Youth Ministry Based on Real Relationships: Interviews With Andrew Root

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Our guest in the following interviews is Andrew Root, Assistant Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota. He's the author of

- *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation,*
- *Relationships Unfiltered: Help for Youth Workers, Volunteer, and Parents on Creating Authentic Relationships,*
- *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church*
- *Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being,* and
- *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry.*

For his books on Amazon.com, click here.

A former Young Life staff worker, he has served in churches and social service agencies as a youth outreach associate and a gang prevention counselor. He lives in Saint Paul with his wife Kara and their two children, Owen and Maisy.

Relationships in Youth Ministry (YI053)

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for joining us on another edition of *You're Included*, the unique interview series devoted to practical implications of Trinitarian Theology in today's complex world. Our guest today is Dr. Andrew Root. [turning toward Dr. Root] Thanks for joining us today.

AR: It's a pleasure to be here.

JMF: We have a lot to talk about. Youth ministry is a dynamic area, and you have some challenging things to say that are significant for facing what the church is up against in today's world. I wanted to read from page 15 of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry*, your first book: "Ministry, then, is not about 'using' relationships to get individuals to accept a 'third thing,' whether that be conservative politics, moral behaviors, or even the gospel message. Rather, ministry is about connection, one to another, about sharing in suffering and joy, about persons meeting persons with no pretense or secret motives." What are you driving at here?

AR: The whole book, as you mentioned, revolves around that point. That point was born in my own experience. It was right around this area, in a church here in southern California that I was invited to be part of a youth ministry. It was at a large Presbyterian church, kind of a classic youth ministry.

One Wednesday night, for no particular reason, some kids from the neighborhood that surrounded the church showed up on the church steps. The church saw this as serendipitous and a wonderful opportunity. So not knowing what to do or how to do ministry with these young people, they decided to throw money at the problem, which probably happens too often in churches, and I was the benefactor of that. It became my job.

I was hired to bridge these two worlds, between the kind of classic youth ministry and the church kids, and then the kids in the neighborhood. I was invited to be part of this and to take this job because I had worked for Young Life and supposedly knew what I was doing when it came to building relationships with young people. It took myself and the team of people that I worked with about two or three weeks to realize we had no idea what we were doing.

We had been taught, and we had read all sorts of youth ministry literature, and we had done a lot of youth ministry, and we were some of the best, smartest, good-looking youth workers that we knew about. It took us, again, like two weeks to realize we had no clue what we were doing.

We had been taught that all you had to do was try to be friends with these kids

and that kids wanted relationships with adults, and that through your relationship with a young person, you could lead them into the church or to accept Jesus or to avoid immoral behavior, or that there would be a way that you could use your relationship to get young people somewhere positive, somewhere good.

The kids we were working with that showed up on the church steps this night were not so easy to influence. They had this incredibly genius way (that was slightly diabolical) of keeping adults at a distance. We would get close to them, and they had a way of either questioning our sexuality or questioning our motives or assuming that we would make a scene, that we were going to do something to them.

It became difficult to figure out "how do you do ministry?" We had been told that all you had to do was build a relationship with kids and they would come, and these kids were pushing us away. I would go and visit these kids at their public school campus, and kids that I had known for months and they had spent time at our church, I would come up to them and they would say, "Get the F away from me," and swear in our face. This was not the kind of youth ministry I was taught was supposed to happen. These kids were supposed to *want* to be with me.

So I started to question, "How do you actually go about doing this?" You take a kid out for a Coke and a burger and you drive them home into their neighborhood and the fog has condensed on your window and right before you drop them off, they write rival gang signs on it so when you turn around and drive back through their neighborhood, your life is put in danger. How are you supposed to do ministry with a group of kids like this? How are you supposed to do it when they seem to refuse your ministry, but nevertheless continue to ask for it by showing up every week? And showing up at 4:00 for something that starts at 7:00, and stay till 11:30 or 12:00.

It was in the middle of a fight with my wife that I realized that I had problems. I realized I had problems in more ways than one, but particularly I had problems in my conception of ministry. We were newly married, and my wife was going through a crisis in her family of origin. That was difficult for her as she tried to kind of figure out what was going on and who she was, in the midst of this family chaos.

We had spent a lot of nights just talking about issues. She would talk about how hard this was as her family was in the midst of transition. I always had this great way of reframing her problem for her. She would say things like, "This is really hard." I would say, "Don't think about it like that. What if we think about it

like this?" Or she would say, "I hate when this happens and I feel that it just grieves me that this is all changed…" I would say, "There are futures before us. We don't have to worry about this. Let's just move on, let's think about something better than this."

Finally, after me reframing all of her issues, she finally stopped me and said, "Would you just seriously, just stop." She said these words. In her frustration she said, "Don't you know that relationships are not about fixing things? Would you stop trying to fix me and just be with me? And if you can't be with me, nothing will get better anyhow. So stop trying to fix my problems and just *be* with me." I realized when she said that, not only did I have a lot to learn about being a young husband, but I also realized that that's exactly what I was doing in my ministry.

These kids who lacked the middle-class decorum that the kids had when I worked in suburban Saint Paul, Minnesota, they lacked that, so they could simply say, "get away from me." They knew that I had an agenda for the relationship. Maybe it was a good agenda, maybe it was good for them, but my ministry wasn't essentially about *them.* It was about where I could take them. Maybe some of the things were really good. Keeping them in church, helping them to understand who Jesus Christ is, those are all great things, but they had the sense that it was happening outside of our actual relationship.

So you mentioned "the third thing." That's something that I've taken from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In his first book, *Sanctorum Communio*, he has this beautiful phrase where he says, "When we encounter the neighbor, God is there." He says, "There's not a third thing. There's no third thing. There's just me and you or I and thou, and Jesus Christ becomes present *there*, not outside of that."

Often in youth ministry the objective has been to use our relationship with young people to get to some third thing. So what I try to do in the book is just re-imagine what it would be to think about ministry (and it's really all ministry, and not just youth ministry), to think about ministry in this idea that there's no third thing. That somewhere in the midst of really encountering another person, God becomes concretely present with them then.

JMF: Isn't that true in any relationship? As a church, isn't that how we tend to think about almost all of our relationships outside of the church? That it's a means to an end. We get to know people, we draw them into the sphere of the church in some way, through some project or whatever, but we really have a hidden agenda.

We have an ulterior motive. A good motive, perhaps, of presenting the gospel

to them, but nonetheless, it's an ulterior motive. The friendship is for that sake. Almost like an insurance-salesman approach or something, rather than friendship, relationship being an end in itself. Is there something to be said for that in terms of who Christ is in us and in them?

AR: I think that is true. When I go around the world and the country talking about this, you'll have people say, "We always have agendas." You can't strip yourself from an agenda. That's true. We are kind of socially located, and we have our own hermeneutical location that we take into relationships. But there is a difference, and I think you're hitting on it.

This reminds me of what American sociologist Peter Berger talks about. Peter Berger talks about that somewhere after industrialization and into modernization, we as people started to take what he calls "technical rationality" into the way we formulated and constructed our day-to-day relationships. We spent so much time working in institutions that tend to make decisions on people through their bureaucracy and in very technical forms.

For instance, I grew up in a community that a lot of employees from 3M lived in. (3M, the people who make your post-it notes and your tape.) One year, 3M decided that they could save a lot of money if they laid people off who were over 55 and hired people at entry level, that they would lose very little productivity but gain a lot of money. So a lot of people in the little suburb that I grew up in, they were laid off during this period. A lot of my friends' parents were. 3M is making that decision, they don't necessarily care about the people, but they make that decision technically. In a realm of technical rationality, it makes sense for them, for their ultimate goal, which is the bottom line of making money, to lay people off who are over 55.

Berger's point is that we live in those realities for so long that they start to filter into how we organize the rest of our relationships. We start to say things like, "Honey, I still really do love you, but for the bottom line of my happiness, this marriage really isn't working out." Or we look at our friendships and say, "I really do care about this person, we share this history, but I just can't do this relationship anymore because it's not letting me become this self-fulfilled person."

I think that's filtered into the church as well, that we tend to make decisions about ministry in the technical realm. We tend to use technical rationality to make decisions about how we go about doing ministry, how we think about the ministry of God. I think that there's a different logic, than this technical rationality that we often fall into when we think about ministry.

JMF: That's exactly the opposite of what real Christian life, Christian ministry is all about, isn't it?

AR: I think so. The core theological element that I'm working from in the book is this Trinitarian element that God the Father and Jesus the Son are in eternal relationship with each other. That relationship isn't built around this kind of technical rationality, but it's built in a whole desire to be with and for each other.

If you look at Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics II,* he will talk about the Spirit as the very essence, the very reality of the Father and the Son's relationship. Too often in the church, we use our relationships as the means to another end, as opposed to seeing our relationships as a way of living into this inner reality of a relationship that's going on between God the Father and God the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

That's the element that I'm trying to work out in that sense of "What if our relationships in ministry (in a broken metaphor) reflect this eternal relationship that's going on between the Father and the Son?"

JMF: You've use the term "real relational, relational youth ministry," and is that what you're…

AR: There was an article that was written probably five or six years ago, that was trying to talk about a post-relational youth ministry. It was a fair article that was trying to show some of the pitfalls of relational ministry, but I tried to reframe that and make the argument that we hadn't really talked about a truly relational "relational youth ministry," that our relationships in "relational ministry" had tended to be means to another end. They had been for influence, to influence kids in some direction, and they have yet to reflect (maybe in this broken way, but in a real way) the inner life of God that we're called into, this eternal relationship that goes on between the Father and the Son that we're invited into through the Spirit.

JMF: There are a couple of ways I want to go right now. One is to take a different gear and talk about your assessment of the TV show *Lost*, but let's save that for the moment and get back to these young people you were working with. You saw that you had to do things differently, so what started to happen then?

