

Jesus is the Gospel!

JYMcSwain 8/07

*Young Life is about Jesus Christ...That's all that Young Life is all about, Jesus Christ.*  
Jim Rayburn, Young Life Staff Conference 1970

*Jesus is not only the Word who became flesh and made His home among us. Jesus is now our motivation and our method as well as our message and our means.*  
Young Life President Denny Rydberg, 2007

*The only system of thought into which Jesus Christ will fit is the one in which He is the starting point.* Athanasius, circa 323

Two days ago I heard the best and most eloquent exposition of the Good Samaritan story that I have ever heard. It was given by Bill Paige at Windy Gap Campaigner Camp. The man accosted by robbers was left for dead, *unable to do anything to help himself*. Bill painted the sorry picture of the Levite walking to the other side of the road because he was so worried about being too close to the man and becoming impure and ceremonially unclean. The kids laughed when Bill acted out this holy man making a cringing face in repulsive reaction to the hurt man. But it was the Samaritan, who you would least expect, who had compassion on the man. He came to the rescue.

Then Bill's point came crashing home with Holy Spirit unction: The Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ! Like the Good Samaritan, Jesus is not afraid to be affected by our cooties; he had a mixed heritage (in Jesus' case, human and divine); when we least expected it, God came lowly, riding on a donkey, and got down into the mess of our lives, getting blood and dirt all over him. He carried the infirmed man and absorbed the cost of delivering this man to the inn; he stayed with him and promised to return when he left. We are the hurt man, the Good Samaritan is Jesus, and this is what he has done for us; when we were helpless, He is the one who was not afraid to touch us in order to heal us.

As I listened to Bill I thought to myself: Wow, what a joy to be under the sound of the gospel!

I am cognizant that this message was spoken to Campaigner kids.<sup>1</sup> But would we want to say that God's attitude is like the Good Samaritan towards some people and not towards others? Or that God is more like the Levite and that Jesus is more like the Good Samaritan? Or that God changed from being like the Levite to being like the Good Samaritan when we believed and became Christians? Or even worse, that God is always like the Levite who must stay separate to maintain his legal holiness, and so Jesus, The Good Samaritan, enters the scene and does God's dirty work to protect the purity of this Levitical "God?"

What does God really think about me? Is God really like Jesus Christ? These are questions that can haunt us all of our lives. In Young Life we have the incredible

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<sup>1</sup> "Campaigners" is the original YL word for teenagers interested in going deeper and who attend regular small group bible studies/discipleship groups.

opportunity to give kids truthful and transformational answers to these questions. My fear is that, in our current proclamation approach, we may be missing the chance to maximize this opportunity.

Sometimes we become blinded by the familiar. It is time that we notice what kids are noticing. They sense a troubling shift when we switch from a Trinitarian/incarnational model in contact work<sup>2</sup> and in the first days of camp to a legal separation model in the middle of the week. Considering how the week began, it feels surprising and harsh. Many kids are keenly aware of their brokenness and are confounded by the introduction of a deity who seems so cold. Others are angered and don't want any part of someone who doesn't want any part of their dirt.

One high school girl described the cabin time after “the sin talk” like this: “We began our discussion about the disease of sin. It escalated until everyone was thoroughly distressed about our separation from God. One of my friends, sobbing, finally stated what everyone was thinking, ‘So basically, I’m a terrible person so I’m going to Hell and there’s nothing I can do about it.’”

Some might say this scenario couldn't have played out better: *this girl is right where we want her on Day 4; she's heard the bad news and now she's ready to hear the good news.* The current wisdom says that we have to love kids enough to tell them the awful truth about their separation from God before they can appreciate the cross. Is this love? Is this truth? Does it set us up to give kids an accurate picture of God and the cross?

In the last decade my mind has been changing about the best model of gospel proclamation within Young Life. Is it possible to change the model without losing the gospel itself? Yes, in fact, I would assert that this has already happened during the almost seventy year history of Young Life. We have been preaching the gospel all along, but as outlined below I think the model we are implementing now is different from that espoused by Jim Rayburn in the early days of our mission. Not only that, but it is a model that is relatively new in church history.

What is the gospel? Surely it is a *Who* more than a *how*. Paul desired nothing but to preach *Jesus Christ* and *Him* crucified. He said, “this is a trustworthy saying that demands full acceptance, Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners...” Is it possible that we could clearly and faithfully preach a Christ-centered gospel without the penal/legal formula and the bridge illustration paradigm? Yes. Is it possible that the legal separation model has actually obscured the Christ-centered nature of Young Life and the gospel? I believe so, and that is my purpose in writing this paper.

There has never been a more exciting time to be a part of this great Mission. Hopefully this critique will provide some good ground for discussion related to how the legal separation model chafes against the Trinitarian/incarnational model that is being

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<sup>2</sup> “Contact work” is the traditional description of YL volunteers and staff reaching out to initiate and build friendly, supportive, relationships with teenagers.

implemented more effectively than ever by many Young Life volunteers and staff around the world.

For the sake of the kids, let's soulfully investigate the possible ramifications of mixing models in our ministry. Let's take a hard look at the separation model and what it communicates about God our Savior. Maybe you will agree with me that by using it we are introducing a *serious confusion* into the hearts of the kids who we love.

Reasons to question the separation model:

**1. The separation model runs the risk of setting up a disjunction between Jesus and God.** For example, in the camp week message sequence, the Person of Christ talk might be about Christ's deity and incarnation - how we know what God is like because of Jesus Christ. We are told we can trust the picture of God that we get in Jesus. He loves and accepts us as we are; here we find the Holy God descending to become a man, and, while the teachers of the law stand by aghast, we see him embracing sinners at their worst and not being ashamed to associate with them. This message is *Trinitarian* because it assures us that he who has seen Jesus has seen the Father. It is *incarnational* because it declares that God has made himself known by coming to us as a man instead of staying aloof and leaving us in the dark.

Fast forward to sin talk: God is Holy and pure and we are impure. God cannot be associated with sin and because of our sin he is separated from us. We've broken the law and someone needs to pay. This message can sound more unitarian than Trinitarian; it seems to squeeze Jesus out and make him an exception to GOD. This eclipse of Jesus is very confusing to kids: "Hey, where did Jesus go? I thought God and Jesus were one. They seem to have different attitudes towards me. Is one for me and one against me?"

The separation paradigm communicates, against orthodox Christian doctrine, that Jesus and God are of a different essence. According to the separation model, God cannot touch sin because of his holiness. Yet Jesus touched sin; Jesus actually became sin. Did Christ take time off from being God when he became sin? No, Jesus is the fullness of deity in bodily form. Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine declares that Jesus Christ is not just a third of God, he is *all* of God. In Jesus Christ we get the whole package of God!

