

“Teenagers scare me.”

A recent comic that runs under the name *Bizarro* by author Dan Piraro effectively illustrates several truths about postmodern youth and our perceptions of them.¹ The comic is intended to be humorous (and it is), but beneath the humor we can see several things. The first sentence the woman on the right says is “Teenagers scare me.” While all generations differ from the generation



before their own, there is something fundamentally different about postmodern youth that is easily discernable and somewhat disconcerting to older generations. The current generation of teenagers is the first one to be raised entirely in a postmodern culture. The Baby Boomers and their predecessors were all raised in modernity and so, although the generations differed from one another, they were all immersed in the same modern worldview. Today’s teenagers are no longer moderns; they are postmodern to the core. This is disconcerting to modern generations because postmodernity is essentially a rebuttal of most of the ideals of modernity.² Fear of teenagers most likely stems from a lack of understanding. Teenagers just don’t “make sense” to older generations.

The woman then says, “Unless they’re working at computer stores – then they’re gods.” Postmodern youth are part of the first truly electronic culture and this is one of the characteristics that defines them and sets them apart from previous generations. I turn now to examine in detail

¹ Piraro, Dan. "Bizarro." Cartoon. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. 19 Mar. 2007. 19 Mar. 2007 <<http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/fun/Bizarro.asp?date=20070319>>.

² Brian McLaren explains these rebuttals in detail in chapter four of his book *A New Kind of Christian*. He gives seven general categories in which significant changes are occurring: new communication technology; new scientific worldview; new intellectual elite; new transportation technologies; decay of old economic system; new military technology; and new attack on dominant authorities. McLaren, Brian. *A New Kind of Christian*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. 28-32.

four characteristics of postmodern youth, loosely adapted from Jimmy Long's categories presented in his book Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations.³ My thesis is that knowledge and understanding will eventually lead to a better model of ministry to and with postmodern youth.

Four Characteristics of Postmodern Youth

This generation of youth is a force to be reckoned with. At 32 million strong, there are more youth in this generation than ever before.⁴ In many respects, this generation is fundamentally different than previous generations of youth, and so our understanding of them is vital if we are to develop a relevant model of youth ministry. Jimmy Long, who belongs to the earlier Baby Boomer generation, says “members of my generation will have to leave our comfort zone and devote ourselves to understanding and appreciating these first postmodern generations.”⁵ If we fail to come to an understanding of postmodern youth, we will end up like the woman in the comic strip who has a limited understanding that ultimately leads to unnecessary confusion and fear. It is important to understand that youth are not taught *how* to be postmodern; it is simply the worldview in which they are continually immersed.

1. Subjective Truth

One of the hallmarks of modernity was a belief that human reason would eventually lead to an objective truth about reality. Postmoderns no longer believe this to be true. Jimmy Long writes: “Instead of human reason that leads to truth, postmodernism posits multiple truths that

³ Long, Jimmy. Emerging Hope: A Strategy for Reaching Postmodern Generations. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004. 84.

⁴ Frontline: The Merchants of Cool. Dir. Barak Goodman. 2001. PBS. 27 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/view/>>.

⁵ Long, 54.

lead only to preferences.”⁶ This is subjective truth. What is “true” for me is just that – true for *me*. Truth is no longer seen as an objective reality but rather a personal preference. One of the ways that subjective truth manifests itself in youth culture is consumerism, which at its core is about having a multitude of choices. Kenda Creasy Dean notes that “youth orient themselves toward a culture’s peculiar seductions, and align their desires with the most powerful force that seems to desire them.”⁷ A fascinating PBS documentary called “The Merchants of Cool” makes the argument that large companies are the most powerful force that seeks the affection of youth.

There are five major companies in the United States competing for the affection of youth and these five companies are responsible for selling nearly all of youth culture.⁸ Each company sells countless different products – music, movies, clothing, internet access, books, etc. – and youth are bombarded with advertisements promoting the whole host of choices they have as to which product best suits their personal preference. The numbers are dizzying: “A typical American teenager will process over three thousand discreet advertisements in a single day, and ten million by the time they are eighteen.”⁹ Because of their large size and relative wealth, youth are the prized target of market researchers seeking to cash in on postmodern youth’s insatiable appetite for choices.

