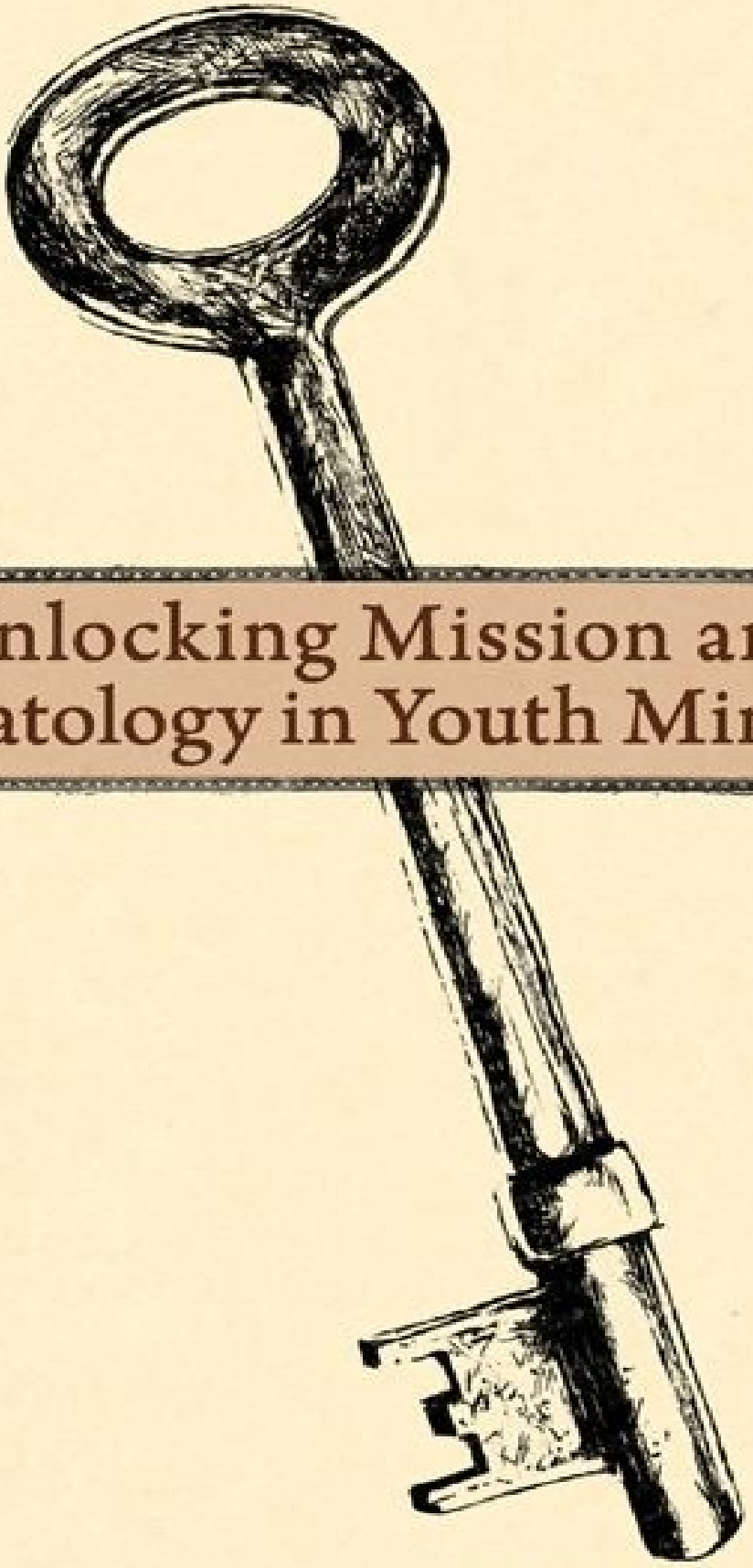
A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY
THROUGH YOUTH MINISTRY



Unlocking Mission and Eschatology in Youth Ministry

ANDREW ROOT



A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY THROUGH YOUTH MINISTRY

Unlocking Mission and Eschatology in Youth Ministry

ANDREW ROOT

ZONDERVAN

To Maisy
whose tenderness and humor melt me

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Preface to a Peculiar Project

1. **The Chronicles of Nadia**

2. **Signs of a Walking Dead Man**

3. **Mission Trips, Tourism, and Globalization**

4. **Youth Ministry in an Eschatological Light**

5. **Resurrection**

6. **Eschatological Discipleship and Mission**

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

About the Author

Copyright

About the Publisher

Share Your Thoughts

Preface to a Peculiar Project

You're holding in your hand an experiment—a kind of dogmatic theology written through, and for, youth ministry. And by "dogmatic" I don't mean rigid, authoritarian, or inflexible, as the term is often used in popular language. Rather, I mean the heart—the essentials—of the church's teaching on God and God's work. When theologians throughout church history have set about to articulate the central theological ideas of our faith, they have often called it "dogmatics."

So what you hold is a dogmatic theology written through youth ministry. But this is an experiment because it is dogmatics written through youth ministry as a *narrative*, a fictional story of a youth worker named Nadia. Adding to the peculiarity of this theological project is the fact that it's *short*—each of the four books is just over 100 pages, meaning you should be able to read each in a sitting or two or three. (Which volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* allows for that?)

In many ways the best analogy for this series of books is the energy bar. An energy bar is a small item, no bigger than a candy bar, but it serves as a meal. I hope these small books can satisfy your theological appetite; I hope that like an energy bar they will give you a protein-filled theological power-up to your concept and practice of youth ministry. But also like an energy bar (at least a quality one), I hope it tastes good—I hope the narrative shape is like a chocolate covering making the protein burst enjoyable.

These books continue a conversation—well, maybe even a kind of *movement*. I believe a small but growing (in numbers and depth) group of youth workers are ready, even yearning, to think theologically about youth ministry. Kenda Creasy Dean and I have called this development "the theological turn" in our book *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*. These books continue fleshing out this turn, hoping to give more depth and direction as we make this shift.

There are many to thank for this odd experiment you hold in your hand; acknowledging them all would make for too long a preface for such short books. But I'm compelled to thank a handful of people who directly impacted this work. First, thanks to Jay Howver, who heard about this project as just a wild idea over steak (a Zonder-steak, as I mockingly called those dinners). I thought I was only making conversation, but Jay called me the next week wanting to do the project. Jay's vision helped bring this weird idea to life.

I had a great editor in Doug Davidson. He worked tirelessly on this project, making it sing. I'm thankful for the support and skill he added to these books. I'd also like to thank Jess Daum for writing the wonderful discussion questions for each book. Jess has been one of my brightest students, and "Miss Jess" is also an enormous blessing to my whole family. Jen Howver, too, deserves great thanks. I was overwhelmed with gratitude when she was assigned to title and set the marketing pack for these books. Jen is a dear friend, and it was a blessing to have these books in her talented hands. Plus, she's hated everything I've written before this—she thinks my writing is too academic. This gave me another shot to win her over! I think I did!

A number of people were kind enough to read versions of these books, providing major help and insight. My dear friend Blair Bertrand and the sharp-minded Erik Leafblad read book 1 (theology). One of my best former students, Tom Welch, and my colleague and friend Amy Marga (who saved me from grave error) read book 2 (the cross). One of my favorite youth workers and friends, Jon Wasson, and my dear colleague and running partner David Lose read book 3 (Scripture). And book 4 (mission and eschatology) was read by the deep-hearted and hilarious Spencer Edwards and the brilliant Christy Lang. Christy pushed me hard to rethink a number of perspectives and exegetical assertions; dealing with her feedback was exhausting and so helpful.

Finally, as always, I must thank Kara, my best friend and partner in all things. We started our friendship and love in our seminary days over summer Greek and Ray Anderson's lectures. I still vividly remember stopping into the Fuller library, reading sections of Barth's *Dogmatics*, and talking theology as we walked the streets of Pasadena. Our first intimate conversations were about theology. With her as my dialogue

partner, I first learned to think theologically, parsing our way through "Ray" (as we called it) and discovering ourselves, each other, and God as we contemplated theology and Anderson's lectures. So it is to her that this project is offered in gratitude.

chapter one

The Chronicles of Nadia

Why am I so cynical? Nadia asked herself as she stood surrounded by about a hundred young people and a dozen adults in bright orange T-shirts that read "Operation Change: Being Jesus' Hands in Making the World Right." *What are we doing here?* she wondered, watching the leaders of the mission organization pump up the youth and herd them onto the buses for a week of mission and service in an impoverished village with no running water.

This was the fourth mission trip Nadia had led during her time as the church's youth pastor, and the third trip to Mexico—all sponsored by the same short-term mission organization. Based in the States, this mission agency led trips to Mexico and about a half dozen other countries. For Nadia and the youth of her church, teaming up with a mission agency like this had a number of logistical advantages: They picked you up at your church in their buses, drove you into Mexico, set up your accommodations, and planned your service outings. In other words, they did almost all your legwork, allowing you to spend your time and energy *doing* mission service rather than *planning* it.

Nadia's sudden fever of skepticism had come on quickly during a leaders' meeting just the day before. Upon arriving, Bud and Stacy, the staff people from the mission agency, had pulled together the youth pastors from the three churches making the trip. After going over some safety-related ground rules, Bud and Stacy asked the youth workers what they were hoping their young people would get out of the trip.

Tara, the youth director of a group from a middle-class suburb in the Midwest, spoke up first: "I'm hoping to shake my kids up a bit, hoping this experience will push them to really believe. I want them to see how other people live, how hard some people have it. I think a trip like this

will push my kids to want to, like, know their faith more and really believe it; I think it will make them take their faith more seriously. My kids get so caught up in all kinds of activities; they struggle with being worldly. I think being here and having this experience helps them to know what's true and to really, really believe it. I think it will make them more God-centered and less world-centered."

Kevin, a veteran youth pastor leading the largest of the three groups, chimed in, "I agree— I want my kids to be moved to take their faith more seriously. And in taking it more seriously and doing these trips, I think they learn that they really can change things in this broken world. In my many years in youth ministry, I've found that the way you change kids' faith is to get them doing something, give them the chance to participate in making the world better. I want to see my kids make a difference, and I think when they're given a chance to make a difference, *they* are changed. After all, Christian faith should change the world, and I think these kids, this generation, can change the world for God. So I want to get them started on that this week." As Kevin spoke, Tara nodded her head in agreement, and both Bud and Stacy offered deep "hmmms" of approval.

"Yeah," Bud said. "That's what our organization is really about. We think kids are right in the middle of the will of God when they're doing mission and service, because they are doing God's work. They're bringing forth the kingdom of God by being Jesus' hands; their work is the engine of the kingdom of God."

Bud then turned to Nadia and asked, "What about you? What do you want for your kids? What's your desire for the trip?" A year ago Nadia might have said almost exactly what either Tara or Kevin had said. In fact, reflecting back on last year's trip, she probably *did* say something very similar. But now, hearing their responses, she felt like they were somehow missing the point, theologically. She wasn't sure what the problem was, exactly—but it all just sounded out of tune, like a familiar song that is, for whatever reason, off.

Nadia sat silently amid the cacophony of what she perceived to be misplayed theology. "Well?" said Bud, interrupting Nadia's frozen pause.

Standing in the thin air between the question asked and the answer

they were expecting, Nadia thought to herself: *This maddening theological journey I've been on has tripped me up again! Can't I do anything in ministry without being thrust into contemplation?*

Nadia had been on this journey since her evaluation meeting at the end of her very first year at the church. At that meeting she'd been struck by the need to really explore the purpose of youth ministry. After lots of wrestling, she'd concluded that youth ministry was about participating—and inviting youth to participate—in the action of God. This central focus on the action of God set terms not only for how Nadia understood youth ministry but also how she practiced it. This had pushed her to rethink how to talk about the cross, which then led her into reconsidering the ways Scripture functions in ministry.[1] And now, here she was again.

Still mentally casting about for an answer and wanting to avoid the theological problems she'd heard in the previous two responses, all Nadia could say is, "I don't know." Even as she said this, she was aware it was not the right—or even the polite—thing to say. Although she didn't intend it, Nadia knew her response would only create discomfort and uncertainty among the other leaders.

Sure enough, Nadia's answer painted Stacy's face with confusion. "You don't know?" she repeated.

"What do you mean you don't know?" asked Bud. Clearly, in his many years, no one had *ever* said they didn't know. "Obviously, you had some reason for coming all this way with a group of teenagers," Bud continued.

"Yeah, I think I did." Nadia continued, "But, now, I'm not so sure."

"Not so sure of what?" asked Stacy, seemingly worried that Nadia's inability to state her goal in bringing her young people could have a negative effect on everyone else's experience.

"I guess I'm not sure why we do these short-term mission trips in youth ministry," Nadia blurted matter-of-factly, aware that such directness might upset the other four. "I'm not saying we shouldn't," Nadia said, trying to clarify herself. "I'm just saying, I don't know why we do it."

"Maybe you should have figured that out before you came," said Kevin

with a tone of authority, or at least with the confidence he'd gained through experience. "What I mean," he continued, "is that over my many years working as a youth pastor in quite a few large churches I've learned that you should never do *anything* without first understanding your needs and desired outcomes, and then assessing your resources. Only then should you plan your program. It sounds like maybe you got a program scheduled before you did the other work."

Nadia tried not to roll her eyes, nodding and biting her lip to hide her irritation at Kevin's "Youth Ministry 101" lecture. She knew it wasn't lack of organization or planning that led to her uncertainty. Although Nadia worried that her "I don't know" made her seem flaky, thoughtless, or (worse) obdurate, she knew it was really an open door into theological reflection. Perhaps it would have been better—or at least more convenient—if she'd figured more of this out before she came on the trip. But Nadia had realized she did her best theological reflection not in libraries or closed offices, but in the middle of doing ministry. Nadia's "I don't know" wasn't avoidance, but the first dramatic leap into theological wrestling.

"Well," Nadia responded tentatively to Kevin, "maybe you're right, but I'm not sure better planning would really answer my question. I mean, I've led several of these trips, and I've seen that they can have an impact. I also know kids like traveling and going. But I guess my question is theological: Why theologically do we do them?"

"Well, okay," Bud interrupted, "I think we need to table this for now, since we still have quite a few logistics to go over." It was clear he wanted to stay away from conflict, especially now that theology had been broached as a subject before the trip had even started. Nadia just shrugged her shoulders. She felt fine with the ambiguity; after all, it was where she'd been for the last few years in ministry.

ON THE BUS

The question of *What are we doing here?* was still wrapped tightly around Nadia's being as they boarded the bus for their first mission activity. Sitting close to the front and leaning against the window, Nadia could see the other two youth pastors, Tara and Kevin. She thought again about what each of them had said about the purpose of the trip. Tara believed the trip was *for* moving kids into further commitment to their faith; Kevin said the trip was *for* young people to do something to change the world. Nadia wasn't sure why, but both premises bothered her. At one level she agreed with them, but at another level these justifications made her uneasy, pushing her into her contemplative state.

By the time the buses pulled up and unloaded a hundred kids into the impoverished village, Nadia was beginning to get a toehold on what was bothering her. It became clearer later that afternoon, as she helped one group of young people prepare a puppet show for the local children and another group paint a wall of the little Sunday school building. She realized her focus was almost completely on her kids. Sure, the village and its residents were there, but in many ways, it was as if they were only the background, a soundstage for her teenagers' experience. Maybe that's why she'd been so uncomfortable with what both Tara and Kevin had said. They spoke as if the village were important only for the way it could be used. For both, it became the material their young people could *use* to do something, could make them into something.

Already feeling cynical, Nadia dug deeper, wondering if this *real* impoverished village with real poverty and real people was *real* to the herd of orange-shirted crusaders. If the purpose of the mission trip centered on providing particular experiences to the young people from the three U.S. churches, it was hard to say whether the village served any other purpose than being the backdrop to those experiences.

Tara sought to engage the village enough for her young people to have a transformational experience, but that experience didn't include encountering the humanity of the people there. She wanted her kids to see the poverty, but primarily so they'd be more thankful for the blessings they'd been given. She hoped her kids would recognize that the

people had very little, yet they were happy. But these realizations didn't depend on encountering these other people in any genuine way as much as it *used* their situation to provide her young people with an experience. In Nadia's mind, this made the mission trip a lot like Disneyland; both provided enclosed, discreet experiences that made you feel something. *What if we made a big Disneyland of Poverty for people to visit? The employees could dress in rags and sit outside huts pretending to be hungry and jobless from 9 to 5*, she thought wryly.

Kevin's purpose fell into a similar trap. He wanted his kids to do something, to act to change the world. But in motivating his young people for action, he risked rendering the people in the village inert and passive. It was as if he believed the people living in that Mexican village existed only to receive help from a few sixteen-year-old Americans who knew nothing about the people's history or culture. Kevin was so passionate to get his kids to *do* that it became easy to lose sight of the very *being* of the people in the village. *Are these people just props? We might as well be cleaning up a vacant lot or sponsoring a highway*, Nadia's doubtful thoughts muttered.

As for Bud, the director of the mission organization, he seemed to believe that as long as kids were doing service, doing *something*, they were doing the will of God, that they were furthering the kingdom of God. But this "doing the will of God" didn't necessarily lead them to the humanity of the ones in need.

Nadia thought again about Matthew 25 and how the actions toward "the least of these," always drew the actor into an encounter with the other's humanity, and how this led to mutuality, relationship, and a shared gift. Things were more complicated than Bud had stated. Nadia wondered: *Isn't it God's will that we treat one another as more than consumers and providers, problems and solutions? We're all just playing roles here.* Looking around at the scene before her, Nadia thought, *I don't have to know anything about the real pain or joy of these people, nor do I have to reveal anything real about my own. Doesn't it matter at all who each of us is in this equation, and that we somehow see and hear one another?*

Of course, as the day went on, the young people from Nadia's church interacted more with the locals. They invited the local people to their worship service and played with the neighborhood children. But after

three hours, all the orange shirts boarded the buses again and left, off to another experience tomorrow.

DAY THREE

After a few days, Nadia's cynicism had lessened. She still had huge questions, and the theological thoughts were still racing from her heart to her head, but she'd found enough equilibrium to enjoy the trip. That evening over dinner, Bud gathered the leaders for an informal mid-trip evaluation. "So," Bud began, "has the trip been meeting your expectations so far? Is it meeting the purposes you had for it in the life of your ministry?"

"Totally," said Tara. "I think this experience is really changing my kids. I mean, I think they get it. In our times together many have shared how thankful they are for their many blessings and said they understand now that you don't need a lot to be happy and to follow God." Nadia felt a rush of unease, but held back her reaction. Like Tara, Nadia had had some deep conversations with her young people about what they'd seen and how they could make sense of it in light of their own lives.