AR: We tried to live this out, but as you mentioned, it's hard in a congregation, and you run into all these conflicts. It was very interesting to watch this church wrestle with this issue. To the church's credit, they had raised money, they had seen this opportunity to do ministry with these young people from their neighborhood, they had hired me, and we worked hard at it. They started this ministry in full blessing of the church, that we want to reach out to these kids. We

really want to build relationships with them.

But what happened is: it started to become costly, and it became costly in ways that a lot of churches experience, but in very profound ways when you're experiencing them. Like your building being tagged, like mothers who are waiting to pick up their daughters from church are noticing kids from the neighborhood doing things behind the church building that would make anyone uncomfortable, when drugs are being sold before Wednesday night program.

Quickly the church's mantra changed from "We want to do ministry to these kids" to "These kids need to act better. They don't deserve to be here until they can show that they can act better." We worked at that for a while, but it became very difficult, and I lacked a lot of power to bring any change in the midst of that system.

My wife and I had an opportunity to travel, and when we came back, I had a school year before I was going to start my doctoral work, so I took a job at a non-profit organization very close to here doing gang prevention counseling. It was my job to go into four public schools a week (this was before the California economy had imploded and there was money available and they were giving grants to these non-profits to go in and do gang prevention). It was my job to go into these four schools and to meet with kids who either were in a gang, a family member was in a gang, or had just been manifesting gang-like behavior. They had been caught tagging their school, or they had threatened their teacher with a pencil, or they had done something that was at risk.

I would go into these schools, and often it was either the principal or the guidance counselor who would give me the folder to one of these kids. It would often come with something like, "Here's Jacob, and Jacob just came to us. He was in an orphanage for a while because he watched his father beat his mother with a wrench on their front lawn." Or, "Here's Sally, and Sally's dad just got out of jail and from as far as we know, he comes back every other week to do his laundry and to beat them up." These horrific stories of loss and pain. And that was just what the school counselor could tell me.

So I would meet with this student, and we'd sit in some little dusty back corner of a public school, some little book storage area where the school could find a place to put a table and two chairs. I realized quickly, as they would tell me these stories, that there was nothing I could do. The story that the school counselor or principal would tell me that was horrific in and of itself was just the tip of the iceberg. After a while they would tell me these stories, and they were just heart-

wrenching.

I knew that there was nothing I could do. There were certain actions I could take, make people aware of certain things, but I couldn't change the fact that this was the family they grew up in, that this was the situation that had happened to them. I realized quickly that all I could do was for one hour, once a week, when I would meet with them, was to share in their hell with them. So I did that. I did that from reading the works of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and reading some of the Trinitarian elements of Karl Barth, and even some of the early Jurgen Moltmann, and I decided that what I would do was for one hour once a week, I would share in their hell with them.

An interesting thing happened. I would haul in this bag of "Connect Four" and checkers and these board games, and I would set them on the table. The kids loved it, because they would get to leave class to play checkers with me or play some board game with me. But we started to share our stories together, and they would share their story with me, and I would share mine with them, and for one hour once a week we would share deeply in each other's life.

There was transformation that actually happened in them. There wasn't this radical transformation that they didn't have all these issues that had been nipping at their heels for their whole life, that didn't go away. But there was this real way that something powerful happened where we would share in each other's lives, that God was present in the midst of that. I was allowed to speak deeply into their lives.

But instead of saying things like, "You can't do that because God wouldn't like that, or because that would make you a bad boy or a bad girl," I could start speaking into their lives in a much more powerful way. I could say, You can't do that because that will hurt you, and if that hurts you, that will hurt me, because I'm your friend, and you can't do that because I'm your friend." Or, "When I see that attitude that you have, I wonder about that, not because I want you to be better, but because I want to be in relationship with you, and that could be problematic to multiple relationships that you have."

The light bulb that went on for me is that there is something in the midst of just sharing each other's suffering and joy that there's a concrete way that God is present in the midst of that, that I've tried to theologically develop through these two books.

JMF: You never had any other opportunity to be with those kids or any other influence in their lives other than these one-hour meetings?

AR: That's correct. Maybe I would see them once in a while in the hallways,

but for the most part it was that one hour once a week. I was constrained by the school, and I was constrained by the job that I worked in, but there was something that powerfully happened when we were able to share our suffering with each other.

I tried to make that mutual. I would try…keeping a boundary…that I think is important, that hopefully we can talk about as we go on, but I also shared my own story with them. There was something powerful for them to hear my story and to participate in my story.

JMF: Did you have any way of knowing what kind of impact your time together was having on them?

AR: That's a great question, and there's two kind of rationalities that I think can operate in that. In the rationality of influence, there was no way I could know. In many ways I was a failure, because these kids went back to their same situation, and I'm sure some of them are in jail now. The kids we worked with in the congregation, we don't know what happened to many of them. A lot of them were in eighth grade and they went into ninth grade and got jumped into gangs. From the rationality of influence, it was a failure. We don't have any trophies to show for it.

But in the rationality of place-sharing, of trying to do relational ministry as being with and being for, as God is with and for us, I don't know if it was successful, but I believe it was *faithful*, in that we were faithful to their humanity. In being a gang prevention counselor, I felt like I was faithful to their humanity.

Was there radical change in their lives? I don't know. I don't know if I can see that, but I do trust that something powerful happened in that one hour a week, that they knew that they were not alone. If in the dark universe that they existed in, at least there was someone for one hour once a week who was with them. That reflects the fullness of the gospel and the fullness of a God who becomes incarnate to share our place in its full brokenness and its full darkness, to share with us so deeply that we're never alone again. Though we still often live in darkness, we're never alone.

So I don't know if it was successful, but I know that it was faithful. In youth ministry particularly, we fall into this trap of looking at success too often. It's a vocational hazard, because you have young people who are, 12, 13,14,15, and they're making these jumps in our societal structures to go to college or to decide for careers or to fall in love and get married, so there does seem to be this trajectory of progress that's going on.

But too often youth ministry has fallen into the trap that believes that our job is to make kids successful or help kids be successful, and then we judge our ministries by how many trophies we have. I don't know if that's a true reflection of God's own ministry in the world as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected in the person of Jesus Christ. We would do better to think of ourselves and think of our relationships as "How can we be faithful both to the young person before us as well as to this God who has revealed God's self in Jesus Christ?" How can we be faithful to that, as opposed to how can we be successful?

JMF: All of that is compelling, because there's got to be a way to measure success in this in order for us to know whether this project is worthwhile or accomplishing anything. It's like the need to ask that question, and find an assessment tool of some kind, is so overpowering that we lose the gospel itself, because when it comes to our Christian lives, don't we do the same thing? We're looking for God to fix things. We think answered prayer means getting me out of whatever situation is a problem for me or what I perceive as a problem.

But isn't that how Christ meets us, just the sense of knowing we're not alone? Meeting us in our loneliness, in our void, in our darkness, and bringing light, because we're operating with faith (which is evidence of things not seen, according to Hebrews), we're looking for a restoration that isn't going to take place in this lifetime. It takes place only in the sense of place-sharing, Christ sharing our place, not in the sense of our circumstances necessarily changing, which can be, in itself, a source of frustration, because we're expecting or looking for something different.

Don't we look for that, because in our preaching and teaching we often build a sense of expecting that? It carries over into youth ministry in the sense you're describing so well of "We want to see kids be more moral. We want them not to make the same mistakes we made, or not to pursue things that are going to cause them trouble." The whole sense across our Christian lives of just being there, like your wife told you, as opposed to trying to make everybody be good and not make mistakes…it seems like you're talking about something that's a big iceberg that needs exploring.

AR: One of the things that your questioning points to that's helpful for me is maybe to boil it down. The thing that we haven't dwelled in enough is this question "Where is God? Where do we encounter God?" Which is one of the central elements of a Trinitarian theology, is that God encounters us, and God reveals God's self. As God reveals God's self in Jesus Christ, we're taken into this Trinitarian reality.

So I'll tell you this story, which I think is the trap that we often fall into in ministry. My son is four, moving toward five, and he's a great little existential philosopher and theologian, probably because I've terribly warped him. One night I was putting him to bed, it's my job to put him to bed, and it's right before I go and watch TV when I put him to bed, so I'm always trying to hustle him off to bed so I can go and relax in front of the TV.

One night I was putting him to bed and he said he was scared, and he was scared that there was a nightmare in his closet. I had told him, "You don't need to be afraid of this. There's no nightmare in your closet. Jesus is with you. You don't need to be scared, because Jesus is with you." And he said, "No, no no no no no there's a nightmare in my closet. I'm scared of this."

I said, "Owen, you don't have to be scared, there's no nightmare in your closet." I opened the door and turned on the light, and he was satisfied that there was no nightmare in his closet, but as soon as I turned out the lights and shut the door, he says, "It's back! The nightmare's back in my closet."

I said, "You can pray to Jesus and it will be okay. Jesus will be here with you and you don't have to be afraid." So we prayed for a little bit, and he said, "But where is Jesus?" I said, "Jesus is here. If you pray, Jesus will be here." "But I don't see Jesus. Where is Jesus?" I said, "He's here with you." "But I'm scared. There's a nightmare in my closet, and where is Jesus?"

Now I'm starting to say, "If you pray, Jesus will be here and you don't have to be afraid and Jesus will keep you from bad things happening." I'm starting to doubt myself as I'm saying this. But then, in earnest desire to comprehend something, he says, "But I don't see Jesus and I'm scared. Where is Jesus?" Then in the profundity of a four-year-old he says, "Jesus is not here. Jesus is not here." I said some prayer and left, and I kind of satisfied him so he wasn't crying anymore, but that is really the question: "Where is Jesus?"

Kids often live with nightmares in their closet. We all do. Often we want to say "Jesus is here, and if you pray to Jesus then the nightmare will go away." One of the theological elements that I'm trying to develop more and more is: How do we answer this question, where is Jesus? Or, where is God? There's something in this story of this God who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ that reflects to us the full life of God as Trinitarian. That God becomes present next to darkness, next to brokenness, next to pain.