They [companies] look at the teen market as part of this massive empire that they’re colonizing. You should look at it like the British Empire or the French Empire in the nineteenth century. Teens are like Africa. That’s [the market]... that they’re going to take over. And their weaponry are films, music, books, CDs, internet access, clothing, amusement parks, [and] sports teams.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁷ Dean, Kenda Creasy. Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church. City: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.

⁸ Frontline: The Merchants of Cool. The five companies are News Corp., Disney, Viacom, Universal Vivendi, and AOL Time Warner.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In addition, market researchers recognize the temporal nature of “cool”. It is constantly changing, which only leads to a perpetuation of more and more product choices. This perpetual change reinforces the idea of subjective truth in postmodern youth. “The state of continual change that characterizes the postmodern era should be expected if we actually are in a major transition... A time of transition entails confusion, differences of opinion and uncertainty, not stability.”¹¹ The PBS *Frontline* documentary spends a fair amount of time looking at the research methods of MTV and their constant struggle to stay “cool”, and Jimmy Long believes this has a profound effect on postmodern youth: “MTV is an excellent example of deconstruction. The images in any given video are constantly changing and redefining reality. Taken together, the images suggest that there is no objective reality, only preferences.”¹²

2. Community

Many people point to the television show “Friends” as an example of the postmodern view of community. The fictional sitcom serves as a representation of the reality of the postmodern ethos, in which “the community decides what is true.”¹³ The late postmodern evangelical theologian Stanley Grenz says,

Postmoderns live in self-contained social groups, each of which has its own language, beliefs, and values. As a result, postmodern relativistic pluralism seeks to give place to the ‘local’ nature of truth. Beliefs are held to be true within the context of the communities that espouse them.¹⁴

These local communities are in contrast to the nationalism that was prevalent in previous generations, and are often referred to as “tribes”. “Tribalism is the bonding together of like-minded people for protection from the rest of society. These groups are a means of survival in a

¹¹ Long, 72.

¹² Ibid., 74.

¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴ Grenz, Stanley J. [A Primer on Postmodernism](#). Wm. B. Eerdmans Company, 1996.

drifting culture.”¹⁵ Many factors, including the lack of any national consensus have created a culture of homeless people constantly seeking a place to belong, leading to the creation of and participation in these tribes.¹⁶ The brief feeling of nationalism in the wake of 9/11 was by all accounts an anomaly, and its brief lifespan is a testament to the actual sentiment of the nation – retribalization.

Shane Higgs, a former strategic advertising planner turned pastor and theologian, recognizes the communal nature of postmoderns but is quick to provide a caveat: “Despite the retribalizing force of electronic media, our culture remains highly individualistic.”¹⁷ He refers to this phenomenon as a “tribe of individuals” in which “people are pulled in two directions at the same time.”¹⁸ This, I would argue, is partly a result of the consumerism mentioned earlier. Postmodern youth are given many choices and are thus able to define themselves as individuals based on their personal preferences. These individuals then band together to form tribes, wherein they find their sense of belonging in a local context.

3. Virtual Reality & Electronic Culture

This is the characteristic of postmodern youth to which the woman in the comic alluded. Postmodern youth are the first generation that have lived their entire lives in an electronic culture. Movies, television, and the internet have all made it more difficult for postmodern youth to answer the question “What is reality?” because these forms of media create a kind of virtual reality that can feel just as real as actual reality. To put into perspective the amount of time an average youth spends in virtual reality, consider these statistics: “Seventy five percent of teens

¹⁵ Long, 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁷ Higgs, Shane. *The Hidden Power of Electronic Culture: How Media Shapes Faith, the Gospel, and Church.* Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2006. 108.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

have a television in their room. A third have their own personal computer, where they spend an average of two hours a day online.”¹⁹ Spending so much time in virtual reality has significant effects on postmodern youth.