Christians in the early church came up with all kinds of more logical explanations for the make-up of the incarnate Son of God. For instance, the Son of God lost a fraction of his deity when he came from the Father, or that because he was the Son he must have come *after* the Father (even being made by the Father), or that when the Son of God humbled himself to become incarnate he necessarily emptied himself of his divinity. Upholders of orthodoxy like Irenaeus (cf. *Against Heresies*) and Athanasius (cf. *Against Arians*) scripturally insisted that there was no wiggle room between the being or eternal nature of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

While it defies our logic, each of the Trinitarian Persons is all of God, and together the Persons are all of God. Like Irenaeus and Athanasius, we must continue to resist heretical

ideas in the church which subtly tend to distance the definition of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, away from the orthodox view: *God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father....*

As we know, lepers in Jesus' culture were thought of as the epitome of sinners and necessarily separated out from the life of God in the synagogue. Standing firmly on orthodoxy, we can say that when Jesus touches an unclean leper it is not simply God's love in action, it is God *Himself* in action. Because Jesus Christ is the exact representation of the being of God, we can be sure that this is the way God is. Because Jesus Christ is co-eternal with the Father, we can be sure that this is the way he has always been!

**2. The separation model is incongruous with our practice in Young Life.** Sometimes it is promoted as a simple, clear approach. This might be true for a more legalistic approach or in a "hit-and-run" evangelism environment, but in the environment of Young Life's incarnational relational approach, the legal separation model is *very* unclear and puzzling. We live out at the high school a different gospel than we preach midway through the progression. In contact work we are at our best. We are "as Jesus" unto our beloved high school friends. We accept them unconditionally, we embrace them at their worst, we go after the Zaccheus-types of the adolescent world with great compassion. Then we find, as we provide a safe place for them, that the kids begin to change (like Zaccheus did!). They begin to be more open and honest about themselves and their sin. They want the relationship with Christ that their leader has.

Do we do all of this because it IS the gospel we are living and sharing, or as a means to an end to get them to a place like club or camp where they can hear about *a God who sounds different than the one we've shown them so far?* Again, confusion abounds: (kid to leader) "Man, that talk on Jesus and the leper on the second night reminded me of you [the leader] in the way you reached out and touched me and cared for me during my struggles with drugs." Then mid-week: "Wait, you and Jesus accepted me unconditionally, but now you're saying God accepts me conditionally? He can't be with me because of my sin?"

The separation model is simply inconsistent with God as he reveals himself fully in Jesus Christ. We pride ourselves on being incarnational and relational in our contact work, yet sin = separation language is not incarnational or relational, but based on legal and penal views. In fact, to believe sin=separation is to unwittingly subvert the incarnation itself. Immanuel means God with sinners.

Jesus is the model for Young Life's foundational principle of incarnational with-ness. Jesus came near to sinners and was with them before and after their decisions to follow him. In the same way, Young Life leaders come near to "sinners" and stick with them before and after their decisions to follow Christ. Is God's style different from Jesus' and Young Life's? Does he only practice halfway with-ness, i.e. separate from sinners before conversion, with them afterwards? No. Immanuel meant God with sinners then, and it means God with sinners now.

### **3. It compromises the foundational tenet of the omnipresence of God.**

If God is omnipresent, can one go anywhere to be separated from him? No!

The Holy Spirit's presence is a permeating one; He is everywhere. Where can I flee from your presence, says the Psalmist, even if I make my bed in Hell, you are there.

In the most recent issue of *Tabletalk*, R.C. Sproul describes Athanasius as “the great champion of Trinitarian orthodoxy.” Athanasius tirelessly refuted the tendency to make the Holy Spirit a second-class citizen of the Godhead. Because we believe in God the Holy Spirit, and because the Holy Spirit is everywhere, we can affirm that God is everywhere. With this knowledge we must constantly avoid the two extremes of 1. Pantheism – which collapses God into his creation instead of Him always remaining distinct from it and Lord over it, and 2. Quarantining the Spirit's presence, as if He is carried around in a container-like fashion by believers. The latter could lead us to believe as evangelists that we are taking Christ somewhere where he is not already present. On the contrary, we can enter the mission field with great anticipation that God has been at work long before we arrived. We can get on board and participate in *His* work!

Our camp properties are some of the most beautiful spots on earth. As aforementioned, God is not creation (G.O.D. Great Out Doors!) but God the Spirit is pleased to whisper his intimate presence *through* it. There is no better place than Young Life camp to capitalize on the magnificent nearness of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we should focus on increasing our awareness of Immanuel instead of highlighting a separation model that is antagonistic to His omnipresence.

**4. It keeps us from interpreting creation Christocentrically.** Oftentimes circumstances require that we crystallize the message down into four or fewer components. For instance, weekend camps are notorious for skimming through the Person and pre-existence of Christ talk because camp starts so late on Friday night. Even worse is the fact that oftentimes busloads of kids arrive late in the middle of the night, and the first talk they hear Saturday is a “sin talk” from the separation model. For whatever reason, at this point we have perhaps inadvertently boiled the *essential* components of the message down to three: sin, cross, appropriation.

On these Saturday mornings there is usually more talk about sin, God, separation and Hell than there is about Christ. We have unwittingly de-emphasized the all important point that Christ made us not primarily for legal purposes but for a relationship with himself, to fold us into his Sonship, the ongoing relationship he has with the Father and the Spirit.

How does starting people off as separated from God jibe with “all things being created by Christ and for Christ, in whom all things exist and hold together” (Col. 1:16, 17)? Can any human being exist outside of the Being of God? No. We should take special note of Paul's sermon to PAGANS in Athens, “God is not far from each one of us. *For in Him we live and move and have our being*” (Acts 17: 28).

We are created in the image of God, and Jesus Christ is that image (Col. 1:15). Ergo we are all created in Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> When, by the fall, our created image was tarnished and dehumanized, God was intent on renewing his image in humankind. “And how could this be done save by the coming of the very image himself, our Savior Jesus Christ?” (Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*).

**5. It communicates that the Old Testament description of God curtained-off in the Holy of Holies is a better picture of God than Jesus Christ.** Is Jesus less holy than the Father? No! As the demons first recognize and as Simon Peter later confesses, Jesus Christ is “the Holy One.” Christ is God’s most direct and clear revelation of himself, and he therefore teaches us *even more* about God’s holiness than what we know from the Old Testament. That’s why we read the Old Testament through the spectacles of Jesus Christ, as Calvin states, instead of the other way around.

In Christ God proves that in his holiness he does not desire to be aloof from the fallen creatures he loves. God’s holiness is so intolerant of sin that it will not allow him to stay separate from sinners. His hatred for sin demands that he do something to address man’s alienation from God. His Holy Love is so fierce that he will not be satisfied until he, as a consuming fire against sin, purifies and heals the sinner. Thankfully, God’s holiness and his compassion have never been at odds. The Good News of the gospel is that we are loved, accepted and cleansed, not in spite of God’s holiness, but because of it!