Too often in youth ministry, we see shiny happy kids as the sign that our ministries are going well. They become the sign of authentic adolescent faith, kids

for whom things are going pretty well. I don't want to belittle those kids, but often it perpetuates this idea that to be a Christian means that you have it together. It leads us away from this question of where is God?

Where is this God of the cross found? Where is this God who cries out to his Father on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and hears nothing. Where is this God? If our models of great adolescent faith are just the shiny happy kids, then what about all those kids who know that question deep in their being? But the church never helps them articulate it.

Christian Smith has done this study, the National Study on Youth and Religion, that *Soul-Searching* came out of. This book has been quite famous about teenage religiosity and faith. One of the overwhelming findings of that book was simply that kids don't know anything about their faith. They know very little about any of the theological elements of their faith. They can barely articulate what it means to find Jesus.

I wonder if the reason is because it doesn't matter to those kids? Those kids often are the shiny happy kids that things are going well for, and we point to them as the models of good adolescent faith, but they don't need to, as Anselm would say, really dig into "faith-seeking understanding" because things are unfolding okay for them.

JMF: For now.

AR: Exactly. Which is the real disservice we do to them, because they go to college, they go into young adulthood, and then things don't go right for them.

JMF: [And they become] totally disillusioned.

AR: They don't have a theological lens to see their reality where God is present in it. So one of the theological elements I'm trying to work out for youth ministry and ministry for the church in general is: how do we answer this question, where is God? I think there's a deeply Trinitarian element about that. But it's also this assertion that God encounters us in darkness, in brokenness, in yearning, because God is reflected to us in Jesus Christ on the cross.

JMF: We're out of time, so let's keep that thought, and when you come back, we'll talk about that some more.

AR: Sounds great.

JMF: Thanks for being here.

AR: Thanks for having me.

Real Relationships in Youth Ministry (YI054)

J. Michael Feazell: Last time we were together, we were talking about place-sharing versus influence in terms of how we relate to young people. What is the difference?

Andrew Root: That's the point of both books, is to try to draw that contrast. Last time I tried to argue that we've tended to see youth ministry as for *influence*, to try to influence kids toward some end. The reimagining of it is to think of it as place-sharing, which is a concept that I stole from Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Bonhoeffer wanted to make this argument that the way we really experience God is as our place-sharer, and he said in his *Ethics*, "Just as a good politician is for her people, a good teacher is for his students, and a good father is for his children, so Jesus Christ is for us. Jesus Christ shares our place."

I think we've tended to see youth ministry as trying to influence kids toward some end, as opposed to sharing their place. When we think of influence, we get the whole understanding of the Incarnation all mixed up. We tend to think the incarnation happened to influence us toward some end, as opposed to sharing our place.

The story I often tell is… every Christmas Eve we go to my grandmother's house, and as soon as dinner is done, and the coffee is brewing, and the Christmas cookies come out, we all move from the table to the couches. Often, my grandma will leave the party and she'll come back with the folded piece of newspaper. It's the story that I'm sure many have heard. It's the Paul Harvey story about the birds.

The story goes that there's this man who refuses to go to church on Christmas Eve. He's basically done with his faith, he doesn't believe it anymore, and it's a cold, cold, bitter cold night. He's not doing it. He is going to stay home. He's going to actually enjoy his Christmas Eve. So he sees his family all off to church and he lays down on the couch to have this wonderful Christmas Eve. He kind of laughs to himself thinking how much smarter he is as he looks out his window and it's so cold.

About halfway though his night, he looks outside some window and he sees there are some birds. He gets very concerned that if he doesn't do something for these birds, they're going to die. I mean, it is a cold, bitter cold night, and they won't make it through the night if he doesn't do something. So he gets his hat, and his gloves, and his boots on, and he goes outside and he opens his barn door and tries to shoo these birds into the barn.

But he's too big, and he's too scary, and the birds don't understand him, so

they jump away. He tries again to shoo them in, but they just won't go. So he gets some birdseed and tries to make a trail, but it just isn't happening. He's frustrated because he knows if he doesn't get these birds into the barn, that they're not going to make it through the night, that they're going to die. He tries one more time to shoo them in, but it just isn't working.

In pure frustration he says, "If only, if only I could become a bird, then they wouldn't be scared of me and I could lead them into the barn, and they would be safe." Just as he says that, the church bells ring, he falls on his knees, and for the first time he understands the meaning of Christmas.

Every year my grandma will fold that newspaper up, and wipe a tear from her eye, and lean back in satisfaction. I always think it, but I never say it. I always think, "Grandma, that's a great story. I can see why you love that so much, but it's not the incarnation."

I think the church has developed an understanding that the Incarnation isn't for simply getting us in the barn, but actually sharing our place. We need a God who doesn't just come close to us, to lead us into some place so we're okay, but we need a God who actually shares our hell with us, who bears the cold night with us.

So what I'm after is trying to develop a theology for youth ministry that can bear the dark night with kids. One that can enter into their lives at its most frigid points and be with and for them in the confession that Jesus Christ is with and for us, born from that eternal relationship of the Father being for the Son as the Son is for the Father. That's what I'm after when we talk about place-sharing, of trying to do ministry that's faithful to this theological assertion that God is with and for us in Jesus Christ sharing our place all the way to hell for the sake of life.

JMF: It's significant, it seems, as you were telling that story, when Jesus says, "I am the way" and "I am the life," that's different from saying "follow me and I'll take you to a new place that's better than this."

AR: That's a key element that I'm hoping to push forward in these books, is that it's something about persons, and Jesus calls us to his person to find life inside of his person, which is a reflection in our relationship with Jesus. As he calls us he says, "Come to me," or "I am the life," or "I am the vine and you are the branches." It is a manifestation of the relationship he has with the Father, and he calls us then to live near his person.

So my argument is that when we live in relationships that are human-person-to-human-person, where we actually share in each other's lives, that that is a reflection and a way of living into the inner reality of God's own life and God's

own love from the Father to the Son. I think there is something about human-person-to-human-person.

Usually, we tend to think about our ministries as pastor or youth worker to kids or to other people, and we tend to find ourselves in that specialized role, "I'm the youth pastor." I think that adolescents don't need youth pastors in their lives. They don't need youth workers. They need human beings. They need people who will have a relationship with them. They don't need a specialized someone who knows all this information — that can actually keep them at a distance from their life.

What young people need is human beings to be in relationship with. Too often we get stuck in these specialized forms of action that keep us from being human with them. What we're really after is being human alongside and with young people as Jesus Christ is human with and for us.

JMF: How does that look? What is the difference between having a relationship with someone and sharing-place with them and being there with them in sharing the humanity? What does that look like?

AR: It plays out in a couple different ways. One of the interesting elements of doing a relational ministry of influence, if we get stuck in that rut, is that influence really can't *suffer* with young people. It's either got another agenda that it needs to go to, so it so quickly wipes away adolescent suffering, or tells adolescents, "Don't worry about that," or, "If you pray about that, that will all go away," or else, even more diabolical, it uses suffering as another carrot that says, "Look, I can suffer with you, so you should listen to me and let me lead you to where you need to go." But it can't really suffer with and for young people.

I was at a conference a few years back. It was a unique conference because it brought together some academics, it brought together some paid professional youth workers, some publishers, as well as a number of volunteers, were in this room. It was a conference where they were laying out the findings to a study that they had done. I don't know if it was number four…one of the points was that relationships really mattered, that relationships were really important.

After the presenter said this, a man, probably in his early 30s, raised his hand and he invited him to talk. He was a volunteer at his church and he said, "I get it. I get that relationships are really important, but relationships can be really hurtful, too."

He went on to explain: "When I was in high school, my parents were going through a really messy divorce and it was really difficult for me. I don't know if it

was in the midst of the chaos or what have you, but I found myself attracted to some Buddhist literature. It was something about the meditation that calmed all the chaos that was going on in my life. I started to read it, and I was just interested in it, but I started to read it."

"My youth worker came up to me and said, 'You know what? You better not read that stuff. That's a false religion, that stuff is corrupt. It's my job as your youth worker to make sure you make the right choices and stay faithful to Jesus Christ, so you better not do that anymore.'"

So he said, "I heard him, and we were close, but there was something about it that I kept reading. My life was so chaotic, I just kept reading. He warned me one more time, 'You better not do that.' Sure enough, after two or three months, he stopped calling me. I didn't talk to him for most of the rest of my high school years."

His point was, he said, "I see that relationships can be really powerful, but relationships can be really hurtful as well." In that story what happens is you have a youth worker who confuses their ministry. It isn't about sharing in a young person's life, but influencing them toward some end. When a young person can't conform to the agenda that the youth worker wants them to go, they feel justified in cutting the relationship loose, where I think imagining our relational ministry as place-sharing calls to be faithful to the young person in the situation.

So the depressed girl that we have in our youth group, if we're trying to influence her, the objective of our ministry is to get her over her depression. But if the objective is to share her place, then we confess that only God can heal her. Only God can come near to her and heal her broken humanity, and we're called to join her in her suffering. Often part of the problem with seeing our ministries as influence is, it can't suffer, and therefore it lacks some reflection of who God is for us in Jesus Christ, which is to take on our suffering, to take on death in its fullest, and then break that by being overtaken by death in the resurrection.

JMF: Isn't it hard to de-link, or unhook, from the sense of need to influence and fix?

AR: It is really hard. It's incredibly difficult. That's the whole specialization that we fall into. It's common in our culture. If you drop your computer, usually you'll have to go to a specialist to fix it. Or if something's not working on your computer, there's a different specialist that runs the software and another one that works with the hardware. We're used to specialization, and I think youth ministry has fallen into that.

We hear this all the time when we invite other adults in the congregation to volunteer, to participate in the youth group or to participate in confirmation or something, and I hear them say, "I did that ten years ago," or, "I don't know what I'm doing," and sometimes you'll even hear them say, "That's what we paid you to do." What that means is "You're the one who's specialized. You received the specialized training to do this."

