PREFACE: Beyond [Generational] Profiling

One of the most satisfying experiences we have in the ministry occurs when we see people make significant connections with faith. When the light goes on for them, we delight in the privilege and promise of the encounter.

We think of Jesus with the Samaritan woman recorded in John 4. When Jesus seizes upon the opportunity of a hot, dry day at a well in non-orthodox territory to promise her ‘living water’—drawing her in even as he asks her to draw him a drink—we are amazed by his creativity. When he proceeds to tell her, a stranger, about herself then deftly moves the conversation towards her deeper, spiritual need, we marvel at his skill as well as his divine insight. By the time he declares his true identity as the Messiah, the greatest ‘fisher of men’ has already hooked her; and the faith that results not only from her but her fellow townspeople inspires us to be effective witnesses and teachers as well.

Of course, it also intimidates us. The seemingly picture-perfect ministry encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman—in no small measure propelled by Jesus’ unique gift of divine knowledge!—can seem so out of reach in our own experience. From our sermons and talks to our personal conversations, we often feel as if we haven’t even nudged people towards deeper faith, or any faith at all. And the truth is, we may be right! Not that we accept responsibility for our work to do the deeper work only God can do in someone’s life, no matter how tempting it is to do so; but effective ministry requires skill as well as a sense of calling. Paul uses the image of a ‘skillful workman’ in his instruction to Timothy, and we, too, aspire to be the same. [We are not ciphers but servants when it comes to the work of ministry, and as such, faithfulness to our calling, whether as professionals or laypeople, motivates us to acquire what we need to do the work well.]

No population of human beings represents an easy group to reach and engage. For those of us who are called to work with young people the challenges are not necessarily greater, but they are legion. American youth find themselves in a peculiar moment. Although many of the needs they feel are typical of young people across cultures and ages, the very fact that we are both ‘post-Christian’ and still one of the most Christianized societies in the world places unique and often conflicting demands on their own receptivity to faith. The deluge of surveys, reports, books, websites, etc. that attempt to characterize this generation and how to reach them testifies to our keen sensitivity to this.

But that very plethora of material in turn places severe demands on youth ministers. How on earth do we wade through all of this in order to figure out how to connect with the
young people in our church or youth group (or even our own families!)? We feel that we should, of course, both because of our stewardship and because many of our efforts fail to engage them. Are these expectations in line with reality? We have made a cottage industry of generational profiling followed by a river of material promising to solve the difficulties of bringing today’s youth to faith or to deeper faith. As a result, we feel understandably overwhelmed by our inadequacy to absorb, let alone apply, all of it.

This might be the moment when you hear the author promise, “But here is something different, something that will make sense of the challenges, which will distil for you a way forward towards ministry success.” If I were to make such a promise I would be guilty of at least arrogance, if not outright lying about the value of what I offer in this workbook. For one thing, much of what is found in these pages is not unique, and only borrows insights from other sources that I have found helpful. Furthermore, what is unique—the ‘Fault Lines’ model—is meant to be only one of many tools to have in our tool kit. I think its advantages are real, but as a tool it only addresses one aspect of the multi-faceted task of moving young people towards a deeper, more enduring connection with God. That aspect involves efforts to respond to one crucial question: What makes this young person in front of me resistant to faith?

I say “this young person” because she or he is often, and ironically, the one who is missed in all of our generational profiling. We label entire generations of young people—‘Gen-Xers’ give way to ‘Gen-Yers’ who are now succeeded by ‘Millenials’—and the classification with all of its descriptors is meant to solve the enigma of what they want. I don’t deny that ‘generationalizing’ has its merits. For one thing, it alerts us to the fact that we have an audience, and that the people in our churches and youth groups are not the same as their leaders. For another, in our rapid-change society new forces arise that shape and re-shape sensibilities in ways that do perhaps register more profoundly with youth. (Witness the dramatic changes in connection and connectivity brought about by new social media technologies that are used far more by younger people.) The benefit here is obvious: to be faithful in our work with this generation calls upon us to pay attention, and anything that promotes such vigilance can be valuable.

But for all of their potential benefits, generational profiles are also tools with limitations. If used as a template for our youth ministries we may miss vital connections that can be determinative when it comes to a young person’s receptivity or resistance to faith. As I noted above, one of their chief drawbacks involves the needs of the individual. The fact is, with any one of the profiles churned out over the past couple of decades, I have
yet to meet any one person who fits them. This is not to say that a profile of a ‘millennial,’ for example, completely misses the mark in terms of this young woman’s or young man’s desires and expectations. But where they do not fit the profile can be as significant as where they do.

Moreover, the features portrayed in generational profiles are not actually specific to youth. Just to site one of many examples, generational profiles from ‘Gen-Xers’ to ‘Millenials’ make the claim that they are, in one form or another, anti-authority/authoritarian. And yet, some of the most anti-authoritarian people I know are middle-aged or elderly! The issue of authority is of vital importance to our ministries, but it is false to claim that it is an issue peculiar to the young. The same can be said for other traits supposedly typical of the young, such as being ambitious and narcissistic, craving authenticity, etc. The long and short of it is this: the use of generational profiles as the basis for our programs and ministry approaches bears the double danger of fitting anyone and fitting no one!

There is one further limitation which gets to the heart of what motivated me to look for other diagnostic models in my desire to engage young people about matters of faith. Generational profiles can tend to foster efforts to be ‘relevant,’ which often involve stylistic changes. I’m in no way denying the importance of style and form to the work of the ministry, including work that seeks to build bridges to those who may be otherwise disaffected. Indeed, some of my suggestions in this workbook have this in mind. But however relevant we may make ourselves to our younger audiences, our goal is resonance, not relevance. We need to discover how to make faith resonate in such ways that young people see themselves in the story and vision of life that faith portrays.

In this regard, to make faith resonate involves cultivating what one philosopher called new ‘capacities of recognition.’ The faith that resonates with this young man or this young woman in our youth group enables them to recognize the ‘Author’ of faith afresh, and in this way, to recognize the story of their lives that He tells as their own story. In the encounter with the Samaritan woman, Jesus achieves first resonance, then through this, recognition: “I who speak to you am He.”

But how do we do this? As youth ministers we must be, so to speak, effective diagnosticians. We want to understand what makes someone resistant to faith, or to some vital aspect of faith; and contrarily, what makes them receptive, not ultimately to a set of doctrines and practices, as important as these are, but to faith’s Author Jesus Christ. If our goal for them is His goal—that they would find in Him the light that is ‘the life of every one’
(John 1)—then we are in earnest to identify what may keep them from seeing, and receiving, Him.

Enter the Fault Lines model. I created it precisely for this reason: to provide a sort of mental map that would help me to identify and address areas of critical importance to a person’s resistance to Christ and a Christian vision of life. As a diagnostic tool, it pushes us beyond generational profiles and ‘being relevant’ to plumb the deeper issues in an individual young person’s life that bear significantly on their faith. Doing so does not guarantee that we will make the kinds of connections with a person that will make faith resonate with him or her. But it does offer a way to discover what may be holding someone back, and how we can be more deeply engaged in the process. Even to take one more step towards faith with them than they might otherwise have made can be the measure of genuine success.
USING THE FAULT LINES MODEL & THIS WORKBOOK

Like geological fault lines, the fault lines within any person mark ‘chasms’ that can stand someone apart from faith. In this respect, they are areas of potential resistance that need to be ‘bridged’ in order to help someone make progress towards faith or deeper faith. Also like geological fault lines, some of these may be gaping, others may be slight; and they are dynamic, subject to constant shifts.

The fault lines I have identified—Truth & Knowledge, Authority, Freedom, Identity & the Self, and The Future—reflect what we may call faith-determinative areas of a person’s mind, will, and emotions. Although any one of these may represent an area of greater challenge than others for someone’s resistance or receptivity, they all relate to and are deeply integrated with one another. Obviously, a person’s notion of truth, for example, is intimately connected to what she holds as authoritative for personal insight, and both relate to how she thinks of herself and her identity as a person. And all of this has profound implications for her view of faith.