"Anyone else?" Bud asked.

"It's been really great!" Kevin answered. "I think we're doing kingdom work here this week and really making a difference. And when you do kingdom work, you are blessed and changed. My kids have really been shaped by bringing forth the kingdom."

"Nadia?" Bud said, giving her the floor to offer her feedback.

"Oh, I agree that it's been a great trip so far," Nadia responded. "But I guess my kids are feeling a little differently than Kevin's kids are. My kids are wondering if they really are making any difference. I mean, we tried to push them to see the suffering and stuckness of the people we encountered, and how this connected to their own stuckness. And I think that's really important. But I think it leaves them wondering if our being here really makes any difference."

The others just stared back. So Nadia continued, figuring she might as well just go for it. "I guess my young people are living near the question I had at the start, which is: What's the point? I mean, there is so much poverty and need here. Do our small efforts really make any difference at all? And why is existence so random? Is it just simple luck that the

kids in this village have been born into situations of desperate poverty while most of our kids live in middle-class neighborhoods surrounded by all kinds of privilege? I mean, what is God doing?" Nadia paused, recognizing that she'd just set the ticker on a theological time bomb that might well explode when she set it in the center of the circle.

"So," she added, "any thoughts on what I should say to them?" Tick … tick … tick …

chapter two

Signs of a Walking Dead Man

As she lay in bed the next night, the stale air seemed to press down on Nadia's shoulders like a weighted vest. She felt as if she had a layer of film obscuring every pore, and lack of sleep seemed to paint her face with a heavy fatigue. But this was normal for night four of a mission trip. Nadia's legs felt so sore that she wondered if she'd even be able to walk the next day. All around her were slumbering kids, their bodies contorted into positions Nadia wouldn't have thought humanly possible; nevertheless, they were all fast asleep.

This day and the three before it had gone well; they'd all been busy doing many things and Nadia could feel it in her body. As she coped with her aching muscles, she tried to close her eyes again, hoping she'd finally be able to calm her mind and find sleep. But she had no luck; her obsessive desire for a shower and her own bed prevented her body from finding its way into slumber.

Peering up at the ceiling, she found herself reflecting again on the ticking theological bomb she'd triggered in yesterday's leadership debriefing. This trip had forced her to think deeply about the theological purpose of doing mission trips, and these theological thoughts had an impact, not only on her conception of mission and service, but on the whole of her ministry. Such thinking was both a continuation and a deepening of the theological journey she'd been traveling the last few years.

In many ways this year's mission trip was like all the other mission trips before it. Nadia was both thankful it was half over and thankful it had happened. But despite its similarities to past years, Nadia knew this trip was unique. The logistics and activities resembled other years, but there was a new kind of energy racing around the organism of her

group. Nadia believed it had everything to do with the Bible reading group and conversations about Scripture that her kids had been having with the adults during the summer Sunday school hour.

One of the most provocative moments of this summer's experiment of getting high school students and adults reading the Bible together was their dialogue about Jesus' Feeding of the Five Thousand (Mark 6:31-44). They struggled deeply together to understand why Jesus seemed so willing to provide a one-shot meal to so many, filling their stomachs for just a short time, when digestion would soon leave them—even children—hungry again. The adults and young people had spent weeks wrestling with the question, *What's the point? What's the point of feeding five thousand people if they're still going to get hungry again?* Nadia guessed it was the reading group's wrestling with that question that had opened her mind to ask the same question in relation to the mission trip. After all, these weeks of conversation and debate had led right into the mission trip, and Nadia couldn't help but see the connections between the one-shot meal Jesus provided and the one-shot mission/service activities of their mission trip. Going into the trip, she'd hoped she could keep the same kind of reflection going.

DEAD IS DEAD

The focus Scripture text that the mission organization had chosen for the kids to discuss during this year's trip was John 11:1-45, the story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus.[2] The climactic moment of John's account is the moment when Lazarus emerges from the tomb. "The dead man came out …" writes John (11:44).

The dead man. I can't help but wonder if Lazarus was known from that point on as "the dead man."

"Who's doing the work on our house?"

"Lazarus."

"Lazarus who?"

"You know, Lazarus—'The Dead Man.'"

"Oh, yeah, that Lazarus! He's a cool guy; he does good work."

John doesn't want us to miss the point when he says, "The dead man came out." After four days behind a stone, Lazarus is dead. He is dead in every way—dead enough that his body would stink, dead enough that Jews would believe his soul had completely departed. (They tended to believe the body had a three-day expiration date, before it was over, over, over). Lazarus's life is over—over for more than four days—and now there's a stink.

But then Jesus speaks and God acts. The Word of God moves and what is dead is brought back to life. The Word of God calls out to the dead man and tells him to live, to walk out of death and back into life. And like a good horror movie, the dead man steps from the tomb cave, still wrapped in ceremonial burial cloth and scarred from decay. He crosses the line from impossible to possible, the infinite chasm between death and life.

Imagine what it must have been like some two, three, or twenty years later, when the dead man dies again, is eulogized, and is laid into the same resting place he'd been before Jesus interrupted his eternal sleep with an unexpected (and maybe, now that he's dead again, undesired) encore. After all, it can't be easy to cross the cold abyss from life into death. Because the dead man lives again, he will again have to cross

back into the bone-shattering cold air of nothingness. And poor Mary and Martha—it's hard enough to grieve a brother once, but twice? I suppose just one more hug from their brother, one more Passover together, one more conversation, makes it worth all the pain. But it does trouble the human heart to think about being given back the one you love, only to lose your grip on him again.

Which brings us around to the same question the reading group wrestled with as they considered the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21): What's the point? One meal, salvation from the pain of hunger, only to be hungry again? A dead man brought to life, only to be placed back in his grave clothes again, left stiff and lifeless. The victory over hunger and death is temporary. It's like a skydiver's "defeat" of gravity. The diver can use her experience and skill to keep herself in the air for a time as if she's flying, but she isn't flying at all, but "falling with style." Eventually, she's coming down (and coming down hard, if she doesn't pull her chute). So it is with both the risen Lazarus and the satisfied child who wipes bread crumbs from his chin as he sits with the masses. God's act seems to make them fly, to hover above their hunger, to jet past death, only to be brought hurtling back to earth once again. The miracle that touches their dead places and brings it to life loses its shine as it's rubbed dull by the reality of existence. Even Jesus' actions—the very actions of God—can't free us from hunger and death. They may bring relief or joy for a time, but nothing lasting—or so it appears.

Watching the orange-shirted young people doing their service and mission, Nadia couldn't help but wonder if we tend to forget the whole story of Lazarus when we discuss mission and service with young people. Bud had spoken to the young people about how Jesus had the power to resurrect Lazarus, but he never mentioned what it might mean that Lazarus found himself back in the grave some time later. Yes, the dead man lives, but the dead man also dies again. And if the dead man dies again, if full stomachs become hungry again, if even the action of God can't stand up to the wearing of atrophy and need, then what in the world are a group of sixteen-year-olds in neon T-shirts going to do? As Nadia and her young people read this text, they couldn't help but wonder: *What are we doing here?*

THE SICK MAN

The climax of John's story is when the dead man walks from the tomb, now alive. But John describes that moment in just two verses (11:43-44). It happens quickly and then the story is over, the Gospel takes another turn. There is no post-postmortem interview; no discussion of what it was like for Lazarus to be dead, or to be alive once again; no Oprah interview on having not a near-death experience but a four-days-dead experience. Lazarus is brought back to life—and then John moves on. He moves on because in many ways Lazarus' resurrection itself is not the point; that's why it's given only two verses. But what's interesting is that the preamble, the events that lead up to the climatic act, takes most of the space and energy in John's account.

The story starts when the dead man is not dead, but just sick. Lazarus's two sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus that their brother is ill. Jesus is close to all the members of this family. In Luke 10:38-42, we find Jesus at their home, with Mary sitting at his feet and listening to his teaching while Martha is busy.[3] Later in John's Gospel, we will find the story of Mary's anointing Jesus' feet with expensive perfume (12:1-8). But here, when Jesus is told that Lazarus is ill, Jesus stays put, aware that the illness will kill Lazarus. Jesus tells his disciples that Lazarus has fallen asleep (11:11). "If he sleeps, he will get better," they respond. "No, you idiots," John as much as puts in Jesus' mouth. "When I say *sleep*, I mean he's dead. But this is good for you dense disciples—because when I resurrect him, you'll believe" (11:12-15).

Believe what? They've already dropped everything to follow Jesus. In fact, Thomas declares in the very next verse (11:16) that they are ready to follow him into Judea and die with him. So often, as we've discussed throughout these four books, youth ministry has been obsessed with getting young people to assimilate to a particular set of rational, religious propositions, and we've called this assimilation "belief." We say we want young people to believe. But what is it we want our youth to believe in? And what does Jesus want his disciples to believe?

Tara and Kevin want to use the mission trip as an opportunity for their young people to believe. In this, they are only repeating what many

youth ministry experts have been saying: that mission trips and service opportunities are great tools to get kids to take their faith seriously, to come to belief. Kids start to believe, Kevin asserts, when they do something for someone less fortunate. The poverty these kids encounter in the Mexican village becomes just a tool, an environment that middle-class youth workers can use to get their kids to commit to their religion.

People are dying because of poverty, but their poverty is being *used* to make middle-class kids religiously rich. You might think it would work the opposite way—that for a middle-class kid who sees people suffering in poverty while knowing he has 30,000 songs in his iTunes might force him to question and doubt his religion. But the fact that it doesn't may indicate that we've turned the village into an unreal simulation we use, rather than opening our lives to the reality and humanity of those who suffer.

At first glance it seems as if Jesus is using the same strategy with Lazarus's death. Let Lazarus die, let his sisters mourn and wail as death sinks its icy claws into the flesh of their brother—then Jesus can use this death as a tool to convince his disciples to believe. As Ray Anderson often said, Mary knows Jesus has the pills to heal her brother in his pocket, but refuses to use them. And Jesus declares that he refuses to use them so the disciples will believe. But, again, believe *what*? It seems more than a little harsh to let a friend die simply to prove a point.

When Jesus arrives in Bethany and the sisters learn that he is there, the personalities of the two sisters color their responses. Martha, the doer, does something; she walks out to meet Jesus, while Mary stays put. Confronting him with words of sorrow and regret that still affirm Jesus' power, Martha says, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21).

Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise again" (11:23).

"I know," Martha counters. She has her religious commitments down, she knows the points; she explains that she believes that her brother will be with her again in the last days (11:24). Martha is a strong and devout woman, a minister, a woman of belief and action. Though she mourns, she still believes what she wrote on her ordination exams. She knows the religious answers.

But this is not what Jesus is interested in. In response to Martha's seminary textbook answer, Jesus asserts, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25). Jesus explains that to believe in him—to be bound to him, to cleave your life to his—is to live and to live forevermore, even though you die. Jesus doesn't want Martha to believe *in* the theory of the resurrection, but in the actuality of Jesus' own person ("I *am* the resurrection"). He doesn't want her to believe in the doctrine of the resurrection, but to trust that in his action the new reality is made manifest. Jesus is preparing to act, to open a window into a reality that Martha longs for deeply, yet thinks is distant.

THE SIGN

This story of Jesus' raising of Lazarus fits within the shape of the larger argument John makes throughout his Gospel. John has framed Jesus' acts as signs that reveal Jesus as the Son of God who is bringing forth the kingdom of God. This is why we can say that the resurrection of Lazarus isn't the point in itself; after all, Lazarus will die again. The point is that in raising Lazarus, Jesus is opening up the new reality that God is bringing forth through Jesus' action. The raising of Lazarus is a sign, a witness, to the new reality that is coming into the world through Jesus himself.

That's why Jesus tells Martha, "I am the resurrection" (11:25). Martha's words are an indication of how easily the idea of resurrection can become ossified into a religious concept. (We know that the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day had been fighting over their differing theoretical understandings of the resurrection.) When Jesus says "I am the resurrection," he frees the resurrection from political fighting. He gives flesh to what was once stone, making resurrection not a concept but his very person; it lives in his action. It lives!

Note that Jesus doesn't stop there; he states, "I am the resurrection *and the life."* This might at first seem a bit redundant; after all, by definition, to be resurrected is to move from death into life. But I don't think this is just Jesus using a few extra words to make his point. Rather, to add "and the life" is to focus direct attention on the culmination, the completion of God's action for all creation. It is to set our gaze on Jesus as the one who brings forth the new reality. Jesus is the resurrection that brings forth life; he *is* life. The act (the function) of resurrection brings forth the new reality of life. It shows us that Jesus acts with an eye to the horizon of the coming new reality. The raising of Lazarus, for John, is a sign of the coming of this new reality, a witness to the new reality that is bound in and born from Jesus' very person, a reality where death gives way to life, where life finally and completely overcomes death.

In book 3 (*Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*) I asserted that the biblical text functions as a sign, a witness to God's action. In the same way, for John, Jesus' actions—whether it be raising Lazarus, feeding the

five thousand, or casting out demons—are signs of the coming of God's new reality; they testify that God's future is breaking into our world. Jesus' actions are signs that point to the coming reign of God, but they are also the very in-breaking of that reign itself. Whereas the biblical text points away from itself to the action of God, the raising of Lazarus and the feeding of five thousand point into themselves. They are tastes of God's future. Jesus' action of healing is more than just a function or sign; it is an actual experience of what will be completed in the future. It is a sample of the feast that is coming. When the five thousand are fed and Lazarus is raised, the new reality has broken into this one; God's future has arrived. But it has not been culminated, and therefore it exists only as an appetizer of the banquet that awaits. So as he emerges to life out of death, Lazarus is a sign of the coming new reality of God's future. But since this experience is only an appetizer, a witness, he must die again—for the banquet, the fullness of God's future, has not yet arrived.

As we've said throughout A Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry, where God acts, life splits death through bringing forth the new reality. When Lazarus walks from the tomb in his grave clothes, he is a huge blinking sign that reads: "It is coming, it is coming, it is coming. Jesus is the new reality, and in this new reality death, hunger, and sickness will be no more. It is coming through Jesus' action."

When John the Baptist is in prison, sitting in a small cold cell, he starts to question his own proclamations about Jesus' identity. So John sends his disciples to get some confirmation from Jesus. When John's disciples ask if Jesus is the one they have awaited or if they should expect another, Jesus responds, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor" (Matthew 11:4-5). Of course, not every sick person is healed nor are all the hungry fed, but Jesus' point is that his acts are bringing forth the new reality. He invites John to taste and see that these actions are signs (appetizers) of the coming reign of God where death gives way to the fullness of life.

So, the point isn't that Lazarus is resurrected; the point is the meaning of that resurrection. The raising of Lazarus is the puncturing of the finality of death with a sign of the coming of God's new reality, the

coming of God's kingdom; it is the appetizer that promises a feast. But the raising of Lazarus is just a sign—significant and beautiful in its own right, but even more significant in that it points beyond itself to *the resurrection*, to Jesus' own resurrection. And Jesus' resurrection, as we will see in chapter 4, is not a sign, but the thing itself.

But for now, Lazarus is given back to his sisters as a witness to what will be in the end, to what is coming. It is a taste, a big taste to be sure, but still just a taste of the new reality of God's action, which overcomes nothingness with new possibility. The dead man alive is a sign of the coming of God, of God's future.

Lazarus lives again as a witness to the new reality that God's action brings forth. Providing bread and fish to five thousand hungry people doesn't solve their hunger, but it is nevertheless a sign, a witness that God is acting to bring forth a new reality where hunger and death have no say. It's just a taste of what will one day be fulfilled—and not just for those five thousand, but for all people. In the new reality all will be fed by the bread of life and will never hunger again (Matthew 14:13-21). For now, we eat and celebrate as a sampling of what is coming. For now, we must continue to face our growling stomachs and our finite existence. But soon, the new reality born from God's act will come in culmination and sweep us all into the banquet feast.

SO, BELIEVE IN WHAT?

But this takes us back to the beginning of our story—and back to the point of all this for youth ministry. Jesus told his disciples he wanted them to experience the raising of Lazarus "so that [they] may believe" (John 11:15). But again, what does he want them to believe in? They have already left home and family, risking death to follow him.

Jesus doesn't want his disciples to rationally commit to some particular belief system or set of facts. He doesn't want them to assimilate to some doctrine or adopt some morality. Jesus wants them to taste the new reality, to recognize that as his disciples they are participating in the very action of God to bring forth God's future. Jesus wants them to taste so they might believe, might trust, in God's action to bring forth this future.

Jesus isn't concerned with his disciples possessing knowledge but with their having the eyes to see that God's future is coming, and to believe so fully in its coming that they will be willing to bend their lives toward a future that is not yet here. Jesus could have easily said, "It is good that you will see me resurrect Lazarus, because when you nibble on the new reality it will burst upon your taste buds and you will be made new.

You will become people of anticipation, people who seek to find in the world more places where the future reality breaks forth. People who pray and yearn for it to come in fullness. People who trust that it is coming and, therefore, seek to participate with their action in the action of God to bring forth the new reality. *To believe is to taste and see God's future."*

So maybe this is the point, the purpose, of mission trips in youth ministry. They are *not* to be used as a tool to move kids into religious commitment, but rather are opportunities to participate in tasting God's future. Through our small and insignificant actions of service, we witness to God's future. And by our witness, by taking action, we are pulled into participation. In other words, witness is not passive but the very active way of participating in God's own action. We have no power to bring forth the fullness of God's future new reality. But as we seek to participate in God's action, our feeble actions of feeding, clothing, and

supporting become substantive witnesses to the coming of God, to the hope for the new reality.

The mission trip, then, is not the grandiose effort that Kevin imagines, nor is it the tool to deepen religious commitment that Tara wants it to be. The mission trip in youth ministry is a week of insignificant acts that, despite the heavy shadow of oppression and poverty, seek to witness to God's new reality. We reach out to the homeless now, knowing that one blanket won't solve their plight or get them off the streets; but one blanket is, to a freezing person, a taste of God's future. The mission trip seeks to taste God's future by acting in small ways that are congruent with it, and that offers others a chance to taste that same future. Sure, our actions may be no more than grocery-store samples, small and episodic, but against the backdrop of God's action they become much more—they become our yearning participation in God's eschatological future.

THE DRAMA

In the youth group's discussion the next evening, Caden jumped into the issue right away. He blurted out, "I mean to me, when I read this story, it's cool that Jesus raised Lazarus, but he's just going to die again, right? So I guess I'm not sure why it's such a big deal. I mean, it's like the feeding of the five thousand that we discussed earlier this summer. They are just going to be hungry tomorrow—so what's the point?"

