The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture †

Sharing Not Only the Gospel, But Also Our Lives

The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original scholarship pertaining to youth and the contemporary church. The lectures are delivered as a series at the Princeton Forums on Youth Ministry and are published online annually. Lecturers include scholars who are not directly involved in the practice or study of youth ministry but who can bring the fruits of their respective disciplines to bear on ministry with the young.

The theme for the 2009 lectures is "Sharing Not Only the Gospel, but Also Our Lives," from 1 Thessalonians 2:8. Youth leaders in today's church can easily speak Paul's words to believers in Thessalonica, written two thousand years ago. "So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us." The 2009 lectures address this passage through discussion of relational youth ministry, the transcendence of God, and the question of what gospel, "which Jesus" will we share.

2009 Lectures

Andrew Root

From an Incarnational Model of Ministry to Being Ministers of the Incarnate One OR Justin Versus Jan

Encounter with the Transcendence of God: The Shape of Faithful Place-Sharing for Youth Ministry

Obery M. Hendricks Jr.

Which Jesus Shall We Teach?

Which Jesus Shall We Teach? † Obery M. Hendricks Jr., Ph.D.

I was brought up in a wonderful Christian home. My parents were devout Christians. My father was a church trustee and my mother was so faithful and devout that in her later years the congregation bestowed upon her the solemn honorific "Mother of the Church."

Throughout my childhood, I was taught what it means to be a Christian. First on the agenda were the rudiments of upright personal moral character, what my community called "home training," which insisted that I be polite and respectful to all, especially my elders. Indeed, the more elderly they were, the more respectful I was expected to be. I was also taught not to be unnecessarily argumentative and confrontational, especially with those in authority (a lesson, I must admit, I learned very poorly—just ask some of my former PTS professors and classmates.) I also was expected to be pleasant, for anger could lead to sin. Good Christians do not get angry, I was taught, except at the tormentors of Jesus, whom we knew to be "the Jews," even though it was the Romans who tortured and executed him, and at most there was only a handful of Jewish elites who had anything to do with it at all. And it went without saying that there were to be absolutely no drugs or public nudity (partial or otherwise); no promiscuous sex or cussing; my sister and I would earn a stern corrective if we even said "darn."

Then there was the etiquette of citizenship and community. We were instructed to treat the flag almost as if it were as holy as the cross, and to believe wholeheartedly that God favored America over every country on earth. Also, that killing was not murder if we only killed those whom our political and religious leaders said it was alright to kill, such as folks who didn't think like us or worship like us or dress like us or who were unwilling to bow to what we were told was America's indisputably God-ordained superiority. One thing we were not taught to do was to spend our energy obsessing about homosexuality like folks do today, because we were still under the naïve understanding that we should spend our energy trying to love everyone; you see, the religious right hadn't yet adopted the denigration of gay Americans as a political strategy in their quest to rule the country and the world, as is so ably chronicled in Randall Balmer's revealing book *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts Faith and Threatens America* (Basic Books, 2006).

Then there were the church teachings of my youth, which were of two kinds, which I will call spiritual and ecclesial, or better yet, spiritual and institutional. I heard the terms "the Spirit" and "the Holy Spirit" all the time, but it was never clear what these were. What I learned through observation is that the Spirit is something that made you cry, shout and lose control, and that you felt better, maybe even closer to God, when you were through. I was told that I must be spiritual and have spiritual experiences, but what spirituality is was never directly addressed, except that I would know when I had a spiritual experience because I would feel it. Yet from what I witnessed in worship it was difficult to tell the difference between a spiritual experience and a strong bout of emotional catharsis.

As important as what I *was* taught about spirituality is what I *was not* taught about it. In Paul's authentic letters such as Galatians and the Corinthian correspondence he reveals himself to have been a mystic who experienced illumination and

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ascended states of God-consciousness and who tried to move believers beyond the milk of their churchly experiences to the meat of real experiences of God-consciousness. He described one of his mystical experiences in his second letter to the Corinthians:

> I must boast; there is nothing to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into Paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter (2 Cor. 12: 1–4).

