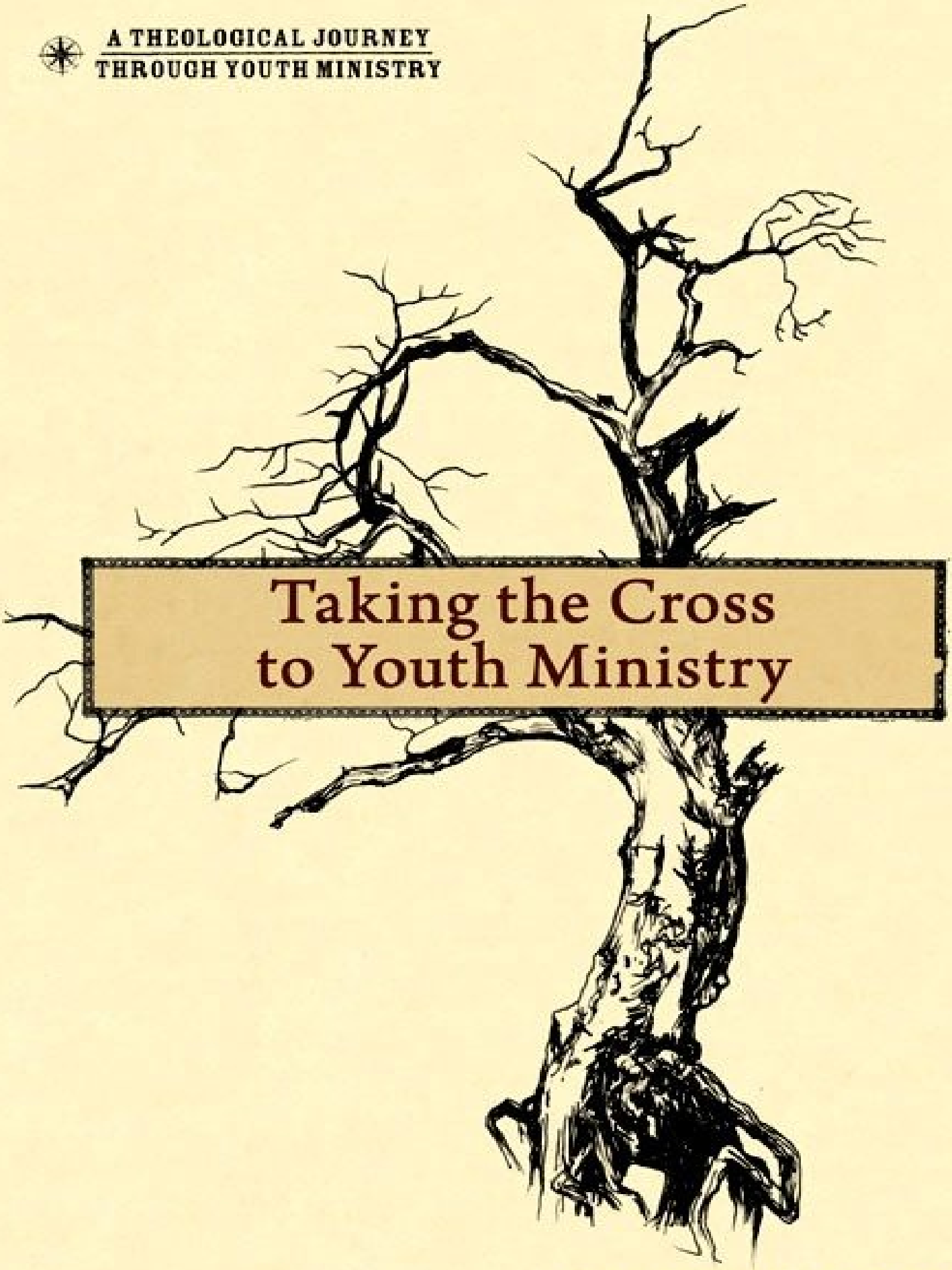
A THEOLOGICAL JOURNEY
THROUGH YOUTH MINISTRY



Taking the Cross to Youth Ministry

ANDREW ROOT

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ZONDERVAN

To Maisy
whose tenderness and humor melt me

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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

The stale smell filled her nostrils as she reentered the church van. Nadia had only stepped out for a few minutes, just enough time to swipe her credit card and fill the van's depleted gas tanks. But as she opened the door to the sight of sleeping adolescents awkwardly contorted across seats and with earphone buds resting gently in their ears, the smell of kid funk was almost too much. She hadn't noticed it while driving, but having escaped long enough to allow fresh air into her lungs, she was now aware of its force.

Nadia held her breath as she buckled her seat belt, a smile now forming, turning her disgusted expression into one of appreciation. In the van were eight high school students (with eight more in the other van) all returning from a spring break youth conference. With just two hundred miles to go and all the kids snug in their hoodies with top-forty beats dancing in their heads, Nadia found herself reflecting on the trip. "Was it worth it?" she asked herself, thinking mostly of the time and effort that she and the other four adult leaders had put in to make the trip happen.

Nadia had been at her present job for a little over a year now. She'd taken the job as the church's youth pastor after several years working for a parachurch ministry. She enjoyed youth ministry and valued her relationships with the church's senior pastor, Jerry, and its associate pastor, Erica (although it had taken awhile for Erica to warm to her after her close friend Chad, the previous youth pastor, left because of burnout). Nadia definitely liked youth ministry when she started the job, but it was more about the kids— the *youth* piece, more than the *ministry* stuff. Yet over the last year (as we saw in book 1), this had all changed. To Nadia's surprise, she'd started caring not only about the kids in her group, but also about what it meant to be in ministry—in short, she'd started thinking theologically.

Nadia had been on a journey to discover the purpose of youth

ministry. She'd come to the conclusion that youth ministry was participation in God's own action in the lives of young people. She believed one of her primary tasks was a theological one—the task of seeking for the action of God in the barren places in young people's lives. Having had her eyes opened to the theological depth of ministry with young people, Nadia found most of the presentations at the youth conference to be theologically thin. Nadia thought about how the flipping of the theological switch in her head had changed everything, forcing her always to be thinking. She loved it, but sometimes wished she could switch the setting back to naïveté—at least for a little while. When Nadia asked the kids about the upfront content, they too seemed to find it shallow. They mentioned several illustrations or stories that they'd liked or found funny, but when pushed to discuss how what they'd heard had impacted them and forced them into wrestling with God and their faith, they had little to report.

Nevertheless, Nadia believed the trip was worth the effort. Much had happened over these five days. While the conference presentations may not have been superb theologically, the conversations and interactions she had with the 16 high school students were. But "superb" wouldn't be the adjective she would use. "Deep," "significant," or "eye-opening" might be more descriptive.

As the mile marker read 82 miles to home, Nadia thought particularly of the four girls she'd shared her room with—Kari, Jessica, Kelsey, and Mattie. All four were sophomores and highly committed to church and youth group. Nadia considered these four girls (along with two junior guys, Jerrod and Brock) to be the cornerstones of the youth group; they not only participated consistently but also took real ownership within the youth ministry. And the involvement of these four girls extended beyond the ministry to the church as a whole; it was not uncommon to see one of the four working in the nursery or volunteering in the church office to stuff envelopes or send emails. They often called themselves the "church girls"—and they said it with pride. It was clearly part of their self-definition, part of their identity.

All but Jessica went to the same public school. Jessica's parents began homeschooling her when she was in seventh grade, after her older brother, a tenth grader at the time, had gotten involved with drugs.

Jessica's mom was an adjunct professor of women's studies at the local community college. She'd cut her course load in half and had taken primary responsibility for Jessica's education ever since.

Jessica was a very smart but quiet person. People at church often referred to Jessica and Kari as "the twins," because they were inseparable and both had matching long brown hair and slender builds. As a way of distinguishing the girls from each other, some in the church lovingly called Kari "the loud one" and playfully referred to Jessica as her "shadow," because the two went everywhere together, yet Kari was always doing the talking. Both girls' parents were very involved in the church; just as their children were anchors of the youth group, these parents were key members of the congregation. It was clear to Nadia that Jessica and Kari's parents not only provided their children with support, but were also engaged in passing on the faith to them.

Kelsey was the athlete of the group. She often hung out with Kari at school, since both were on the cross-country team, but Kelsey also had friends from the softball and volleyball teams she played on. Kelsey began coming to church in ninth grade after Kari invited her to a youth group meeting. Not long after Kelsey started coming to the youth group, her mom began attending church with her. Her dad traveled a great deal and rarely, if ever, came to church. Kelsey explained, "It's just not his thing." But he did make it to her games whenever he was in town, and overall Kelsey felt supported by him.

While Kari and Jessica never really talked much about boys, Kelsey seemed to attract them. In many ways she was uninterested, though she did date a few guys from church. But her overall confidence and broader social interactions at school made her more easygoing with boys, in comparison to Kari's constant chattering and Jessica's shy silence.

If one of the four was boy-crazy, it was Mattie. Mattie was passionate about two things: Jesus and handsome guys. Mattie was the most fashionable of the girls, spending energy thinking about outfits, makeup, and her overall appearance, while the other three spent most of their time in baggy sweats, athletic shorts, and T-shirts. Mattie never knew her father, and her stepfather had just moved out in the last six months. She acted as if she didn't mind her stepfather's leaving, because "he was a zero." He'd lived with Mattie since fifth grade, when he married

Mattie's mother and they all moved into a house on the same cul-de-sac where Jessica lived, just a block away from Kari. After the three became friends, Mattie followed Jessica and Kari to a summer church camp where, as she happily tells people, she gave her life to Jesus. She became one of the youth group's most committed and invested students throughout junior high and now into high school.

Rooming with "the fabulous four" was everything Nadia imagined. They were up late talking, clothes were spilled everywhere, and the high-pitched screaming that came mostly from Kari and Mattie would rattle through Nadia's head with painful tremors. It was mostly wonderful and fun, with occasional streaks of annoying, but always exhausting in the best way.

After each session at the conference, Nadia and the fabulous four would meet back at their room, grab Bibles and a few packages of Twizzlers, throw pillows on the floor, and launch into discussing questions provided by the conference staff. All four girls took these conversations with the utmost seriousness, discussing their love for God and their desire to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus. Nadia noticed that they often stuck with the answers they knew, living inside the phrases their parents and others in the church had given them. This wasn't bad; it was just clear that these inherited answers not only provided them with a framework for living, but that these four girls believed them deeply. After each girl prayed for the others, they would end with a hug.

"These really are the perfect Christian kids," Nadia thought to herself one afternoon as the girls threw their pillows back on their beds and erupted into a conversation in which all four were speaking at once as they spilled out the hotel room door. Nadia felt covered by a heavy blanket of silence as the girls' voices disappeared down the hallway.

Yet, this perceived perfection would be shattered one night at dinner, as the kids from the group met to grab something before the next session. Jessica was standing in line with Kelsey, Nadia, and two boys from the group when Jessica accidentally stepped backward and bumped into a young man in the other line, landing right on his foot. Angered, and standing with his friends, the young man shot back, "Ouch! Watch out, you fat cow!"

Nadia responded, “Hey, easy—it was an accident.” The young man looked Nadia up and down and turned away. But Jessica was clearly shaken, standing wide-eyed, her arms wrapping themselves around her skinny body. Kelsey patted her elbow and said firmly but softly, “It wasn’t about you; he didn’t even see you. He’s just a jerk.” But Kelsey’s words seemed to make little difference. Jessica gave Kelsey a half smile and then wrapped her arms more tightly around herself.

When the other girls sat down to eat, they realized that Jessica had disappeared. After waiting a few minutes and checking the bathroom, it was clear she’d left the dining area. Having heard what had happened in the line, Mattie said she’d check the room; the others went to the conference center, assuming she might have gone there.

Yet, twenty minutes into the evening session, Jessica was still nowhere to be found—and Mattie had failed to return. Nadia walked back to the room in search of them. Entering the room she found Jessica and Mattie lying on the same bed, wiping tears from their cheeks. For the next hour Jessica and Mattie poured their hearts out to Nadia, sharing how awful they felt about their bodies, and how stupid they felt for feeling bad about their bodies. Jessica, in particular, spoke frankly about how much she hated her body—and how she hated even more the fact that she hated her body. She wished she didn’t care, but she thought about it all the time, wishing she weren’t so tall and thin, or that her nose and legs were different. It was clear she felt caught between her feelings of dissatisfaction and shame that she felt dissatisfied. Jessica kept saying, “It’s so stupid to care about this superficial stuff. I tell myself it doesn’t matter, but then I look in the mirror, and just feel disgusted and then frustrated that I’m disgusted. I know I shouldn’t worry about it, but …” she said, shaking her head.

Mattie explained her own issues around food and body image. “I gain weight quickly,” she said, “and look who my friends are! String beans Kari and Jessica, and super-athletic Kelsey. I’m always thinking about what I eat because I’m so scared of being seen as ‘the fat one,’ the chunky friend.” Mattie told Nadia that there were days when she would eat very little. She’d never made herself vomit, nor had she gone a day without eating (she thought that was really wrong), but she’d skipped countless meals for fear of weight gain. She admitted she was obsessed

by it: “Sometimes I tell myself I’m not going to think about how I look or the shape of my body, but then I dream about it! Really, I have dreams that I weigh like three hundred pounds! I’m always thinking about it. I pray and ask God to free me from this, but I just feel so weak.” Jessica nodded in agreement, “I pray too, but …” she threw her hands up, “… nothing.”

As they continued to talk, Kari and Kelsey returned, holding a page of discussion questions from the night’s session. Kari and Kelsey hugged Jessica and Mattie, and Nadia read over the questions they’d brought back. She saw nothing that spoke of a God who would encounter these young people in the areas of life where they felt stuck. If God is really active and present in the barrenness of these girls’ lives, how should Nadia think about this? And how should she present it to these girls?

As she continued to drive, Nadia’s thoughts turned to Justin and Caden, two of the guys riding home in the other van. Looking in her rearview mirror, she felt certain that they were either arguing with each other or telling some story that their peers thought was weird, but the adults loved. Caden was a senior and Justin, a junior. In many ways they were an odd pair; in fact, they actually refused to call each other “friend” even though they were nearly inseparable at church and school. Caden was a big, studious kid whose love of talking about physics, *Family Guy,* the Revolutionary War, and comic books made him stand out as much as did his being one of the few African American kids in a mostly white church. While Caden was studious and articulate, Justin was the opposite, barely passing his classes and speaking with a constant mumble that made him hard to understand, but all the more Justin. Justin was 6’2” with long hair and a pimply face. Like Caden, he loved *Family Guy* and comics, but he was also into Slipknot and tattoos.

Justin’s mom was a member of the church when Nadia got the job. She was consistently present at worship, but rarely attended other church activities, since she worked a part-time weekend job along with her full-time weekday job. Justin’s father left when Justin was six and his brother was nine. Justin’s brother got into a lot of trouble, but he took good care of Justin, always getting him home from school and feeding him dinner before their mother would return from work. When Justin was 12, his older brother was sent to live with their father in

another state. He was simply too difficult for his mother to handle, and Justin was now old enough to take care of himself after school. Justin had begged to go live with his father as well, but was told his dad only had room for one.

Justin hadn't been to church in years before the day at the end of his sophomore year when he walked into the high school youth room and plopped himself down confidently on a couch in the back of the room. Since she'd never seen him before, Nadia went over and introduced herself. Justin mumbled something that Nadia remembers decoding as, "I heard you were the new youth chick, so I thought I would check out what's going on." Nadia laughed and welcomed him heartily, and he never missed another activity. He often showed up twenty minutes late, but never missed a meeting.

Caden came from a big, nonreligious family. He was the youngest of eight kids and his parents were older than most, with his father well into his sixties. Caden began coming to church after Nadia met him at school. Nadia had volunteered to be a guest moderator for the junior class debate on the topic of religion in politics. Caden had argued with the flair of a preacher that there was no place for religion in the civic square. After the debate Nadia told him how impressed she was with his skills. He returned her compliment with a swirl of insecurity and intellectual acumen, asking, "But, seriously, Miss, how can you believe in this religious magic like you do?" Nadia smiled, recognizing that his accusation came more from social awkwardness than anything else, and responded, "Why don't you see if you can figure it out? I'll be back tomorrow after school and we can talk in the cafeteria."

When Nadia returned the next day, Caden was already waiting. They talked for an hour, but she never offered an apologetic for her belief; instead they talked about Caden, school, and the Revolutionary War. Nadia never specifically invited Caden to the youth ministry. But the next Wednesday he showed up, announced that he didn't believe any of it, and then came to everything (Bible study and all) ever since.

Nadia often referred to Justin and Caden affectionately as "her guys." They had become friends through the youth group, and their fierce skepticism was a challenge to almost everything Nadia said. Justin would dismiss anything he disagreed with as "stupid" or "nonsense,"

while Caden was more articulate, humorously countering Justin's mumbling with his verbal elegance.

Throughout the youth conference, Justin and Caden were on their best behavior. Caden was, as always, a model citizen as well as a model skeptic; Justin joked about ordering pornography on the hotel TV. But with just a little firm pushback and a few jokes, Justin was happy to be where the leaders were, talking about how he was going to hit on "chicks" though he lacked the courage to approach any. Whenever Nadia started to approach "girl overload" with Kari, Jessica, Kelsey, and Mattie, she would escape to the convention center and find Justin and Caden. They would sit on the floor, eat junk food, and talk.

Toward the end of the conference, while they were sprawled on the floor and nursing an order of french fries, Nadia asked, "So, are you guys happy you came?" Both boys nodded. Caden's mouth was full, so he nodded his head fiercely to communicate his approval. Justin, not one for manners, blurted out with a mouth full of food, "It's been pretty cool, though the chicks seem a little stuck up." Nadia and Caden shared a look and smiled back at Justin, their silence calling his bluff.

As they continued to eat, Nadia asked, "And how about the God-stuff?" "God-stuff" was a term Caden used often, asserting over and over again that just because he came to church and youth group didn't mean he believed all this "God-stuff."

Caden began, "Actually, I've really liked it. I think the speakers made some interesting points, and Roger [the adult leader in their room] did a nice job leading our discussion." Nadia smiled at Caden's honesty and always-intellectual response. Nadia thought to herself with great warmth, *That's so Caden.*

But then Justin said something that was surprisingly pointed: "I've liked it, too—but I don't get all this Jesus-talk."

"What do you mean?" asked Nadia.

Caden spoke up first: "Uh, this is a Jesus convention, Justin. Haven't you seen all the useless swag with "Jesus" on it and heard all the romantic Jesus songs they sing? What were you expecting they'd talk about?"

"No, seriously," Justin continued, not playing into Caden's friendly

teasing. “They talk about Jesus like he sponsored the event and they get a hundred dollars every time they say his name. But I still don’t know where Jesus is. Like, I don’t see him or anything.”

“Yeah,” Caden shot back into the conversation, now seeing Justin’s point. “Like, I just don’t know how Jesus helps people—like people who hate themselves, or whose parents are on drugs. I just don’t get that.” Caden paused, then added, “Like, where is Jesus in wars, or when kids get abused?”