At the same time, by putting our finger on one fault line, or pressure point, which has particular bearing on a person’s most immediate concerns and needs when it comes to faith makes addressing that area especially important. Hence, we as youth workers want to think about any or all of these areas as we consider the needs of the young people that God has put in our life, and how these might be significant for the faith of this individual young woman or young man. The Fault Lines Model serves as a diagnostic map, then, which enables us to anticipate the kinds of issues, questions, and needs that are actively influencing his or her receptivity to faith, and then to think creatively about how to build bridges and connections that make faith resonate with them.

What this workbook intends to do is help us fill in some of the details of that map. It is not meant for the young people in our groups—though it does suggest ideas for what to do with them—but for their leaders. It is a training guide for us that helps to prepare us to better discover where someone is in their faith journey. By thinking about Truth & Knowledge, Authority, Freedom, Identity & the Self, and The Future as areas that are both integral to a Christian vision of life as well as to any one person’s outlook, and which individually and collectively influence a person’s understanding of and receptivity to faith, we become better equipped to identify and engage key issues in their life.

As you go through this workbook, either individually or with other youth leaders in your church or organization (which I highly recommend), two questions should be at the
fore of your reflections: (1) What does Christianity think about this area and why is it important, and (2) What is going on in our culture that affects views in this area which might be influencing the individuals in our group and causing their resistance? Again, contrary to the presumptions of generational profiling, we don’t know in advance how the culture may or may not be influencing the individual in front of us. Eventually, we have to discover such things in our interactions with him or her. Our task then, as one of my colleagues describes it, is ‘to engage contemporary culture one person at a time.’ The Fault Lines Model prepares us for that encounter.

In addition, the study of each Fault Line includes three areas of reflection or resources:

I. Introductory Reflection: Why this area is crucial to a person’s outlook, how it is regarded in our present culture, and in what ways it may present challenges for someone’s Christian faith.

II. Scriptural Study: Focusing particularly on the person of Christ, why this area is central to Christian faith and how we as youth leaders need to think about it—i.e., how does a Christian view resonate with us?

III. Making Connection: Suggestions about how to bridge gaps of resistance and build towards receptivity and resonance.

In the back is added a section on Other Possible Resources, which suggests books, films, and other sources both for leaders and for their groups.

These treatments are far from exhaustive—we are dealing with huge topics! I have had to be selective, but hopefully in ways that will help to zero in on some of the vital things we need to consider as we seek creative ways to engage the youth in our group. I expect that these reflections and exercises will provoke further study on our part while giving us tracks to run on as we continue the process of ‘diagnosing’ resistance. You should be equally selective in your use of this material, adapting the content and adding to it in ways that best fit the needs of your own leaders and youth.

One expression of my own selectivity is a focus on passages from scripture for our own reflections as well as our engagement with young people. I find a study of the Bible is quite interesting to them, who, although increasingly illiterate about what it says, are nonetheless curious. And scripture remains for us our most important resource as we seek to explain and hold forth Christian faith. I believe scripture aims to convert our imaginations,
and so proves our greatest guide in our effort to equip the imaginations of our youth for a faith that finds deep resonance with them.

A final comment, actually a caveat. In keeping with a commitment to treat people as individuals with their own personalities and experiences, I realize that the backgrounds of and influences on young people across the country are vastly diverse. Studies of what forces may shape the sensibilities of teens in suburban Connecticut may show some strikingly different results from those taken among teens in rural Iowa or The Bronx. True, with social media and what we now call a ‘global youth culture’ those influences may be more consistent across cultural lines than previously possible. But the differences are real, and obviously it is up to youth workers to consider where and how they impact the young people we work with in our unique context.

That said, I would still argue that the Fault Lines Model transcends such variables because it designates areas integral to every person’s outlook on life, and which are integral to the vision of life that Christian faith holds forth. How we apply the model in our own context with our own young people is precisely where we show the fruits of our own labor to diagnose what they need in increasingly specific and engaging ways. Our goal in showing them how faith resonates with the deepest areas of their humanity reflects the heart of the God who loves them, who knows even ‘the number of hairs on their heads.’
1. INTRODUCTORY REFLECTION: DO THESE MATTERS MATTER?

Basic to any of our beliefs and values are the assertions we make about what is true, what we can (or cannot) know, where we think knowledge and truth come from, and most vitally, what difference does this make in our lives. I recall one conversation with a young man who thought the Easter story seemed like just another fairy tale—interesting, but implausible. He wanted evidence to the contrary, and for him, the question of what someone believes revolved around what can be rationally known. Another encounter involved a discussion with several young people in a dorm room where the dominant view was that there really isn’t anything we could call truth, or if there is, we couldn’t know it anyway. What was more important for these students was whether or not a person was sincere in her beliefs.

These are familiar conversations for all of us, and illustrate the range of views on truth and knowledge that we find among the people we work with. They point up something else that we along with the young people we encounter all wrestle with. Whether in the sophisticated heights scaled by scholars of epistemology (the study of knowledge) or at the level of popular outlooks, debates about what we can know, how we know, whether or not there is such a thing as truth, and if so, can we find it, all continue to rage. Do such matters matter? Is it more honest and more ‘authentic,’ as some would advocate, just to admit our limitations … and so, to remain skeptical?

In his book Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be, journalist and cultural critic Walter T. Anderson observes that there is no longer ‘one truth about the truth.’ It is doubtful that there was as much agreement about the matter in other ages as Anderson suggests, but he is right to point out how fractured our ideas about truth and knowledge are in our present culture. Whether in the form of scientific rationalism, on the one hand, or the relativizing of all truth claims in so-called ‘postmodern’ critiques on the other
hand—or, likely, some combination of both views—we cannot assume that a person has one clear, coherent, or even consistent understanding.

Furthermore, more so than being non-religious or ‘secular,’ people in our culture—whether religious or not—tend to be pluralistic in their outlook, both in their own views and values and in how they regard the outlooks held by others. We are persuaded that the most honest, and charitable, view of truth is one which recognizes and affirms diversity and the privilege of the individual to hold as true whatever she decides for herself. Inclusivity is the guiding value: not so much in the arena of scientific ‘truth,’ but certainly in the arena of religious faith.

And yet, it is impossible to think about Christian faith without referring to truth and insisting that faith involves knowing the truth. The one who said, “The truth will set you free” also declared “I am the truth”! Is it enough, then, for someone to say, “This is only true for me”? As with the ways that an understanding of truth and knowledge are integral to anyone’s outlook on life, it is also of vital importance to Christian faith.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:


2. What kinds of things would the young people in your group say that they ‘know’? Do they think knowledge is personal or universal, and about which things?

3. How do they think truth is related to reality, or to being in contact with reality? How do they think truth is related to living a good life?

II. JESUS THE APOLOGIST FOR TRUTH

Of all the Gospels, John’s Gospel is most explicit about matters of truth and knowledge, and how these are connected to faith. In a book that mentions faith and believing over 90 times, we obviously are interested to know not only why it is important, but what it consists of. From Jesus’ perspective, as we see throughout
scripture, knowing the truth is almost synonymous with having faith.

What is most radical, and compelling, in his teaching is that this connection all centers on him: the “Word made flesh” who has made his home with us and “explained” God to us (John 1:14, 18). Tying truth and knowledge to a person and to a relationship with this person naturally raises questions about the nature of both. Others have expressed the same idea, such as the line from “Kathy’s Song” by the 60s duo Simon and Garfunkel: “the only truth I know is you.” But what it means that true faith involves faith in someone who is the truth (for everyone) is a question we want to put to ourselves and to the young people in our group.

Before turning to specific passages to look at, it is important to notice that in John’s Gospel there are different Greek words that our English Bibles translate as ‘know.’ These bear with them common notions of the word, but also include awareness, perception, and recognition, particularly the recognition that something (or someone!) is true. Earlier I noted that our goal is not relevance, but resonance. Let me add that resonance yields recognition: we want to help people understand how faith resonates with them in such a way that they come to recognize the truth of it. In light of the witness of the Bible to Jesus Christ, we want to help young people recognize him afresh for what he is: in the vocabulary of John’s Gospel, as the source of light and life. Jesus was in earnest to help people make this connection.

