The 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture
“Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry”

Introduction

I am honored to introduce the first volume of the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, presented in Daytona Beach, FL, and Princeton, NJ, in the spring of 1996 by James W. Fowler, Robin Maas, and Robert Wuthnow. The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original research on youth and the church. As part of a new venture in ministry sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, the Institute for Youth Ministry they describe a shift occurring in the churches thinking about youth and ministry. Instead of ghettoizing youth into clubs apart from the congregation, the church’s mission with youth views young people as integral to the total mission of the church, and youth ministry as a theological task which is not only about youth ministry, but about youth’s ministry as well.

The 1996 lectures, titled "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry," address mainline churches who have suffered grievous losses in their attempts to address teens. These losses come at a time when public institutions are calling attention to the important role churches play in adolescent development. Churches agree: We believe we have something to contribute to youth in the person of Jesus Christ—and therefore Jesus Christ, not age-level education, pastoral counseling, or recreational programs, must be the starting point for youth ministry.

We asked each of our lecturers to approach this theme from the perspective of their own disciplines. James Fowler posits a new shape for youth ministry that recognizes nuances of human development; Robin Maas uses biblical exegesis to redefine the spiritual journey of youth and the adults who mentor them; and Robert Wuthnow analyzes the sociological significance of service learning trends for the church’s ministry with teenagers. Together they point to a new direction for ministry with young people.

We approach this direction humbly and with hope. We know that the church’s renewal depends not on the church of tomorrow, but the church of today—a church in which youth can be integral missionaries to their elders and world. May this volume challenge and nourish the ministry God has laid before you.

Godspeed,

Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
1996 Lectures
Robin Maas
“Christ and the Adolescent: Piper or Prophet?”
“Christ and the Adolescent: A Decision for Love”
“Christ and the Adolescent: Written in Stone”

James W. Fowler
“Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith”
“Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God”
“Grace, Repentance, and Commitment: Youth Initiation in Care and Formation”

Robert Wuthnow
“Youth and Culture in American Society: The Social Context of Ministry to Teenagers”
“Religious Upbringing: Does It Matter and, If So, What Matters?”
“Unto the Least of These: Youth and the Ministry of Caring”
ADOLESCENCE IN THE
TRINITARIAN PRAXIS OF GOD

James W. Fowler

INTRODUCTION: WHY A THEOLOGY OF
ADOLESCENCE?

In my adult life I have observed a curious oscillation in our portrayal and imaging of youth. Some of the time we have romanticized young people, presenting them as part of a new generation that has the discernment to choose what is good from "grown-up" culture, and to turn away from the corrupt and fallen ways of their elders. We have believed that they would be more in touch with nature, more careful about polluting our globe. We have thought that they might grow beyond the prejudices and narrowness of their elders. We have hoped that they might find the answer to that fundamentally important question, "How much is enough?" and might have a chance at finding the right balance between self-interest and care for the common good. This hopeful, idealized view of youth I call the eschatological vision.

In the last two decades, however, the eschatological vision of youth has faded badly. It has largely been replaced by its opposite—what I called the apocalyptic vision. We all know this set of images: Latch key kids brought up on junk food and thirty hours of television a week, hollow-eyed witnesses to three hundred thousand commercials and one hundred thousand TV murders before they leave high school; young people jaded and saturated with screen sex, involved in earlier and earlier beginnings of sexual activity, claiming earlier and earlier use of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol. Then there are the alarming statistics about violence and the images of gangs engaged in wanton acts of raping, beating, stabbing, shooting, and burning. This is a dark, apocalyptic vision, tinged with flames and urban decay, or with the vacant eyes of privileged suburban teens rich in things but poor in soul.

It seems likely to me that the projections onto youth of our eschatological and apocalyptic images are just that—projections of successive adult generations' feelings of optimism or dread, of hope or anxiety about our
society, about our churches, about our future. Our perceptions of youth have also been shaped by the powerful images of commercial advertising, which have created vast, lucrative markets among succeeding generations of adolescents. Our superficial images of youth are subliminally shaped by the music, the art, and the sartorial styles that are compellingly presented through television, magazines, and youth's own presentation of themselves.