“Those are great questions,” Nadia said, realizing the thin theology of the conference was no match for the depth of reflection of these two social outcasts and youth group skeptics.

Caden continued, his expression now making it clear that his inquisitions weren’t just attempts to show off his intellect. He’d tapped into a deep question that was wrapped about his being. He said, “I mean, why is there so much pain?”

“I know,” Nadia said. “It’s crazy watching the news—”

“No,” interrupted Caden, lowering his voice to make it clear he was speaking very personally. “Why is there so much pain *here?* In *my* world? Not just in TV world; I mean … *Why?*” Nadia could only nod in agreement; it was clear Caden knew suffering and pain.

“Well, at least you have each other,” Nadia said, trying to point to some silver lining.

But Justin wasn’t biting. “Yeah, but that’s it—no one else …” Pausing and realizing that he’d maybe said too much, Justin continued, “It just sucks that people are so lonely, like old people in nursing homes and other people.”

As Nadia pulled the van into the church parking lot, she knew her encounters with the fabulous four and her guys would stick with her. She’d done so much thinking about what youth ministry was for, but confronted with the kinds of situations her young people were struggling with, she knew she had to think more deeply about how this theological perspective connected to their issues of loneliness, doubt, and feeling stuck.

Spring soon turned into summer, and the experiences at the

conference began to seem long past—proms, graduation parties, sectional debates, and state softball tournaments tended to quickly dull the memories from a spring break trip. It was now time to plan the fall event. Nadia sat down for a planning meeting with three other local youth workers. Last year, the four of them had put together a joint retreat that brought the youth from their congregations together for a three-day weekend. Their partnership not only helped build mutual understanding and support across churches, but the larger group size allowed them to rent out a wonderful resort with a number of fun activities that the high school students loved. They decided to do the same this year.

They began the planning meeting by firming up dates and talking about a theme. Next on their agenda was a speaker. Last year they'd invited a youth speaker with a national reputation. He was funny and engaging, but in the end Nadia found him as theologically unsatisfying as those who'd spoken at the spring conference. And probably because of her experience at that conference, she spoke strongly against a repeat in style to last year's speaker.

As they sat in silence contemplating their options, Kerri, one of the other youth workers, broke in, "Why don't you do it, Nadia? You always have great ideas."

Shocked by this turn of events, Nadia just stared back. Should she do this? *Could* she do this? What would she say?

"Well," Nadia broke the silence, "I think …"

chapter two

What Happens in Vegas …

I don't know. I guess I could do it." Nadia was flattered by the invitation to be the speaker for the fall event. It must have been the adulation that dulled her senses enough to say "yes." But the moment she committed to do it, the fear rushed to her bones. What would she say? It's one thing to critique something for being theologically thin; it's a whole other ball game to offer something theologically robust yourself.

Nadia sat in her hard metal folding chair, stunned by the swirl of excitement and trepidation. The meeting went on around her for a number of minutes, but she was somewhere else, tranquilized, her brain held hostage by the possibilities and pitfalls of her new task. Finally, she was shaken from her stupor as Barry, the youth pastor at a large nondenominational church, spoke, "So, what is our theme?"

Oh, yeah, we don't even have a theme, Nadia thought to herself. "I should have considered that before I agreed to do this," she muttered under her breath.

They kicked around a number of options from sexuality to prayer to seeking justice. But there was no consensus. These four churches spanned a broad range of Christian traditions; agreeing on a topic often seemed to be the most difficult task for the group. But in spite of their differences, there always seemed to be enough shared trust and respect that they could find some agreement.

They went around in circles for fifteen minutes, suggesting various topics. With each option, Nadia imagined whether she could say anything on that subject. Finally, Kerri asked, "What about the cross? Even with our differences, we all see the cross as important."

"I like that," Katie added, "I think a lot of kids have questions about it. Every year around Easter we get kids asking questions in Sunday school about why it was necessary for Jesus to go to the cross and why God needed to go to such extremes to forgive us."

They all nodded. “That’s it then,” Barry asserted. “The cross will be our topic. Now, let’s think of a snappy title that we can use for promotion …”

But Nadia was already lost in thought again. Her body was still sitting in that hard metal chair, but her mind had been transported to another place, contemplating what she would possibly say. She breathed deeply, knowing this wasn’t going to be easy. As she sat staring into space, her mind grinding on her task, she heard someone say, “Okay, our theme text will be 1 Corinthians 1:18: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

The conversation then turned to T-shirts, but Nadia had tuned out for good. She held in her stomach the anxiety and excitement of what felt like both a huge burden and a great privilege. She was back in a state of deep reflection, kicking around big ideas in her mind. She smiled as the realization came to her mind: *Doing theology in ministry made her feel alive.*

CORINTHIANS

Viva, la Corinth! The Greek city of Corinth was the Las Vegas of the first century. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:18 about the foolishness and power of the cross were addressed to people living in the Las Vegas of the ancient world, a place where power, spectacle, and ambition had soaked deep into the cultural soil. Paul's tone in the first letter is full of thanks and advice, encouraging this new church born by the Spirit and living in Sin City to love one another as equals *in Christ.* In 2 Corinthians, Paul more fully articulates what he means by the foolishness of the cross and its power to save.

Scholars believe that Paul visited Corinth some time between the writings of his first and second letters to the church there, and perhaps lost favor within the church. Some have speculated that the leaders of this young church located amidst the glow and glitz of ancient Vegas found Paul to be less than impressive. He was not powerful and strong; he bore little resemblance to the movers and shakers who popped in and out of casinos and clubs, dripping with clout, money, and the scent of overpriced cologne. That might have been fine, except it appears there were some other leaders within the church who matched that description.

These "super-apostles" (as Paul sarcastically calls them in 2 Corinthians 11 and 12) had also visited Corinth. Viewing them through Vegas-tinted lenses, the Corinthians saw them as legitimate leaders who projected power and prestige in ways they recognized. So when Paul arrived, a supposed leader and voice of authority for this new movement, the Corinthian church had certain expectations. This young church, as we know from Paul's first letter, had a hard time with unity. They'd too easily accepted the hierarchies of their culture, and had a hard time including those from a lower standing. Used to entertainment and flash, the young church imagined that Paul's tongue and persona would be electric and powerful. But once they saw and heard him for themselves, it's clear his act was something of a disappointment.

Standing on the strip, with lights flashing and powerful people around every corner, Paul seemed more like a slave than a member of the Greek

elite. To the residents of this ancient Vegas, Paul looked more like the custodian who cleans the bathrooms at the Mirage than a high roller who passes behind velvet ropes and is escorted into the club's VIP section. Therefore, they wondered, as limousines and sports cars passed by, "How can such an unimpressive man speak the truth of the gospel? How can such a seemingly powerless man speak of the power of God?"

Yet there's more. If Paul's speaking and appearance left much to be desired, what seemed more offensive to the Corinthian sensibility was that he refused to boast; he refused to hype his game. In the Vegas of the ancient world, Paul was like a hip-hop star who raps that he is just slightly above average and not worth too much attention. The supposed leader of this new movement refused to talk proudly and never sought to persuade others to give him props for his accomplishments.[1] To us, this seems humble and appealing, but to the Greek mind in this culture, it shows only weakness, even vileness. If you can't boast, you must be a slave, a nobody.[2]

To add insult to injury, Paul not only wouldn't boast, he refused their money. Unlike others, Paul seemed unwilling to take their financial help, choosing instead to work as a common laborer. He'd rather sell trinkets and T-shirts to tourists than feed off the excesses of the young church. This was a slap in the face to the proud Corinthians. Paul not only refused their money (and money is what makes Vegas go round), but also dirtied his hand in common labor. This Paul is no star! In a city where all that glitters is gold, Paul had no shine! And if Paul had no shine, how could his gospel?

PAUL'S GOSPEL

These two questions—"How can such a powerless man speak of the power of God?" and "If Paul has no shine, how can his gospel?"—rest at the core of 2 Corinthians. Unimpressive Paul must write to defend himself and, more importantly, to defend his gospel. Paul reminds this young church that if he wished to, he could boast; he has experienced and seen much. But he refuses to do so (2 Corinthians 10-11). He has the spiritual, cultural, and educational credentials to boast like Jay-Z, but he'll refrain. And he'll refrain because his gospel is not one that shines—he admits that. The gospel for which he has suffered is no shiny spectacle like the bright lights and billboards of the Strip.

The gospel Paul proclaims rests on the action of God in Jesus Christ to take up the cross.[3] Just as Moses was called into God's action *ex nihilo*—out of his nothingness as a stuttering, elderly fugitive asked to lead a people bound by the *ex nihlio* of slavery—so Paul sees in the cross the fullness of God's act to take nothingness, death, and sin into God's very self. The heart of the gospel Paul preaches is *only* and *finally* Christ and him crucified. The mystery of the gospel for Paul is not about boastful success or affluent power; it is the event of suffering, death, and weakness.[4]

Paul admits that the Corinthians are right; he is an unimpressive leader! But that points to the very heart of the gospel for Paul: that God in Jesus, for the sake of love, has humbled Godself to the point of suffering and death. Paul is qualified to be their leader not because he is powerful or elegant, but because he is weak and foolish. (Even his attempt to boast is foolish). He is qualified because in his weakness he has eyes to see the act of God's love that breaks in through the cracks of suffering.[5]

This knowledge seems foolish and humiliating to the sensibilities of the powerful. But those who are willing to suffer, those who allow themselves to be weak, find themselves in position to see something wonderful that the proud and powerful cannot see: that God acts, that God is breaking in. The cross has ushered in an altogether new reality, where from suffering comes joy, from pain comes new community. And

in its fullness, it is a new reality where from death comes life. (This is the resurrection reality to which we will give ample attention in book 4.)[6]

A NEW REALITY

From the perspective of the powerful in Corinth, Athens, Las Vegas, Rome, New York, or Berlin, Paul's gospel has no sparkle because it refuses the dominant logic. The God of Jesus Christ, Paul believes, comes to us in the opposite and backward.[7] Paul testifies that God acts in the hopelessness of suffering and in the incapacity of weakness, in what the world regards as foolishness. It is utter foolishness that the almighty God has acted for the world's salvation by becoming powerless. But Paul sees that in taking on foolishness and death, God acts for a new reality. From the cross an altogether new reality breaks forth, splitting the seams of this world where power and strength rule, and freeing us from death, and the sin that death deceives us to participate in. Corinth, Athens, Vegas, and Rome are bound to a realm in which might makes right, but Paul's gospel is not bound to this reality. It is the proclamation of the arrival of a new reality, coming on the rails of suffering and weakness, for it is driven not by sheer power or force, but by *love*.

Youth ministry is littered with images of the cross—on T-shirts, book bags, bracelets, and boxer shorts. The symbol of the cross is everywhere, and it has lost its shock value. For us, the cross has become a logo, but for what? Too often, it's viewed as little more than an image of religious socialization, a badge we want young people to commit to and identify with. We want them to have loyalty to it like they do to their favorite jeans or high school insignia. But this makes the cross no more than a lifeless symbol to which we ask young people to pledge their allegiance. Such a cross has no connection to action, to God's own movement within the world.

For the Corinthian church, the cross was far more than a logo—and that was precisely the problem. They knew the cross as an instrument of violence, torture, and execution. Paul pushes them to see Jesus' taking on the cross as the very revelation of God's nature. The cross was a very real and graphic reminder that God takes on the foolishness of suffering and death, that God acts by being weak. No one wants a logo of weakness, foolishness, and death. The cross is God's action of love; it reveals that God chooses love and therefore abandons force and power

for the sake of mercy and grace.

When youth ministry makes the cross into a symbol, we are too easily deceived into a distorted faith that seeks to persuade through power (and even through force, like the crusaders who marched under the banner of the cross). We end up speaking of the cross more in the language of Vegas and Hollywood than Gethsemane or Calvary. We call kids to stay loyal to a static symbol, rather than inviting them to encounter the very being of God through God's action. We lose sight of the fact that the cross represents God's acting to bring forth a new reality bound by love.

I remember a time in sixth grade when a former NFL lineman was guest speaker in my Sunday school class. He declared that if Jesus were here today, he would be the best athlete in the world. As someone into sports, I found it persuasive to think of Jesus as muscular and forceful, with a cross on his jersey as he sped down the field and smashed his competition with a shoulder to the stomach. The Corinthians would have been happy with such a Jesus. But this understanding is hitched more to the logic of this world than to the new one. In such thinking, the cross isn't linked to the radical action of God to bring forth an altogether new reality. It simply becomes the logo for one more ideology, an emblem bound to this world in which might makes right and force takes the day. This tends to make youth ministry itself more focused on religious socialization, rather than contemplation and participation in the act of God to make all things new and bring life out of death.

THE NEW

The foolishness of the cross is not simply the way God acts to save us (if by "save us," we mean making us into good boys and good girls, so we might have religion—our logo). Rather, for Paul, God's act on the cross is to bring forth a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), to bring forth the restoration of all that is. God chooses to be vulnerable, just as a woman is vulnerable in labor, so that from the old, the new might spring. The cross is the place where the old is ripped through with the new. By choosing weakness over power, God brings forth the new. Or, to say it another way: It is through the foolishness of the cross that God shows God's power as love, and through that love brings forth the dawn of the new—new creation, new humanity, and new community. For Paul, the way of God is the way of the cross, the way of suffering. To the eyes of the world, this way can only seem like weakness, but it is the "weakness" of a woman in labor who is, in fact, doing the incredibly powerful work of bringing new life into the world. This may seem foolish to those whose eyes have been blurred by the lights and spectacle of Vegas and desire to accrue more logos. But for those with eyes to see, *the cross is the very power to bring forth something new, to turn what is not into what is. It is the power to turn death into life.*[8]

Nadia wondered if they could get that printed on the retreat T-shirts!

Nadia's theological journey—which had allowed her to understand youth ministry as participation in God's own action—had prepared her to see the cross in a different way. The cross is the doorway into a new reality—an altogether new way of seeing self, world, and God—for the cross is the fullness of God's action. Nadia thought about how often youth ministry uses the cross simply as a sign of our religion, a common marker to distinguish ourselves, placing it on T-shirts, book bags, bracelets, and boxer shorts. Perhaps many of our young people are too familiar with the cross. Its image has been so often used to brand religion that our youth have trouble understanding that the cross possesses within itself a universe of its own, a new reality that calls the current one into question. The danger of placing crosses everywhere in youth ministry is that we lose the shock of the cross. The cross becomes

so familiar that we no longer realize its scandalous foolishness, its offensiveness. The cross is just another marketing logo (like the Nike swoosh) rather than the very event that ushers in a new reality. This doesn't mean youth ministers should focus less on the cross; instead, our teaching must be an invitation into the cross's foolishness, into the breaking forth of God's action in great love. This calls us into deeper theological reflection.

As the meeting ended, Nadia considered all this. While the rest of the group spent the last 45 minutes of the meeting on T-shirts, she wondered how she could speak of the cross as an event, as a new reality breaking into this one, not simply as a logo. For Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18, the cross could not be experienced merely as a neutral image. It was either the power of salvation or an offense, either the good news of new life or complete absurdity.

When Nadia returned to her office, she read through 1 and 2 Corinthians. She saw that Paul was not willing to argue for his own authority in his letters to the young church at Corinth—though he did keep saying that if he wanted to he could boast, he could make a case for himself. Paul was willing to admit he was nothing special to listen to or look at. But Paul viewed this not as a detriment, a strike against his worthiness as an apostle; instead, he used this lowly status as proof of his authority. Paul essentially says to the young church at Corinth, "You're right, I am unimpressive. You're right, I have none of the appeal of powerful men. But that's the point—don't you see? God has acted. God, who is mighty and powerful, has taken on the lowliness of humanity. Don't you see it? In Jesus, God has become weak, and in the wisdom of God's foolishness, God has gone to the cross." Nadia realized as she read that for Paul, God is never more fully God than when Jesus is on the cross.[9]

THE DRAMA

This thought was still rattling around Nadia's head when Rhonda, the secretary, gently knocked and quietly entered Nadia's office. "Nadia, I didn't know you had returned. I have an urgent message," Rhonda said with a pinched look on her face.

"What is it?" Nadia asked, wondering why no one had called her cell phone.

"Mrs. Stewart called; it seems there's been some trouble with Kari at school." Hearing this, Nadia almost laughed. *Trouble with Kari at school?* Nadia couldn't imagine that attentive, overachieving, ever-obedient Kari could ever get in trouble—especially at school, which she took with utmost seriousness (unlike most of her peers).

"Is she sick? Was there an accident?" Nadia asked.

"No, I don't think so. Mrs. Stewart just kept saying that Kari was in trouble. She didn't give any specifics," Rhonda explained.

"What do they want me to do?" Nadia asked.

"I think they hoped you'd meet them at the school," Rhonda stated apprehensively.

Nadia grabbed her keys and rushed to her car, wondering what could possibly be going on.

chapter three

Rethinking Adolescence

Nadia entered the school office and explained that she'd received a phone message asking her to meet Mrs. Stewart and Kari at school.

"I'm sorry, they've already left." said the secretary.

"Okay can you tell me what happened?" Even as the words left her lips, Nadia knew the answer was no, but the confusion of what could be wrong pushed the question from her mouth.

"I'm sorry, that is confidential," she was told politely, but firmly.

Nadia left the school building and called Kari's cell phone, but the call went straight to voicemail. She decided to drive directly over to the Stewarts' house. As she approached, Nadia could see that people were home. The garage door was open and both Mr. and Mrs. Stewart's cars were present. *What is going on?* Nadia thought to herself. It still seemed nearly impossible that Kari would have gotten herself into any kind of trouble, but all the frayed strands of information were beginning to make Nadia believe the situation was serious.

Mr. Stewart answered Nadia's knock. The tension seemed to be woven in with every thread of his pullover sweater. "Come in, Nadia," he said as he opened the door. Stepping into the entryway, Nadia felt uneasy, like she didn't know what to do. Should she walk forward or stand still? At the same time, she felt a great impulse to shout, "What is going on? What has happened?"

Steadying herself, Nadia walked into the kitchen to find Kari and Mrs. Stewart sitting at the table. Nadia approached slowly with apprehension, as if she were nearing a strange dog.

"Oh, Nadia," Mrs. Stewart said, "I'm sorry I called you. But I just didn't know what to do, and I know how much you mean to Kari." As her mom said this, Kari gave Nadia a half smile and looked down. Nadia thought about how weird it was to see Kari so reserved. She'd never seen Kari this sullen—and only this quiet when Nadia would pray with Kari

and her friends.

Nadia pulled out a chair and sat down at the table with Mrs. Stewart and Kari. Mr. Stewart leaned against the kitchen island. All four sat in silence for what felt like several minutes. Finally, Nadia could take no more. She broke the silence, “What is going on? I’m sorry—I came to find you as soon as I received the message, but I have no idea what has happened.” Nadia said.

The silence continued. It wasn’t that they refused to talk; rather, it was as if their words would get stuck before escaping their lips. Mrs. Stewart sighed, and after a few more seconds, Mr. Stewart spoke. “Kari, why don’t you tell her,” he said with a direct tone.

