christ is near to the adolescent. Allow me to explain this further by examining the following phrase: *The Incarnation means that God has taken on humanity in its fullest, meaning that we are free to be human.* Remember this familiar verse from the Gospel of John: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth...” (John 1:14, RSV, italics added). It was actually this text that was unpacked in our leadership meeting in the story that I began with. Yet there was something I didn’t hear that day that I since have come to see in this passage.

If you’re anything like me, your eyes (and mind) easily skim past the word *dwelt*. We rarely use this word as it is being used here. Few people would say “I dwell with my parents,” and I have never said, “I dwell with my wife, and we live in Minnesota.” It sounds way too stilted. At least to me, it has a feeling of distance, like it would make more sense in a sentence such as, “The ghost dwelt in our house before it left.” *Dwelt* has the feeling of someone hovering above our situation, not entering into it and bearing it.

But the Greek word here, *skenoō*, actually means something different. Many biblical scholars, such as the one whose office is across the hall from me, have said a better translation of this verse might be, “And the Word became flesh and *tented* among us, full of grace and truth...” It’s not that God hovers above us, free from our darkest, scariest, and most difficult moments, but rather God takes residence among and next to these moments, making them God’s own in the humanity of Jesus.¹¹

The incarnation is not a theme or a wooden model of *how* ministry should be done; rather it is the radical story of God’s history, the radical story of God’s love entering so fully into human existence that it became God’s residence.¹² Now after the incarnation we can be confident that the human experience is not only known fully (like knowing the directions to the mall), but known in God’s very being (like knowing that you love your spouse or child, i.e., a relational kind of knowing).

Tenting among people is dirty business. Many of you know how smelly and (honestly) gross a tent or camp area can get after a few short days. I have memories of adult leaders who went on camping trips and tried to somehow avoid the grime and stench of a six-person tent crammed with eight sweaty junior high boys and their bags of junk food. But of course it was impossible. To tent among is to enter the grime and bear the stench. Tenting among has nothing to do with hovering beyond. Tenting among is living deeply with others.

I fear that when we make the incarnation a model for *how* we do youth ministry, we present a God who hovers above, free from the grime and stench of adolescents’ (and our own) existence. I fear that we’ve lost this radical confession that God in Jesus walks among us, as one of us, *who* is for us. I fear that we’ve made the incarnation a pattern of ministry, a theme of ministry rather than a confession of a God *who* comes so near to us that our suffering becomes God’s own.

What I mean is that when we see the incarnation as only a *how* of ministry, as a theme, we’re too often tempted to present a Jesus who’s not human, a Jesus who isn’t bloody or broken but pristine and handsome, with a white robe and a winking eye just visible behind his perfectly conditioned hair. We do this to convince (influence) adolescents that Jesus is important, so we tell them that Jesus would be a great athlete or a major celebrity, persons in our culture that seem to transcend our normal, frail humanity. Or if we do talk about the bloody and broken body of Jesus, we do so to make a shocking point (e.g., Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*). We say something like, “See how badly he suffered! Now you should follow him and do what the Bible says!” But this too ignores the wonder of the incarnation, for it makes the incarnation about “oughts” and “should,” like saying, “Kids, see how hard your dad worked on that swingset? Now you’d better have fun on it and appreciate it.” Rather, the incarnation is the fullest picture we have of a God who wants relationship with us so badly that God bears the fullness of human suffering. For human suffering is most often the burden of broken relationship, and broken relationship can only be healed by suffering it, by placing one’s being within it and joining your broken humanity with another.

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We need a youth ministry that claims that God comes to us, not as a hovering substance, but as our human brother (our place-sharer) who knows fully what it means to be abandoned and neglected. God comes to us in the ordinary, the regular, the average. God tents among us, embracing fully who we are, whether broken or whole, sick or healthy. The incarnate one claims that God is among us, that God is with us, that God is for us, for if you have seen the incarnate one you have seen his Father. To follow the incarnate one is to be free, free to be human, to love one another, free to love God as God made us, human. We can enter suffering and death for the sake of relationship because God in Godself has done this, God has placed Godself within reach of our broken humanity by becoming broken, and now through his brokenness promises us new life, new community, new possibility.¹³

The incarnation makes the claim that it's okay for us to be human, that the objective of the Christian life is not to be other than human, but to be fully human as determined by the incarnate one, Jesus the Christ. But do we say this to, and live this alongside, adolescents? Do we look for volunteers that can be human with adolescents? A theology of the incarnation for youth ministry demands that we be human—that is the objective—not to be super pastors, super volunteers, people with all the answers, people with adolescent-attracting magnets. Rather, the goal is to be human beings who seek to be human with and for others in the power of the God who has become human for us all.