Nadia was still swimming in the murky water of her skepticism, so she shot back, "Well, let me ask all of you a similar question: What's the point of what we've been doing here all week?"

"What do you mean?" asked Kelli, a ninth-grader on her first trip. "I mean, we helped people, didn't we?"

"Yeah, maybe," said Nadia, "although I'm not sure if anyone asked them what kind of help they needed, or if they even wanted help."

"But, the pastor was there," said Grant, a tenth-grader, referring to the pastor of the small church village.

"Yes, he was," said Nadia. "But there were very few other people from the community, other than the handful of children who came to the program."

Nadia could see that her questions about the work they'd done that day were worrying many of her young people, so she tried to shift the conversation back to the text. But Caden wasn't ready to move on. Taking on his debate persona, he launched in, "Well, maybe what we've been doing here is kind of pointless. I mean, you have people living on two dollars a day, and there's political corruption and that kind of stuff, and that's not going to change. And then we come in and paint a wall and drop off some food. It's just a drop in the bucket. I mean, we're going to leave tomorrow—and I wonder if anything's really changed at all …"

Nadia silently agreed, but said nothing. Caden was strumming her skepticism.

"No, no," said Mattie, who, like Caden, had been among the students participating in the weekly cross-generational Sunday morning Bible

reading group. “Wait, in our Bible group, we’ve been talking about the true reality.”

“The *new* reality,” Nadia interrupted, correcting her.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. We’ve talked about how God acts to bring the new reality. If that’s true, then God must be moving here, right? I don’t think the point of the story about Lazarus was to solve the problem, like, to make him immortal or something, but to point to how Jesus brings the true …”

“*New*,” interrupted Kelsey.

“Yeah, I mean *new* …” said Mattie, not missing a beat, “… the new reality. Jesus talked about how this new reality comes in small ways like in tiny mustard seeds or when lost stuff is found. I guess what I see us doing is witnessing through our small actions to God’s action of bringing the true …”

“*NEW*!” everyone shouted.

“*New*,” Mattie said shaking her head briskly as if to rearrange things in her mind so she’d keep it straight. “The *new* reality.”

The conversation shifted direction at that point, but Nadia could feel some of her skepticism melting away. Mattie had said something beautiful, something that helped Nadia understand the theological purpose of their trip. The point wasn’t *for them* to solve any problems, the point wasn’t to go to Mexico believing they could right wrongs and make things better. The ultimate point was to participate with God in God’s action to bring forth a new reality—a new reality where problems will be solved and wrongs will be made right. But this was *God’s* doing—not the work of teenagers in orange T-shirts. Yet these orange-shirted teenagers could be witnesses to God’s coming new reality; they could participate in God’s action. How? Well, Nadia wasn’t completely sure. But she was certain that this participation with God was what mattered. There was a difference between going into a village and passing out candy to the kids and working to help build a well that would provide clean water.[4] The difference had something to do with witnessing to how God acts. Bringing candy witnesses to something, sure, but bringing clean water promises life, promises new possibility.[5] Nadia felt thankful that Mattie’s theological reflection had begun to loosen the tight grip of

Nadia's own cynicism.

After a good night's sleep—her first really restful night of the entire trip—Nadia felt renewed the next morning. She stepped out into the bright sun to see some of her kids saying teary goodbyes to their Mexican hosts and packing their duffel bags onto the buses.

Everyone waved out the windows as the three buses took off, heading for the border. After crossing back into the States, the three groups would be spending one final night together before heading back to their respective congregations. Another summer mission trip was pretty much in the books.

As usual, right before getting to the border, the buses pulled over and kids piled out. They were allowed three hours to eat and browse the tourist shops. But by the time the first few kids began trickling back to the buses later that afternoon, Nadia realized their shopping excursion raised a whole new set of questions …

chapter three

Mission Trips, Tourism, and Globalization

The young people filed back onto the buses weighed down by bags and bags of souvenirs and other items that they'd bought that afternoon. As Nadia counted each young person who returned to the bus, she could feel the electric energy bouncing off the walls. Kids unveiled their purchases with excitement and talked about whom they'd bought each item for. ("This T-shirt is for my friend Melinda; she'll look so hot in it!") It was like they were a group of sugar-holics who'd each been given a case of Pez. The chatter about all the great bargains and cool stuff rattled Nadia's mind. Watching kids hold up novelty T-shirts and shot glasses, she couldn't help but wonder if there was much difference between this mission trip and a tourist vacation. After all, if Nadia had a dollar for every time she'd heard a kid say, "Hey, we're in Mexico—we should party in Cabo!" she'd have enough money to buy a T-shirt or shot glass for every member of the congregation back home.

Nadia thought about how much easier it had been to get kids to sign up for the annual mission trip than to get them to attend almost any other event on the youth ministry calendar. Only fifteen young people had gone on the fall retreat; between eighteen and twenty-five participated in the weekly youth group program; eight or ten came to the Bible reading group; and, surprisingly, only seventeen had been willing to spend a day of their summer vacation at the local amusement park. But when she announced that they'd be taking another mission trip back to Mexico, the thirty available spots were filled in two and a half weeks—a record.

Now, Nadia wondered if the reason the youth had been so eager to

sign up had more to do with being tourists than being servants. Nadia didn't doubt that her kids wanted to do some good; they liked that idea. But their interest in doing good didn't eliminate their desire to enjoy the sensations of travel. As a matter of fact, a number of her young people gave her a hard time when they learned that Kevin's group would be spending two days at Disneyland before continuing home. They wanted a similar stop.

When they reached the deadline the leaders had given kids for returning to the buses, three boys were still missing. There had been strict words about the need to be back at the established time; being fifteen minutes late was not cool. As the fifteen minutes became half an hour, Nadia began asking some of the other kids if they had any idea where the three missing boys might be, and she sent four adult leaders out to make a quick sweep of the tourist area to look for them.

After twenty minutes the leaders returned with no luck. They'd walked through all the little shops and fast food restaurants but had seen nothing. As they continued to wait, Nadia's anger turned into worry. The boys had now been missing for more than an hour.

Finally, Grant, a tenth-grader, came to the front of the bus and asked to talk with Nadia. It was clear he was nervous. After they'd stepped off the bus to escape all the noise, Grant began, "I think I might know where they are."

"Where?" Nadia said with panicked intensity.

"You have to promise you won't tell them I was the one who told you," Grant said.

Nadia agreed, wondering how it would be possible to keep this secret since a whole busload of kids had seen Grant walk to the front to talk with her.

"Okay, Grant, I won't tell them. We really just need to find them. I'm worried something might have happened," she assured.

"Yeah, me too," said Grant as he looked down and dug one foot around in the dirt.

"Well, then tell me," Nadia said with a jab.

Grant looked up shamefully and said, "I think they took a cab to that

beach a couple miles away. They said they'd heard there was a place to rent WaveRunners." Nadia just stared back, speechless. She'd made it very clear to the youth that they weren't allowed to go to the beach; the thought of these guys out racing on the ocean made Nadia's stomach uneasy. "They wanted me to go with them, but …" Grant tried to continue. Nadia had no time to discuss it further. She turned and sent two of her adult leaders off to find the boys.

Nadia leaned heavily against the bus. Every couple of minutes the driver poked his head out the bus window to remind her they were late, which meant they would miss the ideal time to cross the border, possibly leading to further delays. At this point, though, Nadia couldn't care less about the schedule. She was lost in concern for the boys' safety as her mind raced through all the possibilities for what might have gone wrong.

Finally, she saw them: two leaders returning with the three boys. Relief flooded Nadia. The two male leaders explained that, sure enough, they'd found them at the beach.

Tom, a senior, spoke first, with a sheepish smirk. "Sorry, we lost track of time. There was no clock out there. We didn't mean anything by it."

Nadia was shocked and angered by Tom's frankness. "What do you mean?" she said, appalled that this was all Tom had to say for himself. The other two boys looked down quickly, perceiving that the issue went much deeper than just being late. However, Tom didn't pick up on it.

With her eyes as big as saucers, Nadia responded, "Tom, you were at the beach! On a *church mission trip* you went out *wave-running by yourselves*!" Tom looked confused—and then defensive.

"Yeah …" he said with a tone of uncertainty.

Nadia could only repeat, "On a *CHURCH MISSION TRIP!*"

Tom countered, "I'm eighteen, and down here you only have to be eighteen to rent a WaveRunner. So, I don't see the problem."

"Well, Tom," Nadia shot back, "we're not here to *party*. We're here to serve others and God."

"I did serve others!" Tom responded, "I've been working hard all week. I don't see why helping others and having some fun can't go

together. What's the problem?"

Nadia was shocked by his response. "Well, the two friends you took with you are not eighteen, so that's a problem. And you left the group without permission, going where you were told not to, and that's a problem, too. And you were more than an hour late and had us all worried about you, so that's another problem. Now get on the bus."

As they pulled out and headed for the border, Nadia was still shaking —partly from fear but mostly out of anger. *How could he?* she kept saying to herself, responding not just to Tom's actions but even more to his attitude.

But as she began to calm down, she wondered if Tom's comments weren't true for more than just himself. Sure, those three boys were the only ones who'd pushed it to the extreme, spending their free time where they'd been told not to be. But all the kids had their tourist souvenirs, almost nursing them like pacifiers. Nadia wondered if, at least on one level, the rest of the kids would agree with Tom's comment: *I don't see why helping others and having some fun can't go together*. Or, as the other kids might phrase it: *Why can't helping people in poverty and shopping for our friends go together?* Nadia wasn't against fun; she wanted kids to have fun on the trip. But she wondered if the logic of tourism wasn't part of the U.S. adolescent condition, making the young people's idea of "fun on a mission trip" and "tourist consumerism" one and the same in the young people's minds.

GLOBALIZATION

Motion has become one of our primary ways of being in the world. Even when we're sitting still, most of us are constantly in motion. Our smart phones and laptops aren't just communication devices but portals that allow us to cross space at the speed of fiber optics. It's interesting that, at least domestically, there is hardly such a thing as long distance phone service anymore. You can call anywhere for the same price and often talk unlimitedly. Just as long distance calling is disappearing, so is the concept of long distance itself. We can be anywhere in a relatively short time. Some social theorists have asserted that space has become liquefied.[6]

The same technologies that allow us to be constant movers have also bound the world together as one place. We've moved into what's been called a globalized world. And, at least at the level of culture, this globalized world means we have the devices and opportunities to cross vast expanses of space very quickly. We are connected to people all over the world—sometimes connected more closely to people thousands of miles away than to those living right across the street. The process of globalization has been going on for hundreds of years, but the pace has accelerated dramatically over the last four decades or so.[7]

As the world has increasingly become one place through globalization, it's no wonder that short-term youth ministry mission trips have become the hot trend. These mission trips are possible only because of our globalized world. Relatively cheap airfare and open borders allow middle-class young people to travel around the globe for experiences of mission and service. The very same technological and economic realities that make globalization a reality also make it possible for church youth groups to surf the wave of globalization to the ends of the earth in the name of Jesus.

The very fact that we can place "short-term" in front of "mission" is the result of full-blown globalization. Globalization blurs distance by accelerating time. The world is bound as one place, not because space itself has shrunk but because jet fuel and microprocessors slingshot us quickly across areas that once took months or even years to traverse. In

a globalized world nearly everything is accelerated. So, now, thanks to globalization, church groups can do accelerated, short-term mission trips.

MISSION AND GLOBALIZATION

Throughout the church's history, Christian mission work has been wedded to the broader conceptions of the world. The changing ways we encounter the world have shaped our understanding and practice of mission. The earliest Christian missionaries like Paul used the imperially-enforced *Pax Romana*—and the roads built by the military in order to enforce this peace—to spread the gospel. In the medieval period, mercenaries sent by kings raided distant lands, and so missionaries took a similar path and became crusaders.

The modern missionary movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was closely tied to the European colonization of that era. Along with the explorers and armies of European nations also went missionaries. But there was no such thing as "short-term" missions; the world was too big, and technology too slow. The missionaries of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries risked their lives to cross the globe, encountering people and cultures that were utterly different. Mission work was a dangerous and death-defying call, both because it involved the risk of slowly crossing vast uncharted spaces and because it meant encountering others whose ways were unfamiliar (and who'd not been touched by the superhighway of electronic communication and entertainment).

Just as earlier missionaries boarded boats with European colonizers, we drape our young people in T-shirts and send them on planes alongside tourists taking short-term vacations and economic globalizers doing short-term business. This isn't all bad; or, better to say, much of it is inevitable. But it comes with a danger. This danger is easier for us to see as we look back on past eras than as we consider our own time and our own actions. Retrospectively, many of us can see how missionaries in the period of colonization actually damaged the gospel and provided a religious justification for dehumanizing colonization. From Africa to Australia to the Americas, indigenous peoples' cultures were crushed for the sake of spreading the gospel. The theological concept of the Great Commission became so intertwined with the American understanding of Manifest Destiny[8] that they became—at least in the mind of indigenous

peoples—inseparable.

So what might we realize in retrospect when we look back on this era of short-term missions? Is it possible that short-term mission trips and global tourism have been too intermingled?

THE YOUNG PERSON AS TOURIST

Now, it would be a dramatic overstatement to equate short-term mission trips and missionary colonization. *That's not my point.* What I am suggesting, though, is that it can be hard to prevent young people from approaching these mission trips with a tourist mentality. And one primary reason it's so hard is because this tourist mentality comes both through the devices and materials we use to go on these short-term mission trips (planes, rest stops, fast food, souvenir shops, etc.) as well as the devices and materials we use in our day-to-day lives (phones, video-chatting, satellite TV, etc). Just as missionary activities of the nineteenth century were fostered by the materials of empire (steamboats, trains, etc.) and its ideology of superiority, so do short-term mission trips use the materials (and, too often, the mentality) of globalization.

The tourist mentality is the mindset of the beneficiaries of globalization. As Zygmunt Bauman has explained, globalization forces us all into a constant state of motion. Even when it seems we're static, our phones and computers are moving us—and quickly. The motion becomes accelerated when it allows us new and unique experiences through travel, when it allows us to become tourists. But Bauman notes that even those without the means to have things like plane tickets and smartphones are moving. For instance, unbeknownst to Nadia and her youth group, many of the men in the Mexican village they'd visited had recently left the village, some for the first time. Some had set out to find work along the border, and others had traveled longer distances—even to the States—in search of work. If the beneficiaries of globalization are tourists who can travel as they choose, then the losers of globalization are the ones forced to wander: those who move in the shadows, those whose moving is unwanted, and those who work low-paying jobs in service to tourists (such as janitors at airports or hotel housekeepers).

It is no wonder, then, that Nadia found it easier to get kids to sign up for the mission trip than almost anything else on the youth ministry calendar. The mission trip offered young people an opportunity to move, to move their bodies physically across space as they'd been doing digitally. The mission trip is appealing to young people because it allows

them to live in sync with the cultural state of their being. It allows them to move—and nothing is more appealing to the beneficiaries of a globalized world.

But this moving comes with a backlash; it means that those on short-term missions move as tourists, which causes these mission trips to take on a vacation-like feel even over and against the intentions of youth workers like Nadia. Vacation, tourism, and travel are nearly synonymous (unless you're traveling as a vagabond hiding in someone's truck).

The tourists who pay big money to take an African safari have no interest in living permanently on the savannah. Rather, what they desire, and pay for, is the short-term sensation of experiencing that place before moving on to another. Tourism and consumerism are indelibly linked; it's no wonder that tourists often feel they need to buy T-shirts, shot glasses, and glossy pictures to commemorate their trips. The consumer stuff and tourism go hand in hand; without the stuff, the short-term sensational experience of tourism would fade from memory and be forgotten—especially as new sensational experiences are added.

The young people with Nadia may be buying souvenirs as mementos that they hope will help the sensation of the mission trip last in their memories—to keep the experience from being forgotten like last year's must-have new shoes or last spring's must-do bungee jump. But this only proves that the globalizing wave they surf, the very wave that makes the short-term mission trip possible, also sprays them with the lukewarm waters of consumeristic tourism.

NOW, WAIT JUST A MINUTE!

These have been some harsh words! Those of you who've led short-term mission trips may be feeling uneasy, a bit defensive, or perhaps even angry. *Please hear me: I'm not against short-term mission trips*. But what I'm trying to suggest is that despite our best intentions (and I think 99 percent of short-term mission trips are planned with the best of intentions) there are other forces and realities that impact the young people we take on these trips.

This doesn't mean we should avoid or cancel these trips. But we do have a responsibility to think deeply about them and, in doing so, to confront the tourist realities that globalization gives to us (both good and bad). The point of the last few pages isn't to ruin the planning calendar for your ministry or make you feel bad about your efforts to engage your young people in meaningful activity. I'm simply trying to articulate the preconceptions that our young people (and we ourselves) often have as we go on these short-term trips. We need to recognize the lens through which we all experience these trips—a lens that we're so used to seeing through that we can easily forget it's there.

THE DRAMA

As they inched toward the border check, Nadia could see tourists in their cars all around the bus, pulling forward after their one- or two-day trips. But of course it wasn't just tourists waiting there. In the same lanes were other people nervously preparing to cross, trying to communicate with the border guards as they showed papers. Nadia figured most of them were crossing the border to look for work.

After the bus pulled up to the border guard, Nadia could hear the driver say, "We were there a short time, and now we're back." In response to the guard's question, which Nadia couldn't hear, the driver answered, "No, it was short-term."

As the border guard waved them through and back into the States, Nadia couldn't help wonder if "short-term" mission trips were synonymous, at least intuitively, with "tourist" trips.

This thought seemed to tighten itself around Nadia with the force and fright of a boa constrictor. She turned to Eric, one of the adult leaders who had just pulled Tom and his friends from the beach, and said, "What are we doing here? I mean, what was the point of all this?"

Eric looked at Nadia, and then peered around the bus at the young people continuing to show off their souvenirs like kindergarteners at their first show-and-tell. Eric then said, "I guess we just need to hope …"

chapter four

Young Ministry in an Eschatological Light

We need to hope?" Nadia repeated, her mind intently focused on what Eric had said.

"Yeah," Eric continued, "I think it's important to stay hopeful. I mean, I *promise* that the kids got something out of this experience. Don't get down, Nadia, just because they're so euphoric about their new stuff."

"Thanks," Nadia said, nodding in appreciation for Eric's kind words. Maybe Eric was just trying to be encouraging, but she'd heard something significant in what he'd said. Two words had jumped out at Nadia—*hope* and *promise*. Eric didn't necessarily mean them in any theological sense, but Nadia couldn't help but hear them in such a way.