Kari looked down, breathing in and out deeply. Then she said in a whisper, “I was caught cheating.”

“Cheating,” Nadia repeated, both because Kari had confessed so quietly but also because she was relieved. With all the drama preceding Kari’s confession and the difficulty of connecting with the family, Nadia’s imagination had gone other places—pregnancy, drug use, perhaps she’d been assaulted or attacked. Compared to Nadia’s worst fears, Kari’s having cheated on a test seemed like a relatively minor issue.

But she knew it was no small concern for the Stewarts. Nadia could see Kari’s mom as Kari spoke; it was almost like Mrs. Stewart experienced Kari’s confession as a physical attack. With Kari’s words she grimaced and slightly turned her shoulders.

“Yep,” continued Mr. Stewart. “Cheating. Caught by her AP calculus teacher with answers and theorems on her phone.” As he said this, Nadia could see just how distressed this made all three of them.

“Why did you do it, Kari?” Mr. Stewart fired out, a question he’d been repeating and repeating since leaving work early.

“I told you,” Kari stated with her head down. “My grade was dropping and I needed to do well on the test or …”

“Or what?” Mrs. Stewart asked, anxiously cajoling her to continue,

“… or I wouldn’t get an A.” Kari had never gotten any other grade than an A. In her whole life.

Kari later told Nadia that she'd been studying incredibly hard for the exam, staying up until 2 a.m. most nights to review. She said she decided to cheat because she felt desperate. She just wasn't doing well on the practice tests and she couldn't stop thinking about college and grad school. She kept bringing to mind being tied for number one in her class and all the wonderfully nice things that her teachers, her parents, and her friends said about her grades and the potential ahead of her.

"I just got scared! I just—I don't know, I just couldn't face not getting an A. I knew it was wrong, I knew it was a bad idea, but my … my grade. I was scared of losing everything."

Losing everything? Nadia thought to herself. *How could Kari get the idea that she'd somehow created a career portfolio for herself when she was only 17? Losing everything?* Nadia continued to repeat in her mind.

As she continued to talk with Kari, Nadia thought also of Jessica and Mattie, and the conversation the fab four had had about their bodies at the youth conference. Nadia thought about the stuckness they all felt in this area, and the similar stuckness that Kari communicated. They all knew better. They had knowledge and information (even principles) that told them which attitudes and actions were *right*, but nevertheless they felt stuck, they felt caught. They felt that a bad grade or a harsh look could cause them to lose everything; their whole lives lay before them, yet a B+ or three extra pounds and … loss. *Nothingness.*

MADE-UP ADOLESCENCE

Adolescence is a culturally created reality. Two hundred years ago, the idea of an in-between period in which one was no longer a child but not yet an adult simply did not exist. Of course, many of the biological, neurological, and other changes we tend to associate with adolesence were part of the human experience. But adolescence as a unique transitional stage is a relatively modern concept.

But this isn't to say that adolescence doesn't exist. In fact it is a powerful societal and biological reality. But adolescence has its birth and perpetuation in culture.[10] Like so many things we live with today (the nuclear family, capitalism, democracy, mobility) adolescence is a creation of modernity. It arises from modernity's creations—such as national institutions called schools, a mechanized economy that needed fewer hands, and democratic legislation that outlawed child labor. But also, as a creation of modernity, the concept of adolescence is a carrier of modernity's worldview. *And this is why it is important for youth workers*, because this worldview often sets the terms for how we define and treat young people.

The modern age has been about an ideology of progress and improvement. As a creation of modernity, adolescence has been seen as a period of development in which growth, advancement, and preparation are central. Adolescence is understood as the time when individuals seek to improve themselves as they journey toward successful adulthood. It's believed to be the period in life where the primary goal is to grow—intellectually, spiritually, and biologically—into the person that you will be. Adolescence is the time of life where you're told to prepare for the rest of your life. "Prepare now for college," we tell our young people. "Work hard in school so you can get a good job some day."

In youth ministry we tend to follow these same ideologies that have been attached to adolescence. But we've failed to examine them critically from a theological perspective, asking how these very ideologies of modernity set terms for our perspectives and practices in youth ministry. To what extent are we more loyal to these ideologies

provided by cultural anthropology and the modern understanding of what it means to be human rather than to a theological view? Surely, many of us use our theological anthropology in expressing the negative elements of adolescent humanity (young people are prone to deep human sinfulness), but when it comes to the positive we tend to adapt cultural interpretations. This may be the reason so few young people are invited into leadership—or even vital participation—in church communities. After all, the ideologies of modernity have told us adolescents are "works in progress"; they are preparing, so they belong in age-specific ghettos called schools. So the church, in turn, perpetuates the same thinking by providing youth rooms—holding chambers where attention is given to growth, advancement, and preparation. Youth ministry, under the ideologies of modernity, becomes the place where we are *preparing* young people to be vital participants in their churches in the future—not participants and members *now*. This has big problems, of course—but that is a topic for another book.

Rooted in the ideologies of modernity, we youth workers believe our job is to help young people grow in their faith, advance in spiritual maturity, and prepare for a lifelong commitment to Jesus and the church. Once young people graduate from our high school ministries, we hope they are prepared to enter into "mainstream" church life. Youth ministry often evaluates its success on this basis. We ask ourselves, or youth ministry gurus ask audiences of youth workers: "How is your ministry helping kids grow, advance, and prepare to have a vital, mature, and powerful faith?"

And so we in youth ministry mount the treadmill of progress, seeking to push, cajole, or persuade young people to advance in their faith. We assume that if high schoolers are willing to work hard to improve their sports skills, then they should seek to improve in their faith. If they are seeking to advance academically then they should likewise seek to advance in knowledge of the Bible; if they are intent on preparing for college exams then they should prepare also for a lifelong commitment to Jesus. (You can see in these assumptions the middle-class biases—or some might say the captivity—of youth ministry. The more youth ministry's anthropology is tied to the ideologies of modernity, the less able it is to imagine itself beyond the cultural commitment to progress).

Of course, Paul's epistles speak clearly and frequently about growth, advancement, and preparation. Paul pleads with the young churches to prepare to run the race, to grow in understanding and in faithfulness to the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:4). In this sense Paul sounds much like the modern youth worker. But we've viewed these assertions about growth through the ideological lens of modernity, ignoring the fact that Paul's call to grow in faith is indelibly linked with his understanding of the foolishness of the cross and the backwardness of the gospel.

Through the lens of modernity, we view growth, advancement, and preparation as steps on the escalator to strength and power. And, because we think of adolescence as a time to mount the escalator, we youth pastors seek to infuse this escalation toward strength and power with a godly perspective. We accept the cultural view that adolescence is a time to grow, advance, and prepare, so youth ministry becomes a religious add-on, like adding power windows and iPod capacity to your new car. Youth ministry tries to positively influence this escalator ride in a godly direction.

But Paul's understanding of growth does not involve increasing in strength and power, for his Lord chooses a cross over a throne. The new reality that Paul proclaims is one that moves on the rails of weakness and suffering. For Paul, growth, advancement, and preparation are transformed by the cross. We grow toward lowliness (self-outpouring —*kenosis*), advance toward the self-giving of Christ, and prepare not for worldly success but for humility (Philippians 2). For Paul, it is in these seemingly backward ways that we participate in God's action, that we are given eyes to see God's new reality. Paul implores his young churches to see what is real, to see the new reality that breaks forth from the cracks of brokenness, and to live lives that are bent toward this new reality. They do this by choosing love through weakness, rather than by the power of growth, advancement, and preparation. For Paul, if there is anything like growth, advancement, and preparation, it is bound in the act of God—and God acts to take on suffering and death for the sake of love.

Kari and the rest of the fab four have swallowed modernity's ideological perspective that tells them they are to grow, advance, and prepare. For Kari, there is little difference between her tenacious search

for good grades and her faithful involvement in the youth group. Both efforts surf the wave of the ideologies of modernity. It is interesting how often we youth ministers lift up as the trophies of our ministries those young people who manifest the greatest signs of growth, advancement, and serious preparation. Rather than focusing on young people's participation in the action of God (which is made known in our suffering and weakness), we end up celebrating culturally accepted understandings of what being good and religious looks like.

Justin and Caden would not be lifted up as the models of adolescent faith in most youth ministries, although these two teenagers have wrestled deeply with suffering and weakness.[11] Justin and Caden lack the shiny glow of growth, advancement, and preparation that those succeeding in modernity's ideology tend to project and receive. But Justin and Caden were seeking for God in their deep questions and in the brokenness they felt. For Paul, this is where God moves and how God acts; it is through the cross that God brings forth the new reality. Faith is trusting in and living toward the new reality that comes not through modernity's ideologies but through the action of God, who meets us in suffering and weakness for the sake of love.

The question youth ministry must face is whether young people like the fab four are more *mature* in faith than those who are more like Justin and Caden. Are the outward signs of the faith that the fab four display a true measure of adolescent faith commitment? Or are these girls simply more willing and able (again here comes the middle-class bias of youth ministry) to assimilate to a religious concept of the ideologies of growth, advancement, and progress? Because youth like Justin and Caden have not assimilated to these ideologies, we often assume they have no faith, or at least that their faith is tentative. But that is not always the case. I think of Vicky, a high school freshman I once knew who had spent five years in foster care. She always dressed in black and frequently used very colorful language. Few would have picked her as a deeply devoted follower of Jesus (certainly no one at the church). But when she was asked to share her story and wrestle to find God in it, she began by speaking of her fierce commitment to search for God in all that was broken in her life.

By the same accord, we're often shocked when kids like Kari, Jessica,

Kelsey, and Mattie go off to college and supposedly “lose their faith” or participate in college life in ways we’d never have imagined when they were in our youth groups. Are such 180-degree turns in behavior due to kids losing their faith? Or is the faith we often encourage in them constructed on modernity’s ideologies—ideologies that turn on young people in college, pulling the rug out from under them? Or, to say it another way, has adolescent faith in youth ministry been built more on modernity’s assumptions, so that when these assumptions are thrust into doubt, the ground of their faith crumbles? Justin and Caden, on the other hand, are seeking faith up against their doubt. They are not seeking to assimilate to modernity’s ideologies, but to encounter the act of God as a new reality.

Because we have swallowed a cultural anthropology that defines the adolescent as someone who is growing, advancing, and preparing, I think we often fall into this unhelpful view of faith. Although we might assume that this anthropology is foundational and fundamental, it is actually fully cultural, and gives little attention to our person in light of the action of God. I believe we need a refined anthropology, a deeper understanding of who adolescents are.

CONCEPTUALIZING ADOLESCENCE DIFFERENTLY

No doubt there is something biological about the period of adolescence. The organism is unfolding. But instead of seeing this unfolding period as a time of development toward growth, advancement, and preparation, I think it is better to see adolescence as a time where what is true throughout the life span is newly reflected upon. Specifically, adolescents are those *newly* conscious of their struggle between possibility and nothingness. Adolescents are aware that there is so much possibility for their existence, for their future, but this possibility is always near nothingness, always struggling with nonbeing. Love and hate, joy and sorrow, excitement and depression are so close because in adolescence our existential ontological state is at the surface. It is exposed, for in adolescence we are now able to reflect fully upon our very selves, yet have not learned how to ignore or hide from this struggle between possibility and nothingness as we often do later in life.[12]

So often for adolescents everything feels like life or death. A breakup after a two-week romance, a bad grade, a nasty look from someone—all signal that while your life is spread out before you, your very being walks the thin line between possibility and nothingness. This may be the best explanation for the supposed weird behavior of adolescents. It is not that they are in the (crazy) period of stress and storm (that G. Stanley Hall spoke of) in which we ghettoize them in schools and motivate them to grow, advance, and prepare. Rather it may be that this weird behavior, the great highs and devastating lows so characteristic of adolescence, is a truthful reflection of the ontological states of *all* of us.[13] For every one of us, hope and despair are so close, life and death so near.[14] We may be doing a great disservice to ourselves by caging teenagers in preparatory youth rooms, for we may need their perspective at the center of our church life to clear our own dulled eyes to see what is true: We are all in a struggle between possibility and nothingness, a struggle that those in adolescence often experience with heightened awareness.

This may be a better way of understanding what Kari is experiencing.

Sitting in her bedroom, Kari can feel the threat of what a bad grade might mean. It is accompanied by a feeling of oblivion. She is living the struggle between possibility and nothingness. People have so often said how smart she is and, therefore, how much possibility lies before her. But the very thought of any grade less than an A seems to puncture this possibility with nothingness. So she acts contrary to her own values in order to protect herself from the threat of what feels like nonbeing. It doesn't matter that she knows better, that her religion has given her knowledge of right and wrong. She is up against something deeper than right and wrong; she is confronting the chasm between possibility and nothingness. Her given perspective of right and wrong is easily discarded in the heavy downpour of the threat of nothingness. She believes that an A—even an A attained by cheating—upholds her being and keeps her secure in possibility, whereas a B+ hums a dirge of nothingness she cannot stand to hear. Next to her possibility, a B+ is a terrifying thought, for its loss of academic standing, scholarships, and accolades sings of nonbeing.

Jessica's situation at the youth conference might also be better understood through this anthropological perspective. Jessica knows better than to care so deeply about her body image; she *knows* she is much more than what people think of her body. But when some unknown guy in line calls her fat, it strikes at the nothingness that her very being is always fighting against. She knows it shouldn't matter, but she cannot help herself. This stranger's comment clouds her possibility by injecting nothingness into it. Like most adolescents, Jessica teeters between possibility and nothingness—and the boy's words push her over the edge into nothingness. No wonder she is upset.

Back in their hotel room, Mattie admits that she too knows better than to obsess about her body, but does nevertheless. It is certainly true that this perceived need to have a certain body type is the product of culture (and I would argue it feeds off a culture of growth, advancement, and preparation). It is also true that the way Jessica and Mattie hear the boy's comment is conditioned by cultural realities; Jessica thinks she might be fat, that the boy's comment might be true, because of cultural assertions about beauty. But the comment has such power because it confronts her at the most fundamental of levels: the ontological level of

the struggle between possibility and nothingness. She may know better than to care about this cultural assertion about her body, but this cultural assertion is tied to her ontological anthropological state. In her head, she knows the shape of her body doesn't matter; but the cultural assertions have spoken more fully to her being, promising possibility (if she is skinny) and threatening nothingness (if she is not).

In youth ministry we too often try to provide young people with religious knowledge, asking young people to choose this knowledge over the assertions of the surrounding culture. Then we judge our ministries by how well our young people are growing, advancing, and preparing to commit themselves to this knowledge. But up against the struggle between possibility and nothingness, such knowledge is of little help, because the cultural assertions have often wrapped themselves around the young person's ontological state. And when our young people give in to the pull of the dominant culture, we find ourselves saying things like, "If only they knew more about the faith or believed it enough!"

But such cultural assertions are not confronted best through knowledge that leads to preparation, growth, and advancement. Rather, the way to confront these cultural assertions is through the foolishness of the cross. It is to seek for God within the struggle of possibility and nothingness, to search for God at the ontological level. It is not to tell Kari, Jessica, and Mattie that they *know better* than to think or act like that, but to admit with them that they are struggling between possibility and nothingness—and it is a struggle of life and death. It is to acknowledge with them that they are stuck, and to seek God with them from that very place.

God is found at the place of the struggle between possibility and nothingness, because the God that Paul proclaims to the Corinthians is a God who bears the cross. In Godself, God struggles for new possibility through nothingness, and through nothingness the new reality is born. This is what Jesus means when he says that whoever wants to be his disciples must take up their cross and follow him (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). He doesn't mean we must do difficult things, like running three miles at a seven-minute pace, or resisting the temptation to gossip or eat too much chocolate. We so often implicitly or explicitly communicate to young people that "taking up your cross" means being

really committed, so they will do things that are costly and really try to make themselves into something. Rather, what Jesus means is that we must seek him where he can be found, on the cross, at the site of our own crosses, those places where we struggle between possibility and nothingness.

Paul believes that God acts from the cross—from death, weakness, and suffering. This means God moves at the deepest level, the level our very humanity rests on, the level of life and death, of possibility and nothingness. Paul's own great breakthrough, which transformed him from Saul to Paul (Acts 9), brought him up against just such a reality. Saul had no patience for the new movement of the Way, because he believed no Messiah could be crucified. No real Messiah would be weak and suffer. But encountering God in the light that blinded him and the voice that called out to him, Saul is changed into Paul, the one who chose to confess *only* Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). Paul's "conversion" was his coming to see the cross as the place of God's action—action at the most fundamental level of our existence, at the level of life and death, of possibility and nothingness.

If youth ministry is about participation in the action of God, then youth ministry is not about knowledge that leads to growth, advancement, and preparation (even for heaven). Instead, it is about encountering God at the cross, where God takes on nothingness, and from nothingness brings forth new life, new possibility, an all-new reality. This is why Paul says we must die (confront nothingness) in order to live (have possibility)—because to live is to die in Christ, and thereby allow Christ to live in us (Galatians 2:20).

In many ways, Justin and Caden are closer to this reality than the fab four. Even though the guys haven't assimilated religious knowledge as the fab four have, and even though swearing, smoking, and negativity often surround them, they are nevertheless seeking for God at the level of nothingness and possibility. They are seeking for God up against their doubts, up against their lost families and deep pains. The fab four have their own experiences of struggle and pain (as do all young people), but somehow they've gotten the "churchy" idea that they must deny these experiences in order to follow Jesus.

Entering into these places of pain, loss, grief, and struggle is more than

just therapeutic. Paul reminds us that these are the places where the new reality is breaking in. The new breaks in through the cracks of suffering, yearning, and loss, for the new reality is a reality of love, a love that is strong by being weak. Justin and Caden are seeking for God even as they doubt God. Unlike the fab four, they stand in Bethel, in the place where Jacob wrestled with God from the core of his very being (Genesis 32). Justin and Caden have wrestled with God by seeking for God in the cracking of nothingness in their fragile possibility of their very selves.

An understanding of young people as those newly conscious of our common human struggle with possibility and nothingness drives us closer to Paul's proclamation of the cross and the new reality that it brings forth through the resurrection. But it also changes the way we think of faith. It allows us to free our conceptions of adolescent faith from the grip of modernity's ideologies. Faith isn't defined as the ability to assimilate religious knowledge. Rather, faith from the place of the foolishness of the cross is trusting in a new reality. It is trusting that, up against our own experiences of impossibility, God is moving to bring forth the new. Faith is to see and admit our impossibility, our stuckness, and through it to trust that God in the cross of Christ is acting to bring forth a new creation in you and in all that is. Justin and Caden, while not looking like trophies of adolescent faith, are actually closer to this faith Paul calls us into, because they are able to honestly admit their stuckness and seek for God in it. They yearn for the new. Like the father in Mark 9, in the face of nothingness and impossibility, they are willing to cry out, "I believe, help my unbelief."