Often the real problem of youth ministry is that it tends to let the church off the hook. We hire someone who does ministry with our children, therefore *we* don't have to. A better way of looking at the youth worker or even the paid youth pastor is not as the one who does the ministry, but someone who *equips* and is trained to equip the rest of the congregation to do ministry with their own children.

That's where we get hooked, is that we think, "It's my job as a specialist to influence kids, therefore when I have my end-of-the-year evaluation, what will I point to as having done a good job?" It is a full paradigm shift in how we think about ministry. My point is to try to embed that in our theological commitments more than simply pragmatism of, "what will work and how do we get it to work and try to really drive toward." What does it mean to be faithful to who God is?

JMF: Don't we do the same thing with our children? Isn't our goal usually to influence them? We feel like we have a duty to influence them. How does that affect relationship when you are continually looking for getting the kids fixed and getting them to do the right thing in a direct way that we'll always approach it as parents? I suppose it's somewhat rhetorical, but don't we accomplish more when we try to share their place as opposed to just the right-handed force of forced compliance?

AR: I think so. We all can probably point to people in our lives who have been meaningful to us and that we really changed in relationship with them, and it's often been because they shared our place, more than they demanded that we conform to something. All relationships do influence. So it isn't to say that influence isn't found anywhere, even in authentic real relationships, but the question is, what's the driving force?

My wife and I didn't decide to have our son because I thought, "You know what? I hate having to go find the remote. It would be great to have a little kid that I could get to go find the remote for me." Or, "I'm sick of unloading the dishwasher, so what I need is a child to unload the dishwasher for me." Or even maybe more close to home for some of us, "What I need is to have a son that can do all the things that I didn't do. I need to make him into what I wasn't. I need to

get him to an Ivy League school, I need to…" That becomes diabolical parenting.

This reflects to our Trinitarian commitments that God chooses to create out of God's own inner love. It's out of desire to be with and for father-to-son that God creates something. Barth beautifully says that the Trinity exists in a relationship before creation even exists. God creates out of the place-sharing, in many ways, of the Trinity itself. That the Trinity desires to be with and for itself and out of the abundance of that love, it creates.

In the same way, in the best of marriages, we have children out of the reality of our love for one another. Once our children exist, we put certain demands on them. We say things like "We need you to do this." But even those rules function best within the relationship, when we say, "You can't act that way because you are my boy. You belong to me. You're mine and I love you," as opposed to, "If you want to belong, if you want to have a place here, then you better get on board or else you need to find somewhere else to be."

We all have experiences where we've heard similar things, but there is something about place-sharing that we often fall into the trap of this kind of individualized competitive culture where we think that our job is to influence our young people instead of being with and for them.

JMF: Let me ask you this from what you've experienced in youth ministry: Studies have shown that parents have far less influence on their kids than they think they do, that it's peers who actually have the influence on one another. Is that, in part, or largely perhaps, because peers are, by nature, place-sharing with one another?

AR: That's a great question. I'm going to take a step back and try to answer it sociologically a little bit. There's been some great work done by a British sociologist named Anthony Giddens. One of Anthony Giddens's essential arguments for what's happened in late modernity in our time is he argues that all relationships have become what he calls *pure.* He calls it the pure relationship. I've kind of redefined that a little bit and called it *the self-chosen relationship.*

His argument is that sometime in the mid-century and moving on into our own time into late modernity, that all of our relationships are really self-chosen, that for most of human history you were *given* these people, whether it was in a village or in a religious group. You lived with these people, like it or hate it, because you were bound to these people, and if you wanted to survive, you needed these people.

Because of the operations of modernization moving into globalization, we're

free. You know, at 15, 16, 17… You see this in Los Angeles all the time, a 15-year-old from the Midwest decides, "I hate my family. I'm moving to LA, and I'm going to be an actor." The idea that you can choose to do that, is a new cultural phenomenon. Couple that with the high school, the creation of the high school, where young people are spending most of their meaningful hours in a day with their peers, as opposed to working in a business or working the land with their uncles and their parents. Now they're in a peer-government institution.

The argument that I try to make in the first half of *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* is that the task of the adolescent becomes formulating relationships in this self-chosen manner, and they're free to choose those however they want to choose them, there's no tradition or family expectations anymore, for the most part. You're completely up to *you* to formulate your needed intimate relationships.

Young people's whole lives are organized around trying to construct meaningful relationships with themselves. Their friends, some of their closest friends maybe do become place-sharers. There's also this incredibly rich tapestry of power going on in a high school campus where they're defining each other as cool or un-cool and all these things are happening.

It makes great sense that we would talk about relational ministry and youth ministry because young people, their whole lives, are trying to seek out relationships in these self-chosen arenas where all the relationships they have to choose for themselves. That is a driving force for them — they're always trying to figure out "who are these people? Should I love these people? Should I hate these people?"

Parents do influence young people, their own children, in a great manner. But what young people will self-report, whether it's true…and I think there's always debate between sociologists of how much parents actually do influence their young people or how much they do impact them. But if you ask young people to self-report what's the most important thing in their life, they will say their friends. That's because they're trying to work out who they are and where they belong in the midst of this realm of self-chosen relationships.

JMF: Is that good or bad? {laughing}

AR: It is. {laughing} It just is. There's no way to change that. If we see it as the way it is, what it does mean is, we can't just simply wipe relational ministry off the map. Hence the titles of my books, *Relationships Unfiltered* or *Revisiting Relational Ministry.* I think there's good reason for us to say we can't do away with relational ministry. Because of the way the culture is constructed, young

people are all about relationships.

But it does mean that we have to be intentional, and I would add intentional theologically, in asking what is a relationship and what is a relationship for? That is the task of those of us who are thinking about youth ministry. What do we mean when we say relationship? That's one of the things that we've talked about earlier. My assertion would be that it just is, and that we need to enter into that reality.

JMF: Getting back to the difference between place-sharing and influencing, and we were talking about what it looks like to place-share with a young person or even with others who are adults, how does that look from the perspective of…let's say you're not a youth worker, but you're a member of the church and you want to have a decent relationship with young people in church, what do you do?

AR: We tend to over-think it. We're talking about the core of our humanity in many eyes, and it's almost too bad that we have to think, "How can we have authentic real relationships with our young people?"

JMF: From the time I was a teenager, the big word then was generation gap. It was clear that there was a barrier between the adult world and the teen world, and no one knew quite how to bridge that.

AR: We do over-think it. You ask the question, if you're just a member of a congregation and you want to be in relationship with young people, what does that look like, what does that mean? This may sound over simplistic, but it's being yourself with them. That means inviting them into our lives.

Usually what we think the objective of our relational ministry is, we usually think our goal is to get the young person to open up to us. So often we carpet-bomb them with questions. "So, tell me, how's school? How's home? How's reading your Bible going? Who are you dating?" We keep asking these questions. If you've spent any time with a 15-year-old boy, you know you get one answer, maybe two, which is a yes or no and a grunt. That's about the best you can get.

I think it's the other way around. I think the objective for us is not to get them to open up to us and therefore we can say, "I'm good at getting 16-year-olds to open up to me; therefore I'm good at youth ministry." The objective is the other way. I think the goal is to get for *us* to open our lives up to them, to invite them to come near to us and watch as we live our lives. Watch as we struggle with having to bury one of our parents or raising our own children. I hope we can talk a little bit about…

There are boundaries within that, and I don't mean being radically open so you have no freedom in the midst of that, but it's saying, "Come close to me, live

near to me, hear my story and let me hear yours." Usually we think it's the other way around. Your job as the volunteer or as a paid youth worker is to get the kids to open up and to share something. I think there's real power when we'll open our lives up to young people.

It's no wonder we see so many young people leaving the church after high school graduation and not coming back ever, or coming back in their late 30s, because they've never really experienced an adult living out their faith. They've never experienced a faith community living out its faith. They've experienced a youth ministry and they've experienced volunteers who are trying to be volunteers, trying to be youth ministry people and not human beings in their frailty and their suffering and their joy seeking God within great doubt and great hope.

JMF: With my own children that's exactly the complaint. As teenagers they would say, "Why do those people have to pry about everything? Why do they have to come up and be so pushy and won't leave you alone?" It makes them not want to come back, and they don't want to have to keep putting up with that. So you do your best to try to make excuses for people who behave that way and don't know any other way to approach a kid. But it's a problem, because it does turn them off to church, not just my kids, but their friends, too, experienced the same kind of thing at church.

We have a minute or two left, let's talk about the boundaries for a second.

AR: The element we often miss when we formulate relationships, especially in the context of ministry, is that relationships (to be a relationship) have to be, as Bonhoeffer has said, both open and closed. We usually think that a good youth worker or a good relational minister is someone who is radically open. But it's just as important that we learn how to be closed and be able to say things like, "I've just had enough," or, "I'm on vacation," or, "How about you call me when the sun's up. I know you just broke up with your boyfriend and you were dating for a whole two days and this is really hard for you, but can you call me when the sun's up?"

Maybe a story would help if we have time for it. When I was new in ministry, I was invited over to this ministry partner's house. This person that I was going to be in ministry with invited me over for dinner, and I went over and was sitting in the kitchen waiting for the meal to be ready and watching his wife hurry the meal ready and get their kids ready for dinner, and all of a sudden the doorbell rang.

My ministry partner went to the door and then he shut the door behind him and he was gone. I stood there for a few minutes and I was too young and too

stupid to ask his wife if she needed any help, so I just stood there with my Coke in my hand and just watched her. Finally dinner was ready and we sat down, and we ate pasta and had a salad, and he still hadn't returned. He went to the door and just disappeared. Ice cream was being put on the table for dessert when he finally came back in.

I thought something must be terribly wrong. So about halfway through the meal I asked his wife, "Where's your husband? What's happened?" She said, "I'm sure the guys stopped by." I thought, the guys? Maybe he's got a gambling problem, the mob stopped by.