Jesus himself demonstrated the importance of engaging in spiritual ministrations in order to be fully in touch with who we are and what God would have us do. In Luke 4:1–13, Jesus is shown going off on a spiritual quest to experience God even more deeply now that he is the baptized Messiah. In that Lukan narrative Jesus engages in the deep spiritual ministrations of solitude and silence, prolonged fasting and self-abnegation, contemplation of the recorded word of God and silent meditation in his own spirit, all in order to hear the ineffable truths behind and beneath the utterances of men and women. The Letter to the Hebrews sums it up:

> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him (Hebrews 5:7–9).

Yet, despite the spiritual witness of Jesus and his apostle Paul, in church my peers and I were not taught to explore the fecund spiritual terrain within us; we weren't even told that it existed. We were not taught to engage in prolonged meditative striving to achieve a higher God-consciousness. We were not taught how deeply important silence and solitude are for hearing the still, small voice of God. Fasting was sometimes mentioned, but never as a regularized spiritual practice. Anyway, how could we hear God's voice within us when we and everybody around us were busy preaching, singing, testifying, and—yes—shouting?

And as part of our spiritual instruction, of course, we were taught that we must develop faith in God and in his son, Jesus Christ. In fact, faith was stressed much more than spirituality. But it wasn't just any old Christian faith for us, mind you. It had to be a guided faith that was defined by those who knew better, because faith that developed organically, unmediated by some outside authority, was not considered true Christian faith, no matter how deep or personally transformational it might be. It had to be an externally sanctioned faith in God, which also meant faith in and assent to certain prescribed dogmas and doctrines. In other words, faith meant having faith in "the faith" and all its trappings. Thus, we not only were to worship God, worship Jesus, and believe Jesus died for our sins. We also had to accept doctrines formulated by mortal men, many contrived under the auspices and financial sponsorship of the same Roman empire that centuries after Jesus' death still executed those who threatened its unjust power just as it had executed Jesus.

The teachings about faith that I and those like me were taught said that faith is not a dynamic, ongoing process or the long winding path of an insatiable spiritual seeker. Instead it was presented to us as a place, a stance, an identity we could embrace, plant our feet upon, claim as our own. It required no effort, no striving, no fruits of transformation. We had only to declare our faith and not deny it, and viola! We were there! We were in the faith.

That was the so-called spiritual aspect of the teachings I learned in church. The other aspect of my church instruction was ecclesiastical, or institutional. This taught me that salvation lay comfortably planted within the church's four walls and that those of us ensconced there were saved and privileged insiders, while those outside were lost. Our church, I was taught, was not just another building of brick and stone. It was the House of the Lord. Although the witness of numerous scriptures tells

us that God does not dwell nor can God be maintained in any product of human hands or ingenuity, I was taught that our church and every church–at least the churches of folks that believed as we believed–were all certified Houses of the Lord. Therefore, because the House of the Lord was where God dwelled more than any other place on earth, it was my duty as a Christian to maintain our particular worship edifice at virtually any cost of time and treasure. This was a divine duty. In other words, to be a good Christian meant being dedicated to institutional maintenance. It was our duty to take care of the church. Let others take care of the rest of the world.

Thus for me and those who were taught like me, spirituality and faith were all about worship and belief, not actions, except for a minimal standard: No missing church or Sunday school, no asking faith questions or requesting explanations of the immaculate conception, the holy Trinity, or miracles, and no asking why the world is still racked with war and suffering despite Jesus' salvific death. And—this was very important—no questioning the pastor! Each of these forbidden actions was treated as a major sin.