**6. It stands in drastic conflict with orthodox Christology regarding the two natures of Christ.** The Church Fathers who formulated the creeds were adamant in insisting that God the Son assumed a sinful human nature in the incarnation.<sup>4</sup> To them, the incarnation itself exploded any so called separation of divinity and impurity. Against the Nestorian heresy, the Church in the year 451 came down squarely on Biblical testimony that Jesus Christ is two natures but *one person*. The one person aspect is in critical view here, because it keeps us from saying Christ’s divine nature and sinful nature were just two hermetically sealed natures pasted together. Nestorianism was an effort to protect the purity of the divine nature of Christ by separating it out from the human nature. Instead of saying “the human nature of Christ became sin,” or “the human nature of Christ died,” we can say with more orthodox correctness that God became sin, and God died. We must recognize that when we say Jesus Christ is 100% God and 100% man, we do not mean that he is made up of two 100%’s glued together; we mean that he is wholly a man “like us in every way” and at the same time wholly God. “Amazing Love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, wouldst die for me?”

**7. Related to the above, it causes us to keep God locked into an Aristotelian notion of impassibility.** To Aristotle, and to many Christians still today, God is the Unmoved Mover. God can’t change, God can’t become human, God can’t suffer, God can’t become sin, God can’t be crucified and numbered amongst the transgressors. God can’t go to hell.

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<sup>3</sup> Eph 2:10

<sup>4</sup>Against the idea that Christ assumed only a pre-fall, pristine, human nature, Irenaeus, Athanasius, the Cappadocians and Cyril of Alexandria all adopted some version of “the unassumed is the unhealed” to communicate that Christ assumed a flesh that needed healing, not merely one that did not need healing.

So when Jesus does those things he can't really be God – but he is! The gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified was foolishness to the Greeks because they couldn't get past their revered law of non-contradiction. Why do we fail to register the fact that when we say the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed we are testifying to the fact that God did things God is not "supposed to do?" Maybe because, thanks to the poison of modern day Christian Arianism, we think of the Son of God as slightly different from God; "God couldn't do those things, so he sent his Son to do them."

**8.It gives death and Hell more potency than the Trinity.** Because of the legal separation model, we are tempted to give Hell a promotion. In dualistic fashion we might be tempted to think that Hell is it's own realm, a kingdom outside of God's umbrella, a place of God-forsakenness where God cannot go. If separation from God is our consequence for sin, and Christ must pay that consequence, then we will be led to say that Jesus' words on the cross of "My God My God, why have you forsaken me" actually reflect Jesus losing his divinity. Death and Hell are allowed to force a division in the Trinity instead of being swallowed up and pulled inside out by God the Son. Only God can be everything that we are and still remain himself.

The resurrection demonstrates that God can comprehend the sin of the world and it's deathly consequences in himself and still rise victoriously over it. Light has always been the reality (God is light and in him is no darkness at all); it was first because God was first, before all things. The darkness came second and has always been parasitic to the Light and will not overcome it. Augustine's orthodox phrase *creation ex nihilo* means that nothing is uncreated and eternal except God.

Instead of Hell, then, dictating a separation of the Son from the Father, the death and resurrection of Christ proves that *nothing* can separate the Son from the Father, not even the incomprehensible darkness of the human condition experienced by the Son in his solidarity with us. Hell is unfathomably deep, God is deeper still. Can Hell separate God from God? No.

Because of this Trinitarian proof, we can be utterly convinced that nothing can separate US from the love of the Father in Christ Jesus our Lord.... "neither *death*, nor life, neither *angels nor demons*, neither the present nor the future, nor *any powers*, neither height nor depth nor *anything else in all creation*" (Rom. 8:38; italics mine).

**9.It presents verses about sin/separation without the context of belonging.** If separation as a word is used at all, it should be used relationally, not spatially. Unfortunately, I have rarely if ever seen this done when using the word. Instead, separation is almost always meant in evangelism to communicate that a person doesn't belong to God and starts off spatially separated from Him.

Interestingly, the Isaiah 59 verse often used in this vein, "Your sins have separated you from your God" connotes belonging – *your* God. In fact, isn't prior belonging what makes sin so bad? Sometimes we forget that Isaiah was speaking to people who still belonged to God; that is why he was speaking to them! Over and over again in the Old

Testament we have pictures of sinful rebellion *within* belonging: the adulteress is unfaithful to her faithful Husband, the sheep stray from their Shepherd.

In the New Testament, Ephesians is prime example of how, if we import the spatial connotations of the word separation, we stand to miss the meaning of the text. Ephesians 4:17-18 reads this way in the NIV: "...you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." Darkened in understanding, ignorance, hardening against - these things speak not of a truth that the unbelieving Gentiles are spatially separated from, but of a gospel reality which is present all around them and in which they exist. The tragic irony is that they are in it yet they are blind to it. They are estranged and alienated (words used more often in translating Ephesians) to a truth they belong to!

Paul proclaims to the Ephesians that Jesus Christ is the Head of all things in heaven and earth. The body of Christ is made up of those who, submitting to their Head, form a tangible expression of Christ, who is "the one who fills everything in every way." For, Paul says later in the letter, "He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe." Christ ascended to pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and where the Spirit is, Christ is!

Unbelievers' blindness is evident in the fact that they are thinking and acting as if Christ isn't there and as if he doesn't exist. As Peterson says in the Message, "they have lost touch with reality." Paul's teaching in Ephesians is reminiscent of Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom, when he says to Jew and Gentile alike, the Kingdom of God is near (not imminent in time, but immanent in the sense of close in proximity), the Kingdom of God is here, the Kingdom of God is in you (Lk 17:20-21), etc. The relational "separation" is from the unbeliever's side, not from God's side. Even though they have nothing to do with him, he has everything to do with them! Trying to get away from his claim upon their lives and refusing to define life by the Headship and Lordship of Jesus Christ is an exercise in futility and the path to self-destruction.

As Jesus warned over and over, it's the religious folks who are the most in danger of hell. They are like the older brother in the prodigal son story who, ironically, was close to the father spatially, but estranged relationally. They belong, but they think they brought themselves into belonging because of their faithfulness. Blinded by their own self-justification, the "older brothers" are the ones who Jesus warns - you've missed the point of grace; you don't really know me; you don't know my Father's heart; it grieves me when you pretend that you're justified by your badges of "faithfulness;" I refuse to accept a lie as truth; I refuse to know you on those terms (Matt. 7:21).

