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'Loving Angels Instead': Salvation and Relational Youth Ministry

At a time when many brands of 'salvation' appear to be on offer to young people, how can we get the Christian message across effectively? Steve Griffiths reflects on what salvation means, in relation to developing a distinctive Christian message, building relationships, and integrating young people into the church.

The cultural gap between the church and the millennial generation – those born post-1980 – appears to be an ever-increasing one. While it is understandable that, at this early stage, 'their demographics remain largely uncharted',¹ the alienation of young people from the church today is part of a decline that has been ongoing for many years. In their book *Drift from the Churches*, Kay and Francis provide compelling empirical evidence, compiled over a twenty-five year period, to support this theory.² Their analysis of trends is comprehensive. The decline of the influence of Christianity among adolescents crosses gender, class and social setting.³ Moreover, their studies reveal 'a consistent and persistent decline in attitude toward Christianity throughout the whole age range'.⁴

This is not to suggest that young people are uninterested in religion⁵ or that youth culture is devoid of soteriological content. If the lyrics of rock music have been at all representative over the last thirty years, then salvation has been an important concept with which young people have grappled. What is clear, though, is that songs of salvation portray mainly individualistic, temporal and existential understandings. Elton John, for example, sang of a salvation that 'keeps the hungry children fed'.⁶ The Cranberries proposed a concept of salvation in terms of freedom from heroin addiction.⁷ More recently, Robbie Williams' ambiguous lyrics in 'Angels'

1 Wendy Murray Zoba, 'The Class of '00', Part 1 in *Christianity Today*, 3 February, 1997

2 William K. Kay and Leslie J. Francis, *Drift from the Churches*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff 1996. The period of analysis is 1974–1994 and therefore analyses only initial Millennial generation attitudes. See also Peter Brierley's data analysis in *Reaching and Keeping Teenagers*, MARC, Tunbridge Wells, 1993, pp 245f, which analyses 1989 teenage church attendance.

3 Kay and Francis, *Drift from the Churches*, pp 4-6.

4 Kay and Francis, *Drift from the Churches*, p 5.

5 Witness the 70% rise in the number of young people taking GCSE Religious Education in 1997-99. (Sarah Hillman, 'RE Grows in Popularity as Exam Subject', in *Church Times*, 27 August 1999).

6 'Salvation' (John/Taupin), on *Honky Chateau*, DJM 1972.

7 'Salvation' (Lyrics: O'Riordan, Music: O'Riordan/N. Hogan), on *To the Faithful Departed*, Island 1996.

seem to speak of salvation through fulfilment in personal relationships.⁸ While acknowledging the validity of such ideas, we are bound to recognize also that these understandings are conceptually incomplete in terms of the Christian gospel.

In a post-modern cultural context which predominantly rejects not only divine certainties but any notion of the divine itself,⁹ one of the greatest challenges facing the Church is to find a point of contact from which to explore a relevant approach to the doctrine of salvation with young people. The task, for a Church which seeks to take youth mission seriously, is an essential one. David Ford has commented that, 'Salvation is a topic where most theological issues can be seen to converge... it is self-involving, God-involving, and world-involving all at once.'¹⁰ We may argue, therefore, that soteriology must impinge on, and influence, every aspect of Christian youth ministry. A youth ministry that is not soteriological is not Christian. What is needed is a philosophical basis from which to explore the topic and a theological scheme to frame good youth ministry practice.

Teleological foundations

It may be that a starting point for our discussion can be found in the fact that both post-modern secular soteriology and Christian soteriology reflect Aristotelian teleological presuppositions.¹¹ For Aristotle, there is a movement in life towards a desirable end, which is happiness (*eudaimonia*). Clearly, Aristotle did not claim that there must be only one end to be desired for itself at the exclusion of everything else. Rather, the life of the individual ought to be governed by certain desires and interests which, in their totality and according to their priority, lead towards a final end, which is happiness or fulfilment.