So often we in youth ministry depict faith as a burden we ask young people to carry. We cajole and plead with young people to have faith, to assimilate the proper knowledge that will allow them to live a religious life. But from the place of the cross, the place of our ontological struggle between possibility and nothingness, faith is an invitation to *hope* in honest wrestling with our impossibilities. Faith is a willingness to hope in God's new reality, to hope that through and within our experiences of nothingness, God is bringing forth life. Justin and Caden are still wrestling with this. Both are willing to admit their stuckness, which is essential. Yet they still await the step of discipleship—not because they have not yet accepted some particular knowledge, but because they are

not sure, from the core of their being, if they will trust in this new reality. They can't yet see if they will hope in the act of God, which brings life forth and claims them (whether they will admit it or not).

MORE DRAMA

The experience with Kari and the rest of the fab four stuck with Nadia. She never doubted that they were great kids who really do care about following Jesus. Nadia now wondered if she hadn't failed them in some way. It wasn't that she saw herself as somehow responsible for keeping them from doing wrong and even stupid things; Nadia wouldn't allow herself to fall into that trap. But she worried that her theological perspective had not touched the depth of yearning and searching that existed in the fab four. She worried that her teaching had not invited them to articulate the painful realities in their lives and to seek for God in them. The more she thought about it, the more she had to admit that her perspective of young people had more to do with growth, advancement, and preparation than the struggle between possibility and nothingness.

As the months passed and the retreat drew near, Nadia knew she wanted to discuss the cross in a way that would speak to the deep realities that lived in young people. But as she wrestled with how, she could find no traction. Nadia just kept staring at her computer screen, typing a line and then deleting it. Weeks went by and … nothing.

After another few hours of starts and stops, and needing a break, Nadia headed up to the school. When she walked into the cafeteria that afternoon, she saw Caden sitting in his usual spot, with a Twix in one hand and a pencil in the other as he worked on his math homework. Nadia walked over and sat down across from Caden, seeking to catch up on the news from debate club and other things going on with him.

"So, what's up with you?" Caden asked. One reason Nadia loved talking with Caden was because unlike most other kids she knew, even the fab four, Caden would ask Nadia about herself. It felt more like a real conversation than a youth-worker-imposed attempt to connect.

"Oh, I'm just frustrated," Nadia blurted out, nearly surprising herself. "I have to speak at the retreat, and I can't figure out what to say. I mean, I know what I want to say but I can't seem to figure out how to get into it—" She stopped herself abruptly, figuring Caden couldn't care less.

"What's the topic?" Caden asked, surprising Nadia by keeping the

conversation going.

“The cross,” Nadia responded.

“You mean, like, the cross of Jesus?” Caden asked. Nadia just nodded, a little embarrassed that she’d shared her struggle with the speech.

“You know the thing I don’t get?” Caden asked. Nadia raised her eyebrows and tilted her head toward Caden, resisting the temptation to roll her eyes just slightly. Caden was *always* ready to share his latest critique of God or the church; he loved being the skeptic. Nadia looked at him, as if to communicate that he should continue, even as she prepared to take Caden’s skeptic’s whip. (After all, it was her fault for broaching the subject.)

But when Caden continued, it was not with his typical detached skepticism. “What I don’t get,” Caden said, “is why is a *dead God* a good thing? I mean, how does that help, like, lonely people or poor people or … whatever? I mean, why is the cross *good*?. I’m still wrestling with that one.”

As Nadia opened her mouth to respond, she realized she wasn’t sure …

chapter four

The Foolishness of the Cross

… Or, at least, she wasn't sure enough to respond. Nevertheless Nadia tried, figuring she needed to say *something*. "Well … because … because we needed our sins forgiven." As the words left Nadia's mouth, she knew she'd fallen back on a Sunday school answer that was of little help. It's not that Nadia believed the cross had nothing to do with the forgiveness of sin, it just seemed a stale response. Her answer was lacking something —something that would make it more than knowledge, something that would connect it to Caden's life, to her own life.

"Yeah," Caden responded, "but that seems pretty extreme." A number of responses came to Nadia's mind like, "That's how serious sin is," but she could tell this was more of an apologetic for herself than a real response to Caden's questions. ("Why is a *dead God* a good thing? Why is the cross *good*?") Plus, the more his response sat between them, the more she thought he had a point.

It appeared Caden was ready to change the subject: "You know I'm really big into comics and video games, right?" Nadia just smiled and nodded. A person would have to be pretty dense not to know that about Caden; any conversation of more than three minutes would eventually launch Caden into one of those topics. "Well, the thing is …," Caden continued, adopting his debate persona, "… the thing is that those hero stories never quite end like the Jesus story. I mean, the hero might suffer or face some kind of big test, but that suffering always makes him super-powerful or strong or something. The problem with the Jesus story is that it just seems, well, foolish."

Nadia's shoulders thrust back when he said "foolish." This after all was Paul's assertion in their retreat theme verse, 1 Corinthians 1:18.

"What's foolish about it?" Nadia asked, with a tone that didn't communicate defensiveness but interest.

"You always tell us that Jesus keeps saying, 'If you've seen me, you've

seen God.' Well, if that's *God* dying on the cross, then that's just ridiculous; it seems really foolish." Then returning to high-school Caden, who always needed to be the skeptic, he continued, "I'll stick with Wolverine."

THE CROSS IS NOT ABOUT OUR ACTIONS

Too often, when we think of the "foolishness" of the gospel, especially in the context of youth ministry, we think in the framework of human action. We warn young people that their friends (and the world in general) will think it's foolish for them to follow Jesus by not partying in high school, having sex whenever they choose, or just living from their impulses and wishes. We tell young people to expect the world to think they are foolish. And when we speak this way, the foolishness of the cross gets tied to human action: It's foolish to act like a Christian.

While this may very well be a secondary outcome of the foolishness of the gospel, its true foolishness rests not in human action but in God's action. Caden is exactly right: It is foolish that the God who has spoken creation into being would choose to die on a tree. It is foolish that the God of life is found dead. When we speak of the cross with young people, we often speak of what the cross means for human beings, what it means for them that Jesus has died for their sins. *This is very important.* But to make this the starting and ending point of our theology of the cross is to run the danger of sliding into moralism or hyper-pietism. We may also speak of the cross as if it were simply an example of the need to *do hard things*, even things that culturally seem foolish. We point to the suffering of the cross and say, "See how Jesus suffered for you? See the horror he was willing to go through? Now, you should live like a Christian and be really into your faith." The cross, then, becomes the motivation for forms of pietism. We ask adolescents to show their commitment to the cross of Christ by carrying their own cross, which we (wrongly) define as doing "hard things" to show they are following Jesus —devoting time to prayer, devotions, and Bible reading as well as evangelism and ambitious service.

This call to ambitious and radical personal action is music in the ears of so-called millennials—young people who have been told by parents and teachers that they can do anything, that their digital expertise and savvy networking skills means the sky is the limit as long as they're willing to do the difficult, to really try, to commit themselves. In such a context, carrying your cross becomes the pep talk of personal religious

ambition. “Make a difference,” we tell them. “Carry your cross and change the world.” These assertions are positive and motivating—but, again, they are not what’s foolish about the cross.

The cross—and the fullness of Christianity that is born from its radical action—is not really about our doing hard things. The cross refuses to be subjugated to the place of logo for religious ambition. The cross is the end of religion; it reveals that religion in itself cannot save. And, more importantly, the cross is the end of human action. The cross reveals that human action, whether religious or not, is bent toward death. The cross reveals what we know inside ourselves if we’ll stop and listen: There is much nothingness and impossibility in the world.[15] (In chapter 6 we’ll pick up with what Jesus means in telling us we must carry our cross and how this fits with the assertion that the cross is not about our action).

Caden had said similar things to Nadia a number of times. He often questioned her about why Christianity was so important. Caden liked to point out that he knew lots of people who lived moral lives and did good things in the world, yet they didn’t believe in Jesus or go to church. Caden even thought that he was a pretty good person and that life was working out okay for him without Jesus.

Nadia realized that much of what Caden had been saying was true. He was right; it was quite possible to be a good, ethical, or successful person without the cross. But sitting across from him in the cafeteria that day, Nadia was struck by his humanity. It was as if she could almost see into him as he talked with a Twix in hand. Listening to him, she realized that the cross spoke not to the possibilities that Caden could make out of his life, but to all those impossibilities. The cross spoke to Caden’s deepest fears, his extreme loneliness, his insecurity. The cross of Jesus was found next to Caden’s many experiences of impossibility.

If Nadia were to speak about the cross to young people, she would have to go to the depths where human action, where trying to do hard things, is found to be impotent next to fear, loneliness, loss, and brokenness. The cross, Nadia realized, is not for the whole but the broken. Youth ministry is not for the ambitious and successful, but from the place of the cross, youth ministry is for those who yearn for life next to their impossibility.

THE CROSS AS GOD'S ACTION

Nadia was starting to realize that the cross is about God taking on the reality of death. As such, the cross demonstrates that human ambition, moralism, and pietism cannot offer salvation. Turning the cross into a symbol of the need to do hard things (even hard things in service of God) makes the cross static, a logo, and implies that its significance is bound to human action. But the cross is not a logo for personal motivation, it is a doorway into the very heart of God. The cross is God's very way of being and acting in the world. The cross reveals who God is; this is what makes the cross foolish.[16]

It's not that God chose just once to act in a foolish way by going to the cross and winning our salvation, and then running back into glory and might. Rather, the foolishness is that the way of the cross is the very way God moves in the world; the cross is indelibly linked with the very being and acting of God.[17] The cross pierces the heart of God and is inseparable from God's own being. The cross is not a singular moment in which God chose to act differently. It is the event that most fully unveils who God is and how God acts in the world. This is why Paul chooses to know nothing other than Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)—because the crucified Lord is the fullness of who God is and how God moves in the world.

Caden had a point: Many of his comic book superheroes did find their identities through a difficult experience that was something *like* a "cross"—whether it be falling into a well of bats, being bitten by a radioactive spider, or being exiled from one's home planet. But these so-called "cross experiences" are just moments, incidents that give power and insight to the hero, as he or she moves from that moment of weakness or tragedy to greater strength and might. Unfortunately, there are plenty of theologies that adopt a similar perspective (the prosperity gospel is one radical example), understanding the cross as only a small spider bite on the way to personal glory through the resurrection.

But such thinking does not square with Paul's understanding of the cross or his take on suffering, hardship, and tragedy. For Paul, the cross is not just one moment, not simply a quick detour on the road to

strength and power. The cross is not the equivalent of exercising or eating your vegetables—something that was hard for Jesus to do, sure, but once that hard thing is done, Jesus is stronger than ever. Rather, for Paul the cross becomes the continued state of God's very being. The mystery of Christian faith is that in losing to death, in being overcome by it, God acts to overcome death. The cross is not simply adversity met, as we too often tell young people; the cross is the reality of death in God (Moltmann). The all-new reality that Paul sees breaking forth does not come through might and strength, but through God's suffering and weakness on the cross, through death finding its way into God's own being.

Caden is right; this seems foolish. It is foolish that God chooses to take on humanity and be found dead on the cross. It is foolish to those who cannot see the act of God, for those who have not tasted through the Spirit the new wine, for those who are unwilling to admit and honestly face their own impossibilities.

The Corinthians, bathed in the glowing waters of their Vegas-like existence, want Paul and Paul's gospel to be heroic. They are fine with adversity and doing hard things, as long as adversity builds greater strength. They want their actions to accomplish something. But Paul sees such a desire as bound to the old humanity, characteristic of Adam who, unwilling to admit his own weakness and dependence, takes the serpent's bait in an effort to become like God. The old Adam seeks strength and power, seeks to be like God, but finds only death (Genesis 2:17).

For Paul, the new humanity comes about through Christ who throws off strength and power, empties himself, and goes to the cross (Philippians 2:6–11). The new breaks through in death, not in might. It is foolish to the world because it is an all-new kind of power, a power that reverses the ambition of Adam by choosing to be weak, so that love might fully bind humanity to God. This is a love that overcomes death by willingly entering into death. It is a new reality that chooses to be weak so that it might be with and for the other. God *chooses* the foolishness of the cross because God chooses to be with and for us in love. God heals the division that arose between God and Adam. God opens God's being to us by acting for us, by acting not outside but within

our struggle for possibility next to nothingness. God is found with us by placing God's very self in the nothingness of the cross.

All this isn't to diminish the importance of God's glory or to suggest that there isn't a throne on which Jesus is seated in the heavenly realm. But these realities are eschatological, meaning both that they are coming in the future and that they may be happening in the heavenly realm now. But this is *not* the way God chooses to encounter us in our now, and bring forth the new reality in this world. We will one day experience God in the fullness of glory and power, but today God is found in the backward and the opposite (as Luther would assert). God is revealed in the cross of weakness and suffering; this is the very state of God's being.

We seek for God not in another world, but in this one. And it is in this world, through the cracks of suffering, yearning, and loss (our own experiences of the cross) that God moves, encountering our humanity and bringing forth the new through the fullness of a love that is stronger than death. This love has no fear of death because this love has entered into death. In the mystery of God's act, love does not obliterate death, but makes death part of God's story, part of God's very being.[18] God's love is stronger than death because it has borne the fullness of death.[19]

And this is the extent of God's glory: Out of the overflowing love of God's being, God acts to be found in our places of suffering, struggle, and yearning. God chooses to be found in places that confound our conceptions of God. God is not supposed to die, suffer, or cry out; yet, on the cross in the forsakenness of Jesus is the crucified God. "Surely this man was the Son of God," says the centurion as he witnesses the death of Jesus (Mark 15:39).

The cross is no doubt about forgiveness of our sins, but this forgiveness happens by God opening up God's very self to us. The cross as forgiveness of sins is also the picture of where and how God reveals God's self in the world.

Realizing that the cross draws us all to seek for God next to our own places of weakness and impossibility, Nadia wondered if youth ministry had failed Kari and Jessica. These two girls had admitted and confessed their sin a number of times, but Nadia wondered if this confession ever sought more than simple absolution (feeling like one's sins are forgiven).

Did such confession ever move into the action of God? Nadia wondered if these girls realized that God in Jesus was found next to their deepest longings and hurts. Did they understand that being a Christian (a Christ-follower) involved opening up these parts of our lives to the Spirit and honestly seeking for God in the midst of them? It was clear that Kari had felt unable to reveal her fear and ambition to anyone. She acted against her better knowledge because she feared having to encounter nonbeing and impossibility if she were to get anything less than an A. Kari hid from her fear, weakness, and temptation, rather than seeking for God next to it. But the God of the cross is found in such places, because this God in Jesus bears fear, weakness, and temptation. Nadia knew Kari *understood* that the cross forgave her sins, but this forgiveness seemed disconnected from the cross as the place of God's action.[20]

SEPARATING TWO IMPORTANT DOCTRINES

Youth ministry discussions about the cross often fail to make the connection between two essential theological doctrines. (By *doctrines* here I mean ways of thinking of God's action.) Nadia was starting to feel the effects of this divide as she thought about Kari. In youth ministry we tend to see the cross as *about justification.* Jesus takes our sins to the cross, so that we might be forgiven and put into right relationship with God. This focus on justification has led us to practices like having kids write their sins on index cards and then nail them to a wooden cross or burn them, or pouring bleach into glasses of dirty water, turning the water clear. These serve as object lessons of what happens on the cross, of how the cross justifies us by Jesus taking our sins.

But these lessons focus only on *simple* justification, and by that I mean they focus on forgiveness of sin without contemplating how justification itself is bound to another key doctrine. Such illustrations seem to ignore the doctrine of *revelation,* which concerns how and where God makes Godself known in our world. We tell young people all the time that their sins have been forgiven, and they often wonder why this matters—they didn't feel like they needed to be forgiven. Witnessing their apathy, we ramp up the persuasion about the need for forgiveness, dirtying the water by convincing them how bad and corrupt they are. But it doesn't connect because we fail to stress the essential link between justification and revelation. When we don't talk enough about how the cross reveals who God is and where and how God acts, it becomes a masochistic incident that in some abstract way forgives kids for all the bad things they've done (or, more positively, illustrates for them the importance of doing hard things).

So kids like Kari do these object lessons, and they understand that God has forgiven them. But such knowledge rarely touches the depth of their humanity, speaking to their deepest fears and questions. Having separated justification from revelation, we wonder why Kari's understanding of God's forgiveness doesn't keep her from cheating. But in Kari's mind, the cross is just about God forgiving her for doing bad things. It's like the little sticker you get for giving blood; it tells you

something but doesn't change the way you see the world or yourself. That kind of change and transformation can only happen through encountering God's very self. Forgiveness of sin must be found within the encounter with the very action of God. Justification and revelation cannot be separated or we give Kari and other kids what Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace"—forgiveness of sin without the transforming presence of God.

The cross is surely about justification (the forgiveness of sins) but this is inseparable from the way that God chooses to reveal Godself to us in the world. Justification is bound to revelation, and revelation is the very *action* God takes to be found in our world, to be *where* we can encounter God. This was actually Martin Luther's great breakthrough in the Heidelberg Disputation. This theological piece is no doubt about justification, but justification for Luther is inseparable from the *theologia crucis* (the theology of the cross)—a theology of how God is revealed on the cross in suffering and weakness. For Luther justification and revelation are inseparable. We are forgiven because God is found acting for us by suffering with and for us. God encounters us in our own deaths through God's own death. Therefore, justification is deep, because it is bound to a God that reveals Godself in the cross, next to our impossibility, beside our longing, suffering, and fear.

Justification without a focus on revelation suggests that one can be forgiven without ever having to encounter God, without ever experiencing the action of God. This is what Nadia feared had happened with Kari. No wonder so many of our young people can say they believe that Jesus forgives their sins, but have little interest in following Jesus. For them, the forgiveness of God is like subatomic material: They believe what they've been told in science class, that there are atoms and nuclei, they believe these things really exist, but they've never concretely encountered them, so in the end this truth makes little difference in their lives.

But the cross is not just an act through which God forgives and justifies us. In this act of justification, God reveals where God can be found, where God can be encountered. In suffering, death, and brokenness, God is present—and not just abstractly, like atoms. The cross as revelation means that God can be encountered next to the

essential, concrete realities of our being: We yearn, we suffer, we hurt. God is found in those places. God allows Godself to be found in our own weakness and suffering, forgiving us and setting us free by being with and for us.[21]

To be forgiven we must *be* where God is found, and the cross reveals that God can be found in suffering, weakness, and death. God is near to Kari and Jessica in their stuckness, to Justin in his hurt, to Caden in his longing, and to all who suffer and struggle. And when we encounter God in these places of hurt, we will find God ready, for sure, to forgive us. God forgives by inviting us into God's very revelation, by inviting us into the action of God. In great beauty God's action is found next to our deepest questions, next to our struggle for possibility next to nothingness. God is found on the cross, giving God's very self to us, so that we might be with God, forgiven and free.

The cross, then, is not knowledge we ask young people to possess, but a way of experiencing the action of God, a way of encountering God in the depths of their very existence, alongside their deepest pains and yearnings. Our job in youth ministry is not to convince kids that they are made clean by the blood of the cross, but to invite them to seek for God amid their yearning, brokenness, and deepest questions. To find themselves forgiven and set free by encountering the God of the cross next to their impossibilities.