SCRIPTURAL EXERCISES FOR YOUTH LEADERS:

In John 1 the author declares about the Word (God’s Logos) that “In him was life, and the life was the light of humanity. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (vv. 4–5), then adds that this one is “the true light, which coming into the world, enlightens everyone” (v. 8). Later, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus says, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil” (3:19).

1. How does this contrast between light and darkness depict conflicts about what we can and cannot know? Why does Jesus tie this problem to what we love?

2. What is the connection between light and life, if by ‘light’ is meant the revelation of the truth? (See also 1:14: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.”)
John 4 records Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman. What begins with a simple request by Jesus for a cup of water quickly turns to a discussion about this woman’s, and our, deepest desires. Once again, Jesus makes this a conversation about himself, about who he is and what he offers. Having promised her “living water,” he then declares, “whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life” (4: 13–14). Somewhat consternated, the woman eventually refers to the Messiah who ‘will explain everything when He comes,’ to which Jesus finally tells her, “I who speak to you am He” (4:26).

1. How does this woman’s awakening recognition of Jesus as her Messiah emerge from his exploration of her thirst—both literally and then metaphorically—and drawing attention to the circumstances of her life (i.e., her relationships with men)?

2. What does Jesus mean when he speaks of God’s “true worshippers” who “worship in spirit and in truth”? How does further underscore the connection between truth and knowledge of God?

In John 17:3 Jesus declares, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”

1. What ways do we or the young people in our groups talk about eternal life that either do or do not reflect Jesus’ pronouncement here?

2. Again, what is the connection Jesus draws between life, knowledge, and truth, and how does worship reflect that connection?

Jesus does refer to ‘evidence’ when he defends the truth of his claims about himself. In John 5, for example, after calling God his own father and offending some Jewish leaders, he points to four different ‘testimonies’ that confirm his claims: that of John the Baptist, his works (“for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me,” v. 36), his Father, and the scriptures. (See also John 8 for a similar dispute.)

1. What kind of arguments or appeals in defense of the truth does Jesus present in these encounters? How are these kinds of arguments—or any kinds of arguments—pertinent to challenge of making faith in Jesus resonate with people today?

2. What does Jesus say the stakes are for accepting or rejecting the truth of his testimony?
Ephesians 4:15; Galatians 4:16

1. One basic question: How can we ‘speak truth’ to young people?

III. MAKING CONNECTIONS
As we meditate on the connections of truth and knowledge with faith, we want to consider how Jesus’ descriptions of that connection compare with those made by people in our culture. To be sure, some of the young people in our group approach such matters in a scientific or rationalistic manner, and they want to see evidence. Others may feel more suspicious about saying anything is true or that the truth can be known. Still others, and this may be the majority, are prepared to assert that they are certain about their own religious views, but wouldn’t want to ‘impose’ those convictions on their friends.

With any of them, we do need help a person see that there is a vital connection between what we think is true and our lives. And although it certainly does not make all of the difficulties disappear, putting Jesus, his identity and his views on the matter at the center of our conversation helps to ground the subject and find a common focus. Is he true and what does it mean to know him changes the question in some provocative and promising ways.

As we proceed in this manner, let me suggest some approaches that I have found fruitful:

ASKING ‘DIAGNOSTIC’ QUESTIONS:

What do you think is different about religious claims about the truth and claims about the truth of other things? Do you think we can know the truth about anything? What convinces us that something is true? What place does doubt have in faith?
How does Jesus’ claim to be “the truth” expand our understanding of truth? Why does he think knowing the truth is important for faith and for the life that he promises? What would it mean if Jesus is wrong, or if he is not who he claimed to be?

EXPLORING THE IMAGES THAT JESUS AND THE GOSPELS USE TO DESCRIBE HIM:

One of the reasons Jesus used images to talk about himself is because they are both striking (and so memorable) and illuminating. They are powerful ways to make something resonate with someone.

John’s Gospel offers several of these: Jesus as ‘the bread of life,’ as ‘the light of the world,’ as ‘the door,’ as ‘the good shepherd,’ as ‘the resurrection and the life,’ etc. How does each reveal some facet of his character as well as his identity as God’s Son?

CHANGING THE SUBJECT/FOCUS:

Rather than making the conversation about truth and knowledge explicitly, talk about reality. Seeking the ‘real’ - the ‘real deal’ – the ‘real thing’ connects matters of the truth and knowledge with one of the most felt needs experienced today.

Another way of changing the subject while still addressing our topic is to focus on seeing. In John 14, Jesus connects knowing him with seeing him for who he is, and seeing him with seeing God the Father: “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him” (v. 7); Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (v. 9). This is a fascinating description of both Jesus’ self-understanding and the import it has for those who follow him, dovetailing with Jesus’ teaching about the “Spirit of Truth” who lives within each believer.

Both of these approaches that change to subject or focus also help to expand conversations about truth and knowledge beyond the abstract and conceptual, leading to their consideration as ultimately relational.

[We will take up the matter of Christian confession and doctrine in our next session on Authority.]
EXPLORING THE SUBJECT THROUGH VARIOUS MEDIA:

Our image- and entertainment-drenched culture certainly may distract young people from serious consideration of truth. But the fact that their, and our, engagement with the world proceeds with hours in front of screens requires some consideration of the contribution these media can make to our efforts at cultivating receptivity to faith. Moreover, we learn visually and aurally as much as through the written or spoken word. The Christian church has always recognized this, despite debates about church music, icons, the building of ornate cathedrals, and the like through the ages.

The key to our effective use of visual and musical media lies with the care we take in selecting films, T.V. shows, songs, paintings, photographs, or even You Tube videos and other online offerings that do more than entertain. When it comes to truth and knowledge, or any of the fault lines, we do well to ask the young people in our groups what they are watching and listening to. We can set the stage for them with some of the strategies mentioned above, and ask them what they have found that is relevant to the discussion. They will get it! And they will feel all the more motivated to participate in the conversation.
FAULT LINE # 2 AUTHORITY

I. INTRODUCTORY REFLECTION: THE [SHIFTING] GROUNDS OF FAITH

Integral to the matters of truth and knowledge are their source, or grounding. What a person holds to be true and what they think they know come from somewhere. Moreover, these streams of influence not only point to the source of someone’s beliefs, but their validity. Whether we claim to know something about the natural world, ourselves, society, the human condition and destiny, or God, we appeal to some basis for why we think these views are valid. In a word, the authority upon which we believe something—what philosophers of religion call the ‘justification for beliefs.’ Even for someone who holds that truth or conviction or certainty about anything is unattainable, and that claims to the contrary are suspect, they still appeal to some grounds for why they think that this is true. Appeals to authority are unavoidable.

In our own culture, respect for or submission to authority is problematic. To be sure, a strain of anti-authoritarianism marks the attitude of many, though this is hardly the exclusive posture of young people, or even of our age and culture. A suspicion of authority has prevailed throughout the American ‘experiment’; and of course, resistance to authority, or even outright rebelliousness, characterizes the human race. Are there, however, differences in what this looks like today, and so, in how authority can be a crucial issue in someone’s resistance or receptivity to faith?

As with the all of the areas regarded here as fault lines, the matter of authority reflects a vastly diverse, often conflicted range of sensibilities. On one hand, suspicion of institutional authority is widespread, most commonly directed towards government or religious institutions. Even the media, specifically the news media, is considered suspect as a purveyor of the truth, as low on the trust spectrum as politicians. Among young people, it is generally true that mistrust of authority figures including teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officials, parents, seems to come with the territory. Though again, it largely depends on the individual and how she relates to the specific authorities in her life. And I
am continually amazed at how accepting of authority a young person can be; though naturally they are as selective in this appraisal as are adults.

