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Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation (Book Review)

Jason Lief
Dordt College, jason.lief@dordt.edu

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Book Reviews

Root, Andrew. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation*. Downer's Grove, IL, IVP Books, 2007. 221 pages. ISBN 9780830834884. Reviewed by Jason Lief, Instructor of Theology and Youth Ministry, Dordt College.

Foundational to any discussion regarding effective congregational youth ministry is the topic of "relationships." Most of the popular resources and high-profile speakers in the field repeat the same mantra: youth ministry is not about programs; it is about relationships. This idea is reflected in the way many youth leaders engage in ministry, as youth nights, special events, and mission trips become the means of guiding young people into a life of faith through relationships with influential youth leaders. Not included in this discussion, however, is a theological and philosophical perspective of relationships. What do these relationships look like? What is their ultimate purpose and goal? How are these relationships grounded in a biblical, theological, and philosophical understanding of identity? These are issues addressed by Dr. Andrew Root, Assistant Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, in his book *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*.

Root begins with an analysis of the cultural shifts during the late 19th and early 20th centuries that transformed the social life of young people. The transformation of labor through industrialization, increased urbanization, and developments in transportation began to erode the traditional social networks by which young people forged their identity. By the middle of the 20th century, a new social situation had emerged, one characterized by "adolescence," "age specific education," and a social network rooted in the formation of the modern high school. While prior generations of young people lived in relatively closed communities, in which relationships were determined by work, church, and family interactions, at the center of this new cultural reality is what Root refers to as the "self chosen relationship." In this context, young people establish their identity through the formation of relationships and social networks of their choosing, most of which are outside the traditional networks of family and church communities. In order to engage this new social paradigm, para-church youth organizations, such as Youth for Christ, were formed. Birthed in evangelicalism, these organizations began to see "relationships" as a tool for influencing young people into a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." Root writes, "By being in relationship with an adolescent, the adult models a personal relationship with Jesus and therefore personally influences the adolescent in a similar direction" (72). Consequently, many youth leaders enter into relationships, not for the sake the relationship

but as a technique to programmatically bring the young person into a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ."

Root counters this perspective with what he calls "incarnational" youth ministry. Using the theological ideas of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Root emphasizes that in Jesus Christ, God enters into our human experience. On the cross, he takes upon himself the forsakenness of human sin and suffering, while through Christ's resurrection, he bends our humanity back to Himself, restoring and calling us to become what we were created to be—fully human. From this incarnational foundation, a theological perspective of relationships is established. Youth leaders enter into relationships with young people, not for some ulterior motive--not to *lead* them to Christ--but to *be* Christ to them. Just as in Jesus Christ God enters into the human experience for the sake of humanity, youth leaders enter into relationships for the sake of the youth, walking alongside them, experiencing their joy, sorrow, and suffering. At the same time, through the power of Christ's resurrection, we call young people to become who they were created to be, helping them discover their humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. An important aspect of this relationship involves confronting the dehumanizing powers at work in the lives of young people and enfolded them into the gospel narrative of the Christian community.

Although this might seem an impossible task, for Root this ministry is the responsibility of the entire congregation and not just the youth pastor. Therefore, the role of youth pastor must be redefined. Although still responsible for establishing relationships with youth both inside and outside the congregation, as well as organizing activities for the youth program, the primary role of the youth pastor becomes the facilitation of relationships between young people and adults within the congregation. Root writes, "...the youth pastor's job is to go to the adults within the congregation and invite them to become a place sharer to an adolescent....He or she provides open spaces and organizes activities and programs where organic relationships can develop" (201).

Although Root's arguments are compelling, there are a few criticisms to mention. At times, his historical analysis becomes reductionist, unintentionally setting up a golden age when young and old lived harmoniously integrated lives with few of the problems associated with the development of "adolescence." Theologically, his engagement of Bonhoeffer is heavy and abstract in

places and may be confusing to those not familiar with Bonhoeffer's ideas. One also wonders if incarnational youth ministry actually avoids the pitfalls of which he accuses evangelical relational youth ministry. Is not the goal of incarnational youth ministry to eventually bring young people into the Christian community, which might be the non-evangelical way of saying a "relationship with Jesus Christ?" How does the relationship still not become a "third thing"? For some of my undergraduate youth ministry students, Root has merely shifted the purpose of using relationships from a tool for bringing young people into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ to a tool for bringing young people into the Christian community.