As Nadia considered her upcoming talk, the separation of justification from revelation was what seemed to be tripping her up. Sitting at her computer she found herself thinking that the talk would have been much easier to write before she began this theological journey. She could have simply talked about how God forgives our sins on the cross, have kids write their sins down on index cards and nail them to a wooden cross. But now Nadia sensed that there was much more to it. The cross isn't just a formula to forgive our sins, a lever we tell young people to pull so they can receive the gift of forgiveness. It is the very heart of who God is and how God acts. "But how do you say that?" Nadia wondered.

Staring at the blinking cursor on her screen, she asked herself, "Is salvation having your sins forgiven, or is it finding yourself swept up into the being and action of God? Isn't salvation about recognizing that you're claimed by God's new reality that is born in the cross?"

THE CROSS AND THE TRINITY

If the cross is, in fact, something that reveals God's very being to us—if the cross is about both justification *and* revelation—then the cross is not just about the relationship between God and human beings. (This would be to stop at justification). If the cross is also about revelation, then the cross is something that happens between Godself, between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.[22] This means the cross says something about the nature of the Trinity.[23]

God acts in the world as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. God's action is bound within God's being as Trinity. If we believe that Jesus is the revelation of God ("Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," John 14:9), then we are drawn into discussing the cross as a Trinitarian reality. If we are going to confess that the crucified Christ is Lord, then we have to think about the cross and what it means for the Trinity.[24]

Too often in youth ministry, we have stayed on the surface, lacking the theological imagination or desire to think beyond the simple functionality of the cross. We have failed to think at the level of God's very being as Trinity, to think about what the cross means for God and how we are drawn into God's experience of the cross. We frequently tell young people that Jesus went to the cross to forgive their sin—and this is true. But we seem unable or unwilling to go deeper, to help them see the cross as something that happens within the Trinity. This allows kids to accept the gift of forgiveness without ever having to face the thinness of their existence. But when we find ourselves talking about the cross from the place of God's own being facing death, from the place of the Trinity's actually experiencing death, then young people's own struggle for possibility next to nothingness is taken into God's person as Trinity.

The cross isn't *just* about Jesus dying as our sacrifice. Because we confess that "Jesus Christ is Lord," because we believe Jesus is the fullness of God's revelation, then the cross is about the Trinity. The cross is the experience of God's very being, God acting to take on death, suffering, and annihilation. The cross does the most horrible of all imaginable things: It separates the Trinity. The cross separates God from

Godself. On the cross, the Son, Jesus, experiences separation from his loving Father, and cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

This is what makes the cross so foolish, to return to Paul’s words. It isn’t necessarily foolish for Jesus to bear the cross heroically, making a profound sacrifice so we might live. Such heroics lead to glory and veneration—Vegas can get into this storyline. What’s foolish is that the cross stretches all the way to the heart of God. It empties God of Godself; it places death and weakness within the very core of God’s own being. God’s revelation, the very way God makes Godself known, is in suffering, longing, and death. And God’s revelation is forever yoked to suffering, longing, and death because the cross has penetrated the very center of God’s very self; the cross has separated the Father from the Son, annihilating the communion of their love that is the Spirit. This is what Nadia was beginning to see: To talk about the cross is to talk about the very being of God—who God is and where God is found. It is to proclaim that God has acted for us by taking death into Godself.

Back when I used to work for Young Life, we would often take kids on retreats to Young Life’s Castaway Club (a kind of adolescent resort). At these events, we would always show the video for Michael W. Smith’s “Secret Ambition.” (I know this dates me terribly!) This video showed the torture and crucifixion of Jesus in gruesome detail. The combination of music and the graphic images of what Jesus experienced were very effective; the video seemed to *always* move junior highers to tears. After the video a speaker would remind young people that Jesus went through all this torture and pain so they could be forgiven.

Such an approach is quite common in youth ministry. We tend to do *CSI* cross talks, asking young people to consider what the thorns would have felt like on Jesus’ skin, detailing exactly where the nails pierced between the bones of his hands and feet, and speculating on what it must have meant medically for Jesus’ blood and water to separate. Like one of the *Saw* movies, we use the gore to grab kids’ attention, hoping this will motivate them to live like Christians. But the wonder and horror of the cross is not in the torture, blood, and gore; the horror is in *who* is on the cross.

From the human level the cross of Christ is gruesome. But other

people have been tortured worse; in fact, we know Jesus was actually on the cross a short time compared to others who were crucified. When speaking to young people, we tend to emphasize the horrible way in which Jesus died, but our salvation doesn't rest in the gore. It isn't the gore that matters, but the person. The true horror of the cross is seen not from the human side, but from the divine side. The heart-stopping shock of the cross is that the dying man is the fullness of God. The horror of the cross is that it separates God from Godself, dividing Father from Son.[25] It is the thrusting of death into the being of God. This is what should take our breath from our lungs—the unimaginable reality of death in the Trinity.

So, in teaching young people about the cross, it is not the torture we should focus on. It isn't the brokenness of Christ's body that matters most, but the brokenness of relationship. The Father loses the Son to death, the Father experiences the excruciating pain of losing the Beloved, while the Son descends to the dark pit of nothingness from which there is no return (or so it is believed). It is utter foolishness that God in Jesus Christ would take on human flesh and enter fully into the nothingness of death.

The good news of the gospel is the proclamation that death has separated God from Godself. The good news of the gospel is that God has entered hell, that God has been abandoned by Godself.[26] It is the horrible good news that God has been overtaken by nothingness, that God has been found in hell, that the Son has been forsaken by the Father.[27]

Now, any half-conscious teenager might wonder how this could be good news. How is the cross that penetrates and separates God from Godself good news? It is good news because God, in the person of Jesus Christ, has taken on nothingness, abandonment, and hell, and has made such realities the location of God's presence and action (revelation). It is from the nothingness of death that the good news of the gospel breaks open. From nothingness springs new possibility; from death comes life. God has taken nothingness, abandonment, and hell into Godself as Trinity and, by overcoming them in the power of the resurrection (which we'll discuss in book 4), has brought forth a new reality where from death comes life.

This is good news, because *everyone* who struggles with nothingness—all who find themselves alone or journeying through great experiences of hell—can be assured that they are swept up in the presence of God. In our times of pain and struggle, we are bound in the love of the Trinity, a love that takes what is dead and, out of such impossibility, brings new life.

Kari and Jessica didn't need to be given more information about how their sins have been forgiven. They believed this already. What they searched for was an answer to the nothingness that they discovered so close to their being. It was in the face of this nothingness, this thwarting of possibility, that Kari cheated and Jessica could not shake the comment about being fat. They needed a God who would not only forgive their wrong actions (and they *did* need this), but more fundamentally they needed a God who was found acting with and for them in the midst of their struggle between possibility and nothingness. They needed a God who in Godself had entered this struggle, overcoming nothingness with the ultimate possibility of living in the relational love of God—a love that would give them their humanity, give them the dignity and freedom to be human. Because this love has entered death, it provides God's very presence to all who honestly wrestle with their own impossibility.[28]

The cross brings forth a new reality, a reality born in the love of the Trinity that has entered death. And it is from this Trinitarian reality that Paul sees the new breaking forth from within the old. It is from the action of the Trinitarian God—Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer—that the new (new creation, new humanity, new community) is born. When the cross is seen from within the action of the Trinity then we can understand why it is so important to Paul, because it is an event that happens within Godself to bring forth an all-new reality. The cross is something that happens not only in human history, but exists in the history of Godself. And because it has happened in God's own life as Trinity, it merges God's own history in ours. This is what Paul so wants the Corinthians to see.

THE DRAMA

After weeks of waiting and preparation, the night of Nadia's talk finally arrived. The nerves were almost too much; her foot moved restlessly back and forth, almost without her control. As the worship song played, Nadia thought again about what she was going to say and how she was going to say it. She kept asking herself, "Why did I ever agree to do this?" She tried to ease her anxiety by telling herself that it wasn't that big a deal. So what if two hundred kids and a dozen of her youth ministry peers (and their volunteers) were awaiting her message? She knew the other leaders and most of the kids. But those efforts to boost her spirits only pushed her back into the anxious wondering about why she'd chosen to do this.

The music stopped, and Kerri, a fellow youth worker, took the mie and began introducing Nadia. Listening to Kerri's words, a slight smile came to Nadia's lips. She felt a stab of excitement. Next thing she knew, she was walking up front …

Nadia's Talk

Nadia began with her own story, sharing details from her sophomore year of high school—a year that everything went wrong. "That was the year," she explained, "that my parents divorced, and my sister, who had been my protector, went off to college. I lost many of my close friends for some weird high school reason that I never really understood. It was a year when I felt completely alone."

Nadia then transitioned by showing the group a music video that, in its own way, raised many of the same concerns she faced in her tenth-grade year. After the video ended, Nadia asked the young people to gather in small groups and answer the question, "What issues do you see here?" After giving them several minutes she asked them to name a few.

As the young people offered their answers, Nadia wrote each one in large letters on a whiteboard: Fear. Loneliness. Depression. Broken relationships. Misunderstood. Hurt. Sadness. Confusion. Parents fighting. And there were many more. By beginning with the video and her own story Nadia was trying to take the conversation to the young people's ontological state, to move the conversation toward their own struggles between possibility and nothingness. She knew it would not be fair (nor would it work) to demand that young people jump to thinking about themselves at that level immediately. The ontological struggle between possibility and nothingness is too powerful and central to our existence; most of us often try to avoid thinking about it. By using her own story and the music video, Nadia was allowing young people to ease into making the connections to their own experience.

Then Nadia showed two more videos. The first one featured six minutes of commercials that had played on MTV. As the young people watched, she asked them to consider what these clips said about what it means to be a person. "What do these commercials say about what it means to be a guy or a girl?" Back in small groups the adolescents discussed the question. Then, like before, Nadia asked them to speak out

what they thought. A number of kids said things like, “strong, in control, desirable, sexy, together, wanted, fierce, popular, super, beautiful, buff.” After listing those comments on the board, Nadia asked, “So how do these characteristics help us deal with the reality of the music video or my own tenth-grade experience? If we said we saw in the video things like fear, loneliness, broken relationships, confusion, and hurt, how does this MTV definition of who we are help?”

The young people just shrugged their shoulders. “I’m not sure it does,” said a boy in the second row.

Nadia then showed another video. This one featured clips from *The Simpsons* where God was mentioned or depicted. She asked the young people, “What do these clips say about God?” This time they came up with things like, “old man with a beard, aloof, does bad things to you, boring, in heaven, far away, mean and kind of dull, super powerful but not really smart.” Nadia wrote these words on the board, next to the list of situations in the music video (fear, depression, broken relationships, loneliness, etc.). Then Nadia said, “Now, I’m sure not all of you, and maybe not many of you, believe all these things about God. Of course, we know the writers of *The Simpsons* are being satirical—or trying to be funny, anyhow. But this *is* the way some people think about God, which is why *The Simpsons* poke fun at these ideas. Many of us believe that God is super powerful, but also far away in heaven. If that’s who we think God is, how does this help us deal with the realities we saw in the music video? How does a God who feels aloof and far away help us deal with our lives that often feel so fragile?” Nadia got what she expected—shaking heads and shrugging shoulders.

Nadia’s talk then took a significant turn. She said, “Now, I don’t find MTV’s view of what it means to be human or the picture of God we get from *The Simpsons* to be very helpful. I’m not necessarily saying they’re bad. I like watching MTV, and I laugh hard at *The Simpsons.* But I am saying that neither one of these really helps us much as we face issues like fear, loneliness, depression, broken relationships, misunderstanding, hurt, sadness, confusion, or tension at home.”

Nadia continued, “Now, what I want you to do—just for the next fifteen minutes—try to forget everything you’ve ever learned about God or Jesus. Everything you ever learned in youth group, Sunday school, or

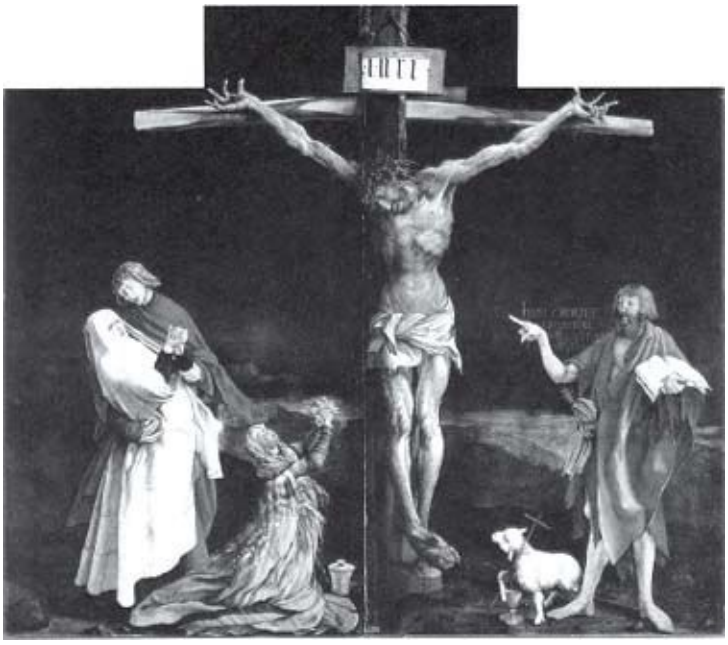
confirmation—try to forget it all.

"Okay, have you done it? Have you tried to erase your brain? I promise you'll be able to reaccess the files after we're done. Don't worry, youth pastors and volunteers, the files are safe!"

Nadia continued, now leaving the jokes behind, "So, the church has said that Jesus Christ is a full picture of what it means to be a person and, at the same time, Jesus Christ is the full picture of who God is. In other words, Jesus is 100 percent of what it means to be human and 100 percent of what it means to be God.

"Now, having forgotten everything you've ever learned about God, what if the only thing we knew about God was what we see in this picture?"

Nadia then showed them Matthias Grünewald's painting "The Crucifixion," a sixteenth-century painting that many Christian historians believe to be one of the best depictions of the crucifixion. Nadia had seen it for the first time in college during a lecture on Christian art. When the slide came up in her class, she remembered being deeply moved by it. But she'd forgotten about it, until she saw a picture of it in Douglas John Hall's *The Cross in Our Context*, which had recently become one of her favorite books.



The Crucifixion by Matthias Grünewald

Leaving the image up on the screen, Nadia asked the young people to return to their small groups to discuss what stood out to them. She asked them, “What do you see?” After a few minutes she asked them to gather again and share their thoughts with the whole group.

“I see darkness,” a junior guy said.

“It just looks like death,” said a girl.

“People are sad,” added another.

“I see Jesus’ hands, they’re turned upward, clenching for something.” said a guy. “And his, body, I guess, is clearly dead, and that dude with the finger, too … what is that?”

Everyone laughed. But Nadia felt like the youth were going where she had hoped they would go.

As they shared, Nadia again wrote the comments on the board, putting them right next to the original list from the music video. Now, next to “fear, loneliness, depression, broken relationships, misunderstood, hurt, sadness, confusion, parents fighting,” was the new list based on Grünewald’s painting, which read, “darkness, death, sadness, hands of abandonment, beaten body, death, and the importance of the event (the pointing finger).”

Nadia then said, “Now, what if I told you that this person experiencing these things (like darkness, death, abandonment) was the fullness of who God was? What if I said, if you’ve seen this person, the person here in this painting, you have seen God? And not only that, but you’ve also seen what it means to be human, what it means to be a person.

“Sometimes we try to ignore it, but part of what it means to be a person is to suffer, to face real pain, to struggle with situations like I did in tenth grade and with issues like the music video raises. But here is the good news: These experiences that so many have to face, these difficult experiences have been taken up by God on the cross. God knows what it means to be afraid, lonely, depressed, misunderstood, hurt, sad, and confused. If you have ever felt this—and to be human is to feel this—then you should know that God has promised to be near to you, to encounter you, because God in Godself has experienced these things. God, in Jesus, has gone to the cross, and on the cross has taken all these experiences that we know too well and suffered them, so we can be

certain that these experiences can never separate us from God. Instead, they are places where God promises to be near to us, forgiving and loving us, because God is completely with and for us."

Nadia then concluded, "And that's the point of the cross. The cross witnesses to a God who wants so badly to be with and for us, who wants so much to love us, that this God is willing to die. This God is willing to die for you, and then, God overcomes death in Jesus' resurrection. This God gives you life, not by ignoring or avoiding your fear, pain, loneliness, or confusion, but by being right in it with you. That is where we find this God of the cross. We find God next to those experiences, next to our deepest fears, because this God has gone to the cross so that we will never be alone again, so that we will find life through our experiences of death. The cross brings forth life, by God in Jesus dying for us so that we might live.

"Let's pray." Nadia said.

chapter five

Why Is It So Hard to Talk about Sin?

The relief, post-talk, was euphoric. Basking in the satisfaction of a job well done, Nadia keep thinking to herself, "I'm so glad it's over." As she gathered her things, a few kids came up and said, "that was cool," as they ran from the camp chapel to other activities. Kerri and a few others from the planning team expressed their thanks and appreciation. The warmth of their gratitude and her accomplishment was wrapped tightly around her. But standing off to the side was a middle-aged man whose nonverbals signaled a potential cold front. Once the chapel had cleared out, and Nadia was nearly alone, he approached her.

"Hello, I'm Pastor Marvin," he said, extending his hand.

"Hi," Nadia answered, smiling broadly. But her energy and smile weren't shared or returned by Pastor Marvin.

With a deep stare and a wrinkled brow, he said, "I found your talk interesting. Have you been to seminary?" Nadia's initial suspicions were confirmed; the cheerful easiness fell from her body.

"Well, kind of. I've taken a handful of classes, but I haven't finished or anything."

"Well, maybe that explains it." Pastor Marvin said. Nadia flinched slightly. "The thing is," continued Pastor Marvin, "your talk had many theological problems, and as a youth minister you may not have even known it."

"I don't think I agree," said Nadia, trying to defend herself and youth workers everywhere. "I did a lot of thinking about theology as I considered what I wanted to say."

"Interesting," returned Pastor Marvin, conveying even deeper suspicion and more intensity. He then launched in, "It's just that you made no mention of sin in your whole talk. Isn't the cross about sin? About Jesus' sacrifice so that our sins can be forgiven? I think especially in talking to youth, where they are surrounded by sin and always being

tempted, you did them a real disservice by talking about the cross without talking about sin."

Pastor Marvin then paused, tilting his head and leaning closer to Nadia to communicate the significance of her glaring omission. Nadia just stared back, not sure what to say. She had some thoughts—but she wasn't about to get into a fight with this senior minister right then, nor did she want to suggest that they get together later to discuss it. It was clear he didn't respect her, making it highly unlikely that a valuable theological dialogue could unfold over coffee or dinner.

After a few more seconds of silence, Pastor Marvin patted Nadia on the shoulder, as if to break the tension yet reinforce his power, "See, you forgot that Jesus is our substitute, that Jesus went to the cross to forgive our sins so a righteous God who hates sin could love us. You may need to take or retake that seminary class," he said with a smile and warm eyes, as if to make the pill of his slamming insult go down easier, allowing him to be a jackass and yet still feel pastoral.