Hope and promise were at the heart of what Nadia and the young people had seen as they read the story of Lazarus. Nadia knew that the story had an eschatological perspective that impacted the way she understood mission trips. But Eric's words—hope and promise—seemed to give her a better handle for thinking about it.

PSEUDO-ESCHATOLOGICAL ANIMALS

Eschatology is, quite simply, theological reflection on the hope and promise of God's completed action.[9] Literally, the word *eschatology* refers to the study of the *eschaton*, or the end. Popular conceptions of eschatology are largely defined by sci-fi movies and books about the rapture, secret codes, and antichrists, but the word simply means the end, the completion of God's action.

Leaning against the window in the fourth row of the bus, Nadia wondered how a focus on the promise of God's completed action—an eschatological hope—might change the way she went about short-term mission trips. She wondered if such a focus might loosen the tourist grip on young people themselves. But she knew that such an emphasis might change much more than just her approach to these occasional trips; it would impact the whole of her ministry, making the short-term mission trips not just bracketed episodes but something more. As the bus accelerated onto the American freeway, and the engine's rumbling drowned out the hyper-souvenir show, Nadia found herself in deep theological reflection again.

In the preceding three books of this series, I've made a number of statements about the anthropological state of the young people with whom we work in youth ministry. For instance, in *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry* (book 2), I talked about the need to move away from seeing adolescence as a period of growth, development, and movement toward certainty and instead view it as a time when humans are awakened to our ontological state between possibility and nothingness. In *Unpacking the Scriptures in Youth Ministry* (book 3), I spoke of how the sudden awareness that they live suspended between possibility and nothingness makes young people hyper-hermeneutical animals: Kids are always seeking to interpret what their own and others' actions mean. Young people spend lots of time and energy trying to interpret who they are—not necessarily so they can grow, develop, and know things certainly, but so they might find possibility amidst the nothingness that exists in the world and in themselves.

Now, I want to add one more related idea to our conception of the

adolescents with whom we work. Young people are not only hermeneutical animals, but pseudo-eschatological animals as well. Let me explain what I mean by that: As we've said, adolescents are newly awakened to the fact that they are caught between possibility and nothingness. They can feel nothingness nipping at their heels, but they can also imagine great possibility for their own futures and for the world. Because young people are newly conscious of this ontological state, they also possess the gift to think beyond nothingness to the fullness of possibility. It's no wonder that the heroes of most teen dramas and comic book movies must always overcome some kind of nothingness to find themselves in an all-new possibility—and then they must go on to fulfill the promise of that possibility. These heroes win completely and fully (at least until the sequel).

Young people are pseudo-eschatological animals, not only because they can dream of new possibility, but because they take this dream to its completion. They dream of actions that might obliterate nothingness altogether, and it is this hope of pursuing possibility to its fulfilled completion that makes many adults think of adolescents as unrealistic dreamers. But eschatology (doing eschatology, like doing theology) is fundamentally about dreaming, about imagining, about the ultimate overcoming of nothingness finally.

Of course, we adults live between possibility and nothingness, too. But adults have often been socialized not to push their dreams for possibility to the *n*th degree. Adults' dreams are stuck in "this reality,"—so we dream of beating nothingness through a promotion at work or a new car. But young people tend to dream of *destroying* nothingness, of finding an altogether new world. Their vision leads them toward completion and culmination; in other words, it leads them into the eschatological.

BUT WHY PSEUDO-ESCHATOLOGICAL?

I think this ability to imagine the coming completion of reality, a time when nothingness is ended, makes young people a rich gift to the church. This is true even if some of their dreams seem weird and wacky. My friend Jon has shared about a teenager on his recent church mission trip who, with all sincerity, declared: "If we could get a unicorn somehow, we could live forever. Because all we would have to do is drink its blood." Obviously, this is a strange statement—but it does point to the eschatological proclivity within the young person. The longing expressed by this young person is eschatological; it yearns for fulfillment and completion where death is overcome once and for all. This young person is willing to imagine such a new reality.

Due to young people's awakening to being stuck between possibility and nothingness, there seems to be a kind of natural eschatology that surges through their veins. But I'm calling this a *pseudo*-eschatological impulse, not because it's sometimes weird or deeply imaginative (these are gifts); it is *pseudo*-eschatological because, due to culture and development, this impulse often takes no account of God's action. It misses that this coming completion, this fulfillment of possibility, has its beginning and end in the action of God.

In a pseudo-eschatological vision, the new reality comes from *human* action, not the act of God. It comes from the ability of the human agent to bring about this possibility—to find a unicorn, wrestle it to the ground, and collect its blood. A biblical eschatology depends not on human action—humans will never even know the day of its coming (Mark 13:32)—but on the action of God. It is God who brings, in its fullness, the new reality of God's kingdom.

But this emphasis on human action that we encounter in young people's pseudo-eschatologies shouldn't dissuade us from pushing into the truly eschatological (or from appreciating their wacky ideas). An eschatological vision becomes a particularly helpful theological perspective in working with young people as they awaken to the struggle between possibility and nothingness. Eschatology is the study of the last things, but at its core is the hope that God will move to bring forth

ultimate possibility next to what feels like ultimate nothingness. To study eschatology is to seek the promise that God is acting to transform possibility into an actuality of love and peace, a reality in which the nothingness that seems always to be threatening us is eliminated forevermore.

Throughout these four books, I've asserted that the purpose of youth ministry is to participate in the action of God. The cross reveals the way God acts, and the Bible witnesses to this action. But the very fact that God acts (in the beginning) promises that this action has a purpose; God's action has an end—an *eschatos*. I've said that the purpose of youth ministry is to participate in the action of God. But the purpose is also found in God's action; the purpose of God's action is to overcome, completely and finally, death (in all its forms) with life so that we might live forevermore with God. Eschatology is simply hope in the promises of God to act to bring forth this new reality—a reality that comes in small ways now, but one day will be all in all.

In the *eschaton*, the end, we will no longer be stuck between possibility and nothingness. Then, we will exist fully in the act of God where there is only possibility. But until possibility is transformed into actuality, until God brings about the end, we find ourselves in interpretation. We seek to discern the action of God, action that moves toward the new reality. We are moved to interpret God's action within the scope of the *telos* (the goal) of God's action.[10] In other words, *we participate in God's action by interpreting God's action with the end in mind*, by seeking to discern what God is doing through the lens of the new reality God is bringing about.

Yes, the globalized culture has spun our young people into ever-moving tourists, and this helps explain the recent popularity of short-term mission trips in youth ministry. But I think a more significant reason mission trips have been so important to young people is the way in which these trips touch their innate pseudo-eschatological state. This is a great gift, but also a potentially poisonous cocktail if we're not theologically aware. Being pseudo-eschatological animals, young people can be particularly vulnerable to false eschatologies. False eschatologies take advantage of the adolescent's anthropological state by claiming that fulfillment can happen outside the action of God. They suggest that

young people, or some other human agent, can bring forth the fulfillment, if we just believe or work hard enough.[11] Nadia was sensing this toxic mix of tourism and false eschatology. She worried that it ran the danger of clouding the young peoples' vision of the coming action of God.

There are three elements of a false eschatology, and Nadia encountered each of them in her mission-trip experience. Below we'll take a closer look at these three elements of a false eschatology, countering each of them with a biblical eschatology that attends to God's action.

1. Apathy vs. Promise

Are adolescents passionate or apathetic? Ask most youth workers and they'll say "passionate"; but ask them again fifteen minutes later and they might say "apathetic." It's probably true that it is not an either/or, but a both/and. False eschatologies (like consumerism, celebrity, volunteerism, etc.) cling to the pseudo-eschatological state of young people, telling kids that if *they* just work hard or want it enough then they can find fulfillment and shelter from the lurking nothingness. And so young people *do* things, and they do things passionately—only to discover that their own actions can produce no fulfillment.

When passion evaporates because of a lack of fulfillment, when young people's own actions dissolve in the acidic waters of nothingness, it leaves a dry layer of apathy. This apathy can have a number of faces: It can be sarcastic, or depressive, or it can mold itself into a self-centeredness that decides to "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die"—because, after all, all our efforts didn't change a thing.

Nadia wondered if one reason her young people jumped into shopping for tourist souvenirs didn't have something to do with apathy. It might be hard to convince anyone sitting on that bus that the cacophony of excitement over the kids' new stuff was apathetic. But maybe it was. Maybe—after a week of encountering severe poverty and people in great need, after a week of trying to help, only to leave with most of those people in the very same state—just maybe the rush to the souvenir shops was a way of medicating the growing apathy. Maybe it was a salve to help them deal with the realization that a week of well-intentioned hard work couldn't solve centuries-old problems. It is interesting that Kevin, the youth worker who was so passionate about his kids' ability to change the world, was the one who stopped by Disneyland for two days before returning home. After his young people had faced the impossibility of people living in a garbage dump, perhaps he hoped some time in Disneyland—"the happiest place on earth," where garbage disappears within three minutes—would pacify them in their false eschatology.

The pseudo-eschatological state of young people moves them to want to act, but once this action slams into the wall too many times, the

passion can turn quickly into apathy. The compassion that motivated our action finds itself too battered and bruised to continue. The false eschatology of tourist consumerism and amusement park living helps kids find some meaning in the now, having realized that the future can't be transformed so easily.

Jesus' actions could be interpreted as apathetic after he receives word that Lazarus is sick. He stays where he is for two more days. John tells us Jesus loves Mary and Martha (11:5), so why the delay? Waiting two days makes Jesus seem too busy or discouraged to make the trip. Like an overworked physician, you can almost imagine Jesus saying, "Give me a break, I've got a hundred other patients. Make him sit in the waiting room for a couple of days."

But when Jesus encounters Martha, he gives her a promise: "I am the resurrection and the life," he says, "whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (11:25-26). In the face of nothingness and death, Jesus first gives a promise, a promise wrapped up in his person, "I am …" Jesus *is* the promise, the promise of God's future.

If passion can die in the fatigue of *our* defeated actions, God's very promise, God's eschatological promise, stands in opposition to this. Promise is not deceived into believing our human efforts can defeat death and transform the world. Promise is the act of trust that moves in the world in ways that anticipate God's own action. Jesus tells Martha, in effect, *I promise that God will act through me; I promise death will be overcome*.

Perhaps the way we break the false eschatologies that lead young people to pacify their apathy with stuff is by entering into the eschatological through a focus on *promise*. We shouldn't give kids the false hope that their episodic volunteerism will crack the foundations of oppression or take away the crippling needs that exist in our world. Our actions may help; the significance of giving a starving mother bread to feed her child should not be overlooked. But that significance rests in a promise—a promise young people can offer in their presence. This promise is that God will act for those in need, that God is bringing forth a new reality where the sick will be healed and the hungry fed. A single bag of food may seem like nothing in a world where millions are hungry. But this one meal is not nothing; it is a promise, a fractured picture of

God's coming future.

The point of the mission trip isn't to give teenagers a chance to change the world through their actions. The point of the mission trip is to invite young people to act in ways that witness to the promise of God's action, which will make all things new. If our passion depends on the effectiveness of our actions in bringing change, then mission trips can become incubators of apathy. But if the point of the mission trip is witnessing to God's eschatological promise to act, then there is no wall to hit—just a reality to witness to.

2. Optimism vs. Hope

Americans are optimistic. And youth workers are hyperly optimistic. Of course, we youth workers are sometimes just hyper. (Even when we lack optimism, we can still find the energy to be hyper!) But in many ways even the desire to do youth ministry takes a person who is basically optimistic—optimistic about the next generation, optimistic that we can help, optimistic that young people actually care (even a little) about the church.

But while optimism is not bad (I like optimistic people), it can easily slide into a false eschatology. The American Dream—that belief that any person who works hard will find prosperity—is an optimistic eschatology that takes no account of the action of *God*. Optimism functions as a false eschatology because optimism is satisfied with *this* reality. Optimism tries to find fulfillment in this reality; if you can just stay positive and upbeat, you'll be fulfilled. But this fulfillment is contingent on our own action; we're asked to believe that if we just try harder we can change things. Optimism doesn't need the act of God, just an attitude adjustment.

Too often the way we fight apathy is with pleas for kids to stay upbeat and optimistic. Sure, these people are hungry and oppressed, but don't be such a downer! Don't look at how difficult their existence is; don't focus on the injustice; don't acknowledge that our attempts to change anything seem so feeble and inconsequential. Just be optimistic that you're making a difference! And when young people ask, *What difference?* we say, "You just have to be optimistic." But for those who can't, those who find the truth of the situation too heavy for easy optimism, apathy, and cynicism become a danger—because they've held the false eschatology of optimism up to the light and have seen that it is only an upbeat counterfeit.

Such optimistic attitudes lead to the ultimate tourist actions, since such activities stay disconnected from history. So you can optimistically give a homeless man a meal, but never have to wrestle with the systemic realities that force a man out onto the streets. Tourism, with its constant motion, requires optimism: As you move from short-term experience to

short-term experience, you need to be optimistic that the next experience will be fun and fulfilling, that the airline won't lose your luggage, and that the resort will be as beautiful as the Internet photos suggest. Tourism offers experiences like individual pearls on a necklace; they are disconnected from one another and from a history. People don't care about the history of their favorite resort, just that it provides a great experience in the now, during the short term.

Every morning Bud got the kids "pumped up for another day of changing the world." He did this with optimistic rhetoric about how great and meaningful that day's experiences would be, like a travel guide talking up the amazing sights his group will see on their bus tour of New York City.

When Martha encounters Jesus, telling him that her brother has died, Jesus says, "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23). Martha figures these are just optimistic words. Yes, she says, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (11:24). But when Jesus declares, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), he moves light years past optimism and into hope.

Optimism and hope seem to be made from the same ingredients. The two seem nearly synonymous, but they're not. Sure, someone who has tasted hope *may* find it easier to be optimistic. But at the heart, hope and optimism are very different. As we have said, optimism is burrowed into this reality; it tries to find a positive spin on this reality; it believes that something better can occur if we take life on with a "can do" attitude. But hope is different. Hope trusts in the promises of God. Hope seeks the action of God that brings forth a new reality. Optimism stands in the current reality, wishing to make the best of each individual experience. But hope stands knee deep in the history of this reality by yearning for the action of God to bring forth a new reality in which everything in this reality is reconciled and redeemed.

Hope seeks to participate in the action of God to bring forth God's promised redemption to all creation. When Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life," he asserts to Martha that in his person, he is bringing forth the new reality in which death is overcome. Jesus calls Martha away from a religious optimism and toward hope in the promise of God's action to bring forth life beyond death.

3. Future vs. Advent

Apathy sets in when our passion for the future is miscarried. In response, we use optimism as the defibrillator to shock that passion back to life. Young people often feel overwhelmed by everything they feel they must do now to have a good and enjoyable future. Many youth, especially those in the middle class, have swallowed the false eschatology that says they must be busy now so they can be successful down the line. They are busy with SAT prep so they can get a good job in the future, busy with basketball camp so they can make varsity in the future, busy going on summer short-term mission trips so they can put it on their college applications in the future.

The young people that teachers, parents, and pastors tend to like best are those who care about their future, those who plan toward and live for the future. And I think we like these young people because we often wear the same glasses of false eschatology. We affirm them for assimilating the false eschatology that tells them, "The future is *yours*." We say that if you just get your ducks in a row now and mitigate risk, *your* future can be a bright and successful one. And *if your* individual future is successful and happy, you'll be fulfilled. But any future orientation that is all about you, that sees the future in terms of your future, has a way of amping up the concern about whether any happiness or success you achieve can last. There is no rest in future-orientation. To be future-orientated is to be standing in the now as you make preparation, through your own actions, for *your* tomorrows.

Now, don't get me wrong—future-orientation has its benefits. It's been shown that societies and individuals who think about the future are more successful—that's another reason we like these kinds of kids. Future-orientation keeps things running on time and often safer—though future-orientation can also lead to war (Everything I've worked for could be ruined if terrorism or communism spreads.) and selfishness (I can't give because I need as much money in the bank as possible to ensure that my future is secure.).

Tourism leeches its vitality off of such a future-orientation. The airline magazine shows the picture of a couple walking on a white sand beach,

with a caption that reads, “This could be your future.” The false eschatology of future orientation asserts that if you’ll just work hard and plan for your future, you’ll have more opportunities to enjoy a luxurious life of tourism. And so less advantaged class people vote against their own interests because they’ve bathed in the trough of the false eschatology of the future, believing that the tax laws that benefit only the wealthy will, one day—when they’re rich—benefit them. The false eschatology of future-orientation says, *Work hard so you can one day live as a tourist and won’t get stuck being a wanderer*. (It’s interesting that the “winners” of globalization tend to be more future-orientated culturally).

Young people often react in one of two extreme ways when they return from a short-term mission trip. Some respond to the experience by buying into the false eschatology of future-orientation even more fully, by embedding even deeper in it. Having come face-to-face with great poverty and need, these young people come back thankful for what they have. Youth returning from a mission experience might say, “I am so thankful for my house and my new comforter and everything else I have. I can’t believe people live like that; I never want to live like that.” For these young people, the short-term extreme tourist experience becomes a motivation to invest in the false eschatology of securing their own future, taking action to make their future fulfilling. Too often parents affirm this, and will say to the youth worker, “I’m so glad we spent the money to send our daughter on the mission trip! For the first time she seems thankful for what she has and appreciates how hard we work to provide these things for her.” Of course, genuine thankfulness should be celebrated, but too often the “thankfulness” that stems from these trips is born in comparison, making it the scorecard of the false eschatology of future orientation.

But other youth will return from a short-term mission trip feeling very differently. They feel ashamed about their nice homes, their families’ wealth, and their parents’ future-orientation. They say things like, “I just hate American culture. I hate how spoiled we are. I wish I lived like the people in that Mexican village; they seemed happy just living for the day.” Of course, there is something to be learned from being with others who have far less material wealth (this a major point, I think, of mission trips). But in some ways this response, too, is shaped by a false

eschatology. It contends that if the young person could just live in opposition to the future-orientation—could live without giving attention to his or her future—then he or she would find fulfillment. But this perspective is, ironically, tied to the future as well. It is tied to it by denying it—but its feet are still squarely stuck in the unfolding of the future and what the human agent does or doesn't do to bring it about.

