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”
CHRIST AND THE ADOLESCENT:
WRITTEN IN STONE

Robin Maas

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child, when I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part: then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. (I Cor. 13:11-12)

When I was a child, and I suspect, when you were, too, what I spent a lot of time thinking about was a future self. My friends and I defined ourselves in terms of our future possibilities. “What are you going to be when you grow up?” That was our big existential question. And because we were children, we always had a ready answer. We would answer confidently, “I’m going to be a pilot, a dress designer, a fireman, a ballet dancer, an astronaut, a doctor”—you fill in the blank. Our minds could change by the day, by the hour. The possibilities were apparently infinite; our hopes were unclouded by self-doubt or despair; and we certainly never stopped to worry about whether we were personally equipped with the necessary capacities and talents to be what we thought we wanted to be.

When I was an adult, things weren’t so simple. When I was a young adult, the existential question became more nuanced: “When can I begin to be what I really want to be—whatever that is?” The infinite “yeses” and blissful certainty of childhood were replaced with a growing sense of frustration. Adulthood was harder than I had expected; the satisfying sense of having arrived still beckoned on the horizon—it was there but farther away than I had at first realized. Still, I had no serious doubts that what I really wanted to be I could eventually be.

As an older adult—on the cusp of middle age—I could no longer avoid facing the fact that time and resources and even my own capacities were limited. I began to recognize, but just barely, that when it came to
being what I wanted to be, saying yes to one possibility usually meant saying no to another, and that choices I had made early on about the kind of person I wanted to be had had a lasting and defining impact, even if they weren't entirely "final." And some of those defining choices had started to feel very confining. Suddenly there seemed to be more noes than yeses. The big existential question then became "What have I done?!"

Now, as I approach my seniority, I sense that the perennial question of identity will be reconfigured once again. It is still too soon to say what it will be. The obvious possibility, of course, is "What have I become?" But we may be wrong about that. When we reach the end of our earthly existence, the question that haunts us may more closely resemble the question with which we began our lives: "What am I going to be when . . . ." And I suspect the answer to the second question will depend largely on the answer to the first. What I am going to be when . . . ." depends upon what I have actually become, on the choices I have made up until "when" finally arrives.

Meanwhile, you have no doubt noticed that, like Paul, I have omitted that stage of life in which our identity is most fluid and therefore most at risk. I have not spoken about the adventure of self-discovery in adolescence—the time of life that remains largely veiled in Scripture, veiled in a very real sense to those who are passing through it, and completely obscured to those who live under the same roof with it.

When I was an adolescent, I spoke like an adolescent, I thought like an adolescent, I reasoned like an adolescent . . . . And here is what I thought about, here is what I asked myself, constantly: Who am I, anyway? And how can I find out?

When I say "asked myself constantly," I don't mean that I was, moment by moment, conscious of not knowing the answer to this question. I suspect I was naively confident much of the time that I did know who I was and where I was going. The "asking" was going on "below"—in the subterranean depths of my driven adolescent psyche.

And this was another one of those times when the answer to the existential question seemed to hinge on the answer to the other, more immediately pressing question, namely, "What are they saying about me? What are they thinking about me? Do they get it? Do they know who I really am?"

Do you recognize this question?

Do you remember asking it yourself?

Do you remember worrying—a lot—about what the answer was?

Of course you do, because it mattered so much to you and to me at that time in our lives what people thought—and maybe it still does. It matters not simply because we want to be liked or admired; it matters, especially when we are fifteen, because we believe that what other people think about us is true—not just sometimes true, but always true. We count on the truthful reaction of others, especially our peers, to tell us who we are. And, like it or not, this counting on others for the truth is going to remain with us
for the rest of our lives. We look to others to unveil what is veiled—to reveal the mystery of who we are. And at no time are we more dependent on others for this “unveiling” of the self than in adolescence.

What is more, much as we adults would like to feel detached from public opinion and from the need for public approval, we still tend to care what “they” say. And the less certain we are about the answer to that question—what are they saying?—the more we will care about what they say.