These teachings helped to shape who I and so many others like me in churches across America ultimately became. Generally speaking, if we took these teachings to heart and were not knocked off course by some overwhelming trauma or seduced by things that dulled our moral sharpness and somehow discredited our belief in an omnipotent, merciful, yet judgmental God, we became good people, good churchgoers; if we are not paragons of society, at least we are not serious troublers of it. We say grace before meals, pray whenever we think of it (especially when we are in trouble), and honor and worship Jesus with constancy of word, though less often of deed. We have become American Christian patriots, thankful to be the new chosen people of God, proudly sporting a cross in one lapel and a flag pin in the other. We have become important sources of support and governance at our local churches, act as if church is the most important thing in the world and, when we have any funds left after tithes and offerings, might even consider donating to some worthy cause to help those Jesus called "the least of these" (more usually, we give them our discarded clothes and furniture and piously imagine that we are loving our neighbors as ourselves.) We love and obey our pastors, accept them as God's spokespersons, and do not flinch when they live more like Caesar than like Christ; we don't flinch even when they tell us that their own agenda or "vision" is really God's vision. We shout, cry, and laugh in church and pronounce our tears and laughter evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence in our midst and look askance at anyone who sits through morning worship too still or too silent. In short, we have grown up to love our lord our God with all our hearts, minds, spirits, and souls, or at least have convinced ourselves that we have. We have grown up to be good vertical Christians, one-dimensional Christians in a multi-dimensional world. That is, we spend almost all of our time looking up at God and obsessing about Jesus, building a veritable personality cult around him, calling his name constantly, singing about him, making pictures, license plate holders, movies, bumper stickers, key rings, and every kind of trinket bearing his name or likeness or a cutely pious slogan. We worship and obsess about Jesus, but there is one thing we do not do: we do not try to follow him. Yes, he told us to follow him, but how can we? He is divine, we have been taught, akin to God himself, and we are only human. So we conclude that we cannot follow him, that there is no bridge upon which to reach him so high in the celestial sky, so we just stand on the mortal shore and hang out in the church and worship our own mode of worship.

This is the Jesus Christ and the faith bearing his name that I was taught. But my early experience probably is not unique. In fact, it is probably quite typical. Many Christians see nothing wrong with it. Growing up with teachings that are so focused on personal piety and church institutional maintenance can be quite comforting and can make you feel quite righteous, but it is not particularly challenging. In fact, one reason the typical church teachings are so comforting is precisely that they are not challenging. Let's face it, those who were taught as I was taught really were not challenged to make serious changes in the world. That is why we can so easily feel good and justified and on our way to heaven without doing much: because all that was required of us was not to rob or kill or steal (although I don't recall charging exorbitant prices or booking obscene profits being included in that admonition), and that we should obey authority and not rock the ship of status quo. To my mind, this is exactly what Bonhoeffer meant by "cheap grace." It entails no cross to bear, no spirit of struggle, no hunger

and thirst for justice. It lets us allow pastors to feed us weak pablum weekly while they run our churches like fiefdoms and entertainment enterprises. It has us engage in loud, enthusiastic monologues with "the Spirit" in which the great noise of our cymbals and drums, loud praying, preaching, shouting, and overwrought singing makes us unable to hear the voice of God speaking to the silent place in our spirits, because there is no silent place. This cacophony of church noise even renders us unable to hear God's voice in words and teachings from other Christians if they don't embrace the exact same doctrines and dogmas in the exact same way as we do.

In sum, we might have grown up to be good about our stewardship of the church and the rudiments of personal piety, but we are not so good about our stewardship of the world and our responsibility to change it. As far as we were concerned, it wasn't up to us to change the world, that's Jesus' job. Our responsibility as Christians was just to worship Jesus, praise his holy name, and leave the real work to him. That's right. Just leave it to Jesus. He'll fix it. So forget about hungering and thirsting for justice or liberating the oppressed. As far as we knew, our lot was to lift our voices in praise: halleluyah! Praise him with your lips, but save the power of your limbs for doing other things.

There are details that differ, sometimes significantly, but by and large, this is still today what our young are being taught in our churches. Yet is this the kind of Christian we should be making of our youth? Is this the kind of believer Jesus lived and died a torturous death to make? Is this really what Jesus taught, or have we misunderstood what he would have us understand?

Worse, have we cleaved to an interpretation, a persona, and supposed message of Jesus that, in the final analysis, is little like him or the teachings of his ministry? Indeed, is the message of the church really the message of Jesus? Or is there another Jesus with another message?

Because we love our young people so, we owe it to them to find out if there is another Jesus whose teachings can transform our youth into fuller partners in the establishment of God's kingdom of loving justice on earth as in heaven and make their spirits to soar. In fact, the gospels do tell us of such a Jesus. Or more precisely, a sober, unsentimentally honest, historically informed reading of the gospels gives us another picture of Jesus, and he is a political revolutionary. Yes, Jesus was a political revolutionary. That certainly is not all that he is, but he is that.