Nadia could see he wasn't interested in a dialogue. She was simply a beneficiary of his monologue, a monologue intended to serve as a theological intervention. Gulping back her anger, she said, "Thank you, you've given me a lot to think about."

Pastor Marvin winked, nodded, and strode out of the chapel, confident that he had saved the theological day.

THE PROBLEM OF SIN

Perhaps one of the hardest things to talk about with young people is sin. Of course, this isn't because the topic is too theologically obtuse. Rather, as Reinhold Niebuhr has said, sin is the most empirically provable Christian doctrine we have. Indeed, most young people are quite capable of telling you how and where they see and experience sin in their world. Sin is real! And though it is tangible in young people's lives, we too often make it confusing.

One place we run into problems is when we confuse sin with sinning. Think of sin as the very state of our being. Orthodox Christian belief has long held that we are all sinful. But sin is not the bad things one does; it is the very state of one's being. Paul writes, "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). We know that we are sinful, because death is our destiny; no amount of money, talent, or religion can keep death from arriving on our doorstep, if not today then in some tomorrow.

To say that sin is the state of our being is not to say that all humans—even newborn infants—are worthless dung in the sight of God. This assertion is more than a little off-putting and represents a crass commitment to Augustinian theology and Calvin's doctrine of the total depravity of humanity. But in seeking to avoid this ugliness, many end up denying the sinfulness of humanity altogether. Rather than stumbling into one ditch in an attempt to avoid the other, we may find it helpful to think of sin as the reality of death.

ORIGINAL SIN

Death is a reality that all human beings must face, and if all human beings must face it, then all human beings are sinful. Not because they are dung, but because *death has separated us from the fullness of the action of God, and outside of the action of God there is only death.* Paul makes this same point in writing to the Romans, "For the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

The link between sin and death is established shortly after creation. God tells Adam and Eve that if they eat from the forbidden tree, they "will certainly die" (Genesis 2:17).[29] It may strike us as odd that the fall of humanity (a fall that would lead to wars, genocide, child abuse, and so much more) was simply due to Adam and Eve being naughty by eating the wrong fruit. But as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, the sin of the garden wasn't necessarily in eating the fruit, but eating the fruit symbolizes the act of denying relationship with God. In this action, Adam seeks to live outside and beyond the action of God.[30] Bonhoeffer contends that the command not to partake from the tree at the center of the garden was necessary to differentiate God from humanity. God and humanity are relationally bound, but this relationship (like all relationships) is dependent on those in relationship being differentiated from one another.

The command against eating the fruit was a boundary of grace. By keeping the command, humanity was given both itself and an indelible connection to God—Adam and Eve were able to act with and for each other as they participated in the fullness of the action of God by walking with God in the cool of the garden (Genesis 3:8). The tree at the center of the garden provided a boundary that allowed the first humans to fully partake in the action of God, because the boundary allowed for relationships. Adam could never confuse himself for God as long as he respected the boundary.

The temptation that leads to the fall is to act outside of God's own action. "Did God really say you can't act for yourself?" This is essentially the serpent's inquisition. Adam falls because he seeks to live outside of or independent from God's action. But to do so comes with a crushing

consequence, as God says, confronting Adam and Eve. Now that they have eaten, they know of life and death. Now that they have acted outside of the action of God, they are exposed to the nothingness of death.[31] But they will die not because God will kill them—God acts in compassion and mercy, clothing their nakedness (Genesis 3:21). They will surely die because to live outside of the action of God is to live outside of relationship with the One who speaks being out of nonbeing, who creates something out of nothing, who brings life out of death. To refuse participating in this action is to slide back into nothingness; it is to serve nothingness. It is to be sinful. It is death.

THE CROSS AND SIN

To say it again, sin is not the bad things we do; sin is living outside of the action of God. Pastor Marvin is wrong—Nadia actually spoke a great deal about sin in her talk. But he views sin only through the lens of morality: Sin is having sex, drinking, smoking, lying, and cheating—things he imagines all young people are prone to. Pastor Marvin saw sin as the things that we do, and young people, in his mind, often do wrong things. But if we define sin as simply doing bad things, then it becomes hard to disentangle what is *truly* sinful and what we might simply find distasteful. So Pastor Marvin could easily label as sin not just high school sex and drinking, but also baggy jeans and hip-hop music.

The cross for Pastor Marvin functions as a tonic we can take so our bad behavior can be forgiven—and if we really understood the power of the tonic and how diseased and bad we were, then we would stop doing the bad things that show how sinful we are.[32] But when the cross becomes a tonic, a medicine for our sinful disease, then the cross has little to do with the action of God, it has little to do with experiencing and participating in God's grace and love, which is sweet. When the cross is a tonic, then God is only as active as the NyQuil in my cupboard; I partake of it when and if I think I need it, but let it sit when I don't, allowing its expiration date to come and go. (No wonder adolescent faith is often summed up as moral therapeutic deism.)[33]

The problem with all this, of course, is that Jessica and Kari believe what Pastor Marvin would want them to. They have gulped the tonic of the cross. They've accepted that sin is really bad and that Jesus died so they could be forgiven from being bad. Although they are *almost* perfect girls, they believe Jesus has forgiven them for being bad.

It is no wonder that youth ministry tends to have the greatest impact on those kids who can easily assimilate to being good. (This often has a lot to do with both personality and parental involvement.) To many of the kids in our ministries, the idea of taking the tonic of the cross to make them good is fine, because they are good already. The idea of being "bad" or "sinful" is too abstract. Young people like Kari and Jessica know that they almost never do bad things, so in the end, for

them, following Jesus isn't something they really need. They have no problem being good. Jesus and the cross just become symbols of their religion, a brand to be loyal to for now. But this cross has little to do with their deepest yearnings and the crying of their broken hearts. That's why young people like Kari and Jessica are known to say things like, "I wish I had a more dramatic conversion story, but I was never on drugs or a prostitute or anything." Such assertions just confirm that they see the cross primarily as a medicine that saves people from being bad. And this keeps them from honestly voicing their own yearnings, needs, and sufferings, from acknowledging the ways that they too wrestle with death.

In her talk Nadia presented a God who is found next to our deaths, next to our shared sinful state. The God who is found on the cross gives us life by bearing our experiences of death. Nadia's understanding of sin delves deeper than simple morality or failing to be good. Sin, for Nadia, is living outside of the act of God, where there can only be death. Nadia was pushing deeper, making the problem of sin not about doing bad things, but about having to face death and all his friends (like depression, isolation, rejection, and fear). Nadia boldly spoke of this reality in her talk, using the music video as a way of helping young people get in touch with the state of their own beings and how they are snared in the teeth of death.

The cross then is more than a tonic. It is God placing God's own being next to our being, which must face death. The cross is the act of God to take on death (the reality of sin), so that we might live. Adam and Eve's original sin was *not* doing the bad thing of eating fruit, but seeking to live beyond and outside of God's action, which can only lead to death. So in the cross, God acts from the fullness of God's very being and enters death, placing the action of God within death, so that death (sin) can never again separate us from God.

It is God's act that overcomes sin, God's act of taking the cross, taking death into Godself. If sin is just doing bad things, then all we need is the tonic Pastor Marvin peddles. But when sin is the reality of death, when we are caught in death's web, then we need a God who acts by taking on death, by being found next to our deaths, bringing new possibility out of death's nothingness, shattering death by bearing death.

This is why Jesus heals the paralytic and says, “Your sins are forgiven” (Matthew 9:2). Jesus explains to the Pharisees that by healing the man, he is overcoming death, overcoming sin. Jesus asks them: “Which is easier: to say, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’?” (Matthew 9:5). The paralytic hasn’t done a bad thing; he’s not unable to walk because he’s behaved badly. The paralytic has been pinned down by the fate of death; he wrestles with death, which has taken his ability to walk. And up against a sinful world of death, Jesus *acts* to free him from sin by making him whole, by prying death’s cold fingers from around his being.

FROM SIN TO SINNING

Now, I've railed pretty hard on thinking of sin as bad behavior. I've pushed for understanding sin as the reality of death that is the consequence of our seeking to live outside of the action of God, outside of relationship with God. But this doesn't mean that I believe there is no such thing as responsibility, that I have no concept of "sinning." On the contrary, I think we do many things that are wrong and even immoral. We hurt others, we steal, we gossip, and so much more. But we commit these sins because we are deceived into believing that if we serve death, somehow death will show us mercy. But death, the serpent, is a liar. I often say hurtful things or I'm tempted to treat another poorly because I fear for my own existence. I feel death whispering that this person is better than me, that he's more important than me. Doesn't that feel like nothingness? Hurt this person and you'll be safe from nothingness. But this is the tangled web that death weaves, making us vulnerable and then pushing us to do things that perpetuate and serve death in a futile effort to avoid it.

Kari, for instance, ended up doing a bad thing. She cheated; she did a sinful act. But her doing this bad thing was an outgrowth of a more fundamental reality, the reality that if she didn't get an A, it felt like (and maybe was) a death. Kari did a bad/sinful act because she was afraid of death, because failing to achieve good grades brought her face-to-face with nothingness. In her talk Nadia sought to push the significance of the cross beyond simple moralism, which perfect kids can ignore and hurting kids find vapid. Instead, she wanted kids to see how the cross spoke to the depth of their struggle with possibility next to the sinful reality of nothingness.

It is no wonder that Jesus frequently urges his disciples, "Do not be afraid!" (Matthew 28:10; Luke 12:32; John 12:15, 14:27) Fear feeds death and wraps our own action into nothingness. Our actions of sinning are bent toward death and exist in opposition to God's own action, which is to speak being out of nonbeing and life out of death.[34] This is why Paul tells the Corinthians that he chooses to know only Christ and him crucified, and why he continues to plead with those living in the

Vegas of the ancient world to embrace the foolishness and weakness of the cross. It seems foolish for God to be weak, but only weakness can conquer death, because only weakness acts against death without serving it. Only suffering love can redeem another without using force and threat to do so.

Therefore, the cross becomes freedom because it conquers death, because it takes death's sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). We need not serve death out of fear, for our destiny is now bound in God's action, in the weakness and foolishness of God dying so that we might live. Kari needed to be reminded that the cross means that no B+ could threaten her. If she would face the reality that any grade less than an A feels like death, and call it what it was (something that felt like a threat to her person), she would discover the God of the cross who meets her at this ontological level. Jesus' own death and resurrection frees Kari from serving death. She is now free to step into death (it will still feel like death to get a B+). But stepping into it, she will discover it cannot destroy her, because death itself has been embraced by God. The cross promises that in the very places where we experience death we will also encounter the presence of God.

Kari and Jessica did sinning things because they sought to avoid death (rejection, failure, isolation). Kari cheated and Jessica starved herself, because not to do so was to risk the strike of death against them. A scale that read too high or a grade-point average that fell too low attacked their very being. Kari and Jessica didn't need just a tonic to cure their bad behavior, they needed a God who would be their representative, who would take on and break death, so that they might be free from fear of rejection, failure, and isolation, so that they could find life and serve death no more.[35]

SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

Pastor Marvin's theology was rooted in a rigid understanding of the theory of substitutionary atonement. He believes Jesus went to the cross as a sacrifice in order to appease God's anger over human sin. He told Nadia, "You forgot that Jesus is our substitute, that Jesus went to the cross to forgive our sins so a righteous God that hates sin could love us." What's interesting is that in such a view, God is not active. For Pastor Marvin, God remains deeply offended by our "badness." Jesus goes to the cross to pay our outstanding debt. After the sacrifice, God's honor is restored, yet God remains seated on the throne unmoved. But this perspective has no understanding of God's revelation, of God breaking into our world to bind Godself to us. It is stuck in justification. This God can't be with and for us in love, because God is offended by our badness.

Pastor Marvin's God sits in anger at the sight of our sin, waiting for the perfect sacrifice to assuage God's disgust. But this disgust is interpreted as directed toward our moral or behavioral corruption. And it makes sense that youth ministry would historically be drawn to this kind of atonement theory, since we too have often assumed that the primary goal of youth ministry is making kids moral so they will behave like good (Christian) kids.

Now, don't get me wrong: There is much that is helpful and even biblical about the theory of substitutionary atonement (although it is not the only biblical perspective on the meaning of the cross). Substitutionary atonement's great benefit is its emphasis on the fact that we are forgiven, that God releases us from our sinning. But when it is applied without theological imagination, substitutionary atonement stays on the surface of both the human condition and God's action within it. The cross affects things only on some cosmic ledger, but makes little to no impact on the frail and yearning humanity of young people. Pastor Marvin's rigid thinking about substitutionary atonement gives us a cross that deals only with the surface of morally or behaviorally being bad, and never stretches deeper to the ontological struggle between possibility and nothingness that young people confront.

As we have seen with Kari and Jessica, our problem is not that we

sometimes do morally bad things; our problem is our very existence. Our problem is the very fact that we are bent toward nothingness; although we can imagine possibility, we are stuck having to grapple with nothingness. The atonement theory Nadia was working from brings the cross to bear on this reality by focusing on God's taking on the fullness of the human condition of death, making God's action again inseparable from human existence. Nadia's atonement theory sought to speak to the ontological reality of young people. Nadia saw Jesus not only as our substitute (although she affirmed this) but also as our representative. In Jesus, the fullness of God and the fullness of humanity are united. Jesus journeys to the abyss of nothingness on the cross, so that death in all its forms might be broken, and we might again find ourselves in relationship with the Source of Life. In Jesus, God dies so we might live[36]—and find ourselves again swept up in the fullness of the action of God.[37]

Pastor Marvin was wrong; Nadia had a significant atonement theory at work. But in Nadia's view, God atones for us not by simply covering our badness, but by becoming sin/death for us (2 Corinthians 5:21), by taking death inside the life of Godself.[38] Pastor Marvin had theological blinders on. He was so committed to viewing the cross and the world solely through the lens of substitutionary atonement that he couldn't see that Nadia had pushed deeper, that she had gone beyond the moral to the ontological level.[39] Nadia gave young people an understanding of the cross that stretches beyond offering a cure for "being bad," a theology that embraces their struggle between possibility and nothingness.

Nadia followed Paul in believing that it is at this level, this ontological level of possibility and nothingness, that God brings forth the new from within the old. It is at this level, the level of weakness and foolishness, that the cross thrusts a new reality into the world.[40] Nadia's atonement theory sought more than just forgiveness in this world. Nadia sought forgiveness that stretches to the very level of being vs. nonbeing, sought a new world that would spring forth from the old. Nadia understood the cross not merely as a mechanical tool to forgive us but as the doorway leading us into the new humanity, which lives beyond the threat of death.

BACK TO THE DRAMA

The rest of the weekend went well. Nadia enjoyed having the talk behind her so she could just be with the kids from her church. She had a number of important conversations with the fab four, and Justin and Caden were their usual selves—both very involved while also complaining about everything.

After they returned home, life slid back into its normal rhythm. A few weeks later the team of youth workers who'd planned the event got together for an evaluation meeting. Nadia walked into the meeting feeling good; all the feedback she'd received from these fellow youth workers had been positive. And when they discussed her talk during the meeting, people expressed their appreciation. Yet Nadia noticed that Kendall was both quiet and uncomfortable. After the meeting concluded, Kendall waited for Nadia at the door.

"Hey, can I talk with you?" he asked hesitantly.

"Sure," Nadia said with a hint of confusion. If she didn't know better, she'd have thought Kendall was about to ask her out; he had that kind of nervousness about him. But Kendall was engaged, and no romantic vibe had ever passed between them.

"What is it?" asked Nadia.

"Well, it's about your talk, and then the conversation we had about it at the camp later that night," said Kendall.

"Oh," returned Nadia, fearing another Pastor Marvin situation.

"It's been really forcing me to think," began Kendall. "But what I don't understand is, what does it all mean for the Christian life? I see my job as assisting kids in being disciples of Jesus. And I'm not sure how your perspective allows for that."

Nadia paused to think, and then said …

chapter six

Living from the Cross

Hmm. I don't see my perspective as unconcerned for discipleship," said Nadia. Kendall just stared back, as Nadia thought more. "I mean, I'm trying to invite young people to be disciples as well."

"I know you are," said Kendall. "That's obvious when you look at the impact you've had on Kari, Jessica, Mattie, and Kelsey. I talked with those girls at the camp; they're clearly on fire for their faith." As Kendall said this, a strange chill came over Nadia's body; she agreed with his comment, but wondered if this were completely true. Kendall seemed to be measuring faith in some way that made Nadia uneasy.

Kendall returned, "I guess it's just that I have such a passion to give Jesus to kids. And when you talk about the cross bringing in a new reality, where God binds Godself to us through Jesus' death and our own deaths, I wonder, well, what else is there to do? I mean if all that's left is to help kids see their deaths, as you said that night after your talk, then what's my job? Isn't my job to make Jesus present in their *lives*? To give them Jesus? In our conversation you said Jesus is already there, through kids' own experiences of the cross. But I see my job as bringing kids to the cross, helping them see that on the cross, Jesus saved them."

"Well, I don't know …" Nadia said in a reflective tone, but Kendall interrupted her politely.

"See, it's clear to me that your ministry has *made* disciples in Kari and Jessica. But then there are kids like Justin. I mean, I have kids like Justin too—kids whom we just pray will get it someday. I guess I see my job as making kids who don't have Jesus like Justin into kids like Jessica who are really living for Jesus, where Jesus is so present in their lives."

Now Nadia understood what made her uneasy about what Kendall was saying. He found it easy to dismiss kids like Justin as needing Jesus, whereas Nadia often wondered if Justin were closer to following Jesus than some of the "perfect" kids in her youth group. Justin was wrestling

with God; he was just willing to admit more forthrightly the places of the cross in his life. “What do you mean when you say your job is to make Jesus present?” asked Nadia.

“I see it as my job to reveal Jesus to kids—through my talks, Bible studies, and relationships with them. My job is to help them see Jesus and then call them to follow him, to be his disciples,” Kendall answered.

With that, the conversation sputtered to an end. Kendall had given Nadia a lot to think about. She found herself agreeing with much of what he’d said, yet some of his perspectives made her uneasy. They said good-bye, and Nadia soon found herself grinding theologically again. *What is discipleship from the perspective of the cross?* she asked herself as she drove back to church.

JESUS AS REVEALED AND HIDDEN

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul was pushing the young church to see something that was difficult for those living near the bright lights and spectacle of the ancient world's Vegas. Paul wanted them to see that the foolishness of the cross means that God is revealed to us in those moments when God often seems hidden. God enters death in order to bring forth all new life. Paul wants his readers, then and now, to see that discipleship involves seeking for God as revealed in God's hiddenness. Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are the action of God through Jesus; God reveals Godself in the hiddenness of Jesus' humanity. Jesus is overtaken by death, and then death itself is overtaken in the resurrection. Yet even God's triumph over death itself is hidden; the message is not flashed on a jumbotron, but hidden in the risen Christ's appearances to beloved women and sacred disciples (Mark 16). The action of God is revealed in its hiddenness—that's why it takes eyes of faith to see it.[41]

Now, talk of God as both revealed and hidden may sound like mind-numbing theological jargon that makes no sense. But this paradox is the foolishness of the gospel that Paul sees as central to following Jesus. God is revealed in the beaten and crucified humanity of Jesus. God is revealed on a forlorn cross outside the city rather than in the glory of the temple. And God is present in the contradiction of God's own experience of being abandoned by God. ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Matthew 27:46) Jesus is the fullness of God, yet is found abandoned by God. God is fully present in Jesus by being absent from him. It is from the soil of death—of hiddenness and absence—that all new life grows. Paul is right. This is foolishness!