Justin could be incarnational (at least in *how* it is understood in popular youth ministry, Justin could be incarnational as a model and theme), but Jan could be human, which is (theologically) what the incarnation is all about. Justin could get adolescents to an event; Jan could help them be authentic human beings. She allowed them to share their stories, dreams, and fears, and in so doing pointed to a God who loved them enough to bear their reality, and even now stands with them. This is why we do incarnational ministry. Not because it's a great strategy, but because we believe that God is close to our humanity in God's own humanity, because we believe that God is close to adolescents' humanity, loving them through God's own humanity. This is the grace and truth that's the result of God's tenting among us in John 1:14. It is sure grace, sure gift, and sure wonder that God has chosen to be with us so fully. And in being with us so fully, truth (that which is real and right) now lives among us. Grace and truth are now relational and personal; they are the human Jesus who is the incarnate one of God in the world.

Tenting with people is a deeply human act. There's something about living close to the land that reminds us that we are human. Tenting with people inevitably draws us near to them as we live with them. Sitting around the campfire we hear their stories, glimpse their pain, and experience their joy in laughter and silent reflection. Tenting among others is the invitation to join in the lives of others, to mutually open our humanity up to the other so that we together might be known, and in our togetherness know the Creator, who (we confess) has become one of us by tenting with us.

1. HT 146
2. For further discussion on this see chapters one and two of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (IVP, 2007).
3. This was originally a phrase created and used by Young Life. There were times in that organization where the phrase did not mean an instrumental functional use of relationships; there were many who avoided this theological pitfall (and sought to teach a richer theological perspective). But as “incarnational/relational ministry” grew in use and popularity both within the organization and the broader church youth ministry took on this perspective.
4. I’m connecting this argument with the distinction sociologists point to between instrumental and expressive relationships. Murray Milner explains, “Instrumental relationships are formed for some specific purpose or goal; expressive relations are those that have no specific purpose but focus on companionship...*Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 63.
5. For further discussion about relational influence see Christian Smith’s *Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Smith articulates what he sees as personal influence relationalism in forms (especially conservative forms) of Protestantism.
6. Bonhoeffer used the German word *Stellvertretung*, which I have translated as place-sharing. Others have translated as “deputy” or “vicarious representative action.”
7. “God loves human beings. God loves the world. Not an ideal human, but human beings as they are; not an ideal world, but the real world. While we exert ourselves to grow beyond our humanity, to leave the human behind us, God becomes human; and we must recognize that God wills that we be human. While we distinguish between pious and godless, good and evil, noble and base, God loves real people without distinction. Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 6* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), p. 84
8. See Douglas John Hall’s *Professing the Faith* for a discussion of representation that encompasses this Christological assertion.
9. “One does not love God in the neighbor, nor are neighbors loved to make them Christian—neighbors are loved for their own sake, and in this love of the human companions one serves the will of God.” Bonhoeffer continues, “. . .I do not love God in the ‘neighbor’, but I love the concrete You; I love the You by placing myself, my entire will, in the service of the You. . .The person who loves God must, by God’s will, really love the neighbor.” *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1963), p. 169.
10. Green summarizes, “If the proper question of Christology is ‘who is Jesus Christ?’ this is a question which can only be asked to the Christ who is present. Christology is not concerned with an ideal of Christ nor with the historical influence of Christ, but with the resurrected Christ, the living God, who is really present. Furthermore, Christ is present as person not in isolation but only in relation to persons.” Clifford Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), p. 209.
11. In many ways this is the very assertion of Luther in his *Theology of the Cross*, a perspective that Bonhoeffer was working from.
12. See Moltmann’s *Crucified God*.
13. “The love of God became the death of death and the life of this human being. In Jesus Christ, the one who became human was crucified and is risen; humanity has become new. What happened to Christ has happened for all, for he was the human being. The new human being has been created.” Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 91.