When Lazarus steps from the cave, it's a sign of the eschatological fulfillment where death is overcome by life. Lazarus is a dead man walking. The Gospel of John declares, "The dead man came out" (11:44), to show how Lazarus now lives as a man between the times. His resurrection is not bound by the future, but by God's coming, God's advent. *Advent* is the dawning of God's action, action located in the new world God is bringing forth, where death and sin have no place. Jesus resurrects Lazarus as a witness to God's own future, which comes only through God's own action. Until Jesus calls him forth, Lazarus has no future; his present has given way to death—the end of any future possibilities. But when God acts, when Jesus calls, "Lazarus, come out" (John 11:43), Lazarus witnesses to the reality of God's own future, in which nothingness is overcome, and the advent of God takes on death for the sake of life.

Lazarus is a man between the times. He continues to wear the marks of a world in which time moves from yesterday to today to tomorrow. He has died. But when Jesus acts, Lazarus becomes a sign of the advent of God's future, which doesn't bow to the progression of time. Rather, this God who raises Lazarus moves from the completion into barrenness, from the *eschaton* into our time. Lazarus still wears the scars of death and will have to die again, but in his raising, he witnesses to the coming of God's future when death is overcome. (We'll pick up on this idea in chapter 6.)

Promise and hope do not bow to the false eschatology that says, "If we work hard we can make something of ourselves." True hope is found in the promise that God is bringing forth God's advent—God's own future.[12] When a U.S. church youth group visits Mexico to stand with people of a small village, they are witnessing to the promise that God is bringing forth a future that stands in opposition to this one of suffering and death. And by entering into suffering and death of this world, we

embody the promise that God is acting to bring forth God's kingdom.[13]

Our hope is not that our efforts can make the world a better place. Our hope is in the action of God to open our eyes to see the small-but-sure ways God's new reality is breaking forth. We hope and pray that we might be witnesses to God's future becoming an actuality through God's action. In that hope, we seek to participate deeply in one another's lives, acting together in participation of God's advent, God's coming future of culmination.

THE DRAMA

Nadia knew the theological time bomb she'd triggered in the leaders' meeting several days ago was continuing to tick, even as the buses carried the groups back to the mission organization's U.S. headquarters. She'd told Bud, Stacy, Kevin, and Tara that her young people had been asking what the point was. In the face of such poverty, her kids felt like their own actions were feeble, and they wondered if what they'd done made any impact. She'd also explained that a number of her youth had raised deep questions about God's goodness: Why would God allow some people to be born into such crippling poverty while most of them had been born into families where they had more than they needed? Nadia had set the bomb ticking that night when she'd asked, "Any suggestions on what I should say to them?"

The other leaders' uneasy silence in response to that question seemed to extend through the final few days of the trip. Nadia stood in the uncomfortable place; figuring she was responsible for it, the least she could do was stay in it. She knew raising questions about the point of the trip had put her at odds with the other leaders. Kevin, in particular, seemed to be avoiding her; he hadn't even looked up when she'd greeted him the next morning. She'd decided to leave him alone, in hopes that they could get through the rest of the trip without detonating the bomb.

But now the trip was nearly over. She noticed that the seat next to Kevin was unoccupied—and she decided to take a chance on resuming the conversation. After all, within a few hours they'd all be headed in separate directions. Before she gave it another thought, she'd crossed the aisle and sat down next to him.

Kevin was immediately uncomfortable and shifted back and forth in his seat. But Nadia figured it was too late to turn back. "So," she offered, "it seems like you were really bothered the other night, when I talked about the questions my kids were raising about the point of the trip …"

At first, Kevin didn't say anything. But as the seconds passed, his lips tightened and his face became more and more red. Finally, when the silence got to be too much, Kevin blurted out, "That's just stupid! Stupid!"

Boom. The uncomfortable silence was broken, but now flooding its cracks was the anxiety of conflict. Kevin placed his hand on his forehead, communicating both his embarrassment for his outburst and yet his concern over Nadia's statement. "I am sorry …" he said, getting control.

"What's stupid?" Nadia shot back.

"Nothing," Kevin said, "just forget it." He clearly wasn't eager to discuss it any further.

"No, I don't want to forget it," Nadia said, now feeling her own anger in response to his outburst. "I want to know what you see as stupid. Is it stupid that my kids are wondering about what they're doing when many of these people are being strangled by poverty? Is it stupid that they question the goodness of God because they won the lottery and were born into safety and the kids in that village are in constant threat of disease or death? Tell me, Kevin, what's stupid?"

Nadia just stared at him, awaiting his response.

Nadia's directness seemed to sap Kevin's intensity; he looked away from Nadia's glare, only managing to raise his shoulders and shake his head. But Nadia wasn't ready to back down. She really was interested in what he found stupid, particularly about her theological perspective. Nadia had been on a long theological journey and she wanted to understand Kevin's reaction.

"Seriously, Kevin, I really want to know. What's stupid?"

"Well," Kevin responded, "I don't think you really believe in the resurrection."

chapter five

Resurrection

What? I don't believe in the resurrection?" Nadia said in confusion. Over the course of this theological journey, she'd been accused of not believing in a lot of things! She wondered why her questioning and reflecting caused some people to decide she didn't believe. To her, it felt like the opposite was true.

Kevin repeated himself, regaining some of his boldness. "Right. I don't think you really believe in the resurrection."

"How could you possibly know what I believe?" Nadia said, as her frustration mounted. "We've never really talked, Kevin."

"I think that if you really believed in the resurrection," Kevin said, "you would understand the point of this trip, and you wouldn't have any trouble communicating it to your kids. This trip is about resurrection power. It's about doing God's work through the resurrection. The reason your young people are questioning whether they can do anything is because you don't believe in the resurrection. You haven't told them that resurrection power runs through them. If we believe in Christ, then his power runs through our veins. I think my kids can tell crippled people to walk just like Peter and John did, and those people will be healed, because resurrection power is running through those kids. Because of that power, I think my kids can change not just a single village but the whole world. So I just find it stupid that anyone who claims to be a Christian wouldn't believe in resurrection power. It's a waste of your whole time here. I think it's sad."

Nadia felt buried under Kevin's response. But she had to acknowledge that he'd given more thought to theology than she'd assumed. And he was right that in all the theological thinking she'd been doing over the

last few years, she'd focused more on the cross than the resurrection. Still, something disturbed her about Kevin's theology of the resurrection.

I AM THE RESURRECTION

Jesus told Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). Up against death, with Martha’s brother lying dead in a tomb in the distance, Jesus says he *is* the resurrection. He hasn’t died yet—there has been no Easter—but here he is already equating himself with the resurrection. Standing in that present moment, as Martha confronts him with news of the death of her brother, how can Jesus say, “I *am* the resurrection”?

Jesus isn’t simply predicting the Easter event that will happen in a few weeks. When Jesus calls himself “the resurrection,” he is speaking eschatologically; the resurrection is an eschatological reality that breaks into the now. Jesus isn’t talking about something that isn’t true yet but will be someday, like a PhD candidate who starts calling herself “doctor” before she’s defended her dissertation. (Sure, it’s not quite true at the moment, but it’ll happen soon enough, so why not just say it now?) One of Jesus’ disciples, like a good personal assistant, might have spoken up to clarify, “Master, you mean you *will be* the resurrection; I mean, it’s close; people are discussing killing you. But it hasn’t happened yet.”

Martha seems to assume as much, believing Jesus is referring to some future event. Martha says, “Yes, I know that I’ll be with my brother again in the future, when he will be resurrected on the last day” (John 11:24). But Jesus didn’t mean to say, “I will be the resurrection.” He states that, right now, he *is* the resurrection.

Time and eternity are colliding in Jesus’ very person. Standing before Martha is the human Jesus who is bound by time—and in *that* sense, Easter hasn’t happened.[14] But at the same time, Jesus stands in that moment as the advent of God’s coming future breaking into the now. Jesus is asserting that it has happened, that in his very person, God has arrived. He is the new humanity, the first of a new creation. He is life.[15] And Martha responds with an advent-laced affirmation, a statement born from God’s coming new reality: “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world” (John 11:27).

THE ACTION OF RESURRECTION IN YOUTH MINISTRY

Throughout these books—particularly in *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry*—I've asserted that God acts from the cross to take on death, placing Godself between possibility and nothingness. The cross is the path into God's action. For that reason, I've said that if we believe youth ministry is about joining in God's action, then we have to be willing to find ourselves in the *ex nihilo*. Ministry is about joining God where God can be found, suffering nothingness, next to our deaths on the cross. We enter into ministry when we enter into death. We enter into young peoples' *ex nihilos* because God has taken on the cross; God acts between nothingness and possibility.

Too often in youth ministry, we seem to think our job is to bring possibility, to make young people into something. We think we should enter the poverty-stricken village on the mission trip and, through the work of a group of fifteen-year-olds, bring forth possibility. But this isn't our job. The human actor in ministry *can't* bring forth possibility; no mission trip can change the world. Nothingness is too heavy, too metastasized in the bones of this reality, to be beaten in this world. That's why, in response to the heaviness of her dead brother, Jesus points Martha to the eschatological, to the new reality, to God's coming, by saying he is the resurrection—*the one who acts from the new reality*. The possibility of resurrection is bound in the action of God and God alone, because it comes from God's future, from God's advent. But *we* are invited to enter God's action not through possibility, but through nothingness.

How often have well-intentioned people gone on mission trips saying they want to bring possibility to people ground down by poverty, only to find that their efforts create new problems in the communities they were seeking to help? Or, how often do those who long to help become so focused on their own attempts to bring forth possibility that they fail to see the nothingness in which people are living? Let me say it again: We can enter into God's action only through nothingness, not through our own work to bring possibility (whether that work is moral, religious, or charitable). It is God alone who brings possibility through God's acting

to take on nothingness. Jesus says, “I am the resurrection”; he never says, “You are the resurrection.” We can’t bring possibility—and when we think we can, we mix up our action with God’s.

But wait—before you throw this book against a wall, let me clarify: This does *not* mean there’s no possibility in youth ministry or that ministry isn’t about participating in the possibility of God. Jesus *doesn’t* say to Martha, “I am the crucifixion.” While we can’t produce possibility, the goal of God’s action is to bring forth the fullness of possibility. Paul asserts that God moves out of death, the cross, for an all-new reality. (This is the “foolishness” Paul references in 1 and 2 Corinthians.) The goal of the cross is the resurrection and the eschaton it ushers in. The resurrection is this all-new reality.[16]

Although I’ve said we must enter death to participate in God’s action, this participation in death is not morbid or fatalistic. By participating in death we participate in the action of God, and the action of God has a purpose that can be seen in the resurrected humanity of Jesus—in Jesus’ *being* the resurrection. Entering into nothingness bends our action toward God’s moving for possibility. By participating in the cross, by sharing in people’s suffering, we are swept up into the breaking in of possibility, of the eschatological (the completion of God’s action).

The cross may be the path into God’s action, it may be *how* God acts, but the resurrection is the *destination* of God’s action. Therefore, if our mission trips are to participate in God’s action, we must follow the cross, feeling the heavy burden of other people’s existence (and our own). But we must also trust that even as we join together with others who suffer, God is moving toward the possibility of resurrection. In other words the resurrection is the promise that death will not prevail, that nothingness does not have the last word. God promises to overcome it with life.

But how—in a world where death is in our very bones, on a mission trip where poverty and oppression are everywhere—how can we trust that God’s promise to overcome death will be fulfilled? We can trust that God will overcome death because Jesus *is* the resurrection, because on the third day Jesus rose again, as the first of many.[17] We can trust because God has acted and has overcome death in the humanity of Jesus. Because God has done this, because God has suffered death and overcome it in Jesus, we can trust God’s promise that death will be

beaten for us as well.[18]

A mission trip in youth ministry is not about *bringing* the resurrection; it is about *witnessing to* the resurrection. Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the resurrection. The mission trip is about joining in God's action by entering death with people, trusting that our small actions are windows into the promise that God will take all that is death (hungry stomachs, sagging roofs, parentless children) and bring life out of it. Promise can happen only within reality, only within bearing death. But promise enters into the death that pervades this reality, hoping and awaiting the new reality that is coming. The mission trip is standing in this reality while, through our action, witnessing to the action of God who promises a new reality where death in all its forms is overcome.[19]

IS VS. IS COMING (IT'S A TIME THING)

In the person of Jesus, the eschaton has happened. In Jesus, the fullness of God's action and restoration of God's creation has been realized. In Jesus, and in Jesus alone, the possibility of God's action has become an actuality. This is what make Jesus distinct from all other human beings—even though he is fully human. For other human beings, God's eschaton *will be*, but for Jesus it *is*. And this is because its coming is wrapped up in his person, because Jesus is the fullness of God's action, the Word made flesh (John 1).

So, as Martha and Jesus speak in John 11, Lazarus *will be* resurrected (and then he will die and be resurrected again on the last day), but Jesus *is* the resurrection. He is the one who brings the eschaton by being the fullness of God's action. And when Jesus acts, the eschaton breaks into time. Time no longer binds Jesus; his now is eternal. So even now though the resurrection hasn't happened in time, it has happened in Jesus—because he is the fullness of God's action.

When God acts, time and eternity come together. God acts from advent, from the end, from the very purpose of God's action. So, in the moment when Jesus calls out to Lazarus, eternity breaks into time, finding death and breaking its hold. Eternity wipes away all that is temporary, including death—the sinister master that thrusts temporality and separation into existence, making time vicious. When Jesus speaks, when God acts, eternity (the eschaton) is released into time. And when God acts, reconciliation, restoration, and redemption break forth like beautiful waves, washing us with the waters of life. The fullness of the eschaton is life, and Jesus *is* that!

But this should make it clear that Lazarus, though he was dead and is now alive, is *not* the resurrection. Standing next to Jesus in his grave clothes, holding his chest as his once empty lungs fill with air again, Lazarus cannot say, "I too am the resurrection and the life." In some ways, from the view of the now, from a view that has no vision for the advent of God's eschatological coming, Lazarus might have more of a claim to being the resurrection than Jesus does. After all, Jesus has yet to move from life to death and then death to life, but Lazarus has

already done so. But Lazarus is never called “The resurrection,” just “the dead man” (John 11:44). And I think this is because Lazarus is acted upon (he is blessed), but Jesus is the actor (the eschatological blessing); Jesus’ actions bring the eschatological into the now.

So when Jesus calls out to Lazarus, the dead man can walk from the tomb because the Word of eternity, of fulfilled possibility, has overcome the nothingness time imposes.[20] Throughout the Gospels, Jesus’ actions reveal the eschaton. When Jesus acts, the sick are healed, the dead are raised, and the possessed are released. In Jesus’ miracles, eternity breaks into time. Jesus’ miracles reveal the *telos*, the purpose of God’s action—to make all things new by overcoming nothingness.

Jesus can speak and raise the dead man to life because Jesus participates, unmediated, in the action of God; therefore, when Jesus acts, it *is* the fullness of God’s action. Lazarus is acted upon, Lazarus is swept up into the resurrection, but Jesus is the resurrection. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, breaks death and brings forth life by penetrating this world with the next. Lazarus is the dead man who lives, but Jesus is the new man, the new Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45), the human of the eschaton, found in the old world. The resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20), the first foundational brick of God’s completed action.

Lazarus is raised, but his resurrection is not complete; he will die again. As we said in chapter 2, the raising of Lazarus is a witness to Jesus’ own resurrection. But for Lazarus—and for us—the full experience of resurrection is not yet; it is still to come. This is where Kevin becomes confused; he has not seen that the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of Lazarus are connected but distinct. Jesus’ resurrection is finished; it is so complete that Jesus can even claim it before it has happened. But *our* full experience is bound to the *is coming*, the hope that the promises of Jesus’ resurrection are on their way.

BACK TO YOUTH MINISTRY

I think youth ministry sometimes functions as if we've mistaken the raising of Lazarus for *the* resurrection. And this confusion keeps us caged in the now; it keeps us from understanding that God's action is about bringing forth God's coming future.

This has had some big ramifications. It causes us to have almost no eschatological vision in youth ministry. Without an eschatological vision, we tend to think that things are static and can be completed—often through our own actions. So when a high school girl who became a believer after one of our talks six months ago seems to fall back into old patterns of destructive behavior, we get depressed—because we'd imagined that once she became a believer, the task was complete. We forget that she (like the rest of us) is continually and always (until the completion of God's action) stuck between possibility and nothingness. Instead, we assume that once she's said she believes in Jesus, once her faith has been resurrected from unbelief, it will never have to die again. But this is confusing Lazarus' raising and Jesus' resurrection.

We tell young people that if they invite Jesus into their lives, everything will get better, everything will be better forevermore, that they will be complete. We seem to have no understanding that even though Jesus, as the resurrection, brings forth the eschaton (the completion of God's actions), our world still awaits the fullness of God's act. Today, we participate in the eschaton through promise and hope, not through sure completion or full arrival.

It's not so much that we in youth ministry don't have an eschatology, but that we tend to offer a false realized eschatology that depends more on the young person's commitment and the youth worker's skill than on God's coming resurrection reality. We think that once we have seen and participated in the act of God, we will never want or doubt again, we will never again have to face death. But that's not the case for poor Lazarus, and it's not the case for us. Lazarus is acted on by God; he is resurrected. But Lazarus is not the resurrection; therefore, even though he has tasted God's future, he must still await its fulfillment.

Youth ministry is more about waiting in anticipation of the fullness of

God's action than it is about possessing it.[21] Faith is about hoping in God's coming (as we'll discuss further in chapter 6). It is about bending your life—not toward being a good, moral boy or girl—but toward God's future. It is living for God's end—of peace, love, and mercy—before that end is here in its fullness.[22]

Sure, we have tastes of it in worship, prayer, service, and relationships. But like the raising of Lazarus, these are just witnesses, signs pointing to what is coming when Jesus' resurrection becomes our own. Youth ministry can't complete anything—it can't completely form a young person's faith, can't completely wipe out homelessness, can't completely change the world. Only the action of God, which brings the resurrection into the now, can do such things. The point of youth ministry is not to bring a fully realized and complete eschatology, but to stand with young people and participate in small ways the coming of God into their now, as we await with them the fulfillment of God's coming.[23]

A realized eschatology in youth ministry assumes that if young people will just direct their passion they can change the world and change themselves—and mission trips have been a primary arena where both of these can happen. It's interesting that both Kevin, who wants his kids to change the world, and Tara, who wants the trip to change her kids, do ministry out of this space. Kevin sees the resurrection as a kind of super energy drink; if his kids will just gulp up the resurrection, they will have the power to change the world. Tara's concern is not so much with changing the world as with changing the palate of her young people, so the energy drink Kevin offers will be tastier in their mouths. For both Kevin and Tara, the resurrection *is* like some kind of spiritual supplement in a bottle that can give young people the muscle mass and energy to change the world. They have little understanding of the acting of God, and without the acting of God, there can be no coming of God from God's eschatological future.