Unless we have genuine sustained and personal relationships with youth, we can fall for these distorting caricatures. And unless we have a robust faith in a God whose providence extends to and actively works in and among us in this period, we could give up on them, and on ourselves. We could give up on the holy story of God's creation, God's loving governance, and God's liberating and redemptive power acting in history and nature.

My lecture tries to do something I have never done before. I want to sketch an attempt to place adolescence in theological perspective. I want to explore with you why, in the processes of biological and cultural evolution and in the praxis of God, adolescence has been experienced and seen as a compelling and crucial time, religiously. In trying to offer what might be called a theology of adolescence, I hope to help us see the churches' ministry with youth as a primally important mode of partnership with God's triune, providential work of creation, governance, liberation, and redemption.

TRINITY AS REALITY:
COMPRESSED NARRATIVE AND SYMBOL

As a preparation for an effort to shape a theology of adolescence, I want to invite you to try a theological thought experiment with me. Close your eyes for a moment or two of inward attention to the screen of your imagination. On that screen, let a round, luminous center of energy and light take form. As it emerges and focuses your attention, allow two equal circles of light and energy to move out from it on different sides, and allow the three centers to begin a slow set of circling movements in a graceful orbit. Imagine their movements as a kind of dance, graceful, playful, yet majestic. Imagine lines of energy and communication moving between them and linking them with each other, and imagine them moving gladly toward each other, converging in a radiant oneness, and then blithely separating to a threeness linked by energy, light, and love.

Then, in the tensile space between the bright spheres of energy and light, let yourself see an infinitely small, infinitely luminous, pulsating, glowing point of light. With lines of energy and light from the three centers extending to this point, it explodes, expands, and takes on a life of its own, deriving from the continuing pulsating energy and light from the one and the three. Creation, light, life, universe. Then they—the one and the three—said, "Let us make a world."

Though it is abstract when put in theological and philosophical
terms, I am coming to understand the doctrine of the Trinity as a dynamic, compressed narrative. In the most economic of terms, it holds the story of all our stories. It tells the story of the coming into being of all that is. It tells how people came to be. It testifies to our linkages with and grounding in the light and energy of the divine life. It portrays how the luminous spheres of the holy perichoresis—the holy circle dance of God—came and come to us in personal address: in covenant and Torah, in the prophets, and in the Logos becoming flesh. Both the presence and the crucifixion of God-with-us are revelatory. The encounter with Christ makes personal the infinite grace and love of the divine personae for those made in God’s image. The tearing—the crucifixion—lays bare both the depths and danger of our alienation from God and from each other. But the cross of Christ also magnificently reveals the extremity and self-giving of the divine love, in submitting to human death on the cross. The Trinity tells us how through fire and light, and through the very ruach—the breath of God—a people of covenant and Torah, a people called into being by the human face of the divine life, are formed into a communion in God that knows no limits of nation, tribe, gender, or race.

To our human point of view, from within God’s oneness God’s self-disclosure has manifested a three-ness. The fullness and plenitude of God’s fullness has come to us in a triplex of relations. We have been given to know God as:

The Divine Creative Source and Sustainer: In this form we see God as generative of the evolutionary birthing of all matter and energy, all dynamism and structure, all form and freedom. From God comes our universe, fifteen billion light years in extent and still expanding. From the creative source and sustainer there evolves an ontological calling for human beings, and for all living things in a lesser way, to be partners in God’s ongoing work of creation. God evolves us to love and to work and to praise. God gives us finite freedom even at the risk of our falling into willful disobedience and enmity toward the divine dream for us (Psalm 8).

The Logos: God’s Gift of Self in Personal Address: Beginning with the covenant with Adam and Eve, God speaks. To Noah God gives warning and promise of preservation. Through personal messengers God makes outrageous promises to Sarah and Abraham, and announces the intent to bring forth a people covenanted for living and teaching all peoples the paths of righteousness and praise. Through Moses, God brings Israel out of captivity in Egypt, and gives to Moses the grace of law and Torah—the way of justice and faithfulness. Through long seasons of unfaithfulness, God maintains chesed—steadfast love and faithfulness with Israel, calling her back in repentance through the voice and personhood of the prophets. Through the vision of a servant people who would show forth the love of God in service and redemption of the nations, the Holy One prepares the way for the Messiah. Then, in the hinge event of our history, the Logos becomes flesh. The Word becomes a human being. And in his teaching and personhood,
and in his death by crucifixion, we receive in all its paradox and power the
disclosure and promise of the kingdom of God (basilea tou Theou). Jesus is
disclosed as the Christ through the witness of the Spirit. He is disclosed as
the suffering servant by whose stripes we are healed. He is manifest as the
crucified God, bringing about the release of the captives (The Descent into
Hell), and as the resurrected Lord. Jesus as the resurrected Lord becomes the
_negation of the negation that is death.