She says, "Oh, the guys from his Bible study." She mentioned that this happens quite often. When he came back in the door, having missed the whole meal, I asked him (assuming that one of the kids must have been suicidal for him to be gone with a guest over for the whole meal), "Is everything okay?"

He said, "Yeah, everything's fine," and he gave me this look, like he was trying to teach me something, and he said, "That's relational ministry for you. It just isn't nine to five." As he said that, I looked at his wife and his kids who were ravaged and tired, and I thought, this is relational ministry? That you leave your guest, you leave your family? He had mentioned that this happens a few times a week that these kids stop by.

The more I thought about it, I realized that I don't think that's relational ministry. What was happening is when he went to the door and spent most of his evenings outside with these kids, he wasn't a human being to those kids, he was a jungle gym. They would come over, and he would hang out with them, and they'd have something to do.

But if he would have just even once in a while went to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, glad you stopped by, but I'm having dinner with my family right now." Or, "It's story time and I'm reading my kids a story," he all of a sudden becomes more than a youth worker. Now he's a human being who calls them into their own authentic humanity to be in relationship with. He becomes somebody really interesting to be in a relationship with.

But when he spends every night outside with them neglecting his own family where he's radically open to them without being closed, well then, he's just a commodity that they can consume. I don't think young people need youth worker commodities. I don't even think they need youth ministries. I think they need people who will be in relationship with them. If he would have gone to the door and said, "Guys, great to see you, but I'll catch up with you tomorrow at school,

I've got some other things going on," he becomes a person to be in relationship with. I think that's what young people need.

JMF: Thanks for your time.

AR: Thank you.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. Andrew Root, Assistant Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Thanks for being with us, I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included.*

Entering into the Full Humanity of Adolescence (YI055)

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for being with us. You wrote an article called "A Call to See and Be Near," and in it you said, "Too often, relational youth ministry avoids suffering and therefore lacks the boldness and bravery to enter into the full humanity of adolescents." What does it look like "to enter into the full humanity of adolescents"?

Andrew Root: That article is an excerpt from this book, *Relationships Unfiltered* (that's the shameless plug). I think it has two broad forms that exist. I'm often asked, "What will this look like, how do I do this?" I'm always very uncomfortable to say too much because I want to remind everyone that *context* always matters. Your contextual location will set the tones for how you do things. I'm no expert to tell anyone in their own context, which they know much better than I do, how to do something. I see my job as only presenting some ideas that might help people think about what they're doing.

I think there are two broad points that give some of this some shape. One is…I think our objective is to correspond to reality with young people. Another way to say that is to take Luther's statement in the *Heidelberg Disputation,* where he says one of the points of the Christian, one of the objectives of the Christian, is "to call a thing what it is." Relational ministry has this element to it, that part of the heart of it is "to call a thing what it is" — to see a young person's reality and be able to speak and call it what it is — to say "this is incredibly difficult," or "you're really good at this."

Maybe the best analogy or story that goes along with this comes from the British comedy *About a Boy.* It's this movie about two individuals, Will, who is this young adult, maybe in his late 30s, who is played by Hugh Grant, and there's this junior-high-aged boy named Marcus. Marcus is this odd eccentric kid who's been raised by his British hippie mother. Will, played by Hugh Grant, is this incredibly self-centered dude. His whole life is really about pleasing himself. He

meets Marcus when he is out on a date with one of Marcus's mother's friends because Marcus's mother is feeling blue.

When they return to Marcus's flat, they realize that his mother has attempted to commit suicide. She's lying on the floor and had vomited. Luckily, she doesn't die, they get her to the hospital. But for some reason, Marcus decides that he's going to start showing up at Will's apartment. So he shows up the first day, and Will is not happy to see Marcus, but Marcus wants to come in. Slowly, day after day, Marcus starts showing up at Will's apartment. They spend about a half an hour, 45 minutes together watching a British game show, and then Marcus leaves. But he keeps showing up.

The scene starts where Will is very reluctant to have Marcus come into his house, until days later, in this kind of montage way they're telling the story, he's opening the door and expecting Marcus to show up. As the scene unfolds, you hear inside of Marcus's head. He says, "After a while, Will felt like he had to ask me serious questions. I know all he wanted to do was watch Zena Princess Warrior, but he decided he had to ask me a serious question."

So Will turns to Marcus and says, "So how are things going at home then?" Marcus kind of stoically says, "Oh, fine. Thanks for asking." Then he says, "Well, is that still bothering you then?" (Referring to his mother). Then we hear inside Marcus's head, and Marcus says, "It's still bothering me. That's why I come here every day after school instead of going home." Then we hear outside of his head, audibly, he says, "A bit when I think about it."

Will turns to him, this self-centered guy who has invited this kid into his life, turns to him and in this great compassion and empathy he looks at him and then shakes his head and swears. He says the F word and just shakes his head. Then you hear again as Marcus is leaving the flat, you hear him say inside his head, he says, "I don't know why Will swore like that, but it made me feel good. It made me feel like I wasn't so pathetic for getting so scared."

I think part of faithful relational ministry, that's place-sharing, is being able to be close enough to kids to say, that's a terrible thing. And being able to call a thing what it is. I think it's a way that we really join in relationship, is to be able to call a thing what it is.

But there's a second element to it as well: we not only have to call a thing what it is and be able to say, bleeping hell this is hard, but also be able to say nevertheless, even in the dark shadow of this reality, the tomb is empty.

A couple of springs back, my wife's grandfather had passed away. It was

right on a Sunday morning when my wife was getting ready to go to church. We had known that he was fading and that he would die soon, but we got a call on Sunday morning that he had passed away. My wife knew about that, so she was fairly stoic about it, so she grabbed our son and got him in the car, and we headed off to church.

But about halfway to church it hit her that he was gone and that she wouldn't see her grandfather again. She started to tear up and cry in the front seat. Our son was behind her in his car seat. After a while she noticed in the rearview mirror that he was looking at her. She said, "Owen, I'm sorry that I'm crying. I'm sad." He said, "Why?" He was about 2, maybe 3 years old, probably 3 years old. "Why?" would just spill from his lips upon any question he would ask. But this "why" seemed to have significance to it.

She said, "I'm sad because my grandpa died, and I'm not going to be able to see him again." We kept on driving, and as I got off the freeway, he was very quiet and pensive, kind of looking out the window. As we got to the first light, he said, "But mommy, I have a secret." She said, "What's the secret?" "The secret is that someday Jesus is coming back and you and your grandpa will be together again. Jesus is coming back and death will be no more."

There's something between these two things, of being able to say bleeping hell, and I have a secret — it's where we live out the faithfulness of relational ministry. We're in connection with young people. We call a thing what it is. This must be incredibly hard to have to deal with not having any friends, or feeling like these rumors are destroying your life, or to wonder if your parent's marriage is going to make it. Or to have your dreams about what you want for yourself, to find them implode when your test scores come back, or when you get cut from a team. To be able to say this is incredibly difficult.

But also to whisper, and whisper it as a secret…I don't mean it's a secret where we want to keep it from people, but it's a secret in the sense that it's so beautiful and so profound and so rich — this idea that God is overcoming death with life — it's so wonderful that it shakes the very foundations of the universe. We have to whisper it because it connects with the core of our humanity so much.

It's living between these two things. Being able to call a thing what it is, and I have a secret — nevertheless the tomb is empty. Living out of those two inclinations, those two stances, is a way that we faithfully live with and for young people, and really live with and for each other.

JMF: What is it about us as adults that makes us feel such an urge to attempt

to control what an adolescent thinks by what we say and how we say it? It's as though we want to give an impression of invulnerability on our part… We think we can control what a child or a kid will think, or be, by telling them the thing that we want them to do, or the thing we want them to think, from some kind of imperial bench looking down on them to tell them how it really is.

AR: Right. I think it's out of fear. We fear that if we're not in control, then we don't make a good case for the gospel, which is counter to the biblical picture we received from Jesus, particularly about what the gospel is… It always comes in weak, broken forms. It's like a mustard seed, or it's like a woman who sweeps her whole house looking for a coin, or it's like a father who sees his son on the horizon and rushes out and throws off his cloak to embrace his lost son. It's about all these broken forms.

We tend to think that if…and this is just the lens we've been given in our cultural context, that "might makes right" or powerfulness is what sells; maybe it's part of the consumer culture that we exist in, the material culture we exist in. But there's something counter to that in the gospel, which is that God comes to us in frail and weak ways. In a baby born in a manger to a 15-year-old girl who's existing under the thumb of Roman rule, and then this God chooses, in the person of Jesus Christ, to show us the full picture of who this God is by going to a cross outside the city to be neglected and destroyed by death.

We tend to want to control young people because we fear that if we show weakness, then what will become of them? They'll surely deny the faith or not have a place for the church in their lives unless we give it a nice spin and we make it look shiny and good as opposed to talking about the fact that Christianity is this commitment to a God who comes to us in the frail humanity of Jesus Christ, that goes through death for the sake of life. There's something unique about that narrative in Christianity that should change the way we interact with the world and engage the world.

The reason we have such a hard time doing it is that we fear that weakness will lead them away from where we desire for them to go. But at the very core of who we are, what we want more than anything is to be with them — that's what we want from our children. That's what we're all yearning for — is to be with and have someone be for us. I think we get stuck in thinking that we all have to make something of ourselves. How can young people make something of themselves if we show ourselves as vulnerable?

JMF: It seems like in our desire to push them, that we actually harm the

relationship. Our efforts to influence drive them away from us instead of drawing them in. We lose the influence we want through the effort to exercise the influence.

AR: Yeah, I tell my students all the time, "You cannot get a relationship through judgment." There are very few people who will ever have a friendship when someone comes up and says, "I just wanted to tell you, you are a very ugly person" or, "You dress like you're from three decades earlier" or, "Your whole disposition repulses me." Usually a relationship does not start very well that way.