Now, to say that Jesus was "political" doesn't mean that he was "involved in politics" in the sense that we know it, with its bargaining and compromises and power plays. Nor does it mean that he wanted to wage war or overthrow the Roman Empire by force. To say that Jesus was a political revolutionary is to say that the message he proclaimed not only called for change in individual hearts, but also demanded radical change in the political, social, and economic structures of colonized Israel in which he lived. It means that if Jesus had his way, the Roman Empire and the ruling elites among his own people either would no longer hold their positions of power, or if they did, they would have to act very, very differently. It means that an important goal of his ministry was to radically change the distribution of authority and power, goods and resources, so all people—particularly the little people, or "the least of these," as he called them—might have lives free of political repression, enforced poverty and hunger, and undue insecurity. It means that Jesus sought not only to heal people's pain, but also to inspire and empower them to remove the unjust social and political structures that too often caused their pain. It means that Jesus had a clear and unambiguous vision of the healthy world that God intended and that he addressed any issue—social, economic or political—that violated that vision. This aspect of Jesus' ministry can be seen throughout the gospels, but is particularly in evidence in what is arguably the central teaching of Jesus' ministry, a proclamation that hundreds of millions of Christians worldwide recite weekly, if not daily. What is that proclamation? It is the Lord's Prayer.

In the opening decade of the first century, the Roman emperor Augustus declared his reign the *Pax Romana*, that is, a season of total peace in the Roman Empire. Josephus recounts that rather than a period of peace in Israel, the so-called *Pax Romana*

really was a time of numerous violent uprisings against Roman rule. One account by Josephus is worthy of particular note. He reports that roughly contemporaneous with the birth of Jesus, the Roman military crucified some 2,000 people in the Galilean city of Sepphoris as punishment for rebelling against Roman rule (*Ant*. 17:295).

Another significant factor in Jesus' setting in life was widespread, sometimes extreme poverty. Indeed, the presence of poverty in Israel pervades the gospels. Even a cursory reading of the gospels reveals that the plight of "the poor" was a primary concern for Jesus, from his loving affirmation of the worth of the struggling masses in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20; cf. Matthew 5:3); to Luke's account of "a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table" (Luke16:19–31); to Judas' complaint that the cost of the expensive perfume used to anoint Jesus' feet should have been "given to the poor" (John 12:4–5).

It was into this landscape of hunger and poverty, political turmoil and tumult that Jesus of Nazareth was born and his ministry forged. The suffering that the Romans visited on the Jewish people was so pervasive and so brutal that its influence on the political consciousness and social witness of Jesus was inescapable. It must not be forgotten that even while he is worshipped as the Son of God, until his last earthly breath Jesus was also an oppressed Roman colonial subject with all that meant and implied. Thus more than any other factor, it was the Roman colonial occupation of Israel and its deleterious effect on the people's lives that was the context for the formative years of Jesus.

There are no reports of anything particularly striking about the appearance of Jesus. Not even Paul, his unfailing advocate, made such claims. In such a time of upheaval and insecurity, what drew people to Jesus and established his credibility must have been his selfless service and concern for their plight. The depth and the breadth of his dedication to serving the needs of the people are reflected in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:7–13; Luke 11:2–4). That Jesus offered this prayer as a model prayer indicates that it includes and summarizes his foremost spiritual concerns and, indeed, articulates the central principles of his ministry.