Hell can thus be described as separation relationally, as it appears to me in the Young Life statement of faith. But again note, it is virtually never described as such, i.e. within the context of belonging, in the typical YL proclamation. And again, I would emphasize that the concept of spatial separation vs. relational separation is not worth delineating with kids because it introduces more confusion than clarity. They often see it spatially



(and the bridge illustration is certainly a spatial reinforcer), even if you mean it relationally.

My wife had a wonderful experience of the Spirit at Young Lives camp last month. She appreciated how speaker Justine Conley was able to communicate about sin within the context of belonging. Justine said sin is saying “F--- you, God,” and then shared a surprising text, “The proof of God’s amazing love is this, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). Justine told the young moms something like this, “When your baby messes himself, you say, ‘You STINK.’ But then you say, ‘You’re my sweet stinking baby,’ and you do whatever it takes to clean your baby up like a loving mom does.”

As proclaimers of the gospel, we strive to give kids accurate pictures of who God is and what he thinks of us. In my messages I know I’ve given many less than good pictures of God; like all speakers I was trying to give the best picture I could at the time. And the Spirit moved, like he is prone to do at Young Life camp. Yet, even as good and beautiful as Justine’s analogy is in my opinion, it is only that - an analogy to the even more amazing reality of the gospel of Christ! When humanity said “F you, God,” God gave us a bath at a great cost to himself. He didn’t wait for us to stop messing, he didn’t wait for us to realize the damage we were causing, he didn’t wait for us to say we were sorry, he didn’t wait for us to clean up our act. Instead he said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

We say “F you” and God continually says “I love you.” No good father loves his child *only if* his son or daughter loves him. The faithfulness of God means one may resist and grieve the Spirit and act as if one doesn’t belong to Christ, but the higher claim remains; on the other hand, there is heavenly joy and transformation for those who celebrate the faithfulness of God, crying “Abba, Father.”

**10.It causes us to think that the atonement occurs on night five at camp instead of 2,000 years ago.** In Ephesians 2:12 Paul describes how the Gentiles formerly lived in ignorance, oblivious to God and without enjoying the special relationship God had with Israel. Even if one wanted to view this “separation” spatially more than relationally, the “But now” of the next verse emphasizes that any former separation no longer exists. “But now in Christ Jesus you who were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” If there was ever a doubt, the sin/separation problem was solved in the work of Christ 2,000 years ago. The at-one-ment between God and man is a done deal.

What about our part? The Jeff-event of my decision for Christ is always rooted in the prior claim and prior belonging established by the Christ-event; it is, by the Holy Spirit, my subjective participation in an objective truth. We want [to say to]<sup>5</sup> kids to experience the salvation of Jesus Christ in a very profound way during the 20 Minutes, for example. But do we want them to think they were separated from God before the 20 Minutes and connected after it? Do we want their existential decision for Christ to carry that much freighted meaning? Wouldn’t it be better to tell them how excited we are that they are

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<sup>5</sup> typo

experiencing the reality of Christ by the Holy Spirit, discovering their rootedness in Christ, and coming to a transforming knowledge of the truth? What a platform for discipleship, communicating that God has *always* been more committed to us than we could ever be to him! We can say, “hey, let’s go home and walk in the light together.”

**11. It’s light on sin.** Instead of being bankrupt, lame, enslaved and unable to move towards God, a sinner in the separation paradigm is able to “walk” over the separation chasm’s bridge (the cross) through the step of appropriation. Can a person make any decision for Christ apart from Christ’s enabling presence? No. Thus a tragic flaw is exposed in the legal separation paradigm. We are asked to respond while we are dead in our sins! A dead man can’t accomplish anything.

When we tell kids that Christ paid the penalty so we wouldn’t have to die, we are actually telling them implicitly, “Ok, now that you don’t have to die, DO SOMETHING!” *This view does not take our sin seriously enough.* Paul doesn’t tell us that Christ died so we wouldn’t have to, he says when Christ died we died, every single human being died with Christ (2 Cor. 5:14). And apart from Christ including us in his resurrection, we simply cannot respond. Within grace is a severe indictment against us, highlighting our inability to respond to God. God’s amazing grace is a saving grace because it is a *slaying and a recreating* grace. As Paul says to the Colossians: When you were dead in your trespasses and sins, God made you alive with Christ.

By refusing to allow our response to contribute to the truth of who Christ is and who we are in him, we are able to proclaim the same gospel to everyone. The gospel really is a declaration before it is an invitation. We don’t have to stop singing with our children the words of *Jesus Loves Me* - “little ones to him belong” – when they reach some elusive age of accountability, in order that they might then decide whether they belong to God! We may proclaim the same truth, therefore, to everyone and every kid everywhere and let the Spirit of Truth do his work. We leave the responses up to Him.

Nowhere is this more poignantly portrayed to me than in our Capernaum ministry,<sup>6</sup> which I think is an amazing gift to Young Life because of the way it causes us to think about this issue of declaring a pure gospel. Should we preach a different gospel to these kids because many of them do not appear to have the tools to cognitively understand and because many may be unable to take a step of appropriation? NO! It’s good news regardless of one’s response. In fact, I’ve come to realize that my greatest disability is my ability, because my ability leads me to believe I make it good news by clinching the deal with a response.

**12. It’s humanistic.** As a corollary to the above, the emphasis is on what I do instead of what Christ has done. Case in point, I ask Joe Christian if he is separated from God. He

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<sup>6</sup> Capernaum is Young Life’s ministry alongside of those with Intellectual Developmental Disabilities. Along with the 2007 Non-Negotiables of Young Life’s Gospel Proclamation document there was an accompanying (different) document for those working in Capernaum. For more on the importance of one gospel message for all persons, see my article “Sheep or Persons?: What Luke 15 Has to Say About Agency and Persons with Intellectual Disabilities,” <http://www.tftorance.org/journal-s03>.

says no. I say why not? He says because I accepted Christ into my life. The sad part about this is that the more co-redemptive aspects that are included in our step of appropriation, the less assurance we have of our salvation. Appropriation must always be couched as participation *within* a reality, not the creation *of* a reality. We have to continue to fight for ways to talk about appropriation in the right context, so as not to throw kids “back on themselves.”

**13.It promotes relativism.** The separation model leads me to believe that my reconciliation and connection to God is not true until I decide it is. I am separated from God before my decision, and connected to God after my decision for Christ. The great Reformation mantra of justification by faith is morphed into a grace-less I’m not justified until I have faith. To the extent that we believe we were justified by *our faith* we become religious and miss the scandal of grace. We must never define Justification by Faith outside of Justification by Grace (i.e. Justification by Christ).