But this foolishness Paul presents is not simply an intellectual exercise designed to confuse the young Corinthian church. Rather, Paul sees this very perspective as essential for following Jesus, for being Jesus' disciples. This is why Nadia was so troubled by Kendall's suggestion that Justin was far from being a disciple. Nadia believed Justin was seeking God despite God's hiddenness, struggling to find God's presence in what *appears* to be God's absence. In other words, Justin was seeking God's

action in the foolishness of the cross. Justin was wrestling to believe—and wrestling, Nadia sensed, is essential for faith. Faith isn't simply a moment of religious acceptance, but a very way of living in the world, a way of seeing reality and seeking for God's new life within it.

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH THE HIDDEN

Justin was seeking to find God in his own experience of the cross, through his "thorn in the flesh" (to continue drawing on Paul's themes from 2 Corinthians 12). Justin was a part of every youth group event. He may not have been able to verbally assimilate to the faith like other kids, but he had thrown himself into this community of faith and belief; he was acting with and for them, even as they together sought to live within the act of God. Justin couldn't confirm this in words the way the fab four could, perhaps because of his experiences of abandonment by his father. Since his childhood, Justin had been through a number of experiences that could be described as God's absence—because God seemed so hidden in those times. Justin refused to put these experiences aside; they defined him in so many ways. If he were going to follow Jesus, he would have to follow him *through* those experiences, because those experiences were such a big part of who he was.

Paul is actually presenting a gospel that meets each of us at the most fundamental level. Paul's gospel addresses the realities that make us who we are—those experiences of the thorns in our flesh, of the impossible. Paul speaks often about the thorn in his own flesh. He never tells us what his thorn is; we know only that it is something in his life that has caused him pain and struggle. He wants his thorn removed, but he is told it will not be, that he will have to live with the impossibility of its removal. But Paul has learned to see this thorn as a blessing. It is from the thorn's very penetration in his being, from the place where it pierces him, that he will do ministry. It is at this place that he is drawn, through this experience, to the cross. It's here that Paul shares in the cross, that it becomes more than theoretical or religious, but personal or existential. It's here that the cross becomes about discipleship.

Justin sought for God through the thorn in his flesh, through experiences that spoke loudly of God's hiddenness and absence. He may have been close to discipleship, at least according to Paul, because it is through these experiences of the thorn, through experience of God's hiddenness, that we are drawn into God's revealed presence. This is why Nadia couldn't go along with Kendall in thinking that a youth worker's

job is to bring kids to the cross. Nadia knew that Justin was already at the cross, in his own experiences of pain and abandonment.

Kendall may have seemed more zealous about discipleship formation in his youth ministry, more zealous because he seemed to be working hard at seeing results. But in all his well-intentioned hard work, he had removed the cross from the lives of young people. The cross no longer was the source of God's action, but a static religious symbol to which kids were called to pledge their loyalty. And the real problem with this is that it meant Kendall controlled the action of God. Kendall made disciples by bringing kids to the cross. But Nadia couldn't accept this. She knew she was *not* the one who makes disciples. Disciples are made only by the action of God, for a disciple (by definition) is one who seeks to follow Jesus in act and being. Therefore, Nadia's job isn't to bring Jesus to kids or bring kids to the cross. It is to seek along with young people for the God who already moves in their lives, the God who moves through God's own cross into ours. But this God's action comes to us through hiddenness and absence (through the cross, through the thorns in our flesh). God claims us by acting for us.

But instead of leaning into the hiddenness of God's action, we youth ministers tend to think our job is to make the mysteries of faith transparent. This becomes our problem, because it encourages kids to stay on the surface. Without hiddenness, kids never seek for the action of God at their most fundamental level, at the place where they encounter the cross of God—their own experiences of forsakenness. It's no wonder then that kids often have a very conventional faith, a faith that can easily slide into moral therapeutic deism. The discipleship we call them to is only surface discipleship; it is seeking for God in the obvious. And in the obvious (like good grades, sport team wins, and new stuff), God's action through the cross is lost.

Justin met Jesus in his experiences of hiddenness and absence. Justin met Jesus at the cross—the cross that had become, simultaneously, Jesus' cross and Justin's cross. In other words, seeking for God in the hiddenness of our thorn in the flesh is the way of discipleship because it is the way we confess not only our belief in Jesus (belief in what God does through the cross of Christ) but also our belief that God promises to take up our own experiences of the cross (abandonment, loneliness, fear,

depression) and transform them into something new. Justin had yet to profess such faith verbally, but his constant participation and wrestling with God showed he was following Jesus by seeking for him in absence and hiddenness, seeking for Jesus at the core of his being where he struggles for possibility next to nothingness.

FAITH THROUGH HIDDENNESS

In youth ministry we tend to think of adolescent faith (signs that young people are disciples) in terms of the revealed and the present rather than hiddenness and absence. We spend most of our time trying to help young people see God and getting them to live in ways that acknowledge the presence of God.

But the God of the cross is not self-evident. The God of the cross, the Christ we are called to follow, meets us in hiddenness. Neither the mourning couple walking on Emmaus Road nor the women outside the tomb recognize the risen Christ at first. Jesus tells the disciples they will encounter him as they minister to the hungry, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned. ("Lord, Lord, when did we see you …" Matthew 25.) Jesus even tells the demons to be quiet when they seek to reveal who he is, for discipleship is about seeking God in hiddenness. The demons can blurt out a true confession, but they are no disciples.

Paul reminds us that it takes the eyes of faith to see this God revealed in hiddenness, to see that the horror of the cross is the genesis of the beauty of the new creation. We are made new, Paul believes, not by assimilating to religious belief, but by encountering the act of God in the hiddenness of the cross. This God of the cross meets us in the places where we often feel most dead, bringing new life out of death.

Like Kendall, most youth workers have seen it as our job to reveal Jesus, to make him known to kids. So we work hard to make obvious what can only be seen with the eyes of faith. But God's action is rarely obvious; even when Saul is confronted by the light of Jesus, those around him hear a sound but see nothing (Acts 9:7). Dietrich Bonhoeffer suggests that God's action most often comes incognito. In other words, God's action in our world and our lives is not obvious and easily recognized; it is blended with our experiences of loss, yearning, and brokenness—our experiences of the cross.

Youth ministry often avoids these places of hiddenness and absence, thinking that if we get kids past or around these difficulties then they can be disciples. But from a theology of the cross, discipleship is not getting past or around such experiences. It is seeking to follow God

through them. The way of discipleship is from death to life. Youth ministry that seeks the link between the cross and discipleship should try to reflect with young people on their own experiences of God's hiddenness. This should become the foundation upon which we build discipleship, because this is the place, at least according to Paul, where the act of God encounters us.

DISCIPLESHIP AS FOLLOWING THE ACT OF GOD

Discipleship, after all, is about action; it is about *following* Jesus. To follow Jesus, we must seek out Jesus where he can be found. And, as we have discussed, Jesus is found in the places of nothingness, moving to bring forth new possibilities.

For Kendall, discipleship was static. He believed his job was to bring Jesus to young people, because he construed discipleship to be about assimilation of knowledge rather than participation in God's own action. Bringing Jesus to kids assumes that Jesus is inert, a product or idea that kids need to follow, rather than a person who encounters them.

Kendall thought the fab four had deep faith because they possessed the knowledge to speak the language of discipleship. Since Justin did not speak the language, in Kendall's view, he couldn't be a disciple. But Nadia had witnessed Justin seeking for the action of God. She had seen him open up what was dead in his life and seek for God to bring it to life. Having had that experience, Nadia thought Justin was actually more open to following Jesus by seeking for God in other places of death in the world.

Nadia believed Justin was skeptical of *happy shiny* Christianity, which, because of his own impossibility he knew he could never measure up to. Nadia had witnessed Justin seeking for the action of God through his own impossibility, wrestling with the God of the cross who met him in hiddenness and seeming absence. This is discipleship, because it is seeking to participate in the action of God from the core of one's own being; it is to seek for God where God can be found.[42]

Nadia wondered if her "good" youth group kids (the fab four as well as others like Jerrod and Brock) had the courage to seek for God next to these most raw and core experiences. If we are honest, these raw experiences, these thorns in our flesh, are not good in and of themselves. (They must be judged and brought into the redemptive act of God.) But they do tend to be central to who each of us is—a large part of the stories that shape us. Justin was willing to open up those places in his life where God seemed absent, to express his desire to encounter God there. Most of the youth group, although they were good kids with

religious zeal, feared facing these difficult realities (maybe because the pain was not as pervasive for them, since their lives had been pretty chaos-free). Therefore, they tended to see discipleship more as being good and taking on a Christian style than as encountering the God of the cross.

ARTICULATING GOD'S HIDDENNESS

This phenomenon of putting faith in a lock box or (as I would call it) casting off Christian style is all too common because youth ministry has failed to talk about the hiddenness of God. We've neglected to see that reflecting on hiddenness and absence is what it means to carry our cross. We rarely ask kids to speak about the places in their lives where they experience God as absent, but many young people are yearning to express just how and where God seems absent (like in the divorce of their parents, in their loneliness, in their failures, in the loss of friends). They are hungry to name where they find themselves at the cross. They might desire to do this not as an expression of unbelief, but as an act of belief that leads into discipleship.[43]

Jesus commands his disciples to carry their cross. It is one of the most direct commands in all the Gospels. It is clear that this command has a correlation to Jesus' own cross, but the disciples are called to carry not Jesus' cross but theirs. We've already explored what I think this cross is —those places and times in our lives where God *seems* absent or hidden. These experiences have direct correlation to Jesus' own cross; it is on the cross that Jesus is abandoned by God. But the experiences are ours; Justin must carry his cross of loneliness and pain due to his father's departure. But when he carries his cross with Jesus, as he follows Jesus, it becomes not only Justin's cross but also Jesus' own. Or, to say it better, Justin finds his own cross borne in the cross of Christ.

When Jesus calls his disciples to take up their crosses, he is not simply telling them to "do something hard"—like taking on a Christian style in a world that finds it unfashionable. Jesus is not simply pumping them up to decide to live like a Christian in a world that doesn't value such behavior—though this is often how we discuss this cross-carrying command to young people. Rather, when Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24), Jesus is calling us to enter death, to face darkness, to die, to seek for God, as Justin does, up against loss and loneliness.

Crosses are not self-help devices that motivate us to accomplish things. Crosses are mechanisms that annihilate and destroy. Crosses are

godforsaken (even the Hebrew Law asserts this). To follow Jesus and take up one's cross is to enter death; it is to walk near annihilation. It is to confront, face-to-face, godforsakenness, by searching for God through God's hiddenness and absence. To carry your cross is to participate in the absence of God, it is to open up those places of death and suffering within us and seek for God in their rawness. The disciple is the one who enters death to seek for the God of life.

HONESTY AS THE MARK OF DISCIPLESHIP

One of the key marks of discipleship, then, is *honesty*. This means being willing, in Luther's words, "to call a thing what it is." We often urge kids to be honest, by which we usually mean always telling the truth so they can be good boys and girls. But adolescence is often the time when we begin to lie to ourselves and others—not necessarily by telling fibs, but by taking on dishonesty as a way of protecting our fragile beings. We act as if we're always in control. We seek to compensate for the shortcomings in our personality or performance. But the cross demands the honesty to admit our questions, fears, and longings. It is to make these core and raw realities known to God, for in so doing we encounter God's own action in them.

Kari was a good girl; no one would deny that. But at certain points she lacked honesty. She never told lies, but that doesn't mean she was honest. If she could have honestly articulated her fear of a B+, she could have broken the power of her ambitious pursuits. More than that, if she'd honestly articulated those fears within a community of faith, she could have found her very fragile humanity fortified in the love of others. She was deceived into believing that she was the girl who always got As—this defined who she was. But to be a disciple, to be a person who carries his or her cross, provides a new identity. If Kari could have carried her cross by honestly articulating her fear and longing, she would have found herself embraced nonetheless—and would then have seen herself in a new way. She would have been moved to see herself, the core of her person, as weak, yes, but also as beautiful, not in spite of the weakness but through it. For through this weakness she would have recognized herself as bound to God through God's own action in the weakness of the cross.[44]

Through carrying her cross, Kari would have been claimed by the action of God, which not only gives her accompaniment in her suffering, but also takes on her suffering and from it brings forth the new—the new humanity. So it is by carrying our cross in honesty and weakness that we encounter the action of God that pulls us into the altogether new.[45] This is the irony of discipleship: By seeking for God in God's

hiddenness, we are forced to wrestle honestly with our broken humanity. And when we do so before the God of the cross, we are swept into the new creation. For the vehicle of new creation, for Paul, is Jesus' suffering of the absence and hiddenness of God on the cross.

When we are honest enough to admit and struggle with our yearning and brokenness, the action of God transforms us into the new creation, the new humanity. With Christ we have passed through death (in our honesty) and now seek to live fully in the action of God. We are new, not because we have avoided death through our religion, but because we have died. In honesty, we admit we are dead; we are on a cross. But, having died, and died in the wrestling with the hiddenness of God, we are made alive, made new. We have died with Christ and now live in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:22). We become the new creation as we follow the act of God through death into life. We are Jesus' disciples because we have taken up the cross and followed him from life, to death, to new life.

As we are swept into the new, as life springs from the honest admitting of our deaths, we exhibit the marks of discipleship, which Paul names as faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13). Faith, hope, and love are the new; they are new because living into them takes honesty. Faith stands in opposition to sight; hope opposes sure-handed certainty; and love stands against any kind of domination (even religious domination). To live the life of discipleship marked by faith, hope, and love is to seek to bend your life toward the new reality that God brings about through the suffering of the cross. It is to live what is true: We have been made new, though we still feel the pull of suffering and death.

An adolescent disciple, then, is someone like Justin. Sure, Justin maybe swore too much and was a bit gruff socially, but he was honest. And in this honesty he was, Nadia believed, carrying his cross and seeking for Jesus in his questions and pains. Justin was longing for the new; he was never satisfied with trite religious platitudes. Justin sought the new creation, not plastic religious experiences that are clean and safe. Nadia knew that when she defaulted into easy religious answers, Justin would say, "That's stupid." But when she said something that connected to the reality of God's action in the world, Justin was the first to say, "Cool. Weird, but cool."

Justin tenuously, and sometimes gruffly, separated what was a true reflection of the new reality of God's action from what was simply religious socialization. Kari had been religiously socialized—which isn't completely bad as much as it is inadequate. But Justin was courageously and honestly seeking for God in the hiddenness of his doubt and yearning.

THE DRAMA

Nadia found these very thoughts swirling within her as she returned to the church. Walking into the messy youth room to pick up after the previous night's gathering, Nadia continued to think about discipleship and Justin. It felt like a breakthrough. Her job wasn't to bring kids to the cross of Christ, but instead to recognize how the cross was already present through their brokenness and yearning. Young people become disciples as they seek for the act of God in such experiences and as they learn to trust that they will encounter the new through God's Spirit. Nadia felt relief. Discipleship building wasn't something *she* did; it was something *God* did through the Spirit. Her job was to invite young people to be honest, and in their honesty to seek for the action of God up against what feels like God's absence. She felt free.

As she was pushing a couch back into line, Erica, the associate pastor, walked in. The two had become close since their conversations about the purpose of youth ministry. Nadia counted Erica a friend and valued the way Erica challenged her to think deeply about ministry and theology. Before long, Nadia began to share her thoughts about the cross and discipleship, and how she saw God moving in the lives of the youth group kids. Erica nodded: "I agree, I think. What you're saying matches up with what I know about Justin from the little I've interacted with him. And I can see your concerns with Jessica; I think that is all true."

Then Erica pushed deeper, "But I guess the question I'd ask is: What about Scripture? I mean honesty and seeking for God's action in the areas where God feels absent seems important. But what about seeking for God in Scripture? Or, maybe I would say it this way: Doesn't reading Scripture have something to do with discipleship?"

Nadia put her hand to her chin and stared, in deep contemplation, tilting her head sideways as if to say, "Good point."

Erica continued, "I guess what I'm thinking is that Jessica and the other church girls really read their Bibles and care deeply about studying God's Word. Justin, it seems to me, doesn't really care. Does that have anything to do with discipleship?" Nadia raised her eyebrows in acknowledgment. Erica had a good point.

“I guess it all comes down to this,” said Erica. “What is your view of the Bible? Is a commitment to reading Scripture important? And how are kids supposed to read it? And what difference should it make in their lives?” Now, Nadia just shook her head, not because she disagreed, she agreed deeply. But she realized she had a lot more to think about, more to delve into. Nadia leaned over, rested her forehead on the coffee table, and said with a swirl of exhaustion and, possibly, also excitement, “I guess I’m going to have to give that some more thought …”

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Chapter 1: The Chronicles of Nadia

- Have you experienced a "turning of the theological switch" as Nadia has? If so, how has it affected you and your ministry with young people?
- Describe some of the "committed" youth in your context. Do you know a Jessica, Kari, Kelsey, or Mattie? Are you familiar with a Caden or Justin?
- Have you ever been disappointed by the theological depth or impact of a youth ministry event? How have you responded?
- In what ways have you been made aware of the reality that the young people in your context know suffering and pain?

Chapter 2: **What Happens in Vegas …**

- "It's one thing to critique something for being theologically thin; it's a whole other ballgame to offer something theologically robust yourself." How does this realization of Nadia's resonate with your experience?
- What did you appreciate about the sketch of Paul's theology of the cross presented in this chapter? What, if anything, might you challenge?
- When have you experienced the use of the cross as a symbol for religious socialization—a logo—in youth ministry?
- When have you witnessed the cross as the power of salvation? When have you seen it function as an offense or absurdity?
- What can be done in order to communicate the cross as an event and not simply as a logo?

Chapter 3: Rethinking Adolescence

- How do you feel about this redefinition of adolescence as a social

construct?
- What would it look like in your context if there were no youth room or youth group, but instead adolescents were treated as full participants and members of the church? What might be gained? What might be lost?
- How would parents and other adults in your context respond if you explained that your hope is that young people would choose weakness, rather than the power of growth, advancement, and preparation?
- The author suggests that adolescents are "those *newly* conscious of our common human struggle between possibility and nothingness." What are the implications of this statement for you?
- What have you confronted lately that has clouded your possibility with nothingness?
- How would you answer the question at the end of the chapter? Why is the cross good?

Chapter 4: The Foolishness of the Cross

- Nadia realizes that youth ministry from the place of the cross is not for the ambitious or successful, but for those who yearn next to their impossibility. Who comes to mind for you right now as someone who is yearning in this way?
- How does this chapter's description of the way the cross justifies, or forgives sin, compare to other explanations you've heard? Have you ever considered that the cross isn't only a function that forgives us?
- Share your own "horror story" of using gore or witnessing someone else using gory tactics to convince young people of the importance of the cross. What was the result?