It is more difficult in virtual reality to distinguish between what is true and what is untrue – in other words, it is difficult to “keep the facts straight.” The increase in the number of information sources, especially on the internet, makes postmodern youth more likely to mix fact and fiction.²⁰ Virtual reality, on the other hand, may also provide *too much* information, overstimulating youth while creating a world for them that is more holistic. Television is a good example of this trend. “It [television] presents a multitude of images that are readily detached from their reference to reality, images that circulate and interact in a ceaseless, centerless flow.”²¹ Shane Hipps argues that this is a result of the rise in image-based forms of media in postmodernity. “The rise of image-based communication in our culture,” he says, “weakened our preference for the abstract and linear thought patterns in favor of more concrete, holistic, and nonlinear approaches to the world.” Postmodern youth have a preference for image-based forms of communication and because of the amount of time they spend in virtual reality, their view of the world is much larger and more holistic than ever before.

4. *Micronarratives*

Perhaps the most defining characteristic of modernity was the belief in a metanarrative, or “an overarching story or truth that organizes and makes sense of all other truths.”²² There was a sense in the modern era that humanity was moving toward a unified goal – a goal that I once

¹⁹ Frontline: The Merchants of Cool. This documentary was first aired in 2001, which means these numbers are somewhat outdated. However, it is more than reasonable to assume that the numbers have only increased since then, making these figures even more alarming.

²⁰ Long, 78.

²¹ Grenz, 35.

²² Hipps, 68.

heard “died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz”. This has left us with many “micronarratives” instead of one overarching metanarrative. “Members of the emerging generation,” says Stanley Grenz,

are no longer confident that humanity will be able to solve the world’s great problems or even that their economic situation will surpass that of their parents. They view life on earth as fragile and believe that the continued existence of humankind is dependent on a new attitude of cooperation rather than conquest.²³

The fall of the metanarrative has left postmodern youth searching for a way to create meaning. Again, although there was a short-lived unity after 9/11, it “quickly reverted to numerous micronarratives based on societal cynicism. This cynicism leaves people desperately looking for something to give them meaning.”²⁴ Postmodern youth are searching for a way to organize all of the information they take in; they are trying to make sense of a fragmented world.

Youth Ministry and Theology

Now that we have examined these four aspects of postmodern youth, it is time to shift our attention towards how to minister to this unique generation. Youth ministry, like all other ministries, is bound to fail if it is not supported with theology. As a specific ecclesial enterprise, youth ministry is very new if viewed in the context of the two millennia of church history. It is however, a valid ecclesial enterprise, and thus requires a valid theology – which many think has been missing from youth ministry for some time. Tony Jones, the author of Postmodern Youth Ministry says, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, “too often we have focused on the simplicity of the message [in youth ministry] and left the theology for the adult education pastors.”²⁵ Kenda Cready Dean, associate professor of Youth, Church, and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary agrees. She says we must “shift youth ministry’s emphasis away from

²³ Grenz, 7.

²⁴ Long, 79.

²⁵ Jones, Tony. Postmodern Youth Ministry. Zondervan/Youth Specialties, 2001.

sociology, psychology, anthropology, educational theory – not to mention car washes and lock-ins – towards theology.”²⁶ It is no secret that youth ministry has tended toward program-heavy curriculum. As a result, we’re not engaging in meaningful theological reflection with or about postmodern youth. The message of the gospel is unchanging; it is the *medium* with which we must grapple if we are to prepare postmodern youth to be faithful members of the Kingdom of God. Enter the emerging church movement.