This teleological approach appears to underpin the existentialism of secular soteriology in as much as that "fulfilment" [describes] what secular people seek when they aim... at some form of greater human well-being, but seek this without reference to God.'¹² Hence the search for fulfilment – even salvation – in wealth, consumerism, entertainment and personal lifestyle choices which so characterize secular society in general and youth culture in particular.¹³ The consumption of illegal drugs amongst our young people may be a contentious example. However, it is arguable that the *reason* many of our young people take these substances seems to have changed in recent years. Escaping from a bad life-experience no longer

8 'Angels' (Williams/Chambers), on *Life Thru a Lens*, Chrysalis 1997. The line 'Loving angels instead' in the title of this article is taken from this song.

9 The Doctrine Commission, *The Mystery of Salvation*, Church House Publishing, Melksham 1995, p 6.

10 David Ford, *Theology: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press 1999, p 111.

11 Aristotle explores teleology in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. See *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics Translated*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1955, 1.2, pp 26f, 1.7, pp 36f, 1.10, p 48.

12 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 32.

13 Kevin Ford touches on this issues in his excellent book, *Jesus for a New Generation*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1996. For a North American perspective (from an unashamedly Reformed stance), see Q. J. Schultze et al *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture and the Electronic Media*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1991.

appears to be the primary motivation. Rather, many of our young people are taking drugs to enhance an *already good* life-experience. Ecstasy, acid and cannabis use is not generally about escapism; it is about reaching *heightened levels* of personal happiness. Salvation through sensory experience. Teleological fulfilment through Club Culture. Perhaps.

Similarly, Aristotelian teleology affects every definition and nuance of Christian soteriology, inasmuch as it provides the organizational principle rather than the content; personal conformity to the *imago Dei*, healing and wholeness, personal reconciliation, the restoration of creation, union with Christ, ecclesiology, eternal well-being, etc.¹⁴ Salvation is a continuous process by which the designs of God are fulfilled within the created order. There is purpose to salvation; an understanding that can only be comprehended as a doctrine of hope within a teleological context. As Fiddes states, 'in exploring the event of salvation, with the help of the great images of faith which have emerged in the Christian community, we shall be released in imagination to celebrate the future too.'¹⁵

We must, however, be careful not to draw too close a relationship between the secular pursuit of happiness and fulfilment – which, since it seeks personal autonomy, is necessarily atheistic – and the Christian notion of salvation.¹⁶ The fulfilment which secular society seeks is, from a Christian perspective, only ever partial at best. Nevertheless, given their shared teleological bias, we may confidently agree with the Doctrine Commission report that 'The human search for fulfilment and the divine gift of salvation could appropriately be seen as two sides of the same coin'.¹⁷ There is a massive gulf between the two systems in their particularity. But, in general, both secular soteriology and Christian soteriology are seeking personal fulfilment, wholeness and happiness.

The implication of the doctrine of salvation for youth ministry, then, is centred on a tension of teleological imaginings. Put in its barest form, the tension is between a youth culture that forms for itself a doctrine of salvation (temporal happiness through existential choice) and a doctrine of salvation that shapes youth culture (a Kingdom event). This tension was recognized in the 1996 Church of England report, *Youth A Part*: 'Youth work that is culture forming involves both the reclamation of insights which arise from the gospel but which have been lost to our society, and the search for new insights as the gospel is applied to a new context.'¹⁸ Soteriological youth ministry is nothing less than the transformation of a cultural world perspective. It underpins a process of moral, spiritual and ethical change. The secular teleological hope for personal fulfilment and happiness is transformed, not removed, through the soteriological teleology of Christian faith.

How that is worked out in practice is our next concern. The approach suggested here is that covenant relationships form the basis for effective youth ministry; that

14 'Our ultimate destiny must be the resurrection and transformation of our entire being', *Mystery of Salvation*, p 11.
 15 P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London 1989, p 34.

16 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 35.
 17 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 32.
 18 General Synod Board of Education, *Youth A Part*, The National Society and Church House Publishing, Melksham 1996, p 28.

it is through the formation and practice of covenant relationships that our young people are led to an experience of salvation. Taking this as our basic theological assumption, we are able to explore its implications in two specific areas: relational youth work and the role of the local church.