For many adults, those others about whose opinion they care tend to be relatively faceless and nameless—it’s not just the Joneses, but society in general whose good opinion they value. What they say determines their sense of self-worth; and few things are feared more than the loss of one’s good reputation. Those of us who call ourselves religious professionals tend to take pride in not being subject to this kind of pressure. Yet even if we have reached the point where we believe we no longer really care what they think and what they say, if we are not entirely self-absorbed and solipsistic, we recognize public opinion as something to be reckoned with, especially if we are concerned with keeping our jobs. At the very least, we tend to care deeply what those whom we care deeply about are thinking and saying about us.

For adolescents it is rather different. When you are in high school, they certainly have names and faces; and the power they exercise is akin to the power of blessing and cursing, of life and death. Indeed, the power of one fifteen-year-old over another is a terrifying thing. It governs not only what a young person wears and chooses for entertainment; to a large extent, it determines how she will think, how he will talk, how both of them will act. It is a power which lets people in and just as quickly shuts them out.

This power, which Sharon Parks has aptly termed “the tyranny of the they”¹ has been presented as a power lodged in the mind of the adolescent—and in the minds of many adults, for that matter. It represents a form of self-subjection which is, in theory, curable with a healthy dose of ego strength. The rise of what Fowler calls the “executive ego” signals that the hold of this pernicious form of tyranny over the self has been broken, or at least seriously weakened. And so those who work with the young labor to enhance what is now called “self-esteem”—what we used to call “self-confidence.” Or they may, in a fit of hope and idealism, attempt to reason with teenagers as I used to do with my own daughter: “No, everyone is not looking at you and thinking about you. If they’re looking at you it’s because they’re wondering what it is that you’re thinking about them!”

What I told her was probably true, but I had it all wrong. What the adolescent fears as a result of her own egocentrism has its actual, objective counterpart in the cruel reality of peer pressure. They exist. They are out there; and it takes a lot of courage, a lot of truth, for a fifteen-year-old to challenge their hegemony.

What courage to resist the young do have is usually hoarded so that it can be directed elsewhere. Ask any parent.
What any parent will tell you is that adolescents appear profoundly impervious to what they, the parents, think. Parental authority is quickly identified as “tyrannical” and therefore unjust by many American teens, even while parental influence continues to exercise immense, mostly subconscious power—especially over the youth who labors actively to reject it.

And so it is the power of the parent to influence that is self-consciously foresworn by youth in the heroic effort to become an independent self: “Get thee behind me, Mother!” But since the self is not yet sufficiently strong or well defined to stand alone, another form of tyranny is sought out and willingly embraced; and this new form of fealty, while necessary, is fraught with danger. Because this form of subjection is exercised by the young, it is impatient and ruthless; because it is exercised by the inexperienced, it is untempered by wisdom and compassion. Its demand for loyalty is total and unforgiving; and its success rate with the young is astronomically high. Few indeed are the youth with sufficient ego-strength to resist today’s predominant youth culture. Those who do are consigned to the deadly irrelevance of eternal nerd-dom.

Well, you say, it has been ever thus. Just look at the youthful Saint Augustine, who hung out with a nasty gang who called themselves the “wreckers” and pretended to be more sexually active and criminally degenerate than he actually was in order to win peer approval. Look at the gang violence on the streets of medieval Verona. Look at Romeo and Juliet—another tragic case of adolescent suicide in the pages of Shakespeare!

Yes, it has been ever thus in terms of the psycho-dynamics of adolescence; but today the stakes seem much higher than they have been in recent history. The social and spiritual cost of what Erikson calls the adolescent identity crisis has recently skyrocketed; and today’s kids are spending their personal capital as if there were no tomorrow—which is another way of saying they are convinced that there will always be a “tomorrow.”