Sure, Kevin would be happy to discuss eschatology with the kids. But his perspective has little connection to the kind of eschatology we've been discussing. He holds to an apocalyptic culmination of history—a dramatic, fiery end. But this belief has little connection to what the life of Jesus teaches us about how God acts—how Jesus is the resurrection

that brings not destruction but life (John 11:25). And Kevin's theological mistake is all too common; far too many Christians have apocalyptic eschatologies that are disconnected from the acting of God. Think of how often the faithful heroes in bad Christian apocalyptic films try to prevent or delay the coming of God's end, because the apocalyptic eschaton has been disconnected from the act of God. When the end is disconnected from God's action, we fear the end rather than yearning for it deeply. But God's action brings life out of death; therefore, God's end, the eschaton, is the fullness of *life*, it is peace and mercy in the embrace of God. Who doesn't want this to come?

Kevin's *end* has nothing to do with the *now*. And this is the issue. Kevin can't see that the resurrection points to what *will be* for *us*, but it already *is* for *Jesus*. The resurrection is the eschatological fulfillment for Jesus; for him, the kingdom has come. But while it has happened in Jesus, we still await its coming, it remains in the *will be*. Therefore, the way we participate in the resurrection is not through effort, not even through our well-intentioned efforts to make a difference. We participate in the resurrection through promise and hope. Standing with suffering people on the mission trip we participate deeply in their lives. We help where help is needed—not as a way of giving them the resurrection, (as though it is ours to give!) but as a way of hoping in what *will be*, anticipating what God is doing.

As Nadia listened to Kevin's comments, it became clear to her that his theological perspective seemed to miss something essential about the resurrection. Kevin missed that the resurrection was fundamentally an eschatological reality. He thought Nadia's questions about the point of the mission trip were stupid because he interpreted them as denying the power of the resurrection. Kevin seemed to believe that if he trusted in Jesus' resurrection, then all the contradictions of time no longer impacted him or his young people. Therefore, they could go on the mission trip feeling that if they tapped into resurrection power by *really* believing, they could do anything. Nadia's questions were a puncturing of his theological position, in that they pointed to the ways in which the coming of God had not yet been fully realized. Her focus on the *will be* of the resurrection was a great frustration to him.

I AM

There is something more that should be pointed out about Jesus' statement in John 11:25—"I am the resurrection and the life." This "I am" statement connects Jesus' words back to the Scripture from Exodus 3 that we considered in the first book of this series (*Taking Theology to Youth Ministry*). In that passage, Moses encounters the burning bush and is told that the name of this living God he has encountered is *I am* (Exodus 3:14). God is the One who *is*, the One who acts. Here in John 11, Jesus echoes this assertion, saying to Martha that he, too, is the *I am* who acts—that he and the *I am* are one. Jesus' statement is dripping with Trinitarian ramifications. Jesus *is* the resurrection and the life. But Jesus is not simply God's tool, a device God uses to act, like I use a screwdriver to tighten my always-loose bicycle seat. Rather, this acting to resurrect is the very heart of the life and action of the Trinity. The Trinity acts to bring life. God in Godself is the One who *is*, the One who acts so death will give way to life.

Resurrection isn't something Jesus *does*, nor is it something God does through Jesus. Resurrection is something Jesus *is*; it is the core of Jesus' very being, because this action of resurrection is bound to the *I am* of the Trinity. Jesus doesn't say, "I do resurrection,"—my business is resurrecting. Jesus asserts that his very being-in-the-world *is* resurrection. As the second member of the Trinity, Jesus is the one who takes death upon himself in order to overcome it in resurrection. And just to make sure we won't miss the point, he adds that he also is the life, because the Trinity is the community of life. All three agents of the Trinity act for the sake of life, and Jesus is the fullness of life come to humanity.

This is why even before Easter, Jesus sees resurrection as the core to his own self-definition. He is sent by the Creator of life, and empowered by the Spirit of life, to resurrect life from death.[24] As the Father is the creator of life and the Spirit is the sustainer of life, Jesus is the resurrector of life. He will bear death, and through the power of the self-giving love of the community of the Trinity, death will be overcome by life.

Jesus saying “I am …” reveals the community that exists within the Trinity. It is a community that gives life in creation, resurrects life from death, and sustains life through the Spirit. Jesus’ “I am” has eschatological significance; it reveals that life spills forth from the community of mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit. And we, those who know death and must die, will one day be part of this community. We will find ourselves bound in the love of the community of God that is the fullness of life and acts to overcome all death. Even as humanity remains caught between possibility and nothingness, God acts —and acts from the core of God’s very being; God acts as the *I am* who is the resurrection, the One who takes on death and beats it, giving life to all of creation.

Because Jesus overcomes death and *is* the resurrection, we are promised that one day we will be given life from the very outpouring of the Trinity—a life that has completely overcome death in its community. Therefore, we will be free from death for evermore; in the end we will find ourselves in the community of the Trinity where death has no more say. This community where death cannot touch us is *already* the reality for the Trinitarian God, but it is *coming* for us. When God’s future arrives, when nothingness has been extracted from all creation as it has been for the Trinity, when God’s action moves from possibility to actuality, we will be completely and fully in the community of the Trinity forevermore.[25]

This is the great joy of the resurrection, the great joy that is connected to Christian hope. Throughout these books, we’ve discussed the need to enter into suffering and nothingness. This might be misunderstood as sucking all the joy and celebration from the Christian life. But the opposite is actually the case. In the contradiction of encountering the God of life in experiences of death, we discover the coming of life, the coming of God, who reaches out to us from God’s future by being with and for us in our deaths. God binds us in the community of life with the promise that death is passing away.

IMPATIENT YOUTH MINISTRY

Realized eschatology makes youth ministry impatient—and youth ministry has a reputation for being very impatient. We tell ourselves we must hurry because we have, at most, only three to six years with these kids. We also know from sociological studies that a high percentage of people who come to faith do so before or during adolescence. So we feel we need to move—*now!* We become frantically impatient, changing programs and curricula, always seeking the next big idea. But this impatience is often closely tied to a theological perspective that assumes that young people's faith can be complete, that through our youth ministry kids can gain a completed faith. We rush because we think this is something we can—and must—get accomplished in the few years we have with each kid.

But the eschatological perspective we've been sketching out is about anticipation. It stands in opposition to such realized eschatology. It reminds us to stop running and wait for the coming of God. Youth ministry is not about getting things accomplished—only the act of God can bring about the transformation we seek. Youth ministry is about participating deeply in young people's lives as we await, together in suffering and joy, the coming of God. There is no "to-do" list to check off, just the blessed invitation to be with young people as together we imagine and bend our lives toward God's coming.

The impatience of youth ministry's realized eschatology often shapes our mission trips, making them susceptible to tourism. Tourists are notoriously impatient; they want things now. Often, the success of a trip is measured by the amount of waiting imposed; it was a good trip if there were few lines, if security at the airport was easy, if we sat first class so we were the first ones off the plane. Mission trips are too often seen as quick-cooking microwave ovens that will speed kids toward a completed faith rather than opportunities to imagine and await God's coming through the gift of being with others in a different place. (One of the true joys in mission trips is that the change in place and culture often helps us see and imagine God and ourselves differently.)

The question of Nadia and her young people that ignited Kevin's

frustration—What are we doing here on this mission trip?—is born *not* out of irreverence but out of anticipation for God's coming. It asks: Does all the activity, all the effort, all the stuff of this mission trip in any way anticipate God's coming? Sure, the trip keeps young people busy and gives them feelings of doing good, but does it serve life? And, does it give life not only to the middle-class young people who travel but to the others we encounter? Do we leave these experiences having given or received life?

Our mission trips should seek to reflect the Trinitarian reality of encountering life through community. But too often, we focus only on the community created within the group; we use the experience of encountering other people's suffering to create community among our youth. But the community seen in the Trinity calls us to find ourselves dwelling with the others in the places we minister, to find community of friendship and mutual assistance with them. It is when we see, hear, and act with these others that we are drawn into the outpouring of the community of the Trinity. It is here that we participate in life.

But this leads us to Nadia's second disturbing question, the one that pushed Kevin over the top. She reported that her young people were asking, "How can God allow some people to be born here and me to be born where I was?" This question scared both Kevin and Tara, in part because they were using the mission trip to *do* something, and this question is a question about *being*, a question about the very being of God. How can God be fair and good, when some are born into poverty and others are not? If the goal is a complete and realized eschatology, then such questions become a dangerous nuisance, because they uncomfortably reveal the reality under the tourist candy shell. But if these questions are asked in waiting anticipation, they become a wrestling with the Trinitarian God who promises to bring life out of death. They are questions that can't be avoided if we are really building community with the people we meet on such trips. Perhaps the true measure of whether young people are really encountering others, are entering into community with them and moving beyond tourism, is not the help they provide, but the cognitive dissonance they're left with. When we really *see* the other, it is impossible not to ask why he or she is in need. It is when we have the courage to ask this question that we can

await the coming action of the God of life.

BUT HOW?

There is another important question with which we must wrestle: How does community with others on a mission trip (or even others in the youth group) draw us into the indwelling community of life of the Trinity? I'd like to suggest two concepts drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures that can help us understand how we might participate in the Trinitarian community of life. Both have direct relevance for short-term mission trips and breaking the tourist hold on them.

The first is *Shekinah*. *Shekinah* is a Hebrew word that describes the presence of God experienced by the Israelites; it is the experience of God dwelling with God's people.[26] The Jews of the Exodus understood that God traveled with them. Even in their exile and wandering, God's very presence was with them. God suffers the nothingness of exile with God's people.

Paying attention to the concept of *Shekinah* can help us remember that when we travel to a village on a mission trip, we don't bring God. God's Trinitarian presence already dwells with God's people there. The U.S. youth group that travels to do ministry needs the people of the village in order to participate more fully in the presence of God, to participate in the *Shekinah*. The local people are not passive museum exhibits to enrich our tourist experience; they are the ones who invite us into community to participate in the presence of God through our mutual indwelling—which is analogous to the indwelling of life in the Trinitarian community. Therefore, we youth workers should always work hard to make sure our groups are welcomed, that we are invited into the places our short-term mission trips take us.[27]

If the first concept to remember is *Shekinah*, then the second is Sabbath. Sabbath and tourism stand in direct opposition to one another. Tourism is about harvesting sensational experiences of pleasure and excitement; Sabbath is about resting as a way of anticipating God's coming future. In God's future, we will no longer fight for life up against death; instead, in the embrace of the Trinity, we will find peace in life-giving community. Sabbath is a period of "trying on" God's promised completion, trying on God's future. Sabbath is *not* rest for a privileged

few while all others serve them—that's tourism. Sabbath is the inviting of all creation to be still and imagine the coming of God.

If we truly seek to anticipate God coming, one of the most important things we can do on a mission trip is to find ways that we might rest together with the people there. We often think the success of a trip is measured only by how much we did for the people we visit, but perhaps it's just as important to rest with them. When we rest together, we see one another, hear one another, discover what kind of help we need from one another, and learn to do all things in joy and gladness. After resting together, no one is less or more than another, and assistance is given friend to friend. I think it would be transformational to explore how our short-term mission trips might provide space to rest together, because I believe such an experience will open our eyes to God's indwelling presence, making such trips much more than tourism.

THE DRAMA

Nadia felt incredibly relieved when the bus finally made it into the church parking lot, ending the summer mission trip. It had been a long journey, and it was wonderful to see kids embracing their parents and crawling into their cars. Nadia walked through the bus one last time, collecting a box of forgotten items and a bag full of garbage before the driver headed on his way. When she finally got home to her own bed, Nadia slept for what felt like two days.

On the first Sunday after the trip, there was a special sharing time for the entire congregation. After the worship service, lunch was served and then the young people—all wearing the T-shirts Nadia hated—showed photos and told stories from the trip. At the end of the sharing time, they all hugged one another and expressed how much they couldn't wait until next year's trip.

And then that was it. They didn't mention the trip again.

chapter six

Eschatological Discipleship and Mission

To be honest, Nadia didn't think too much about the trip either, at least not until the winter, when she received the promotional information for the next year's trip. She stared at the flyer on her desk for weeks, knowing the registration deadline was approaching, but for some reason unable to pull the trigger and sign up for another year. She even went to the registration page on the mission organization's website, but she clicked on her Facebook bookmark and navigated away before she found the motivation to type in the information.

Nadia had been going on mission trips with this organization for years, so it was no surprise when she received a phone call in March from good old Bud. Of course, Bud wanted to know if she'd be taking another group to Mexico, saying he wanted to make sure they'd have spots for her. But Nadia knew registrations were down.

As she talked with Bud, she thought about what had happened during the eight months since the previous trip. Listening to him discussing the few minimal changes they'd planned for this year, Nadia's mind hooked onto how little the mission trip experience had filtered into the rest of her ministry. Sure, there were three kids who seemed more committed to the youth group since going on the trip—and this was no small thing. But other than that, she was amazed to realize that the trip seemed to have had minimal impact on her young people's theological questioning or their understanding of how they sought to live out their faith as disciples. Even the Bible-reading group rarely, if ever, brought up the mission trip. Nadia worried that it was just a disposable experience—an episode that seemed significant in the moment, but one that lost its

energy as time moved on.

On last year's trip, Nadia had been drawn into some deeper thoughts about the ministry significance of having an eschatological perspective grounded in the resurrection. Therefore, she couldn't be satisfied with leading a mission trip that was disconnected from the theological commitments of her ministry—a trip that, at best, offered little more than a disposable experience, and which might even enforce stereotypes and bathe young people in apathy. As hard as it was, and as much as she appreciated Bud and his good intentions, she felt certain it was time to do something different. In mid-sentence as Bud continued to talk, Nadia made her decision. "Hey, Bud," she said, politely interrupting him, "that all sounds great, and I may come to really regret this, but we've been on trips with you for a number of years, and you guys have been awesome. But I think it's time for us to do something new this year."

Bud took it quite well, which led Nadia to wonder if the theological bombs she'd set on last year's trip actually had caused him to hope secretly that Nadia would move on. But that didn't matter now. As she hung up the phone, she felt a stab of fear in the realization that summer was just a few months away, and she had no trip. Her procrastination had put her behind the eight ball; most other organizations had filled their spots long ago, and she would need to get info out to kids and parents soon. Plus, they would surely need to do some fundraising. The shock of these realizations sent Nadia's eyes back to her phone, anxiously contemplating whether she should call Bud back before he gave away their spot. But she resisted the urge.

Nadia's nervous energy sent her across the hall to see if Erica, the church's associate pastor, was in her office. Early on, Erica had raised some skeptical questions for Nadia, but she'd since become a great advocate for the youth ministry and a good friend and dialogue partner to Nadia. Erica was in charge of planning the summer short-term mission trip the adults took each year. Soon after Nadia and her group had returned from Mexico, she and Erica had had a great conversation about the theology of short-term mission trips. But when the church calendar got busy again in September, the topic got lost amid the day-to-day responsibilities of their various ministries.

Popping her head into Erica's office, Nadia asked, "Hey, what's the

name of the organization you go on your mission trip with?"

Looking up from her computer, Erica answered, "Mission Amigos."

"Hmm," Nadia said, remaining in the doorway. Erica picked up on the nonverbal cues that this wasn't a quick hit-and-run question and pushed her chair away from her desk. "It's a small organization that my friends from seminary started," Erica continued. "We've gone with them the last three summers, and it's been really great."

"What's their theological perspective?" Nadia asked, knowing Erica would appreciate the question and would have done some thinking about it. After all, Erica loved to talk theology and had been a great conversation partner throughout the theological journey Nadia had been on during the past few years.

"Oh, it's great," Erica said. "Amanda and Jonny hold firmly to the understanding that the people we partner with on these trips have something to offer us. So we don't go expecting to do things for the local people; instead, we seek to engage with them and their church so that we might enter into friendship. The organization really doesn't see its job as creating service experiences but as being liaisons or matchmakers that help connect churches in the States and churches abroad, so that they might organically (in some ways) form friendships. Remember last year when Pastor Ortiz and his choir came to our church?"

"Yeah," Nadia said, hanging on every word. She well remembered the powerful sermon Pastor Ortiz had given.

"Well," Erica continued, "that's the church we work with, or I should say that we're friends with. Last year, right before Christmas, they had a flood in their building, so we sent them money to repair it. We had the funds and they're our friends, so we sent it. This year we're going to do some work with them on repairs to help make sure it doesn't happen again. We're also going to help them with their Kids Carnival, a neighborhood event the congregation has done every year for two decades. We have a team that will plan certain pieces, but everything we do is determined by what they ask us to help with."

"Wow," Nadia responded.

"Yeah," Erica continued, "Amanda and Jonny hold to three commitments that they think help to frame the kinds of international

friendships that reflect the activity of God."

"What are they?" Nadia responded eagerly.

Erica smiled at Nadia's infatuation and continued. "First, they want to help people see things as they are. Second, they want to help people act in response to seeing the other's humanity and God's activity. And, finally, if we've seen and acted, they believe we need to live under obligation. They say the church groups that participate in these trips have to think of ways they can stay connected. They actually use that word—*obligated*. Friendship, they believe, means we are obligated to one another, but obligated in a way that doesn't destroy our freedom."

Nadia couldn't contain herself. It sounded like exactly what she was looking for, so she blurted out, "Do they do trips for high-school groups?"

To Nadia's disappointment, Erica shook her head, "No, they don't." Nadia felt all the wind rushing out of her sails. But then, to Nadia's great surprise, Erica added, "But maybe you and the youth group should come with us!"

"What?" Nadia said with shock.

"Yeah, why not?" said Erica. "We had a great time doing the summer Bible reading project together, and I can't see any reason high school students and adults couldn't go on the same mission trip. Pastor Ortiz has a number of teenagers in his congregation and I'm sure they'd be excited to have our young people come down and interact with them and participate in the life of their church."

"Wow. That sounds great," Nadia said.

"Plus," Erica added, "it will be interesting for the two of us to think together about how we can keep the energy from the trip going, how the experience can impact the rest of what we do throughout the year. If we do it together and if we do it in a way that gets more of the congregation involved, then it's not just a youth ministry thing."

"Yeah," said Nadia, her pulse racing and her mind filling with possibility, "I'm super-interested in how the issues and experiences we wrestle with on the trip might inform young people's theological imaginations as they think about discipleship and mission."

“Totally,” said Erica.