Salvation as relationship

Of fundamental importance for youth ministry, we note the relational implications of soteriology. Good relationships can bring life¹⁹ just as bad relationships can lead, quite literally, to death.²⁰ The knowledge of self-worth and love within the context of relationship is the greatest gift of youth ministry. It is certainly the case that 'relationship forms the basis of all youth work'.²¹ Pete Ward is correct to analyse the basis for this as trinitarian theology: 'It is the trinitarian nature of the God who has called us to care for young people which inspires us to act relationally in the way we minister.'²² We are able to place that within a soteriological context by using Barth's idea that 'the history of salvation is both a history between God and man and also a history between man and man. It is the second as and because it is the first.'²³ We must briefly examine both of these concepts.

First, soteriology has relational implications for youth ministry in that the theological aim is ultimately a restored relationship between the young person and God. As the writers of *The Mystery of Salvation* comment, 'Salvation itself is not only gifts from God, but God's gift of God's own self to us in his gifts and as himself.'²⁴ The gift of salvation is the giver himself; the experience of God is what the report calls 'the depth-dimension of the gift itself'.²⁵ That covenant relationship with God brings both privileges (since it is the way in which we move from being creatures of God to being children of God)²⁶ but also responsibilities of discipleship and obedience.²⁷ A primary objective for youth ministry must surely be the nurturing of Christian identity that takes seriously both the privileges and responsibilities of being a child of God. Too much youth ministry in our present time stresses privilege at the expense of responsibility. How many of us involved with young people have been guilty of trying to persuade them into the Kingdom through a blatant offering of the riches of God's blessing, but with no mention of the cost of discipleship? It is impossible to have one without the other, since 'the loss of a sense of ultimate accountability [means] losing the shape and meaning to life'.²⁸

19 See Richard Peace's definition of process evangelism in *Jesus*, pp 195f.

20 For an example of this, see Ford's tragic story about Rex in *Jesus*, pp 5-7.

21 *Youth A Part*, p 81.

22 P. Ward, 'Christian Relational Care' in *Relational Youthwork*, Lynx, Oxford 1995, p 23.

23 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1958, p 809.

24 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 36.

25 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 37.

26 For a discussion of why it is that only Christians are properly called children of God – and the privileges of that relationship – see J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1973, pp 223ff. This stands in contradiction to the unbiblical appraisal in *Mystery of Salvation*, which states that all people, including those of other faiths, are children of God: p 181.

27 Nick Aiken examines this idea in Chapter 1 of his book, *Working with Teenagers*, Marshall and Pickering, London 1988.

28 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 6.

It is commendable that the *Youth A Part* report stressed the relationship between youth work and discipleship.²⁹ However, we note the fundamental error that 'The gospel can be seen as a "grand" story meta-narrative which is to be placed *alongside* the individual's story.'³⁰ Such an approach may help a young person acknowledge that God stands with them and identifies with them in their needs but it will not necessarily encourage obedience and covenant responsibility. Rather, our young people must be encouraged to sit *under* the Gospel story, not *alongside* it, if they are to contextualize and comprehend their meaning in life. If that approach is not taken, the individual story retains its own power, independent of the Gospel. If we are to 'show our young people that God has a claim on their lives',³¹ a radical message of Lordship is needed, not one that can be interpreted as an optional extra. We are doing our young people no favours by watering down the commitment issue. They want something to believe in; they will devote themselves to something that makes a difference. One of the most attractive qualities of youth is having the energy and dynamism to respond to a challenge: no pain, no gain. The prospect of embracing a weak and flaccid faith is not appealing. The authors of *Youth A Part* would have done better to examine the issue of potentiality through union with Christ rather than merely speaking of Christ as 'our model for maturity' in their section on Personal Development.³²