On the other hand, there is a great deal Americans accept purely on the authority of others. Ours is a culture of ‘experts’ who are endlessly cited as having the definitive word on an issue. Scientists and ‘science’ are prime examples of this, which is why pharmaceutical ads often have actors wearing lab coats. (Even Trident chewing gum ads have actors dressed like one of the ‘4 out of 5’ dentists who recommend their product!) Because of our enchantment with celebrities and celebrity, ‘the stars’ are also often held up as authorities of one kind or another, as if the delivery of lines in a film or T.V. show assures us that they also can deliver true insight. (It’s interesting that entertainers are granted authority because of their celebrity, whereas Jesus was granted celebrity because he had authority!)

Whatever views a modern American, including a young American, may have about external authorities and authority figures, it is reference to internal authority that rules the mind and will of most. How a person feels about an issue, for instance, decisively affects what they think is true. In this respect, inner feelings or intuitions yield not only authenticity, but validity. As many have observed, what is different about our own age and culture is that this basis for one’s outlook and values has been ratified as nearly universal. A product of longstanding skepticism, of disenchantment with traditional authorities, along with a heightened sense of autonomy and numerous other historical factors, the preference for one’s own preferences often reigns supreme. This is especially the case in matters of religious or ‘spiritual’ beliefs and values.

All of this also is familiar to us. But how might it affect a person’s receptivity to Christ and a Christian vision for their life? As with the other fault lines a person may straddle the divide as much as they stand on one side or the other. For someone who believes that their feelings or experiences are arbiters of the truth, for example, they may stand both within and apart from a Christian understanding. Christians believe in what the Reformers called the ‘inner conviction of the Holy Spirit,’ while at the same time affirming the authority of scripture, as well as tradition and ecclesiastical leadership. The difference, of course, lies in what a person believes governs their conclusions about what is true or false, right or wrong, etc. If one thinks that, ultimately, their own emotions, instincts, and
experiences are the final source for determining such matters—even if they don’t admit as much—then they likely will resist appeals to the Bible or tradition or the wisdom of church leaders, which challenge their beliefs. The results can be devastating for them if this leads to harmful choices.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. What distinctions do we draw between authority and authoritarian? Do the young people we work with understand the distinction?

2. What are some ways we can nurture a healthy view of authority that describes this distinction?

3. Where do the young people in our group look for the source and legitimacy of their beliefs and values? Which external authorities? Which internal authorities? How do sincerity, authenticity, and

4. What are some key challenges to their (and perhaps our) receptivity to authority as a source of and basis for truth, morals, the ‘good life,’ etc.? Do these challenges tend to regard God or Christ, the Bible, church leaders?

II. JESUS THE AUTHORITY FOR LIFE

It is tempting, when talking about authority, to jump right into questions about the authority of the Bible and problems with interpretation, ‘God-given’ roles of authority (parents, elders, governors), the church (called in I Timothy “the pillar and support of the truth”), and so forth. In terms of meeting young people where they’re at, however, it may be more productive to step away from some of those abiding—and important—questions and consider what aspects of authority might resonate more readily with them, at least on a first pass. I find that putting Jesus in the center of this issue a more promising way to begin the conversation. As with our own study of the other fault lines, a focus on him makes the issue relational as well as substantive, and so tends to bring someone closer ?? since ultimately, it is to be under his authority that ??
The following exercises from the Gospels will help us think about authority, and the authority of Jesus in particular as preparation for conversations with our youth.

SCRIPTURAL EXERCISES FOR YOUTH LEADERS:

1. **From Mark 1:22, 27; Matthew 7:29; Luke 7:8**
   What was it about Jesus that impressed people to attribute unique authority to him?

   For what purposes does Jesus exercise his authority?

   (Cf. 2 Corinthians 10:8 : For what does Paul say he and his fellow leaders exercise Their authority?)

3. **From Matthew 20:25; Mark 10:42**
   How does Jesus qualify the kind of authority that he exercised and the example he expected his disciples to follow?

   (Cf. I Peter 5:2–5; I Corinthians 11:1 : How do Peter and Paul fulfill this expectation themselves and extend it to others in the church?)

4. **From Matthew 28:18–20**
   How does Jesus relate his authority to the mission that he gives his followers?

5. How do Jesus’ unique example and teaching regarding authority provide bridges to connect young people with him and encourage the prospect of being one of his followers?

6. **Authority and Scripture**
   How do Jesus’ example and his own teaching relate to the authority of the Bible in Our instruction to young people?

   2 Timothy 2:15, 3:16–17 : How does Paul’s instruction to Timothy guide leaders in their view and practice of biblical instruction?

III.  **MAKING CONNECTIONS**

The fault line of authority hits on a foundational issue that affects people oftentimes
without them even realizing it as a cause for their resistance to Christ. As a result, we may first need to win a young person to an appreciation of how authority is even related to their flourishing before appealing to specific sources of authority. To be sure, as with anyone we have to consider human rebellion as well as what may be his or her distorted view of authority. But it’s interesting to note how Jesus’ authority was usually first recognized by people and rarely imposed by him, prompting not only amazement but trust. (Think of the episode with the Centurion in Matthew 8:5–13: this man’s recognition of Jesus’ authority was, according to Jesus, a demonstration of “great faith”).

This approach of cultivating a clearer understanding of authority and its value, and then directing people to consider how Jesus proves worthy of our trust in him as our own authority, represents a promising way to help someone make new connections.

ASKING GENERAL ‘DIAGNOSTIC’ QUESTIONS:

What qualities do you believe a reliable authority has? Who would you point to as an authority you trust? Who do you consider to be an untrustworthy authority?

Most people believe that their own feelings and intuitions are a reliable authority: why do you think this is the case? Are their dangers with this view?

We tend to think that authority means authoritarian: Why do we think this? In what ways does authority relate to our flourishing rather than our frustration?

JESUS & THE BIBLE AS RELIABLE AUTHORITIES:

[Using some of the passages above] What did people mean when they were “amazed” by Jesus’ authority? What did they see or hear that inspired them to think this? How did they respond

In what ways would you consider Jesus a trustworthy authority? If he is, what might this mean for the decisions we make about our lives?

The Bible is called by many ‘the word of God’: do you think this is true, and if so, in what sense? Does the Bible have authority because it is true?
I. INTRODUCTORY REFLECTION: FREEDOM FROM & FREEDOM FOR

Authority is the handmaid of matters of truth and knowledge, and freedom is the hard currency of authority, especially when understood within visions of human autonomy. Freedom is obviously of great import in an American context, matched only by commitments to equality in prominence and urgency as another “inalienable right.”

But freedom is also one of the key notes of a Christian vision, though it is often not understood to be so. For this reason, both on behalf of one’s personal freedom and in reaction against what someone perceives as a threat to such freedom, it marks another critical fault line when it comes to someone’s resistance or receptivity to Christian faith. For someone who holds their freedom dear, submission to Christ, even in the form of loving obedience (see John 14), can seem like oppression. As with matters of authority, an all-too-human desire to have one’s own way is a familiar inclination that infects us all, and needs to be addressed. But how is it that a faith which champions freedom is misunderstood as the opposite? To answer that question in our cultural context requires some reflection on the nature of freedom itself, if we are to help young people rightly understand Christian faith as a way of flourishing as truly free individuals.

The classic distinction between two kinds of freedom—freedom from and freedom for—is a helpful way to begin. For freedom to mark a path towards flourishing we need to consider not only which constraints may harm us, but which aims make our release from certain constraints worthwhile. The ultimate trajectory of the exercise of our will is not release into a void of possibilities but the realization of valuable purposes. ‘Freedom from’ only merits our aspirations if it frees us ‘for’ the pursuit of those things that make us more fully human.

Freedom in matters of religious faith takes on some peculiar traits in contemporary America. In addition to the centuries-long process of winning freedom of conscience when it comes to someone’s religious commitments, which we all applaud, a commitment to personal autonomy has led to a willful eclecticism in popular views of faith. As an article in the L.A. Times once described the phenomenon, for many this is an age of “Build-It-
Yourself Religion.” As one person interviewed for the piece put it, “The spiritual and religious experience is like the great American mall experience.” Hence, not only may a person react against the idea of following Christ, for example, as an offense to their autonomy per se, they may also be persuaded that the best way to approach religious faith in general is by sorting through one’s own preferences and choosing the beliefs they feel fit them best.