Jesus begins his prayer instruction by telling his disciples to start their entreaty to God not with "my father," but with "*our* father" or simply "father" (Matthew 6:9; Luke 11:2). Missing are instructions to pray for personal concerns; in no sense was this to be an individual prayer. It could be personal, but never individual, never private, never for one's own needs alone. In fact, there are no individual petitions anywhere in the Lord's Prayer; it is always "our" or "us" or "we." In this way Jesus makes certain to focus the disciples' gaze not on their personal needs and circumstances, but on the plight of their people. Moreover, although this is a prayer taught by a Jew to other Jews, there are no explicitly Jewish pronouncements in it, such as "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." Neither does it contain any explicitly self-referentially Christian phrase. Nowhere to be found is "in my [Jesus'] name" or any sort of messianic mention. Thus the prayer is also a purposely *universal* prayer. Jesus himself had already begun to model universal concern for humanity by ministering to the needs of Samaritans, the age-old enemies of Jews (e.g., John 4:7–42), and by even extending his healing hands to the hated Roman military, as in his healing of the Roman centurion's servant (Luke 7: 1–10). In no uncertain terms Jesus declared his understanding of God as father of all: "God makes the sun to shine on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45).

Next Jesus tells his disciples to pray, "Hallow your name," or "Sanctify your name." Because Roman state religion required that Caesar's name alone be hallowed, this was a radical call (one of Caesar's Greek titles was actually *Soter,* "Savior"). Yet Jesus had recognized the sanctity and holiness of God's name throughout his life, so it is unlikely that he would have his disciples ask God to become what God already is. It makes more sense that Jesus is telling them to ask God to demonstrate God's holiness, as in "Our father in heaven, *demonstrate* your holiness." When we consider that in the Bible God's holiness is often coupled with God as judge, i.e., vanquisher of injustice, we get a fuller flavor: "Our father in heaven, demonstrate your holiness by manifesting your judgment." Or "Our father...we are ready for the judgment of your justice."

Judgment upon what? Upon Caesar's unjust kingdom. That this is Jesus' meaning is indicated by his instruction to disciples to pray, "*your* kingdom come, *your* will be done." The manifestation of God's holiness, the arrival of God's kingdom, the enacting of God's just will, all mean the same: that Caesar's kingdom must go; Caesar's rule must no longer be left unchallenged. Why? Because it did not treat the people's needs as holy.

The "kingdom" of which Jesus speaks here is the kingdom of God, the *malkuth shamayim* (Hebrew), or "sole sovereignty of God," the declaration that only God is worthy of worship and fealty. No emperor, no king, no president is to be given ultimate obedience—only God. Thus, *malkuth shamayim*—the sole sovereignty of God—is both a religious principle and a political principle. It is a fundamental statement of the uncompromising monotheistic faith of Israel, yet its insistence on freedom from all human domination meant that in practice it was a political tenet as well. In this way, the revolutionary sentiment evoked by "thy kingdom come" is multi-dimensional.

However, Jesus not only preached the primacy of the kingdom, the sole sovereignty of God; he demonstrated it by the very act of teaching the necessity of the demise of Caesar's kingdom. This also was one of the reasons he so consistently and publicly rejected the legitimacy of the Temple priesthood: because rather than working to establish God's kingdom of liberation and wholeness, many priests cast their lot with the interests of their Roman overlord, as evinced by their offering of daily sacrifices in the Temple on Caesar's behalf (cf. Josephus, *Jewish War*, 2:197). The Gospel of John even recounts the highest ranking priests as uttering "we have no king but Caesar" when Pilate questioned their loyalty (John 19:15).

Jesus' total dedication to the sole sovereignty of God is also seen in his refusal to accept the kingship so enthusiastically conferred upon him by five thousand of his fellow Jews (John 6:1-15). Possibly the most poignant demonstration of Jesus' commitment to the sole kingship of God is his uncompromising rejection of the sovereignty of Caesar even as his own life hung in the balance: "You have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

Each of the gospels narrates Jesus demonstrating his concern that the people have enough bread by feeding those around him who were hungry, thus also providing an important model for his followers to emulate. That is why when Jesus told his disciples to pray, "give us enough bread for the day;" it was a prayer for the end of Caesar's kingdom, because by its very nature Caesar's kingdom would never let there be enough bread for everyone. This was a basic fact of the political economy of Roman imperialism.

Because with subsistence farming there is no surplus left after basic consumption, large numbers of peasants had to borrow funds from the wealthy in order to pay Roman taxes. Similar to the experiences of sharecroppers in America, many farmers had no choice but to repeat this pattern of borrowing every year until their burden of debt became so great that they were no longer able to meet their debt payments and thus were forced into default. A terrible consequence of defaulting on debts is reflected in Matthew 18:21–34 which, when correctly translated, matter-of-factly mentions that a lender seized his indebted worker and, "delivered him to the 'torturers' (*basanistais*) till he should pay all his debt."

