

Laying the Foundations

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Anyone who knows me well will tell you that I like a challenge. If you say something is impossible, I can't resist having a go! But here's one challenge that I find particularly tough: "Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus". These are Paul's words from Philippians 2:5. In our youth ministry, we are called to imitate Christ, to be like Christ. I don't know about you but, at first glance, that fills me with dread rather than encouragement! It seems like I am being set up to fail – there is no way I can possibly achieve that.

But wait a minute. What if Paul is right? What if there really is a way to have a truly Christlike ministry? What would it look like?

Over the next few months, we will be exploring what it means for us to minister in a way that imitates Jesus. Each month, we will look at one key event in his life – incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and second coming. Using these, we will develop a picture of what a truly Christlike youth ministry looks like.

This month, however, I want to set the foundations for our series by suggesting that a Christlike ministry has two primary features. First, it is based in a biblical understanding of Jesus. Second, it is culturally relevant.

Who do you say I am?

Are we allowed a favourite passage in the Bible? If so, I want to nominate Mark 8:27-30 as one of my top three. I'm sure that you are familiar with it. Jesus and his disciples are coming to Caesarea Philippi. What an incredible place! In the olden days, it had been a focus of Ba'al worship. There was also a cavern in the hills where, it was said, the Greek god Pan was born. At the top of the hill, there was a temple dedicated to Caesar worship. Quite deliberately, against this background of pluralist religious belief, Jesus asks his disciples: 'What about you? Who do you say I am?' In the midst of this pagan environment, Jesus poses the ultimate question.

'What about you? Who do you say that I am?' That is the question that Jesus asks everyone who encounters him. Nowadays, young people are confronted with many different ways to respond. There are so many different ideas about Jesus. Christian ideas; Islamic portrayals; Jesus the political liberator; Jesus as a Hindu expression of God; Jesus the champion of feminism; Jesus the gay icon. The nature of our pluralistic, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-interest society is such that it is possible to make one of any number of responses to the question of who Jesus is. But as Christians, we want the young people we work with to answer with Peter, 'You are the Messiah.' Our desire is to introduce them to the Jesus who is the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

But if we want young people to respond to the truth of who Christ is, we must have a good understanding of Jesus that underpins our own ministry. Why? Because the words and actions of Christ are the words and actions of God himself. If we misunderstand Christ, we misunderstand God. We are called to teach Christ. When we teach young people to pray, we help them build a relationship with God the Father through Jesus Christ. When we disciple them in the ways of holiness, it is union with Christ that is developed. Baptism, the Eucharist, spiritual gifts, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation – all these and more reflect Christ to others.

A scriptural framework

There are many influences on how we develop our understanding of Jesus; the ideas of others, media portrayals, fictional and non-fictional books, sermons, artistic interpretations, non-Christian doctrines and so on. However, the primary source must be the Scriptures. There are three reasons for this.

First, Scripture provides the *context* for Jesus. His life is the pivotal point. The Old Testament era builds up to Jesus. The New Testament era is founded on Jesus. The story of Scripture is his context and we cannot fully understand him outside of that.

Marcion, in the 2nd-century, believed that the god of the Old Testament was a different god from the one portrayed in the New Testament. The Old Testament god was one of anger and wrath. The New Testament god was one of love, mercy and forgiveness. He therefore abandoned the Old Testament and used just the New Testament. I wonder if there is a hint of Marcion in our youth ministry? There is a real temptation for us to avoid the 'difficult bits' with young people. We are far happier teaching about the love of Jesus than an obscure part of Leviticus or Kings or Chronicles. We are more comfortable in using the parables than Old Testament stories of pillage and genocide.

If we avoid the tough passages in the Old Testament, it becomes difficult to develop a balanced notion of Jesus that takes seriously the wrath of God, the power of sin, the need for obedience and the reality of judgement.

God tasked Israel to be 'a light to the nations.' As Christians, we are tasked by God to be 'lights to the world.' Through Jesus Christ, God has a plan of salvation that embraces every social grouping on earth. The New Testament is the story of the impact of Christ in action. If we separate Christology from the New Testament, there is no story worth believing.

Our understanding of Jesus cannot be separated from the New Testament because it reveals the plan that God has for universal salvation.

In short then, the Old Testament helps us have a holistic view of Christ and the New Testament helps us see the impact of Christ.

Second, Scripture provides the *content* of our understanding about Jesus. Quite simply, what we know about Jesus is found in Scripture; a particular man in a particular place who did particular things. Christianity is not about abstract ideas. It is about a person named Jesus. When we are discipling others, we are not teaching them ideas. We are introducing them to a person: Jesus of Nazareth. The history of the early Church suggests that the biblical portrayal of Jesus is accurate. The way in which the church grew, the way in which lives were changed, the courageous witness of the first Christian martyrs all testify to the fact that everything we have read about Jesus is true. He really is that remarkable man whose life is outlined in the Gospels.

Third, Scripture affirms the *continuity* of our understanding about Jesus. The New Testament writers might use different phrases than Jesus did, but they teach the same thing. For example, Jesus believed that he had a relationship with God that could be expressed in the phrase 'Abba, Father' (Mk. 14:36) so the New

Testament writers call him 'the Son of God' (e.g. Rom. 1:3; Heb. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:17; 1 Jn. 1:3). Jesus created a community of disciples and believers (Mk. 1:16-20, 3:13-18) so Paul calls him Head and Lord of the Church (Col. 1:18). We could look at other examples. But what is clear is that there is continuity between what Jesus thought about himself and how the New Testament writers portrayed his ministry.