The Emerging Church Movement and a Theology for Postmodern Youth Ministry

The emerging church is a relatively new movement in ecclesiology that challenges traditional evangelical ecclesiology, yet it is also a movement that defies definition.²⁷ It manifests itself differently across the globe, but there are, Scot McKnight suggests, commonalities in the movement which he calls “streams” that flow into “Lake Emerging.” McKnight, professor of Religious Studies at North Park University and outspoken proponent of the emerging church, contends that there are five streams.²⁸ The streams are the Prophetic/Provocative, Postmodern, Praxis-oriented, Post-evangelical, and Political.²⁹ Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger published the first in-depth analysis of emerging churches in 2005 and devised this definition: “Emerging churches are communities that practice the way of Jesus within postmodern cultures.” To buttress that ambiguous definition, they then identify nine common practices found in emerging churches:

²⁶ Dean, 21.

²⁷ Andrew Jones, a prominent blogger and member of the emerging church conversation, has said, “It may be of some console for you to know that no one else has succeeded in defining it [the emerging church], and some of us have been at it a long time. Maybe that is OK. People in the emerging culture do not really want or need such a definition. And some of us are hesitant to give one, because behind the practices and models of emerging church, lies a radically different mindset, value system and worldview.”
<http://tallskinnykiwi.typepad.com/tallskinnykiwi/2004/02/emerging_church.html>.

²⁸ Scot McKnight maintains what is perhaps the most popular blog in the emerging conversation at <http://www.jesuscreed.org>.

²⁹ McKnight, Scot. “Five Streams of the Emerging Church.” Christianity Today 19 Jan. 2007. 20 Jan. 2007
<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/40534>>.

Emerging churches (1) identify with the life of Jesus, (2) transform the secular realm, and (3) live highly communal lives. Because of these three activities, they (4) welcome the stranger, (5) serve with generosity, (6) participate as producers, (7) create as created beings, (8) lead as a body, and (9) take part in spiritual activities.

It is my belief that the emerging church provides the best framework for formulating a theology for postmodern youth ministry. In order to construct a theology with postmodern youth in mind, it is necessary to look to theology that is itself postmodern, and theology from the emerging church is just that. One of the streams flowing into Lake Emerging, McKnight says, is the postmodern stream. This, he says, “is conscious, it is intentional, and it is desirable.”³⁰ We are in a new era, and our theology must reflect our new context. Stanly Grenz explains,

We dare not fall into the trap of wistfully longing for a return to the early modernity that gave evangelicalism its birth, for we are called to minister not to the past but to the contemporary context, and our contemporary context is influenced by postmodern ideas.³¹

There are streams of theology in the emerging church that converse with each of the four characteristics of postmodern youth outlined before and provide a way for formulating a theology of youth ministry. I would like to add that while my examination focuses on youth ministry in the United States, it should be noted that many of the ideas here can be applied globally, and many have.

1. Subjective Truth: Incarnational Theology

The church has been significantly affected by consumer culture, especially in the last few decades. The church markets itself as one of many choices for consumers. In an attempt to remain relevant, the church has donned the apparel of the culture. I recently attended a very large

³⁰ McKnight, Scot. "What is the Emerging Church?" Fall Contemporary Issues Conference. Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. 26 Oct. 2006. 30 Oct. 2006 <<http://www.foolishsage.com/2006/10/29/scot-mcknights-full-text-of-what-is-the-emerging-church-available-here/>>. 14.

³¹ Grenz, 10.

national youth conference where a nationally known Christian rock band performed an extravagant show every morning and evening complete with lighting effects and video clips. Although the intent was for youth to engage in worship, an unknowing bystander might have assumed that it was just another rock concert. That's what kids want, right? Perhaps not, says Shane Hipps:

The modern church learned that if you put on a great show with a talented, high-energy motivational speaker and an outstanding band playing compelling music, people will come... At the end of the day this is still target marketing, not church.³²

Creating a spectacle only reinforces consumerist values in youth. Alan Hirsch states rather bluntly, "we plainly *cannot consume our way into discipleship*."³³ If youth ministry is to seriously consider its role in creating disciples, the consumerist tendencies of the church – either covert or overt – must be addressed. In the emerging church, the response is known as incarnational theology.