FAITH AND HOPE

In youth ministry, we tend to talk a lot about both "discipleship" and "mission." Discipleship has long been a primary theme in youth work (and we discussed how it relates to the cross at the end of *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry*), while *mission* has become the new buzzword. It's not unusual to hear youth workers say that our mission is to invite young people to become disciples. And once the kids we work with become disciples, we invite them into mission themselves. To me, this is all theologically legitimate and potentially rich. But such efforts can easily get off kilter if we don't see how discipleship and mission rest on a larger framework—a framework of faith and hope.

The connection between discipleship and faith may seem self-evident. You can't be a disciple unless you have faith in Jesus. ("Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "God's Messiah"—Luke 9:20). But as we've discussed throughout these books, faith can't be equated with some kind of substance—a medicine we give kids that makes them moral or good or assimilates them into a religious tradition. Rather, we've asserted that faith is trust in the action of God; it is trust that God is moving between possibility and nothingness.

And it takes that kind of faith to participate in the action of God, because (as we said in books 2 and 3), God's action comes to us through hiddenness and contradiction. Trust in God's action is not self-evident; it takes eyes that are open to see. The religious leaders of the time couldn't see that Jesus was the action of God who brought forth God's future. Immediately after the account of Jesus' raising of Lazarus, the Gospel of John tells us the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting to discuss what Jesus had done (John 11:47). "It is better for you that one man die for the people," says the chief priest, Caiaphas, "than that the whole nation perish" (John 11:50). Caiaphas can't see Jesus as the act of God, because Caiaphas can't see how God's action comes through death and nothingness. Power has clouded the chief priest's vision. But with these words, John points to how God's action is bound in hiddenness and the contradiction of death and nothingness. Caiaphas doesn't understand the truth of what he's saying—he has no faith, he can't see the action of God

—but with great irony John records Caiaphas confessing that through the death of Jesus, life will spring. From the death of one, God acts to bring life to all.

So faith is trust in the action of God who brings life out of death.[28] But as Paul makes clear, this means faith is indelibly linked with hope (Romans 5:1-2; 1 Corinthians 13). If faith is trust in the action of God to take what is dead and bring forth life, then, in the face of all the deaths we experience, our response should be to hope and hope deeply for the fullness of God's action to break upon us. Faith, then, is eschatological; it trusts that God's promise to overcome death will come to be. We have faith in a God who acts through death but also promises to overcome death. That promise is worthy of faith, because the crucified Jesus has been made alive. And Christ promises us that through his dead and now alive humanity, our humanity will be given the fullness of life.[29]

FAITH IS BECOMING

Let me say it again, because this is an important point: *Faith is eschatological*. Youth ministry is *not* about leading kids to "faith" by urging them to assimilate to some moral or religious code. Having faith does not mean our young people will repeat all the right answers and never do anything wrong.

Rather, young people have faith when they trust in the coming of God, when they bend their lives toward God's future by seeking to participate now in the action of God who encounters us in nothingness and death.

Because faith is eschatological, because it seeks God's action to bring God's future, faith is always becoming. We *never* arrive at it (in this world); we are always searching for it, always seeking faith next to our unbelief. We are like the poor father in Mark 9 whose son is possessed by spirits that hurl him into convulsions. Desperate for his son's healing, wanting so bad to have faith, he cries out, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). Despite great fear and heartbreak, the father believes next to his doubt; in the face of death, he believes Jesus can bring about God's future where his son will be whole.

Because God is coming, and because belief means trust in the coming of God's new reality, faith is always becoming; it is always in motion. The ever-moving faith we see among young people is not just because of the whims of adolescents, but because of the very action of God. We do a great disservice to both young people and the gospel when we see faith formation as locked in the now, as a frozen destination to which we hope our young people will arrive. When we do this we cut the eschatological wires from faith, and without these wires we can't connect our conception of adolescent faith to the motherboard of God's action.[30] To have faith is to become a pilgrim; it is to join a journey that seeks to participate in the action of God's own becoming, in the coming of God's future.[31]

Nadia viewed the mission trip in a whole new way that summer, when she and her youth group joined Erica and the other adults on their trip. Rather than seeing it as a church-based form of tourism, Nadia saw the trip as an immersion experience. Tourists seek to fill themselves up, to

consume the sights and experiences of the places they visit, but participants in an immersion seek to understand, to learn by entering into the location. A tourist experience is about the person who goes, but an immersion is about the people in the location visited. Nadia decided she didn't want to worry so much about what kids got out of the experience. (This was too close to tourism.) Instead, she wanted to turn the attention toward helping young people participate in God's becoming by learning how these new friends in this very different culture were interpreting God's action. So the mission trip was about joining others who live in a different context, in order to learn and participate with them as they interpreted the action of God. The young people were learners, fellow disciples, partners with others in seeking the action of God.

This means, concretely, that the folks from the States weren't the ones there to do the ministry, while the people in the village simply received. Rather, the adults and youth from Nadia's church began by watching and listening, hearing their hosts' stories and observing the ministry their church had in that village. Then they were invited to participate with the local people in their ministry, even as they participated with God in God's action. And as the young people leaned into God's becoming among and with these new friends, as they gave attention to God's action in their midst, Nadia saw their faith grow.

HOPE IN THE COMING OF GOD

If faith is always in the process of becoming—because God is acting to bring the completion of God's action in God's future—then faith is intractably linked with hope. If faith is trusting in the promises of God to act, and if this action has its purpose in the overcoming of death and nothingness, then it is hope that animates faith. It is hope that makes faith alive, makes it more than just assimilating to doctrine or signing on to moralism. Faith is trust in the action of God, and it can be lived out only in the hope of God's coming future.

So Christian faith is fundamentally hopeful. It enters death, bears darkness, seeks God's action in nothingness—but it does this because of the fundamental hope that from these dead places of the cross, God brings the new life of the resurrection. Into the brokenness of the now, God is coming with God's future—and this future is founded in God's great love. In his famous statement at the end of 1 Corinthians 13, Paul writes, "And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." Love is next to faith and hope, yet it is the greatest of the three, because love is the currency, the very air, of God's kingdom. Love is what remains when all else passes away. Love is a taste of the fullness of God's action, because God acts out of love—whether in creation, reconciliation, or redemption. God acts out of the love of God's indwelling community of Father, Son, and Spirit.

The community of the Trinity brings life, because the community of the Trinity acts in love.[32]

So often in youth ministry we connect faith and belief—you have faith if you believe. But Paul connects faith and hope. Rather than saying young people have faith if they believe without doubt, it might be better to say they have faith if, up against doubt, fear, and struggle, they hope. When kids are willing to seek for the action of God while longing for the coming of God, that is faith.

Youth ministry has focused so much on faith, adding all kinds of adjectives before it (vital, mature, lasting). But we sometimes fail to see that faith exists only if it leads to hope. If young people can say they have faith but it makes no real difference in their lives, that may be

because their faith is not connected to hope. They have more faith in getting into a good college or buying the next smartphone because faith in these things seems to provide more hope. Regardless of what adjective you place before it, faith is hollow without a vision of hope for the all-new reality that God is bringing forth. Faith can't connect with young people's lives unless it is lived out next to their deepest questions and *their deepest hopes and yearnings*.

Nadia began to see the short-term mission trip as an opportunity to broaden the perspectives of her young people, to help them deepen and transform what they hope for. Nadia knew that hopes of getting into a good college, or dating someone you have a crush on, or making the varsity team would remain. But in the experience of living with these new friends—friends who knew little of, nor cared much about, these hopes that clung to the very beings of her young people—Nadia hoped her young people would be better able to see the hope of God. She wanted to shake loose their attachment to the hopes of this fleeting world by giving them an opportunity to hope in God's justice, mercy, and peace coming to their new friends—and to them. Nadia was amazed that after the trip, after seeing and participating in the lives and struggles of these people (through their own leading), her young people were more willing to broaden their hope— and this impacted the way they looked at their lives after the trip. Beginning on that trip and continuing throughout the next year, Nadia invited young people to imagine the end, to imagine what God was doing to bring forth God's coming future. In Bible reading times and youth group meetings, Nadia would ask the young people, "What do you hope for?" In response to their answers, she would ask, "And how is this hope connected to God's action to bring God's future?" These questions began to reframe how young people thought about themselves and their world.[33]

DISCIPLESHIP

Discussions about discipleship within youth ministry often assume that young people become disciples by possessing faith, and they possess faith when *we* (their youth workers, pastors, or parents) pass it on to them. Of course, at one level this is true. But too often this passing on of faith has nothing to do with helping young people hope in God's coming. We want to give them faith, but it might be that they can have faith only when their hope is transformed.

Discipleship is active. To be a disciple is to follow, and to follow assumes motion and action. So you become a disciple by seeking to participate in the action of God—by placing your actions in line with God's action. And God's action is bringing forth God's future. The disciple is the person who yearns for God's coming future, who participates in the suffering of the world, witnessing to God's action within it.[34]

Just six days after the dead man is raised to life, Jesus is back in Bethany again (John 12:1-11). On this occasion, no one will be raised; no great miracles are to happen. There is only a meal given in Jesus' honor, served by Martha as Jesus and his disciples relax. The dead man is in the room. Lazarus eats with Jesus; in great eschatological expectation the dead man eats with the one who can bring life out of death with just a word. In an act of great discipleship, an act that Jesus' "official" disciples wouldn't dream of performing, Mary—passionate Mary—anoints Jesus' feet and wipes them with her hair. The scent of God's future fills the air. The man who was dead eats, the ones who'd been grieving rejoice, and the feet of the one who brings the good news of God's future are honored (Isaiah 52:7).

Although she's sitting in a room with Peter, James, John, and the other apostles, Mary is shown to be the great disciple, because she sees that Jesus is bringing about the kingdom of God (John 12:7). As she sees the brother she'd been mourning now leaning against the wall, laughing at Peter's jokes, and passing food to Jesus, Mary knows the coming of God's future is wrapped up Jesus' being. She knows that in Jesus, God's future has arrived. So Mary acts, bending her life toward this future,

wasting nothing to point to its coming, she anoints his feet with precious oil and then wipes them with her hair (John 12:3). In this way Mary participates in the coming of God.

With Mary's hair still dripping and shock painted on the faces of the disciples, Judas speaks, accusing Mary of acting unethically. "Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?" he objects (John 12:4). And Mary's act might be considered wasteful if one's eyes can only see this reality. But from the vision of God's coming, it is an act of discipleship; it is the placing of human action into the stream of God's own action.

Throughout these books I have taken a number of shots at the overemphasis within youth ministry on trying to make kids good and moral. I hope it's been clear that my goal was to turn our attention toward a more robust theological understanding of youth ministry. Now, having said that, I do think an ethic is needed. I think young people need to be helped to understand what behavior is appropriate for them as Christians. After all, Paul was very concerned with how the early believers in his young churches were acting. But for Paul, this behavior is not measured by some frozen ethic of good and bad, or even by the Law. (Paul is more than willing to break the Law in certain areas, such as with respect to circumcision.) For Paul, the ethic of discipleship, the vision that shapes the way we act, is determined by the coming of God's all-new reality. The disciple is to act in a way that is congruent with God's future, just as Mary did.

Certainly, youth ministry is concerned about the ethical behavior of young people. It's important to say to young people through teaching, preaching, and mentoring, "Don't hurt others or yourselves." But we do this not because we're the moral police, but because of our vision of God's future. In God's future all people are respected and loved, so now the disciple respects and loves all people, not in order to earn salvation, but as a way of anticipating God's coming. We encourage young people not to engage in casual sex, not because sex is wrong, but because sex outside of marriage risks great dehumanization— and in God's coming, which we are bending our lives toward, our humanity is upheld and all are free. So the mission trip is not about western middle-class kids gaining the moral high ground because of their efforts to help others.

The mission trip is simply another opportunity to act in a way that witnesses to God's coming. Our behavior is not determined by trying to be good, but by seeking to live now for a world that is coming. We live in honesty, peace, wholeness, and mercy because this is the shape of God's future. The disciple lives for God's future in a world where it is not yet here in its fullness.[35]

ONE MORE WORD ABOUT MISSION

The idea that mission is not something we do but something God does flows throughout all four of the books in this series.

Mission is the bringing forth of God's coming future; as such, mission is inseparable from God's own action. So the youth ministry short-term mission trip is not about what we (kids and leaders) do but about what God does. We go on these trips to participate in God's action. We go in humility, awaiting God's action.

This is what Nadia loved so much about the youth group's taking part in the trip with Erica and the other adults. Participating with the ministry of the local church in the village put the emphasis not on what the U.S. young people did, but on what was happening there already, what God was doing. The trip was just an invitation from the church in the village to join with them as they participated in the action of God.

The disciple, the one who follows the action of God, is on a mission. But it is God's mission, God's activity, that brings the fullness of God's future. And when God's future comes, there will be no more hungry stomachs or people without shelter. There will be no more sick or lonely people. When the coming of God's future arrives, death in all its forms will be banished, and justice and mercy will be the air we breathe.

When Judas accuses Mary of being unethical, he says the perfume could have been sold so the money could be given to the poor (John 12:5). Judas claims this is a justice issue (though John doubts his motives, and reminds readers in the very next verse that Judas is a crook). But if we give Judas the benefit of the doubt—and even until the last, Jesus gave Judas the benefit of the doubt—he does seem to have a point. Mary's act seems wasteful, and people's stomachs are hungry.

But Jesus' response is telling: "Leave her alone…. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me" (John 12:7-8). Jesus will not allow service and seeking justice to become a law that is disconnected from his own person, from his death and resurrection. Jesus is asserting that true justice will not come in this reality; no matter how much is sold to feed those in need, there will still be people in need. Only through the cross and resurrection, through the bringing forth of

God's coming future, will justice flow like a river (Amos 5:24). Jesus reminds Judas that justice is inseparable from Jesus' eschatological actions. Jesus is the one who brings forth the kingdom of God where all wrongs are made right. Our responsibility is not to bring about this new reality but to live for it, to act for it, even if it is not yet here. So we feed the poor, clothe the naked, and speak out for justice, not because our actions can bring it, but because in witnessing to the coming of God, we stand in the promise that justice is coming. And even our small acts become a sacrament of this coming future. Our actions of justice are not insignificant. They are not insignificant to the person in need nor are they insignificant in the eyes of God. But they are prophetic; they are events that point to God's coming. They witness and signal that in God's soon-to-arrive future no one will be hungry or lonely; no one will be oppressed or dehumanized.[36]

A group of teenagers on a mission trip possess no power to bring forth justice. But such actions bend our lives toward the coming of God's future, where all will be fed and cared for.

So now, today, we feed and care for others as a sacrament of the fullness of God's coming future.

THE DRAMA CONCLUDED (FOR NOW)

"Where is that stupid thing?" Nadia said out loud, as she looked for the small wrench that she'd once used to assemble the Ikea furniture she'd bought for the youth room several years ago. But during her time with the group, the bolts on several of the chairs had loosened, so a little tightening was needed. As she searched through the middle drawer of her desk, removing items one by one and placing them on the desktop, she exhaled in frustration. "Come on!" she pleaded, forcefully urging her desk to give up the wrench.

As she thrust her hand back into the drawer for one more look, she came across her old seminary ID. Nadia was shocked by the picture. *What happened?* she thought. *I look so young!* She threw herself down into her desk chair, examining the ID card as if it were an ancient artifact. Looking at its curling edges, she was pulled into reflection. *Wow, I've been through a lot at this church.* And she couldn't help but smile.

She'd grown a lot in the four years since she'd taken the youth ministry position at this church. They'd been some great years, and she felt excited that her growth she'd experienced in doing youth ministry was connected to, and fueled by, her thinking about youth ministry. She felt like she knew why she was doing what she was doing, and she had a sense of how what she was doing connected to who God is and where God moves. The cross as the place where God takes on nothingness had become a central motif for her. But the action of God, Nadia believed, always moved toward the hope of God's coming. She'd been given the great opportunity to participate in God's action by joining in the sufferings and longings of young people, but this joining always takes on the terrain of hope. And the crazy thing was that these theological ideas seemed to help her understand young people better—and also helped her better understand herself. The theological journey she'd been on helped to deepen her connection to the Bible, too. She'd always felt like reading the Bible was an *ought*, but learning to see it as a witness and an essential tool to interpreting God's living action had made reading Scripture mean so much more.

Yeah, Nadia thought, *it's been a good journey*. Staring at her old seminary ID, she thought back on how boring and frustrating she'd found some of her theology classes. I c*an't believe it … she thought … I never would have thought I'd call myself a theologian. But I really like theology—and I see how important it is to me as a youth worker.*

As Nadia sat in the warm glow of these thoughts, she heard a knock on the door. Madison, an eighth-grader, entered.

"Hey, Nadia," Maddie launched in without pausing, "what's the Holy Spirit?"

Nadia was pulled from reveling in the joy of her theological journey and pushed back into the theological fray of youth ministry. "Why do you ask?" Nadia responded.

"Well," Maddie said, "my friend goes to this church where they say you have to have an experience of the Holy Spirit to be a true Christian."

"Oh?" Nadia responded.

Madison continued in earnest, asking with worry, "So … have I had that?"

Nadia could only think to herself, "I guess thinking theologically in ministry never ends."

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Chapter 1: The Chronicles of Nadia

- Are mission trips a part of ministry with young people in your context? If so, why do you participate in mission trips? What do you hope you and your young people will get out of the experience?
- On a mission trip or in the midst of another experience with young people, have you ever found yourself wondering, "What are we doing here?" How have you answered that question for yourself? What would you say to Nadia?
- As you read through the drama in this chapter, do you see yourself most in Bud, Tara, Kevin, or Nadia? Why?
- What would you say to the kids in Nadia's youth group as they wrestle with deep questions?
- What's the point of short-term mission trips in the face of deep poverty? And what does it mean that some are born into safe, middle-class lives while others are born into poverty and conflict?

Chapter 2: Signs of a Walking Dead Man

- How has thinking theologically informed or reformed your sense of the purpose of mission trips?
- How does Scripture inform your answer to the question: "What are we doing here?" What impact, if any, do the stories of the feeding of the five thousand and the raising of Lazarus have on your perspective?
- How is it beneficial or exciting to be "people of anticipation, people who seek to find in the world more places where the future reality breaks forth"? How is it frustrating or difficult?
- When and where have you experienced a foretaste of the feast? How has this shaped your view of youth ministry and your own faith?

Chapter 3: Mission Trips, Tourism, and Globalization

- What do you see as the differences between a mission trip and a tourist vacation? In what ways are they similar?
- What do you suppose draws young people to sign up for a mission trip?
- It seems every youth worker who's led a mission trip has had an experience like Nadia with her boys' disappearance to the beach. Do you have a similar mission trip horror story? Can you see ways in which a culture of tourism and consumerism contributed to that situation?
- What preconceptions do young people have as we go on short-term mission trips? What are our own preconceptions as leaders?
- How might an awareness of the lenses through which we view these trips change our experiences?