Second, soteriology has relational implications for youth ministry in that it is to do with restored human fellowship. Despite the continuing debate over subjectivity in analysing this issue,³³ it seems clear that the millennial generation is growing up in an age where 'the electronic media supply appealing alternative mentors and "friends"',³⁴ In a conversation about the Internet, one teenager told me that 'it's only in an anonymous Chat Room that I can really be myself'. One of the greatest challenges facing Christian youth workers is to build, and encourage the building of, relationships founded on honesty, integrity, respect and reconciliation. Greg Jones, part-time minister of discipleship at Arbutus United Methodist Church in Baltimore, has recognized the dangers of focusing on 'the enjoyment factor' at the expense of relational work: 'When youth ministry focuses on playing into the entertainment culture, it encourages passivity and reduces it to just another consumer item.'³⁵ It is understandable, but still depressing, when youth group leaders approach me for advice 'because they have run out of ideas of what to do with the kids'. There was a quite exceptional youth worker in East London during the 1960s called George Burton. His philosophy of Youth Club work was simple: 'Talking is an activity... [our young people] consider themselves to be adults and therefore they are entitled to sit down and do nothing if they wish.'³⁶ Burton's direct approach may seem frightening to some of us. We may dismiss his

29 *Youth A Part*, pp 36f.

30 *Youth A Part*, p 34 (italics mine).

31 Aiken, *Working with Teenagers*, p 3.

32 *Youth A Part*, p 32.

33 Witness Diana Murrie's response to Alan Storkey's *Media Addiction: Children and Education*, Movement for Christian Democracy 1999, recorded in 'TV addiction is "disabling" our children' (S. Meyrick, *Church Times*, 13 August 1999).

34 Schultze, *Dancing in the Dark*, p 57.

35 Cited by Zoba, 'Class of '00'.

view, confident that, whilst it may have worked for him thirty-five years ago, it would never work for us in our sophisticated twentyfirst century setting. We would do well to analyse ourselves first. Are we afraid because we may not have rotas, schedules and the general busyness of 'organized activities' to hide behind? Full diaries and schedules justify our existence. Numerical attendance at our events is how we gauge personal 'success'. Burton shows us a different way. Burton points us back to Christ.

The authors of *Youth A Part* rightly recognize that 'human identity is established through relationships'.³⁷ This is necessarily the case, as we have noted above, since salvation, by which the *imago Dei* is restored in us, is a dynamic trinitarian work. *The Mystery of Salvation* speaks of salvation as the 'experience [of] the trinitarian life as our own life, within and beyond the conditions of this mortal life'.³⁸ While the Doctrine Commission are here internalizing that salvific experience of the trinity, it is also the case that love for others is intrinsic to the process of salvation. Third-party involvement is *imago Dei* in practice. As Barth rightly contends, 'for theological work the dominant position of love is a vital and unalterable necessity'.³⁹ The nurture of loving relationships, *agape* relationships, is central to youth ministry and central to the Christian doctrine of living out a life of salvation in community.

Salvation and ecclesiology

This brings us to our final issue: the ecclesiological implication of the doctrine of salvation for youth ministry. This is a vital topic for us since, as Christians, we believe that 'the Church is to be the agent of a salvation that transforms history'.⁴⁰ Soteriological Christian youth work must always have the intention of bringing young people within the fold of the Church. The precise meaning of that statement is, of course, open to a wide variety of interpretations. There has been an historic gulf between the ecclesiological hopes and aspirations of youth work as embodied by, for example, CYFA⁴¹ and that of a detached model, such as Emmanuel Church, Forest Gate which seeks to work alongside young people in an ethnically-mixed area of East London.⁴² It is not our purpose to engage with that debate. Our concern here is that, for those young people who do profess faith in Christ, it is appropriate to work out that faith within the life of the local Church. This is the arena for the fulfilment of covenant responsibilities in that the Church is *communio sanctorum* to which they are united. Therefore, the Church has an obligation towards young people to make discipleship and learning within the fold a possibility. Crucially, given its soteriological content, this is not so much a *moral* obligation as a *theocentric* obligation.