God’s Animating Breath, God’s Igniting and Empowering Spirit:
Biblically the Spirit appears in the gift of the lamb at the sacrifice of Isaac, in
the dreams of Jacob, in the burning bush that apprehended Moses, in the
pillars of cloud and fire that led Israel in the wilderness, and in the shekinah,
the veil of clouds surrounding Yahweh at the giving of the Ten
Commandments. This same shekinah surrounds our Lord and the disciples
on the Mount of Transfiguration. At Pentecost the Spirit publicly ignites the
witness of the post-resurrection church in Jerusalem. (Acts 2) More inti-
mately the Spirit enters the disciples in the upper room, when the risen
Christ appears to the disciples, and breathes into them the power to become
the Body of Christ. (Jn. 20:21-23) The Spirit of God animates and quickens
our faith. The Spirit teaches us to pray; it indwells us with power to become
children of God. The Spirit addresses us with the call to our vocation; it sur-
rounds us with prevenient grace. The Spirit forms and sustains the moral
conscience in humankind; it prepares the hearts of strangers to hear and
receive witness to God’s love. The Spirit inspires and orchestrates long lines
of convergent faithfulness into gestalts of grace and power in history.

_ADOLESCENCE AND MINISTRY
IN TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE_

Here I want us to see what an exploration of the meanings of the
Trinity as reality and as compressed narrative and symbol suggests about
our ministry to and with adolescents.

All individual human beings, as well as the species taken as a
whole, are unfinished; we are still evolving, still struggling toward the ful-
fillment of the dream God has for us, implanted in our being, created _imago
Dei_. Adolescents are a powerful icon of our and creation’s unfinishedness.
As Meister Eckhart liked to say, they are novissimus—newest creation. They
manifest the promise of adult forms and contours; they manifest emerging
adult capacities for knowing and for thought. They bring unopened pack-
ages of potential; their bodies zing with energy and sag in depletion.
Sometimes their sexual awakening is radioactive. Whether shy or gregari-
ous, their longing for relation and voice and worth are palpable. They stand
at such a jumping-off place. They stand at the place of such promise and
such peril. Sometimes I think of them, in the vulnerability of their being
novissimus, as the canaries in our cultural, economic, and social mines.
Adolescents are a powerful icon of our and creation’s unfinishedness, our
enormous potential and promise, our fragile vulnerability and peril.

Youth engage us; they may disturb us. They can remind us—and make us confront—the unfinished stuff in us: our old unresolved relations with our parents, our continuing—if submerged and hidden—struggles over our identities and callings, our desires for escape and irresponsibility, or our longings for a cleansed and unspoiled world. On the other hand, they remind us that God is not through with us, or with our species. And we can recognize in them the forming generation among whom the Spirit is active, and to whom Christ gives a special call. In our society youth are among the "little ones" among whom Jesus said he would be found. We do them no favor to project upon them either our eschatological hopes or our apocalyptic terrors. We can and should convey to them our confidence that God surrounds and sustains them and our world in the power and love of God’s triplex companionship.

Trinitarian faith can offer youth the witness that God calls each human being, and has called the church collectively, to vocations of partnership in God’s cause—partnership in the divine praxis. Trinitarian proclamation offers as a prime theme this news about an ontological calling for human beings—this calling that comes with our very beings. This ontological vocation does not pertain just to Christians. This is a Christian and biblical insight which we take to be revelatory of the true calling of all people, whether they know it and acknowledge it or not. We might modify Augustine’s famous statement in the light of this claim. We can say, in address to God, “Thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until we find purposes for our lives that are part of thy purposes.” Our hearts will be restless until we find and shape ways of being in partnership with God’s work in the world. Today parents, guidance counselors, peer pressure, and our cultural images of success all conspire to encourage youth to engage in narrow, focused, and rushed thinking about “getting into the right college,” “marketing their majors,” and “getting into that career slot” as quickly as possible. From our grounding in trinitarian faith, we have an important witness and ministry to help youth find alternative approaches. Faith in the praxis of God can help them claim the calmness and confidence to take the chronological and spiritual space to allow the Spirit to be a partner in their exploration of where their gifts and the world’s needs might meet. Or as Frederick Buechner has put it so powerfully, in the power of the Spirit they may find out “where their deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”