A recent series in the Washington Post focused on the lives of teenagers in the national capital and its affluent suburbs. We can see in their responses the naive pleasure in the new-found freedoms that we would expect. “I don’t want to ever not be a teenager,” gushes “Becca,” a fifteen-year-old girl from prosperous and hip northern Virginia. “Sometimes it’s kind of rough, but that’s part of growing up. My friends are just learning to drive, we’re going around doing fun things. We’re getting freedom to stay out later . . . .” This is innocuous enough. Nothing exceptional here. But listen to what she has to say about the wonders of self-discovery: “It’s all about discovering yourself. If you want to be bisexual, snort coke, or stay at home and watch TV with your parents, you’re finally discovering what you’re really like.”

A large part of this process of discovery apparently hinges on sexual activity. One of Becca’s friends, a boy named Tony, reported the following: “I have this group of friends [ninth and tenth graders] who have grown up together; they sleep with one person one week, someone else the
next . . . It sounds bad, but they’ve all had tests. They just like sex.”

You may no longer find this shocking, but I hope that you at least find it pathetic. For it is pathetic that the children of the privileged middle class seek to define themselves in such spiritually impoverished terms. Becca’s mother was apparently shocked at the jaded, worldly-wise attitude of her daughter and her friends as they sat in her living room talking to the Post reporters. Yet Becca’s mother has told her daughter that she prefers her smoking marijuana to her drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes. And Becca’s mother believes that it would be stupid for her to actually forbid her daughter to try something. In her own words: “The more a parent says no, the more a child says yes . . . . This is a time in their lives when they try everything.”

And there you have it. The modern parent of adolescents, typically a survivor of a morally chaotic youth and young adulthood, has foreworn the difficult but ultimately rewarding exercise of legitimate parental authority. She has robbed her children even of the “rite” of rebellion against an absolute “no.” And in removing the absolute “no”—the clearly-defined boundary—the adult (who is not yet fully grown up) has essentially crippled her offspring in their quest to discover who, in fact, they really are.

Today’s youth are having their moral horizons profoundly narrowed by the absence of authority, by the premature unveiling of what should remain, for the time being, “under wraps.” But the modern parent has listened to the experts. She, too, is responsive to what they say and, as a consequence, her children are defenseless against this same insidious and oppressive tyranny.

Given all this, we should be intensely interested in that remarkable biblical passage in which Jesus wants to know what they are saying—about him.

You know the one I mean. In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, Jesus asks his disciples this very question—What are they saying about me? (v. 13) He knows there’s plenty of speculation, gossip, and scandal. And he wants to know whether people do know who he really is—do they get it? Is it possible that our Lord longs, just as we long, to be known for who and what he really is?

The disciples have heard some of this talk, of course, and they dutifully report what they have heard: “Some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” (v. 14) And so he has his answer: No. They don’t really understand—not yet. They don’t know who the “Son of man” is.

So Jesus asks his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 16) This time the stakes are high. What will his own inner circle, his star pupils say? Simon, son of Jonah, is the one who answers, who takes what has to be a significant risk. And what Simon says is gratifying to Jesus, because it is the truth: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Listen carefully to how Jesus responds: “Blessed are you, Simon
Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” (v. 17) Did you notice? This is not something that has been told to him by “flesh and blood,”—it not something they are saying about Jesus. Rather, it is the Father himself who has “revealed” or unveiled this reality to Simon. Matthew is telling us that the true identity of the man Jesus is something that can only be revealed from a divine source; and John’s Gospel says essentially the same thing when Jesus tells his detractors “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” (Jn. 6:44)

What we see next is that the witness of the Father, God’s unveiling of the truth about the man Jesus, brings with it the bestowal of authority, of immense spiritual power. But first, the disciple who tells the truth about Jesus is himself renamed, and his new name is a revelation of identity: “You are Peter—petros,” says the Lord, “and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16:18)

Voicing the truth about who Jesus is opens up something new for this disciple. He hears from Jesus what the Father has all along planned for him, that he himself is to be defined by the truth he has spoken about the Lord. Simon Peter is rock solid. Who he is, his very essence, is something so true and so firm that the Lord can now build his house—his church—upon it, so that when the rain falls and the floods come and the wind blows and beats upon this house, it will not fall. Not even the gates of hell shall prevail against it. And so Jesus tells Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (v. 19)