36 G. Burton, *People Matter More Than Things*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1965, p 55.

37 *Youth A Part*, p 37. cf. S.A. Kujawa (ed), *Disorganised Religion*, Cowley, Boston 1998, p 225.

38 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 44.

39 K. Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1963, p 201.

40 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 79.

41 Pete Ward traces the history of the Christian Youth Fellowship movement in Chapter 2 of *Growing up Evangelical*, SPCK, London 1996, pp 45ff.

42 This laudable youth work project is mentioned in *Youth A Part*, p 77. Information about the project itself is available from Emmanuel Church, Romford Road, London E7.

There is plentiful evidence, however, that the Church of England has not always taken its responsibilities to youth ministry as seriously as it ought. If it were not the case, there would have been no need for the *Youth A Part* report, which pleaded for 'a church that takes young people seriously'.⁴³ There is a sense in which all sixteen recommendations of that Report are born out of soteriological implications for youth ministry.⁴⁴ However, we will focus on only one issue which seems to embody all that we have discussed thus far: namely, the participation of young people within the life of the church.⁴⁵

The crucial nature of this recommendation as the embodiment of all soteriological implications for youth ministry is manifested in various ways. For example, it is by participation in *soma Christou*⁴⁶ that individuals live out their destiny 'to be [God's] own people in union with Christ'.⁴⁷ It is therefore by participation within the life of the Church that individuals are enabled to grow in the *imago Dei*. It is by participation in the mission of the Church that individuals can fulfil their obligation to the Great Commission outlined in Matthew 28. Participation in the decision-making processes of the Church, whether locally or nationally, enables the individual to engage in a prophetic role within the strictures of order, discipline and accountability. Spiritual growth, conformity to Christ, missionary zeal, prophetic culture formation. These are the teleological priorities of Christian youth ministry. Each one is shaped by soteriological content. Each one is reliant upon ecclesiological context. Each one is founded upon a covenant responsibility, in Barth's words, either 'between God and man [or]...between man and man'.⁴⁸

Affirming potential and value

The Mystery of Salvation states quite simply that 'The doctrine of salvation itself means that human beings are not trash, to be thrown away, but the good creation of God which God can and does rescue from evil'.⁴⁹ The proclamation of this message is pivotal to authentic and effective Christian youth ministry. There is a need for those involved in Christian youth ministry to enhance ideas of self-worth amongst individuals so that they may be confident, not only in themselves, but in their ability to have a profound impact on the world in which they live. Young people are loved by God and worth saving. Likewise, they can bring salvific activity to bear on their environment through relational commitment and existential choice. One of the saddest characteristics of the millennial generation is apathy in the face of social injustice, fuelled by a negative conviction that they are unable to make a difference. Where are the visionaries? Where are the radical students? Who will be their heroes? Which Christian leaders will serve as role-models? Tony Campolo analysed the situation thus: 'The most serious problem with the church today is that whilst it is filled with believers, it is seriously devoid of committed disciples... A person is a Christian when he or she becomes totally committed to changing the things that God wants changed'.⁵⁰ That process of change, whether internal or

43 *Youth A Part*, p 161.

44 *Youth A Part*, pp 161ff.

45 *Youth A Part*, Recommendations 3, 4, 6 and 16, pp 163, 164 & 168f.

46 1 Cor. 12:27.

47 Eph. 1:11.

48 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.2, p 809.

49 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 52.

50 T. Campolo, *You Can Make a Difference*, Word, Milton Keynes 1984, p 14f.

external, is salvation in action through 'renewal and completion'.⁵¹ That process of change is, in essence, the fundamental implication of a doctrine of salvation for youth ministry. As mature Christians, we have a responsibility to model that for our young people. The enthusiasm to work for change is caught, not taught.