Despite these issues, Root's book is a valuable asset to the field of youth ministry. In calling for an incarnational perspective of relational ministry, Root provides a biblical and theological foundation from which youth leaders can

establish meaningful relationships with young people. This book is not a practical "how to" manual, a fact which some may find frustrating, but the theological and philosophical ideas provide the groundwork for anyone seeking to develop a healthy congregational youth program. Root reminds us that we are not first and foremost working to make young people moral or calling them to transcend their humanity through guilt trips and altar calls; instead, we are calling young people to reclaim their humanity through baptism into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the beauty and relevance of Bonhoeffer's theology: Although many cultural voices, including much of North American Christianity, call young people to transcend their humanity, Bonhoeffer reminds us that in Jesus Christ, God has come to give us our humanity back. This is a message that both our youth and youth leaders need to hear.

Kirby, W. J. Torrance. *Richard Hooker: Reformer and Platonist*. Aldershot, England / Burlington, VT, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005. xi + 138 pp. ISBN: 0754652882. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

Richard Hooker (1553-1600), often referred to as "the judicious Hooker" by his admirers, was the Englishman who defended the "Elizabethan Settlement" of the post-reformation reformed Church of England (1558 onwards) from its "Puritan" critics, including Thomas Cartwright (1535-1603) and Walter Travers (d. 1635). These men and their followers held that the Church of England was but "half-reformed" in matters of worship, discipline and governance. These first Puritans advocated reform in church worship, discipline, and governance along more or less Presbyterian lines with multiple levels of ecclesiastical assemblies. This Reformed or Presbyterian approach reflected the new thinking about church polity that had emerged during the time of Beza and Knox and that its advocates often associated with the Geneva of John Calvin himself.

In his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594 onwards), Hooker famously utilized the triad—Scripture, tradition and reason—that inevitably involved the practices of the ancient catholic church and the will of the monarch (as in reasons of state) in the discussion. This approach was consistent with the retention of episcopacy in England, whatever other arrangements might be necessary elsewhere. For their part, the Puritans were on strong ground when arguing against the hierarchical episcopacy of their day (often referred to as "prelacy"), as offending the norm stated by Jesus himself: "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them...but it shall not be so among you" (*KJV*. Matthew 20: 26-7). On the other hand, although Puritan supporters of Presbyterian-style alternatives might advocate their viewpoint with extensive proof texts from the New Testament, they were

hard pressed indeed to demonstrate that there was ever a functioning Presbyterian polity operating anywhere in the post-Apostolic church *prior* to the early rise of episcopacy. The truth is that the Reformed-Presbyterian polity was a product of the mid-late sixteenth century.

Neither side was able to convince the other, each having different starting points as to how the authority of Scripture was to function in matters of polity (cf. 76f.). Protestantism was tragically divided in England for many centuries as a consequence. Hooker's "Scripture, tradition and reason" formula, and the fact that many protestant churches in Europe emerged as non-Episcopal (for example: Scotland, France, the Netherlands, and the protestant cantons of Switzerland), meant that in the eyes of many critics the retention of bishops and ancient ceremonies in the Church of England amounted to its being semi-scriptural and but "half-reformed." Later advocates of "Anglicanism" embraced this viewpoint for their own purposes. Especially in the nineteenth century, they came to speak of an Anglican *via media*, as if Canterbury had deliberately adopted a mid-way position between Rome and Geneva (or Edinburgh) in the first place (60). While this *via media* characterization may have *some* validity in regards to church *polity*—after all, the Churches of Rome and England are both Episcopal—it forgets that *doctrine* (specifically the doctrines of grace) was the first and foremost issue of the protestant reformation.

Torrance Kirby, Associate Professor of Church History at McGill University, Montreal, Canada, is clear in his rejection of those who see Hooker as signifying and legitimizing a *doctrinal* "mid-way" position between Protestantism and Catholicism often attributed to