Professor C.F.D. Moule in his book, *The Origin of Christology*, likened this process to biology. There is *evolution*, in which new species mutate from existing species (a monkey becomes a human), and *development*, in which a species changes within itself (a small dog becomes a big dog). In the Bible, we see a *developing* understanding about Jesus, not an *evolving* understanding.

This idea of continuity is important because it reinforces the fact that we have a *relationship* with Jesus, not a *changing idea* about Jesus. In youth ministry, we are leading people into a loving relationship that will grow – *develop* – as the years go by. We are not teaching them a series of ideas that will change – *evolve* – as they learn more about God.

The Bible gives reliable context, content and continuity for our understanding about Jesus. Without that, the young people we serve will be like boats tossed around by the waves of life, rudderless and with no anchor to hold them firm.

A cultural framework

A scriptural framework is only half the story. The question of effective Christian youth ministry is this: How do we get from stories written 2000 years ago about a Middle-Eastern man to something that makes sense in 21st-century Western society? Our task in youth ministry is to interpret Christ for today. We must be faithful to the Gospels – but we must also be flexible enough to interact with the culture in which we minister.

In the 1950s, Richard Niebuhr wrote a book called, *Christ and Culture*. His idea was that there are five ways that we can present Jesus in the culture where we minister. Let's relate this to your youth ministry...

1. Christ against culture

The young people you work with are lost. The way they live and behave is not compatible with the Gospel. Your task, as a youth minister, is to convert them, get them out of their culture and bring them into the Church.

Example: The young people take soft drugs, smoke tobacco and binge drink at the weekends. Your ministry is to introduce them to Jesus so that they no longer behave in this way and find a home in the Body of Christ.

2. Christ and culture in paradox

There is both good and bad in the culture of the young people you work with. Some of the things they do are compatible with the Gospel. Some of things they do are not. Your task, as a youth minister, is to work with them whilst accepting this paradox.

Example: The young people take soft drugs. That is not good and should be challenged. However, they are very loyal to each other and forge deep friendships. That is very positive and to be celebrated.

3. Christ transforming culture

The culture of the young people you work with needs changing by Christ. However, they don't need to leave their culture. Your task, as a youth minister, is to 'bring' Christ into that culture.

Example: The young people take soft drugs and that needs to change. If you are able to bring the leaders of that group to Christ, they will then be able to influence the others into a more positive lifestyle.

4. Christ above culture

Christ is already at work amongst the young people you work with. Your task, as a youth minister, is to help them recognise God in their midst and help them develop beyond where they are already at to a deeper reliance on God.

Example: The young people have strong friendships and are very loyal. That depth of love is a reflection of God at work. If they can learn to see that, their love will deepen even more and they will grow in godliness.

5. Christ the fulfiller of culture

Christ is already there amongst the young people you work with. Your task, as youth minister, is to celebrate all that they are and all that they do as 'God-at-work'.

Example: The deep friendships the young people enjoy are to be celebrated and used as the foundation for teaching them about Jesus. He is the source of their friendships, after all!

As we think about these five approaches, it is obvious that we need to use all of them, at different times, with the same group of young people.

During my time as a minister in the East End of London, there was one group of street kids who I worked alongside. They used drugs a lot. For the first few months, I never criticised this. Eventually, when I felt more secure in my relationships, I presented them with Christ standing against it. I quickly supplemented that with Christ above their culture, encouraging them to find the good within their group – loyalty to each other, laughter, friendship, and so on. From that, we were able to have conversations that explored the Christ and culture in paradox type; the tension between their behaviour and the values of the Kingdom of God. I would like to end by saying that the young people all became Christians and renounced their former lifestyles. Sadly, I cannot do so! But one of the boys did recognise that a change was needed. He got off drugs and became a youth worker. He now works the same streets I did and has a powerful ministry amongst the young

people who have come after him. His story, I believe, is a wonderful example of the Christ who transforms culture.

A Christlike ministry for today

Those of us in Christian youth ministry are called to missionary work. But the work of a missionary is never just to plant our idea of who Christ is into an alien culture. There must always be interaction between the Bible and the cultural setting. We must create a suitable balance between 'Christ' and 'culture'. We must model a Christ who is relevant in a multi-cultural, multi-faith environment. We must model a Christ who speaks powerfully within our cultural settings.

Given the fact that youth culture changes so quickly, the approach we use this week may be different from the approach we use next week. We may need to speak of Christ as Brother and Friend today but as Judge tomorrow. We may need to stress the forgiving love of Jesus this week but draw attention to his Lordship over a believer's life next week. When a young person is doing drugs in our church porch, Christ will stand against that culture. When that young person seeks drug rehabilitation, Christ will transform that culture. When that young person sets up a drug rehabilitation service for other addicts in the neighbourhood, Christ is the fulfiller of that culture.

What does a Christlike ministry look like? First and foremost, it is a prophetic ministry. We are called to be prophets, preparing the way for Christ. In doing that, we need to develop an understanding of Jesus that will be flexible enough to discern the need and recognise the movement of God; an understanding that is both loyal to Scripture and culturally relevant.

Our task is awesome. We recognise the difficulties that arise from working with young people today. But we move out to minister in the power of the greatest promise of all: 'I will be with you always, to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20).

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