But once you *have* a relationship, it does demand judgment, or it does demand certain assertions. My wife wouldn't love me unless she said things to me like, "Because I love you, I have to tell you, do you know you talk more than you listen?" Or, "When you say things like that, it is belittling to me." The fabric of our relationship is contingent on her saying those things to me. It deepens our relationship.

But too often adults (maybe it's this generation gap that you've mentioned in an earlier session) we come into this relationship saying, these kids need to be made right. Instead of seeing them for who they are in their humanity and then joining in relationship… And there are things that *need* to be said, like "You can't do these things" or "These thing will hurt you."

We tend to lead off with the judgment. We may not intend to, but it's often interpreted that way. I don't want to say that we never say anything to kids like, "You know what? You need to finish high school." Or, "You need to think about showering before you go to a job interview." Those are all valuable things that we would want our friends to say to us, but the key is, are they our friend, or is there a relationship there of love and mutuality and connection that invites us to share things and to share life this way?

The way relationships function, at least in my own experience, is that there has to be kind of an equal pace at going at depths. This happened to me in college all the time, it's why my dating record in college was so poor, because I would go out on a date with a young woman and then I would want to take the relationship deeper than she would want to, and all of a sudden the relationship was over, because I had forced a level of intimacy or connection that she wasn't ready for, and no relationship can live under those strictures. But when relationships function the best is where people go at a level, and it's mutual.

Often in youth ministry we meet kids and then we try to get them "deep" right away, instead of sharing their lives and trusting that in being together and being with each other and sharing the importance of the gospel in my own life, that

there's a level of shared life that will bring us to a deeper level. But too often we think it's our job to get them here, and then drive the relationship deeper. There's many kids who say, "These people are weird" Or, "This is just uncomfortable." Or, "They don't see *me,* they see where I need to go." That's an important element.

JMF: Isn't that partly a function of having a number of kids assigned to you, as it were? The kids become a job, a project, and you have to get through so many, and you've got a place where you want them to be, as it were. You want them to be moral and you want them to make a commitment. It isn't like you've got the patience or the time to invest in letting each one develop into the relationship that will, in effect, bring them where they need to be.

AR: Yeah. This gets back to the specialization thing we talked about earlier — I don't think that one paid youth worker and her two or three volunteers can be place-sharers with 35 kids in their youth group. It's impossible. If we are about sharing in the yearning and brokenness, the joy and the suffering of young people…then if it's going to be both open and closed, then you can't do this with 20 kids, if it's just you or maybe one other person.

This is a congregational approach. You're right that one of the reasons we tend to default toward influencing them toward some end is because we think, "I have 15 kids here and they all seem to need more time." It's even worse, because once one class graduates, there's another class going in, and it can feel like this incredible burden. That's why I don't think there's such a thing as an incarnational or a fully relational youth worker, but there are *communities* that are incarnational. There may be a few people who do some of that action, but it takes a congregation.

We can only be place-sharers with three or four kids at the most. The truth is that one paid youth worker cannot be a place-sharer with…unless your youth group is three or four kids. But every congregation has the resources in its own life to have adults be place-sharers with the young people that they have, and even more young people they have in their community. It becomes about a congregation and not a youth ministry, or even worse, a youth worker.

That does mean that the paid youth worker has to change the way she thinks about herself. It's no longer your job to be the pastor to these kids, but you are pastor to this whole congregation that advocates for these kids. That means you have to do certain work to accrue relational capital with the young people in the youth group, but also in the adults. Usually when we interview youth workers, we want to know, do the kids like him or her, do they like this person? That's important. But it's just as important that other adults in the congregation are

willing to be led by this person or to enter into a partnership of ministry with this person.

If this person is good with the younger populations of people but the other people in the congregation, the older people, don't trust this person, then their ministry becomes only about them, and we'll always default then into patterns of influence instead of patterns of place-sharing, and we'll tend to live out of more of our knee-jerk need, than out of this theological commitment to a God who comes to us in Jesus Christ and this Trinitarian element that we've been trying to point to.

JMF: Isn't that true across the board in any ministry of the church that it becomes real in its context within the whole congregation, as opposed to a segmented narrow approach to just "meet the needs" as it were, the perceived needs, of seniors ministry, or a young adults ministry, or a singles ministry? When everyone can be part of everything, it works a lot better.

AR: Yeah. This always makes my students uncomfortable, but youth ministry doesn't really exist in the sense that it's not a biblical theme, it's not a theological commitment, it's a reality that's determined by the way our society is structured. As soon as the high school doesn't exist anymore, MTV doesn't exist, there's really no reason for youth ministry. Youth ministry exists because we put over 90 percent of people in their teen years in a government institution and have them spend most of their days in a peer-driven institution, and then there's a whole marketing infrastructure that sells things to them in these niche markets.

You know, 150, 200 years ago, there was no such thing as youth ministry. Your young people were near you. Youth ministry exists because of the way culture has constructed itself. It doesn't exist as a thing. Too often we've fallen into the trap of seeing it as this thing, and then we perpetuate certain activities and actions that we think a youth worker would do or a youth ministry should do. But the truth is, it isn't a thing. Ministry is human-person-to-human-person, through the humanity of God in Jesus Christ.

We fall into that trap that youth ministry is this particular thing, and then we give all sorts of different "bubbles" of this — like you said, there's a senior ministry and there's a young adult ministry, and there's the "mothers with three kids who like bubble gum" ministry or something. You can segment this into all sorts of different groups. I think it does tend to be problematic and lead us away from this core commitment … This is about a community of faith who seeks God in the frailty of our humanity.

JMF: In your article, "A New Generation Demands New Categories for

Theology and Ministry," you wrote, "As it has been documented, most don't hate or despise the church, they just don't care. And they don't care because the categories that they use to make meaning are not the categories we are using to do theology and ministry. Our categories no longer match their reality, no longer have congruence with their habits. We must do theology and ministry in new categories if we hope it will mean anything to a younger generation." What are these categories that they have, that we're not sharing?

AR: In that article you can find online, I look at this pop artist, Lily Allen, and this song she has called *The Fear*. She says some interesting things in it where she discards these categories that the church and theology have tended to live in, which is right and wrong, and connected to that saint and sinner. She has this very provocative line in the song where she says, "I'm not a saint and I'm not a sinner, but all is cool as long as I'm getting thinner," which shows — at least the way I interpreted it — she's not going to live in these old categories, but that there's something else she's trying to find meaning and purpose in.

My argument, as you read, is that these categories have changed, in that instead of young people trying to figure out "am I good or am I bad?" that they recognize, especially in a post-modern context, that that's really a hard thing to define — that you can exist in one of those things. But the new category that we haven't yet dwelt enough on, and she enters into this in her chorus, is that she asks this question, "Am I real? Is there anything real here?" It's a question of ontology. Do I have any being, and is there anything solid that I exist in? Her fear isn't that she's bad or that she's a sinner, it's that she doesn't exist at all.

There's this element of the early Reformation theology that goes back to Luther, which is dwelling on these questions of the ontological significance of Jesus Christ for us. It's asked these huge questions of where does God encounter us, and how does God encounter us?

For Luther — and Calvin picks this up in his own way — but it's really the God on the cross — that's where God encounters us. Luther would always love to use this phrase that Moltmann picked up for his book in the late '60s/early '70s called *The Crucified God*. Luther wanted us to recognize that it's God on the cross who is being crucified — that God, in God's self, is going through death. Moltmann would push this in his work to talk about how the Trinity goes through death on the cross — that the Father, that the Son is overtaken and experiences negation and the Father understands what it's like to have the Father's heart ripped out from the Father as he loses the one he loves, to the abyss of death.

My argument in this article is that the church hasn't dwelt enough and formulated practices of ministry that reflect on this question of "Am I real?" "How do I navigate life in a way that makes my existence feel like it stands on anything solid at all, because I feel like things are slipping away?"

Part of my argument is that it's not that young people don't like the church or don't think there's any value in it, they just don't think it has anything meaningful to say. It's still talking about being right or being wrong, it's still talking about *saint* and *sinner* categories instead of talking about them through this ontological framework, which is when the saint and sinner dynamic becomes much more significant — that we're both saint and sinner simultaneously, but we're caught between these two realities. God, in Jesus Christ, enters into despair and death so that we're never alone in it again, and so that turns it, so that from death comes life.

JMF: What does that mean for a congregation's approach for young people in the church and those they want to reach?

AR: It means, ultimately, being people who are willing to confront and articulate those places in our lives that we find to be places of yearning and brokenness — our preaching and our teaching and our life together should mean something, and it should mean something up against those raw places of our life.

Part of the issue why young people have these benign relationships with the church is because they don't think it means anything. It doesn't matter to them. So the place for us to start is to be willing to dwell in our own lives at those places of yearning and of brokenness and try to construct theology around those.

JMF: So that gets back to what we were talking about earlier — that of sharing the place and learning how to listen to the story and to share stories, our story, with young people.

AR: Yeah.

JMF: Thanks for your time, and we're out of time. Let's get together again soon.

AR: All right. Thank you.

God Turns Death Into Life (YI056)

J. Michael Feazell: Thanks for joining us.

Andrew Root: Great to be back.

JMF: I wanted to begin with something from the back of your book *Relationships Unfiltered:* "For more than 50 years relational or incarnational

ministry has been a major focus in youth ministry, but for too long those relationships have been used as tools, as means to an end, where adults try to influence students to accept, know, trust, believe or participate in something. Andrew Root challenges us to reconsider our motives and begin to consider simply being with and doing life alongside teenagers with no agenda other than to love them right where they are, by place-sharing." How does that kind of relationship with teenagers play out?

AR: The objective of it, and the desire, is that we would start with living authentically with young people and living authentically from our own places of rawness and brokenness and sharing each other's lives from that location. That's been one of the main problems with the church in the last few decades, something that it's been striving for, is to say something authentic and meaningful — something that is located in the messiness of our lives.