To be sure, the appeal of ‘traditional’ religion among young people continues to attract many, so once again we need to discern the views of what this young person in our group holds. He or she may or may not resist faith in Christ—however it is expressed—in the name of a ‘mix and match’ approach to spirituality. Because the assertion of freedom as radically personal is so prevalent in our culture, however, and often accompanies a negative view of ‘dogmatic’ faith with its set of prescribed [creedal] beliefs, we may need to work hard to explain how the faith of Jesus is a faith of freedom.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. How do a person’s, or a society’s, perception and practice of freedom express an orientation in life in terms of what they value most? What does this look like in 21st century America, especially in light of the dramatic diversity of subcultures within our society?

2. What conditions do we think are necessary for freedom’s fulfillment? When does a person become truly free, and what does this look like?

3. In what ways do we see young people in our group approach religious faith like ‘the great American mall experience’? In what ways not?

4. Do young people in our group see following Christ as a path of freedom? How does this relate to their views of the Bible or the creeds or other basic Christian commitments?

II. JESUS THE AUTHOR OF OUR FREEDOM

As noted above, people in our society may not readily associate religious devotion with freedom. The common impression—now almost a cliché—that religious faith is about
negative restraint rather than positive renewal and redemption, however, stands in stark contrast to a Christian vision.

At the center of a vision of human freedom, offering both freedom *from* and freedom *for*, is the person of Christ. Some of the main titles that Christians give him—Savior, Redeemer, Deliverer—all underscore this central facet of his work. How is it, then, that faith in him would be recast as oppressive? Overcoming that disconnection with young people, then, addresses a major misunderstanding or distortion. And it goes to one of the great motivations of human beings: the desire to be truly free.

**SCRIPTURAL EXERCISES FOR YOUTH LEADERS:**

1. **From Luke 4:18** “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed …” (cf. Psalm 102:20, 146:7)
   - Why does Jesus frame his entire ministry in terms of releasing prisoners and freeing the oppressed?
   - How does his unique anointing relate to these central features of his work?

2. **From John 8:31–36** Here Jesus makes one of the most quoted statements of his ministry, perhaps of all time: “the truth will set/make you free.” But what did he mean by this promise?
   - How does it relate to discipleship (since he said it to his followers)?
   - How does he relate it to the slavery he talks about?
   - In what way is this freedom related to ‘the truth’?
   - What freedom *from* and freedom *for* does his promise imply here?

3. **From Romans 5–8** In these chapters Paul describes freedom from the *punishment* of sin (chapter 5), freedom from the *power* of sin (chapters 6–7), and freedom from the *presence* of sin (chapter 8) …
   - What does freedom depend upon in these chapters?
What do we learn about God and his commitment to freedom?
How does freedom from sin in all of these ways regard what it means for us to become more fully human?
How does one appropriate the freedom offered by Christ?

4. From Galatians 5:1
What is the larger context for Paul’s declaration that “It was for freedom that Christ has set us free,” and how does this affect the view of freedom promised?
How does this statement expand to take up all that the Christian vision of life holds forth?

5. From Hebrews 2:15
How does the fear of death, from which Christ has freed us, mark one of the chief spiritual needs we have as human beings?
How does Christ specifically free us from this fear?

6. How does freedom ‘in Christ’ as elaborated in the above passages subvert, correct, and expand ideas about freedom that our young people may hold?

III. MAKING CONNECTIONS

Freedom as a fault line bears two significant aspects when it comes to addressing a young person’s resistance to faith in Christ. One regards both the meaning and the value that we place on freedom in general and how it relates to human flourishing. The other considers how a Christian vision takes up the impulse to be free that we all feel, but challenges us to a fuller appreciation of its meaning as well as its importance to us. With both facets, consideration of freedom pushes us back to consider how freedom relates to truth, as a source of what makes someone free (on Jesus’ account), and authority—as a source of freedom in terms of who, ultimately, can give us true freedom.
ASKING DIAGNOSTIC QUESTIONS:

When you think of freedom, what does it give us that makes it so valuable? What would you say is the difference between having freedom *from* something and freedom *for* something?

Are there ways that freedom can be negative? What kinds of situations come to mind when having freedom could be harmful?

When you think of religious faith, do you or your friends consider it a source of freedom? Why or why not? What did Jesus mean when he said “You shall know the truth and the truth will make you free”?

What, or *who*, makes someone free?

EXPLORING FREEDOM THROUGH JESUS’ EYES:

Holding forth Jesus as the “Author of our Freedom” is a provocative way to clarify a true picture of what he offers and to challenge distorted notions. The passages above provide some places to look. It also would be fruitful and would help to flesh out Jesus’ views by studying episodes from his ministry that involve acts of deliverance: the encounters with the Paralytic lowered through the roof by his friends in Mark 2 (which also has a fascinating connection to forgiveness), with the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5, and with the man at the pool of Bethesda in John 5 come to mind.

One of the great ‘freedom-themes’ of the Bible involves sin, guilt, forgiveness, and transformation, exploring freedom as both *from* and *for*. The intriguing connections that Jesus draws between truth, freedom, and sin in John 8, for example, is a promising place to start. The great passages of forgiveness in the Psalms (32, 51) as well as the NT letters would also help to emphasize the freedom one has ‘in Christ’. The image of ‘cancelling of our debt’ and of being ‘made alive’ in Colossians 2:13–14 is a powerful statement about what a follower of Jesus has been freed *from* as well as *for*.

EXPLORING FREEDOM THROUGH FILM:

Of the many films that explore freedom from a young person’s perspective, three
oldies but goodies come to mind: *Dead Poets Society, Pleasantville,* and *Footloose* (either original or recent version). *Footloose* in particular locates freedom within a religious context, pitting teens against the local minister. *Pleasantville* presents a blistering critique of reactionary religious hypocrisy (not fairly balanced, and therefore interesting for discussion).

Another film is *The Truman Show,* which explores the topic of human freedom in conflict with ‘higher authority’ and control. The religious connotations are more subtle, but poignant (Truman, or ‘True-man,’ is pitted against Christof, the ‘creator’ of “The Truman Show”).

Any of these films would set the stage to discuss a variety of topics related to freedom, including common views and stereotypes, freedom and religious faith, the value we place on freedom, and so forth. Most of the films that feature young people have freedom as one of their major themes, and though most offer only stereotypes and clichés, they have an obvious resonance with teens who are their main audience.
All of the other fault lines find their deepest convergence in a person’s sense of herself. Questions about what it means to be a person, and all the ways that notions of truth and knowledge, authority, freedom, and the future shape this, come down to ‘what does it mean to be me.’

As we know, a young person’s struggle with identity and self-image reaches an acute phase during this time of their lives: how someone is coming to think of him- or herself, regardless of how accurate or distorted, takes center stage. It’s not that our sense of ourselves ever recedes in influence, but during the teen years up to the early twenties (some would say later), the drive to determine our ‘true self’ dominates our attention unlike any other period in our lives.

Our culture exacerbates the confusion. On the one hand, as a society we have put the quest for self-image and identity at the center of our aspirations, which can have healthy results but also encourages wide-spread narcissism. On the other hand, we have relativized the value of what Catholic sociologist Charles Taylor has called ‘sources of the self.’ Rather than stable and healthy sources for a person’s sense of self, there is a smorgasbord, any of which can be deemed valid. With the view that we are the captains not only of our destiny but our identity, despite promises of self-realization the vast array of identity choices has generated deeper anxiety, perhaps especially among younger people.

Furthermore, the most pressing social issues of our age revolve around larger questions of the self—of what it means to be human, and to be a person. From debates about abortion, racial and gender equality, marriage, euthanasia, and an array of human rights issues, to ‘identity politics’ that seek to take up the cause of the marginalized, personal identity and personal dignity stand at the forefront of some of our deepest concerns.