Think about it. Quite apart from what this text tells us about the origins of the ecclesiastical authority of the apostle Peter, it reveals a profoundly personal truth about every disciple. In a very real sense, the person who tells the truth about the Lord—whoever names him accurately—holds the “keys to the kingdom.” Why? Because it is that truth—the truth of who Jesus really is—that does indeed give entrance to the kingdom for those who will accept it, just as truly as it refuses entry to those who cannot or will not receive it.

You may not be able to absolve people of their sins, but if you are someone to whom the Father in heaven has revealed the true identity of Jesus, then you have been given what is at least a potentially immense spiritual authority—and, along with that, an equivalent degree of responsibility. You can bind and you can loose; you can say No and you can say Yes. You must and You must not. I insist and I forbid.

Let us be clear. There is nothing tyrannical in the authority that is bestowed by Christ—the authority to say Yes and to say No. We can say this because the authority to do so resides not in our person (weak and sinful as we are), but in our commission. The power of the keys does not reside in us but in the truth we tell about the one who is truth itself and who entrusts those who know who he is with the power of binding and loosing—with the
power of No and the power of Yes.

That is why a morally compromised past in a parent or in a pastor, providing it has been repented of, is no obstacle to the exercise of moral authority in the believing adult. That is why Becca’s mother (and the legion like her)—no matter how many foolish choices she may have made in her own youth—does not have to be resigned to watching her daughter repeat the same mistakes. In fact, the repentant and forgiven adult sinner, the one who has previously experienced moral chaos and felt its power to destroy, has a special obligation to share, not all the gory details of his past, but the strength of his conviction. The power of the keys is the power of the person named Jesus; and if you get it, you’ve got it. You have the keys only because of what has been revealed to you by God. It’s not what they say about you, but what the living God says about his Son.

Given the fragility of adolescence, the “tyranny of the they” appears to be the sand trap of adolescent identity formation. It provides the justification for much silly, risky, and increasingly destructive behavior, and serves as a major nexus of conflict between parent and teen. We know that youths require enormous amounts of external affirmation and confirmation from peers; and we know that they need empathetic adults in their lives who, although they remember what it was like to be fifteen, no longer have a need to behave as if they still were fifteen. Above all, a secure sense of self requires a degree of moral coherence between what the family, the church, and the culture each claim is true and worthy of our loyalty. And this, we know, is precisely what today’s youngsters do not have. This is why you, as ministers to youth, so often—and accurately—feel like voices crying in the wilderness.

The prototypical parent of the modern teenager belongs now to the generation we call the “baby boomers,” who came of age in the sixties and seventies and who, as an age cohort, embraced a thoroughly individualistic, anti-authoritarian, and self-indulgent style of life. On the one hand, these parents are ambitious for their children to do well. They hope, as all parents do, that their children will be happy, healthy, and safe from harm. On the other hand, they exhibit a profound ambivalence, if not downright antipathy, to the rightful exercise of parental authority. Having lived with the belief that there are no absolute Noes but an inexhaustible supply of Yeses, they cannot now, with any confidence or enthusiasm, require obedience to standards which they as youths did not embrace and now, as adults, do not uphold. To do so would be to call into question their own histories, their major life choices, their personal values.

The children of such parents, today’s teens, are being asked to define their own moral universe, to choose a self which, in the end, will be no better, no finer, no truer, than the self anyone else has chosen. It’s only virtue will be its claim to having been chosen freely: “I can be bisexual, snort coke, or sit home and watch television with my parents . . . . I can sleep with a different friend each week . . . . I can be whoever and whatever I want to be . . . .”
The irony in all this is that the surrender of parental authority to make moral claims on the conscience of the child is, at the same time, the surrender of the soul of the child—not to real freedom, but to the “tyranny of the they,” to the power of worldliness, a kingdom over which the Prince of Darkness and the Father of Lies rules. Erikson, after all, was right. The youthful need for absolutes will impose itself no matter what; and whatever authority their parents surrender, their peers will seize upon with zest and zeal. They will gladly shoulder the responsibility of binding and loosing, but without divine authorization.