To help today’s youth learn to dwell in the narratives that sustain trinitarian faith might enable them to shape a different sense of time. It could help them resist the mood of foreclosed future that permeates the apocalyptic imagery that infuses much of the music, art, and self-destructive life patterns of youth populations here and in many parts of the world. There is a cult of death at large in our society. Recently on the Emory campus, in a place near the University Center where many students walk past
all day, I was startled to see a late-model black pickup truck parked. Its appearance made clear that its owners had invested in expensive custom painting and imprinting. On one side, imprinted in ghostly white, faces of babies and children with somber eyes covered the fenders, door, and bed; the other side exhibited the ghostly faces of youth and young adults. On the front, in all its artful power, a human skull and crossbones leered with empty eyes and a grim grin, stylishly etched onto the hood of the truck. One could not discern this strange truck's message. Did it aim to alert us to the threat of human extinction through ecological degradation or nuclear war? Or was it a moving tabernacle devoted to the lord of death? Where there is no negation of the negation of death, it can take on the aura of power and majesty. In a society where drugs and weapons function as death-dealing instruments of coercion, power to waste others may compensate for the unrelieved fear of mortality.

The biblical story and trinitarian faith show today's youth—and all of us—that in the trinitarian praxis of God, moral lawfulness is serious business. As the Ten Commandments assert, there is a structure that intends righteousness built into the patterns of the universe. There are moral principles and practices which may not be flaunted widely or for long, if communities or nations truly are to flourish. There are considerations for the care of the weak and vulnerable which, if not provided, harden the hearts of the strong in distorting ways. This is a call to covenant faithfulness with God which cannot be reduced to contracts with the special interests of self-aggrandizing classes. Paul Tillich said it memorably: "It is not so much that we break the laws of God, but that we break ourselves upon the laws of God." And Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of this structure at the heart of things that intends righteousness when he asserted, "The arc of history bends slowly, but it bends toward justice." The Old Testament prophets captured this in their scathing accusation, "You sell the needy for a pair of shoes." God made covenant with Adam and Eve, to be caretakers of God's garden. We are turning the garden into a stinking sewer. Trinitarian faith calls us to teach and embody this moral seriousness. In our ministry with youth and their families, and in our ministries to the larger communities where we live and work, we must break through the growing coral reefs of psychologization and the pink sad clouds of recovery spirituality. We need to help them see that the actions we choose have consequences, that we are called to be responsible selves, and that fulfilling the commands of love and justice may not always "feel good."

Our Vocations and the Trinitarian Praxis of God

Trinitarian faith can help youth and parents recognize that the divine creative source and sustainer is still working. We may be able to help them begin to discern the paradoxical shape of the praxis of God in history.
Through living with the biblical narratives, and through the gift of new perspectives on recent and present history, we and our youth may learn to detect the subtlety of the divine praxis. In order to track the plan and work of God one has to have a very wide net and look more deeply than the evening news or the daily paper. Biblically we are alerted to the fact that God’s dream for creation, God’s intention to bring about a commonwealth of love and justice on this earth, works through long lines of convergent faithfulness. These long lines of convergent faithfulness come from many directions. Often they are hidden, not visible to the public eye. Nor are they made up exclusively of Christians. Not all the contributors and players look like our images of anointed ones. The witness of the Spirit blows where it will. It nurtures flames in the hearts of orphans; it often animates the vision of people from the margins; it uses the ordinary faithfulness of people in their vocations to lay the groundwork, on many fronts, for the astonishing moment when God’s promise, “Behold, I am doing a new thing,” becomes manifest.