Religious commitments are found to be both the motivation for these causes and their nemesis, as religious ‘traditionalists’ are pitted against ‘progressives.’ What only rarely emerges in the public square is the fact that the dignity of an individual as a foundation for
human rights is a singular legacy of a Judeo-Christian vision. Christians for their part insist upon a high view of the individual and have great stakes in the formation of one’s sense of self. They also place a premium on communities of selves, the formation of which has also become one of the most urgent quests of people in our fractured society. The vision of humanity that rises from the foundations of what it means to be made in the image of God and to be re-made as a new creation in Christ expands far beyond the stereotype that religious faith leads to the suppression of the self. As one teacher put it, ‘Christ did not come to make us Christians, but to make us more fully human.”

For this reason, and because identity and a sense of self takes on such significance for a young person and is of such import for our society, the fault line of identity and the self warrants a great deal of careful reflection.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. Borrowing Charles Taylor’s phrase once more, what are the most influential ‘sources of the self’ that form the identity and self-image of young people in your group? How would you rank their influence between different members that you know personally?

2. What are the identity-forming beliefs and practices of your group, both those you promote and those they adopt? What sources do you use, and are they effective?

3. Identification with a community is a vital part of one’s sense of self: in what ways do you seek to cultivate a healthy community identity, and do members of your group know what this is? Do they see it as health-creating?

4. Which social issues that concern identity and the self do your youth care deeply about? In what ways do public discussions about these issues form their own opinions? How do these resonate with someone’s own identity formation?
II. JESUS THE AUTHENTICATOR OF OUR SELVES

Christianity offers some striking answers to questions about human identity and the self, answers far more profound and radical than being ‘a religious person’ or being ‘communities of faith’ recognizes. The estimation of our great worth as creatures made in God’s image, the eternal nature of our unique personhood, the prospect of being made whole and ‘more fully human’ out of the ashes of our sinfulness, the affirmation of our bodies, all commend this vision of identity and self that we in turn commend to the young people we serve.

As with our other fault lines, Jesus stands at the center of this vision. Despite certain portrayals of him as someone uncertain about his identity (e.g., *The Last Temptation of Christ*), Jesus was never more confident than in his self-awareness. In confrontation after confrontation with those who challenged him and his authority, he remained steadfast in his insistence that he was the Son of God, the very embodiment of the Father in the world. As Jesus tells his detractors on one occasion, after declaring himself to be the “Light of the World,” “I know where I came from and where I am going. … if you knew Me, you would know My Father also” (John 8:14, 18). In an arena that so deeply concerns authenticity, Jesus was above all an authentic self!

As noted above, the fault line of identity and the self roils with complexity in our contemporary setting. Self-image, body-image, gender and sexual identity, race, ethnicity, are just some of the issues that can bring controversy as well as confusion to a young person’s quest for her true self. Taking our cue from Jesus, the following scriptural exercises do not aim to engage these issues directly but to recall some of the foundations upon which a Christian vision of the self is built.

SCRIPTURAL EXERCISES FOR YOUTH LEADERS:

*Psalm 139* includes one of the great paeans to God’s intimate knowledge of and concern for the individual person. “You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother’s womb. … I am fearfully and wonderfully made … in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them …,” etc.
1. How does this portrayal of God challenge the feeling that God is not interested in the details of our daily existence?

2. How does the Psalmist’s confidence in God’s creation of him challenge some of the ways we judge ourselves inadequate? What difficulties do we face in accepting God’s view of us as opposed to a self-image influenced by others?

**Mark 1:40–42ff (healing a leper); John 9 (healing the man born blind);** In the Gospels one of the chief activities of Jesus is the healing of others, from which we learn much about him and about ourselves through his eyes …

1. Why did he bother to heal people if they are made for another world? What does it affirm about life in this world? About our bodily existence?

2. Jesus did not always touch people when he healed them: why did he do so on these occasions?

**John 1:14, 16–17** In the Prologue to John’s Gospel the author declares that Jesus is “full of grace and truth,” and then adds, “For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace. For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”

1. How does this testimony to fullness—both the fullness Jesus possessed and the fullness he ‘realizes’ others—regard our own craving for self-fulfillment?

2. How do grace and truth combine to undergird someone’s identification with Jesus as the source of self-understanding and self-realization? What notions of the latter does this provision challenge or subvert?

**John 17 (the ‘high priestly prayer’)**

1. How does Jesus’ vision of his future ‘body’ commend a view of selves-in-community that defines our very notion of what community means?

2. How do we reconcile his insistence that his followers are both ‘in’ the world but not ‘of’ the world?
3. What does or would it look like to have Jesus’ joy “made full” in us (cf. John 15:11)?

**Romans 6:1–23** Here we find one of the great gospel themes in Paul: a new life ‘in Christ’ characterized by the transformation of the self: from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from unrighteousness to purity …

1. How does Paul’s answer to the question ‘Why not keep on sinning since we have grace?’ involve a new identity and new self-concept?

2. How does a state of being ‘in Christ’ change the terms of our self-regard? How does this declaration elaborate notions of authenticity?

**2 Corinthians 5:17**

1. How does Paul’s grand claim that “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come” interact with various other ‘claims’ on our identity: gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, even ‘teenager’? Is this a new paradigm for self-identity that supersedes all others?

2. How does this declaration address our pasts, including past pains?

**II. MAKING CONNECTIONS**

The sheer plethora of influences on a young person’s identity and self-concept can make the task of connecting them to a Christian vision of the self seem intractable. The feeling shared by parents and youth leaders alike that ‘we just can’t compete’ with the volume and variety available can lead to resignation rather than active engagement. Resistance to a Christian understanding of the self can take so many different forms! This in fact is one of the appeals of generational profiles, which seem to bring some order and explanation to what can feel like a bewildering onslaught.

But the effort to help young people discover the many ways that a Christian understanding resonates with their deep longing for self-understanding and authenticity
requires us to dig deep with them, and to be willing to do so one person at a time. It has been my experience that this effort involves three interconnected elements: unmasking deception and false bases for someone’s self-concept, converting and equipping their imagination to see Christ and his vision of them afresh (we subvert in order to convert), and supporting them with love during one of the most difficult seasons of their lives.

Along these lines, and in addition to scriptural studies with the youth in our group using such passages as those mentioned above, the following will help to prepare them to ‘hear and feel anew’ what having and identity and sense of self involves and what Jesus the authenticator of the self provides.

**DIAGNOSTIC EXERCISE #1:**

Our self identities are composed of numerous overlapping sources. List all of the different ways you have of identifying yourself (as a son/daughter, male/female, church member, teen/young person, American, etc.).
1. How do all of these influence the ways that we think of ourselves?
2. What makes them all fit together? Which is our ‘true’ self?

**Supplement:** In *Philippians 3:3–10* lists several ways that he identifies himself, and then says that he ‘considers all of dung compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ’:
1. Why does Paul highlight these particular ‘identifiers’?
2. Why does he draw the comparison that he does? What is he trying to instill in the minds of the Philippians about how they should view themselves?
3. What would our list include?
4. What are all the other ‘identifiers’ that the Bible uses to describe followers of Jesus?

**DIAGNOSTIC EXERCISE #2:**

(This is more for younger teens, though I have used this with *graduate student men* with surprising effect!)

Using the painting “The Girl in the Mirror” by Norman Rockwell as a point of reference, ask:
1. What is this girl thinking? What is she feeling?
2. How does this painting capture our anxieties about our self-image?
3. How do we also compare ourselves to ideals that we find in our culture? What are some of those and where do we get them?

**Supplement:** In Revelation 2:17 we are told that the person who stays faithful to Christ will receive a white stone with a name on it that only God and the person know:

1. What does this say about how God views each one of his children?
2. What does this say about a Christian understanding of the individual?

**HELPING THEM TO BECOME GOOD ‘CULTURAL DIAGNOSTICIANS’:**

Rather than making the culture the enemy—however nefarious its influence can be—we want to help young people engage what they read, view, listen to, with critical minds, and to do this with them.

It has been one of the practices with our children, for example, to ‘deconstruct’ T.V. shows, commercials, films, magazine ads, YouTube videos, etc. and discuss how and why these appeal to us, and with advertisements and commercials especially, how the promoter wants us to view ourselves. Our kids have found this both fun and enlightening, and it helps to make them far more aware of the influences on their sense of identity and self-image. This is also a great way for them to reflect on how these media affect their views of others (e.g., the portrayal of women in video games).