John Stott says this poignantly:

It is vital to affirm that there is nothing meritorious about faith, and that, when we say that salvation is ‘by faith, not works,’ we are not substituting one kind of merit (‘faith’) for another (‘works’). Nor is salvation a sort of cooperative enterprise between God and us, in which he contributes the cross, and we contribute faith. No, grace is non-contributory, and faith is the opposite of self-regarding. The value of faith is not to be found in itself, but entirely and exclusively in its object, namely Jesus Christ and him crucified. To say ‘justification by faith alone’ is another way of saying ‘justification by Christ alone.’

**14.It can misrepresent the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion.** Many would say, “Wait, how dare you say my decision was all my doing, and that it was therefore humanistic. It was all God. His Spirit touched my heart and I was converted.” Yes, but does the Holy Spirit ever finish a work Christ hasn’t finished? No. The Holy Spirit always points to the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of Truth helps us to come to a knowledge of the truth – a truth that existed *before* we believed.

Another problem with this description is that it involves the Holy Spirit, he who is not less holy than the Father or the Son, *touching* our hearts. Yet for God the Spirit to touch the corrupt heart of a sinner involves an internal contradiction in a separation model which says a Holy God cannot touch sin.

**15.It goes against Jim Rayburn’s stated belief in the finished work of Christ.** Based on Romans 3:23-24 and 2 Corinthians 5:19, Rayburn shared the following at the 1957 Young Life Staff Conference:

I had heard of redemption all of my life and believed Jesus died for my sins. I had heard my father talk of redemption, but it had not rung the bell for me until I studied soteriology. Young Life is Christian dogma...Redemption – it has already benefited the whole human race, lost and saved, Christian and non-Christian, everyone, every single

one....Everything that can possibly be done about the sin problem has already been done by Jesus. He completely and perfectly cured the sin problem forever. There is never any more going to be done about it. Redemption is something that has happened. Everyone is redeemed!

Reconciliation: Every single person in the whole wide world is now reconciled to God....it's been true for nearly two thousand years. I wonder what they [high school kids] would do if they knew it....God has reconciled us, all of us, it's already done.

Rayburn's comments prompt the question: if everyone is redeemed and reconciled to God, where is the separation?

**16. It causes us to smash the beautiful symmetry of sentences Romans 3:23-24, Romans 5:18, Romans 6:23, Romans 11:32 and others.** By splitting these verses at the comma, the paradigm of separation is presented as if the cross hasn't happened. Even after the cross talk, the other half of these verses are presented (if they are presented at all) as a future possibility instead of retrospectively as an accomplished actuality. Do we want to present that the first half of these verses apply as true for all and the second half of these verses apply as true for some? No, this would be an egregious expository error.

**17.It incites fear and puts a tremendous amount of psychological pressure on kids who naturally do not want to be in Hell.** This can only cause our hearers to run from a place (Hell) instead of to a Person; there is a static emphasis in the former and a dynamic emphasis to the latter. If kids run to a Person instead of away from a place, the place takes care of itself! But, on the contrary, there are many kids who have run away from Hell and try to convince themselves that they have a ticket to heaven, but they have absolutely missed the meaning of a dynamic love relationship with Jesus Christ.

First kids run away from Hell, then as disciples they run away from the God who seemed originally inclined to send them there. Martin Luther reminded us that those who are converted out of fear will learn to hate their conversion, but that those are converted out of love will learn to love their conversion.

We must continue to learn just how strong the connection is between evangelism and discipleship. Otherwise we may find ourselves enlisting converts without actually following the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).

**18.It hinders proper confession of sin.** It causes us to repent to the wrong "god" – a God who has to be conditioned to love us, forgive us, etc. A person cannot truly confess until he is given a safe place. Over and over again in the gospels, persons are embraced at their worst by God the Son. They repent because they have been given a safe place, not in order to get into a safe place. Yes, God's kindness leads us to repentance.

“A man cannot apply himself seriously to repentance,” said John Calvin, “without knowing he belongs to God. But no one is persuaded that he belongs to God unless he has first recognized God’s grace.”

Because we have to repent in order to get forgiveness in the legal separation model, it does not inspire assurance or an honest thoroughness of confession. Operating on the contractual level with God - i.e., if I repent I will be forgiven - causes us to grovel before God and scrounge up as much sincerity in our confessions as possible, but we often remain unsure as to whether we’ve met our end of the contract sufficiently to get us back into favor with God. It’s difficult to avoid becoming preoccupied about staying on the right side of the threshold, or staying in or out of God’s favor. The result is that we are less likely to walk further into the room of God’s unconditional love where we become less fearful of being exposed and where we can process our sinfulness with Christ and receive his truth in a transformational way.

Again, it’s worth re-emphasizing: *our trajectory for discipleship is set in evangelism.* Did we help our young disciples by telling them that God forgives us conditionally before our conversion, and that God changes after our conversion to play by the rules of mercy? On the contrary, we may have inadvertently poisoned them. We may have falsely communicated that Christ’s death *or* our appropriation of Christ’s death made God feel a way about us that he did not originally feel!

When kids screw up after they have made a decision for Christ, which picture of God is going to weigh more prominently in their minds? Answer: no matter what we tell them, it’s what’s been taught as the *original* disposition of God that often carries more weight. Sure, our young disciples are supposed to believe they are under “new rules” now, but those rules are an exception to the old rules, and an exception clause can’t carry the day when we really need to know where we stand with God.

**19.It plays grace off against truth.** In the separation paradigm the truth proclaimed is our separation from God because of our sin. Therefore the truth is related more to bad news than it is to good news, making grace secondary. Especially significant is that at this point in the camp week we give kids more time between messages, sometimes thirty plus hours, to “wrestle with the truth of their sin.” Instead, shouldn’t we give them the most time to wrestle with a higher truth than their sin - the Truth of Jesus Christ and his redemptive claim on their lives? Is grace an exception to truth? No! If we believe in a finished work we can say that grace is truth.

**20.It’s soft on justice.** Because it doesn’t emphasize a finished work, there is introduced by the legal separation model a very unjust element of double jeopardy. If the cross covers all sins for all times, past, present and future, how can there still be leftovers? Was the work of Christ impotent or ineffective? Is there still justice to be meted out?

Justice involves God taking what is wrong and making it right. God would not be satisfied until he had exacted full justice. Scripture tells us that *It is finished*; Christ *has* destroyed sin and death; he *has* overcome the world. We often don’t judge justice

correctly because we look around us and see so much that is still unjust. Certainly, we are very aware of our own sinfulness. But with the eyes of Faith we can define ultimate reality not by our surroundings but by the death and resurrection of our Lord. We can define ourselves not by what others think about us, and not even by what we think about ourselves, but by Jesus Christ. The knowledge of this Reality salubriously informs everything we do and endure on this side of the veil.