Our jobs as trustworthy guides to the young in their quest for an authentic sense of self has been made very much more difficult by a culture that denies there is such a thing as objective truth and invites youngsters to experiment with both safe sex and self-invention. The wise biblical admonition, “Judge not, that ye be not judged,” has been twisted by cultural relativists to mean “You have no firm basis on which to make a judgment about good and evil, right and wrong. Therefore you may not make moral judgments.” And absent the basis for making firm moral judgments, there is likewise no firm basis for establishing an identity that will not fall when the rain falls and floods come and the winds beat upon that house.

Erikson was right, but I wonder if we aren’t barking up the wrong tree when we operate as if self-discovery is the single most important goal for the young person, and then pattern our schools and youth ministry programs around this assumption. When we make the individual self the goal of youthful or even adult questing, we are, I believe, missing the mark. A strong sense of self is a very good thing, provided it is rooted in reality, in truth.

And that’s precisely what the young should be searching for: Truth. He said it: “Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven—and all these things will be added unto you.” But the search for truth—which is every young person’s God-given right—is distorted and aborted when truth becomes something the self is responsible for choosing rather than finding—when there’s my truth and your truth. Then there’s nothing to build a self on but sand.

It is in the search for truth that the rock on which to ground a self is discovered and identity is secured. In reality, our identity is a by-product of the search for God, in whose image and likeness we have all been created. The Lord is the one who says who we are—at our beginning and at our end. He’s the one we can count on to tell us the truth about ourselves when we have the courage to speak the truth about him.

Contrary to what Becca and her peers think, our true identity is not something invented, or even discovered, but conferred. Our names are given to us; our destiny is a gift from the living God, bestowed on those who have not been seduced by what they, the world, have to say, but who instead have listened to “what the Spirit says to the churches.” To the one who conquers, says the Lord, “... I will give ... a white stone with a new name written on [it] which no one knows except him who receives it.” (Rev. 2:17)
Written in stone: the commandments of God, the power of binding and loosing, and our true, but secret, selves. The Lord is the one—the only one—who knows what is written on that white stone he will someday hand to those of us who have “conquered;” and we will not know who we really are until that great day comes. To the extent that we try to discover prematurely what is written on that stone by searching through the dust and rubble of worldly pleasures and pursuits, we will be wasting our time and squandering our inheritance. This we have on good authority, apostolic authority.

Saint John the Evangelist assures us that the world, which did not recognize the Son of the living God, will not know who we are either—so what they are saying will ultimately do us little good when it comes to figuring out who we are. The one thing we can be certain of is that we are God’s children, and that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God’s children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. (I Jn. 3:1-3)

So although we are destined to search, we must be content, as was the apostle Paul, to know ourselves and our Lord only in part, to see what can be seen in earthly mirrors that dim and distort the imago dei, trusting all the while that we shall someday see him face to face. In that first and final seeing, face to face with our risen Lord, the apostle’s promise will be fulfilled: “then [we] shall understand fully, even as [we] have been fully understood.” (I Cor. 3:12) Then there will be no more existential questions.

There you have it—that’s what they, the apostles, say. What we owe the young is the truth that their life, their name, their self is safely “hid with Christ in God.” (Col. 3:3) This is the only rock on which they may safely build—where yes means yes and no means no. The world can’t tell them this truth because it neither recognizes nor accepts it, just as it did not recognize or accept Christ. But there is a hope, as the Evangelist says, that “purifies”—and therefore clarifies. It is the hope that we shall someday see the Lord Jesus as he truly is. And in seeing him face to face we will meet ourselves as if for the first time.

Notes
1 Sharon Parks, The Critical Years (San Francisco: Harper Collins), p. 76.