**[RE-]TELLING THEIR STORIES:**

In her book *The Telling*, the poet and critic Laura (Riding) Jackson writes:

“There is something to be told about us for the telling of which we all wait. … We know we are explainable, and not explained. Many of the lesser things concerning us have been told but the greater things have not been told; and nothing can fill their place. … Until the missing story of ourselves is told, nothing besides told can suffice us: we shall go on quietly craving it.”

As this passage relates, telling our own stories and thinking about the story that is not yet told (“the missing story” for which we wait) is both revealing and mysterious. Riding’s
reflections look both toward our past and our future, and make the story of our lives exciting.

There are numerous ways of tapping into this: group conversations, journaling, art, having them tell the story of their life that they want to be told, etc. Some of the group activities may be harder for shy people, however, and it may help to be sensitive if they are asked what kinds of things they use to express themselves.

EXPLORING THE ISSUE THROUGH FILM & OTHER MEDIA:

In addition to the critical thinking exercise suggested above, as we all know films with good stories remain one of the best ways to engage young people. There are so many good films that treat questions about identity and the self. Some that I recommend especially for older teens or college age youth are Gattaca, The Matrix series, Memento, I, Robot, and for a more domestic story, Lars and the Real Girl. The latter especially raises issues about identity and community both, and in a religious context. The recent film Her offers a fascinating study of what it means to be human, and for older teens can be a provocative basis for discussions about identity.

Music, of course, is another vital way to explore issues of identity and the self. Much of what young people listen to raises, and often agonizes over self-image, relationships, one’s place in the world, society, etc. Interacting with people about what they listen to as a basis for discussion is an illuminating experience, as well as shocking when the music expresses destructive attitudes. In either case, discussions about the music that moves them creates bridges in ways that resonate deeply with a person’s own perceptions and struggles.

In all of these exercises, every effort should be made to nudge people towards deeper consideration of Jesus. As the one who both modeled an authentic self and makes possible the same for us, helping young people to engage him draws them towards deeper resonance with the vision of themselves he offers. The same is true for the lives of the authors of the Bible and other biblical figures, who have a story behind the things they wrote that gives more flesh to their teaching. A person’s resistance, particularly when it comes to their identity, is most powerfully addressed by the testimonies of others who
capture their imagination by embodying a different vision of life which still resonates with them.
FAULT LINE #5: THE FUTURE

I. INRODUCTORY REFLECTION: HOPE ON TRIAL

Integral to any set of beliefs or philosophy of life, a vision of the future regards questions about the purpose(s) of human existence, the human condition, notions of human history and progress, the imminence of death and the possibility of immortality, and—of keen emotional significance—hope. What is the future of our planet and of humankind ultimately registers most deeply when someone ponders the question, ‘What is my future?’ How someone considers this question can represent a fault line with numerous other cracks and fissures as it takes up concerns that are both global and personal.

One prominent divide between ideas of the future is a clash between beliefs that God or some supernatural force (fate?) rules over the affairs of humanity and individuals, and those that reject this in favor of the view that the future is a product of our own devices (as ‘captains of our own destiny’) and/or the product of chance. (The film Forrest Gump attempts to say that it is both!).

Another divide regarding the future involves the means by which we think we will make progress towards a better world for ourselves or for all. In addition to the above-mentioned divide between reliance upon God or divine providence vs. various forms of self-reliance, strategies for creating a better world span everything from the exercise of military and political power to economic and social reforms, to recycling our waste. What has keen relevance to the young people we work with is usually not a sophisticated commitment to certain strategies, but whether or not they think any of the problems facing humankind can be solved, if the world will ever improve. The sheer exposure to conflicts and tragedies around the world, most of which leave us feeling helpless to address personally, can generate anxiety and despair, either of which someone may not even realize she is experiencing.

Along these lines, a third divide concerns hope expressly: whether a person imagines good outcomes in their lives or those of others, or despairs of this. Sometimes a person experiences both; that is, he may feel hopeless about the future of the world but still hopeful about his own prospects for a good life. The prevalence of apocalyptic books and films often
aimed directly at youth audiences (e.g., *Hunger Games*), and which often project a dystopian vision, both express our anxiety and, perhaps, relieve it by their cathartic effect.

A fourth fissure, taken up expressly by most religious faiths, concerns views of death and the afterlife. Although most Americans affirm that there is some kind of life after death, there is widespread disagreement about what this looks like, and for whom, or how someone gets there. Conflicts that can express resistance to a Christian vision may involve everything from the existence of heaven and hell to salvation, including salvation through Christ alone. Such conflicts thrust us back upon other fault lines: How can we know? On whose authority? Is our future the result of our own choices or God’s? How do I regard those who don’t believe what I believe? What gives my life purpose and meaning? etc.

Any or all of the above may be operating in a person’s resistance or receptivity to faith. And all of these aspects of our views of the future are integral to a Christian vision, calling once more for serious attention to the imagination. How someone envisions her future, as well as our future, proves crucial to their response to Christian faith. Although it has always been in our DNA as human beings as well as the DNA of religious faiths, having ‘a future and a hope’ is perhaps more at issue in our own cultural moment than in other times and settings. As theologian Jurgen Moltmann has averred, “the basic question of modern times is the question of the future. Therefore, Christian theology of modernity must necessarily be a theology of the future. … Religion should give the answer to the question, ‘What may I hope for?’”

II. JESUS THE ACHIEVER OR OUR HOPE

Visions of the future abound in Scripture, visions that in no small measure have shaped the imagination and historical sense of people around the world. From belief in the inevitable fulfillment of God’s plans of redemption in history to depictions of a New Heaven and a New Earth, from cover to cover the Bible portrays the future on a grand canvas. But the Bible also brings the future into the realm of the personal and individual: Does God have a plan for my life?
The Jesus we find in the New Testament likewise addressed the future, projecting both the impact that his work and faith in him would have on his followers, and its impact on the world—a global destiny for all humankind. That destiny as he articulated it centered entirely on people’s response to him, and included suffering and judgment as well as salvation (Matt. 10, 24, 25; John 3, 15, 17; &c), death as well as glory (Luke 24:26). What do we do with this provocative message, and how does it fit with the full vision of the future depicted in the Scriptures?

SCRIPTURAL EXERCISES FOR YOUTH LEADERS:

Jeremiah 29:11
This classic text, “‘For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans for your welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope’, ” expresses much of what we want to communicate to young people about their future.

1. What all do we learn about God’s character and will for us from this verse?

2. In its context (one of exile), why would God’s promise, not of a hopeful future but of both a future and a hope, resonate with them? How might this context and this promise speak to the situation people find themselves in today?

3. What in our lives challenges the assurances given here?

Matthew 24 & 25 (the ‘little apocalypse’)

1. In what ways does Jesus bind the fate of his followers to his own fate? How are we to understand inevitable suffering as something more than the pain experienced? (cf. Matt. 5:10–11, “blessed are those who suffer persecution …”; Romans 5:4–5, hope as the outcome of suffering)

2. In what ways does Jesus bind the destiny of everyone to himself? Is his depiction of the future bleak or hopeful … or both?

Jesus on hope: Although Jesus spoke often and explicitly about faith and love, he never uses the word ‘hope’ …

1. Why is this? Or perhaps more poignantly, why did he not need to?
2. What Jesus does speak of often, particularly in John’s Gospel, is ‘life’: “I am the bread of life’; “I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly’; “I am the life.’ The author summarizes this neatly: “In him was life, and this life was the light of men” (John 1:4). The word for life was not bios (biological life), but zoe, meaning the ['eternal'] life that God gives—a richness or fullness of vitality as well as duration. How does the promise of such life that we glean from these passages regard the future, not merely as an extension of years but a quality of existence?