What will our final judgment be but when we stand at the foot of the cross and see ourselves implicated in Christ's death? How exposed will we be when God's wrathful justice, as it *has been* exercised against our sin, is fully revealed (Col. 3:6)? Yet only then will we know just how much God is for us, how much he really loves us, and what our adoption means in his resurrection life. Because of the Christ event, we can be sure that God's justice and wrath will continue to serve his love this side of the eschaton.

In preaching Jesus Christ, we can tell the magnificent story about how God's justice has always been intrinsically related to our deliverance by the Deliverer:

*Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight;*

*I will put my Spirit on him and he will proclaim justice to the nations.*

*He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.*

*A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,*

*till he leads justice to victory* (Matthew 12:18 - 20, from the prophecy of Isaiah 42:1-4)

**21.It's founded on a premise that is more about what we don't know than what we know.** In the legal separation model, the emphasis is exclusion over inclusion, which is tantamount to starting with Hell more than with Christ.

As someone once said, the truth of Christ is the truth for all, or it's not the truth at all. Faith is a faith *in* the truth, and it comes from hearing the word of truth by the Spirit of truth. We simply cannot know who ultimately does or doesn't *hear*. To start with Christ is to start with his robust claim on all men as Savior of the World, Savior of all persons, Lord of all, Creator and Redeemer, and with grace as truth. Then we can say with the Apostle, "Do not receive God's grace in vain!" (2 Cor. 6:1)

Why is this mindset so difficult for us? Largely because we can't understand how this could avoid universalism, and yet this fear is again rooted in a mindset of static categories. To be in the category as redeemed, justified, forgiven, etc is not the same as having a love relationship with the Redeemer, Justifier and Forgiver. Again, this love relationship comes in hearing, by the Spirit, God's word of truth, his whisper of unconditional and re-creating love for us which elicits a free response. I like Eugene Peterson's statement that we worship a God who "waits to be wanted."

To me, this perspective allows us to talk about Hell in a much more accurate way. We can start with "God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:3,4), and we can talk about our enemy, the Father of Lies, who wants us to live in ignorance. Let's be careful not to communicate that God

wants anyone to be in Hell,<sup>7</sup> while at the same time being careful to pay heed to the Bible's warnings about Hell and the serious and destructive consequences for those who insist on "denying the sovereign Lord who bought them" (2 Peter 2:1).

God can take care of his own reputation. I believe we are called to focus on the *Who* even if we don't understand the *how*. For instance, surely it is better to live with the question - How can one who belongs to God end up in Hell? – than to live with the dangerous idea that some belong to Jesus and some do not (even the goats of Matthew 25 belong to the shepherd!). Did Jesus die for some but not for others? Did Jesus decide from all eternity that he would create some folks and then send them to hell without a chance? Jesus said that when he was lifted up on the cross, he would draw every person to himself.<sup>8</sup> Let's not make the grave mistake of saying the first Adam has more extensive influence over the human race than the Second Adam,<sup>9</sup> or that the Creator Jesus Christ has more "coverage" than the Redeemer Jesus Christ.

**22. It's sounds as if the gospel is more concerned about the breaking of God's law than about God meeting us in our brokenness.** When Chesterton was asked what is wrong with the world, he said "I am." Who would argue with the fact that each one of us has not been faithful? Yet I am afraid that kids are hurting and broken so badly that they cannot understand this properly. Our interpretation of our own sin is skewed by our sinfulness. We're liable to 1) deflect blame 2) try to reform/put a good face on things (and then live a double life because we can't keep it up) or 3) live in self-condemnation. What terrible options!

With heavy emphasis in proclamation on kids being the perpetrators, we forget that more than ever they are feeling like victims. Do we want kids thinking: it's my fault my uncle raped me, my dad left us, my mom is a crack head, my step dad abused me, etc? To even insinuate this to kids and then to promptly tell them they are separated from God is an astonishing divergence from the incarnational gentleness we have always supremely valued as a Mission: "As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us."

If we adopt a different stance with these "bruised reeds," do we lose the chance to talk to them about sin with appropriate seriousness? No, Jesus didn't! Again, as the gospels reflect, we understand broken-ness best in the context of wholeness and hope. I'm not going to give up working on my old self until I am convinced I'm given a new one in Christ!

In the safe embrace of the Light we are enabled to freely confess and address our darkness. We are able to quit playing games with God, able to quit hating others and hating ourselves. As Henri Nouwen so eloquently reminds us, we must not speak of the

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<sup>7</sup> 2 Pet 3:9

<sup>8</sup> Jn 12:32

<sup>9</sup> Rom 5:18

curse outside of the blessing. To do so is only to play the game of the curse and so drive people deeper into it.

**23. It leads towards theological liberalism.** The rise of 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism stemmed from the Enlightenment view that man was really the center of the universe. In these circles, as God got pushed to the margins, so did the Biblical notion that Jesus was God. Jesus was often exalted as a great teacher of a wonderful body of truth, but in the liberal mind he was at best a leader amongst equals. Just like in the Arian controversy, the internal and eternal link between Jesus and God was lost. In the same way, the separation model gives man way too much autonomy. We are asked to see what Jesus did and said, and from an isolated standpoint make a decision about God. In other words, it says the truth of Jesus Christ doesn't necessarily have anything to do with us.<sup>10</sup>

So in the liberal tradition we've actually lost two critical links: the link between Jesus and God and the link between us and God. But, if Jesus is God, then everything links back up, and everything that happens to our Creator God has everything to do with everybody! The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the HIS-story of the human race! How exciting to see ourselves in his story instead of somehow adding him into ours.

In the same way that Pantheism collapses God into nature, the liberal New Age tendency is to collapse God into the human spirit. Ever since Plato's "know thyself," people have been tempted to look for the answers within themselves. Yet it is only by looking away from ourselves at Christ, that we find ourselves. By understanding who Christ really is we find ourselves *in him*. We can't know who we are until we know whose we are!

**24. It lapses into cheap grace and antinomianism.** Liberalism provides half-way solutions that are more about reform than transformation. The legal separation model, as we've said already, says God did something for us but not necessarily with us. Jesus becomes a bleeding heart who loves us with a syrupy love and accepts us as we are.[this sentence and the previous one look like they got switched around, making this pretty confusing!]<sup>11</sup> In the legal model, Jesus pays the penalty for our sin, but what he does doesn't really (directly) touch us.

In the incarnational model the Doctor becomes the patient in order to heal us. God's holiness is so intolerant of sin that he, as a consuming fire, embraces us at our worst in order to cleanse us and make us holy. We are recreated and given a new identity. We are not just given a righteous covering, we are made righteous through and through in Christ!

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<sup>10</sup> More clearly, the separation model mirrors liberal theology in the sense that the truth of Christ is external to us, for us to objectively consider. Christ's humanity is not a truth that all humans are already inside of, and implicated in, as in the incarnational model.