Take for example, the Montgomery bus boycott, widely acknowledged, retrospectively, as the beginning of the struggle for the civil rights of black people in the United States. On the face of it, we see Rosa Parks, a tired seamstress who finally decides that she will not get up from the only available seat on the bus and go to the back to make room for a white man to sit down. Then when thousands of black women and men rally behind her to boycott the buses, a brave and bright new pastor of the Dexter Avenue Church comes forward to articulate their grievances and to expose the brutal face of a segregationist society. And that is true.

But to see this emergent event in the light of the divine praxis, we must look more deeply. We must look at a series of brave pastors who led that church, who with middle-class black laity had quietly opposed a policy of brutality toward blacks and insisted on their people being treated with dignity. We have to look at the decade or more in which Rosa Parks and other leaders of the boycott had traveled to the Highlander Folk Center in Tennessee, where they had learned the fundamentals of non-violent protest, and had formed fellowship and correspondent relations with like-minded blacks from across the south. We have to look at the heritage that came to focus in Martin Luther King Jr.—a multi-generational family heritage, on both sides, of teachers and pastors who gave strong leadership in their communities; the teaching of Drs. George Kelsey and Benjamin Mays at Morehouse College that began to equip him with the theological and philosophical knowledge to articulate the principles of love and justice. Other teachers at Colgate Rochester and Boston University stimulated his mind and inspired his writings. There were the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, with that great leader’s insights about satyagraha. Then there was the courage of people in the press and the new reality of national television networks that made the events in Montgomery glaringly public and moved a nation to begin to confront its own deepest contradictions.
All these factors in the Montgomery situation contributed as parts of the long lines of convergent faithfulness that came into focus there. This convergence is what made Mrs. Parks's refusal to give up her seat a moment of disclosure that God had laid the groundwork for bringing forth a new chapter in the history of this nation and the world. King himself saw this and wrote about it in his book Stride Toward Freedom: "There is something about the protest (in Montgomery) that is suprarational: it cannot be explained without a divine dimension. Some may call it a principle of concretion, with Alfred North Whitehead; or a process of integration, with Henry N. Wieman; or Being-Itself, with Paul Tillich; or a personal God. Whatever the name, some extra-human force labors to create a harmony out of the discord of the universe. There is a creative power that works to pull down mountains of evil and level hilltops of injustice. God still works through history His wonders to perform. It seems as though God had decided to use Montgomery as the proving ground for the struggle and triumph of freedom and justice in America."2

Not all moments of the disclosure that God is doing a new thing are so dramatic or so far-reaching. But it should be a source of great encouragement and confidence to us as ministers and teachers and Christians. God uses the faithfulness that each of us offers in and through our vocations, grafting the acts and patterns of our faithfulness into long lines whose points of convergence or concretion we may never see or be aware of. It is this conviction that makes teaching and ministry an exhilarating way to respond to God’s call to partnership. It is this conviction that helps us offset the undertow of doubt about the relative worth of the work we do and the institutions we lead.

We must hold to this clarity about the paradoxical power inherent in vocational faithfulness. In a world that is fixated on the now, and fascinated to the point of idolatry with this culture’s obsession with ephemeral power and the glitz of symbolic wealth, we need to build this faith into our souls. Otherwise, we, too, will lust after the illusory satisfactions of publicity. We will drool for the insecure leverage of corporate power. Or we will pursue the acquisitive satisfactions of accumulating and controlling virtual money, through transactions whose only reality shows up on the screens that flash on our electronic altars and on an occasional score card in print. We are called for more than that!

The trinitarian God has dreams for this earth. The Holy One is not finished with us yet. It is from such gatherings as this, where two or three are gathered together in the name of Christ, to witness to each other and share their faith and callings, that the Spirit of God weaves together new strands of the long lines of faithfulness already forming in intensified and strengthened ways. In such circles as this the hidden praxis of the circle dance of God gives impetus toward new concretions, new co-creations, toward the new heaven and the new earth God intends. Even now, even here, the praxis of God nurtures the seeds and weaves the strands of God’s
new creation. We stand on holy ground; we are links in long chains of faithfulness; and, in God's good pleasure, the lives of many of God's newest creation—the novissimus generation—will be awakened and formed by our ministries for their partnership in the paradoxical power of the praxis of God.