Though Jesus did not use the word hope, his apostles and followers did. They understood that the life he secured and offers to others forms the foundation for what can only be called a hope …

I Timothy 1:1 (“… Christ, who is our hope”)

1. In what sense is Christ ‘our hope,’ the very embodiment of hope?

2. How is Christ the hope for all human beings?

Hebrews 6:19

1. How does the image of an anchor, which keeps something in place, relate to hope, which looks to a new place on the horizon beyond our present circumstances?

2. The hope described here (‘which enters within the veil’), finds its core in a relationship with God made possible by Christ. How do we understand our future and our hope in terms of relationships, particularly this relationship? (Cf. Hebrews 10:19–23)

1 Peter 1:3

1. What makes hope in Christ ‘living? How is this connected to being ‘born anew’? To the resurrection?

2. What does ‘living hope’ look like? What are the alternatives?

3. What do we learn about God’s purposes for this life in terms of how we live?
III. MAKING CONNECTIONS

BRINGING THE FUTURE INTO FOCUS:

The future can seem vague and distant to young people especially. Even when particular ways of looking at the future, such as apocalyptic or dystopian books and films, project disturbing visions of what lies ahead, a person may still feel fuzzy about what their own lives can or should look like. At the same time, more and more young people in their late teens and 20s experience growing anxiety about their economic prospects. As one recent article observes about many college-age youth in America, they are also “majoring in fear” (see http://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/11/majoring-in-fear).

But this also may mean only a vague sense about the future. A Christian vision of life refines one’s future and hope in this sense: it promises a life of purpose and meaning now, and the consummation of existence beyond this life. We can help young people explore their own expectations and anxieties about the future in healthy ways when we help them not only to identify these, but also direct their attention to Jesus as the one who calls them into a meaningful future with him.

1. How does the idea of ‘calling’ found in the Bible give more substance to someone’s future than career planning, and help to mitigate some of the anxieties she feels about it? How do we see this in, for example, Jesus’ calling of his first disciples? (Cf. Mark 1:16–20; John 1:35ff)

2. If following Jesus means leading a life of purpose and hope, what other aspirations compete with that central commitment by promising the same? Can these deliver on their promise? (Cf. Matthew 13, the parable of the four soils, especially the seed planted among the thorns)

3. How is hope talked about in our culture? Who are the people who promise hope, either living or in our memory?

PILGRIMAGES TO SITES OF HOPE:

Physical pilgrimages to sacred places is a growing phenomenon around the world. They
emphasize the fact that our lives are purposeful journeys, not vague wanderings, and that each of us has a destiny. Although taking young people to a known pilgrimage destination is likely beyond the means of most youth groups, are there ‘mini-pilgrimages’ to take them on? These could be places around them that mark significant or defining moments in their lives, places where they experience a sense of hope, or places of contemplation where they are asked to consider the above reflections on the future. (Retreat locations often serve this purpose well.)

EXPLORING THE ISSUE THROUGH VARIOUS MEDIA:

Books (what they’re reading)
In addition to popular futuristic books like the Hunger Games series, the books read in high school English classes provide ways to engage young people on questions about hope in particular. Although they may resist talking any more about their school assignments than they need to (!), the seemingly unchanging selection of books about teen anxiety often project a rather bleak vision of life (A Separate Peace, Death Be Not Proud, &c), and can be illuminating conversation-starters.

Films (what they’re watching)
Any number of futuristic films can serve to direct people’s attention to consideration of the future, including the future of humankind. In addition to ones already mentioned, the recent film The Giver and the 2006 film Children of Men are two well-done and thoughtful resources, both with particular religious overtones.

Films about the afterlife can also be engaging sources, for instance two older films, Defending Your Life and What Dreams May Come, and the more recent Hereafter. None of these has a particularly Christian vision of the afterlife, and so when viewing and discussing them plan to draw comparisons and contrasts.
OTHER POSSIBLE RESOURCES

FOR YOUTH GROUP LEADERS:

There are a plethora of books about the changes that have taken place in how we approach matters of truth and knowledge in our ‘postmodern’ context. These range from the popular to the academic, and depending on your and your leaders’ interests and aptitudes they can be helpful as you reflect on the ways that truth and knowledge may mark a line of resistance to faith for the young men and women you work with. Here are a few suggested titles:

- *Christianity Beyond Belief* (Todd Hunter)
- *Thinking About God* (Greg Ganssle)
- *The Truth is Stranger than It Used to Be* (J. Richard Middleton & Brian Walsh)

TED Talks are another resource for our own preparation, not necessarily presented from a Christian perspective but providing an easily accessible window into what people are thinking and talking about. Their library is huge, so it will take some poking around to find ones that deal with questions about truth and knowledge. For those talks that are age-appropriate, these can also be helpful as well as engaging audio-visual tools to use with our youth group.

FOR YOUR YOUNG PEOPLE:

Scripture study

As you reflect on the passages mentioned above and other places where truth and knowledge are discussed, especially by Jesus, these can form the ‘curriculum’ for your group meetings or individual conversations. Although it can be difficult, John’s Gospel is such a rich resource for this fault line that it is worth taking the trouble to think about how to incorporate it into our teaching.
Again, we don’t want to underestimate their interest or curiosity about what the Bible says, but we do want to be sensitive to presentation. Some of the young people I have worked with, including my own children and their friends, like heaving around large study Bibles. Others, especially those who are being introduced to the faith, may feel intimidated by such heft. I often print individual passages that are more manageable and distribute these.

**Fiction**

As with other media, we want to know what young people are already reading. These books may be assigned in school or stories that are popular (Think *Harry Potter* and *Hunger Games*.) You might consider starting a ‘book club’ with young readers who like to talk about what they are reading, and use this as a way to direct attention to one or more of the fault line areas. I recommend the books of Marilynne Robinson (*Gilead, Home, Lila*) as sensitive and thoughtful stories that have faith as one of their subjects.

**Films**

Many of the so-called faith-based films are of such poor quality or so predictable that they can turn off instead of turn on. Not to pick on these films alone: plenty (most?) popular films are of equally poor quality! We want to find age-appropriate films that we can show for ‘movie nights’ and other activities, and also want to include what they are watching. In addition to viewing those I have mentioned already, one suggestion is to take a survey of your group using the fault line topics and ask them to classify their favorite films along these lines and let them decide what to watch. Again, anything we can do to involve them in the development of the ‘curriculum’ for the group enhances the prospect of personal resonance.

**Poetry and Music**

Although poetry may be beyond the reach or interest of many young people, there is wonderful poetry that is accessible and brings into focus the kinds of issues Some poets I recommend are Denise Levertov, Wendell Berry, Scott Cairns, and Lucille Clifton (for older teens and college age).

Of course, the ‘poetry’ that most young people are exposed to comes in the form of song lyrics. Have each member of the group bring the lyrics to one of their favorite songs or play that song at one of your gatherings, then have them talk about why they find it meaningful.
Visual Arts

Trips to art galleries with an idea of exploring the fault lines can be an Some of the most meaningful discussions I have had with our youngest daughter, who is herself an artist, have arisen after going to art exhibitions.

Rituals & Spiritual Disciplines

Most of what I have recommended in ‘making connections’ revolves around conversations. But there are many other ways vital to learning, ways that may be more attractive to young people than we think. Participation in rituals and spiritual disciplines are ways of embodying spiritual principles, even for those who have no faith.

I have mentioned going on ‘mini-pilgrimages’ in the section on the future. Are there rituals that you can repeat at every one of your group gatherings, ones that speak to some of the fault line areas? This could even be a group project! How can participation in communion serve as a learning moment? How might the Christian Year—Advent, Lent, Easter, Pentecost—provide opportunities for ‘embodied’ engagement? In addition, how might you use spiritual disciplines such as fasting, simplicity, or alms-giving to promote spiritual sensitivity and values?

He and Us Together

Remember, your greatest resource is the Lord whose own life-giving creativity and engagement is our ultimate resource for transformation. As Paul reminded the Corinth-ians, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God’s fellow workers …” (I Corinthians 3).

With that in mind, remember that the love and creativity you bring and the community you form with your young people will do more to lead them into life than any ‘experts’ could ever accomplish. The Lord wants to work through you to them!