There's a great scene from the movie *Walk the Line* where Joaquin Phoenix plays Johnny Cash… it's a movie about Johnny Cash's life…and there's this powerful scene that I think relates to this, where Johnny Cash is going to have his first audition with his band, and he confronts the owner of this recording studio and asks for an audition, and he gets one, reluctantly, by the owner. He gets there with his band and they're wearing black shirts because that's the only color they all have of the same shirt, and he starts to play a gospel tune.

You can tell in the first few notes that the record company guy is unhappy with this, as he doesn't find it very interesting. After a while he stops him and says, "Are you really going to do this? Are you really going to just sing this same song we've heard over and over again? This Jesus By and By? Is this what you're going to tell me again?" Joaquin Phoenix playing Johnny Cash says, "What are you saying? That I don't believe in Jesus?" He said, "No, I'm not saying you don't believe in Jesus, I'm saying that this doesn't mean anything. There's nothing here."

"Well, what do you mean?" Johnny Cash asks him, and he says, "What I mean…is this the song you would sing if this is the last song you had, you were lying in the gutter and you were going to die and you had one last song to sing to God before you were dirt — this is the song you'd sing? By and By Jesus is with me?" He says, "It doesn't mean anything unless you sing it from your heart," unless it comes from your own broken experience, is essentially what he's saying.

Johnny Cash says, "Well, you got a problem with the Air Force?" And he says, "No." Johnny says, "Well, I do." Then he sings this song that he had written (I think it's the Folsom Prison song), but then it has this incredible human pathos

to it, this incredible significance that's born from Johnny Cash's own broken experience and his own yearning.

Often I will show that clip in classes and say, "How come our sermons aren't like that?" Replace "song" with "sermon." Many people in our congregations hear a sermon or another Sunday School lesson and they're thinking, "Really? You're going to give me this same 'Jesus is with me by and by'?" Why don't you say something that means something, that comes from this place of loneliness and this place of deep yearning? The objective of being a place-sharer is to do ministry from our broken humanity that yearns for God and seeks to confess and worship a God who meets us from the gutter of the cross and seeks for God to find us taking on death for the sake of life.

JMF: Don't we, as youth ministers and as pastors and associate pastors and otherwise, gospel workers, feel like we have to give an image of strength, some kind of façade of righteousness and faithfulness and all that? And in doing that, we think that somehow we're setting an example or conveying a proper image, and yet there really is no such beast as a person who is the façade we're trying to put forward.

AR: Exactly. I think the objective is to be and to do ministry from the location of our own barrenness or our own broken situation. There's a great story about my kids. My son is almost five now and my daughter is two. But when my daughter was younger, she was probably eight months, we made the terrible parenting mistake of having her sleeping upstairs in our house and having the baby monitor switched to the wrong channel so we couldn't hear her. After an hour or so we thought, "Wow, this is a really long nap for her."

I walked by the stairs and she was howling, she was crying, she was very upset. So I yelled for my wife and we raced up the stairs, and our three-year-old at the time followed us up the stairs as we went to her. We picked her up and she was as mad as heck. She was angry. We don't know how long she had been crying, but it had been a while. We picked her up and we tried to comfort her, and as we did that, my son climbed up on our bed and we were saying, "Oh Maisy, it's okay, it's okay," and he, in his great three-year-old way, crawled up next to her, patted her head, and said, "Maisy, it's okay. You just had hotus."

We looked at him and said "hotus?" This made-up three-year-old word. We said, "Hotus? Owen, what is hotus?" He looked kind of matter of fact-ly, like everyone should know this, and he said, "Hotus is when you're all alone and crying and no one is there to be with you."

It was this beautiful, beautiful assertion, but I think that is the human condition. In many ways, if we're not now, we know of times when we've been all alone and crying and need someone to be near to us. Too often we do ministry out of "I have the answer" or "I can get you somewhere" instead of this mutuality of trying to dwell in God's word and contemplate who God is amidst and alongside our shared hotus. At some point in our life, we're all alone and crying.

I think the beauty of the gospel is that we have a God who encounters us not outside, around, but within our moments of hotus, of being all alone and needing someone to be with us. God desires to be with us, and with us to such an extent that God goes to death. Not only death but, as our creeds say, all the way to hell, so that we'll never again be alone or without God, even when we still feel overwhelmed by our experiences of hotus, as my three-year-old, now moving toward five-year-old, son would say.

JMF: We usually present the gospel as being a way to become moral and righteous and to solve our problems. But that's not what it's about, is it?

AR: I always worry because we've tried to frame things for my son not about what's right or wrong, but what serves death or what serves life. I fear that we've warped him, because he'll always package things in death. Once we were on a walk and he fell and he skinned his knee, and so we raced over to him and said, "Owen, are you okay?" He said, "Yeah, I'm fine," and he pointed to his knee, which was a little bloody, and he said, "But death made me bleed."

He has this concept of life and death, which I think biblically there is something about right and wrong that's there, but there's also another foundation which that rests on, which is, do you serve life, or do you serve death? The God of Israel is a God that is about life. We have all these odd biblical texts about "the right thing to do is to hide spies in your house and to tell a lie when someone comes to your door," because it's not really about what's right or wrong, but what serves life or what serves death. What serves the God of life or death?

Too often we fall into moralism with young people. We tend to judge how well we're doing in our ministries with "our kid's getting better." And how many conversions and how many virgins do you have? That seems to determine if you're a good youth worker, instead of trying to live with young people next to their death, so that they might be people who seek for God and death for the sake of life…. It gives us an ethic, but it's a much more robust theological perspective that leads us into contemplating our own broken humanity and a God who encounters us within it. It's grander in the sense of, in the way it encompasses us and claims

us. That is much more beautiful, at least to me.

JMF: You have a couple of new books that came out in 2010. *The Promise of Despair: The Way of the Cross as the Way of the Church,* from Abingdon, and *The Children of Divorce: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being,* from Brazos Press. Can you give us a little preview of those two books?

AR: *The Promise of Despair* is my attempt to write at least a little bit of a theology for the church …in the church's location in our context now. I fear it's not an upbeat Hallmark kind of piece. The basic assertion is that [we need] many of the new kind of paradigms for church that have been around from emerging church folks, to others talking about the church needing to take new form and think differently about its theology and its very life in our cultural context. I affirm that very strongly in this book, but also add to the conversation that I don't know that in those conversations we've dealt enough with the reality of death.

So I try to articulate that and tell some of my own experiences with that. It hinges around this argument that comes from Luther in his Heidelberg Disputation, where Luther is writing his, really a major document of his theological breakthrough that would bring forth the Reformation, and Luther has this very interesting comment in there where he says "a theologian of the cross." If there's anywhere forward for a theologian of the cross to escape all the legalism of the Christendom of his day, that person, that theologian must *despair* — that you have to despair.

I've tried to look into that and to ask, what would it mean — is there a promise in despair, and what do we believe about this God who brings life out of death from the location of the cross? It's a theology of the cross for our contemporary church in our context. In the second half of the book I try to develop a Trinitarian theology, drawing from Eberhard Jungel as well as the early Moltmann, trying to make an argument using some of their sources that God takes death into the Trinity itself.

The ramifications of that, which are quite beautiful, is that now anyone who experiences any element of death — whether that's legitimate death being put in a grave, or severe depression, or just experiences of death, that we can be confident that now we exist within the life of God — that because death has been placed within the inner life of God, that death destroys the Trinity, and then the Trinity is put back together after resurrection, and that now, anytime we experience death, we can be confident and confess that we find ourselves taken up and swept up into the life of God in the Trinitarian relationship between Father and Son that the

Spirit ushers us into.

That's a mouthful for that book, but it gives a cultural analysis and then takes a turn on the theology of the cross and looks at how we might do church next to death, and a lot like the Johnny Cash story — how might we actually practice our faith in a way that honors the realness and messiness of our existence.

The second book, *The Children of Divorce,* touches on some of these themes, but in a much more specific way. It argues that we haven't quite culturally grasped the significance of divorce as it relates to young people. One of the issues that we haven't necessarily dealt with is that divorce may be… (before it's an *epistemological* issue [a question of what we know], in the sense that we usually think as long as kids know that the divorce wasn't their fault, and if we can get some structures in place, like after-school programs and grandparents to be invested, then it's not a big deal, it's a minor disturbance).

My argument is that maybe some of that stuff helps, but that primarily divorce is an ontological issue [a question of being]. What I mean by that is: that what's thrust upon a young person when their parents divorce is the very question if they can exist at all, after the fact that they realize that this relationship of mother and father is responsible for them existing at all. What does it mean for them, that this relationship that is the very elements of their being in the world, is taken apart?

From my own experience of my parents divorcing, as well as the young people I've worked with, I try to make an argument that we need to look at the experience of young people in divorce differently — that it may be an issue of questioning "do I exist at all?" or "How can I be, now that these people who are responsible for my being are no longer in the world?" That's the point of that book — two kind of heavy topics. But ones that would be interesting reads for people.

JMF: You've written an article that I read and found very interesting. I don't watch the TV show *Lost* because I watched it a couple of times and I haven't gotten into it because I found it so abysmally difficult to understand and know what's going on. I know a couple people who are great fans of it, a couple of relatives who never miss it. I ask them, "Well, give me a little… so I can at least have enough to go on to watch it." They look at me for a second thinking, and then they say, "You really have to watch it from the beginning. I wouldn't know where to start. There's too much to just say easily." So I don't watch it. But then I read your article and I thought it gave some good insight into what was going on in the show, and you brought in some theological perspective that the show triggered for you. I thought it would be interesting for everyone to hear that.

AR: The first thing I'll say is, for real *Lost* fans out there, I fear saying anything, because you don't want to make avid *Lost* fans angry at you. So I will just say this for myself. I'll say two things before getting into the theological dialogue that I do with the show. The real interesting thing to me is that it is an incredibly dense, and I don't want to say intellectual, necessarily, but there's so much rich mystery and theory that's embedded with it…so much with philosophy and mythology, and it's fascinating to me…

A question the church has to confront is, why does J.J. Abrams, the producer of this show as well as other movies, why does he get all the best stories? What I mean is, how come we have this incredible story of a crucified God, of… this incredibly beautiful story, and we can so easily make the story of the gospel benign or uninteresting or just plain lame. A show like *Lost,* I think, reminds us that the public is yearning for good narrative. Not narrative that is clean and easily finished after 22 minutes in a laugh track, but is really wanting to dwell in a difficult narrative. At least there's a number of people who are fans of that show who don't want it to be neat and tidy but want to really focus on a very mystical, very transcendent, very raw narrative. I would say that first.