Chapter 4: Youth Ministry in an Eschatological Light

- Had you heard the term *eschatological* before reading this chapter? If so, in what context? Do you find the use of this term helpful? Why or why not?
- Why does the author describe young people as "pseudo-eschatological animals"? Could the same be said of adults? Why or why not?
- In the section on "apathy vs. promise," where do you find yourself? Are you "passionately doing things" or have you moved into apathy by way of cynicism, depression, or happy self-centeredness? What about the young people in your context?
- How would you describe the difference between optimism and hope? How about the difference between future and advent? How have you seen each of these in your own life and among the young people with whom you minister?
- What is the difference between thinking of the point of a mission trip as "making the world better" and as "participating deeply in one another's lives in anticipation of God's advent"?

Chapter 5: Resurrection

- Why do you think that questioning faith and thinking theologically insinuate disbelief for some?
- How do you feel about the role of doubt or questioning in the life of a Christian?
- The author says, “The cross may be the road into God’s action, it may be how God acts, but the resurrection is the destination of God’s action.” How does your understanding of resurrection relate to the way it is presented here?
- What does it mean that Jesus is the fullness of God’s action? How would you explain this to a young person or adult in your context?
- What are the dangers of mixing up God’s action with our own? How and when do we tend to do this?
- Root writes, “Youth ministry can’t complete anything.” How would people in your context feel about this statement? Do you feel it is true? Why or why not?
- If you were to live into the understanding that youth ministry isn’t about getting things accomplished, how would your work with young people look different? How would your role change? What items might get removed from your current “to do” list? What items might get added?

Chapter 6: Eschatological Discipleship and Mission

- At the beginning of the chapter, Nadia is frustrated by the lack of impact the last mission trip has had on her youth in the long run. How does this compare to your own experience of short-term mission trips?
- What do you hope for? How are these hopes connected to God's action to bring God's future?
- What changes when a short-term mission trip is understood as an opportunity for friendship and partnership with the local people rather than a time to minister to them?
- What is your reaction to the idea that mission is something God does, not something we do?
- As we reach the end of our time with Nadia, she seems to feel more confident in her theological framework for youth ministry. What about your own sense of theological grounding? Why would you say you're doing what you are doing, and how is what you're doing connected to who God is and where God moves?
- What particular insights will you take into ministry from your reading and reflection on this book (and series)? What questions will you take with you?

About the Author

ANDREW ROOT

(PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) is the Olson Baalson associate professor of youth and family ministry at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota). He is the author of several books, including Relationships Unfiltered and coauthor of The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry with Kenda Creasy Dean. Andy has worked in congregations, parachurch ministries, and social service programs. He lives in St. Paul with his wife, Kara, two children, Owen and Maisy, and their two dogs, Kirby and Kimmel. When not reading, writing, or teaching, Andy spends far too much time watching TV and movies.

Visit www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

ZONDERVAN

Unlocking Mission and Eschatology in Youth Ministry
Copyright © 2012 by Andrew Root

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of Zondervan.

EPub Edition © NOVEMBER 2012 ISBN: 978-0-310-58954-9

YS Youth Specialties is a trademark of YOUTHWORKS!, INCORPORATED and is registered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office.

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Root, Andrew, 1974-

Unlocking mission and eschatology in youth ministry / Andrew Root.

p. cm. — (A theological journey through youth ministry; bk. 4)

ISBN 978-0-310-O7081-0 (hardcover)

1. Missions — Study and teaching. 2. Eschatology — Study and teaching. 3. Church work with youth. I. Title.

BV2090.R66 2012

259'.23–dc23 2012030019

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version®*, *NIV®*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor

does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other — except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and cover art: SharpSeven Design

About the Publisher

Founded in 1931, Grand Rapids, Michigan-based Zondervan, a division of HarperCollins*Publishers*, is the leading international Christian communications company, producing best-selling Bibles, books, new media products, a growing line of gift products and award-winning children's products. The world's largest Bible publisher, Zondervan (www.zondervan.com) holds exclusive publishing rights to the *New International Version of the Bible* and has distributed more than 150 million copies worldwide. It is also one of the top Christian publishers in the world, selling its award-winning books through Christian retailers, general market bookstores, mass merchandisers, specialty retailers, and the Internet. Zondervan has received a total of 68 Gold Medallion awards for its books, more than any other publisher.



1. The first three books of A Theological Journey Through Youth Ministry—*Taking Theology to Youth Ministry* (book 1), *Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry* (book 2), and *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry* (book 3)—explore Nadia's wrestling with each of these central themes in ministry.

2. I'm leaning heavily on Karoline Lewis's exegetical comments regarding this passage as found on Workingpreacher.org.

3. Martha may well be busy doing very important things. Christy Lang has kindly (but forcefully) pointed me to the fact that when Luke tells this story he uses the same Greek verb used to describe Stephen in Acts where Stephen is "deaconing"—doing ministry. We often portray Martha as if she were compulsively doing chores, too anal retentive to stop and listen. Rather, it may be that she is too busy doing good things, doing ministry, to stop.

4. Thanks to Christy Lang for this analogy.

5. When we, in mission, seek to enter into death for the sake of life, that becomes the road to our participation in God's action. We have no power to bring life out of death, but by entering death and fighting for life, we witness to the God in Jesus who is the resurrection.

6. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

7. See Malcolm Waters, *Globalization* (London: Routledge, 1995).

8. "The belief or doctrine, held chiefly in the middle and latter part of the 19th century, that it was the destiny of the U.S. to expand its territory over the whole of North America and to extend and enhance its political, social, and economic influences." From http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/manifest+destiny

9. Wolfhart Panneberg states, "Eschatological hope can only be based upon God, not on human nature." "The Task of Christian Eschatology," in Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson, *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 5.

10. Jürgen Moltmann says it this way: "To think eschatologically is to

think a matter through to its end. Is there at the end of things, of men, and of history such a final purpose?" *Theology of Play* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 34.

11. See Erik Erikson's negative element to identity formation and its danger to cleave to fascism and ideological perspectives. Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968).

12. "European languages generally have two possible ways of talking about what is ahead. *Futurum* means what will be; *adventus* means what is coming." Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 25.

13. "Eschatology … has finally to do not with the best that we can hope for in this world, but with a new world which will be brought into being only when God wills and acts to do so." Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart, *Hope Against Hope: Christian Eschatology at the Turn of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 174.

14. Moltmann pushes this deeper: "Time after the coming of Christ must be seen as 'fulfilled but not yet completed time.' It is no longer a time of pure expectation, nor is it as yet the eternal present of the time of completion. That is why Christians live between the 'now already' and the 'not yet.'" *The Coming of God,* 11.

15. Ted Peters explains, "Eschatology begins at Easter. At Easter the end appeared ahead of time. It appeared proleptically. Thus, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation upon which we must build our constructive thoughts regarding the future. It also provides a sort of limit. Beyond what we know about the resurrection of Jesus we have little or no knowledge that penetrates the shroud of mystery protecting the divine secrets of what is to come. We ought not pretend we know more than we do." Ted Peters, *God—The World's Future* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 319.

16. "The resurrection of Jesus and the coming resurrection of the dead at the end of history are clearly understood in the New Testament as entry into a wholly new kind of life, beyond the power of death. Resurrection is then not merely restoration but transformation." Bauckham and Hart, *Hope Against Hope,* 123.

17. "In the act of raising Jesus from the dead, God guarantees his

promise, while simultaneously contradicting present reality. The concept of promise, therefore, helps to interpret the proper understanding of God's activity. In contradistinction to the God of metaphysics, the God of biblical revelation participates in history in the 'event of the cross and resurrection.'" Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 16.

18. Moltmann explains, "So the 'power of the resurrection,' as St. Paul calls freedom, makes us followers of the crucified and leads us into fellowship with the forsaken whose brother the crucified has become. This may sound like a contradiction but is in fact an inescapable correlation. Only those who are capable of joy can feel pain at their own and other people's suffering. A man who can laugh can also weep. A man who has hope is able to endure the world and to mourn. Where freedom is near, the chains begin to hurt. Where the Kingdom of God is at hand, we feel the abyss of God-forsakenness. Where men are able to love because they are loved, they are also able to suffer, accept suffering, and live with the dead." Ibid., 31.

19. "A promise is a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist. Thus promise sets man's heart on a future history in which the fulfilling of the promise is to be expected. If it is a case of a divine promise, then that indicates that the expected future does not have to develop, within the framework of the possibilities inherent in the present, but arises from that which is possible to the God of the promise. This can also be something which by the standard of present experience appears impossible." Ibid., 103.

20. Moltmann says it succinctly, "Where Jesus is, there is life." *The Passion for Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 19.

21. Bauckmann and Hart say it nicely, "To be a Christian might be defined as living in the light cast by the resurrection; living, that is to say, as those who insist on interpreting this world in terms of its (surprising and unexpected) future as made known to us in the resurrection of Jesus by his Father in the power of the Holy Spirit." *Hope Against Hope*, 70.

22. "Faith in the God and Father of Jesus Christ is faith in the God

who raised Jesus from the dead, an action which while it is certainly presented as having occurred within history must equally certainly be admitted to lie beyond the range of possibilities of history as such. In this respect the resurrection of Jesus is the paradigm case for Christian hope, and its essential dynamic is mirrored in many other scriptural accounts and features of Christian experience." Ibid., 69.

23. Moltmann adds texture to this: "So where do we have to look for the completion of what has begun in us in the new life of the Spirit? Some people have thought of a 'sinless perfection or perfect holiness already to be achieved in this life. But that is a mistake. The perfecting of our here-and-now new birth in the Spirit will be completed only in the raising of the dead and the life of the world to come. Consequently our knowledge of God here remains fragmentary. It is only when the perfect consummation 'comes' that this fragmentary knowledge will cease (2 Cor. 13:10). The completion does not grow out of the beginning, and it does not develop either. It comes to meet us in God's coming. What we experience here in the Spirit as God's love, we expect there as God's glory." *The Source of Life: The Holy Spirit and the Theology of Life* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 35.

24. "The 'spirit' … is a 'direction': Yet, even here this understanding of the spirit has one central affirmation, which has two sides: (1) the spirit affirms life and (2) overcomes death." Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 178.

25. In this section I've made a case for the Trinity being a community of life. This doesn't exclude or reserve the argument I presented in *The Promise of Despair*, in which I argue that through the cross the Trinity takes death into itself, that death is bound between the love of the Father and Son. This remains the case. It is through experiences of death that we are taken up into the love of the community of the Trinity. But the Trinity does this, the Trinity takes death into itself by sending Jesus to the cross, so that life might overcome death, so that we might be embraced by God in our deaths, our very selves brought into Godself. In this way the life of the Trinity, the life that reaches into nothingness to bring Jesus' dead body back to life, touches our deadness and splits it through with life eternal, which has its source in the community of the Trinity.

26. "The Shekinah is God's dwelling in the midst of his people, his

wandering in exile and suffering with his exiled people, awaiting redemption and the eschatological indwelling of God in the whole creation, which thus becomes his resting place. The eschatological Sabbath is also the cosmic Shekinah." Richard Bauckham, *God Will Be All in All: The Eschatology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 25. Moltmann says further, "In his indwelling in Israel the eternal God becomes for the Israelites the companion on the way, and then also the companion in suffering. He participates in their exiles; their sufferings are his sufferings too. Consequently Israel's hope is directed towards the universal, cosmic indwelling of God in a creation which through this indwelling will be newly created and then eternal." *Sun of Righteousness, Arise!: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 30.

27. "Or did the Shekinah continue to dwell 'in the midst of the Israelites', moving with the people into Babylonian captivity? Then the people can be God's people even in exile and among foreign peoples, and can experience his presence in suffering. Through his Shekinah the eternal, infinite God became the companion on the way and the fellow-sufferer, the one who is persecuted with his dispersed people and suffers with them." Jürgen Moltmann, *In the End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 43.

28. "The triumph of life over death, and the forces of life over the forces of death, rather than vice-versa, is the hallmark of God's promised new creation in Scripture. Salvation is participation in 'life in all its fullness.' And life is the characteristic gift of God's Spirit at work in the world. Thus Paul refers to the resurrection body as a 'spiritual' body, a body which belongs to the economy of the Spirit rather than the 'flesh.' It is part of the new creation, not the old. 'To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace' (Rom. 8:6)." Bauckman and Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 105.

29. Moltmann gets into this in this long quote: "In the contradiction between the word of promise and the experiential reality of suffering and death, faith takes its stand on hope and 'hastens beyond this world,' said Calvin. He did not mean by this that Christian faith flees the world, but he did mean that it strains after the future. To believe does in fact mean to cross and transcend bounds, to be engaged in an exodus. Yet

this happens in a way that does not suppress or skip the unpleasant realities. Death is real death, and decay is putrefying decay. Guilt remains guilt and suffering remains, even for the believer, a cry to which there is no ready-made answer. Faith does not overstep these realities into a heavenly Utopia, does not dream itself into a reality of a different kind. It can overstep the bounds of life, with their closed wall of suffering, guilt and death, only at the point where they have in actual fact been broken through. It is only in following the Christ who was raised from suffering, from a god-forsaken death and from the grave that it gains an open prospect in which there is nothing more to oppress us, a view of the realm of freedom and of joy." *Theology of Hope*, 19–20.

30. The eschatological dimension of God's action is explored in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. Here, Barth turns all theology over to the action of God, making the assertion that Moltmann would spend his early career working out—that all theology is eschatological; it is bound in the purpose of God's action.

31. A similar argument is made by Eberhard Jungel in *God's Being Is in Becoming*.

32. Moltmann adds texture to this: "To believe means to cross in hope and anticipation the bounds that have been penetrated by the raising of the crucified. If we bear that in mind, then this faith can have nothing to do with fleeing the world, with resignation and with escapism. In this hope the soul does not soar above our value of tears to some imagined heavenly bliss, nor does it sever itself from the earth." *Theology of Hope*, 21.

33. Bauckman and Hart say it beautifully: "Hope is … an activity of imaginative faith." *Hope Against Hope*, 53.

34. For more on how someone goes about discerning God's action and what types of human action witness to God's own eschatological act, see "Youth Ministry as Discerning Christopraxis" in Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011).

35. "Christian ethics are eschatological ethics. What we do now for people in need we do filled with the power of hope, and lit by the expectation of God's coming day." Moltmann, *God Will Be All in All*, 289.

36. “The proper reason for feeding the hungry, healing the sick, comforting the distressed, protecting the weak and vulnerable, and so on, is not in order to provoke (let alone assist or enable) God to save the world, but because these are things which are worth doing and which ought to be done if we truly value life in the here-and-now. They are, we might say, concrete parables, anticipations of God’s kingdom, the new creation, under the conditions of this world.” Bauckman and Hart, *Hope Against Hope*, 182.

Share Your Thoughts

With the Author: Your comments will be forwarded to the author when you send them to *zauthor@zondervan.com*.

With Zondervan: Submit your review of this book by writing to *zreview@zondervan.com*.

Free Online Resources at www.zondervan.com/hello



Zondervan AuthorTracker: Be notified whenever your favorite authors publish new books, go on tour, or post an update about what's happening in their lives.



Daily Bible Verses and Devotions: Enrich your life with daily Bible verses or devotions that help you start every morning focused on God.



Free Email Publications: Sign up for newsletters on fiction, Christian living, church ministry, parenting, and more.



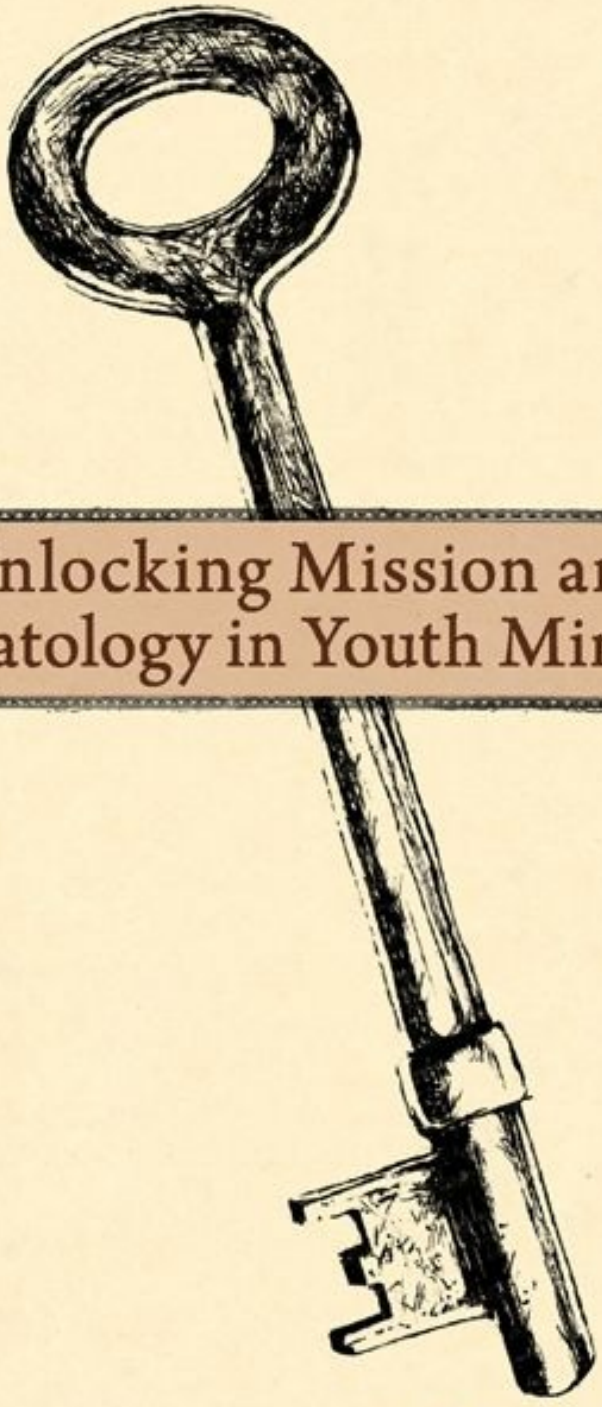
Zondervan Bible Search: Find and compare Bible passages in a variety of translations at www.zondervanbiblesearch.com.



Other Benefits: Register yourself to receive online benefits like coupons and special offers, or to participate in research.

ZONDERVAN

A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY
THROUGH YOUTH MINISTRY



Unlocking Mission and Eschatology in Youth Ministry

ANDREW ROOT