The church should not seek to mimic culture, but to transform the culture it enters. This insight is at the heart of incarnational theology. But why the incarnation specifically? Shane Hipps believes "the incarnation is the most helpful guide for engaging culture." He continues,

The incarnation of Jesus shows us an important truth. Jesus came into the world speaking the language, living the customs, and using the forms meaningful for people living in a particular time and place... These acts reflected values of the kingdom of God that radically countered those of broader culture.³⁴

This means that instead of inviting people into the church, the church must enter into the world. It must be *missional* instead of *attractional*.³⁵ It is missional in that emphasis is placed on participation in God's mission rather than pursuits of our own. This frees the church from the

³² Hipps, 149.

³³ Hirsch, Alan. The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church. Grand Rapids: Brazos P, 2006. 45. Original emphasis.

³⁴ Hipps, 157.

³⁵ McKnight, Scot. "What is the Emerging Church?" 21.

chains of constantly competing with popular culture to attract people. It does not mean, however, that the church becomes irrelevant. “Relevance is derived from experimenting with authentic and indigenous practices that emerge from the gift mix of a particular congregation for a local community.”³⁶ For youth ministry in particular this means constructing programs *for* students in a way in which their gifts are used, as opposed to creating programs directed *at* students. Gibbs and Bolger explain the importance of using individual gifts in community:

Creative potential will be realized only to the extent that the leadership has a wide and comprehensive view of gifting and is able to develop individuals by providing opportunities for them to give expression to their God-given talents in a community that provides both affirmation and honest assessment.³⁷

Because youth “align their desires with the most powerful force that seems to desire them” as stated before, “the church must bear witness to a love more true than those available in popular culture.”³⁸ In a world driven by consumerism, the church must find a way to articulate to youth that Jesus is essentially the “best of all possible choices” while at the same time avoiding the temptation to convey this truth by means of mimicking popular culture.

2. Community: Trinitarian/Communitarian Theology

Community has been an integral part of the Christian life since Jesus lived among and taught the community of disciples nearly two thousand years ago. The new tribalism of postmodern youth is something that can be reconciled – celebrated, even – in youth ministry. Those involved in the emerging church conversation constantly remind us that community is not some abstract concept conjured up by lonely Christians but rather it is a thread woven throughout the fabric of Scripture and the rest of God’s timeless story. In fact, community is inherent in the very nature of God. Grenz writes: “The fact that God is the social Trinity – Father, Son, and

³⁶ Hipps, 154.

³⁷ Gibbs and Bolger, 189.

³⁸ Dean, 7.

Spirit – gives us some indication that the divine purpose for creation is directed toward the individual-in-relationship.”³⁹ Tony Jones further explains the importance of this communitarian theology for youth ministry in a postmodern context:

When our youth ministries reflect a Trinitarian/ communitarian layout, we’ll not only tap into the postmodern longing for community in a world filled with divorce and division, but also we’ll point with our lives toward a God who *is* a community and who created us to be *in* community.⁴⁰

The lack of a national consensus, as noted earlier, has created a culture of homeless people searching for a home, a place of belonging. Yet it is precisely when we find ourselves exiles in a lonely and barren land that the biblical story of hope and restoration in a safe creation resonates the loudest in our souls.⁴¹

“Community,” says Shane Hipps, “is the soil out of which the flower of discipleship grows.”⁴² In many ways, much of youth ministry has to do with community. Silly games, mission trips, excursions to water parks, even Bible studies all have the development of community as a goal, whether it’s explicit or not. But what is it that cultivates the most genuine sense of community among youth? Alan Hirsch believes, “the most vigorous forms of community are those that come together in the context of a shared ordeal or those that define themselves as a group with a mission that lies beyond themselves – thus initiating a risky journey.”⁴³ Again we see the importance of entering into the world as the church, not only for the benefit of those in need, but to create the most “vigorous forms of community”. Mission work,

³⁹ Grenz, 168-169.

⁴⁰ Jones, 107.

⁴¹ Long, 77.

⁴² Hipps, 121.