So when Jesus taught his disciples to pray "release us from our debts" (the Greek word here, *aphiemi*, means both "forgive" and "release"), it was also a prayer for the end of Caesar's kingdom, because Caesar's kingdom could not stand without the yearly monetary tax tribute that was both its lifeblood and the major factor underlying the unjust debt system.

The prayer's concern about debt raises another issue as well. Forgiving the debts of others means not only decrying the exploitive ways of commerce and empire, but also refusing to participate in them any longer. It is a declaration to once again honor the biblical commandment not to steal, cheat, or hold others hostage to debt, or to even charge interest for necessities they might need to borrow. This held the important spiritual lesson that those who follow Jesus must clear their own consciences and transform their own practices so they can honestly declare that they themselves honor the dictates of God and not the ways of usurers.

Parenthetically, this teaching on debt in particular might seem impractical in our complex world, but it has as much saliency today as it did in Jesus' time. Businesspersons can refuse to place profits before people. They can refuse to participate in unfair business dealings, refuse to pay substandard wages, refuse to force workers to labor without healthcare or pension benefits, refuse to charge exorbitant interest rates and rental costs. Lawyers can refuse to press unjust prosecutions, refuse to defend corporate wrongdoing, refuse to pursue laws and measures that are not in the best interests of the masses of God's children. In the final analysis, to pray "We have also forgiven others" means we have chosen to give others the same justice, the same freedom, the same measure of life unencumbered by the onerous weight of unjust policies that we seek to receive ourselves.

And when Jesus told them to pray, "Lead us not into temptation," he was not teaching his disciples to ask God not to tempt them, because God is not a temptor, as we are reminded in the letter of James (1:13–14). Rather, Jesus was instructing his disciples to ask for strength to *resist* the temptation that, in the context of the rest of his prayer, could only be the temptation to serve Caesar instead of God; the temptation to give up their struggle for justice and accept the empire as the god it had made of itself, thus treating the rulers' needs as holy, instead of the people's.

By instructing his disciples to bring the people's needs before God ("give *us* our daily bread," "release *our* debts"), Jesus taught them to treat the people's needs as holy. He taught them that using their strength, their gifts, their spiritual ministrations to make this a just world was the most important service they could render to God. He taught them to serve God by making sure that everyone has enough daily bread, that everyone is free from economic violence and exploitation, that everyone is delivered from the clutches of unjust kingdoms, principalities, and powers. In this way Jesus showed that the salvation that all followers of Jesus should strive for is the salvation of everyone. In essence, what Jesus taught his disciples, then, was to strive for revolutionary change on earth as in heaven as their righteous service to God. Revolutionary change that honored God by doing indiscriminate justice, by lifting up "the least of these" on the altar of God's justice and mercy. A revolution of love and holistic spirituality that demonstrates love for God by treating the people's needs as holy.

This is the Jesus we must give to our young, the Jesus who taught all who would follow him to change the world so all might share in life's fullest fruits. The same Jesus who, for all his moral and ethical teachings in the Beatitudes and the parables and paranetic instructions, gave just one criterion for judging the righteousness of our lives:

> Then he will say to those at his left hand, 'You that are accursed, depart from me...for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they...will answer, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick in prison, and did not take care of you?' Then he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matthew 25:41–46).

This is the Jesus we must teach to our young people, the Jesus who proclaimed without equivocation that it is not religious practice, or memorization of scriptures, or even attendance at church or temple by which our lives will be judged, but by this measure instead: whether we have tried to relieve the plight of the hungry and dispossessed and those stripped of their freedom; whether we have tried to change the war-torn world to a world free from oppression and exploitation and consignment to inferior social and economic status, so that all of God's children might have life, and that more abundantly.
This Jesus is not the Jesus of dogma or the Christ of doctrine. This is the Jesus of Nazareth who shows who he really is by his words and his deeds. It is this Jesus we must teach our young so they might one day be able to build the kind and loving world that we, their elders, have not.