<sup>11</sup> More clearly, first, the liberal model provides us with a moral example of Jesus' sacrificial death and is meant to inspire us to do what Jesus would do. The legal separation model has Jesus' paying our penalty by dying *so that we don't have to die*. This is what I mean by it not touching us. Both of these models are relatively external to us as compared to the incarnational model, which again teaches that *when Jesus died, we died*, and when Jesus rose, we rose. Such solidarity marks the latter model as one of internal relations between Christ and every human as opposed to external relations.



Continuing to sin and just getting the commodity of forgiveness over and over is essentially sin management. It's about putting medicine-drops and band-aids on the old self instead of living out of whole new self.<sup>12</sup> If grace is understood as the overlooking of our sin and/or God letting us off the hook, it will breed disobedience and license.<sup>13</sup>

However, the beautiful irony of incarnational grace is that it catapults us towards good works in a way that cannot be met by focusing on the law (Eph 2:10). Because we are truly new creations in Christ, we may live a life of grateful obedience that is motivated by love, not obligation. In fact, the only way to fulfill the law of God is to, by the Holy Spirit, share in the righteous mind and heart of Jesus Christ. He perfectly obeyed the Father, not in order to get love, but because he was loved. Anything less is antinomian.

We simply don't do God's will, said Luther, until we *desire* to do God's will.

**25. It communicates that God is more a Legal Judge than he is a Father God.** Did God create us more for legal purposes than for filial? No. But sometimes we articulate the gospel in such legal ways that it would lead kids to believe God is pre-eminently concerned with obedience to the legal standard. Of course, this leads kids to ask all kinds of questions: Why would God give us a law he knew we couldn't keep and then send us to Hell for not keeping it? If I could perfectly obey the law, would God be satisfied? Did Jesus come to die for our sins only to return us to a state of legal purity? Even after Christ pays my penalty on the cross, God doesn't accept me unless I do something?

My friend Dr. Douglas Campbell calls the legal paradigm the Tale of Two Contracts. At the cross, Christ pays the consequences of our faithless breaking of the first contract. Then we are asked to enter into a second contract that we are just as unable to keep, i.e. *if* we have faith we will be justified and redeemed. Yet, if Jesus Christ is the author of faith, can faith be generated in isolation from him? No. Only by union with him! One cannot have faith in God except by participating in the ongoing faithfulness of Christ on his behalf. As the prophet spoke in anticipation of Christ, "The righteous shall live by his faithfulness" (Habakkuk 2:4).

Thankfully, Jesus did not come to fit into a legal system of contracts; in God's economy his relationship with humanity has always been about covenant. Even if we could perfectly obey the law, God would not be satisfied until we shared a deeper and higher purpose of existence, namely Trinitarian life as righteous sons and daughters of God. This is God's covenantal promise. We are created to be sons and daughters and are redeemed as such: "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, *Abba, Father*" (Gal 4:4-6).

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<sup>12</sup> Typo: "a whole new self"

<sup>13</sup> More clearly, the grace of the incarnational model doesn't let us off the hook, it crucifies us and recreates us with Christ. We are recreated, and *therefore* forgiven. Thus, we cannot merely claim forgiveness without acknowledging the claim made upon us! We are accountable to live as the new persons we've been recreated to be. Living against who Christ is and who we are in Christ is inherently self-destructive.

If we are sons and daughters of God through the faithfulness of Christ Jesus, why do we often interpret John 1:12 as a contractual agreement? Do we want kids to think that they have to meet a requirement to become beloved children of God? Or, if they receive Christ, they thereby adopt themselves into the Father's family?

We can only receive truth from *within* it, not as isolated from it. Jesus Christ is the Light of the World and from within the Light we live as children of Light. We cross over from death to life not in a spatial way, as if we change the truth about ourselves when we believe, but because we have already been given life. The scales fall off and we are enlightened as to what is already true; as the Psalmist says, "in your light we see light."

It is with this sense that Peterson translates John 1:12 in the Message Bible:

*But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves.*

After Paul preaches in Acts 17 that "in him we live and move and have our being," he goes on to say twice that we are all "God's offspring." And that *because* of this belonging, we are commanded to repent. What great news! As aforementioned, we are not commanded to repent in order to get into a safe place, but we repent because we are in a safe place. We are urged to participate while we can!

In *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning states: "repentance is not what we do in order to earn forgiveness; it is what we do because we have been forgiven. It serves as an expression of gratitude rather than as an effort to earn forgiveness. Thus the sequence of forgiveness and then repentance, rather than repentance and then forgiveness, is crucial for understanding the gospel of grace."

We are all God's children not simply because we are God's offspring, but centrally (and against liberal notions that stem simply from the Fatherhood of God) because we have been adopted in the Son Jesus Christ. In Young Life we live and minister in the name of Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost. One of the most thrilling things about this uncaged view of Jesus is the anticipation it gives one when he or she goes to the high school to do contact work. I can go into the realm of the most lost, furthest-out kids, knowing something that is true about them before they do. They are lost children of God; people can't be lost unless they have a home!

In the words of Henry<sup>14</sup> Nouwen, "If there is no father, we cannot be lost....Only in the light of goodness and forgiveness do we discover that we are lost....To say it very traditionally and in theological terms, *You only know that you're a sinner in the light of God's love. It's only in the light, in the fullness of the sun that you know there is a shadow.*"

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<sup>14</sup> Apologies to Henri!

## Conclusion

Jim Rayburn's Trinitarian/incarnational emphasis made him a maverick to more legal-minded Evangelicals of his day. He said the beginnings of Young Life came out of theology, "Christology and Soteriology." For Rayburn it all started with the question, Who is Jesus Christ and how do we relate to him in light of his finished work? Colossians 1 and John 1 were Scriptural pillars for Rayburn. Jesus Christ was the visible image of the invisible God; "God didn't write us a letter," Rayburn said, "He paid us a visit." Rayburn's *Trinitarian* emphasis contended that we could really trust the compassionate picture of God we see in Jesus Christ. In his *incarnational* emphasis he preached that we have a God who refused to be separate from us but who was Immanuel, God with us: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

I do not know how much Rayburn recognized the tension he lived in between his Trinitarian/incarnational model of praxis on one hand and the conventional legal separation model on the other. In ground-breaking fashion he promoted the importance of preaching to kids about the Person of Christ from the gospels, highlighting Jesus' company with and compassion toward sinners. In the fleshing out of this theology, he and subsequent Young Life leaders went to far reaches and questionable places to meet kids on their turf. Like Jesus, incarnational Young Life witnesses were thoroughly criticized for their close association with sinners.