⁴³ Hirsch, 25.

although wildly popular in youth ministry,⁴⁴ is not the only way of cultivating community among postmodern youth.

Story telling has become somewhat of a lost art in the church, and Shane Hipps argues that story telling as a corporate spiritual discipline is “one of the most powerful ways to deepen our connections.”⁴⁵ Challenging current trends in youth ministry, Hipps writes,

Instead of a 30-minute monologue explaining a text from the Scriptures of a high-energy motivational guru offering fill-in-the-blank self-help tips from Jesus, emerging churches are experimenting with dialogue, shared storytelling, and picture shows in place of traditional sermons.⁴⁶

Storytelling has a powerful unifying power – it highlights commonalities among individuals and breaks down prejudices and ill-conceived judgments. We must help youth discover that they are not alone in the world; they are accompanied by a God-in-community and by persons with similar stories to share.

3. Virtual Reality & Electronic Culture: Putting Images to the Work of the Gospel

The amount of time that postmodern youth spend in virtual reality, as we examined earlier, has significantly altered their perception of the world. Virtual community via chat rooms, blogs, and even cell phones may be detrimental to youth. “While relative intimacy can be gained in virtual settings, the experience of permanence and proximity have all but vanished. Without these, we lose our shared memories and imagination for where we are going, elements central to our identity as God’s people.”⁴⁷ We must persuade youth to abandon their computer screens and cell phones, however briefly, to participate in the authentic community to which scripture calls us.

⁴⁴ At the time of this writing, a Google search for *youth mission work* returns c. 16,000,000 results.

⁴⁵ Hipps, 117.

⁴⁶ Hipps, 130.

⁴⁷ Hipps, 111.

In the cultivation of authentic, non-virtual community it is entirely appropriate to speak the language of the youth, and that language is overwhelmingly image based. This is not to be confused with the consumerism driven church mimicking culture. Hipps writes: “Our adoption of images in worship is not merely an imitative practice [of pop culture]; it’s also *generative*. We now know that the use of images changes the way we perceive everything, including the gospel.”⁴⁸ In his book, Hipps demonstrates this by using half of a page to print the sentence “The boy is sad,” followed on the next page by a picture of a boy crying. Images speak much differently than words. This sentiment is reaffirmed elsewhere in the emerging church conversation as well. An essay in the recently published Emergent Manifesto of Hope says, “The church, if it is to be heard, must speak... using images and activities as its primary communication media.”⁴⁹

4. Micronarratives: Kingdom Theology

While the rejection of a metanarrative is a staple of postmodern theory, it flies in the face of the Christian narrative. Kingdom theology in the emerging church recognizes the participation of all creation in God’s story and it shifts the focus from life after death (personal salvation) to life before death (salvation for the world). Emerging churches draw this theology largely from the passage of Mark 1:15-16, the beginning – not the end – of the gospel story in which Jesus proclaims, “The time is fulfilled, and *the kingdom of God is at hand*; repent and believe in the gospel.”⁵⁰ Kingdom theology is not a rejection of the cross; it a reinterpretation in which the good news is not Jesus’ death and resurrection but rather that the kingdom is come. This

⁴⁸ Hipps, 77. Emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Padgitt, Doug, and Tony Jones, eds. An Emergent Manifesto of Hope. Baker Books, 2007. 133.

⁵⁰ Mark 1:15, emphasis added. Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

theology – like many theologies – has profound implications. Stanley Grenz calls for a “rejection of the rejection of a metanarrative.” Grenz writes:

Our world is more than a collection of incompatible and competing local narratives... We firmly believe that the local narratives of the many human communities do fit together into a single grand narrative, the story of humankind. There *is* a single metanarrative encompassing all peoples and all times... It is the story of God’s action in history for the salvation of fallen humankind and the completion of God’s intentions for creation. We boldly proclaim that the focus of this metanarrative is the story of Jesus of Nazareth, who, we testify, is the incarnate Son, the second Person of the triune God.⁵¹

This is perhaps the most important thing for us to impart to youth, that is, the overarching story of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom is not something to be longed for after death, but it is, as Jesus says, “at hand.” If postmodern youth are searching for a way to organize all of the information they take in, the Kingdom provides the necessary narrative. Kingdom theology is more than indoctrinating youth with a “Biblical worldview” that is too often condescending and shortsighted. Instead, it places youth in the middle of God’s story and helps illustrate the plot, the setting, and all of God’s characters in captivating detail.