That being the case, we heed the words of *Youth A Part* that 'The Church's youth work, in a time of cultural transition, has to be based in the confidence that the gospel is public truth, with the capacity to shape a culture.'⁵² Whether the Church in England has the confidence to believe that it has an integral role in shaping post-modern youth culture is questionable. It is certainly the case that many young people do not have that confidence in the Church. Ex-Beatle George Harrison spoke of his own sense of disillusionment with the Church in 1972: 'The thing is, you go to an ordinary church and it's a nice feeling. They tell you all about God, but they don't show you the way. They don't show you how to become Christ-conscious yourself. Hinduism, however, is different.'⁵³ Twenty-seven years on, his words have been echoed by new pop icon, Mel C: 'I'm a Christian but I'm more spiritual now. I do a lot of yoga. I believe in a God but I think it's more within. Our generation can't see any good in religion when it causes such destruction and war.'⁵⁴ Their opinions reflect the sentiment of many young people today. At the end of a decade where all the evidence is that 'the search for spiritual guidance is on the rise',⁵⁵ this presents a very clear challenge to the Church.

Reformed theologian Joel Beeke informs young people that 'our society is full of ways to go; behind each way there is a persuasive voice. Each voice desires you to be its follower.'⁵⁶ The task of the Church, as it seeks to work with the millennial generation, is to grow in confidence in its culturally transforming message and persuade its hearers that Christian discipleship is the 'way to go' for happiness, fulfilment and, ultimately, salvation. A theology of covenant, far from being an anachronistic leftover of Christian modernity, must once again become the focus of a youth ministry that seeks to wrestle with the implications of soteriology. A covenant relationship between the young person and God strengthens a sense of self-worth, calling and potentiality within a framework of obedience and discipleship. A covenant relationship between the young person and others is the practical outworking of *imago Dei* within a trinitarian framework and the basis of godly society. A covenant relationship between the young person and the Church is the fulfilment of the participatory purpose of humanity within the *soma Christou*. Covenant relationship is the arena in which salvation becomes an actuality for the believer.

What becomes clear, even in this limited study of soteriological youth ministry, is that finding new ways of proclaiming old truths is central to the task facing the

51 *Mystery of Salvation*, p 52.

52 *Youth A Part*, p 29.

53 Cited by G. and B. Giuliano, *The Lost Beatles Interviews*, Virgin, London 1995, p 100.

Harrison was twenty-nine years old in 1972.

54 Interview with Mel C, *The Big Issue*, 13-19 September 1999.

55 F. Warner, cited by S. P. Gerali in *Agenda for Youth Ministry*, SPCK, London 1998, p 48.

56 J. Beeke, 'Seeking Real Things', *Teen Corner* web page, n.d., n.p.
<http://www.heritagebooks.org/teenlit.html>.

Church. Over three hundred years ago, one London pastor was moved to write a treatise for young people in his congregation. In the Epistle Dedicatory, he petitioned his readers thus: 'Ah! young men and women... tender the everlasting welfare of your souls... escape hell and come to heaven...have an interest in Christ, a pardon in your bosoms... be blessed here and glorious hereafter.'⁵⁷ While it may be true that 'only in the last century has there been the emergence of an adolescent subculture by name',⁵⁸ the issue of salvation for young people within and on the fringes of the church has been consistent throughout the Christian era. Ours is merely the latest endeavour in a historic tradition of evangelistic and pastoral concern. The onus is on us to remember our inherited tradition whilst doing all we can to find new and relevant ways of bringing the doctrine of salvation to an ever-changing youth culture in our post-modern society.

The irony is, of course, that the new way we seek is founded on the oldest ministerial method of all: simply building relationships. As youth workers, we would do well to consider placing less emphasis on strategies and activity-based agendas and put more energy into just 'wasting time' with our young people. We would do well to use the Jesus of Mark 2 as our model. The Jesus who entertained at home (v 1). The Jesus who went for a stroll at the seaside (v 13). The Jesus who went out for a meal with his friends (v 15). The Jesus who took his friends for an afternoon walk in the countryside (v 23). No organized activity there, no strategy other than loving. No purpose other than building the Kingdom of God – which, at the end of the day, is what soteriological youth ministry is all about.

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57 Thomas Brooks, *Apples of Gold*, 1660, in *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 1980, I. 171.

58 Gerali, *Agenda*, p 36.