Nadia's Talk

- Nadia attempted to communicate that the cross is the very heart of who God is and how God acts. How do you think her message would be received by the young people and youth ministers you know?
- If you'd been in Nadia's position, what might you have said or done

differently?
- After reading chapter 4 and Nadia's talk, consider again how you might respond to Caden's question. Why is the cross good?

Chapter 5: Why Is It So Hard to Talk about Sin?

- Do you find yourself agreeing or disagreeing with Pastor Marvin? How do you feel about the way sin was addressed (or not addressed) in Nadia's talk?
- This chapter makes a distinction between "sin" and "sinning." Is this distinction familiar to you? Do you find it to be helpful? Why or why not?
- Two ditches were described in understanding human sinfulness: One is seeing humanity as worthless dung in the sight of God, and the other is denying the sinfulness of our humanity. Which ditch do you find yourself in most often? Which ditch do those around you tend toward? Do you find the definition of sin as "the reality of death" to be a helpful middle ground?
- For Nadia, sin was "living outside the act of God, where there can only be death." How would you define sin in your own words?
- How does this chapter's description of the function of the cross fit with your previous understanding of the cross? In what ways has your view changed?
- What would you say in response to Kendall's question? What does all of this theology about the cross in youth ministry mean for the Christian life?

Chapter 6: Living from the Cross

- Justin was willing to seek for God up against God's hiddenness, to find God's presence in what appears to be God's absence. Whom do you know that is brave enough to do this? When have you been able to do this yourself?
- Do you agree that wrestling is essential for faith? Why or why not?
- How do you feel about the idea that it is not a youth worker's job to bring kids to the cross, because they are already at the cross?
- What is attractive about seeing yourself as one who makes disciples

and attempts to make the mysteries of faith transparent? What is dangerous about seeing yourself in this role?

- Do you agree that most young people are yearning to articulate just how and where they experience God as hidden or absent? How could creating space for this change young people, youth ministry, or yourself?
- At the end of this book, how has your understanding of the cross and youth ministry changed? What insights stand out to you as the most powerful? What questions remain?

Note

1. I was helped much in this chapter by reading Australian youth ministry scholar Matt Brain's *Engage! How the Church Can Reconnect with Youth People* (Canberra, Australia: Barton Books, 2011). It is a book well worth running down.

2. For a great resource on the historical and cultural realities, see Timothy Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12ff.

3. Karl Barth says it this way, "According to the New Testament witness we have the presence and action not only of the man Jesus, but in the existence of that man the action and presence which is supremely proper to God Himself as the Reconciler of the world. God chooses condescension. He chooses humiliation, lowliness and obedience. In this way He illuminates the darkness, opening up that which is closed. In this way He brings help where there is no other help." *Church Dogmatics* IV.1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), 199.

4. Eberhard Jungel explains, "For Paul, the Crucified One is weak, subject to death. But Paul does not celebrate this thought with melancholy, but rather thinks of it as the gospel, as a source of joy. What is joyful about the weakness of the Crucified One? The weakness of the Crucified One is for Paul the way in which God's power of life is perfected (2 Cor. 13:4). Weakness is then not understood as a contradiction of God's power. There is, however, only one phenomenon in which power and weakness do not contradict each other, in which rather power can perfect itself as weakness. This phenomenon is the event of love. Love does not see power and weakness as alternatives." *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 206.

5. "The great irony is that it is precisely in submitting to the suffering meted out by the powers of the old age that Paul is able to repulse those very powers (verses 8-9). Living as he does at the intersection of two ages he endures the 'dying' of the old in order to receive the 'life of the new'…. This remarkable fact is underscored by … 1 Corinthians 4:10-11…. Incidentally, the teaching here is similar to Philippians 3:10, … where the apostle affirms that he knows 'both the power of (Christ's) resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering.'" Savage, *Power through Weakness,* 176.

6. Alan Lewis in his book *Holy Saturday* makes a strong case for keeping an important boundary between cross and resurrection, so that the significance of either event is not lost. He explains the importance of not skipping over the cross to the resurrection. "Significantly, the

tradition which Paul received, and then passed on to the Corinthians, was that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised the third day (I Cor. 15:3-4). Here resurrection is not permitted to verge upon the cross, instantaneously converting its death into new life, still less to trespass death's own borders and thus to identify the cross with glory. Instead, death is given time and space to be itself, in all its coldness and helplessness." *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 37.

7. Timothy Savage adds, "Indeed, as the apostle underscores in another epistle, it is precisely in dying the death of a slave on a cross that Jesus demonstrates what it means to be Lord. At the heart of the kerygma thus lies a paradox which draws together two seemingly contradictory features about Christ, his humility and his lordship." *Power through Weakness,* 153.

8. Savage writes: "We thus find in 2 Corinthians 4:10 and 11 a dramatic exposition of the principle enunciated in 2 Corinthians 4:7 and illustrated in verses 8 and 9. It is in human weakness that the superlative power of God springs to action, bringing 'life' out of 'death' and a new age from the old." Ibid., 176.

9. Jürgen Moltmann says powerfully, "When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God,' the meaning is that this is God, and God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity. The nucleus of everything that Christian theology says about 'God' is to be found in this Christ event. The Christ event on the cross is a God event." *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1974), 205.

10. I discuss this at greater length in chapters one and two of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

11. I recognize that this narrative as it is laid out could be understood as falling into the trap of gender distinction. In other words, rebellious boys do things correctly and conforming girls are wrong. However, while research points to a more relational impulse for young women, the idea is not that rebellion matters but honest wrestling, an honesty that is (because of the relational impulse) often seen in girls' relationships. In other words, while in this narrative Justin and Caden deal with suffering and doubt, it appears that research shows that both boys and girls can be equally religiously conventional and both can wrestle deeply with their doubts (both genders equally fearing honesty and social estrangement).

12. James Loder makes this very argument in his book *The Logic of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998). Loder seeks to explain how negation is a driving force in human development or to say it another way, how the human spirit seeks for the spirit of God as the human spirit recognizes its negation.

13. Douglas John Hall confirms my point here, “Because in this social context people have lost the sensitivity to recognize the sometimes subtle ways in which children and adolescents (as well as the aged and the dying) raise ontological questions, such questions are regularly transmuted by parents and teachers (and by physicians and others who serve humanity at the other end of the life-span) into technical questions.” *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 316.

14. “Becoming is suffering. One must ‘suffer’ one’s becoming … from childhood to adolescence.” Douglas John Hall, *God and Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1986), 65.

15. This is Kierkegaard’s very argument as he appropriates Luther’s *theologia crucis* (theology of the cross). For further reading on how Kierkegaard understands the impossibility of human action see Richard J. Berstein’s *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971).

16. Jungel gives flesh to this perspective, “Thus it is not a contradiction of the definition of God’s ‘being as being-in-act’ when suffering is predicated of God. God’s suffering corresponds to his being-in-act. But God’s suffering is his being-in-act; thus ‘from the very first’ God’s ‘passion’ is to be understood as ‘the divine action.’” *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 100.

17. This theological perspective is why Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Christ the Center* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) says that Jesus Christ is ontological *pro me;* Jesus is always for me, because Jesus, for Bonhoeffer, is always the Christ on the cross.

18. Douglas John Hall states, “Because for Luther human existence is a frail and uncertain business, divinity for him is not first of all sovereign omnipotence (as it was for Calvin) but astonishing compassion.” *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 22.

19. Jungel explains how this love is the act of entering into nothingness. “Therefore, God’s being does not first become love because love is necessary to counter nothingness. Rather, because God is love as he is himself, he counters nothingness and its power. Because God is love, this is then God’s being: to be related to nothingness.” *God as the Mystery of the World,* 222.

20. Hall makes my point here, “There is a persistent warning in the theology of the cross to avoid the facile, the simplistic—to offer easy religious answers to difficult human questions.” *The Cross in Our Context,* 32.

21. Pastor Tom Welch, in our correspondence, helpfully articulates these points; he states, “Connecting justification to revelation seems to be a way of talking about the gift of the Holy Spirit (God’s presence with and for us in the groanings, etc). Justification: God forgiving us.

Revelation: God *for-giving us* the Spirit. In this sense, the Spirit is not power for progress, but presence in the midst of death."

22. Jungel explains how suffering and the cross connect with the action of God: "Thus the Father, too, participates with the Son in the passion, and the divine unity of God's modes of being proves itself in the suffering of Jesus Christ. God's being is a being in the act of suffering. But even in suffering God's being remains a being in act, a being in becoming. God persists in the historicality of his being." *God's Being Is in Becoming,* 102.

23. Here I'm following Barth's assertion that the act of God in the world (revelation) is an accurate reflection of the very nature and inner constitution of the Trinity or God's being. In other words, God is who God reveals Godself to be. In relation to the Trinity, and pushing beyond Barth, this has been called Rahner's rule, because of Catholic theologian Karl Rahner's assertion that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. In other words, who God reveals Godself to be in the action of revelation is who God is eternally and in Godself.

24. Moltmann explains, "The Son suffers and dies on the cross. The Father suffers with him, but not in the same way. There is a Trinitarian solution to the paradox that God is 'dead' on the cross and yet is not dead, once one abandons the simple concept of God. Theopaschite talk of the 'death of God' can be a general metaphor, but on closer inspection it will not hold." *The Crucified God,* 203.

25. Moltmann says, "We must go on to ask: 'What does the cross of Jesus mean for God himself?' 'Jesus died for God before he died for us,' said Althaus in an ambiguous way, meaning that a serious fault of earlier Protestant theology was that it did not look at the cross in the context of the relationship of the Son to the Father, but related it directly to mankind as an expiatory death for sin." Ibid., 201.

26. "Why did Jesus die? He died not only because of the understanding of the law by his contemporaries or because of Roman I power politics, but ultimately because of his God and Father. The torment in his torments was this abandonment by God. It leads us to understand, in the context of his life itself, what happened on the cross as something which took place between Jesus and his God, and between his Father and Jesus." Ibid., 149.

27. Jungel says poignantly, "The fundamental aspect of the victory over death is not the 'standing outside of nothingness' (*extra nihilum sistere*) which flees from nothingness, but rather the creative "standing into nothingness' (*in nihilum sistere*)." *God as the Mystery of the World*, 224.

28. Moltmann adds, "There is no loneliness and no rejection which he has not taken to himself and assumed in the cross of Jesus. There is no need for any attempts at justification or for any self-destructive self-accusations to draw near to him." *The Crucified God,* 277.

29. "The sin of man is the human action which does not correspond to the divine action in

Jesus Christ but contradicts it. To that extent it is the action of unbelief and therefore of disobedience." Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV. 1, 415.

30. See *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition on Genesis 1-3* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

31. Ray Anderson explains, "Sin infects the human race as a result of this act, but that is not the dilemma itself. It is death that creates the dilemma, not merely sin. Even if sin is forgiven, without resurrection from the dead this forgiveness is null and void. 'If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15:17)." *The Soul of Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 57.

32. "Sin is not a condition, like a virus, that corrupts and weakens life. Rather, sin produces death, and sin is not removed until death has been destroyed. Forgiveness of sin is not like a medicine that removes an infection, nor is it a legal pardon that cancels a debt. While both might be included, until death that sin causes is destroyed, sin is not forgiven." Ibid., 168.

33. See Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) and Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

34. Moltmann points to this very perspective when he says in the first lines of *The Crucified God,* "The cross is not and cannot be loved. Yet only the crucified Christ can bring the freedom which changes the world because it is no longer afraid of death."

35. Jungel says it this way, "The death of the Crucified One reveals itself in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the death of death for the benefit of humanity and thus as an event of God's love for godless men." *God as the Mystery of the World,* 93.

36. To read in more depth on the atonement perspective that I'm putting on the lips of Nadia see Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith.*

37. Moltmann says, "With the early Christological titles, then, Jesus is designated God's lieutenant on earth, 'God's representative,' who stands for God before men and for men before God." *The Crucified God,* 180. He continues, "Without the representative saving significance of his death on the cross, the Christ raised from the dead would be a miracle or at best a model or a forerunner of the future. But that does not help those who suffer under their own unrighteousness and that of the world, and live in the shadow of death. It is only his death on the cross that makes the meaning of the resurrection manifest for these men, for it is only through his action as their representative that the glory anticipated in him enters into their misery. Only through his death 'for them' does that new life begin for them which he lives by virtue of being raised by God." *The Crucified God,* 186.

38. Barth says it this way, "Made sin for us, He stands in our place. He represents us in that

which we truly are. That He represents us in it does not mean that we are not it, but that what we truly are, our being in sin, is taken over by Him, that He is responsible for it in divine power, that it is taken from us with divine authority, and forgiven…. To look in faith on the One who took to recognise ourselves in Him as the men for whom He has taken responsibility, who are forgiven." *Church Dogmatics* IV. 1, 241.

39. Andrew Purves, drawing from the church father Athanasius and 2 Corinthians, explains further this representative perspective: "The consequence of the dual mediatorial ministry of Jesus Christ is the transition of humankind from one state into another, which the theological tradition came to call 'the wonderful exchange' as a commentary on 2 Corinthians 8:9: 'You know the generous act [grace] of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.' The idea is also summed up in John 17:22: 'The glory that you have given me I have given them.' Out of the measureless love of God, Jesus Christ became what we are in order to make us what he is. He descended, wrote Athanasius, to effect our promotion, and made us sons and daughters of the Father. For Athanasius this is the glorious conclusion to Christ's ministry to the Father on our behalf." *The Crucifixion of Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 83.

40. Moltmann points to this when he says, "For the ideas of expiatory offerings move consistently within the framework of the law: sins transgress the law, expiation restores the law. By sin man falls short of the righteousness of the law and comes under the accusation of the law; by expiation he is restored to the righteousness of the law. Expiation for sins always has a retrospective character. Its future concern is the restitution in integrum, not the beginning of a new life." *The Crucified God,* 183.

41. Jungel articulates this point through reflecting on the historical reformation tradition: "Faith cannot speak of God's presence without conceiving at the same time of God's absence, just as it has never been certain of God's presence without experiencing his hiddenness," *Godas the Mystery of the World,* 55.

42. "For a faith which is abstractly antithetical to doubt makes faith itself doubtful, and doubt which abstractly opposes faith makes doubt unworthy of credibility. Faith does, of course, exclude doubt—there is no doubt of that. But faith can really exclude doubt concretely only when it contests that doubt as the other possibility, which is set in opposition to faith. Therefore, faith can exclude doubt only by confronting it. In order to overcome doubt, faith would virtually have to summon up doubt, unless faith does not want to stop being faith. Therefore, all mere antitheses of this kind are irresponsible because they set up false alternatives." Jungel, *God as the Mystery of the World,* 110.

43. Jungel says helpfully, "The presence and absence of God are no longer to be thought of as alternative in the word of God. Rather, God is present as the one absent in the word." *God as the*

Mystery of the World, 166.

44. Moltmann says it boldly: “Christian identity can be understood only as an act of identification with the crucified Christ …” *The Crucified God,* 19.

45. I know that this is the very slave religion that Nietzsche hated, but while Nietzsche’s perspective is beyond brilliant, I think he failed to understand the theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*)—because after all to understand a theology of the cross, one must stand inside it. As Paul and Kierkegaard admit, the cross is absurd from outside it, but from within it is salvation.

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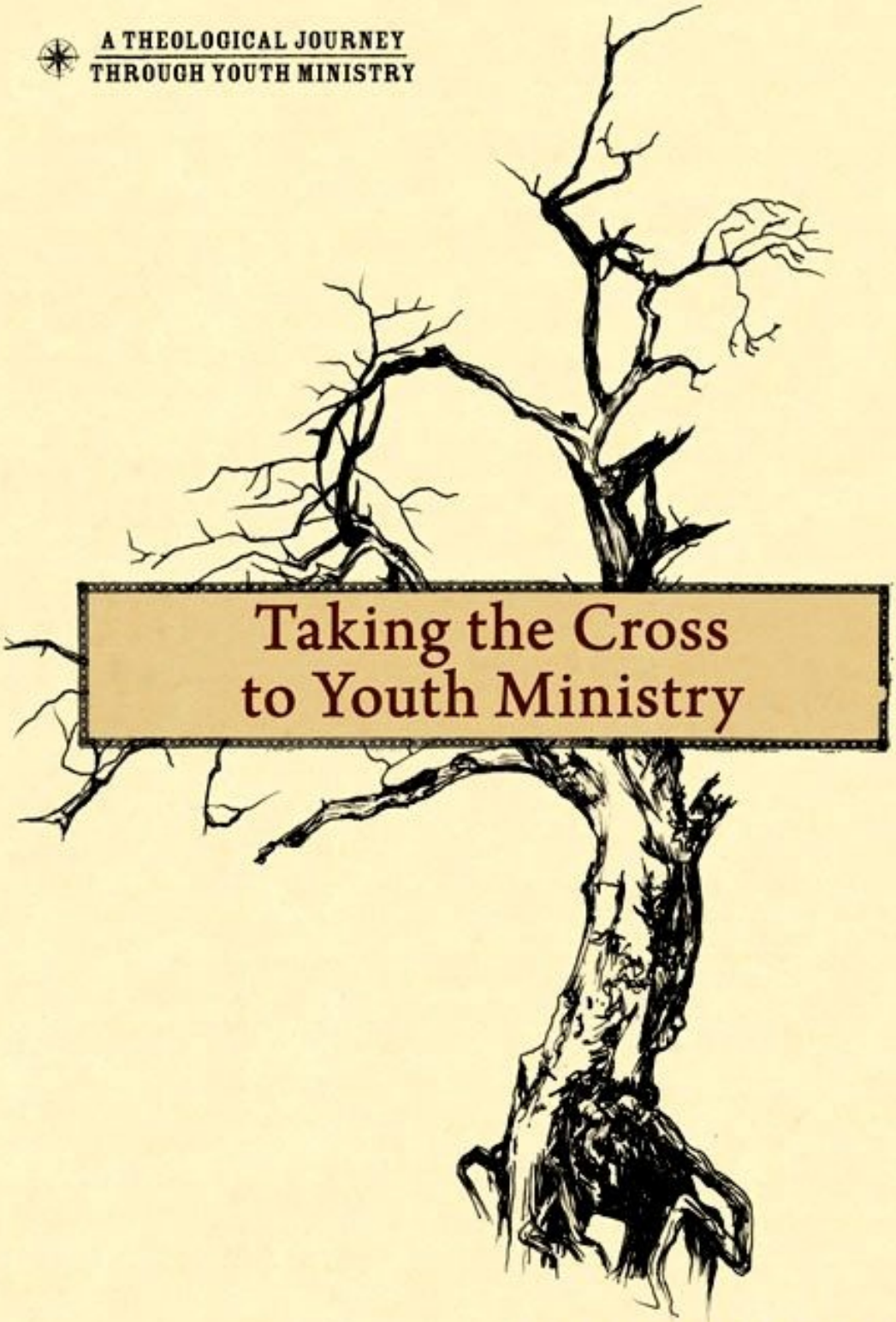
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