Undeniably, Rayburn did resort to legal language when talking about the meaning of the cross at camp. Because of his desire to be thoroughly Christocentric, however, he was usually able to keep the talk about penal substitution *within* the overarching emphasis that Jesus is God and that God is *for* us. Against the penal view that describes Jesus as a third-party whipping boy, Rayburn preferred to couch the work of Christ in terms that kept Jesus as the subject more than as the object in the atonement. There was less risk that kids would get the wrong impression that Jesus and God were different or felt differently towards sinners.

Rayburn talked tirelessly to kids from day one at camp about *the Savior* and how He had lovingly laid down his life for them; Rayburn was not afraid to make the claim on every kid's life that he or she was bought with a price, "twice God's" by virtue of Creation and Redemption. And he was not afraid to let pagan kids sing songs all week long which declared they had been redeemed, loved, and forgiven by God. That was radical! Rayburn looked at every kid as redeemed and reconciled to God, and he treated them as if they were inside the blessing, not outside.

If our YL predecessors were able to use one model within the other, the gap today between these two models in our Young Life proclamation ministry has increasingly widened. This is especially true at camp, where instead of using the legal separation model within the Trinitarian/incarnational model, we use the incarnational model as a means to an end to get kids to a place where we can use the legal model. The emphasis is

on separation more than on nearness and with-ness, which brings us into even more direct contrast with our praxis, i.e. our incarnational practice “on the ground.”

By doing this, we’ve subtly become less Christ-centered in our proclamation ministry; the incarnational gospel stories on the Person of Christ mean less because they don’t relate as well to the dominant view that we are separated from God (again the incarnational presence of Christ is more a means to an end to get him to the cross); there is more talk about God and less talk about Jesus; we refuse to proclaim Christ’s Lordship over kid’s lives until they make a proper response to Christ; we are scared to “put words in kid’s mouths” that sing their belonging to Christ the Savior. Instead, we have often resorted to putting more emphasis on our sin and need in order to break kids down and make them squirm.

One of my friends who spoke at camp this past summer told me about a leader who was critical about my friend’s more incarnational proclamation style. Protested the leader, “I only had one kid broken and in tears after the sin talk.” In other words, without the separation language the talk lacked leverage; it didn’t have the oomph of displacement necessary to break kids down. Condemnation and fear are excellent short-term levers. Is that Young Life?

If we were a ministry first and foremost to churchy religious kids, it might be different. After all, Jesus was unquestionably scathing in his remarks to the religious types! But, as John Miller emphasizes in *Back to the Basics of Young Life*, Jesus never said a harsh word to “sinners.” Isn’t Young Life modeled after Jesus Christ as particularly illustrated in his relationships with the down and out? Don’t we believe that the fierce love of God is a better catalyst than condemnation and fear? Isn’t this what it means to “walk in wisdom toward those outside the faith?”

Miller says that Colossians 4:5 is “central to Young Life.” These words are “the embryo that formed Young Life.” Miller goes on to say that Jesus’ interaction in John 8 with the woman caught in adultery “demonstrates what walking in wisdom is all about.”

Interestingly, Jesus’ gentle encounter with the exposed woman comes right before his harshest diatribe against the religious guys. These religious guys were giving Jesus’ Father a bad name, allying themselves with the Father of Lies. In fact, they were hardening themselves so much into the lie that Jesus, with full shock value and hyperbole, said they would die in their sins as sons of the devil! To the adulterous woman, however, Jesus was the epitome of God’s kindness leading us to repentance. Says Miller in *Back to the Basics of Young Life*:

Jesus addressed the woman graciously, ignoring her sin. Not that he condones sin, but she was desperate for grace, love and acceptance. She had no need to be reminded of her sin. She was vividly and shamefully aware that her lifestyle was wrong....Our *actions and our words* should be as disarming to kids as Jesus’ *words and actions* were to this woman. He

simply asked, 'Where are they all – did no one condemn you?' And she said, 'No one, sir.' His reply, 'Neither do I.'"

Here is the very heart of the Christian faith; the very heart of His being in our world. The world does not know our God is a forgiving God. To this woman, to kids, to the whole non-Christian world, God is stern and full of vengeance. They think, 'because of my lifestyle He does not like me.' I believe, with all my heart, this sinful woman will be in heaven because Jesus did not conduct Himself in the way she expected. I'm convinced this led to a beautiful conversion and a refreshing new lifestyle.  
(italics mine)

Actions and words, words and actions: let's strive to keep the two together. In our praxis and our proclamation we can be like Jesus here, preaching in word and deed "You are forgiven, therefore repent."

I have never been so enthusiastic about our wonderful Mission and the exciting possibilities we have to share the good news with all kinds of kids. I am constantly unpacking the loaded statement of my friend Dr. Ray Anderson: "I have long thought," said Anderson, "that Young Life discovered a praxis theology of evangelism without really working through the basic foundations for it."

Yes, emphasis on the Trinitarian/incarnational model actually aligns us more closely to Church Fathers Athanasius and Irenaeus than it does to the later theologians who formulated penal substitution. Some may not want to make adjustments to the current course. I hope we can start having more profitable discussions as we hoe the rich bed of the Scriptures together, and I hope we can love each other well in the process.

If we hold on to penal substitution, let's be very careful how we do it. And if we dare to move even farther toward bringing congruity to what we say and what we do, to me that would be even more exciting. I understand that a move as a Mission could only be done if we were convinced the Trinitarian/incarnational model was more evangelical and more Christ-centered. Young Life has led the way before, and now Young Life has the opportunity to lead the way again. We could then be able to say our praxis is our proclamation and our proclamation is our praxis! It's all about Jesus Christ.

Maybe that's why my heart was singing as I listened to Bill Paige's message on the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan basically said to the needy man, "You need me; I care; I'm going to help you without your permission, because you're too broken even to cry out to me; I'm going to get involved; I'm going to enter in to your condition; I'm going to carry you to safety and wash you clean. If you want to curse me later, you can. If you want to refuse to appreciate me, because you think you probably would've been ok without my help, you can. If you want to thank me and live a life of gratefulness by helping others, you can. But no matter what, I'm with you in spirit and I'll be back to see you face to face."

All of us, every staff person, every volunteer leader, every kid everywhere, is in this story. The question is not whether Jesus is the Good Samaritan or whether we are the helpless man. The question is – are we ready to see Jesus and ourselves as such? Because we can't make a proper assessment of our condition "from below," we need to define our lives through Jesus Christ. The more we see Jesus Christ as The Good Samaritan, the one who carried our infirmities and our diseases, the more we will see ourselves and others as the needy man, the needy men and woman who have been redeemed. Thus we proclaim and yearn for our young friends - every kid, everywhere, for eternity – to know and sing with us "I know my Redeemer lives!"<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> "every kid, everywhere, for eternity" was a Young Life slogan at the time