My argument in that article, which was written several seasons ago, so things have changed. But one of the things that was true that I was pointing to in that article that I hadn't verified yet was that the life on the island and the life in the regular world, that they were existing on two timelines — that time was unfolding at a different pace on the island than it was in the regular world.

What was interesting to me about that reality is that essentially, Jurgen Moltmann, in *The Theology of Hope* and in some of his other works, his whole eschatology is built on that perception — that God is encountering us not from the past but from the future. That God's bringing forth God's future. In a sense, God exists on another timeline. That timeline overlaps with ours, but God is ushering all of time and all of creation into God's very future.

It got me thinking about certain things, and *Lost* was doing this — it was living between these timelines. In many ways I think that the vocation of the Christian is to live between times, in the sense that we're stuck in this time. Our lives unfold from life to death, but a future is breaking in where death, from death comes life, where the complete opposite happens. There's a certain way of even reading some of the gospel texts to see it as this reality of a new timeline coming in. For instance, after the crucifixion, people from the graves come out and start walking around Jerusalem. It's a sense where the time has been split open.

Then when Jesus returns after the resurrection, some of the disciples and some of his followers don't even recognize him — not because he isn't human anymore, but because he is the person of the future, he's the man of the future. As many theologians, particularly Karl Barth has argued, that Jesus Christ's resurrection is our promise. The only one that has been resurrected is Jesus Christ, and because of Jesus' own resurrection, we're promised a resurrection as well. Jesus Christ now exists in God's future.

So I tried with the show, in these multiple timelines going on in the show, to make this argument that the church awaits, yearns, desires for God's future to come while we live in this time. It's interesting to think, for instance, about prayer and healing in that situation. There are times in our congregations and in our lives where we pray for somebody to be healed, and they are. In the church, we rejoice in that and see in it a gift. But it's not the norm. It's abnormal. It's God's future breaking in for some reason into our now. But the unfolding of the timeline we exist in, is that if you get cancer, you die. Or if you get hit in a head-on collision, you probably die. There are times when God's future breaks in and we're healed, or we taste God's future, but that's more abnormal than normal. I tried to develop that element of timelines and eschatology through the TV show *Lost.*

JMF: It makes me want to watch it, but I don't know if I would invest the time it takes to get caught up to speed.

AR: It will make you a fanatic, too. You have to have the time for that.

JMF: I'm glad that some of the shows that I was having to never miss have finally come to an end. It gives me a break in having to be addicted to a certain TV show.

As we conclude, I wanted to ask you something we often ask, we try to ask everyone at some point, and that is, if there's one thing that you would really like people to know about God, what would that be?

AR: The one thing that I would want people to know about God is that God comes near to us in those moments where we don't know what to do or when we feel lost. There are certain moments in our life that are utterly God-forsaken and are irredeemable. But often in those moments, someone else will share in our lives with us. I think, in those moments, God becomes concretely present.

The one thing that I would want us to know about God is that God comes near to us, in our yearning simply to be human, and that the Christian life is a basic life of trying to grab hold of what it means to be human in the midst of a lot of questions and doubt, and doubt is a way of faith in many ways — that if we'll

yearn to know God up against our deepest questions, we'll encounter God, and in a beautiful way encounter God in a community of people who are believing while they're doubting, who are yearning for God in the midst of broken and thin places in their life. I think that's the thing that captivates me the most lately, is how to think about our encounter with God in those places of deep yearning and brokenness.

JMF: Interesting you bring up doubt, because typically we're afraid to admit our doubt. There's no Christian who doesn't doubt, and yet we don't want to admit it to anyone else, and we don't even like to admit it to ourselves. Yet this is where Jesus meets us, in the midst of our doubt.

AR: One of the ways potentially forward as we think about passing on our faith to young people (whether that happens through confirmation or some other form of catechesis or Sunday School or some other educational form) … I wonder often if we wouldn't do well to build those conversations around our doubt, and how powerful it would be to get a handful of high school students and a couple of adults and to say, "In this hour and a half, we're going to talk, and we're going to doubt our faith together."

I don't mean doubt it, in this kind of nihilistic tone that we're just going to wipe it all off the table and find it's all meaningless. But to enter into the kind of doubt that says, "We're going to wrestle with this" is to take faith and to take the Christian tradition with utmost seriousness — that we're going to really delve into this, but we're going to do it not through our place of power, of having it together, but from our place of wondering, what does this mean?

Young people are searching for a church that will doubt with them, and we continue to give them a church that has certainty. Certainty is the demonic element. Certainty doesn't need to see neighbors. Certainty doesn't need to listen. But doubt listens intently. So I think there's a way that we doubt our faith while confessing Christ. We hold those things together. I doubt while I yearn for God. There's something really beautiful about that.

It would be an incredible witness to the world if the church was this group of people, maybe a little weird people, but these people who deeply searched for God through their doubt and through their brokenness — never claimed to have it all together, but simply yearned for God as they articulated to the world their own shortcomings and their own doubt. We would have a generation of young people that would know their faith better, that would live their faith, and we would have a witness to the world that would be much richer. There would be a community in

the world that calls a thing what it is. We have a culture that desires for the church to call a thing what it is.

JMF: Often when somebody approaches us (young person or otherwise) with doubts and has the courage to express those, we respond with defensiveness and with authoritarianism, with "You better not doubt your faith," "You're in danger of something," of losing your faith, or whatever. So we don't listen, and we ourselves become fearful and defensive, perhaps because we have the same doubts and don't know what to do with them. A dialog where there's freedom to live with and express out doubts, share them, deal with them, confront them, look at them, consider them, would be a nice healthy environment.

AR: Yeah. We often are afraid of doubt because, well, because we're afraid. Our fear really is fear of death. It will feel like death if our kids aren't good kids or if they deny their faith. But what's so interesting and paradoxical and maybe disobedient about such a stance is that the Christian commitment is a God who meets us in death…and there's a freedom in that. There's a freedom, that we need not be afraid of death, because God has overcome death with life. So we don't have to fear our children doubting our faith. Their doubt of our faith is an invitation to share deeply in their lives and to share deeply in the activity of God in a certain way — to yearn for God, to seek God. But we fear death, and because we fear death, we fear them doubting, instead of recognizing that God has overcome death.

There's great freedom in discipleship to not fear death. There's a great line in *The Cost of Discipleship* when Bonhoeffer opens it up in the first few pages when he says, "When Jesus Christ calls a person, he calls a person to come and die." We usually think of that like a football coach on the Friday night high school football game, where the football coach says, "We're going to go out there and we're going to kill those guys this week." The players know that the coach doesn't mean that they're literally going to go out and kill them. They don't take guns out onto the field. It's rhetoric that's supposed to motivate certain action.

We think that when Bonhoeffer says that or when Jesus says, "Take up your cross and follow me," that it's a pep rally, that's just to get us motivated to live the Christian life. But in a real way that that's the call — that if you are going to follow Jesus, that you have to come and die, that you have to come and face the death inside you, the death inside the world, and seek for God in that death.

We often want to keep our young people from doubting because we're scared to death that they will start smelling like death instead of saying, if I can hold them

and if we can together look at and face death, whatever that might be — either doubting of their faith, or their certain struggles, or their depression — that we can in faith and hope trust in God in the midst of this, for our God is a God who brings life out of death. Our God is a God who enters deeply into death. There will be a great way forward if we would choose to doubt our faith together. Again, not as a nihilistic way, but as a way of actual obedience of following God to the cross.

JMF: I can't help but think of a passage, Colossians 3, verse 3, "For you have died, and your life is now hidden in Christ with God." We're dead and alive at the same time, yet the life is hidden and yet the death is real. It also reminds me of the doubt you mentioned [in an earlier interview], the story with your son saying, "Jesus isn't here. There's a nightmare in the closet, and Jesus isn't here."

AR: The objective of the church is to say, "You're right — Jesus isn't here. So together let's search for God…" and this is the paradox — "let's search for God in the utter feeling of God-forsakenness, of God not being here," which is this Christological element that opens up, that Moltmann beautifully does, to the Trinity — that God knows death, that God knows what it's like. Jesus essentially says "God is not here" on the cross. The Father knows what it's like to lose the Son to the abyss of separation and death. There's something very Trinitarian about being willing to say "God is not here," but not as a nihilistic assertion but as a confession of faith.

"God is not here" as a confession of faith that says "I will now search for God in this place where God cannot be found" because this God who cannot be found, this God who I can't find now, is a God who is often not found, in certain places like in the barren womb of Sarah or in a people under years and years of oppression in Egypt, in the virgin womb of a 15-year-old girl in a God-forsaken place called Galilee…that in those places where "God is not here" is the place where God becomes found.

It would be really interesting for the church to be this place that is willing to say "you're right, God is not here, and we will serve this God and worship this God," because when we say God is not here, God becomes here, in our shared community of suffering.

JMF: Thanks for your time again. Appreciate you being with us.

AR: A great pleasure, great pleasure.

JMF: We've been talking with Dr. Andrew Root, Assistant Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Thanks for being with us. I'm Mike Feazell for *You're Included.*

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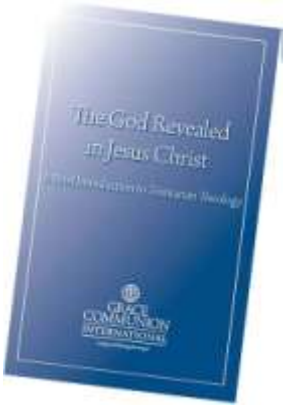

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