What Must I Do to Be Saved?: Considering Further Implications

Like any theology, postmodern theology is susceptible to regressing into fundamentalism if pushed too far or presented as the only way. This is really fleshed out in youth ministry in the topics of conversion and evangelism. If a youth pastor sees her job as a “conversion specialist”, she will spend her time devising ways to convince students to choose a Godly life. Whether the theology the youth pastor uses to influence students is modern, postmodern, mystical, or any other theology, it still has the potential to become dogmatic and fundamentalist. Rather than seeing the role of a youth pastor as a taxicab driver on the road to God, controlling the departure time, speed, direction, and arrival time, we can see it as a signpost, presenting the path for

⁵¹ Grenz, 164.

students and allowing them to make the journey at their own pace. Pete Rollins, a Ph.D. in postmodern theory and emerging Christian, uses a similar analogy with food: “In a world where people believe they are not hungry, we must not offer food but rather an aroma that helps them desire the food that we cannot provide.”⁵² The subtle change in emphasis – from offering food to offering an aroma – has profound implications. Most importantly, it shifts our attention away from numbers and statistics (how many students were “saved” this year?) to communicating and experiencing the good news as a community and allowing the Holy Spirit to do its work. Tony Jones explains, “The challenge will be convincing our senior pastors and youth committees that numbers matter less and kingdom-oriented, holistic communities matter more.”⁵³ It will be a challenge because our fast paced culture is exceedingly results-oriented. Yet if we spend time developing kingdom-oriented communities, we foster an environment that allows the religious question to arise in youth.⁵⁴

In addition, the question “What must I do to be saved?” is not always expressed verbally and therefore the answer does not need to be verbal. I attended a forum featuring Tony Jones in March 2006 in which he said the question is asked in many different ways in the gospels, such as the woman reaching out to touch Jesus’ robe (Mark 5:25-34) and the woman wiping Jesus’ feet with her tears (Luke 7:36-38).⁵⁵ This is an example of how using images as the primary media to communicate the message of the gospel can be effective. Far from implying that the actual words of the Bible aren’t able to speak to youth, we must be open to communicating in ways that are familiar to postmodern youth, especially in our use of images.

⁵² Rollins, Peter. *How (Not) to Speak of God*. Boston, MA: Paraclete P, 2006.

⁵³ Jones, 109.

⁵⁴ See Rollins, 40-41.

⁵⁵ Jones, Tony. Address. Valley Church Student Ministries. *Tony Jones Youth Worker Forum*. Valley E-Free Church, West Des Moines. 05 Mar. 2006. 27 Apr. 2007 <[http://www.jakebouma.com/media/notes\(3-6-06\).rtf](http://www.jakebouma.com/media/notes(3-6-06).rtf)>.

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a monumental shift taking place in our Western culture as we emerge from modernity into a new, postmodern world. A generation of teenagers that is fundamentally different from any other previous generation is maturing and they are coming to church and youth groups. The church's response to this cultural change will determine how successful and faithful the church will be in the next century in accomplishing God's mission for the world. Once we understand postmodern youth, we will have no reason to say – like the woman in the comic – that teenagers scare us. Kenda Creasy Dean poses the following rhetorical question: “What if mainline Protestantism's disappointing track record with young people (in and beyond the church) has not been primarily a failure of models, educational strategies, historical cycles, or institutional support, but a failure of theology?”⁵⁶ The theology found in the emerging church conversation, I believe, provides the necessary framework for which Dean calls to engage in honest theological reflection about ministry to and with postmodern youth.

⁵⁶ Dean, 25.